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**Input on the victimisation of people belonging to ethnic, religious and linguistic minorities
in Bosnia and Herzegovia**

Key questions and types of input sought:

Is there evidence of minorities being subjected to contemporary forms of slavery (forced labour, bonded labour, forced/child marriage, descent slavery and related practices) in your country? If so, please provide information relating to the profiles of victims and the nature and extent of their exploitation and abuse. What additional traits and characteristics, including gender, age, sexual orientation and disabilities, have made them more vulnerable?

What types of personal, situational and structural factors push minorities into contemporary forms of slavery in your country/community?

Are there wider political, economic, social, religious and cultural factors making persons belonging to minorities vulnerable to these practices?

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, it is estimated that out of 3.5 million citizens 12,000 of them are victims of modern slavery. There are reasonable doubts and fears that this number may be even higher, according to the statements of experts dealing with human rights, who believe that the situation about modern slavery in Bosnia and Herzegovina is much worse and that this number is even higher.¹

Due to very bad social and economic situation and worsening political situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina, with highest migration ever, with average of 50, 000 young people leaving the country every year in search for a jobs, Bosnia and Herzegovina has been officially identified as

¹ <https://www.vecernji.ba/vijesti/u-bih-12-000-modernih-robova-koji-trpe-i-sute-1271245>

a source, destination, and transit country for men, women, and children subjected to sex trafficking and forced labor.

Minorities in Bosnia and Herzegovina are being subjected to many forms of contemporary forms of slavery, such as forced labor and begging, domestic servitude, forced and early marriages and many others.

This especially affects Roma people, who are the most numerous national minorities in Bosnia and Herzegovina, according to available data, the Roma are at the same time the most vulnerable national minority in all social parameters that are taken into account when assessing the social status of a community or social group. Of all the national minorities in Bosnia and Herzegovina, none is in a social position that is similar in weight and problems to that of the Roma, who live in almost the entire territory of Bosnia and Herzegovina.²

Due to their ethnicity, Roma people are experiencing social exclusion and because of the many factors, such as their low socio-economic status, poverty, racism and discrimination they are experiencing, low education, high unemployment, lack of birth registration documentation and many others, they are at high risk of becoming victims of contemporary forms of slavery. Roma children often lack documentation on birth registration, which makes it extremely difficult to provide protection to social welfare services, as well as an obstacle to the protection of human trafficking, contemporary forms of slavery and their access to education.

The high number of women and girls subjected to trafficking for purposes of sexual exploitation and forced labour, including begging, especially among the Roma population.³ Especially Roma girls with disabilities are also subject to exploitation and all forms of modern forms of slavery.

Roma population, especially Roma children from a rural area in BiH are deprived of more rights in comparison to children from urban areas, and Roma children are subjected to the early and forced marriages. There are a large number of Roma girls who are forced to get married before they turn 18 or even 15 years old. Roma women are forcibly sold, often by their families, and are subjected to forced begging and domestic servitude.

The practical experience of “Novi put” in prevention of human trafficking and contemporary forms of slavery has shown that there is a low level of awareness about trafficking in human beings and prevailing prejudice against most of victims thereof. Exploitation of Roma children is still considered as Roma way of life and tradition, even though people throughout BiH can witness barefoot and scarcely clothed toddlers and children walking down streets and begging in winter. Child marriages of Roma girls are hardly paid any attention to. Over the last few years, it has been observed that exploitation of Roma children, especially girls had worsened due to increase of drugs and gambling addictions among Roma men. Roma girls were found to be valuable tools to make money which will enable adult Roma to pursue their addictions. Many

² Istraživanje o maloljetničkim brakovima u romskim zajednicama, Udruženje žena romkinja “Bolja budućnost” Grada Tuzla, autorica Larisa Kovačević

³ https://arsbih.gov.ba/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/CEDAW-C-BIH-Concluding-Observations-6_AsAdopted.pdf

Roma men end up in debt bondage due to their addictions and human traffickers, who are also Roma, help them out. However, in most of the cases, families are not able to pay back the amount due to traffickers and they are forced to let their own children beg for the benefit of their exploiters until the parents' debts are paid off, which in many cases lasts for years.

Forced child begging affects both boys and girls, however, in BiH Roma girls are found more vulnerable to being forced to beg by individuals outside and inside the family. Evidences collected by the author during the grass-root experience in prevention and combating trafficking of minors have shown that children subjected to begging experience long working hours and no pay, regardless of whether they are exploited by parents or other parties. Those children are forbidden to take any food or any other goods. The BiH experience of children forced to beg in most popular tourist destinations have shown that many children come from other places. Moreover, those children are dropped off by exploiters in the tourist parts of the cities, at major intersections where they beg overseen by an adult member of a trafficking gang. Those children, some of them as young as toddlers, beg 24/7 during Summer tourist seasons, especially in the City of Mostar, which proximity to Medjugorje, a famous Catholic shrine visited by hundreds of thousands of pilgrims a year and to the cities of Dubrovnik and Split in the neighboring Croatia, attracts thousands of tourists a day, and obviously ill-treated children, filthy and walking around at 45+°C or at midnight with shier despair on their faces cause empathy among tourists.

