

SHORT REPORT

ANALYSIS OF THE INFLUENCE OF COVID-19 ON MIGRATION IN THE MARRI PARTICIPANTS



This report was prepared by International Advisory Products and Systems (i-APS), in partnership with KS-APS (Kosovo Advisory products and Systems), for MARRI RC (Migration, Asylum, Refugee Regional Initiative Regional Center) for the project: Preventing and Combating Trafficking in Human Beings, commissioned by the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) and implemented by the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) and MARRI as a strategic partner. The opinions expressed in this analysis/study are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the MARRI Regional Centre or GIZ.

INTRODUCTION

The MARRI Initiative has served as a hub for migration in the MARRI region (Albania, North Macedonia, Bosnia & Herzegovina, Serbia, Montenegro, and Kosovo*) since 2003. During 2020, the presence of COVID-19 had a significant impact on migration in the MARRI region affecting refugees, asylum seekers, migrants and victims of trafficking. As a result, the MARRI Regional Centre initiated the study “Analyses of COVID-19 influence on migration in the MARRI Participants” which was conducted within the regional project Preventing and Combating Trafficking in Human Beings financed by BMZ and implemented by GIZ and MARRI as strategic partner. . The study identifies the gaps and needs of key migration stakeholders in adapting to the pandemic. In response to the findings of this research, the study recommends actions for more efficient implementation of World Health Organization (WHO) recommendations.

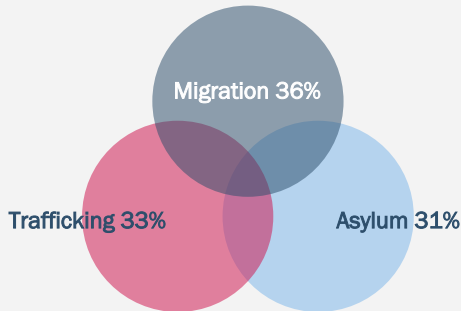
Respondents' thoughts associated with the word “pandemic”



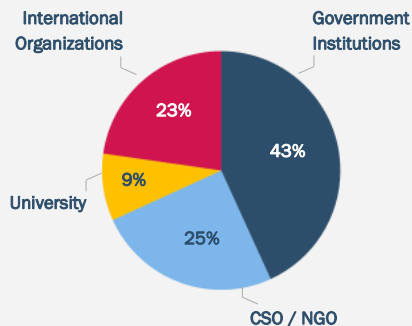
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METHODOLOGY

Research tools were designed to provide analysis of the COVID-19 influence on migration in the MARRI Participants. The research was conducted from October 24 - December 2020 through desk research and interviews with relevant stakeholders in all MARRI Participant countries across three areas:



Field research was conducted through mixed interviews and questionnaires with 88 respondents from all MARRI Participants. Across all respondents, 60% were conducted using facilitated interviews, while 40% were done online/self-administered. Interviews were structured in 2 parts: general demographic-oriented questions, followed by 21 questions designed to assess the impact of COVID-19. Summary of respondent professional affiliation:



Based on the findings of the research study, the research team was able to:

- Analyze and assess the impact that the COVID-19 pandemic has had on migration in the MARRI region;
- Identify gaps and needs of key migration stakeholders in adapting to the pandemic;
- Share good practices for the efficient and effective implementation of WHO recommendations and
- Strengthen regional cooperation for addressing migration challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Based on good practices in the region, as well as identified gaps, the team was able to propose policy recommendations for three thematic topics: Irregular Migration, Trafficking in Human Beings and Asylum.

DESK RESEARCH

As of March 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic was spreading in all MARRI Participants, as well as across Europe as a whole.

The European Commission, in its annual reports for each of MARRI Participants, recommended that emergency measures taken in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic be proportionate, restricted to what is necessary and limited in time so that rule of law and democratic and human rights standards are respected.

