

Correlates of sex trafficking in three Balkan countries

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Abstract

Trafficking of human beings has reached epidemic proportions: There are approximately 20 to 30 million slaves in the world today whereas the total value of the trade has been estimated to be around \$32 billion. Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Bulgaria have been particularly hit by human slavery. The author has investigated the common correlates that have facilitated the problem in these countries, such as long term poverty, passive societies, low resistance to bribery, high levels of corruption, and weak legal framework. Obstacles rising from the inability to proceed with cross-national prosecutions in combination with low sentences imposed on traffickers in both developed and developing European countries, have rendered the situation explosive. Despite the European Union's effort to implement the new rules of the Anti-Trafficking Directive which proposes higher penalties for offenders, increased protection for victims and facilitates cross-border prosecution, only six out of the 27 EU members have fully transposed it into their national legislation.

Key words: Albania; Bosnia-Herzegovina; Bulgaria; Human trafficking; Sex slavery.

INTRODUCTION

According to Article 3, paragraph (a) of the "Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons" human trafficking is the "recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation. Exploitation shall include, at a minimum, the exploitation of the prostitution of others or other forms of sexual exploitation, forced labor or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery,

servitude or the removal of organs" (United Nations, 2000).

Trafficking of human beings has reached epidemic proportions: There are approximately 20 to 30 million slaves in the world today, whereas according to the U.S. State Department, 600,000 to 800,000 people are trafficked across international borders every year. More than 70% are female and half are children (11 Facts About Human Trafficking). The total value of the trade has been estimated to be around 32 billion U.S. dollars. In Europe, traffickers make around \$2.5 billion per year through sexual exploitation and forced labor (Maddox, 2011).

The causes for this epidemic are multiple: Poverty and ignorance of the victims, inadequate legislation, high profitability and

rampant police corruption. In this paper one will concentrate on the epidemic and its causes as it has unfolded in Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Bulgaria. These Balkan countries, have been severely marked by poverty, corruption and human slavery.

CULTURAL IMPEDIMENTS IN THE BALKANS

The economies of the regions are in a dire state. The transition economies of Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Macedonia, Montenegro, Romania and Serbia suffered serious losses from the global recession in 2008-09 resulting in unemployment of 25% (The Economist, 2012). Moreover, average salaries were €491 in Montenegro, €360 in Serbia and at similar levels elsewhere while at the same time prices have been hiking. The lack of social unrest over the economic demise has been averted mainly due to the backwardness of the region. The emphasis and the extent of the primary sector and the popularity of the extended family have enabled many people to survive. Furthermore the disintegration of the leftist parties and trade unions have prevented the organization of anti-government protests. In the midst of all the gloom apathy seems to reign (ibid).

This indifference towards politics, is an unrecognized threat to stability and recovery. The decline in political involvement leads to a removal of the human element from the government with growing alienation among the people. The government is perceived as a heartless mindless bureaucracy that has abandoned its people. Thus the future is endangered as people abandon any effort to improve their society. The more alienation grows, the less resistance one observes to criminal activities. Corruption rises and acceptance of corruption becomes endemic. Joko Purnomo has investigated the relationship

between corruption and alienation and has concluded that the inability or unwillingness of the state to pursue public interest, namely social justice, welfare society, and national prosperity significantly reduce public trust to the state. The absent state, then, facilitates the raise of political alienation among people. Political corruption, consequently, is conducted in order to protect the self-interest of people in the era of an absent state (2011).

It is not surprising then that according to the Democracy Index 2012, Croatia scored 6.93 out of ten, Bulgaria 6.72, Greece 6.67, Serbia 6.33, FYR Macedonia 6.16, Montenegro 6.05, Albania 5.6, Bosnia and Herzegovina 5.11. Moreover, according to Transparency International, Croatia scored 46 out 100, FYR Macedonia 43, Bosnia and Herzegovina 42, Bulgaria and Montenegro 41, Serbia 39, and Greece 36 (Corruption Perceptions Index 2012).

