

2025 Trafficking in Persons Report: Bosnia and Herzegovina

BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA (Tier 2)

The Government of Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) does not fully meet the minimum standards for the elimination of trafficking but is making significant efforts to do so. The government demonstrated overall increasing efforts compared with the previous reporting period; therefore, BiH remained on Tier 2. These efforts included the state, Federation of BiH (Federation) and the Republika Srpska (RS) entities, and Brcko District (BD) investigating more trafficking cases, and the State Prosecutor's Office (SPO) hiring a prosecutor specialized in trafficking. The government significantly increased funding to NGO-run shelters and adopted guidelines to implement victim-centered prosecutions and guidelines for issuing restitution for trafficking victims as a part of criminal proceedings. RS authorities developed specific SOPs for identification, referral, and victim assistance within the RS, and the government adopted the 2024-2027 Strategy to Combat Trafficking. However, the government did not meet the minimum standards in several key areas. RS courts have not convicted any traffickers in three years, and law enforcement continued to lack capacity, which hindered its ability to conduct effective investigations. The RS Supreme Court acquitted a suspected trafficker by justifying potential forced child begging involving the Romani community as traditional cultural practices and customs. While first responders increasingly identified victims from the Romani community, some authorities continued not to investigate cases of potential forced child begging involving members of the Romani community but rather justified them as traditional cultural practices and customs and returned children to their families, even when their parents were involved in their exploitation. The government continued to lack capacity to provide comprehensive victim assistance after the largest government-funded NGO-run shelter closed in January 2024. Some cantonal governments did not budget honorariums for regional monitoring teams (RMTs), which hindered participation and coordination.

PRIORITIZED RECOMMENDATIONS: ✓

- Vigorously investigate and prosecute trafficking crimes, including those involving complicit officials, and seek adequate penalties for convicted traffickers, which should involve significant prison terms.
- Increase partnerships with NGO-run shelters and strengthen victim service provisions.
- Train first responders on victim identification and referral and increase proactive identification efforts, particularly among migrants, refugees, asylum-seekers, and members of the Romani community.
- Increase resources, personnel, and training for law enforcement to investigate complex trafficking cases.
- Provide training and support for NGO-run shelters to meet minimum standards, particularly for children.
- Establish and implement policies to formally disconnect identification procedures and recognition of official victim status from a victims' willingness to cooperate in investigations and prosecutions.
- Establish procedures to ensure trafficking cases are handled by trained prosecutors.
- Implement victim-centered approaches in prosecutions and strengthen access to justice, such as allocating sufficient funding for NGOs providing legal assistance.
- Train judges on restitution in criminal cases, establish procedures to seize assets from traffickers, and create effective methods to allocate restitution in a timely manner.
- Integrate Romani advocates into decision-making processes in anti-trafficking efforts.
- Budget and disburse honorariums for all RMTs.

- Implement recommendations from the independent evaluation of the 2020-2023 national strategy.
- Appoint a permanent national anti-trafficking coordinator.

PROSECUTION ✓

The government maintained anti-trafficking law enforcement efforts.

BiH consisted of two entities within the state – the Federation of BiH and the RS – and the BD. Each entity has political, legislative, and judicial authority. BD was a self-governing area under the jurisdiction of the state. Entity-level authorities addressed domestic trafficking offenses internal to their areas of responsibility, and state-level authorities addressed cases with international aspects. Article 186 of the state-level criminal code criminalized sex trafficking and labor trafficking only in cases where the victim was exploited in a country in which he or she did not reside or have citizenship; it prescribed penalties of one to 10 years' imprisonment. Articles 210a and 210b of the Federation's criminal code criminalized sex and labor trafficking and prescribed a minimum penalty of five years' imprisonment. Article 145 of RS's criminal code criminalized sex and labor trafficking and prescribed a minimum penalty of three years' imprisonment. Article 146 of RS's criminal code criminalized child trafficking and prescribed penalties between five to 20 years. Article 207a of BD's criminal code criminalized sex and labor trafficking and prescribed a minimum penalty of five years' imprisonment. These penalties were sufficiently stringent and, with regard to sex trafficking, commensurate with those prescribed for other grave crimes, such as rape.