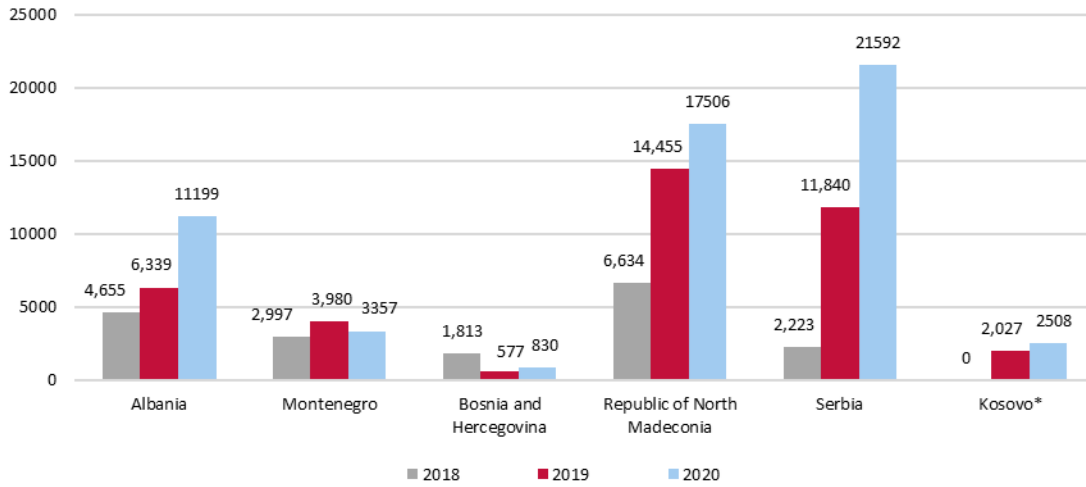
Irregular migration around and in the MARRI region

With the introduction of COVID-19 restrictions, numbers of irregular migrants who were prevented from entering, have shown significant increase in three of the MARRI Participants: Serbia (21,592, in 2020), North Macedonia (17,506 in 2020), and Albania (11,199 in 2020) (see chart on the following page).

The transit and detention centers in the MARRI Participants are recognized as high vulnerability points, with the need to counter COVID-19.



Number of irregular migrants prevented from entering the MARRI Participants from March–September (2018–2020)



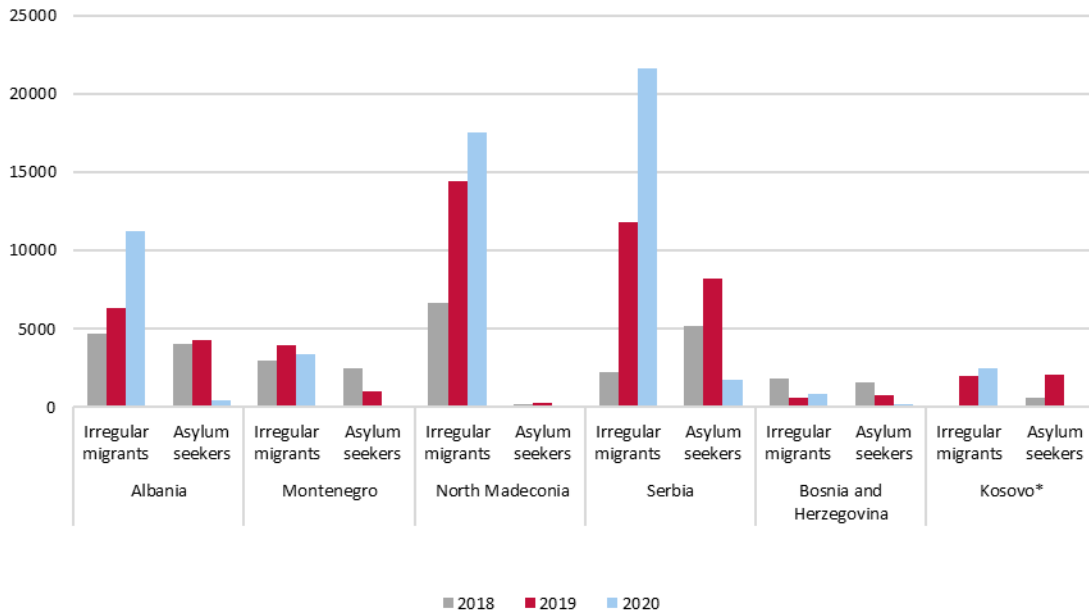
Source: Ministries of Interiors of MARRI Participants, provided for the scope of this study, November 2020

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Irregular migration and asylum nexus findings from the survey

There is always a link between irregular migration and asylum. Data from the MARRI region shows an equal trend of irregular migration and asylum, even during the COVID-19 pandemic.