Human trafficking in the Balkan region has acquired endemic proportions. It is not just the sheer numbers that evoke the sense of urgency in preventive policy making but also the anecdotal evidence that portrays a tragedy of unprecedented proportions. Human slavery stories have been reported since 2000 and despite the recurrent incidents and escalation of the problem, the local police have not been willing or able to tackle the problem. The evolution of the human trafficking practices has been investigated by Lejla Kablar (2011), who has pointed to a different pattern in the 1990s. Immediately after the fall of the Berlin Wall, women of the region were free to travel and many were lured by false promises of work abroad. Many women were also kidnapped or even sold by their families seeking a -at all costs- temporary relief from extreme poverty. Local organized criminal groups found and lured the victims, made counterfeit documents, transported them and once they were in a foreign country, these women found themselves

unable to communicate, in bondage, subjected to physical and psychological abuse and finally forced prostitution.

ALBANIA

Parental involvement in trafficking, directly or indirectly, has been common in a number of countries. The testimony from trafficked prostitutes in Italy has shed light to the dark questions of parental complacency, weak laws and local corruptive practices. According to the Italian prosecutor in Brindisi, Sergio Tosi, most prostitution rings in Italy are run by Albanians (Fleishman, 2000), who have taken it on in a vicious way. They rape women to destroy them mentally and make them slaves. Girls as young as 12 years old are put on the streets and forced to earn \$500 a night (ibid). In 1998, the number of Albanian girls and women working as prostitutes in Italy was 8000 (30% of whom were under the age of 18). Today the number has spiked to 20,000. Fleishman clarifies that Albania has few laws for prostitution trafficking. Although the legal system provides a maximum sentence of 15 years, many end up paying only small fines whereas most are never arrested. Police earn about \$120 a month and are easily bribed. In Vlora in 1998, when more than 200 smuggling boats daily crammed the harbor, city records show police made no prostitution-trafficking arrests (ibid).

The lack of strict laws reflects a patriarchal culture that has remained powerful throughout the centuries. Under an Albanian traditional law dating from the 15th century, a husband may return his bride to her family if she turns out not be a virgin. Or he may even kill her himself, usually with a bullet given to him at the wedding by the bride's father, just in case (Jennings, 2002). Local populations of Roma and Egyptians, hit by extreme poverty exacerbate the problem. Children between six and ten years of age

are trafficked mainly for begging whereas girls between 15 and 17 are trafficked mainly for prostitution. There are rumors that there is also trafficking of children for the removal of organs (ODIHR, 2003).

"An Albanian girl handed to traffickers is doomed," said Giulia Falzoi, an Italian human-rights worker who deports illegal immigrants. "She cannot even start a new life if she is arrested and sent back to Albania. Her family has disowned her. She is psychologically damaged. The trafficker either kills her or puts her on a boat back to Italy" (Fleishman, 2000). Fleishman also notes that there was documentation on three Albanian girls in Italy, to have been sold by their parents. Others were tricked into false marriages just to be trafficked to Italy.

The same fate awaits them once they reach another popular destination, neighboring Greece. A Greek journalist, Fotini Kalliri has reported on a number of cases: "'She was only 14 years old. When she was 12, she dropped out of school in a village of Northern Albania, and her father sold her for \$385. When Roza arrived in Greece, she was violated and obedient. She did not know what month or year it was. She simply knew when it was Friday or Saturday because on these days she had more work. She was resold by the bar owner where she worked for \$2700. She worked six days a week, had at least 10 clients a day, and brought to her owner a total income \$188,000. Her expenses did not exceed \$1500. She did not smoke but she was addicted to alcohol. Her strong make up hid the paleness. She probably had contracted hepatitis. She is missing" (Kalliri, 2001).

Besides the lenient legislation, what accelerates the epidemic proportions is the police corruption (Freedom House, 2011). Partially because of low salaries and partially because of the social acceptance of graft and the country's tightly knit social

networks, corruption is hard to beat. According a 2009 survey by the Institute for Development Research and Alternatives (IDRA) that measures the perception of corruption in Albania on a scale between 0 and 100, in which 0 signifies "very honest" and 100 signifies "very corrupt," police officers measured 63.1 (RIRS, 2011). Ten per cent of the respondents reported being asked by a policeman to pay a bribe during the previous year, whereas 27.3% reported seeing someone paying a bribe to a policeman. Among those who dealt with the courts, about one third reported that they had paid a bribe (IDRA, 2008).

