VANGUARD

adVANced technoloGical solutions coupled with societal-oriented Understanding and AwaReness for Disrupting trafficking in human beings

Dr Carlotta Carbone (UCSC), Caroline Sander (GGMH), Dr Karen Latricia Hough (FUNDEA),
Theoni Spathi (CERTH), Dr Despoina Chatzakou (CERTH), Dr Theodora Tsikrika (CERTH), Dr Stefanos Vrochidis (CERTH)

The Dynamics of Trafficking in Human Beings

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Overview

1. Scale of THB at global level and EU and characteristics of victims
2. THB victims' and perpetrators' vulnerabilities: results of empirical research
3. Recent and emerging trends in the modus operandi of THB traffickers: results of empirical research

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1. Scale of THB at global level and EU and characteristics of victims

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What is THB?

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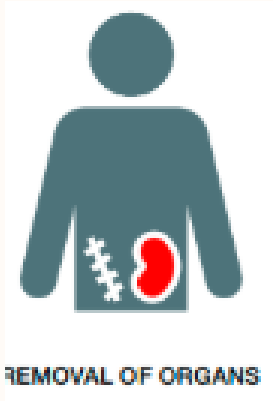
What is THB?



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Definition of THB

Directive 2011/36/EU, as modified by Directive 2024/1712

"***recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or reception*** *of persons, including the exchange or transfer of control over those persons, by means of the* ***threat or use of force or other forms*** *of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a* ***position of vulnerability*** *or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person,* ***for the purpose of exploitation***" (Article 2, paragraph 1)

Exploitation "*shall include, as a minimum, the exploitation of the prostitution of others or other forms of* ***sexual exploitation, forced labour or services, including begging, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude, or the exploitation of criminal activities, or the removal of organs,*** **or the exploitation of surrogacy, of forced marriage, or of illegal adoption**" (Article 2, paragraph 3)

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Scale of THB at global level and EU and characteristics of victims

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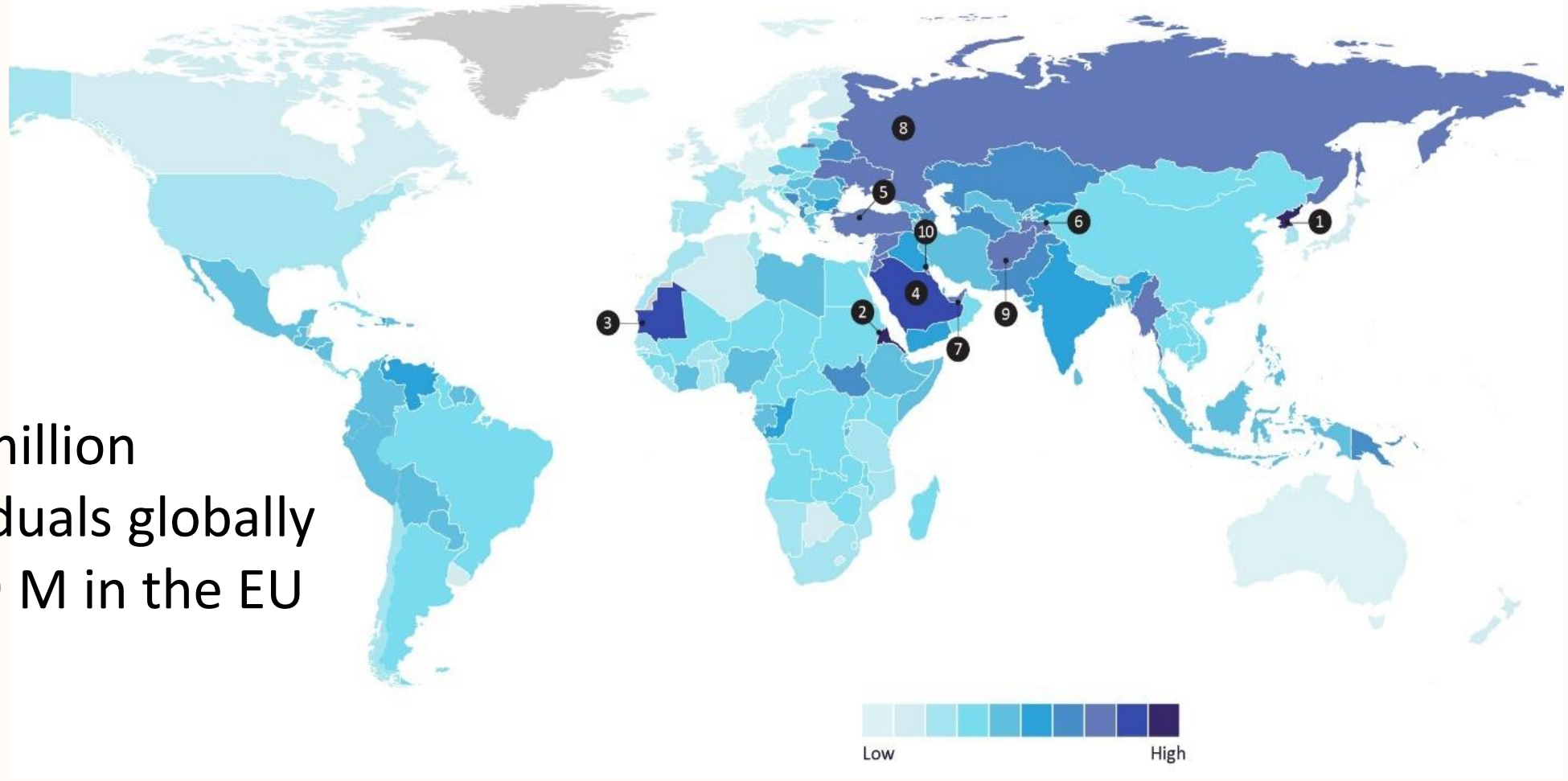
Estimated prevalence of modern slavery globally

- ~ 50 million individuals globally
- ~ 1.29 M in the EU



Estimated prevalence of modern slavery by country of exploitation, per 1,000 population, 2023 (Walk Free 2023)

