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Human trafficking in Moldova

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Introduction

Since Moldova declared its independence in 1992 and people gained the right to travel freely abroad, illegal migration and human trafficking became an important problem for the Government and its international partners.

After the war against Russia, in Transnistria (1992) the Government lost control over the most industrialized part of the country and almost all the eastern border. Constant fights between pro-western and pro-russian parties, corruption created an environment where officials could use their positions to make fortunes by protecting organized crime.

Poverty and lack of employment opportunities in Moldova made people desperately search for solutions in other countries.

In this environment, many desperate people became victims of criminals (often protected by officials) who made fortunes by selling other humans for sex, begging, labour.

Unfortunately in the early years of independence there was no much interest in studying and fighting the phenomena of human trafficking. Only by the end of 90's, when the issue of fighting human trafficking became one of the most important conditions for receiving assistance from international partners, the Government started to take actions to better understand and fight the phenomena.

In 2004 in the US embassy report¹ on human trafficking Moldova was described as “primarily a source country for women and children trafficked for the purpose of sexual exploitation to the Balkans; other European countries; and the Middle East”. The report was also saying that trafficking from and through Moldova to Russia, Turkey, the U.A.E. Israel continued unabated. Moldovan men and children were trafficked to Russia and neighboring countries for forced labor and begging.

According to the report, Moldova was also a transit country for victims trafficked from Ukraine to Romania. The border region of Transnistria, not under the central government's control, served as a source and transit point for trafficking victims.

According to US officials, although the Government of Moldova was making significant efforts to fight trafficking, it didn't fully comply with minimum standards for the elimination of trafficking.

1. Understanding the phenomena

Protection of victims and prevention of human trafficking was mostly supported by NGOs and international organizations funded by foreign donors. One of such NGOs, with a prominent activity in Moldova is the International Center "La Strada", which started its activity in 2001².

Among many services, La Strada, offers assistance to victims of human trafficking. During this process a standard set of data is collected on each victim. These data offer the possibility to understand better the phenomena.

¹ <http://moldova.usembassy.gov/reports-on-moldova.html>

² <http://www.lastrada.md>

1.1. The victims

From 2001 to 2012 La Strada's hot-line operators received 33315 calls concerning the Center's services. Of them, 5922 (18%) were calls from victims of human trafficking seeking help (1986 calls) and calls from people searching for missing persons considered as trafficked (3936 calls).

According to the La Strada reports³, it seems that human trafficking is almost totally driven by the demand of sex slaves as most victims are women (more than 90%) under 25 years (about 80%) from villages (48%) and small towns (22%). Children⁴ make about 14% of victims, and this share increased over time (from 10% in 1999-2004 to 20% in 2005-2009). Almost 80% of trafficked children were sexually exploited, 15% were forced to work and 5% forced to beg.

Single persons are more exposed to risks of being trafficked (75% of La Strada assisted victims). Risks increase if the person is an orphan or lives with only one parent. Among persons who live in complete⁵ families, those who are abused by family members face a three times higher risk of being trafficked, than those who are not.

Level of education is also linked to risks of being trafficked. Most of victims (92%) at most studied 9 years in school, 5% had vocational education and 4% higher. This relation is most probably the result of the fact that 86% of victims, before being trafficked, were living in extreme poverty, doing unskilled work.

Only 9% of trafficked persons knew exactly what will be they doing, which is prostitution. The rest of victims had no idea.

1.2. How trafficking works

Recruitment usually takes place in Chisinau (48%) or the village/town where the victim lives (37%), through false job offers (79%). Recruiters are both strangers and non-strangers. Still, during 2005-2010, compared to 1999-2004 the share of non-strangers among recruiters increased to 73%, from 48%. Data indicate that the share of women among recruiters is increasing. Also increased the share of recruiters-foreigners: from 10% to 30%.

Only 8% of victims declared that they were kidnapped and trafficked.

