

MISSING PERSONS GROUP

ANNUAL REPORT

1 July 2023 to 1 August 2024

Introduction

Nearly three quarters of the 40,000 persons who went missing during the conflicts in the former Yugoslavia have been accounted for. This is the result of the efforts of domestic institutions (DIs). Nevertheless, more than 11,000 persons have still not been found.

Their families continue to endure the unimaginable pain of not knowing the fate of their loved ones, a burden that affects new generations. If left unresolved, this issue could have long-term consequences for the future stability of the entire region.

Recognizing its importance, in July 2018 at a Berlin Process Summit in London, heads of states and governments of the Berlin Process countries, including those from the territory of the former Yugoslavia, signed a joint declaration on missing persons, reiterating their commitment to the regional effort to account for those still missing from the conflicts on the territory of the former Yugoslavia. [The London Declaration](#)¹ was the result of the need to enhance the existing cooperation. It asserts the centrality of resolving the fate of the missing in a manner that is commensurate with human rights and the rule of law.

To operationalize the principles outlined in the London Declaration, in November 2018 at the Headquarters of the International Commission on Missing Persons (ICMP), representatives of the DIs that are responsible for accounting for missing persons in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Kosovo*, Montenegro and Serbia signed a [Framework Plan](#) that identifies five key issues that are essential to increase effectiveness in accounting for missing persons through multilateral cooperation. The key component of the Framework Plan was the establishment of the Missing Persons Group (MPG), a unique multilateral cooperation mechanism comprising DIs responsible for the search and identification of missing persons from each signatory of the Framework Plan.

The London Declaration and the joint Framework Plan initiated a new phase in the multilateral cooperation to address the issue of persons missing from conflicts in the former Yugoslavia. Resolving the fate of these missing persons is crucial in relation to European integration and meeting key requirements for European Union (EU) candidate countries, especially in the field of fundamental rights and freedoms, good neighborly relations, and good governance. As an EU member state, the Republic of Croatia supports the principles of the London Declaration by actively participating in the Missing Persons Group (MPG).

The MPG reports on progress made in resolving the missing persons issue in the former Yugoslavia, each year at Berlin process summits. This is the fifth Annual Report of the MPG, covering the period from 1 July 2023 to 1 August 2024.

¹ The Declaration on Missing Persons signed by Berlin Process leaders takes into account existing bilateral agreements, protocols of cooperation and mechanisms of cooperation, as reiterated in Article 1 of the Framework Plan. DIs held meetings and conducted various activities within the framework of existing bilateral agreements and mechanisms for cooperation.

* This designation is without prejudice to positions on status, and is in line with UNSC 1244 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo Declaration of Independence.

Key achievements since establishment of the MPG

Since its establishment following the London Summit, and despite the existing challenges, the MPG has made continuous efforts to increase cooperation and trust between DIs responsible for the process of accounting for missing persons. The MPG created two operational groups: one focused on resolving cases of unidentified human remains, and the other on managing the exchange of information within the Regional Database of Active Missing Persons Cases from the territory of the Former Yugoslavia (the Database).

The Operational Group to Resolve Unidentified (NN) Cases (NNOG) plays an important role in addressing the widespread issue of unidentified human remains, a challenge faced by all MPG members. Through individual efforts and cooperation within the NNOG, DIs achieved significant results in reducing the number of NN cases in mortuary facilities, bringing the total from approximately 4,000 to around 2,800 cases.

A significant milestone was achieved by the MPG in 2022 with the public launch of the Database on Active Cases of Persons Missing from the Conflicts on the Territory of the Former Yugoslavia (the Database). Originally established in 2018 and used by DIs as a platform for data harmonization and exchange, the Database now offers up-to-date records on active missing persons cases to families of the missing and the broader public. The Database is searchable by first name, father's first name, surname, and reported territory of disappearance, and it allows users to provide information on specific missing persons via a feedback box or to report a missing person if this person is not already listed. This globally unique compilation of records, spanning multiple territories, exemplifies regional cooperation and shows engagement to provide factual information.

Another notable achievement occurred in September 2022, when representatives of family associations and MPG members jointly commemorated civilian victims of the conflicts in the former Yugoslavia at a monument in Pobrezje Park, Podgorica.

Progress in implementation of the Framework Plan in the reporting period (1 July 2023 to 1 August 2024)

The MPG, as a multilateral mechanism, adds value to the results already achieved by individual DIs. It upholds the responsibility to protect human rights and promote peace and stability through dedicated institutions and laws that ensure the sustainable and non-discriminatory handling of missing persons cases.

The activities carried out by individual DIs, members of the MPG, remain the foundation of efforts to account for persons missing from conflicts in the former Yugoslavia. They conduct numerous field visits and surveys of locations that may conceal clandestine graves containing the remains of missing persons. They analyze data, search archives, and gather information from survivors. These efforts lead to the discovery of remains of victims and DNA-based identification of remains found in individual and mass graves.

