PRESS RELEASE

NEW REPORT UNCOVERS LOW LEVELS OF AWARENESS AND PROTECTION AGAINST COMMERCIAL SEXUAL EXPLOITATION OF CHILDREN IN THE WESTERN BALKANS

The new GI-TOC report Exploited in Plain Sight assesses the different forms of commercial sexual exploitation of children and analyses child protection responses in the Western Balkans.

**VIENNA, Austria – 18 May 2021:** Children are at risk of commercial sexual exploitation in all six Western Balkan countries, according to a new report from the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime. This comprises tech-facilitated exploitation, including the creation and distribution of child sexual abuse material online. The report shows that societies and institutions in the Western Balkan have limited awareness and capacity to respond adequately to the commercial sexual exploitation of children.

***Exploited in Plain Sight: An assessment of commercial sexual exploitation of children and child protection responses in the Western Balkans*** is the first report of its kind that focuses on the problem in this region. It provides detailed information on the activities and responsibilities of the different actors working to identify, prevent and combat exploitation in the Western Balkans.

The report is a civil society-led analysis, based on the contributions of human trafficking, child protection and tech experts from the Western Balkans. While the report sheds light on this hidden problem, ‘the lack of up-to-date and disaggregated data, together with a general tendency to underreport cases, most likely make the numbers presented in the report a significant underestimate’, says Livia Wagner, one of the report’s authors.

Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, exploitation cases facilitated through social media or online communication platforms were increasing in the region. ‘Tech-facilitated exploitation often follows a similar cycle starting with grooming, then sexting, leading then to sextortion and/or live sexual abuse and the sharing of child sexual abuse material’, explains Thi Hoang, one of the report’s authors.

The report concludes that the current weaknesses in the child protection system and limited institutional capacity, lack of specialization and engagement by civil society, and the low awareness of the private sector make the Western Balkans vulnerable to commercial sexual exploitation of children.

‘Although the national legal frameworks generally comply with international standards, there is no efficient multi-stakeholder approach in place to address the phenomenon in a holistic way’, says Kristina Amerhauser, one of the report’s authors. ‘There are not enough resources available to counter and reduce children’s vulnerability to sexual exploitation in an adequate way across the region.

‘There is a clear need for greater understanding and capacity in the region to deal with the topic’, says Ruggero Scaturro, one of the report’s authors. ‘This includes both specific national actions but also a joint regional approach based on sharing good practices and information. Law enforcement also needs the skills and tools to disrupt this digital danger’.

The report provides extensive recommendations divided by country and stakeholder group. A practical guide for legal practitioners is also available: it outlines the national and international legal frameworks that regulate commercial sexual exploitation, and highlights the current gaps that require national and regional harmonization.

**For further questions or to interview the report's authors, please contact Claudio Landi (****Claudio.landi@globalinitiative.net****).**

About the Global Initiative

*The Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime is a network of professionals working on the frontlines of the fight against the illicit economy and criminal actors. Through a network of global civil society observatories on the illicit economy, we monitor evolving trends and work to build the evidence basis for policy action, disseminate the expertise of our Network and catalyze multisectoral and holistic responses across a range of crime types. With the Global Initiative’s Resilience Fund, we support community activists and local NGOs working in areas where crime governance is critically undermining people’s safety, security and life chances.*