In 2024, the SPO investigated one sex trafficking case and one labor trafficking case, compared with no investigations in 2023. The SPO prosecuted two defendants for labor trafficking, compared with four defendants in 2023. State-level courts convicted two sex traffickers, compared with six traffickers in 2023. State-level courts sentenced one trafficker to 11 years' imprisonment and the other trafficker to 10 years' imprisonment. Federation authorities investigated 17 suspects in 12 cases, compared with eight suspects in six cases in 2023. Federation authorities prosecuted six defendants (three for sex trafficking and three for labor trafficking), compared with no prosecutions in 2023. Federation courts convicted 13 traffickers (four for sex trafficking and nine for labor trafficking), compared with 18 traffickers in 2023. Federation judges issued sentences ranging from one year to one year and six months' imprisonment for the four sex traffickers and sentences ranging from five years to ten years' imprisonment for the nine labor traffickers. RS authorities did not initiate any investigations, compared with three suspects in two cases in 2023. RS authorities prosecuted one defendant in both 2024 and 2023. RS courts did not convict any traffickers for the third consecutive year. BD authorities investigated five suspects in three cases, compared with three suspects in two cases in 2023. BD authorities prosecuted three defendants (one for sex trafficking and two for labor trafficking), compared with no prosecutions in 2023. BD courts did not convict any traffickers, compared with two convictions in 2023. While Federation courts increasingly issued sentences with significant prison terms, particularly for labor trafficking, the RS Supreme Court acquitted a suspected trafficker by justifying potential forced child begging and forced child labor involving members of the Romani community as traditional cultural practices and customs. Additionally, the government reported some traffickers avoided imprisonment by utilizing a provision in the criminal code that allowed convicted perpetrators to buy their way out of up to one year of imprisonment for 100 convertible marks (\$53) per day. The government did not report any investigations, prosecutions, or convictions of government employees complicit in human trafficking crimes.

The State Investigation and Protection Agency (SIPA) maintained an operational team with 20 officers across four regional offices. In the Federation, Tuzla Canton maintained a specialized trafficking unit in addition to trafficking liaison officers in all police units within the canton. Sarajevo Canton assigned two police officers within each of the seven police stations as liaison officers. Other Federation cantons, the RS, and BD did not have specialized police officers, but organized crime and corruption units investigated trafficking. The SPO maintained the Department for Combating Trafficking in Human Beings and Illegal Migration and hired an additional

specialized prosecutor in 2024 with a total of five specialized prosecutors and one specialized investigator. In the Federation, each canton maintained a prosecutor specialized in trafficking, and one prosecutor coordinated efforts across cantons. BD also maintained one prosecutor specialized in trafficking. While RS prosecutors at the central-level had jurisdiction over trafficking cases, observers reported district prosecutors did not have the knowledge, capacity, and/or experience to identify trafficking cases and refer them to central-level prosecutors. As a result, RS, but also Federation and BD authorities, continued to investigate and prosecute sex trafficking, forced begging, and trafficking cases involving family members under offenses with lesser penalties, such as “enticement to prostitution,” “child negligence,” and “enticement to child prostitution.” Law enforcement officials continued to report lack of capacity, resources, and technical knowledge hindered their ability to conduct effective investigations. For example, the government reported difficulties in meeting the evidentiary requirement of trafficking due to a lack of resources and knowledge to conduct specialized investigative measures to corroborate victim testimony. Police experienced obstacles in investigating trafficking crimes involving multiple cantons or entities due to a lack of communication and coordination between prosecutors in different jurisdictions. The Chief State Prosecutor chaired the anti-trafficking strike force (strike force) that coordinated law enforcement efforts across entities on trafficking cases. The strike force met monthly, and the government allocated 80,000 convertible marks (\$42,560) for honorariums and operational expenses for strike force members in both 2024 and 2023. The SPO cooperated with authorities from Germany, Montenegro, and Serbia on trafficking cases. Police academies maintained basic courses on trafficking, and the government, with financial and technical assistance from NGOs and international organizations, trained police, border police, prosecutors, and judges on various trafficking issues.

PROTECTION ✓

The government slightly increased victim protection efforts.

