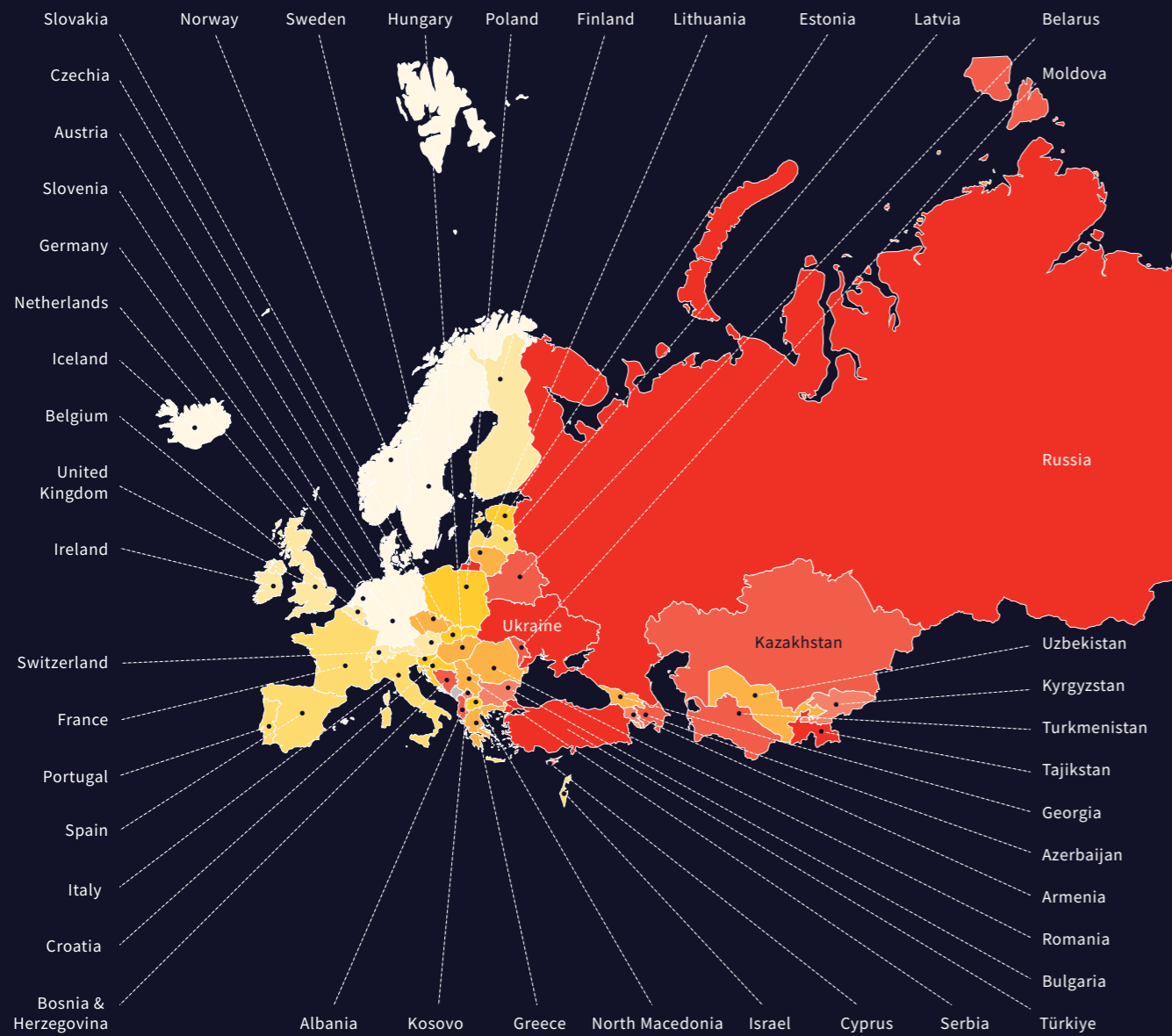


EUROPE AND CENTRAL ASIA



Regional heat map: prevalence



Europe and Central Asia is home to 12 per cent of the world's population. Although the region is highly diverse in terms of geography, ethnicity, culture, religion, and wealth, modern slavery occurs in every country. Europe and Central Asia has the second highest prevalence of modern slavery of the five global regions. Various factors contribute to the prevalence of forced labour and forced marriage, including poverty, discrimination, migration, and a lack of economic opportunities.

Conflict, the COVID-19 pandemic, and climate change further compound these vulnerabilities. The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated existing vulnerabilities and created new ones, with increased economic insecurity across the region and unequal access to vaccines and healthcare. To varying extents, countries across the region are impacted by climate change, with effects on agriculture and other primary industries driving poverty and food insecurity. Climate-related displacement continues to drive the risk of exploitation, particularly in forced labour, across the region. Although not reflected in our estimates, Russia's invasion of Ukraine has increased the risk of modern slavery, with mass displacement and forced migration both in-country and across the region.

The United Kingdom (UK) took the most action to combat modern slavery, followed by the Netherlands and Portugal, while Turkmenistan and Russia took the least. Europe has taken the most action of any region to tackle forced labour that ends up in global supply chains. Across all countries, governments should address significant gaps, including expanding the provision of safe and regular migration pathways for the most vulnerable, and tackling underlying discrimination of migrants and other marginalised groups.

What is the extent and nature of modern slavery in the region?