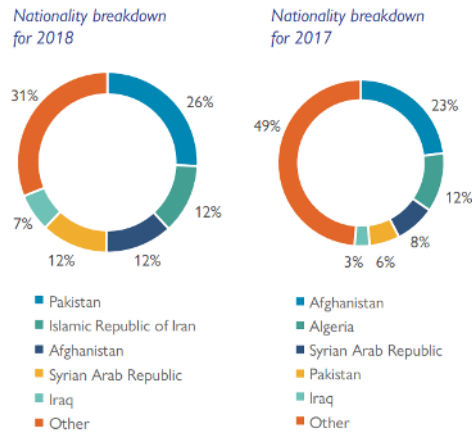
Number of intended asylum seekers and irregular migrants prevented from entering the MARRI Participants in the period March–September (2018–2020)



Source: Ministries of Interiors of MARRI Participants, given for the scope of this study, November 2020

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Nationality breakdown for migrants: top 5 nationalities in 2017 and 2018



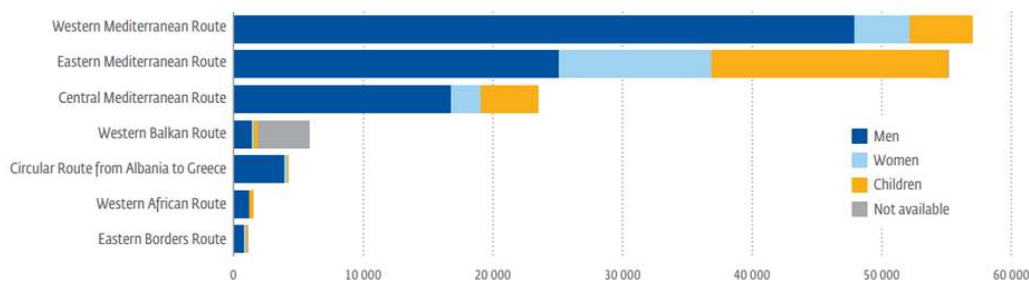
Source: Europe — Mixed Migration Flows In Western Balkans 2018 Overview, 07 February 2019

Children in migration

Children in migration are more vulnerable than adults, particularly when they are unaccompanied. Their vulnerability makes them more exposed to violence, exploitation and trafficking in human beings, as well as physical, psychological and sexual abuse.¹

All routes together accounted for 3% (808 children) of all child arrivals in 2018. Most of the children arriving on these routes were boys (83%), with girls mostly present on the Western Balkan route (28%) and the Eastern Borders route (24%).

Demography of arrivals, including children



Source: FRONTEX – European Border and Coast Guard Agency; "Risk Analysis for 2019"

¹ European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA), "Children in Migration in 2019", Annual Review; 1.1.2019 – 31.12.2019.

Children as victims of trafficking

Nearly a quarter of victims of trafficking registered in the European Union (EU) are children. EU child victims are twice as many as non-EU child victims, with girls especially targeted and mainly trafficked for sexual exploitation.²

The continuing arrival of children (albeit at lower numbers) carries specific challenges and additional concerns that require a proactive response and unified approach by the various actors present at external borders.³

The provision of accommodation that is age-appropriate and responds to the specific needs of boys, girls, unaccompanied children and families with children must be ensured.⁴

In order to guarantee their protection, it is vital that children are prioritized in all border-related procedures (identification, registration and referral), and supported by specialized staff who use child-friendly and gender-sensitive approaches.⁵

One of the challenges is age assessment, a key step in determining whether a person will be treated as an adult or a child (with the respective safeguards and procedural and legal guarantees). Due to differences in treatment between adults and children, there have been a number of instances where adult migrants have falsely claimed to be under the age of 18. These cases are particularly problematic as they lead to abuses of legal systems in the Member States and deprive genuine children of the special protection measures reserved to them.⁶

² EuropGuide to enhance child protection and improve transnational cooperation with a focus on child victims of trafficking; Migration and Home Affairs; June, 2019.