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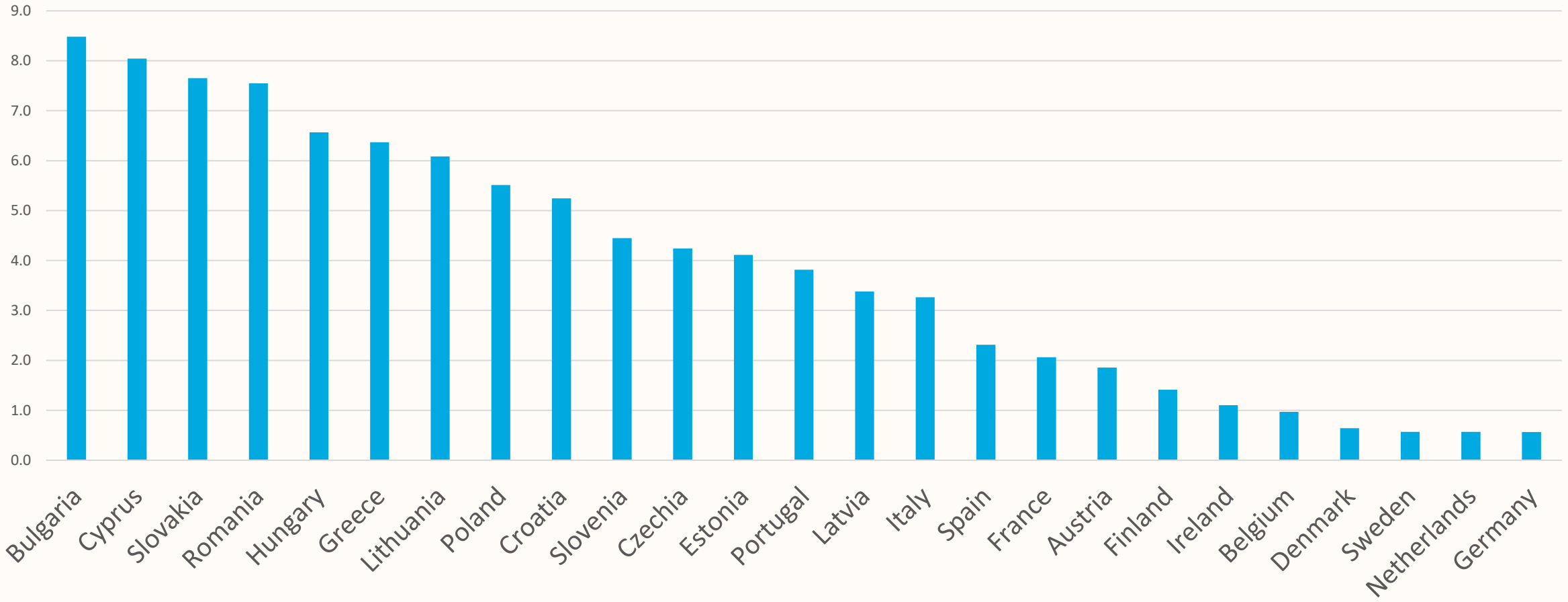
Focus EU: estimated prevalence



Estimated prevalence of modern slavery by EU country per 1,000 population, 2023 (Walk Free 2023)

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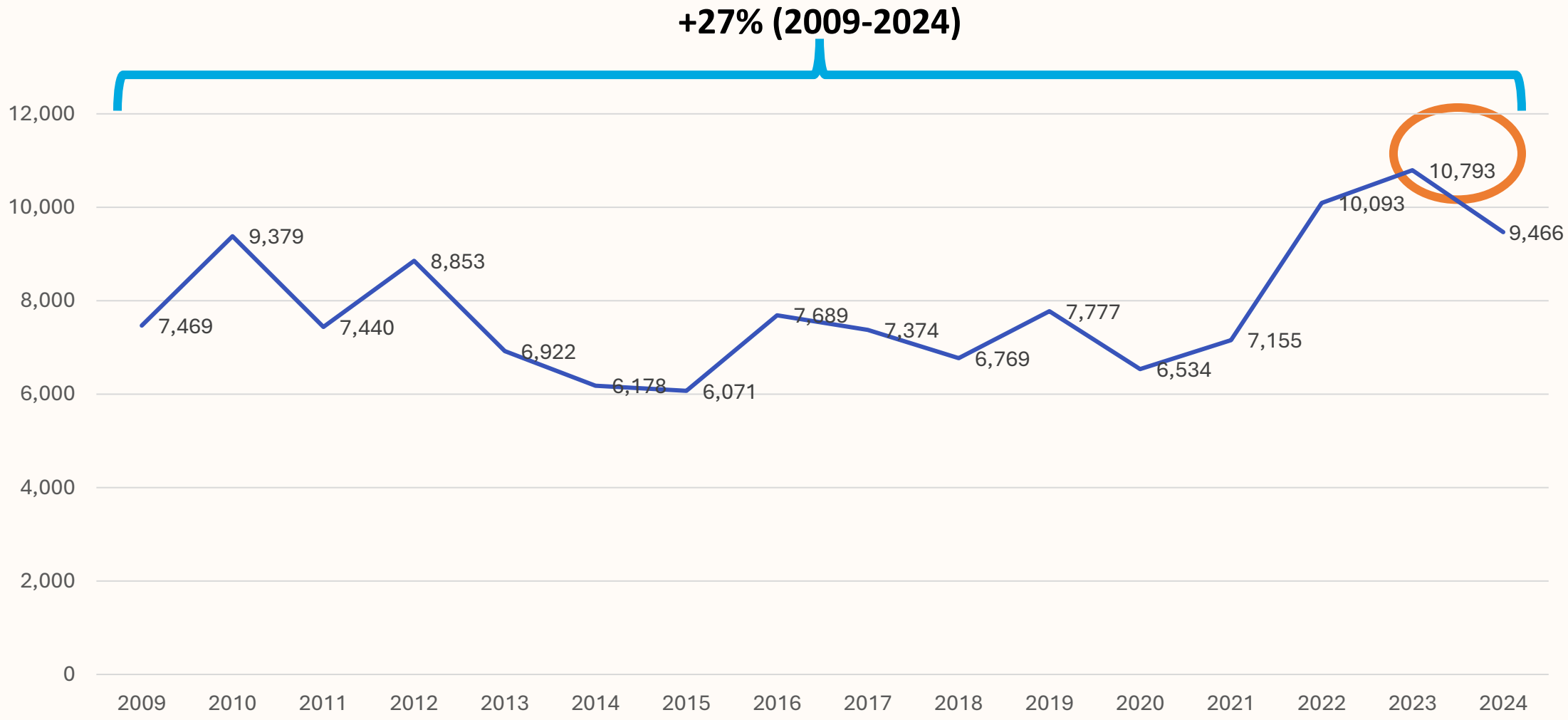
Victims identified in the EU



Victims registered in the EU (aggregate), 2009-2024 (Eurostat 2026)