The extent to which forced begging is present in Bosnia and Herzegovina is also shown by the data of the State Coordinator for Combating Human Trafficking for Bosnia and Herzegovina for 2020, which identified 70 potential victims of trafficking, 35 of whom were minors. Begging, as a form of human trafficking, was the most prevalent, and 38 cases of begging were identified.⁴

Through its field work, and in the Counselling for children and adults, the Association "Novi put" has provided free legal aid to all potential and actual victims of human trafficking, all forms of violence and contemporary forms of slavery, where focus especially on Roma people, as vulnerable categories have learned very frightening information of ways to exploit Roma, especially children.

In 2021, the Association "Novi put" noticed in its work that the victims were Roma children who were exposed to various forms of violence, both inside and outside the family. All children lived in very difficult conditions, without basic living conditions, and were educationally neglected. We noticed that the most common trends in child exploitation are labour exploitation, forced begging, sexual exploitation, forced underage marriages, forced criminal activities, selling children to others for debt repayment, recruiting children through social networks. The key factors that have influenced the vulnerability of children are the lack of parental care and dysfunctional families, which affect the fact that children leave the education system.

⁴ Report on the Situation in the Field of Trafficking in Human Beings and on the Implementation of the Strategy for Combating Trafficking in Human Beings in Bosnia and Herzegovina for 2020, State Coordinator for Combating Trafficking in Human Beings, Sarajevo, March 2021.

During 2021, 30 children came to the Counselling centre of “Novi put”, where each of them received help in the form of individual counselling and treatments. Of these 30 children, all were Roma, 20 were girls and 10 were boys. Of the 30 children who came to the counselling centre, 21 children were identified as victims of exploitation, including sexual exploitation, forced marriages, forced criminal activities, and forced begging.

One of the frightening examples encountered by the Association “Novi Put” in 2022 is the sexual exploitation of a Roma underage girl, who is also a child with disability, who was sold by her father to migrants, who sexually exploited her when she was 13 and also forced her to marry older men twice.

What has your government done at the local, national, or regional levels to protect minorities from being subjected to contemporary forms of slavery in your country? Please share examples.

Employees of the institutions that provide services to victims are neither sufficiently theoretically informed about the issue of trafficking in human beings, nor well trained to recognize the presence thereof, and that they are not aware of their professional responsibility for trafficking cases. In the case of children potential trafficking in human beings victims, it is evident that no criminal proceedings have been initiated against parents for child neglect, the number of court proceedings related to banning parents from living with children or depriving them of parental care due to trafficking in human beings is also very small. Comparing the number of registered children in begging, the number of warnings issued to parents or decisions on supervision of parental care is negligible, which is a very big problem. Also, prejudices and stereotypes surrounding Roma often cause that people hardly pay any attention to violence committed against Roma women and girls and thus hardly react to prevent and/or stop it. Widespread discrimination and negative experiences in social services, the police, judicial system and fear of expulsion, leave Roma women reluctant to disclose violence or access protection and support. 2021 Trafficking in Persons Report: Bosnia and Herzegovina, U.S.Department of State⁵, states that authorities justified cases of potential forced child begging and forced labor involving Roma as traditional cultural practices and customs and sometimes returned children to their families even when parents were involved in their exploitation. Additionally, the government lacked proactive identification efforts and, as a result, often penalized victims for unlawful acts traffickers compelled them to commit, particularly with misdemeanor charges for petty crimes. Also, law enforcement and social workers at centers for social welfare (CSW) justified cases of potential forced child begging and forced labor involving Roma as traditional cultural practices and customs and sometimes returned children to their families even when parents were involved in their exploitation. Further, no proper monitoring or risk assessment is carried out by the social work centres when returning trafficked children to their parents.

⁵ 2021 Trafficking in Persons Report: Bosnia and Herzegovina, U.S.Department of State

However, government created a new database to standardize data collection on trafficking victims, established 18 regional monitoring teams to coordinate anti-trafficking efforts, where government, with financial and technical assistance from NGOs, organized a discussions with the Romani community on trafficking and recruited and train 25 Romani activists to join Regional monitoring teams.