An estimated 6.4 million people were living in modern slavery in Europe and Central Asia on any given day in 2021. The region had the second highest prevalence in the world, with 6.9 per thousand people living in modern slavery. Europe and Central Asia had the second highest prevalence of forced labour at an estimated 4.4 per thousand people and the third highest prevalence of forced marriage (2.5 per thousand).¹

Türkiye, Tajikistan, and Russia had the highest prevalence of modern slavery in the region. Russia, Türkiye, and Ukraine had the highest number of people living in modern slavery, accounting for nearly three in every five people in modern slavery in the region. The countries with the lowest prevalence are Switzerland, Norway, and Germany.

There are 4.1 million people trapped in forced labour in Europe and Central Asia. Forced labour takes many forms across the region for both adults and children, including domestic servitude, agricultural labour, and construction work and forced commercial sexual exploitation. There is a high population of migrant workers, both from within and outside the region, who are more vulnerable to being trapped in situations of debt bondage and exploitation.² Displacement fuelled by conflict, climate change, and political and economic instability also contributes to forced labour prevalence in the region, as well as rising discrimination against certain groups, such as the Roma community.³

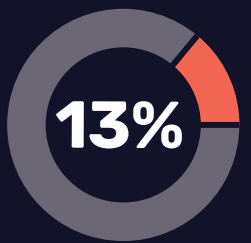
Ten per cent of all forced marriages in the world, involving an estimated 2.3 million people, are in Europe and Central Asia. Forced marriages occurring across the region represent a rigidity of gender beliefs that uphold traditional roles for girls and restrict their prospects. Patriarchal attitudes towards girls, including the preservation of "family honour," are often associated with forced and child marriage, as well as poverty rates. Growing crises may also be driving forced marriages in the region. For example, data from the UK highlights that the increased risks of forced marriage created by COVID-19 and pandemic-related restrictions were experienced significantly by children, while their access to identification and support services were limited.⁴ In some countries in Central Asia, the practice of bride kidnapping, or *Ala-Kachuu*, occurs — where men abduct a girl or woman and force them to get married. Despite existing domestic laws and international obligations, the practice is widespread in Kyrgyzstan, with an estimated 12,000 cases taking place a year.⁵

Although these estimates are the most reliable to date, they are conservative given the gaps and limitations of data collection in the region. These estimates do not capture all forms of modern slavery, such as, the recruitment of child soldiers, trafficking for the purposes of organ removal, and all child marriages. Notably, these figures do not capture any impact of the ongoing conflict in Ukraine.⁶

Estimated number living in modern slavery:

6.4 MILLION
(6.9 per thousand)

Regional proportion of global estimate:



Forced labour

64%

Forced marriage

36%

Average vulnerability score:

27%

Average government response rating:

54%

Top 3 countries:
United Kingdom 68%
Netherlands 67%
Portugal 67%

Bottom 3 countries:
Russia 24%
Turkmenistan 26%
Liechtenstein 31%

Table 19
Estimated prevalence and number of people in modern slavery, by country

Regional rank	Country	Estimated prevalence of modern slavery (per 1,000 of population)	Estimated number of people in modern slavery	Population
1	Türkiye	15.6	1,320,000	84,339,000
2	Tajikistan	14.0	133,000	9,538,000
3	Russia	13.0	1,899,000	145,934,000
4	Ukraine	12.8	559,000	43,734,000
5	North Macedonia	12.6	26,000	2,083,000
6	Turkmenistan	11.9	72,000	6,031,000
7	Albania	11.8	34,000	2,878,000
8	Belarus	11.3	107,000	9,449,000
9	Kazakhstan	11.1	208,000	18,777,000
10	Azerbaijan	10.6	107,000	10,139,000
11	Bosnia and Herzegovina	10.1	33,000	3,281,000
12	Moldova	9.5	38,000	4,034,000
13	Armenia	8.9	26,000	2,963,000
14	Kyrgyzstan	8.7	57,000	6,524,000
15	Bulgaria	8.5	59,000	6,948,000
16	Cyprus	8.0	10,000	1,207,000
17	Kosovo	8.0	14,000	1,806,000
18	Georgia	7.8	31,000	3,989,000
19	Slovakia	7.7	42,000	5,460,000
20	Romania	7.5	145,000	19,238,000
21	Uzbekistan	7.4	249,000	33,469,000
22	Serbia	7.0	61,000	8,737,000
23	Hungary	6.6	63,000	9,660,000
24	Greece	6.4	66,000	10,423,000
25	Lithuania	6.1	17,000	2,722,000
26	Poland	5.5	209,000	37,847,000
27	Croatia	5.2	22,000	4,105,000
28	Slovenia	4.4	9,000	2,079,000
29	Czechia	4.2	45,000	10,709,000
30	Estonia	4.1	5,000	1,327,000
31	Portugal	3.8	39,000	10,197,000
32	Israel	3.8	33,000	8,656,000
33	Latvia	3.4	6,000	1,886,000
34	Italy	3.3	197,000	60,462,000
35	Spain	2.3	108,000	46,755,000
36	France	2.1	135,000	65,274,000
37	Austria	1.9	17,000	9,006,000
38	United Kingdom	1.8	122,000	67,886,000
39	Finland	1.4	8,000	5,541,000
40	Ireland	1.1	5,000	4,938,000
41	Belgium	1.0	11,000	11,590,000
42	Denmark	0.6	4,000	5,792,000
43	Sweden	0.6	6,000	10,099,000
44	Netherlands	0.6	10,000	17,135,000
45	Germany	0.6	47,000	83,784,000
46	Norway	0.5	3,000	5,421,000
47	Switzerland	0.5	4,000	8,655,000

The realities of risk and resistance: How one survivor of domestic violence and sex trafficking fought her way home

Katya* is a 25-year-old woman from Belarus. Following her father's death when she was a child, her mother remarried and had another child, after which her mother's attitude towards her changed. Over time, her mother became psychologically abusive, emotionally distant, and would constantly seek to humiliate Katya. This abuse led Katya to spend as little time at home as possible.