BOSNIA-HERZEGOVINA

The situation in Bosnia Herzegovina is equally dire, partly due to a complex administrative apparatus and extensive public sector but also because of the deep ethnic and political divisions that have torn the country after the civil conflict of 1992-95.

Surveys have shown that 20.1% of citizens aged 18 to 64 have been exposed - either directly or through a household member - to a bribery experience with a public official (UNDOC, 2011). The UNDOC report describes a pattern of corruption different than the one seen elsewhere. Although the global tendency for corruption is to be evident in urban settings, in Bosnia and Herzegovina, as in many other western Balkan countries, it is almost as prevalent in rural areas. Moreover, the Open Network of Human Rights and Democracy, has estimated that every second, 24 euros are lost through corruption in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The report concluded that corruption had become a way of life, without which a job cannot be done on time, or completed (Southeastern Times, 2012). The citizens reported that the most corrupt are those that should be fighting the trend. "Those who expressed public opinion, in their situation, are the most influenced by corrupt politicians and public workers," said

Edin Osmanbegovic, a professor of economy at the University of Tuzla. "And those who failed the most in the fight against corruption are courts, prosecutors, police and police agencies" (ibid).

Specifically in 2010 the police commissioner of the Una-Sana region Ramo Brkic, as well as a number of other local police officials and politicians were arrested on suspicion of participating in organized crime, abuse of office, economic crimes and bribery (Arslanagic, 2010). In 2013, police detained 50 people, including 10 police officers, in a countrywide operation against corruption and organized crime. The suspects had been smuggling cattle into Bosnia from neighboring Serbia making millions in profit (AP Worldstream, 2013). Moreover, in 2013, Bosnian police arrested Zivko Budimir, a president of the Bosniak-Croat Federation, the president of the region's commission of pardons Hidajet Halilovic, and 17 more officials on charges of abuse of office, illegal intermediation, receiving and giving bribes, organized crime and drug trafficking (AP, 2013).

Human trafficking has flourished in the region. Geoffrey Beaumont, coordinator of the UN's project to set up a functioning Bosnian State Border Service, has reported that more than 10% of the half million illegal migrants who reached the EU last year came through Bosnia. Illegal immigration traffic, cover the trade in sex slaves which lures women and young girls to Bosnia mainly from Eastern Europe and former Soviet republics with the promise of well-paying jobs (Beaumont, 2001). Beaumont reports on a notorious case that has demonstrated the depth of corruption and its ability to prevent prosecutions on human trafficking. In 2000, twelve women and young girls were found locked in a darkened room in a bar in the town of Prijedor, where they had been held and repeatedly raped. However, efforts to prosecute were hampered by corrupt local officials to such

an extent, that the women had to be moved four times in 10 days to different secret safe houses because the traffickers kept turning up outside. Their new location was obviously reported to the traffickers by corrupt officials. Disgracefully, the traffickers won. Faced with constant harassment, four of the five women refused to testify against the traffickers, and the case collapsed (ibid).

The rampant corruption and high profitability attracted even UN peacekeepers into the illegal trade. The scandal inspired the movie "The Whistleblower" and encouraged Madeline Rees, former U.N. high commissioner for human rights in Bosnia and secretary general for the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom to question whether extraterritorial jurisdiction — the legal ability of a government to exercise authority beyond its borders — can be a tool for improving accountability for human rights abuse during peacekeeping operations (Marques, 2012). Rees was referring to Bosnia where peacekeepers reportedly abused, tortured and actively trafficked women and girls. She noted, however, that there have been similar accusations of sexual exploitation, abuse, and sex trafficking, in U.N. missions in Cambodia, Haiti and the Congo since the 1990s (ibid).

In the case of Bosnia, war and militarism have influenced sex trafficking in women. War may produce militarist cultural ideals about gender which increase the vulnerability of women to socio-economic factors that lead to sex trafficking (Nicolic-Ristanovic, 2002). Ristanovic writes that examples from recent history show that the expansion of prostitution due to the extended presence of military forces has long-term consequences on the development of sex trafficking on both local and global levels.