The government and NGOs identified 37 victims in both 2024 and 2023. Of the 37 victims, traffickers exploited 23 in labor trafficking and 14 in an unspecified type of trafficking; five were women, seven were men, 11 were girls, and 14 were boys; and 13 were foreign nationals. The government maintained two bylaws which provided SOPs for identifying and referring victims to services, including a list of general indicators. In 2024, RS authorities developed specific SOPs for identification, referral, and victim assistance within the RS. Observers continued to report some first responders did not know or consistently use the guidelines and lacked the knowledge to accurately identify trafficking victims. The government, with financial and technical assistance from an NGO, maintained eight mobile identification teams (MITs) that conducted outreach to vulnerable populations. MITs consisted of police officers and social workers, including three mediators from the Romani community. MITs identified 20 potential victims (33 in 2023) vulnerable to trafficking, primarily children. Observers reported first responders increasingly identified victims from the Romani community; however, some Roma potential victims remained unidentified as officials considered forced child begging and forced child labor as traditional cultural practices and customs. The government, in cooperation with international organizations and NGOs, continued to train border police and staff from the Service for Foreigners’ Affairs (SFA) on identifying victims within migration flows; the government identified one victim within the migrant population accommodated at temporary reception centers (none in 2023). First responders referred potential trafficking victims to law enforcement, which conducted interviews and had authority to officially recognize victims. However, observers reported the interview and identification procedures lacked transparency, and authorities often required victims to cooperate with investigations and prosecutions to receive assistance and support.

The government maintained an MOU with four NGO-run shelters to provide victim assistance, and the State Anti-trafficking Coordinator administered a victim protection fund for the NGO-run shelters; the government allocated 210,000 convertible marks (\$111,700) to the NGO-run shelters, a significant increase compared with 130,000 convertible marks (\$69,150) in 2023. However, the largest NGO-run shelter closed in January 2024. The government, in cooperation with NGO-run

shelters, provided accommodation, psycho-social support, medical assistance, food and hygiene, and legal assistance. The government's capacity to accommodate and provide assistance decreased from approximately 150 to 64 trafficking victims after the largest NGO-run shelter closed. The closure resulted in the relocation of victims, causing family separation and re-traumatization of victims in previous reporting periods. Observers reported staff in some NGO-run shelters were not trained to work with trafficking victims, particularly child victims. NGO-run shelters also provided services to domestic violence victims, which further limited accommodation and specialized services available for trafficking victims.

NGO-run shelters assisted 24 victims (34 in 2023). Centers for social welfare (CSW) also operated seven drop-in centers for children, which provided academic tutoring, food, and laundry services; drop-in centers assisted 232 children (243 in 2023). However, drop-in centers lacked resources, capacity, and staff and could only provide basic food, workshops, and short-term accommodation for a small number of children. The government maintained standards on providing assistance to victims, particularly children, and a commission to inspect NGO-run shelters to ensure the minimum standards were met before allocating annual funding. NGO-run shelters allowed victims from BiH to leave voluntarily after informing the staff and law enforcement, but foreign victims required approval from law enforcement and SFA. The minimum standards required each child victim be appointed a guardian from the CSW and accommodated in a separate, dedicated facility. However, observers reported guardians often failed to offer necessary services to child victims, and guardians often only participated in interviews with law enforcement. One NGO-run shelter accommodated male trafficking victims but did not offer specialized services for trafficking victims. NGO-run shelters reported developing a reintegration plan for each victim, including vocational training, but observers reported victims spent, at times, multiple years at shelters due to slow court proceedings and a lack of reintegration opportunities. The law provided repatriation assistance to BiH citizens identified abroad and foreigners identified in BiH; no victim required repatriation assistance in 2024 or 2023. Foreign victims were eligible for a humanitarian visa allowing them to temporarily reside and work in BiH, and victims were permitted a 30-day reflection period to determine whether they wanted to request a visa; the government issued a humanitarian visa to one victim (none in 2023).