Bilateral cooperation and similar mechanisms between the DIs remain essential to addressing the issue of missing persons. This cooperation forms the foundation for all other multilateral efforts. Through bilateral cooperation, and similar mechanisms, DIs can ensure exchange of vital information

and jointly resolve cases. Therefore, bilateral cooperation based on the cooperation agreements and other mechanisms needs to be intensified.

Due to the nature of the armed conflicts on the territory of the former Yugoslavia in the 1990s, which resulted in huge population movements across the borders of newly formed states, in addition to bilateral, multilateral cooperation has been key to resolving the missing persons issue.

In this context, multilateral cooperation enhances the achievements of individual DIs, which have the mandate to work on missing persons cases within their territories. In their work, the DIs uphold the principles of the rule of law and human rights protection, while employing modern scientific methods and advanced data informatics systems.

During the reporting period, DIs reaffirmed their commitment to multilateral cooperation within the framework of the MPG and its operational groups: the NNOG and the Operational Group for the Database of Active Missing Persons Cases from the Conflicts in the Former Yugoslavia (DBOG). The MPG convened two sessions—one in Tirana in October 2023 and another in Dubrovnik in February 2024. At both sessions, the MPG members discussed important issues regarding efforts to account for the remaining missing persons, and strategic direction about the future of cooperation.

The NNOG continues to address NN cases stored in mortuary facilities across the region, through regular sessions and continuous operational collaboration between experts from DIs. As a result of the NNOG's efforts, certain cases are being reviewed and resolved, some of which had remained unidentified for more than 30 years.

During the reporting period, experts from the DIs who are members of the DBOG made 875 modifications to the records of 397 missing persons in the Database, increasing the accuracy of data. Simultaneously, 23,999 members of the public accessed the Database to view information on approximately 11,000 active missing persons cases. Some of them included family members who provided feedback on the information on their missing relatives or asked questions or requested clarifications from the relevant DIs. These numbers show that 30 years after the conflict, a large segment of the population is still affected by this issue.

The MPG remains committed to increasing the involvement of families of missing persons and their associations in its multilateral cooperation efforts. The MPG established the Forum of the Families at their seventh session in August 2022, as a platform for representatives of the family associations to actively participate in multilateral efforts to address the issue of missing persons. The first meeting of the Forum of the Families was held in Podgorica in September 2022. The MPG hosted the second Forum of the Families before the summit on 16 October 2023 in Tirana. This forum brought together MPG members and representatives of the Regional Coordination Network of Family Associations (RC) Board. During the meeting, MPG members provided the latest updates on their work, while RC Board members, representing the families of missing persons from the former Yugoslavia, had the opportunity to ask questions. After the meeting, the RC Board, composed of heads of family associations from all MPG member states, disseminated the information gathered to their respective associations.

Future outlook and conclusions

The MPG is a unique regional cooperation mechanism dedicated to addressing the issue of missing persons and securing the rights of families of the missing. It serves as a potential model for addressing large-scale disappearances in other parts of the world, particularly in the context of regional armed conflict, such as Ukraine, the South Caucasus, and the Middle East. The MPG exemplifies an approach where former adversaries have established cooperation aimed at protecting the rights of victims and their families. In this regard, the MPG stands ready to share its collective knowledge, expertise, and experience with stakeholders in other regions facing similar challenges.

At the session in February 2024, the MPG made a number of decisions regarding its strategic direction in regard to sustainability and future operations. Members are committed to operationalizing key components of the Framework Plan, including advancing the work of the NNOG by collecting additional reference samples and locating relatives who might provide these samples. The MPG remains committed to new methods and technologies to search for human remains in locations such as riverbeds and lakes. To address cases of joint interest, operational meetings will be organized as needed, with the participation of ICMP.

Looking ahead, the MPG aims to raise awareness about its work and forge new partnerships. This includes ensuring high-level participation in the upcoming Berlin Process summits and initiating strong partnerships with EU institutions, with planned meetings in the EU Parliament and the European Commission's Directorate-General for Neighborhood and Enlargement Negotiations (DG NEAR) to secure EU financial and political support. To increase visibility, the MPG is considering organizing annual joint media events on significant dates related to the London Declaration and the signing of the Framework Plan. Additionally, MPG members are taking steps towards ensuring sustainability of this cooperation mechanism.

Addressing the issue of missing persons carries not only humanitarian significance but also legal, political, and security implications. Considering this, sustaining the cooperation mechanism requires continued support. MPG members therefore stress the importance of the international community, particularly Berlin Process members, reaffirming their commitment to this issue—first expressed in the London Declaration—by providing both political and financial backing to the MPG.

We, the members of the MPG, would like to express our appreciation to the Government of the United Kingdom and the Government of the Federal Republic of Germany for supporting activities related to the crucial issue of accounting for the missing, and to ICMP for providing technical and expert support for the implementation of the Framework Plan.

MPG members invite Berlin Process participants to take this report into consideration at the next Berlin Process summit in Berlin.