³ FRONTEX – European Border and Coast Guard Agency; "Risk Analysis for 2019", Chapter "6.2. Children in migration: overview of arrivals at the external borders in 2018"; Warsaw, February 2019

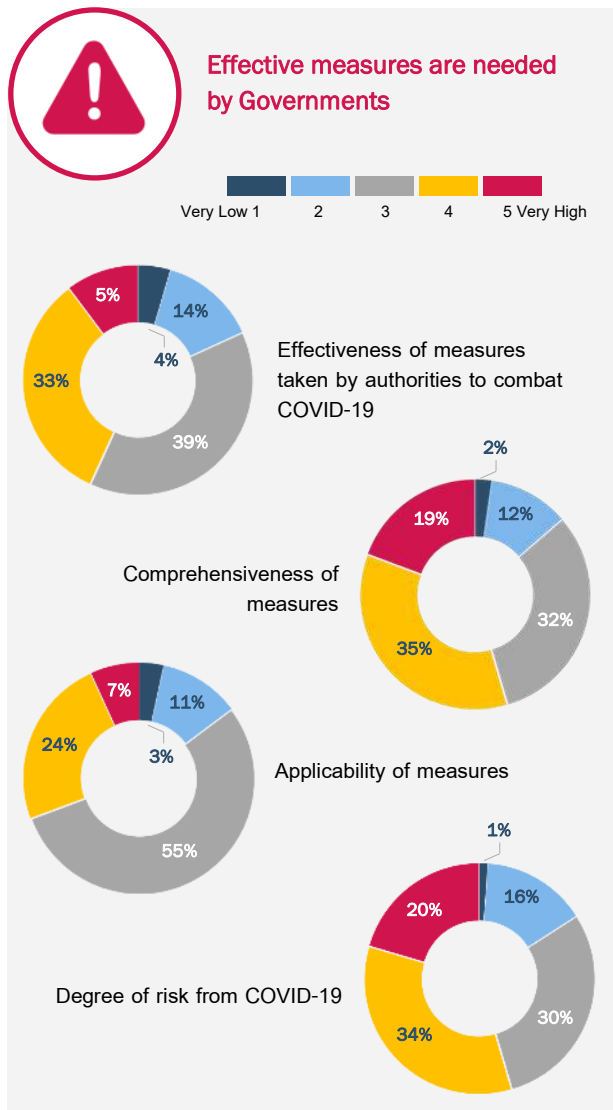
⁴ Ibid

⁵ Ibid

⁶ Ibid

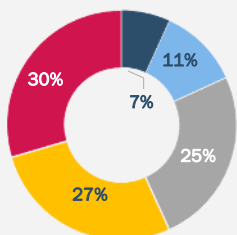


FIELD RESEARCH FINDINGS





Access of migrants, asylum seekers and victims of trafficking to exercise their rights remains limited

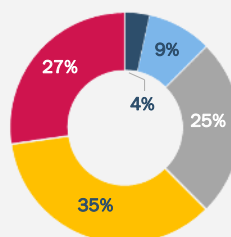
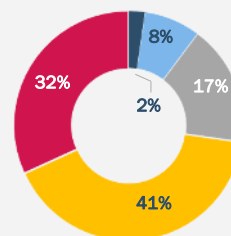


The rate of difficulty to exercise rights during the pandemic



Key migration stakeholders need to make more use of ICT (Information and Communication Technology) tools to share information.

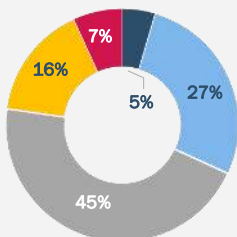
The reported need for ICT facilitation for sharing information internally



The reported need for ICT facilitation for sharing information to intended vulnerable groups



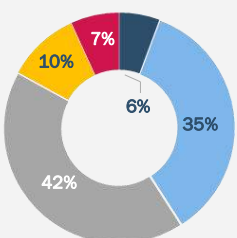
Improved regional cooperation is needed



Extent to which regional cooperation has improved during the pandemic



There is poor media coverage on issues of migrants, asylum seekers and victims of trafficking



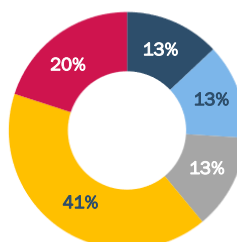
Engagement of media reporting activity on issues of migrants

Irregular Migration

The main findings from the research focused on irregular migration are the following:

- There is a high risk at exercising rights of irregular migrants;
- For all vulnerable groups (migrants, victims and asylum seekers), there was low media reporting activity during COVID-19;
- Effectiveness of government measures needs to be improved;
- Regional cooperation should be strengthened and
- Need for wider usage of ICT communication means, which will bring more information to vulnerable groups.