The US State Department Trafficking in Persons Report in 2009 summarized the

situation as follows: "Bosnia and Herzegovina is primarily a source for women and girls trafficked within the country for commercial sexual exploitation, though it is also a destination and transit country for women and girls trafficked to Western Europe for the same purpose. Internal trafficking continued to increase in 2008, as the majority of identified victims were Bosnian, and more than half of them were children. Traffickers continued to force some victims to apply for asylum in order to keep their victims in the country legally. The Government of Bosnia and Herzegovina does not fully comply with the minimum standards for the elimination of trafficking; however, it is making significant efforts to do so. The government continued to provide funding to NGOs to protect and assist identified trafficking victims. However, some convicted trafficking offenders received suspended sentences. Moreover, the government failed to follow through on investigations of trafficking-related complicity initiated in 2006 and 2007."

BULGARIA

Poverty in this country is rampant as well, having the highest percentage of citizens at risk of poverty in the European Union (Mahony, 2013). According to Eurostat statistics, almost half of Bulgarians (49.1%) risk falling into poverty or social exclusion. During 2013 six people self-immolated to protest the worsening social conditions (Esslemont, 2013). Poverty and weak political institutions have encouraged widespread involvement in organized crime and particularly in trafficking.

Bulgaria is along with Romania the two countries with the EU's largest number of people falling prey of human trafficking with children paying the highest price. According to research by the Animus Association, women and children are trafficked out of the country for either labor or organ transplantation. Trafficking for sexual

purposes draws upon girls living in orphanages who grow up to believe that sex is the key to a better life. Children are also easily picked as many are orphans and run away from the orphanages. Nightclubs and modeling agencies also participate in the trade (Sofia Echo, 2007). Although no statistics exist on how many of the victims of human trafficking from Bulgaria come from orphanages, it is logical to assume that it is disproportionately high, especially when one combines the lack of education and cultural prejudices against people who had been institutionalized with the emotional trauma of abandonment and repeat institutionalization. The social isolation encourages the children to latch on to the first person who seems to care (2007, Ridgway).

Rampant corruption has once again exacerbated the situation. The Center of the Study for Democracy has reported that corruption in Bulgaria is at least three times higher than the EU average. Its report cites 150,000 bribes every month, given to judiciary, police and customs. When asked about the bribery figure Tsvetan Simeonov, president of Bulgaria's chamber of commerce and industry, replied: "Well, we can't know exactly but 1,000 more or less doesn't make any difference" (Giannangeli, 2013).

In 2011, seventeen Bulgarian traffic police were arrested for operating as an organized crime group. The investigations began after a number of motorists, including foreigners, filed complaints against traffic police officers who were filmed accepting bribes (Sofia Echo, 2011). Police corruption has reached levels the public can no longer tolerate while at the same time the local police has been monitored by the EU for failing to tackle corruption. Thousands of Bulgarians have joined a Facebook group called "Film the Police" that publishes photos of cops breaking rules. Most published photos show policemen routinely taking up disabled

parking spots, and asleep en masse in a patrol car during work time. Others show policemen drinking alcohol while on duty and performing dangerous stunts on a bike on the wrong side of the road. Others show them demanding bribes or not interfering while girls prostitute themselves on the streets (RT, 2012).

Furthermore the police cooperate with the local mafia and corrupt policemen from neighboring countries like Greece. Kalliri reported on a 22-year old from Kiev, who as a member of a ballet company had visited Greece where she was asked to work in a night club. When she arrived, the club owner took her passport away, locked her in a room for months, deprived her of food, and beat her mercilessly to show her that her survival depended on him. He asked her to prostitute herself, promising that this way things will change. Eight months later, during a police raid she was arrested and extradited. At the first train stop in Bulgaria, the Bulgarian mafia, probably in advance knowledge of the events, entered the train, and arrested her along with 6 more girls. She was taken back to Greece, to another town (Kalliri, 2001).

