

# SEX TRAFFICKING AND ORGANIZED CRIME IN BULGARIA...



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In its annual report devoted to trafficking in persons, Europol (2008: 3) yet again identifies Bulgaria as one of the six main source countries of victims who are trafficked within the EU, along with Ukraine, Romania, Russia, Nigeria and Moldova, whose population is several times that of Bulgaria.

Organized crime in Bulgaria is specialized in human trafficking, in particular for the purpose of sexual exploitation. This type of trafficking has become a social and criminal phenomenon in the country. Entering this criminal activity does not require large initial investments from the criminals but guarantees large profits which, in conjunction with the social and economic situation in the country, intensifies the endemic growth of the problem and turns it into a huge source of financing for Bulgarian organized crime.

This paper presents data from a study conducted by experts of the RiskMonitor Foundation (Petrunov 2009). The study is based on 150 semi-structured interviews conducted with sex workers, pimps, law-enforcement representatives and prosecutors.

## Evolution of sex trafficking

The roots of sex trafficking in Bulgaria and related organized crime date back to the early 90s of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Since then this criminal process has gone through many modifications; drawing upon the characteristics of the activity during the various time periods, we can isolate four main phases in the development of human trafficking in Bulgaria:

- genesis – the first half of the 90s; during this period are established the initial contacts with persons linked to foreign sex trade markets; only in rare cases are Bulgarians involved in the exploitation of victims;

- episodic – beginning in the 2<sup>nd</sup> half of the 90s until the beginning of the new millennium; sporadic cases of Bulgarians involved in human trafficking, primarily in Central European countries; victims are recruited and controlled through force and violence; in many cases they are sold to foreign exploiters;
- large-scale activity – from 2001 until Bulgaria's accession to the EU in 2007; the period coincides with lifting up the visa requirements for Bulgarians for EU countries; Bulgarian traffickers have by then gained experience and contacts, they build up structures and take over a significant part of the sex trade markets in Western Europe. Violence drops down and in many cases is replaced by partnerships between the victims and the trafficker;
- stable development – after 2007, following Bulgaria's accession to the EU; the number of the Bulgarian victims increases; the Bulgarian organized crime groups gain control over large segments of the most profitable sex trade markets in Europe; the physical violence in recruiting the victims disappears almost completely; in most cases, the involvement and participation of the sex workers is voluntary.

## Characteristics of sex trafficking

Most of the girls (49%) interviewed in the study state that they have become victims of trafficking between the ages of 18-21. In almost half of the cases the victims had been recruited upon an offer from a relative. 26% of the respondents had been unemployed prior to joining this criminal business, and 22% were students. Most of the victims who did work had low qualified jobs – waitresses, bar tenders, cashiers, dancers, etc. For the main part, transporting the victims is legal, even when trafficking minors - by using a parental consent form. The majority of the final destination countries are within the EU, but there are also cases of trafficking to South Africa and the USA. Financial penalties and fines become the main method of control and punishment for the victims. This reduction in the use of physical violence explains the low percentage among the respondents (5%) who have declared themselves victims of sexual exploitation before law enforcements officials.

- A characteristic feature of sex trafficking is the connection between a city in Bulgaria and a foreign country as a major export country. For example, from the city of Sliven to Belgium and the Netherlands; from Pazardjik to Germany, Italy, Austria and France; from Dobrich to Germany and France; from Blagoevgrad to Greece, Spain and Italy, etc.

## Statistics on sex trafficking

As the UN notes as well (UN.GIFT 2008), the lack of accurate statistics about the actual number of victims is a global problem and Bulgaria is no exception. In an attempt to gather more reliable information about the number of Bulgarian women victims of sexual exploitation, a combination of two methods was used in the study. One is the method of expert evaluation, and the second is establishing the number of unknown victims based on the cases already known. In this way our study found that an average of 8,000-12,000 persons are exploited at a time outside Bulgaria.

Based on this estimate and the information derived from our interviews with prostitutes<sup>1</sup> - they service an average of 6 customers per day, charge an average rate of EUR 70, and log an average of 270 working days per year, we calculate that Bulgarian actors in human trafficking for the purpose of sexual exploitation generate between EUR 900 million and 1,300 million annually. Between 50% and 80% of the money from sex trafficking, i.e. between 500 million and 1 billion EUR come back to Bulgaria, which is between 1.5% and 3% of the GDP of the country for 2008. The rest of the money is used to cover living and other expenses in the countries of final destination.

## Actors in sex trafficking

The information collected in the study allows us to identify the following types of participants in sex trafficking originating in Bulgaria.

