

HUMAN TRAFFICKING IN THE TERRITORY OF THE REPUBLIC OF NORTH MACEDONIA

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Abstract: Human trafficking is considered one of the most serious forms of organized crime in the modern world. It undermines the foundations of the rule of law, violates fundamental human rights and freedoms, and deprives individuals of their dignity while seriously endangering their physical and psychological well-being. Often referred to as the “white slave trade,” this form of criminal activity has deep historical roots and has continuously adapted to changing social and economic conditions throughout history.

In ancient and medieval periods, human trafficking was most commonly expressed through the enslavement of women during wars. Captured individuals were exploited to serve military forces, while many were subjected to slavery or sold into state-controlled brothels. This historical perspective demonstrates that human trafficking has long functioned as a tool for economic gain and social control, reducing human beings to objects of exploitation and denying them basic rights and dignity.

In the context of globalization, one of the key responsibilities of states is to ensure effective protection of citizens from such abuses by safeguarding their fundamental rights and freedoms. At the same time, strict legal sanctions must be imposed on perpetrators in order to reduce criminal activity and strengthen preventive measures.

The rapid expansion of the internet and social media platforms has created new opportunities for recruitment and manipulation. Victims are frequently deceived through false job offers, promises of high income, or various forms of coercion. These methods significantly increase vulnerability and facilitate exploitation.

Another contributing factor to the growth of human trafficking is the liberalization of national borders. Easier movement and reduced border controls allow victims to be transported and resold multiple times, increasing profits for criminal organizations. Although governments, non-governmental organizations, and civil society institutions have implemented various measures through conventions, protocols, strategies, and legislation, the results have not yet been fully effective. Therefore, stronger coordination, improved implementation of policies, and continuous public awareness remain essential in the fight against this growing form of crime.

Keywords: crime, human trafficking, organized crime, human rights and freedoms, human dignity, integrity

1. INTRODUCTION

Human trafficking, often known as “white slavery,” is a crime with a long historical background. It has existed throughout all stages of social development, constantly changing and adapting to different historical and social conditions. In ancient and medieval times, it mainly appeared through the enslavement of women during wars. As a result of conquests, captured women were treated as war spoils, used to serve armies and soldiers, and many were later forced into slavery and sold to state-controlled brothels (Paoletta, 2020, p. 36).

The strong link between human trafficking and prostitution also reflects another historical form known as temple or secular prostitution. This practice emerged in the 3rd century AD and was later justified and promoted under religious institutions as an act of devotion to the gods, intended to demonstrate spiritual dedication.

At the same time, as methods and purposes of human trafficking developed over time, scholarly understanding of the phenomenon also expanded. Researchers increasingly focused on defining its nature, identifying its characteristics, and explaining its causes (Kosevaliska & Manoleva, 2018, p. 14).

In more recent times, the view that prostitution constitutes violence against women was incorporated into international law during the twentieth century. In 1996, following feminist advocacy, the United Nations defined trafficking as the recruitment, transportation, and exploitation of people in migration processes under conditions of coercion and force. The 1990s were marked by significant disagreements regarding the international definition of prostitution and the most appropriate approaches to its regulation or legalization. Many scholars argued that the lack of a clear and unified definition increased risks for potential victims, as there was no consensus on key concepts and terminology (Rodrigues & Guia, 2024, p. 11).

From the perspective of the United Nations, another major challenge was achieving international agreement on the issue. This ambiguity may have been intentionally maintained in order to avoid a strict division between coercion and voluntary participation, but it was criticized for failing to adequately protect the rights of women who migrated with the intention of entering the sex industry.

In 2003, further discussions suggested that human trafficking should be understood as a form of illegal migration that exploits inconsistencies between national and international definitions of legal and illegal migration. However, such an approach was considered limited due to the complexity of migration processes. Since many victims initially enter countries legally, it was argued that attention should focus more on exploitation and violence occurring within both legal and illegal migration systems, rather than on the distinction between trafficking and irregular migration.

Trafficking in human beings and organs - the evil of modern times

Human trafficking is not an issue that affects only a limited number of individuals; rather, it is a global phenomenon with serious social and economic consequences, which has been further intensified by globalization and modern technologies. It affects people of all ages and genders, including women, men, girls, and boys. International efforts to combat trafficking receive significant attention because this practice violates human rights and undermines the fundamental values of democratic societies. The Council of Europe addresses this persistent violation of human dignity as part of its broader mission to protect human rights, dignity, and justice.