WEAK LEGAL APPARATUS

Traffickers feel comfortable in their surroundings not only because of the protective cloud of corruption but also because of lenient sentences. The US Department of State reports that Albania does not fully comply with the minimum standards for the elimination of trafficking and its lack of sustained funding to anti-trafficking NGOs resulted in temporary closure of a shelter during the year. The report underlines the negative impact of widespread corruption, particularly among the judiciary. The Albania government also removed the national anti-trafficking coordinator, who was highly effective in collaborating with NGOs to develop the national referral mechanism (NRM) and

standard operating procedures, and left the position vacant for five months. The long term vacancy along with the failure of some ministries to participate in the NRM prevented implementation of the anti-trafficking legislation. The report also emphasizes that assistance to child victims was inconsistent. Finally the number of human trafficking suspects investigations dropped to 11 in 2012 from 27 in 2012 (Albania, 2013).

As for Bosnia-Herzegovina, the same report states that the government has not fully complied with the minimum standards for the elimination of trafficking although it is making significant efforts to do so. There was one conviction of a public official the previous year, whereas there has not been an amendment of sub-national laws to criminalize all forms of trafficking, and to endure consistency with national and international law. Furthermore, police complicity in trafficking-related offenses and the authorities' lack of sensitivity to child victims of sex trafficking impeded efforts to hold trafficking offenders accountable (Bosnia-Herzegovina, 2013).

Bulgaria is also reported as not fully complying with the minimum standards for the elimination of trafficking. Moreover, it prosecuted slightly fewer cases, and the majority of convicted offenders did not receive a sentence requiring time in prison. Law enforcement action against public officials and police officers remained limited, although one court imposed a 10-year sentence on a former municipal official for leading an organized crime group involved in trafficking (Bulgaria, 2013).

Unfortunately the weak legal framework and lenient sentences are a reality in most countries, developed or not. In Austria for example the maximum sentence is ten years. In Vienna, during a major trial of traffickers who had brought in girls from Bulgaria, one defendant was convicted to

four years because he was a repeat offender while others got a few months, and two walked out of the courtroom as free men. In the media, the case was largely ignored (Rohrer, 2012). In Kosovo, the owner of the Medicus clinic, Lutfi Dervishi, who was found guilty of organized crime and organ-trafficking, was sentenced to eight years in prison and was fined 10,000 euro. His son Arban Dervishi who was found guilty of the same charges was sentenced to seven years and three months in prison, and fined 2,500 euro (Peci, 2013).

During the period 2008-2010 there was an 18% increase in the number of human trafficking cases in Europe whereas at the same period there was a 13% decrease in convictions. Accordingly, the European Commission has called upon the member states to implement the new rules of the Anti-Trafficking Directive which proposes higher penalties for offenders, increased protection for victims and facilitates cross-border prosecution. But so far, only six out of the 27 EU member states – Czech Republic, Finland, Latvia, Hungary, Poland and Sweden – have fully transposed the EU Anti-Trafficking Directive into their national legislation, despite a deadline of 6 April, 2013. Three other countries – Belgium, Lithuania and Slovenia – have reported partial transposition of the directive. (Muskat-Gorska, 2013).

CONCLUSION

Human trafficking is the third most profitable crime after drugs and weapons trafficking, generating more than \$32 billion annually. During the period 2007-2010, UNODC identified more than 460 individual trafficking flows in the world, with the detection of victims of 136 nationalities in 118 countries (UNODC, 2012). And although the number of convictions for trafficking is increasing, most countries' conviction rates remain very low. The Global Report on Trafficking in Persons

records that one in three countries covered by the Report did not register any convictions for human trafficking crimes between 2007 and 2010 (ibid). Human trafficking is thriving because of poverty, demand for cheap labor and sex services, and a weak legal framework.

Although poverty will remain with us, public awareness of sex slavery and strengthening the legal system are areas that may stand serious improvement. Awareness on sex slavery can be undertaken by media campaigns and school curriculum that has to be updated. In the legal sphere, we observe in many countries, developed and underdeveloped alike, a lack of a protection net for the victims, lack of shelters, lack of training among police officers, weak prosecutions and lenient sentences. Thus the ground work for compromising deterrence has been laid and traffickers thrive because of the low probability of conviction. The EC Anti-Trafficking Directive should be transposed on all member states along with uniformity in prerequisites for prosecutions. A strict legal apparatus will strengthen the perception that the crime is heinous and the resulting public awareness could prevent numbers of potential victims from falling into the trap of human slavery.

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