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Combating Human Trafficking in the Republic of Belarus

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1. The Evolution of Policies against Human Trafficking from 1991 until 2013

The history of formation and development of the anti-human trafficking policy can be divided into two stages: (1) from 1991 until 1999, when the fight against human trafficking was predominantly dealt with by NGOs; (2) from 2000 until the present day, when the state policy in this regard has been actively implemented with a joint effort of various actors.

In the process of looking into the state policy in the field of combatting human trafficking in the Republic of Belarus during the post-Soviet period, it is advisable to begin with the understanding that no information regarding this issue on the territory of the Republic was available until the dissolution of the USSR. Hence the criminal aspects of the problem were not perceived as socially important and were not receiving any attention on the part of legislative state bodies.

In the 1990s, no official policy on human trafficking existed. Firstly, in the conditions of a difficult economic situation in the country during the first half of the 1990s, trafficking has not existed as a separate field of work amongst the police forces.

The problem was predominantly addressed by the non-governmental organizations that have emerged with the financial assistance of the Western states. The NGOs studied this phenomenon and attempted to combat trafficking by means of information campaigns and assistance to the victims. Secondly, state organs did not have special units, which would have been assigned to fight this problem. When discovered, cases of human trafficking were prosecuted as regular criminal offences.

During the first stage, the non-governmental organizations were the main actor in the field of combatting human trafficking (first and foremost, sexual exploitation of women). State agencies also paid attention to this problem. The Ministry of Labour and Social Protection had a department that dealt, among other issues pertaining to the issues of labour, with human trafficking. The employees of this department actively cooperated with the non-governmental organizations in research and the process of elaboration of measures to combat human trafficking.

In 1995, the officials from the above mentioned department of the Ministry of Labour and Social Protection and from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, as well as NGO activists, took part in the Fourth World Conference on Women in Peking. An Action Platform was adopted. The Platform became the basis for a number of plans and concrete measures against human trafficking in the framework of a more general fight against all types of violence against women, including sexual abuse. Belarus signed documents and resolutions of the Fourth World Conference on Women, i.e., officially joined the process of implementation of the strategic goal of the Peking platform: «Liquidation of Female Human Trafficking and the Assistance to the Female Victims of Abuse as a Result of Prostitution and Trafficking».

In the absence of special laws against human trafficking, trafficking in human beings was considered a crime related to forced exploitation of women in the sphere of sexual services, predominantly after their fraudulent export abroad. Women were regarded as victims of violence, who got in trouble as a result of their unfamiliarity with laws, trust to traffickers, direct fraud, etc. At the state level, policies combatting human trafficking were introduced in the framework of a general fight with prostitution, where women who were found employed in sex-industry were considered both victims and persons looking for an easy income. Attempts were undertaken to re-educate these women and offer them a different type of employment. The national media of Belarus actively participated in the campaign against these unlawful forms of behaviour.

The NGOs (volunteers) paid more attention to informing Belarusian women and girls about possible dangers of human trafficking and providing help to the victims of trafficking. The main topics were related to the possibilities of getting into sexual or labour slavery.

During the second stage, the state joined the main agents involved into the elaboration and execution of the anti-human trafficking policy. In 2000, a special division on anti-trafficking for the purposes of sexual and other exploitation was created within the Ministry of Internal Affairs. Analogous structures were created in the regional centres. Since then, various types of anti-trafficking laws have been adopted as well as programs combatting human trafficking and prostitution. Furthermore, various complex measures have been elaborated and implemented on the basis of this legislation.¹ In recent years, these measures have been tightly connected with counter-measures against irregular migration. A State Program for 2011-2013 is currently being implemented in this sphere, which involves active collaboration of various governmental and non-governmental organizations. The program pays great attention to the rehabilitation of victims of human trafficking, including the examination of case-studies, prophylactic measures, active collaboration with the international organizations in this sphere, research of various aspects of anti-trafficking policies, seminars and training sessions (jointly with the NGOs and international organizations). It also involves training national experts in this sphere.

During the second stage, in the very beginning of the 2000s, a new non-governmental program «La Strada» was launched. Within «La Strada», a 'hot line' was set up. It provided information to those in need of information or assistance regarding their travel abroad. The significant contribution of «La Strada» to the fight against human trafficking was noted in the Alternative report on the implementation of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women in the Republic of Belarus. Thus, the analysis of phone calls on the 'hot line', it was revealed that the potential risk group consisted primarily of women aged 21-40, who wished to travel abroad for work or marriage (Petina 2003).

2. Brief summary of projects dealing with the problem of human trafficking, and their results

"Ariadne" was the first project to open a hotline in 2001. Since the end of 2001, a hotline within «La Strada» was launched. Initially, the Program existed within the NGO "Belarusian Association of Young Christian Women" (BYWCA). Currently, «La Strada» is working under the auspices of the international NGO "Gender Perspectives." The work of the hotline is managed by this organization jointly with another non-governmental organization "Business Women's Club."