Also, in 2020, the Ministry of Human Rights and Refugees of Bosnia and Herzegovina launched activities to develop an Action Plan for Roma Inclusion in BiH for 2021-2025, which defines goals and measures in priority areas (civil registration of Roma, antidiscrimination and antigypsism , housing, employment, health and education).

What have non-governmental entities, including businesses and educational institutions, done to provide equal access to decent work and quality education in your country? Please share examples.

Roma face persistent deprivation in virtually all areas of life – education, employment, housing, access to healthcare. Roma people face the highest level of discrimination in terms of employment opportunities and are almost completely absent from the workforce, working instead in the informal sector. The educational status of Roma is dramatically lower compared to the majority of the populations making Roma the least qualified labour force in the countries. Bosnia and Herzegovina has the lowest enrolment figure in Europe with 25%, which includes only 3% for Roma children. Enrolment of Roma children in primary and secondary schools remains very low, at only 35%. 69% attend primary and 23% secondary education. The situation has worsened due to the COVID-19 crisis and the lack of possibilities to follow online classes.⁶ Only a minimum percentage of the Roma children go to kindergartens. Roma children often also lack birth registration documentation making it extremely difficult for social welfare services to render protection and it presents serious obstacles while rendering protection to victims of trafficking.

During the covid pandemic, majority of Roma children did not have access to online education due to poverty and lack of technical equipment. There is pronounced social exclusion among Roma people and rural children in early childhood education and only 1.5 per cent of Roma children attend these programs. Dropout rates for Roma children remained considerably higher, especially in higher grades, while secondary school attendance for Roma children was significantly lower compared to the majority population⁷.

In order to reduce the vulnerability of Roma children to all forms of human trafficking and contemporary slavery, as of January 2022 “Novi put” has started implementing a one-year literacy course for Roma children in Sarajevo, that have not been included in regular education system. This activity is funded by the UN Fund on Contemporary Forms of Slavery. The project activity is targeting illiterate Roma children as the most vulnerable category in BaH with

⁶ https://www.dei.gov.ba/uploads/documents/bosnia-and-herzegovina-2021-report_1634741127.pdf

⁷ file:///C:/Users/PC1/Downloads/Summary_NHDR_2020_ENG.pdf

extremely high illiteracy rate, but they also constituent majority of underage human trafficking victims exploited for the purpose of forced begging, child marriages, sexual exploitation and commission of crimes, both in the country and abroad.

What has been the role of civil society organisations, faith-based organisations, trade unions, and human rights defenders in protecting minorities from being subjected to contemporary forms of slavery? Please share examples.

Civil society organizations and human rights defenders have a great role in protecting minorities from being subjected to contemporary forms of slavery. Since the government often do not have enough capacities and is not providing adequate help to minorities who are the victims of contemporary forms of slavery, civil society organisations are providing help on a different level to the all victims of contemporary forms of slavery, violence, human trafficking etc., and especially to minorities, such as Roma population.

Since 2010 “Novi put” has been working on combating, prevention of and awareness raising about all forms of human trafficking and contemporary forms of slavery among vulnerable categories, especially Roma communities, as well as on provision of direct counselling support to potential and genuine victims thereof. “Novi put” has been implementing trainings for governmental and non-governmental officials who come into contact with victims, debates and round tables. “Novi put” has also included news media organisations as its target groups aimed at breaking the existing prejudices about survivors of all forms of exploitation, especially Roma for the purpose of forced begging, child marriages and sexual exploitation among the media audience, as BaH media often tends to perpetuate the prevailing prejudices.

“Novi put” participate in drafting and reviewing all the relevant State Action Plans and Strategies aimed at prevention of human trafficking by providing input based on information collected from direct beneficiaries and at the grass-root level.

Due to an increase in number of minor victims of trafficking in human beings and contemporary forms of slavery in the City of Mostar, „Novi put“ opened a counselling centre for minor victims of all forms of exploitation in 2013.⁸ Facing the constant increase in the number of victims, “Novi put” has expanded its services to women and children subjected to exploitation from the whole Herzegovina region and as of January 2020 through the project funded by the UN Fund on Contemporary Forms of Slavery “Novi put” has been providing free of charge psycho-social and legal help to potential and actual victims of the human trafficking, contemporary forms of slavery also in Sarajevo Canton.

⁸http://www.mhrr.gov.ba/ljudska_prava/djeca_bih/Prvi%20periodicni%20izvjestaj%20BiH%20o%20provodjenju%20Fakultativnog%20protokola%20uz%20Konvenciju.pdf

Association “Novi put” is also conducting activities and providing direct legal and psychosocial help to the victims of contemporary forms of slavery within the project and support of UNHCHR.