Is it difficult for irregular migrants to exercise their rights in the MARRI Participants

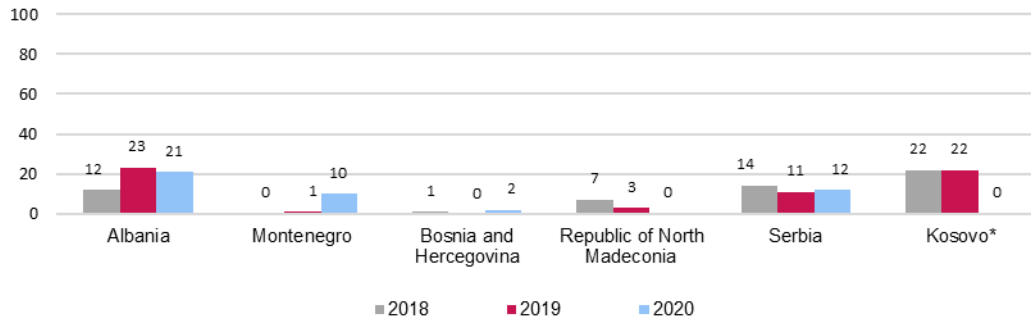


The rate of difficulty for irregular migrants to exercise rights during the pandemic

Trafficking of Human Beings (THB) around the MARRI Region

Referring to the THB data shared by Ministries of Interior of MARRI Participants (November 2020), Albania and Kosovo* report to have the highest number of criminal offenses in THB during the last two years, with 23 and 22 cases Albania (2019, 2020), and with 22 cases Kosovo*.

Number of criminal offenses in Trafficking of Human Beings in the MARRI participants in 2018, 2019 and 2020.

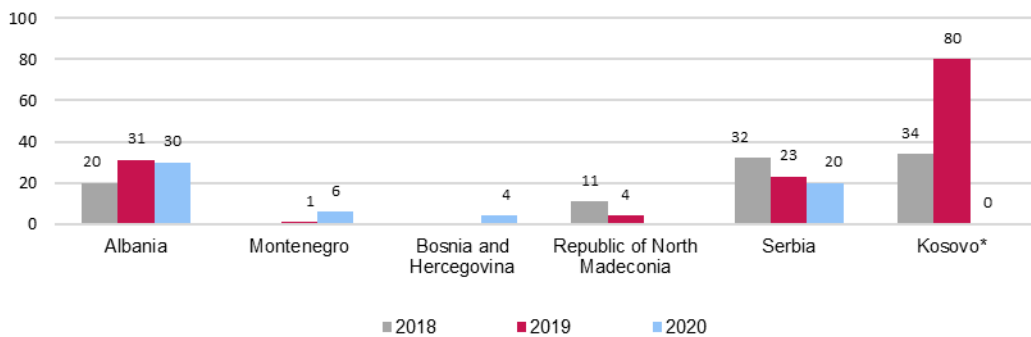


Source: Ministries of Interiors of MARRI Participants, given for the scope of this study, November 2020

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Based on numbers and statistics provided by Ministries of Interior of MARRI Participants for the scope of this study (November 2020), Kosovo* is reported to have had the highest number of the perpetrators in THB, with 80 cases during the year 2019, followed by Albania and Serbia.

Number of perpetrators in Trafficking of Human Being in the six MARRI Participant countries and in 2018, 2019 and 2020.



Source: Ministries of Interiors of MARRI Participants, given for the scope of this study, November 2020

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Considering that accessing rights for VT/ PVT during the COVID – 19 has been reported as difficult , it is necessary to provide them with access to safe and immediate accommodation, health care and psychological assistance, and protection from revictimization. Furthermore, it is vital that children are prioritized in all border-related procedures in order to guarantee their protection.

