

Research and Practice in Combating Trafficking Human Beings: Reflections on an International Conference in Pécs*

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Between 14 and 16 May, the Research Group on Combating Trafficking in Human Beings of the University of Pécs, Faculty of Law hosted an international conference, dedicated to the fight against human trafficking. Bringing together legal scholars, practitioners, and experts from across Europe, the event provided a platform for interdisciplinary dialogue.

The conference, which was entitled “*Innovative Research Approaches in Combating Human Trafficking*”, addressed various dimensions of trafficking-related crimes, ranging from legal and institutional responses to victim protection and international cooperation. The topics covered the practical challenges of criminal justice to the role of EU policies and prevention efforts, offering insights into both ongoing struggles and promising practices.

Beyond the academic context, the event highlighted the importance of working together across sectors and borders. It also reflected the faculty’s strong commitment to support international dialogue on this complex issue. The following paragraphs offer a selection of the presentation that shaped the conference agenda.

The conference was opened on the afternoon of 14 May. The official opening ceremony featured remarks by H.E. Désirée Bonis, the ambassador of the Netherlands to Hungary, Ágoston Mohay, the vice-dean of the Faculty of Law and István Szijártó, a member of the Research Group on Combating Human

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Trafficking. Their speeches highlighted the importance of transnational cooperation and the central role of academic research in developing effective strategies against human trafficking.

Following the opening remarks, the keynote speech was delivered by Jorn van Rij, who is a senior analyst at the Netherlands National Police, and a visiting professor at the University of Pécs. In his keynote, he spoke about how third parties can help in preventing human trafficking. He explained that trafficking is a complex crime with many forms, such as sexual, labor or criminal exploitation, and he also mentioned that the number of cases is growing. Because of this, police work must go beyond reacting to crimes that have already happened. Instead, it should focus more on prevention and early detection, using up-to-date research and better cooperation with others. The presenter highlighted the importance of building strong partnerships – with public organizations, private companies, and universities. He shared how the Netherlands National Police is working with these groups to improve training, research and awareness. He also said that while partnerships should be based on trust and shared goals, there may be situations where some actors need to be required to take part in anti-trafficking efforts, since fighting this offense is a shared responsibility.

The second day of the conference began with a presentation by Gabriel Zaharia from the Technical University of Moldova. The presentation introduced the ‘Trafficking Escape’ platform, a digital simulation game designed to raise awareness among teenagers about the dangers of human trafficking – particularly in online environments. Zaharia emphasized the growing digital presence of children and the increasing risks raised by cyberbullying, online grooming, and misinformation. He demonstrated how the use of artificial intelligence within educational games can create more realistic scenarios, personalize content, and adapt dynamically to users’ needs. The presenter highlighted the pedagogical potential of AI-driven tools and gaming in prevention education, especially, when addressing the vulnerability of minors to online exploitation. The project reflects a broader European effort to promote digital safety through legislation, innovation, and targeted awareness campaigns.

The second presentation of the morning was delivered by Liwia Palus from the University of Wrocław, who examined the legal challenges of victim protection in cases of human trafficking under Polish law. She explained that despite various international and national efforts, victims still face major barriers in accessing legal protections, mainly due to fragmented regulations and unclear legal definitions. A key issue discussed was the lack of a single, comprehensive law that would gather all victim rights in one place. Palus also highlighted difficulties in identifying victims, especially in cases of forced labor, where the legal framework is vague. While she acknowledged Poland’s recent improvements in combating trafficking, she stressed the urgent need for better-coordinated and more inclusive legal protection mechanisms.

The third presentation of the session was delivered by Tsisana Khundadze from Sulkhan-Saba Orbeliani University. The research focused on how financial difficulties, digital platforms, and social exclusion contribute to the vulnerability of sex workers, particularly trans and migrant women. Based on interviews with eleven sex workers, the study revealed that while online platforms offer more autonomy, they also expose workers to surveillance, abuse, and coercion. The study emphasized the urgent need for stronger protections, better-informed support systems, and more inclusive policy responses in Georgia.