After finishing school, Katya took up a job in sales, but her family criticised her for not earning enough money. Feeling unsupported and lost, Katya accepted the offer of a friend who told her about a job in Moscow. She agreed to work in a market, but upon arrival quickly found that the promised job was not real. Instead, after arriving in Russia, Katya was forced into sexual exploitation. Unable to leave, she was subjected to daily physical, sexual, and psychological violence.

After months of living in modern slavery, Katya found an opportunity to escape when a client fell asleep while she was with him. Not willing to let an opportunity for freedom pass her by, Katya jumped out of a second-story window, injuring both her legs in the fall. Luckily, she was assisted in seeking medical attention and, with the help of friends, Katya finally returned to Belarus. Having made a daring escape to fight her way back to her homeland, Katya sought help from a non-governmental organisation and began rebuilding her life.

**Not her real name*



Pitesti, Romania, January 2017.

Adolescent girls who had been exploited by Romanian traffickers operating in Italy, Spain, Germany, and France, greet the psychologist at the shelter. Photo credit: Daniel Mihailescu/AFP via Getty Images.

What drives vulnerability to modern slavery in the region?

Europe and Central Asia is the least vulnerable region in the world to modern slavery. While the region performed relatively well across all dimensions, disenfranchised groups remain particularly vulnerable to modern slavery. Inequality and conflict disproportionately impacted some countries, while vulnerability was further compounded by the COVID-19 pandemic, conflict, and climate-related displacement.

Conflict exacerbates vulnerability to modern slavery⁷ and although it was found to be the lowest driver of vulnerability in the region, it is important to note that Russia's invasion of Ukraine fell outside our data collection period, therefore its impact is not reflected in these findings. The United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR) reports more than 8 million refugees and 5 million internally displaced people in what has become the largest movement of refugees since World War II.⁸ Ukrainian citizens fleeing the conflict are at increased risk of trafficking for various purposes, including sexual and labour exploitation.⁹ Media reports and crisis-response work have highlighted instances of exploitation of women and girls crossing the Russian border and of those in refugee camps.¹⁰ This vulnerability predates and is exacerbated by the war.

“Hundred of thousands of Ukrainian women have been victims of human trafficking. This was the case before the war and the war has only made it worse.”

Robert Biedron, EU lawmaker and chair of the Women's Rights Committee.¹¹

Discrimination against disenfranchised groups on the basis of migration status, race, ethnicity, and/or sexual orientation represents the greatest driver of vulnerability in the Europe and Central Asia region. The region is a source, transit, and destination for significant migrant and refugee populations.

In 2020, more than 71.1 million migrants¹² and 6.7 million refugees¹³ lived in the region. These people often encounter a lack of legal protection and insufficient information about their rights, which increases vulnerability to exploitation and abuse from recruiters, employers, and authorities.¹⁴ Discrimination fuelled by bigotry and xenophobia has also grown alongside mass migration, with black, Muslim, Roma, and Jewish communities in the region often experiencing social exclusion, verbal harassment, and physical attacks.¹⁵ For example, recent reports in Germany,¹⁶ Austria,¹⁷ France,¹⁸ the UK,¹⁹ and elsewhere in Europe²⁰ highlight steep spikes in antisemitism and other hate crimes against Jewish people. In some instances, discrimination against certain groups has been grounded in policy and justified under national security measures, such as increased surveillance of Muslim communities in France, Germany, and Austria.²¹

Governance issues such as corruption drive vulnerability to modern slavery in the region and particularly in Central Asia. Corruption is increasingly prevalent in fragile democratic states throughout Eastern Europe and Central Asia,²² with the subregion performing second lowest in the most recent Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI).²³ Populist governments in Eastern Europe have cracked down severely on the freedoms of expression and assembly needed to call out corruption.²⁴ Additionally, for several years, international bodies and NGOs have condemned state-imposed forced labour in Belarus,²⁵ Poland,²⁶ Russia,²⁷ and Turkmenistan.²⁸ Despite Western Europe and the European Union performing better on governance issues and scoring consistently well on the CPI, progress has stagnated. The neglect or curtailment of accountability and transparency measures resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic have remained unrestored across the subregion, and public trust has fallen in the wake of scandals associated with procurement of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) in response to the pandemic.²⁹ These have included allegations of corruption, overpricing, substandard quality of PPE, and unequal distribution.³⁰

Despite impressive economic growth that has helped halve the number of people living in poverty in the region over the 20 years prior to the COVID-19

pandemic,³¹ economic inequality still leaves many at a stark disadvantage,³² increasing their vulnerability to modern slavery. The impacts of income inequality in some communities include higher rates of health and social problems, such as poor health outcomes, increased poverty and homelessness, and lower levels of economic growth.³³ Inequality will likely increase as the region faces a cost-of-living crisis fuelled by COVID-19, climate change, and most recently the war in Ukraine.³⁴ As food and energy prices surge, already vulnerable populations across Europe and Central Asia will be further impacted. When individuals and families struggle to access basic necessities, they become more vulnerable to exploitation and forced labour. Additionally, the increased demand for food and energy can create opportunities for traffickers and exploiters to take advantage of the situation by profiting from the higher prices. This can lead to the exploitation of vulnerable populations, including forced labour in the agriculture, fishing, and energy sectors.