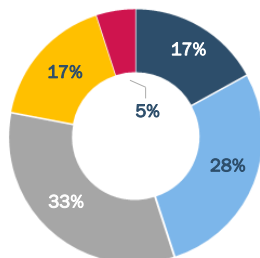
Effectiveness of control institutions in regards to Trafficking of Human Beings (THB)

- One in three THB key stakeholders reported the Prosecutor and Ombudsman to be sufficiently effective oversight & control institutions.
- Access to justice must be safeguarded.
- Law enforcement officials must remain vigilant in addressing new and evolving crime patterns
- OSCE recommend to ensure high alert among law enforcement and other first line responders to recognize and detect human trafficking.

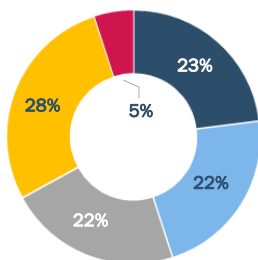
“Since way before the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, women and girls have continuously constituted the majority of detected victims of trafficking. This trend will likely continue in the aftermath of the pandemic, especially affecting marginalized communities”.

Anonymous respondent from the survey

Effectiveness of Public Prosecutor’s office during the pandemic



Very Low 1 2 3 4 5 Very High



Effectiveness of Ombudsman’s office during the pandemic

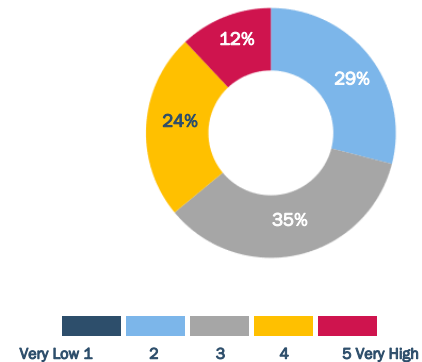
Impact of COVID -19 on asylum seekers

The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the exposure of risk for the most vulnerable groups on exercising their rights, including asylum seekers and refugees, because of the restricted measures taken to prevent infection. The below conclusions are drawn from survey responses to evaluate the difficulty of asylum seekers to exercise their rights, the visibility of media to asylum seeker issues and their access to information:

- The ability of asylum seekers to exercise their rights is limited
- Media coverage of asylum seekers during COVID-19 has been poor
- There is a lack of information available for asylum seekers

Media play an important role in shaping a narrative about migration and influencing public opinion on the image of asylum seekers and refugees. This survey evaluated media for its reporting activity and found the media was not very active or positive in relation to this category.

Engagement of media reporting activity on asylum



Very Low 1 2 3 4 5 Very High



General findings from the field research

- Migrants are recognized by MARRI participants as people in need, while their rights under COVID-19 are extended to health care services, as recommended by WHO.
- Difficulties arise when migrants and refugees, regardless of status, attempt to exercise their rights and gain access to healthcare and other vital services.
- Refugees, migrants and internally displaced persons are not properly accounted for in the pandemic plans of most countries. Governments, mostly focused on their health and security priorities, inadvertently marginalize a highly vulnerable population.
- MARRI participants, who are geographically based in the east Mediterranean route, should expect further migration pressure.
- Human rights were eroded and impacted during COVID-19 and time will be needed to reverse the process.
- MARRI participants reported increased irregular migration.
- Transit centers and detention centers in the MARRI participants are recognized as high-vulnerability points, with the need to take measures to counter COVID-19 risk.
- The research confirmed strong nexus between migration and asylum, even during the COVID-19 pandemic. The figures indicate an increasing tendency of criminal offences of smuggling of migrants and decreasing figures for trafficking of human beings (THB) across the MARRI region.
- One of the major challenges when it comes to migrant integration policies is the lack of data, official statistics, transparency and comparable indicators at a regional and local level. There is a high potential to overcome this problem by implementing ICT solutions to support the delivery of public integration services, while at the same time provide the relevant data to the public authorities and CSOs.
- The availability of information about country specific public services and locally offered private services intended for vulnerable groups, such as asylum seekers, migrants and victims of THB has been identified as a key opportunity and need for better integration of individuals as well as for migration management.