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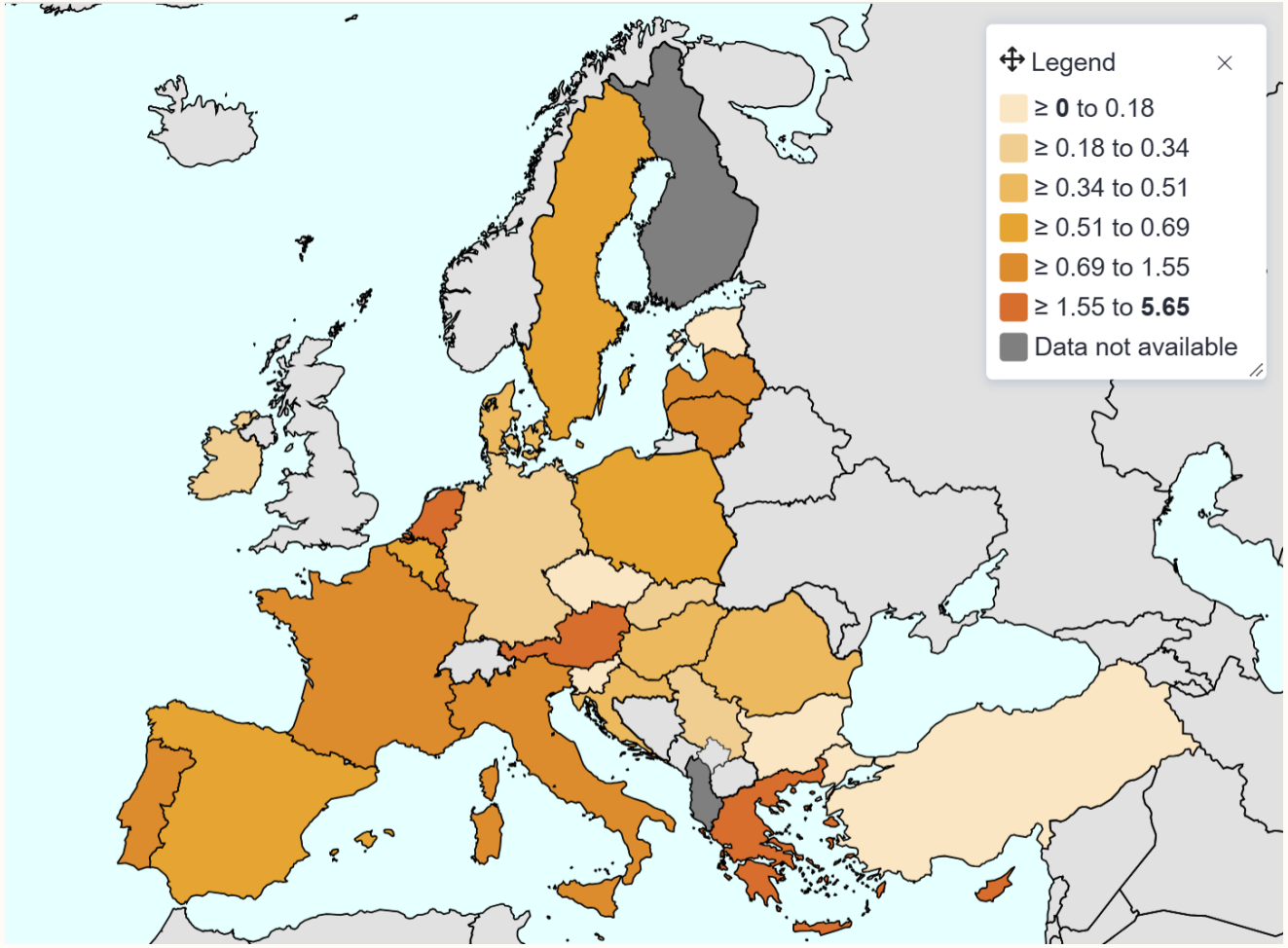
Victims identified in EU MSs

- **Top countries:** Luxembourg (well ahead), Greece, Austria, the Netherlands, and Cyprus

- Intensification of prevention and detection measures
- Emphasis on forced labour
- Enhanced capability to identify victims



Victims registered in EU MSs (hundred thousand inhabitants), 2024 (Eurostat 2026)

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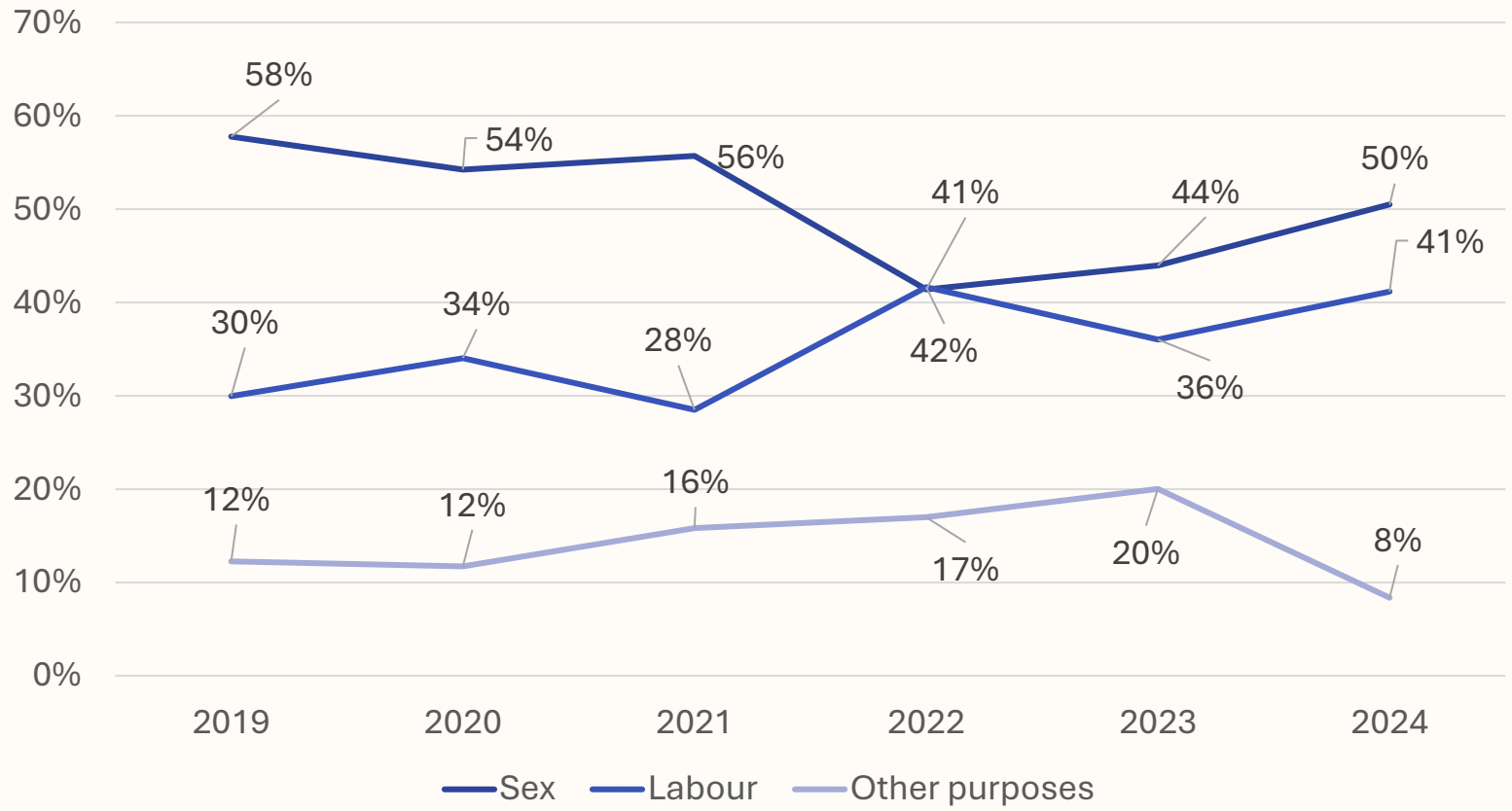
THB types – EU level