While some countries such as Norway, Switzerland, and Ireland have made significant progress on gender and income inequality, women in neighbouring countries still face widespread discrimination.³⁵ However, even among countries with strong performances on gender rights measures, domestic and intimate partner violence remains a significant problem, as in the region more broadly.³⁶ Evidence also suggests that this issue has been exacerbated by recent crises across the region, such as the COVID-19 pandemic and Russia's invasion of Ukraine.³⁷ In addition to being paid on average 30 per cent less than their male peers,³⁸ women living in Europe and Central Asia are more likely to work in the informal sector, be irregular migrants, and face greater risks of trafficking and abuse.³⁹

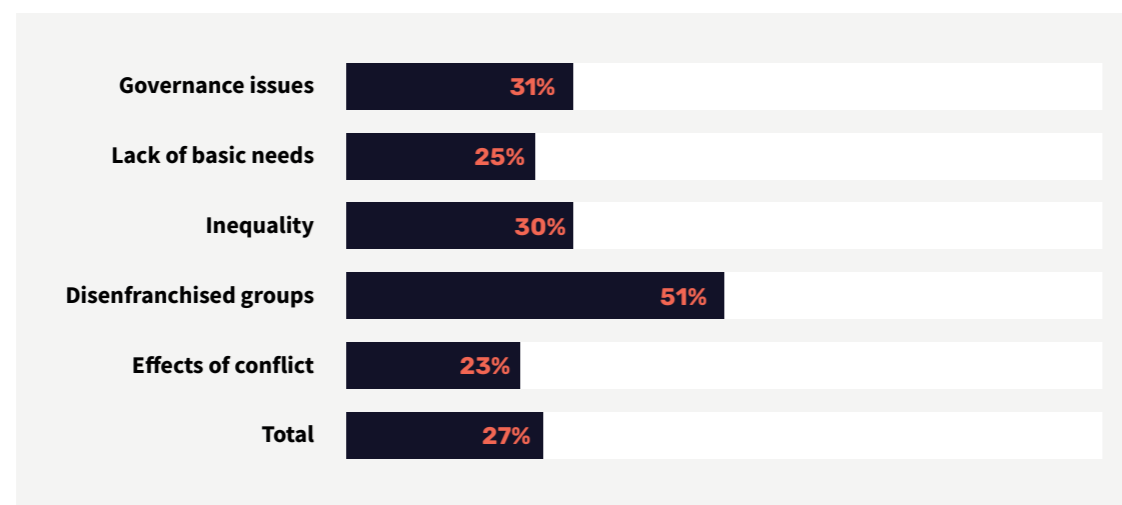
Limited access to basic needs also drives vulnerability to modern slavery. Across the region, the COVID-19 pandemic has had major health, social, and economic impacts on people and communities, as around the world,⁴⁰ which in turn have compounded challenges for already vulnerable populations. For Tajikistan, one of the least economically developed countries in the region, the impact on access to basic needs was felt across the population. Four out of 10 Tajik households reported they were forced to reduce their consumption of food, while one in five families have said they were unable to obtain medical care.⁴¹ An analysis of impacts of the pandemic across the EU revealed educational gaps across low-income families and significant rises in households in arrears.⁴²

Vulnerability to modern slavery in Europe and Central Asia is also exacerbated by the adverse impacts of climate change and climate-related disasters, which in turn are not evenly shared across the region. For example, severe drought has affected many parts of Europe and is expected to expand and worsen,⁴³ which ultimately increases the risk of exploitation and modern slavery through decreased livelihood opportunities and increased migrant flows to and from the region.⁴⁴

Country	Total (%)
Tajikistan	67
Russia	60
Azerbaijan	57
Uzbekistan	56
Kyrgyzstan	55
Türkiye	51
Armenia	48
Ukraine	48
Turkmenistan	47
Kazakhstan	42
Belarus	41
Kosovo	40
Albania	40
North Macedonia	38
Georgia	38
Bosnia and Herzegovina	36
Moldova	36
Israel	35
Serbia	34
Croatia	30
Bulgaria	26
Romania	26
Italy	22
Cyprus	21
Lithuania	21
Greece	21
Poland	19
Hungary	19
Latvia	17
Slovakia	16
Estonia	15
United Kingdom	14
Switzerland	14
France	13
Czechia	13
Belgium	11
Germany	11
Spain	10
Ireland	9
Slovenia	9
Austria	8
Sweden	7
Portugal	6
Netherlands	6
Denmark	6
Finland	5
Norway	1

Table 20
Level of vulnerability to modern slavery, by country

Figure 17
Level of vulnerability to modern slavery, by dimension



Finding cooperation in crisis: Tackling modern slavery in Ukraine after the Russian invasion

In February 2022, Russia launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine, resulting in a displacement and protection crisis on a scale not witnessed in Europe since World War II. Today, 8.1 million refugees⁴⁵ and 5.4 million internally displaced people⁴⁶ require protection and assistance.