- Loners: a prostitute or a couple moving independently, touring various countries. One person works, having limited access to territories. In many cases they seek customers in clubs, bars, etc., or through connections in the social networks;

- Independent pimp: one pimp arranges for 2-5 girls (relatives in some cases) to transfer to foreign countries and work there. Access to lucrative segments of the foreign market is difficult;
- Partners: groups of pimps running stables of several girls each, who work together. A network of channels for access to foreign markets. There may be a distinct leader among the pimps, or an independent pimp may hire people to help him. The groups consist of 2 to 8 pimps with stables of 1 to 7 girls each;
- Mafia-like organisations: large entities with a multi-tier hierarchical structure and a clear distribution of functions. Commonly involved in another criminal activity besides human trafficking. Consist of numerous members, as well as pimps with stables of girls who work for them. Try to control the above-mentioned actors and to force them to work for them or to extort money from them. In some cases, over 100 prostitutes work for or report to such organisations. They have sustained international contacts, built in the course of years, which guarantees them access to the most lucrative market segments and protection and support for those linked with them. The organizations' bosses have a solid legitimate business, and in certain cases occupy positions in local government – municipal councilors, mayors, etc.

Mafia-like organisations are the actors that exert a significant influence on the criminogenic situation and takes the lion's share of the profits generated by human trafficking. Separately, the other actors can hardly exert a significant influence both on the state of crime and on the state of the economy through the money they generate. This does not mean that these actors should be ignored, but that the priorities should be identified and the main efforts should target suppression of the organisations, of organised crime which holds key positions in human trafficking. Nevertheless, in many cases the public authorities treat human trafficking as offences committed by separate individuals rather than by entire organisations. Success in combating organised crime, however, requires an effort to detect all tiers in the organisations, and especially the highest tiers. Arrests of low and medium tiers should be avoided, lest they appear as

autonomous actors and their link with the organisation be severed. To achieve this goal, the efforts should focus on money laundering which, as Franco Frattini (2007: 63) notes is at the very heart of organised crime. Following the money is the only way to get to the top of the mafia-like organizations.

## References

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## **Barberet: Half the Sky**

Half the Sky is a gory read for newcomers to these issues and a tedious read to those familiar with these issues. For someone who repeatedly teaches this material to undergraduates, I found it surprisingly annoying. Kristof and Wudunn have facile explanations for gender-based violence, ignore men as perpetrators (indeed, they are as invisible in their book as women have been invisible in the past), quip research results when they support their arguments, and offer simplistic, (albeit well-meaning) solutions while ignoring the vast body of research in violence against women, and perhaps most importantly on Tuesday, relevant international law and United Nations efforts in this arena.

Much of the book is ethnocentric, including a chapter about Islam and misogyny, where the authors admit to being 'politically incorrect' without realizing they are also ignorant of the nuances that plague the study of world religions and gender. There is much discussion of the developing world and little discussion of the violations of women's rights in the developed world, including the United States.

The Standing Group on Organised Crime is organizing two panels on 'Gendering Criminology: the Role of Female Offenders in Transnational Organized Crime':

## **JOHN JAY COLLEGE NINTH BIENNIAL INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE**

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**Societies in Transition:  
Balancing Security, Social Justice and Tradition**

### **THE ROLE OF FEMALE OFFENDERS IN TRANSNATIONAL ORGANIZED CRIME**

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Until recent years, the criminality of women had a long history of neglect. Criminology has treated women's role in crime with a large measure of indifference. Women have been misrepresented in conventional criminological literature, leading to the development of feminists' critique of the accumulated wisdom about female offenders. Scholars have argued that theories of criminality developed by and validated on men had limited relevance for explaining women's crime and that criminologists had little understanding of the social worlds of women. Throughout the years, feminist scholars have succeeded in 'gendering criminology'. Feminist approaches have tended to unmask the unique experiences that shape women's criminal involvement. Gendered crime analysis attempts to discover the contingencies within and across gender in order to specify the dynamic relationships between gender and crime.

The focus of this panel is on two interrelated topics: (1) Current trends and developments in the field of transnational organized crime; and (2) The increasing role of female offenders in committing various organized crime-related activities. The panel will focus primarily, but not exclusively, on the role of women as human traffickers and recruiters, pimps/'madams', drug carriers, 'victims-deceivers', messengers, consultants, debt-collectors, organizers as well as leaders of criminal organizations. It will study women's criminality and involvement in organized crime from both practical and theoretical perspectives. It will try to answer questions such as: Are male and female offenders equally capable of committing organized crime activities? To which extent increased occupational opportunities and women emancipation explain increased female crime? What is the link between gender power, patriarchy, women subordination, and female offending? How women navigate gender-stratified environments, and how they accommodate and adapt to gender inequality in their commission of organized crime?