GOOD PRACTICES:

- Use of electronic, written and social media as education instruments for bringing positive communication and narratives on migration. Aim to decrease hate speech and hate crime toward migrants across MARRI Participants.
- Use of unified data regarding Migration, THB and Asylum, which will better address the needs, priorities, policies, plans, and budget for interventions across MARRI Participants.

- Equipment of key active stakeholders with IT technology (mobile phone, tablet, PC, laptop and others) and provide the necessary IT infrastructure (Internet, online communication programs and others) to facilitate the remote work of key active stakeholders for meetings, coordination, expertise and consulting.
- Establish and develop digital classes and infrastructure for children and their families (Migration, THB and Asylum) to help them communicate with local authorities. Digital communication can also help children and their parents in the psychosocial aspect. Enhanced application of ICT technologies could facilitate the delivery of psychological counseling to victims of Migration, THB and Asylum.
- Migration, THB and Asylum are primarily led by Government. There should be cross-sectorial cooperation between Governmental Institutions, International Partners and NGOs. Representatives of NGOs could be involved in the Coordinating Body for monitoring the implementation of strategies, plans, laws, for example. State authorities dealing with Migration, THB and Asylum may sign agreements with NGOs in combating THB.
- State Institutions can develop a cooperation with NGOs in project activities. Ministries may allocate a part of their budget for Migration, THB and Asylum project activities with NGOs, which are granted through an open call.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- WHO recommends that governments review their national COVID-19 and/or emergency preparedness and response plan, national and local capacity, legal framework and regulatory requirements for providing health services to refugees and migrants.
- Key stakeholders must continue to work on improving the capacities and accelerate the progress towards achieving universal health coverage for refugees, asylum seekers, migrants and victims of trafficking in the MARRI region.
- Invest in improving standards for migrants and asylum seekers, with the aim to establish well-organized procedures that guarantee integrity and allow for claims to be dealt with fairness.
- WHO recommends that governments enhance capacities needed to continuously provide public services to ensure effective COVID-19 preparedness and response actions.
- Law-enforcement agencies must work on increasing inter-agency communication, working cooperatively and closely towards a common goal of countering the most harmful elements of smuggling where the impact of organized crime is significantly high, and where abuse of migrants is rampant.

- Improve data collection and analysis related to migration.
- Increased data and management are needed to implement WHO recommendations about “identifying/mapping health and isolation facilities available for refugees, migrants and surrounding populations”.
- The increased use of ICTs for internal information sharing between government institutions will support the exchange of vital information when resolving the administrative processes relating to asylum seekers, migrants and victims of THB.
- Strengthen partnerships among governments in the MARRI region as well as inter-sectoral and inter-agency coordination, as part of the overall COVID-19 response, which has also been recommended by WHO.

FEEDBACK

The following feedback was received from participants at of the conference “Tuning Migration Procedures to COVID-19: Good practices and way forward” held online from 15th-16th of December 2020.

“The question of how the media talk about these vulnerable groups is of great importance. We are witnessing hate speech against them, especially on social networks, supported with the spread of fake news and disinformation...What to do: media literacy projects, media education, and social media regulation: Positive communication and narratives on migration to decrease hate speech and hate crime toward migrants. In your research, one of the findings was: Poor media reporting activity. However, this is not the case on social networks, and there is a large number of hate speech against migrants. Therefore, we should also work on the issues of positive communications and presentations in the media.”

Aner Zuković, RCC



“Screenshot from the Conference: Tuning migration procedures to COVID-19: good practices and a way forward (December 15, 2020)



Asylum seekers waiting to cross boarder between Serbia and Croatia

(Photo credits: Jerome Cid, dreamstime.com)

“During the Covid-19 pandemic asylum seekers and refugees faced a lot of difficulties in Albania. There were big delays from the responsible authorities to deal with the asylum requests. The National Reception Center for Asylum seekers was not fully functional. Asylum seekers had problems with documentation, so they could not have access to health care system or exercise other rights.”

Mariana Hereni, RMSA

“Enhancing the use of ICT is of paramount importance for efficient communication and sharing of information with the audience on the subjects of migration, asylum and human trafficking. Potential sources for funding these kind of projects can be EU Funds dedicated to digital skills.”