Unlike many other global conflicts, where modern slavery is often a neglected protection risk, the response to prevent exploitation was swift and coordinated. For the first time in a humanitarian response, an anti-trafficking response was embedded from the outset in the work of the humanitarian Protection Cluster. By May 2022, the Cluster's Anti-Trafficking Task Force, consisting of over 30 local and international organisations,⁴⁷ was disseminating modern slavery risk information, ensuring that modern slavery was put on the agenda of humanitarian responders, mapping available services, operating hotlines, and establishing referral pathways.⁴⁸

One year on, despite the scale of the crisis, and credible evidence of conflict and displacement exacerbating modern slavery risks and giving rise to new ones, an increase in the number of victims identified in Ukraine and host countries has not been observed.⁴⁹

The Ukraine crisis: an anomaly in the equation that crises = modern slavery?

Crisis responders, including governments, NGOs, international organisations, and UN agencies, have expressed surprise that the projected spike in cases of modern slavery has not occurred. There may be several reasons for this, both positive and negative.

Firstly, the proactive and prolific early warning system about the risks of trafficking, gender-based violence, and exploitation disseminated to conflict-affected people and those on the move may have helped to raise awareness and mitigate the risks of these forms of abuse. Unlike in many conflicts, where government breakdown or collapse creates ideal conditions for traffickers to operate without risk of punishment, in Ukraine, government institutions remain functioning, alongside civil society actors and NGOs, reducing opportunities for offending, and ensuring vulnerable people can access support.

Regionally, for the first time in the European Union's history, the Temporary Protection Directive (TPD) was activated to provide refugees with legal access to entry and stay, freedom of movement, and access to vital protection and assistance. This has enabled refugees from Ukraine to receive emergency health care, education, and employment.⁵⁰ Members of the host communities have volunteered their time

and resources, opened their homes to host refugee families, and donated food, clothing, and other essential items.⁵¹

These internal and regional factors have served preventative and protective functions against compounding risks for conflict-affected and displaced people. They have played an important role in mitigating exploitation risks and have helped to build resilience and strengthen crisis responses.

However, there are several reasons that risks of modern slavery could be higher than currently detected, and that the reduction in the reporting and detection of trafficking cases should still be cause for concern.

Within Ukraine, despite sustained efforts to provide humanitarian assistance to the millions in need, support is stretched. Some populations remain highly vulnerable to exploitation, including women and girls in active fighting zones who are inaccessible to humanitarian responders, and unaccompanied and separated children and child-headed households, who are not receiving sufficient practical assistance.⁵² For Ukrainian men, previously vulnerable to forced labour, the decision to bar them from leaving the country — while potentially stemming the flow of labour exploitation abroad — may be forcing some into irregular and dangerous routes and could reduce their likelihood of coming forward to be identified and receive assistance.⁵³

Regionally, four million refugees have not formally registered for the support and protection under the TDP. Some refugees, particularly those from minority groups, are sometimes refused registration due to lack of documentation. Many Ukrainian children, particularly unaccompanied and separated children, and children previously in institutions, also remain unregistered and unmonitored.⁵⁴ The lack of oversight over these two hugely vulnerable groups may be impacting our understanding of what exploitation is occurring.

It is possible that victims and survivors may not be ready to come forward, or that ongoing challenges associated with the conflict will go on to impact levels of modern slavery in Ukraine and the region. These challenges include the depletion of resources, dwindling access to goods, reduced access to affordable accommodation, loss of documentation, and family separation. In many hosting countries, the gap between social benefit payments and potentially lucrative work offered by unscrupulous employers or traffickers may become too good to refuse.⁵⁵ In addition, the potential for donor, host state, and community compassion fatigue could also make it difficult to sustain effective responses to this ongoing crisis.

Recommendations for governments

Approximately two billion people, equating to over a quarter of the world's population, currently live in conflict-affected countries.⁵⁶ There is much to be learnt from the swift, coordinated, and compassionate response to the Ukrainian people and the impact this has had to date on reducing anticipated cases of modern slavery. It is vital these lessons be applied to some of the most neglected conflicts across the globe, where thousands of victims of modern slavery, and people at risk of exploitation, remain trapped, displaced, and unassisted.

Governments must:

- 1** Extend social assistance and benefits to refugees without conditions, especially to those who are unable to secure employment, to help minimise risks of modern slavery. Such assistance may include facilitating accreditation of licenses for refugees, expanding employment opportunities, and providing free or subsidised childcare and free language classes to increase employability, foster integration, and reduce risks.
- 2** Strengthen screening at borders and at all stages of the asylum or registration process with the support of UN agencies and specialised NGOs to ensure that vulnerabilities and risks are identified and addressed.
- 3** Address the issue of discrimination against non-Ukrainian nationals and Roma people fleeing Ukraine and improve their access to rights and services, including access to registration and safe and suitable accommodation.
- 4** Individual safety should be prioritised over immigration. Investigation and prosecution should be decoupled from accessing protection and services for survivors of modern slavery or for those identified as at risk of exploitation, ensuring timely referral and access to asylum procedures, with provision of free counseling on rights to international protection or asylum.
- 5** Strengthen government oversight over care and accommodation of unaccompanied or separated children (UASC), particularly children coming from institutions, and strengthen best interest assessments where return is being considered. Strengthen support to guardians and carers of UASC to ensure adequate care and support is provided.