- In 2024, sex trafficking is still the most prevalent form
- Labour trafficking has increased since 2019
- Other forms constantly increasing, except for 2024
- Need to collect data on specific categories → **gap**



Victims registered in EU by form of THB, 2019-2024 (Eurostat 2026)

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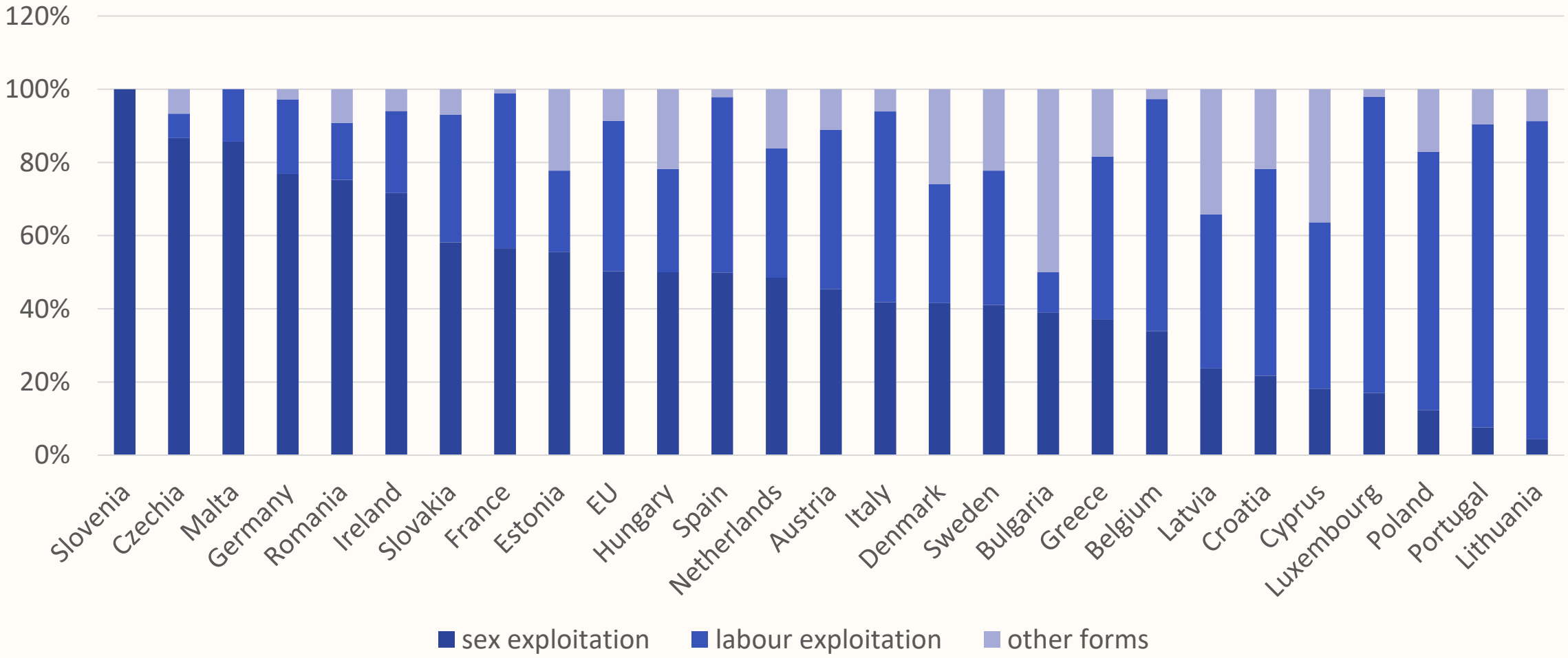
THB types – EU MSs



Share of detected victims by THB type, EU MSs, 2024 (Eurostat 2026)