Some other BaH NGOs also conduct ongoing research on trafficking in human beings and modern forms of slavery, mark World and European Anti-Trafficking Day, house and care for victims in safe houses, and raise awareness campaigns, both general and specific, and for a specific risk groups - such as Roma.

In February 2021 the Association “Novi put” received the Child 10 2021 Award and the award of HM Queen Silvia’s Foundation – Care About the Children for dedicated efforts to eradicate trafficking and commercial sexual exploitation of girls within and towards Europe. “Novi put” was one of ten organizations selected from over 90 nominations from 27 countries across the globe and the first NGO from Bosnia and Herzegovina that has ever received these awards.

What has been the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on minorities, including the related adopted measures and its social or economic effects with regard to contemporary forms of slavery? What actions has your government taken to protect them?

Many countries, including Bosnia and Herzegovina, have enacted and adopted many restrictive measures during the Covid-19 pandemic, such as banning or restricting leaving the home, banning gatherings, curfews, and the like. This has greatly affected the increase in domestic violence and various forms of exploitations. Many victims were "captured" with their perpetrators and exploiters. Due to the worsening situation caused by Covid 19, the number of calls to helplines increased, which was also noted by the Association "Novi put" with the aim of seeking information on employment opportunities abroad, but also due to increased domestic violence. The Covid-19 pandemic has greatly affected the increase in domestic violence, leading to an increased risk of children becoming victims of trafficking, underage marriages, discrimination and social exclusion, especially of children coming from the Roma population. Also, the challenges of human trafficking and modern forms of slavery, brought about by mass migration across the territory of Bosnia and Herzegovina, became more challenging during the Covid-19 pandemic.

To our knowledge, the government has not taken any measures to protect minorities due to the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on them.

Only NGOs, like the Association “Novi put” provided free legal and psychological assistance, had an open helpline, raised awareness of the increased risks of domestic violence and various forms of exploitation due to the Covid-19 pandemic, and provided financial or food assistance due to poor economic impacts of the Covid 19 pandemic on minorities.

What are persisting obstacles/challenges in preventing minorities from being subjected to contemporary forms of slavery? What mechanisms exist in your country to report instances of contemporary forms of slavery as affecting members of minorities? How actively are such mechanisms used by members of minorities and to what extent have they been able to access justice and remedies? What are the main obstacles/challenges in this regard?

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, there are a lot of obstacles and challenges in preventing minorities from being subjected to contemporary forms of slavery. As mentioned above, one of the main obstacles is that government bodies do not have enough capacities, especially law enforcement agencies such as police and Center for social work, who are often justifying cases of contemporary forms of slavery and human trafficking as tradition of Roma. Not only that law enforcement agencies do that, but also prosecution and courts justifying these cases as a common law.

Also, cases of exploitation are often characterized as domestic violence and not as human trafficking, and traders and exploiters are given very low or no penalties for exploitation. All cases of contemporary forms of slavery in Bosnia and Herzegovina can be reported to the police, the center for social work or the prosecutor's office. However, as already stated, law enforcement agencies are justifying cases of exploitation of Roma people and children as a tradition, and often Roma children were returned from social work centers to the families in which they were exploited.

Due to such practices, Roma and non-Roma are discouraged from reporting cases of contemporary forms of slavery.

What recommendations do you wish to propose in order to effectively address these ongoing challenges and protect minorities from contemporary forms of slavery?

As stated above, there is no proper coordination among institutions that are supposed to work on addressing the contemporary forms of slavery and relevant governmental actors still need to take a proactive approach and identify victims thereof among Roma minority aimed at preventing their exploitation for the purpose of forced begging, forced criminality and early, child or forced marriages. Roma population has been significantly growing in HNC as numerous Roma families settle down in Mostar, as it has become a city with booming tourism industry visited by more than a million foreign tourist every year and thus creating fertile ground for forced begging by both children and women.

Currently, "Novi put" is the only CSO in the whole Herzegovina Region that has been primarily focused on prevention and combating of all forms of human trafficking and contemporary forms of slavery, as well as providing direct services to survivors thereof. However, even though

“Novi put” used to be an active member of the former RMT Mostar (Regional Monitoring Team for Combating Human Trafficking) however, as of 2020 the RMTs were replaced by the Coordination Teams which did not include any of the few remaining anti-trafficking CSOs in their composition, and this might have an adverse long-term impact on future victims of human trafficking and contemporary forms of slavery. We deem it would be important to advocate at the international level for inclusion of the relevant CSOs in in the composition of the Coordination Teams , in order to enable ongoing formal exchange of information on newest trends between CSOs as grass-root activists and service providers on one hand and the relevant institutions on the other, especially when it comes to prevention of exploitation of Roma population, who make a vast majority of all identified victims of all forms of exploitation.