Trafficking in persons, which places victims in conditions of exploitation, represents a contemporary form of slavery that has existed throughout history and continues to exist worldwide. Victims are treated as commodities that can be bought and sold and are forced into various forms of labor, most commonly in the sex industry, but also in agriculture, domestic work, and exploitative conditions in workshops and factories where they receive little or no payment. Although women constitute the majority of identified victims, men are also affected, and many victims are children and young people. Most individuals are simply trying to survive, yet they become victims of exploitation and criminal greed.

Although the forms of exploitation differ, they all involve severe abuse of human rights and violent treatment of individuals. These may include sexual exploitation, forced labor, domestic servitude, forced criminal activity, coerced military service, and arranged or forced marriages. Victims of trafficking often become trapped in a cycle of violence and psychological trauma due to extreme physical and mental abuse inflicted by traffickers, and some even become victims of organ trafficking, which is considered one of the most severe crimes of the modern era.

Organized criminal groups often conceal their activities behind attractive advertisements for well-paid jobs abroad. Victims are deceived and transported away from their place of residence, their documents are confiscated, and they are forced into various forms of exploitation, especially sexual exploitation, to which women and girls are particularly vulnerable. Some victims never reach their intended destination (Stammers, T., 2022, p. 31). During transit, they may be repeatedly resold, raped, and in some cases even killed so that criminals can profit from the sale of their organs.

Common locations of exploitation include streets, nightclubs, restaurants, discos, factories, apartments, houses, and other private properties. The psychological and physical damage suffered by victims is extremely severe, making recovery and reintegration into normal life very difficult.

The procurement of human organs and body parts occurs through their removal from living individuals, deceased bodies, or skeletal remains. Depending on the material extracted, trafficking may involve two principal categories:

- Organs, encompassing vital structures such as kidneys, liver, heart, pancreas, and other comparable organs.
- Body parts and tissues, including cells, skin, bones, blood, veins, tendons, nails, teeth, ligaments, bone marrow, and hair.

Organ transplantation or organ parts is a medical procedure for removing an organ or parts of an organ from a living or deceased person for transplantation into the body of another person for treatment, including all procedures for preparation, processing, preservation, monitoring of serious adverse effects, as well as distribution of organs and organ parts.

The organ itself is a vital part of the human body, composed of various tissues, which have their own structure, vascularization and ability to develop physiological function with a significant level of autonomy.

Cell transplantation, i.e. tissue transplantation is a medical procedure for obtaining cells, i.e. tissues from a living or deceased person for use, i.e. transplantation to another person, including all procedures for taking, processing, preservation, use and distribution of cells and tissues, as well as monitoring of serious adverse events and serious adverse reactions.

In addition to organs and body parts, the safety practices of some countries are also evident in trade in human fetuses or embryos obtained after spontaneous or intentional (benign or violent) termination of pregnancy. It is an extremely profitable crime business, precisely because of their rarity on the human organ market, but also because of their wide utility value, primarily for research purposes, for the production of commercial pharmaceuticals, for the production of cosmetics. (Winkler, J. S.2021. p.20)

Illegal organ trafficking is increasing. According to research conducted on the black market, it is confirmed that different organs can be found at different prices, such as a stomach for \$500, an eye for \$1,500, lungs for up to \$290,000, pancreas for up to \$140,000, etc. A dangerous business has developed on the black market for organs,

where the total value of the body parts of an average adult is equal to approximately 600,000 euros. Doctors claim that almost all parts of the human body can be found on the black market - organs, bones, skin, blood, etc. Prices vary according to the needs and desperation of the person selling them, and further down the chain of sale, the same can experience a price up to five times higher. The fact is that this is a phenomenon about which there is very little reliable information, but also about the segment and form of organized crime, the nature of which is such that it does not allow data collection using conventional methods. But despite this, this phenomenon poses an immense danger to humanity, and the very focus on its consequences, without eliminating the causes that initiated it, may be doomed to failure, with a price that will be paid by the entire society. Although it is believed that no drastic abuses have been observed on the territory of the European Union, it would be wise not to ignore the facts about organ trafficking in the world and to underestimate the risks that may threaten the countries of the European Union in the future. So, on the one hand, we have scientific, technological and general social progress to unimaginable proportions, and on the other hand, we have the most monstrous crimes such as human trafficking and organ trafficking, which degrade civilizational achievements. (Koettl, J., 2022, p. 9)