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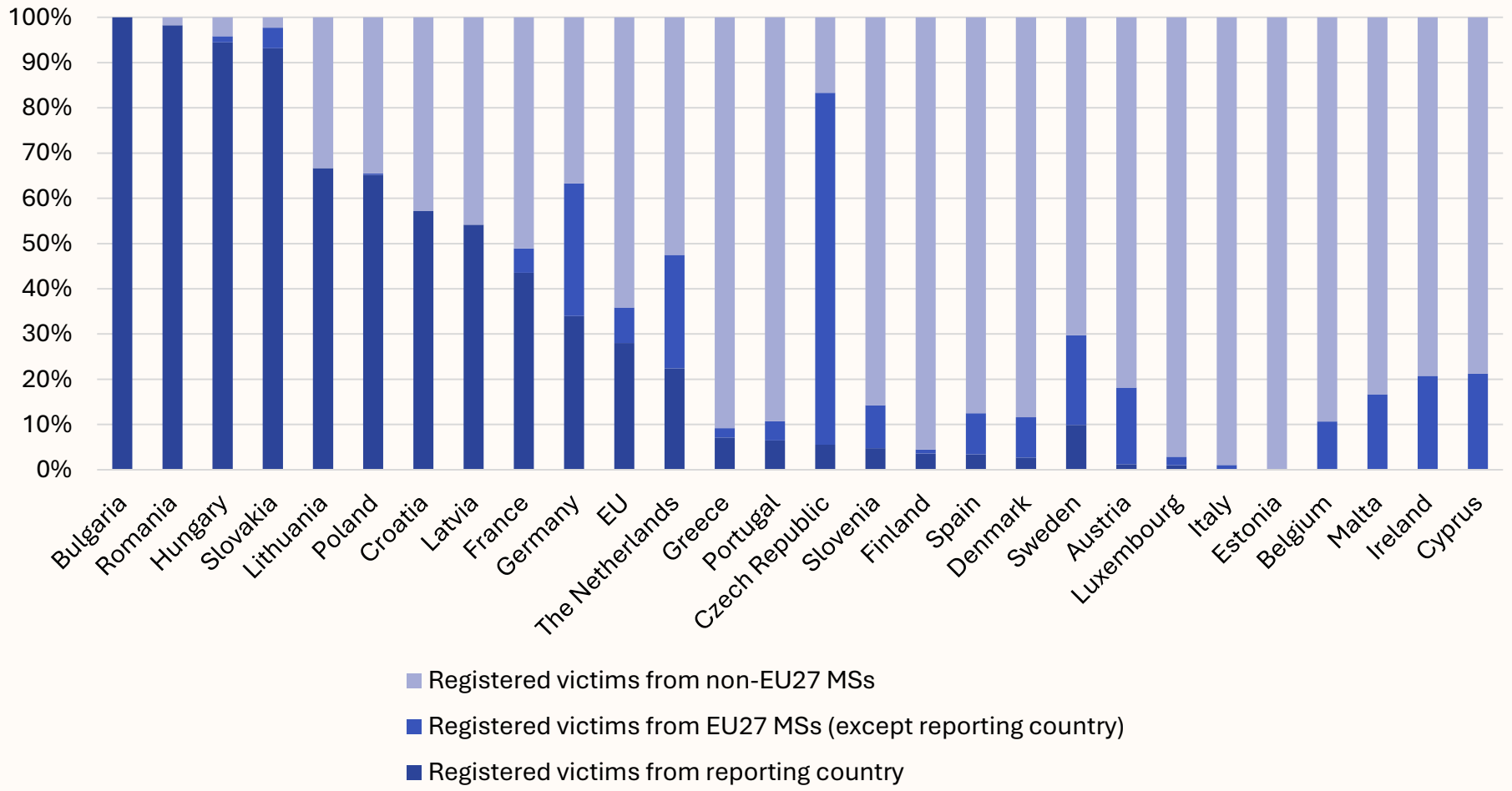
Gender, age and nationalities of victims registered in the EU

- 63% of victims are female (2024)
- Decrease of child victims (17% in 2024 from 24% in 2021) → online sexual trafficking?
- Nationalities of victims (2023)
  - 64% outside the EU (+11% since 2022)
  - 36 % of the EU
  - Many MSs from Eastern Europe mainly identified victims from their countries



Percentage of registered THB victims by citizenship, 2024 (Eurostat 2026)

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2. THB victims' and perpetrators' vulnerabilities: results of empirical research

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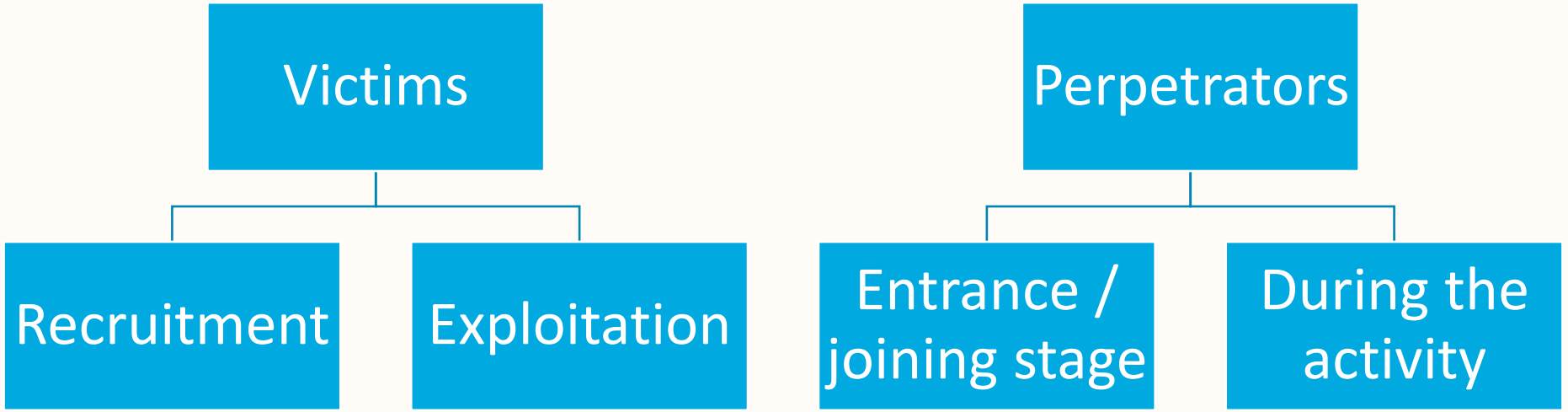
Aim & method

- **Aim**: Identify the vulnerabilities of THB victims and perpetrators



- **Method**: semi-structured interviews with experts (37), victims (5), and (sex) perpetrators (18)

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Results

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Victims' vulnerabilities

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Vulnerabilities [recruitment stage]

- **Absent, weak or dysfunctional social relationships**
  - Emotional vulnerabilities (not only romantic relationships)
  - Also in privileged educational or social backgrounds
  - Difficulty in distinguishing healthy and unhealthy relationships (SE, FC)

"'is it normal that my dad is abusing me and giving me away to other people?' Like, 'this is happening in other households too?'" (expert)

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Vulnerabilities [recruitment stage]

- **Allure of freedom, excitement, dreams, quick money**
  - Quick money and lack understanding of consequences
    - Young people involved in forced criminality (drug production and trafficking) at the port of Rotterdam

“if your friend walks around with sneakers that are €1,000, that is attractive. If you want to work at the supermarket, as I did a lifetime ago, (…) it will take you ages to reach that goal. (…) you just have to carry some packages somewhere, you know, and recycle instantly ” (victim)

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Vulnerabilities [exploitation stage]

- **Cultural and personal beliefs**
  - Lack of awareness of being a victim
  - LE: Comparison with conditions in their countries, cultural perception of what is ‘normal’, ‘acceptable’
  - FC: internalise guilt, seeing themselves as offenders rather than victims