The second section began with a presentation by Gillian Kane from Ulster University and Andrew Chisholm employed by the International Organization for Migration, focusing on the identification of modern slavery and human trafficking in cases of child criminal exploitation (CCE) in Northern Ireland. The presenters highlighted a striking gap: since 2015, only 45 child victims have been referred to the UK's National Referral Mechanism (NRM) from Northern Ireland, and none of them were UK-born male children despite thousands of similar referrals from other parts of the UK. The study explored why child victims exploited by paramilitary or organized crime groups in Northern Ireland are rarely recognized under the legal definitions of trafficking or modern slavery. The presentation concluded with a call for better training, clearer regulations, and stronger cross-sector cooperation to ensure children in Northern Ireland are properly identified and protected.

Sanne Spronk from the Rotterdam University of Applied Sciences shared good practices in cross-sector collaboration in human trafficking cases. She presented the work of the university's Expertise Centre on Trafficking in Human Beings. The presenter emphasized the importance of linking education, research, and fieldwork. The initiative focuses on training professionals, supporting predictive policing with tools like geovisualization, and raising international cooperation, including with institutions from Hungary, Georgia and Moldova. The presentation encouraged continued exchange of knowledge, joint research, and the creation of an international minor on human trafficking by 2027.

István Szijártó from the University of Pécs introduced a case study on the use of an innovative crime prevention method in Hungary, focusing on the *Escapetruck* – a mobile escape room designed by the Reshape Foundation to raise awareness about human trafficking. The Escapetruck uses interactive storytelling to simulate a realistic trafficking scenario set in a brothel, educating participants about grooming, manipulation, and exploitation. The mobile unit traveled to six Hungarian cities in 2024 and reached around 1.000 participants. Based on a follow-up questionnaire completed by nearly 300 participants, the projects showed strong results in raising awareness about digital recruitment methods, emotional grooming, and coercion tactics. Overall, the initiative demonstrates how experimental, mobile learning can effectively communicate complex legal and psychological concepts in crime prevention.

Péter Hudák, employed by the Ministry of Justice in Hungary, made a presentation about the national identification and referral system for victims of human trafficking. He started the presentation by outlining Hungary's legal framework, which is rooted in the Council of Europe Convention and aligned with the EU's Directive 2011/36/EU. A key component of the system is the 2012 Government Decree (THB Decree), which sets out procedures for victim identification and cooperation among responsible bodies, including provisions on shelters and cross-border cases. The presentation focused on the EKAT System which is Hungary's web-based IT platform, to centralize victim data and streamline the referral process. It was designed to replace the inefficient paper-based system, and the system enables authorities to collect, manage, and analyze victim-related information securely and effectively. The development project, expected to run from 2025 to 2027, aims to strengthen victim support through better data coordination and broader institutional engagement.

The afternoon session was opened by a joint presentation of Jan Stajnko from the University of Maribor and Michał Wawrzyńczak from the Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań on the legal implications of the Poland-Belarus border crisis, particularly in relation to human trafficking and migrant smuggling. The speakers reviewed the events that began in 2021, when thousands of migrants were pushed across the EU's eastern border – often manipulated by Belarusian authorities and subjected to violence, coercion, or misleading promises of easy entry into the EU. From a criminal law perspective, the presentation explored the distinction between migrant smuggling and human trafficking. The speakers emphasized the lack of clarity in legal classification and called for more precise definitions and harmonized EU-level responses.

The next presenter was Stefan Coman from the International Justice Mission, Romania. He presented about the European Anti-Trafficking Program, which is a comprehensive model aimed at stopping cross-border human trafficking within the EU. The program focuses on three main pillars: enhanced European cooperation, stronger criminal justice system responses, and survivor empowerment. Coman highlighted recent successes, including over 700 justice system actors trained, dozens of convictions secured, and significant legislative reforms in Romania.

