

BULGARIA (Tier 2)

Bulgaria is a source, transit, and, to a lesser extent, a destination country for men, women, and children from Ukraine, Moldova, and Romania trafficked to and through Bulgaria to Germany, Belgium, France, Italy, Spain, Austria, Norway, the Czech Republic, Poland, Greece, Turkey, and Macedonia for the purposes of commercial sexual exploitation and forced labor. Ethnic Roma women and children remain highly vulnerable to trafficking. Children are trafficked within Bulgaria and to Greece and the United Kingdom for the purposes of forced begging and forced petty theft. Around 15 percent of identified trafficking victims in Bulgaria are children. Bulgarian women and some men are trafficked internally, primarily to resort areas along the Black Sea coast and in border towns with Greece, for the purposes of commercial sexual exploitation and forced labor.

The Government of Bulgaria does not fully comply with the minimum standards for the elimination of trafficking; however, it is making significant efforts to do so. In 2008, the government maintained strong efforts to investigate, prosecute, and convict trafficking offenders, targeting some of the leaders of trafficking networks. The government also doubled the number of government-run centers available to assist child trafficking victims and opened a new adult shelter in April 2009. The government generally maintained the number of traffickers sentenced to time in prison, but it did not prosecute public officials complicit in trafficking over the last year.

Recommendations for Bulgaria: Vigorously investigate, prosecute, convict, and punish government officials complicit in trafficking; continue efforts to investigate, prosecute, and convict trafficking offenders and ensure that a majority of convicted traffickers serve some time in prison; continue to increase the number of victims referred by government officials for assistance; and continue to improve data collection and methods for assessing trafficking law enforcement statistics.

Prosecution

The Bulgarian government demonstrated strong anti-trafficking law enforcement efforts over the reporting period; however, it slightly decreased the number of traffickers sentenced to time in prison and it did not apply vigorously law enforcement measures to government officials complicit in trafficking. Bulgaria prohibits trafficking for both sexual exploitation and forced labor through Section 159 of its criminal code, which prescribes penalties of between one and 15 years' imprisonment. These penalties are sufficiently stringent and commensurate with those prescribed for other grave crimes, such as rape. In 2008, police conducted 187 sex trafficking and 25 labor trafficking investigations, compared to 179 sex trafficking and 22 labor trafficking investigations conducted in 2007. In 2008, authorities prosecuted 79 individuals for sex trafficking and eight for forced labor compared to 78 persons prosecuted in 2007. In 2008, a total of 69 trafficking offenders were convicted -- 66 for sex trafficking and three for labor trafficking offenses -- compared to 71 sex trafficking offenders and two labor trafficking offenders convicted in 2007. Twenty-five of the 69 traffickers convicted in 2008 served time in prison. Of those 25, twelve trafficking offenders were sentenced to up to three years' imprisonment, six were sentenced to from three to five years' imprisonment, and seven were sentenced to from five to 15 years' imprisonment.

There were continued reports of trafficking-related corruption during the reporting period. In autumn 2008, police arrested three municipal councilors in Varna for allegedly leading an organized human trafficking and money laundering group; the investigation was ongoing at the time of this report. In 2008, the government also investigated one police officer for complicity in trafficking. During the reporting period, the government closed its investigation launched in 2007 against a low-level border police officer allegedly involved in human trafficking. The Government of Bulgaria did not prosecute, convict, or sentence any government officials for trafficking during the reporting period.

Protection

The Government of Bulgaria increased its victim assistance and protection efforts during the reporting period. The government increased available assistance for child victims of trafficking by boosting funding for the number of government-run child-crisis centers from three to six in 2008; these centers provided rehabilitative, psychological, and medical assistance to identified child victims of trafficking. Approximately 25 child trafficking victims were assisted in government shelters in 2008. The majority of adult victims were assisted by privately funded NGOs, although the government did provide limited in-kind assistance to some anti-trafficking NGOs. In 2008, the Varna local government provided facility space and the National Commission for Combating Trafficking in Persons (the Commission) allocated \$13,000 to renovate and establish an adult trafficking shelter in that city; the shelter was opened in April 2009. In 2008, the government identified 250 victims of trafficking, including 38 minors, and referred all of them for assistance, compared to 288 victims of trafficking identified in 2007. Approximately 80 victims were assisted by NGOs during the reporting period. All victims in Bulgaria were eligible for free medical and psychological care provided through public hospitals and NGOs. Victims were encouraged to assist in trafficking investigations and prosecutions; victims who chose to cooperate with law enforcement investigators were provided with full residency and employment rights for the duration of the criminal proceedings, although no victims requested temporary residency permits during the reporting period. Foreign victims who chose not to cooperate with trafficking investigations were permitted to stay in Bulgaria for one month and 10 days before they faced mandatory repatriation. In 2008, seven victims participated in the police witness protection program. Victims were generally not detained, fined, or otherwise penalized for unlawful acts committed as a direct result of their being trafficked.

Prevention

The Bulgarian government maintained its strong efforts to prevent trafficking during the reporting period. In June 2008, the commission organized a campaign that educated 1,385 students through movie viewings and brochures about the danger of trafficking while looking for summer employment and travel. In September 2008, the commission also produced and distributed 20,000 informational leaflets with movie tickets for a film about human trafficking. In October 2008, the government launched an awareness campaign in more than 3,000 schools across the country and distributed 125,000 information cards to students to raise awareness about the dangers of trafficking. A local anti-trafficking commission organized an exhibition of paintings produced by child victims of trafficking. In April 2009, Parliament amended Bulgaria's criminal code to punish clients of children in prostitution with of up to three years' imprisonment.