Walk Free is proud to support the work of the Global Protection Cluster (GPC), a network of nongovernmental organisations, international organisations and United Nations agencies, engaged in protection work in humanitarian crises, including armed conflict and disasters. The GPC is led by UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency. Walk Free have supported the GPC to improve anti-trafficking action in crisis contexts since 2020.

What are governments in the region doing to address modern slavery?

Walk Free assessed government responses to modern slavery across 52 countries in Europe and Central Asia. Overall, the Europe and Central Asia region continues to have the strongest response to modern slavery, scoring an average 54 per cent rating among countries. Responses to modern slavery vary significantly within the region and there remains a relatively higher level of political will to address modern slavery in Europe, in part driven by regional and multilateral coordination bodies which hold governments to account and monitor their responses.

GDP per capita PPP (current international \$) varied greatly across the region,⁵⁷ meaning certain economies have far more resources available to dedicate to responding to modern slavery than others. Overall, the countries with the strongest government response to modern slavery are those with a higher level of wealth, such as the top-ranking countries in the region and globally — the UK and the Netherlands. However, notable outliers are present. For example, Liechtenstein and Iceland, despite having some of the highest GDP per capita in the region and as such having relatively more resources to combat modern slavery, were among the nine governments taking the least action in the region. Both countries scored poorly on indicators relating to national, regional, and cross-border coordination and tackling forced labour in government and business supply chains. Conversely, while Albania and Georgia are among the region's

countries with lower levels of GDP per capita, they have shown relatively stronger government responses to modern slavery, with both countries scoring highly on addressing risk factors.

Strong government responses in the region are typically characterised by robust criminal justice mechanisms and effective identification and support to survivors of modern slavery. The countries with the strongest government response scored high on indicators related to criminal justice mechanisms, highlighting their function to effectively prevent modern slavery. Conversely, it is concerning that more than half of the countries in the region did not have laws in place that recognise that survivors should not be treated as criminals for conduct that occurred while under control of criminals. Treating survivors as criminals not only fails to acknowledge the exploitation they have faced, but it also creates additional barriers to accessing support and justice. This approach also undermines the EU Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings, which states that the “rights and dignity” of trafficking survivors must be respected and that they should not be penalised for their involvement in criminal activities that are a direct result of their trafficking situation.

“Police need more training on the signs for victims. Many don’t know what the signs are — they take the word of the trafficker over the victim.”

Male survivor of modern slavery, United Kingdom, 2018

Restricting routes, reducing protections: Impact of recent changes to UK immigration policy

Recent changes to the UK’s immigration policy, particularly post-Brexit, have been criticised for putting vulnerable people at greater risk of exploitation and modern slavery. The shift towards a more hostile and discriminatory environment has made it increasingly difficult for vulnerable people to access essential support and services.⁵⁸ The criminalisation of immigration offences and the tightening of immigration laws⁵⁹ has led to individuals not coming forward and reporting instances of modern slavery out of fear of being arrested and deported. This allows traffickers to operate with impunity, putting people at even greater risk of abuse and exploitation. In March 2023, the UK government proposed the Illegal Immigration Bill,⁶⁰ which aims to detain and swiftly remove anyone entering the country “illegally.” In its current form, the bill contravenes the UN Refugee Convention,⁶¹ which the UK government has ratified, and could prevent modern slavery victims from reaching safety and accessing support.⁶² The increasing curtailment of clear and accessible pathways to safe and legal migration leaves people vulnerable to exploitation by traffickers and other criminal networks.⁶³ As such, the recent changes to UK immigration policy pose a serious threat to the safety and well-being of people who are vulnerable to modern slavery.

Throughout Europe and Central Asia, Turkmenistan and Russia have the weakest responses to modern slavery. This is characterised by limited action to address underlying risk and drivers of modern slavery. In general, this reflects a combination of limited political will and a lack of resources, which means these governments do not prioritise the response to modern slavery. Our assessment of government responses also reflects evidence of state-imposed forced labour in both countries, as well as in Belarus and Poland. In Turkmenistan, reports highlight forced labour being used as a method of mobilising labour for the purpose of economic development; and as a means of labour discipline, tens of thousands of adults are forced to pick cotton, and farmers forced to fulfil state-established quotas, under the threat of penalty.⁶⁴ In Poland, abuse of prison labour for private interests has been reported.⁶⁵ In Russia, an initiative has been approved by the prison service and several government bodies for prisoners to exchange confinement for labour on major construction projects.⁶⁶ More than a third of the country’s total prison population are eligible, while it is unclear how voluntary this labour is and if it will be paid.⁶⁷ Further, there have been reports of North Koreans in forced labour within the construction and agriculture industries in Russia, with migrant workers sending the majority of their earnings back to North Korea to help prop up the regime.⁶⁸ Abuse of prison labour occurs in Belarus⁶⁹ while so-called medical labour centres⁷⁰ see citizens struggling with drug addiction forced to work as part of their recovery.