Aleksander Stojanovski, North Macedonia

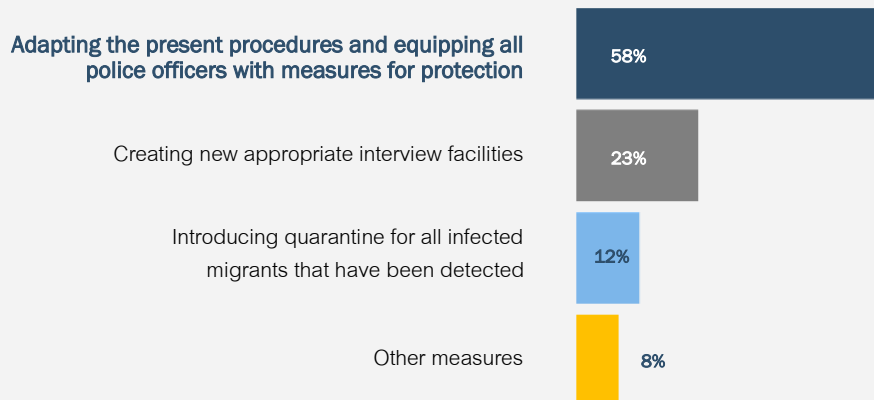
“Despite the difficulties during the Covid-19 pandemic, many of the countries in the region never stopped the work dealing with migrants and asylum seekers and UNCHR supported the responsible authorities for providing basic needs to them. Regarding the implementation of WHO recommendations, first it must be governmental authorities to implement them and ensure their applicability. Also, keeping in mind that all the region is affected by mixed migratory flows, it will be good to put in place and use differentiated procedures at the borders.”

Christina, UNHCR

Questions and answers (Q&A) from the conference

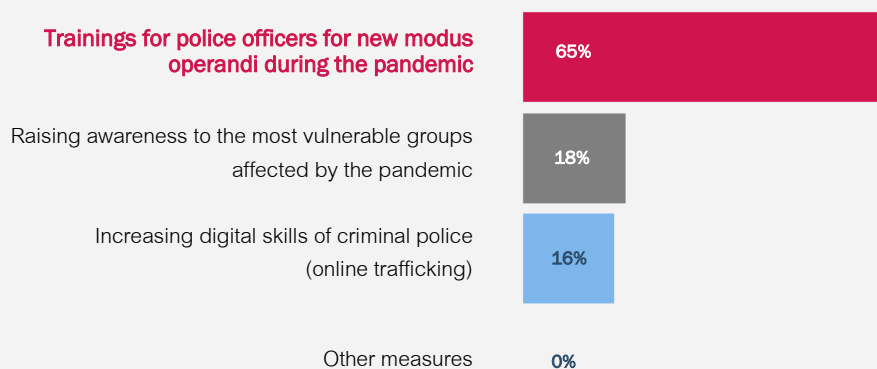
Irregular Migration (Q&A)

What measures should be taken by the Border Police to accomplish faster and qualitative pre-screening procedures for irregular migrants in compliance with EU guidelines during the pandemic?



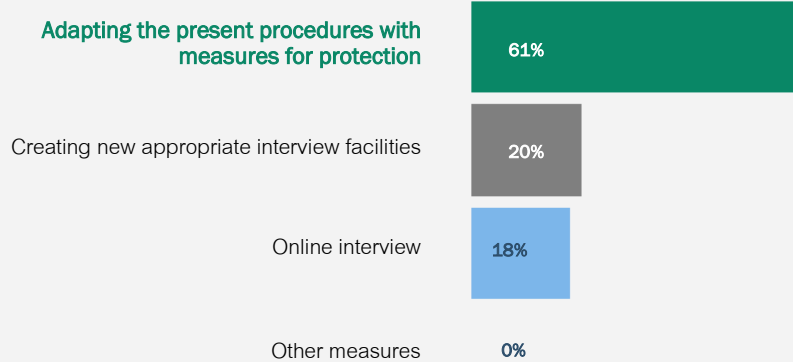
Human Trafficking (Q&A)

How do you believe the authorities dealing with the fight against trafficking in human beings should adapt to the new forms (modus operandi) of trafficking, used by criminal groups during the pandemic?



Asylum Q&A)

How do you think the authorities responsible for asylum should respond to ensure access to procedures for migrants seeking asylum during the pandemic period?



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January, 2021