Now, victims cross the border mostly legally (85%), by plane or train and mostly individually, unattended. In the 1999-2004 period only 65% of victims were crossing the border legally and traveling in groups, supervised was practiced more often.

In recent years, most victims were trafficked in Turkey (29%) and Russia (28%). Compared to the 1999-2004 period, it could be said that an important shift from west (Macedonia, Yugoslavia) to east happened.

As noted earlier, human trafficking in Moldova is mainly driven mainly by sex slavery, still there's an evidence of an increasing share of trafficking for forced labour.

On average, the duration of exploitation decreased from 2 years in 1999-2000, to 5 months in 2003-2004 and 3 months in 2005-2010.

Significant changes happened regarding methods of control of victims. Over time traffickers improved their methods preferring psychological manipulation over crude force. Traffickers try to

³ <http://www.lastrada.md/publicatii/en.html>

⁴ Persons aged 0-17 years.

⁵ Both parents present

make victims think that they need them, that only they can take care of them. They offer their victims rewards for good behavior and promises of big moneys after they will pay the debts.

2. Prosecution

Over time, facing the need to fight dangerously growing phenomena, several actions were undertaken to spot and punish traffickers.

The criminal law was revised, anti-trafficking courses were instituted at the police academy, Police and prosecutors received anti-trafficking investigations trainings.

Over the years the number of opened trafficking investigations varied a lot. What is important is that if in the 2003-2008 period on average 15% of investigations ended by a conviction, then in 2010 and 2011 this rate increased to 30%⁶.

It was widely suspected that the Anti-Trafficking Unit limited the number of cases it investigated due in some instances to pressure from complicit officials at higher levels in the government. In 2005, the Anti-Trafficking Unit was dissolved and a Center for Fighting Human Trafficking was set. A couple of policemen were convicted for cooperation with traffickers.

Besides policemen, several judges were investigated under charge of helping traffickers avoiding prison, but none was convicted.

In 2009 an investigation initiated in 2006, against governmental officials protecting a well-known sex trafficker was reopened, but no one was convicted.

3. Protection

Many years the Government did not undertake active actions to help victims of trafficking and make them cooperate in order to help punish traffickers. Although several changes were made to the law, no concrete steps were made, although there were concrete engagements.

Only starting with 2006 the Government started to cooperate more actively with NGOs and international organizations, according to its engagements.

4. Prevention

In order to coordinate all anti-trafficking actions a National Committee on Trafficking in Persons and an Action Plan were set. Although the Committee met twice a month on a regular basis it produced limited results due to the lack of a full-time secretariat and a clear mandate.

With support from NGOs and international organizations, in 2005 the Committee proposed to the Parliament a new law to comprehensively address all aspects of trafficking.

Still most of prevention work was being done by NGOs. Government's efforts were limited to interviews, attending trainings organized by International Organization for Migration and NGOs.

Only starting with 2009 the Government involved more responsibly in prevention activities. A national network of 34 multidisciplinary regional commissions was set. Members of commissions (NGOs, officials, local activists, priests, etc.) meet monthly, planning activities meant to reduce risks of trafficking.

⁶ Own calculations based on data from the US embassy reports

The Government gave possibility to NGOs to more actively participate in the process of investigation of trafficking cases.

5. Human trafficking in present

Although in the recent years the Government involved more in combating human trafficking, it does not comply fully with minimum standards for the elimination of trafficking.

The 2012 US embassy report recommends that in order to efficiently fight human trafficking Moldova has to make important efforts to investigate, prosecute, and convict government officials involved in trafficking, and seek criminal prosecution and conviction of any guilty officials. Also, it is crucial that convicted trafficking offenders serve time in prison, not only pay fines.

Complicity in human trafficking of governmental officials is still a concern. No government official was convicted for trafficking-related complicity in 2011. The government is currently prosecuting two high-level government officials for trafficking-related complicity.

Corruption in high-level officials and judges is seen as the main, structural problem, which prevents efficiently fighting traffickers. Even if convicted, less than a half of traffickers go to prison. Usually they pay a fine and return to crimes.