“kids who are recruited by criminals and are forced to commit criminal acts often see themselves also as criminals, like the people they work for, they have committed something punishable by law” (expert)

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Perpetrators' vulnerabilities

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Vulnerabilities [Entrance / joining stage]

- **Social or familial connection with other perpetrators**
  - Exposure to criminal and red-light environments
  - Entry into this milieu through social contacts, jobs (e.g., as bouncer), or lifestyle choices (not through conscious decision-making)
  - Participating in various combat sports (mixed martial arts, boxing, kick-boxing, martial arts) → opportunity

"They said: 'You're a good guy, don't you want to make more money?' And that's how I got into it – debt collection, pimping" (perpetrator)

"...I was always training ... and hanging out with them. ...Then I saw them doing it and thought to myself: 'I could actually do that too" (perpetrator)

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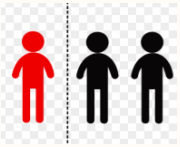
Vulnerabilities [During the activity]



- **Stigma and discrimination**
  - Experiences of exclusion in the education system, in the workplace or in everyday social life
  - Lack of sense of ‘not belonging’ (for foreigners in Germany) → frustration, anger or a sense of having no prospects
  - Experiences of racism

“I was the token foreigner in Germany…Kurdish, from Turkey. (…) My appearance – big, muscular, tattooed – fit the stereotype” (perpetrator)

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Vulnerabilities [During the activity]

- **Cultural and religious norms**
  - Patriarchal views of masculinity and culturally/religiously influenced gender norms
  - And contradictions between their actions and religious values…

"I just wanted to use women. Exploit them. Show them what they're worth – nothing" (perpetrator)

"Even if I go to mosque on Fridays, I can't pray. How can you go to mosque, but send women to the street the next day?" (perpetrator)

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Conclusions

- Beyond stereoytpical image of victim
- Victims / perpetrators: diverse set of vulnerabilities, often interrelated
- Victims and perpetrators often share the same vulnerabilities
- Particularly relevant to increase capacity of law enforcement agencies, border guards and judiciary in better identification of cases, improve legal protection and reintegration in society

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3. Recent and emerging trends in the modus operandi of THB traffickers: results of empirical research

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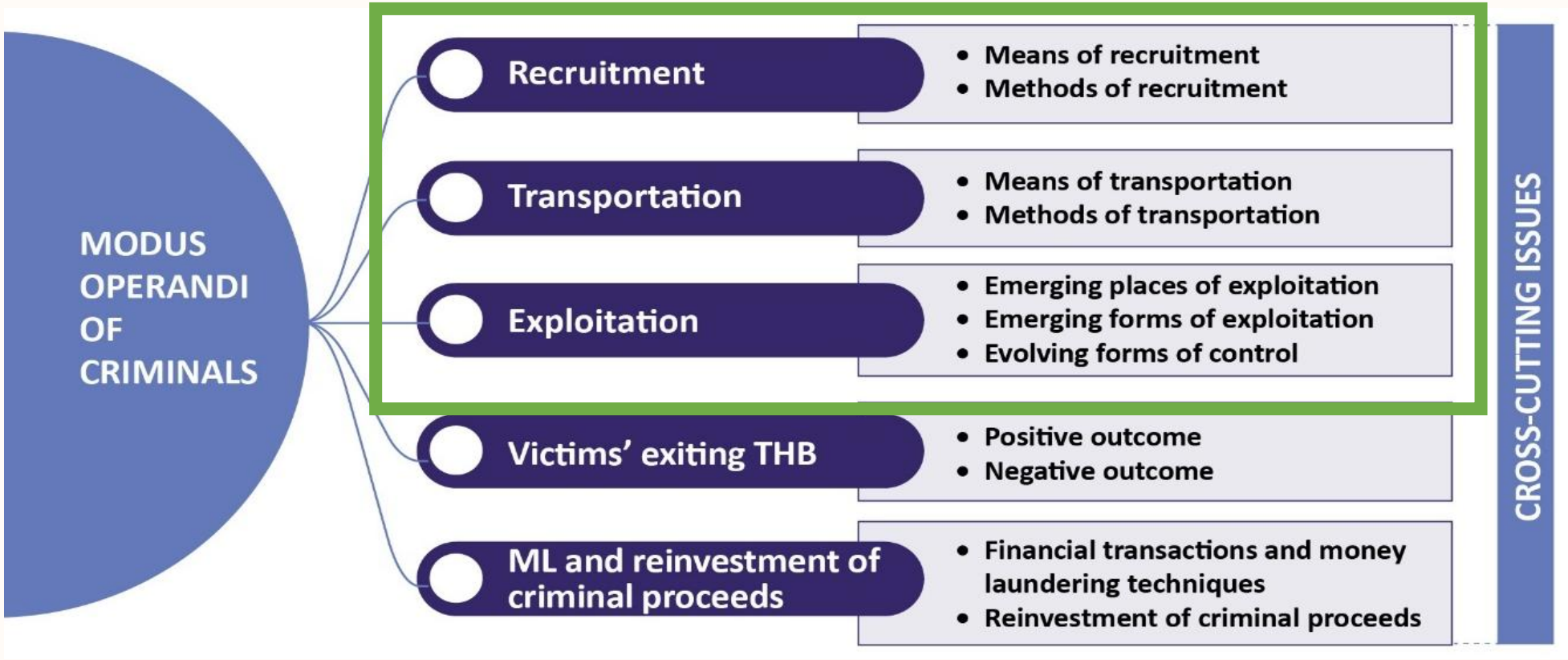
Aim & focus

- **Aim**: investigate recent and emerging trends and patterns in the modus operandi of criminals involved in THB in Europe



