



Photo: RENATE Working Board, Madrid, 2026

October 18, 2026. The RENATE Europe Core Group share some thoughts on our current reality in Europe as we work together to combat human trafficking and exploitation.

The **EU Pact on Migration and Asylum** significantly shifts how Europe processes displaced individuals. Civil society organizations, including the **RENA TE network**, argue that its focus on accelerated border procedures and detention inadvertently increases vulnerability to human trafficking. Here are just a few observations on current European human trafficking trends, the implications of the EU Pact, and the response by the RENATE Europe Network.

Human Trafficking in Europe: Current Trends & Challenges

- **The exponential growth in Digital Exploitation and AI:** Traffickers use artificial intelligence (AI) and digital communication to automate conversation, build fake social media personas, and generate fraudulent travel documents to recruit victims.
- **Rising Cyber Scams:** In parallel with traditional labour and sexual exploitation, human trafficking has expanded into forced participation in multi-billion-dollar digital fraud and cyber-scam operations.
- **AI shifts its focus to now include Labour Exploitation:** While historical AI anti-trafficking tools prioritized tracking domestic sexual exploitation, European agencies face a massive rise in forced labour, which demands localized, adaptable responses.
- **Under-Identification at Borders:** Displaced populations fleeing conflict and economic collapse face systemic vulnerabilities. Border security personnel often lack deep training in victimology, leading to victims being penalized as irregular migrants rather than protected.
- **Armed conflict and Climate change - Repeated and prolonged displacement:** Wars destroy homes, livelihoods, documentation and community protection systems. People may be displaced several times, become separated from family members, or depend on informal transport, housing and employment, increasing exposure to deceptive recruiters and exploitative intermediaries.

- **Heightened risks for women and children:** Conflict-related displacement often involves women, children and unaccompanied minors travelling or settling without stable support. Risks include sexual and labour exploitation, forced marriage, forced criminality, illegal adoption, online grooming and children going missing across borders.
- **Overstretched protection systems:** Large arrivals can overwhelm reception centres, shelters, child-protection services, interpreters and legal-aid providers. Rapid registration and asylum procedures may fail to identify trafficking indicators, particularly where trauma, fear of authorities or language barriers delay disclosure.
- **Climate-related livelihood loss and mobility:** Floods, droughts, wildfires, extreme heat and environmental degradation can damage agriculture, housing and local employment. Sudden disasters create immediate displacement, while slower changes can deepen poverty and debt, prompting unsafe migration and reliance on unregulated recruiters.
- **Compounding crises:** Climate pressures can intensify food and water insecurity in conflict-affected or fragile settings. People already displaced by violence may then face further displacement from hazards, with fewer resources and weaker social networks each time they move.
- **Exploitation in high-risk sectors:** Displaced people may accept informal work in agriculture, construction, domestic work, hospitality, care or post-war reconstruction. Recruitment fees, withheld wages, tied accommodation and confiscated documents can create conditions for forced labour and debt bondage.
- **Digital targeting during emergencies:** Traffickers exploit urgent online searches for transport, accommodation, work and family reunification. False offers, impersonation of aid providers and technology-enabled surveillance make verification and safe referral increasingly important.

Implications for RENATE: These developments increase the need for multilingual information at borders and reception points; safe, accessible reporting and referral channels; long-term housing, legal and psychosocial support; stronger child safeguarding and family-tracing procedures; ethical recruitment and labour inspection; digital-risk awareness; and cross-border continuity of care. RENATE can also advocate for anti-trafficking safeguards to be integrated into humanitarian response, climate adaptation, migration policy and post-conflict reconstruction rather than treated as a separate issue.

The Impact of the EU Migration Pact

The **EU Pact on Migration and Asylum** overhauled the Common European Asylum System. And while it introduces mandatory health and vulnerability screening, its structurally restrictive measures pose specific anti-trafficking risks, for example:

Pact Provision	Trafficking Risk Factor
Accelerated Border Procedures	A compressed timeframe makes it difficult for traumatized victims to safely disclose exploitation.
Expanded Use of Detention	Holding applicants at the border for up to 12 weeks isolates individuals from NGO legal aid and civil society support.
Stricter Deportation & Returns	Fear of immediate return forces irregular migrants into hiding, pushing them directly into the hands of exploitative labour networks.

A general overview of the responses of the RENATE Network across Europe

The **Religious in Europe Networking Against Trafficking and Exploitation (RENATE)** network operates across **31 European nations**, mobilizing over 135 member organizations to counter these structural challenges.

- **Cross-Border Protection and Safe Housing:** RENATE network members operate designated shelters and safe houses across Europe to provide safe spaces, psychological rehabilitation, and skills training for survivors.
- **Legal Aid and Advocacy:** Through its dedicated Law Task Group, the network challenges systemic injustices by training lawyers in trauma-informed human rights law and advocating for victim protection. RENATE has two representatives at the Conference in INGOs at the Council of Europe, where RENATE is directly involved with European partners in advocacy, awareness-raising and policy formation. RENATE directly engages with European institutions via the EU Civil Society Platform against Trafficking in Human Beings.
- **Advocacy, Awareness and Prevention:** The network hosts educational webinars, targets youth awareness, and partners with regional anti-trafficking organizations to address the root causes of exploitation before vulnerable migrants embark on perilous journeys. RENATE participates in the Commission for Status of Women (CSW) since 2018, on themes such as the following:
 - *survivor dignity and leadership;*
 - *trauma-informed legal assistance;*
 - *the role of shelters and long-term reintegration;*
 - *prevention through education and communications;*
 - *attention to conflict, displacement and digital exploitation;*
 - *cooperation among civil society, faith-based organisations, legal professionals and European institutions;*

All of which ensure the RENATE Network brings practice-based recommendations from its European network into international policy discussions, in addition to addressing emerging trends in human trafficking and Exploitation.

There is much done but a lot more to do. We are so very grateful for all who collaborate with us in the mission to combat human trafficking and exploitation.

Together we can achieve so much for so many.