The third day of conference started with a presentation by Efthymis Antonopoulos, from the organization called Victim Support Europe. The main focus of the speech was about the early identification of labour trafficking victims, focusing on both adults and children. He outlined common forms of coercion – such as debt bondage, document retention, and constant threats – that often go unnoticed in sectors like agriculture, construction and hospitality. Antonopoulos stressed that frontline professionals, including teachers, healthcare workers, and labour inspectors, play a key role recognizing risk indicators. He advocated for trauma-informed, victim-centered approaches, emphasizing the need for early

support, coordinated referrals, and respectful communication.

In the second presentation of the final day, Ernesta Rousseva, from the Bulgarian National Commission for Combating Trafficking in Human Beings, examined whether prevention in the fight against human trafficking can be standardized. Her research was grounded in comparative analysis of international, EU, and national awareness campaigns. She applied a three-tiered model to evaluate strategic alignment and practical outcomes. Rousseva demonstrated how a structured, yet adaptable approach can produce effective results, especially when targeting vulnerable communities. While her findings suggest that some degree of standardization is possible, she stressed that prevention must remain flexible and context sensitive.

The final presentation of the conference was delivered by Angel Vadim from the “Stefan cel Mare” Police Academy of Moldova and focused on the special hearing procedures for minor victims and the innovative Escape Van Project. The speaker outlined Moldova’s evolving legal and institutional response to child trafficking, highlighting law No. 66/2012 and the 2022 extension of protections following the Istanbul Convention. The presentation also showcased the Escape Van Project, a mobile outreach initiative launched in 2023 to raise awareness about human trafficking across Moldova. With support from multiple partners, including Open Gate International and the Netherlands Embassy, the project has reached thousands of citizens and trained hundreds of police officers. The recent transfer of the van’s equipment to a local NGO ensures its continued use, with the program aiming to reach over 7.000 people in 20 communities.

The final day of the conference also featured two roundtable discussions, which offered the participants an opportunity to reflect critically on the practical dimensions of anti-trafficking efforts. The first panel, *“Partnership and Proactivity in Fighting THB”* was moderated by Jorn van Rij and focused on the importance of cooperation across sectors – including law enforcement, civil society, and international organizations. Speakers shared insights on building trust-based networks, improving information sharing, and supporting victims through coordinated responses. The second discussion, *“How Can Academia Effectively Contribute to the Fight Against THB”*, was chaired by Ágoston Mohay and brought together researchers and practitioners to examine the relationship between scholarship and practice. The panel explored how academic institutions can support evidence-based policymaking and conduct interdisciplinary research that informs legal reforms and social services.

Fighting human trafficking in the 21st century requires less reaction and more anticipation – a shift from responding to symptoms to addressing root causes.³ The three-day conference in Pécs showed how complex and important the

¹ Jorn van Rij, “Towards a New Human Trafficking Strategy: Proactivity at the Heart of the Ps

fight against human trafficking is. With more than thirty speakers from over ten countries, the event brought together researchers, law enforcement professionals, policymakers, and civil society actors to exchange ideas, discuss challenges, and explore ways to work together. Topics ranged from legal reforms and victim support to innovative technologies and education-based prevention, emphasizing that real change depends on cooperation, knowledge, and long-term commitment. The conference, which was organized by the Research Group on Combating Trafficking in Human Beings of the University of Pécs, Faculty of Law underlined the university's active role in international discussions on trafficking human beings. It also highlighted the value of working across borders and disciplines.

Finally, in connection with and building on the results of the conference, the Pécs Journal of International and European Law has issued a call for papers for a special issue on combating trafficking in human beings.¹

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² 'Call for Papers – Pécs Journal of International and European Law' (*PJIEL*, 23 May 2025) <<https://journals.lib.pte.hu/index.php/pjiel/announcement/view/55>> accessed 23 May 2025.