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Results

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Recruitment

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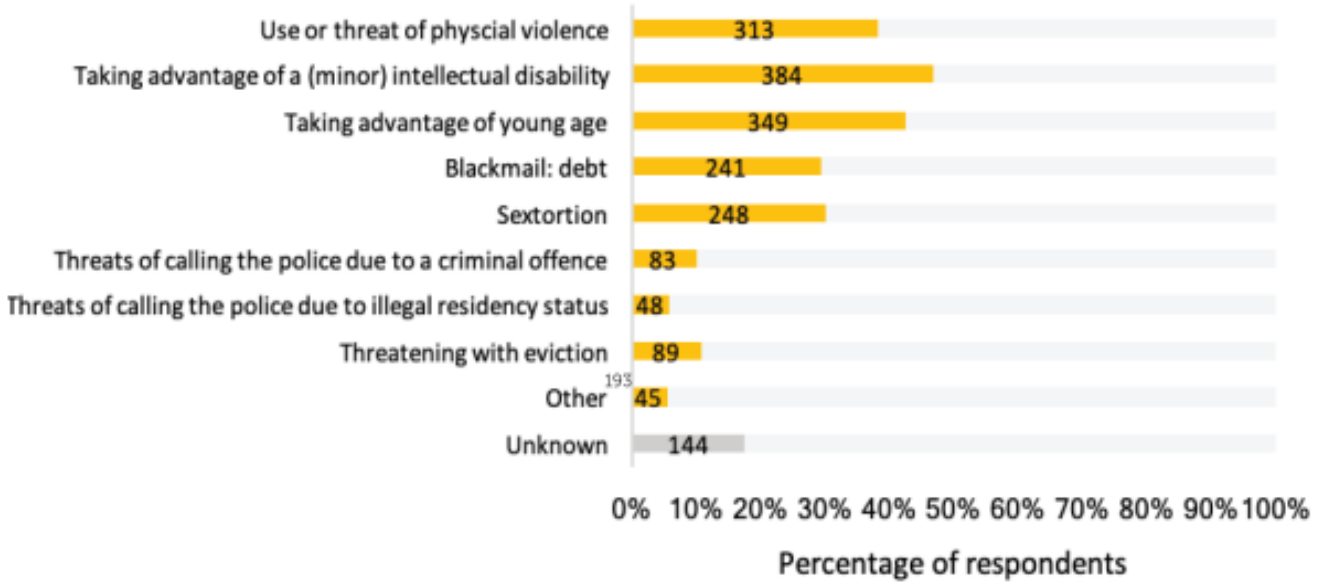
Method: Recruitment by deception regarding working and living conditions

- In many cases of SE deception not on nature of work → violence and exploitative conditions
- Deceptive narratives tailored to younger audiences ('you can become rich') → exaggeration of financial returns
- FC: promise of money / consumer goods → example from the Netherlands

Figure 8. Ways in which victims have been forced into criminal activity (n=821)[192]



CMK (2022), Changing Perspectives An exploratory study into criminal exploitation in 13 large and medium-sized Dutch municipalities

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Methods of recruitment

Recruitment through other forms of emotional manipulation (than Lover-boy method)

- Approached at school by someone offering friendship and a sense of belonging (especially in FC)
- Awareness comes later on
- Targeting minors experiencing personal difficulties
  - mirror the victim's language
  - adapt their behaviour and slang to match the child's age and gaming culture

"It almost reminds me of the classic lover boy method, where someone is lured into a relationship (…) The relationship is not only a love relationship. A friendship can also be an instrument" (expert)

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Criteria for choosing the victims

- Same nationality → language and cultural proximity
- **Recent trend**: often target individuals already present within EU territory → more efficient and less risky
- Also target national victims, especially teenagers
- SE
  - physical appearance and adherence to prevailing beauty standards
  - previous experience in sex work

"traffickers don't even have to look for people. Or not always. They sometimes come to you because they want to escape the conditions in which they live" (expert)

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Transportation

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Means of transportation

- **Road transport**
  - Which means: trains, private vehicles, taxis, vans, and buses
  - Vehicle types employed depends on the route, group size and level of control required
  - Short journeys: international bus lines and private cars (within Europe and from neighbouring regions)
  - Adapted their methods in response to increased enforcement and monitoring: example from Spain (**emerging trend**)

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Means of transportation

- **Maritime transport**
  - Which means: inflatable or small boats
  - Transporting victims to European Mediterranean countries
  - Complex cases: combination of THB with drug and arms smuggling (OCGs)
  - Alternative to planes especially when prices get higher

- **Air transport**
  - Long journeys
  - Often through 3rd countries: e.g. Brazil → Turkey (via plane) → EU (via ground transport)
  - Minimisation of risks and financial loss: enter legally using visas or as tourists

"It is true that, for example, looking at African routes, they are less and less willing to move their merchandise by walking routes or by a rudimentary boat, because in the end it is money that you can lose if the person die" (expert)

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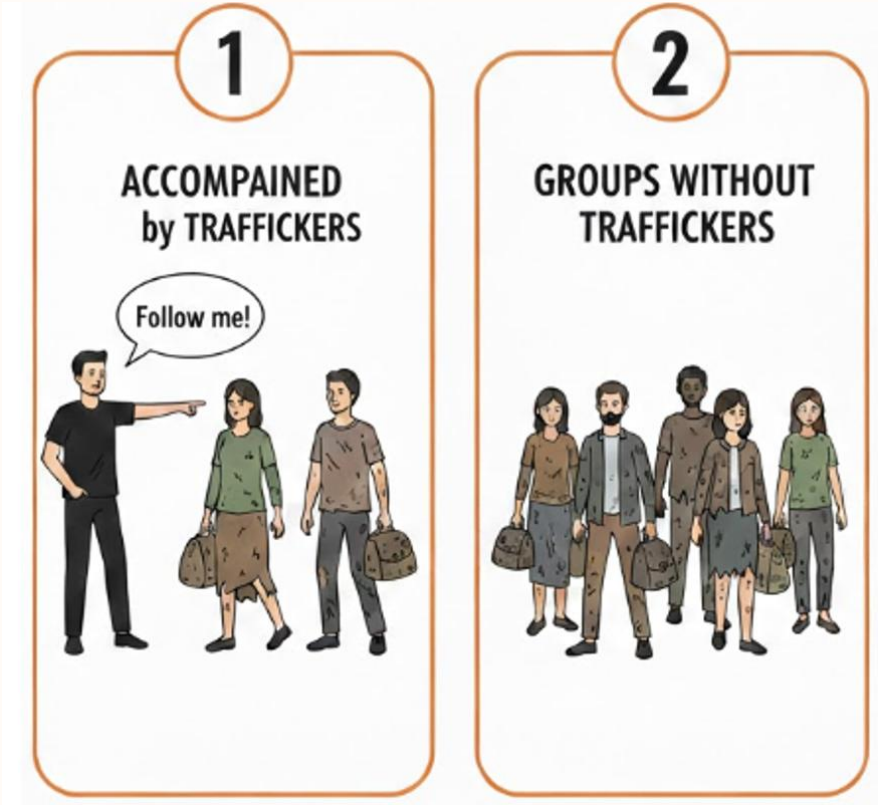
Methods: victims' travel modalities

- Depends on the level of control exercised by traffickers, the country of origin and the perceived risks associated with travel
- **Victims are accompanied by traffickers** (many cases from Romania)
  - Direct supervision
  - Trafficker pretends to be a relative or friend
- **Travel in groups without direct accompaniment by traffickers**
  - Remote control
  - Lower detection risks