The government reported its SOPs incorporated non-penalization standards. Sub-state laws against "enticement to prostitution" permitted law enforcement to treat children 14 years and older as juveniles willingly engaging in commercial sex instead of victims of rape or sex trafficking. The law provided for victim-witness assistance, but lower courts did not possess necessary technical equipment to organize testimonies with adequate protection and confidentiality measures. The law provided free legal aid, and the government operated legal aid centers; however, it lacked specialization and capacity to assist trafficking victims. As a result, NGOs provided most of the free legal aid. The government did not consistently conduct victim-centered investigations and prosecutions. For example, the government did not require prosecutors to have a certification on how to work with children, and child victims sometimes faced their traffickers in the waiting room before they were escorted to the court room, causing re-traumatization and/or creating opportunities to threaten and intimidate victims. NGOs reported judicial authorities or judges interviewed child victims only in the presence of social workers or psychologists and provided a separate room from which the child victim provided testimony during the trial. However, experts noted some victims' attorneys were not informed in a timely manner, or at all, by the court or prosecutors when medical experts conducted assessments of child victims. The government adopted guidelines to limit the number of interviews victims were required to provide during criminal proceedings. Separately, the government adopted guidelines for prosecutors and courts to issue restitution for trafficking victims as a part of criminal proceedings. A RS court issued restitution of 5,000 convertible marks (\$2,660) for a victim; however, the victim has not yet received the restitution. No victim has successfully received restitution to date, and judges generally rejected restitution in criminal proceedings and encouraged victims to seek compensation by filing civil suits. Observers reported civil suits required victims to submit new testimonies and medical examinations – causing re-traumatization – despite the government convicting the trafficker(s) in criminal proceedings.

PREVENTION ✓

The government maintained prevention efforts.

In October 2024, the government adopted the 2024-2027 Strategy to Combat Trafficking. The State Coordinator coordinated anti-trafficking efforts and monitored the implementation of the strategy; however, the State Coordinator resigned in May 2024, and the position remained vacant. The government maintained 18 RMTs: 11 in the Federation (10 cantonal and one at the Federation entity level), six in the RS, and one in BD. RMTs consisted of law enforcement, government, and NGO representatives (in some RMTs only) and a Ministry of Interior official as the coordinator. Five cantonal governments in the Federation allocated honorariums for RMT members to encourage participation. For example, Sarajevo Canton approved and disbursed honorariums of 300 convertible marks (\$160) per month for each RMT member for an annual total of 72,000 convertible marks (\$38,300). Herzegovina Neretva Canton also allocated 200 convertible marks (\$106) for each RMT member for an annual total of 19,200 convertible marks (\$10,210). However, BD and five cantonal governments failed to budget honorariums, and activities of RMTs varied widely with some participants reporting difficulties in dedicating time to participate or coordinate RMTs, particularly with no honorariums and additional work duties. The government allocated 10,000 convertible marks (\$5,320) to local NGOs to conduct an awareness campaign during European Anti-Trafficking Day. State-level institutions regulated recruitment agencies and required agencies to obtain a license and register, but labor inspectors lacked resources to adequately inspect recruitment agencies and did not report if they inspected any agencies. The government did not make efforts to reduce the demand for commercial sex acts. The government did not provide anti-trafficking training for its diplomatic personnel.

TRAFFICKING PROFILE: ✓

Trafficking affects all communities. This section summarizes government and civil society reporting on the nature and scope of trafficking over the past five years. Human traffickers exploit BiH women and girls in sex trafficking within the country in private residences and motels. Traffickers exploit Romani children in forced begging, forced criminality, sex trafficking, and domestic servitude in forced marriages. In 2024, traffickers exploited foreign victims from Afghanistan, Croatia, Germany, Russia, and Türkiye in BiH. In previous years, officials identified victims from Cuba, The Gambia, Libya, Pakistan, Philippines, Serbia, Sri Lanka, Uruguay, and neighboring Balkan countries in BiH. Women and girls from other European countries are vulnerable to sex trafficking within the country. Migrants and refugees from Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq, Morocco, Pakistan, Syria, and neighboring countries traveling through, stranded in, or being smuggled through BiH are vulnerable to trafficking, particularly women and unaccompanied children. Traffickers exploit BiH victims in sex trafficking and forced labor in construction and other sectors in other countries across Europe.