Encouragingly, for the first time in 11 consecutive years of monitoring forced child and adult labour in Uzbekistan’s cotton fields, the latest reports found that state-imposed forced labour during the country’s cotton harvest no longer occurs.⁷¹ This is due to central government policy, international pressure, and national awareness raising of the illegality of forced labour.⁷² In other countries across the region, modern slavery responses have been undermined by state authorities. While most countries have criminalised corruption, reports of official complicity in modern slavery cases failed to be investigated in 14 countries. This includes reported instances in Bulgaria, where police officers have not been investigated for allegedly taking payments to turn a blind eye towards women exploited in commercial sex.⁷³

Albania, Portugal, and Ireland have all taken further action to combat modern slavery since the previous assessment of government responses in 2018.⁷⁴ Recent developments have occurred in Albania, with the government operating one specialised shelter and allocating US\$175,390 to NGO-run shelters in 2020 to support staff salaries.⁷⁵ Additionally, in Portugal, guidelines were published to outline that frontline responders, including police and NGOs, could identify and refer presumed victims to services.⁷⁶



Berlin, Germany, August 2017.

Two of four accused cover their faces during a trial against them where they are accused of trafficking people from Hungary and Austria into Germany. Photo: Gregor Fischer/dpa via Getty Images.

Significant gaps remain in legal frameworks to combat modern slavery across Europe and Central Asia. Thirty-four countries have failed to criminalise forced labour and 29 countries have failed to criminalise forced marriage. Both Cyprus and Malta were the latest countries to criminalise forced marriage since the last Global Slavery Index in 2018. Although 14 countries in the region have ratified the ILO Protocol of 2014 to the Forced Labour Convention, 1930 since 2018, overall ratification remains disappointing, with 23 countries in the region failing to do so. Other critical gaps across the region include uptake of the ILO Domestic Workers Convention, 2011 (No. 189) and the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of their Families, 1990.

Where countries have enacted legislation or put in place relevant policies, implementation is not always consistent. Gaps in services appeared across the region, with 15 countries failing to provide services to all survivors. For example, in Serbia,⁷⁷ Germany,⁷⁸ and Hungary,⁷⁹ among others, services for men and children were inconsistent. Further, despite National Action Plans existing in 41 countries, only 11 governments fully funded activities within these plans and just 10 countries monitored their implementation through an independent entity. Most recently, in October 2020, the Irish government appointed the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission as the independent national rapporteur responsible for monitoring human trafficking policy and data collection.⁸⁰

“There needs to be some sort of global standard of aftercare to avoid re-trafficking.”

Female survivor of modern slavery, United Kingdom, 2018

Given the significant migrant flows across the region, cross-border collaboration on issues specifically related to modern slavery is integral. Encouragingly, most governments in the region did cooperate bilaterally in some way, either through repatriation efforts or labour migration agreements, and often this is facilitated through EU agreements. These agreements can help to prevent exploitation and modern slavery, as they can provide a legal framework for movement and workers' rights. However, 35 countries did not have systems in place to allow asylum seekers to seek protection or there was evidence of systematic discrimination, detention, and/or deportation of these groups. This includes countries in the region with some of the largest asylum seeker populations, including Germany, the UK, Greece, Armenia, and Spain. For example, in April 2022, the UK announced plans to deport to Rwanda asylum seekers from that country who enter the UK using “irregular routes,” such as on small boats or in the backs of trucks.⁸¹ Although the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) stepped in to issue injunctions that halted deportation flights,⁸² a judicial review published in December 2022 found the policy to be lawful.⁸³ The scheme has been justified by the UK government as a way to deter people making dangerous journeys; however, the numbers crossing have not fallen since the policy was announced. More than 45,000 people used irregular routes like this to come to the UK in 2022, the highest figure since records began.⁸⁴



Kherson, Ukraine, November 2022.

Since the start of the invasion, staff at a children's hospital in Kherson have protected a group of 10 orphans between the ages of two months and three years old, after hearing that occupying authorities were forcibly removing children to Crimea and Russia. There are allegedly thousands of such abductions, including 46 from the local orphanage where these children lived prior to the invasion. The whereabouts of these missing children remains unknown. Photo credit: Chris McGrath via Getty Images.

Country	Survivors identified and supported (%)	Criminal justice mechanisms (%)	National and regional level coordination (%)	Risk factors are addressed (%)	Government and business supply chains (%)	Total (%)
United Kingdom	59	81	75	71	38	68
Netherlands	77	62	88	64	38	67
Portugal	73	73	75	64	25	67
Ireland	59	69	88	64	25	63
Norway	55	73	75	64	38	63
Spain	55	73	75	71	25	63
Sweden	59	69	63	79	25	63
Albania	55	69	75	79	13	62
Austria	59	65	75	71	25	62
Denmark	64	65	75	64	25	62
France	41	81	88	57	38	62
Georgia	68	65	75	71	0	62
Germany	50	81	63	57	38	62
Greece	68	62	75	64	25	62
Finland	55	62	88	71	25	60
Montenegro	68	73	63	57	0	60
Azerbaijan	64	69	63	64	0	59
Belgium	45	65	75	71	38	59
Croatia	59	65	75	64	13	59
Czechia	59	62	88	57	25	59
Italy	50	65	63	79	25	59
Latvia	64	65	63	57	25	59
Bosnia and Herzegovina	68	65	63	57	0	58
Cyprus	64	62	63	57	25	58
Lithuania	59	65	50	64	25	58
North Macedonia	68	65	75	50	0	58
Romania	59	65	75	50	25	58
Slovakia	50	62	63	79	25	58
Estonia	59	46	75	79	25	56
Serbia	64	69	63	50	0	56
Slovenia	50	65	63	64	25	56
Bulgaria	50	65	63	57	25	55
Hungary	50	58	63	71	25	55
Poland	50	65	75	50	25	55
Armenia	64	58	75	50	0	54
Luxembourg	50	62	50	50	25	51
Ukraine	64	54	63	50	0	51
Switzerland	50	50	50	64	25	50
Malta	64	58	38	29	25	49
Türkiye	64	54	63	36	0	49
Belarus	64	50	38	50	0	47
Iceland	55	50	38	50	25	47
Kyrgyzstan	41	65	63	43	0	47
Moldova	45	50	63	57	13	47
Kazakhstan	45	50	50	64	0	46
Uzbekistan	45	54	50	57	0	46
Israel	41	50	63	57	0	45
Kosovo	59	50	50	36	0	45
Tajikistan	23	54	50	36	0	36
Liechtenstein	27	42	25	29	13	31
Turkmenistan	14	46	25	21	0	26
Russia	5	46	38	21	0	24