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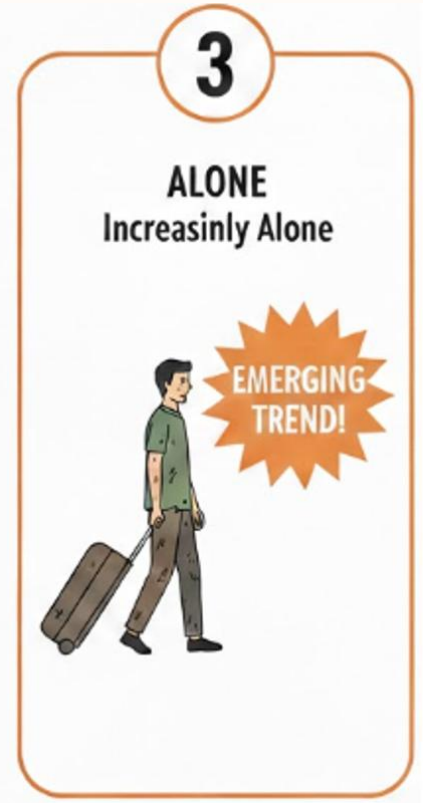
Methods: victims' travel modalities

- **Emerging trend**: **individuals increasingly travelling alone**
  - Detailed instructions and financial incentives
  - Assurances not to betray the traffickers
  - Present themselves to authorities as voluntary migrants or tourist

- **Emerging trend**: victims are **encouraged to assume the cost themselves** (instead of being paid the travel by traffickers) → no traceable link



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Exploitation

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Emerging forms of SE

- **Live-streamed exploitation**
  - Wealthy individuals in developed countries pay anonymously to watch or direct the live abuse of children occurring in another country
  - Perceived as safer by clients
  - Grew more in the last 10 years

- **Emerging demand for unconventional sexual practices**

"something like 70% of cases where children are put in are put in front of a live camera and abused, the person running the camera and doing the abuse are family members. 70% of the time, according to the Filipino police, it's a parent, a brother, a sister, a cousin" (expert)

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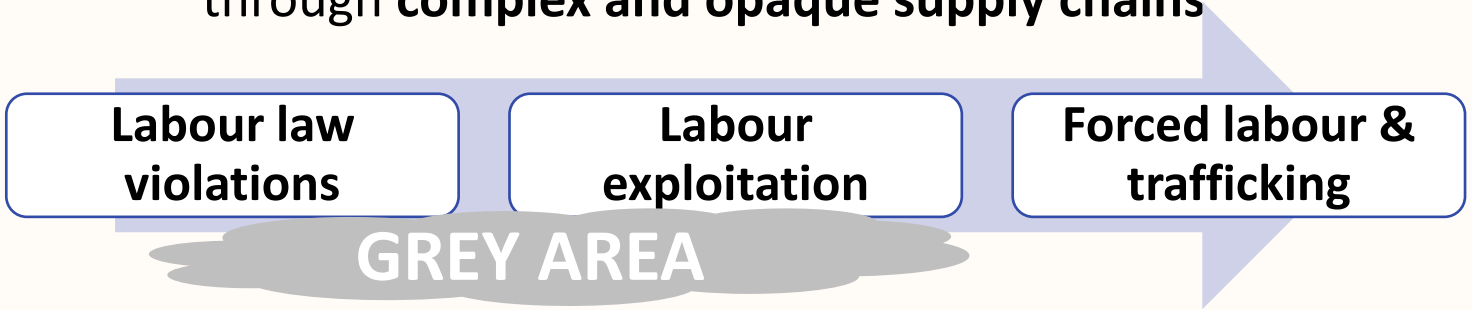
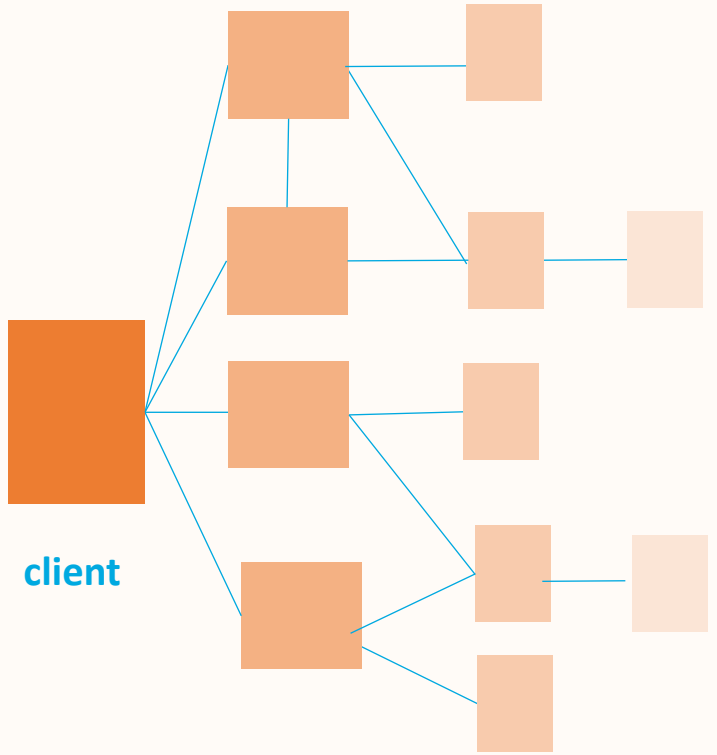
Emerging forms of LE

- Increase in the number of identified cases in recent years but **persistent gaps in knowledge**
- **Emerging trend**: new sectors are increasingly being associated with abusive practices
  - **Logistics sector**, particularly in parcel and package delivery
  - Often not legally recognised as trafficking offences
  - **Role of private companies** in tolerating LE, often through **complex and opaque supply chains**





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Emerging forms of FC

- **Broad spectrum of offences:** e.g., drug dealing, smuggling, organised theft and shoplifting, gang-related violent acts, online fraud and phone scams (neglected in Europe)
- Exploitation of **unaccompanied foreign minors**
- But also **national victims** (e.g., in UK many are British)
- **Emerging trend**:
  - Use **minors to circumvent stricter controls** (example from the Netherlands): minors as young as 12–15 have been recruited to empty containers of drugs
  - Involvement university students, particularly those studying chemistry or physics, targeted for their technical knowledge in drug production, or students in shipping and logistics

But also…many cases of **poly-exploitation** (often neglected!)

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Thank you for your attention!

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Find out:

Contact us: vanguard_horizon@iti.gr

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