The analysis of the hot line activity showed that most people, both men and women, seek information regarding employment opportunities abroad. Second most numerous group of questions concentrates on the issues related to marriages abroad. These issues are mainly of interest to women. The site of «La Strada» reported that in 2012 alone, the program helped 28 persons-victims of trafficking and their families. During the 12 years of the existence of the program under the auspices of the international NGO "Gender Initiatives", the organization assisted 317 individuals (Results 2012). The Program director Elena Nesteruck notes that her colleagues meet the victims upon their return to Belarus, help to rebuild their lives, and provide psychological, medical and legal aid. If necessary, they provide temporary shelter and offer help in finding employment. A large-scale activity is being undertaken to prevent cases of labour and sexual slavery: for instance, in 2012, 335 thematic lectures on safe migration were attended by three thousand people in different cities of Belarus (Results 2012). The program has a network of coaches to work with different target groups. It produces and distributes free information on the issue of combating human trafficking and migration.

¹ On the Governmental Programme of Comprehensive Measures to Combat Human Trafficking and Prostitution, 2002-2007: resolution of the Council of Ministers as of November 8, 2001 № 1636, amended, text status June 18, 2004; the Law of the Republic of Belarus On ratification of the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime as of May 3, 2003, № 195-3; the Law of the Republic of Belarus on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings (ratified by the House of Representatives on December 14, 2011, approved by the Council of the Republic on December 20, 2011).

The website of the program is annually visited by approximately 100,000 individuals from around the world, who are interested in safe migration.

The Program has a number of partners, including the International Organization for Migration (in 2012, a joint conference "Development of a national referral mechanism to protect and assist victims of human trafficking" was organized, as well as a number of regional workshops to combat domestic violence and trafficking in human beings). In previous years, the program «La Strada» worked on a number of projects in partnership with other organizations (e.g., two projects were organized jointly with the UNDP, Belarus).

Currently, a number of projects in the anti-trafficking sphere is carried out under the auspices of the "Young Men's Christian Association" ("YMCA"), which is active in Belarus since 2000 and has offices in Brest, Minsk, Gomel and other cities. Other community organizations that continue to work in this field are: the Belarusian Young Women Christian Association (BYWCA) and "Children are not for violence."

Given that the Ministry of Interior is now an umbrella organization that oversees the implementation of activities that combat human trafficking in Belarus, the Ministry officials participate in joint seminars with community organizations. They also participate in the dissemination of publicity for the Info-line of «La Strada» and offer assistance to the victims of trafficking. The officials also invite public organizations to participate in the development of legislation in this area (for example, «La Strada» participated in the elaboration of the State program on combating trafficking in human beings).

In recent years, men between the ages of 18 and 45, who intend to work abroad, became a potential risk group of labour slavery. In this regard, as reported at a press conference on December 3, 2012, by a representative of the International Organization for Migration in the country and the head of the international technical assistance project «Combating Trafficking in Persons: Belarus» Natalia Jacques, Belarus launched a new information campaign to counter labour exploitation, particularly in Russia (BelaPAN 2012a). Cases of labour slavery of men in Russia were reported in the local media as well (Spasyuk 2013), pointing to the need of a special law against trafficking in persons in the CIS (CIS 2013).

According to the statistics of «La Strada», in 2012, 70% of victims to trafficking were exploited in the Russian Federation. The average age of victims was 23 years. At the time of recruitment, all victims were in a difficult financial situation. All victims of human trafficking cooperated with law enforcement authorities (Belarusians ... 2012).

As the Foreign Ministry spokesman Andrei Savinykh reported on December 6, 2012 at a briefing in Minsk, Belarus attaches great importance to the implementation of the United Nations Global Action Plan on Combating Trafficking in Persons and Anti-Trafficking (BelaPAN 2012b).

In 2013, Belarus starts to implement the new international technical assistance project on the subject of "human rights in the context of combating trafficking in human beings" that was launched by the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner. The problem remains relevant for Belarus. Thus, the Ministry of Interior News reported that in 2012, the detectives in the capital city of Belara managed to prevent the trafficking of another batch of Belarusian prostitutes to Germany, organized by a German and a Belarusian (upon consent of the women, which does not cancel the illegality of this type of business in Belarus) (Boyarovich 2013).

Due to its geopolitical position, Belarus remains an area of risk of growth of human trafficking as both a sending and a transit country for international trafficking. Therefore, international law enforcement cooperation should be developed in this field, information campaigns regarding the overseas employment should be launched, and programs to support the victims of trafficking should be maintained and supported.

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