Table 21
Government response score, by country and milestone

Dunkirk, France, October 2022.

A migrant man carrying a child runs to board a smuggler's boat and attempt to cross the English Channel, while smugglers stand behind him. Many people, forced by circumstance, take dangerous journeys to find a better life in the UK. However, hostile attitudes towards migrants and refugees are increasing their vulnerability to exploitation. Photo credit: Sameer Al-Doumya/AFP via Getty Images.



European migration policies in response to the crises in Libya have also been criticised for their hostility and focus on border enforcement and control.⁸⁵ From 2020 to 2021, there was a 90 per cent increase in those attempting the crossing from Libya to EU countries.⁸⁶ The safe and legal options for those seeking to flee humanitarian crises across Africa via Libya are limited and have been further impeded by the European Union's support of the Libyan coastguard and its intercepting of those fleeing and returning them to Libya, where they are vulnerable to being bought and sold in slave markets.⁸⁷ Such policies appear to be addressing the sentiments of European audiences at the expense of Libyan stakeholders and local vulnerable groups. Similar border management measures have been implemented by the EU and its member states with other African countries in recent years in an attempt to limit irregular migration from the region, such as an €80 million (approximately US\$87 million) deal signed with Egypt in October 2022. Egypt is likely to see intensified flows of migrants in the medium to long term as a result of regional instability, climate change, demographic shifts, and a lack of economic opportunities.⁸⁸ By limiting safe legal pathways for migrants, modern slavery, and exploitation risks will rise considerably.

Other examples of rights curtailments across the Europe and Central Asia region include labour laws in 12 countries preventing certain groups from

exercising their rights to freedom of association and collective bargaining. For example, in Israel, prison staff do not have the right to form and join unions, nor do self-employed workers.⁸⁹ In Denmark, certain groups of non-resident foreign workers do not have the right to collective bargaining.⁹⁰

The Europe and Central Asia region scored poorly on indicators relating to government and business supply chains, although countries in the Europe subregion have among the strongest legislative responses globally in this area. France,⁹¹ Germany,⁹² and Norway⁹³ have active mandatory Human Rights Due Diligence (mHRDD) legislation while the same type of legislation has been proposed Switzerland⁹⁴ and the Netherlands.⁹⁵ What this means in practice in Norway, for example, is that all Norwegian-domiciled "larger enterprises" (as determined by size and income thresholds) are required to carry out due diligence in identifying, preventing, and mitigating possible adverse impacts on human rights and labour rights. Failure to do so results in fines and/or injunctions. Encouragingly, progress in this area is likely to grow in the region. An EU Directive on Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence (CSDD), including environmental concerns, was proposed in 2022 but has not yet been adopted.⁹⁶ It would require in-scope companies to conduct due diligence on the human rights and environmental impacts of their operations and supply chains, and to take steps to address adverse impacts.

Promising Practices in Europe and Central Asia

Within the Promising Practices Database, just over 20 per cent of evaluated programs were delivered within Europe and Central Asia, covering 36 countries in the region. The majority of programs focus on industries where there are known modern slavery risks, such as sex work, agriculture, and domestic work. Seventy per cent of evaluated programs in the region targeted human trafficking, followed by the worst forms of child labour. The most common activities delivered within the evaluated programs included awareness-raising campaigns, policy advocacy, and technical support for the government. Almost 75 per cent of evaluated programs in the region met some or all of their objectives.

Notably, none of the evaluated programs in Europe and Central Asia that had some success featured a reliable evaluation methodology that included a control or comparison group to test the veracity of these positive outcomes. This severely limits the insights able to be drawn on what works to end modern slavery in Europe and Central Asia.

Recommendations for governments

- 1** Strengthen efforts to protect vulnerable populations in situations of conflict and disaster from modern slavery risks, including repealing hostile migration policies that place securitisation above human rights and expanding the provision of safe and regular migration pathways and screening asylum seekers and migrants for modern slavery indicators. This should include ending political, financial, and material support to the system of forcible returns from international waters in the Central Mediterranean Sea to Libya.
- 2** Ensure that the right of survivors to not be treated as criminals for conduct that occurred while under the control of traffickers is enshrined in legislation.
- 3** Enhance efforts to prevent discrimination against certain populations — such as Muslim, Roma, and Jewish people — and ensure that state policies serve to further integrate rather than target these communities.
- 4** Ensure that legal loopholes that facilitate state-imposed forced labour are closed and that the practice is abolished in Belarus, Poland, Russia, and Turkmenistan.
- 5** Expand enactment of mHRDD laws across the region to place more robust requirements on companies to report on identifying and mitigating modern slavery in their supply chains.