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United States Mission to the OSCE

Response to Special Representative on Trafficking Human Beings Kari Johnstone

As prepared for delivery by Ambassador Darrell Owens
to the Permanent Council, Vienna
October 22, 2026

Special Representative Johnstone, dear Kari,

Thank you for your report and for your office's continued leadership on this urgent issue.

The United States welcomes your work addressing the convergence of crimes and emerging forms of trafficking, notably forced scamming and drug trafficking. Combating human trafficking is a U.S. priority, and a core OSCE mandate, one the Organization must continue to emphasize as it returns to basics. The United States just released the 2026 Trafficking in Persons Report on October 8 which reveals new ways criminal organizations and repressive regimes use this abhorrent practice for financial gain. The rapid growth of forced criminality, particularly in scam centers, demands action; these centers defraud Americans of billions of dollars each year, deceptively recruiting, and then coercing, victims worldwide into committing these crimes. For our part, the United States is decisively combating this threat, including through sanctions, indictments, and rewards programs, having sanctioned more than 200 individuals and entities involved in scam centers over the last two years.

This work illustrates your office's added value, reflecting the Organization's comprehensive approach to security and its links to the security, economic, and human dimensions.

We commend the Office of the Special Representative's convening role and engagement with all participating States and partners. The lesson for the OSCE region is clear: we cannot win this fight unless all countries take meaningful action; we must work together to identify scam centers, disrupt their operations, and prosecute perpetrators.

The United States places particular importance on the promotion of survivor-centered approaches and the non-punishment principle. While holding perpetrators accountable is essential, it is only one part of the response; we must also protect the victims forced into criminality, who are too often penalized for crimes they were compelled to commit. In January 2026, President Trump signed the Trafficking Survivors Relief Act, giving trafficking victims a path to vacate federal convictions and expunge arrest records for crimes they were forced to commit. Survivors who had lived through trafficking helped shape this law and were critical to its eventual passage. Elevating survivor engagement and embedding survivors' expertise into programming, policy, and victim assistance remains a key U.S. priority. ISTAC remains a model of this principle in action: ten survivor leaders from across the OSCE providing direct, formal guidance to ODIHR and, through it, to the 57 participating States.

Looking ahead, the United States supports a whole-of-society approach to combating trafficking, bringing together governments, civil society, and the private sector as partners.

We also welcome your office's priority focus on trafficking in times of crisis. In Ukraine, for example, nearly one-third of the population has been displaced due to the war, increasing vulnerability to human trafficking. Identification, intervention, and investigation efforts for trafficking victims must be treated as essential activities during and after any crisis or state of emergency; these services cannot stop when everything else does.

We support integrating trafficking prevention into post-war reconstruction. We note your work with the OSCE's RESTORE Ukraine Alliance, a program that brings together governments, international organizations, business, employers' organizations, financial institutions, civil society, and communities around the shared objective of ensuring Ukraine's recovery is free from human trafficking and exploitation.

Finally, as your office marks its 20th anniversary this year, the United States recognizes that this structure has provided the foundation for the Office's ability to deliver on its mandate and provide focused, specialized support to participating States.

It is time for ODIHR, the OSCE, and participating States to translate today's discussion into concrete outcomes. The United States stands ready to work together to combat forced criminality and protect survivors.

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