Stages of Human Trafficking

Human trafficking never stands still, traffickers are constantly changing their model of execution. The basic structure is stable, and the organization of human trafficking, i.e. the process of human trafficking, consists of the following stages:

- Recruitment stage – recruitment stage, which consists of recruiting victims in the place of origin, during which contact is made between the victim and the trafficker;
- Transfer stage of the victim – transport stage in which the victims are transported to the place of destination;
- Exploitation stage – exploitation stage, which includes the acceptance, control and exploitation of victims to the place of destination. (Stanojoska, A., 2024, p.48)

2. RESEARCH AND ANALYSIS OF HUMAN TRAFFICKING IN THE TERRITORY OF THE REPUBLIC OF NORTH MACEDONIA

In the Republic of North Macedonia, recorded cases of human trafficking show that victims include both domestic and foreign individuals. Women and girls are often subjected to sexual exploitation and forced labor within the country, particularly in places such as restaurants, bars, and nightclubs. Traffickers involved in sexual exploitation frequently recruit victims from abroad, mainly from Eastern Europe and the Balkans, including countries such as Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Romania, Serbia, and Ukraine.

Citizens of North Macedonia, as well as foreign nationals transiting through the country, are also exploited for sexual purposes and forced labor in sectors such as construction and agriculture across southern, central, and western Europe. Roma children are particularly vulnerable, as traffickers—often relatives or individuals known to the victims—force them into begging, sexual exploitation, and arranged or coerced marriages.

In 2021, cases were reported in which Taiwanese traffickers deceived workers into coming to North Macedonia under the false promise of employment. Once recruited, their passports were confiscated, wages were withheld, their movement was restricted, and they were forced to operate fraudulent call centers.

Irregular migrants and refugees passing through North Macedonia are especially exposed to the risk of trafficking, particularly women and unaccompanied minors. Reports from non-governmental organizations also indicate that children with physical and mental disabilities are increasingly targeted.

In addition, officials and observers have raised concerns about the involvement of some lower-ranking police officers in facilitating trafficking activities. Such involvement may include concealing evidence, accepting bribes, altering patrol routes to assist perpetrators, warning traffickers about planned raids, or even direct participation in organized criminal activities.

Identifying victims of trafficking

Unlike migrant smuggling, which is primarily characterized by the intent to unlawfully cross borders, human trafficking is defined by its primary purpose, which is the exploitation of victims. This exploitation can take different forms, such as forced prostitution, begging, forced labor, pornography, petty criminal activity, and even the trafficking of human tissues, cells, and organs. In the initial phase of trafficking, physical violence, threats, or coercion are not always immediately present, as victims are often deceived and may initially consent or cooperate voluntarily. However, during the exploitation stage, coercive methods such as violence, intimidation, and restrictions on freedom of movement typically appear, resulting in conditions that closely resemble slavery.

The identification of trafficking victims in the Republic of North Macedonia is carried out through a structured approach developed by relevant institutions and organizations. This process is regulated by standard operating procedures (SOPs), which provide detailed guidelines for handling both suspected and confirmed victims. The SOPs established in 2010 were in use until November 2018, when they were revised and updated. According to the revised

procedures, victim identification is treated as an urgent process based on information collection and specific indicators used to assess whether a person may be a victim of trafficking.

Once initial contact is made and there is reasonable suspicion, the individual is referred to the appropriate authorities for further evaluation. The referral system includes institutions such as the National Referral Mechanism, the Centers for Social Work, the Ministry of Labor and Social Policy, and the Unit for Trafficking in Human Beings and Migrant Smuggling. Since 2018, the National Unit for Suppression of Migrant Smuggling and Human Trafficking has also been responsible for conducting these procedures.

The competent authority determines the identity of the potential victim, collects information from the victim and determines his or her immediate needs. Based on the collected data and using indicators, an early risk assessment is carried out. Finally, in order to establish all the facts and circumstances relevant to the procedure, an interview is conducted with the potential victim to determine the status of a victim of human trafficking. With the help of a facilitator, the interview is conducted in a language understandable to the victim. If the status of a victim of human trafficking is determined, a period of reflection and recovery, in which the victim stays in a Center for Victims of Human Trafficking or the Reception Center for Foreigners. For each victim - foreigner, a responsible person is appointed, i.e. a police officer from the Unit for Human Trafficking and Migrant Smuggling at the Ministry of Interior, i.e. since 2018 the National Unit for Suppression of Migrant Smuggling and Human Trafficking, who is responsible for the victim of human trafficking until the end of the reflection and recovery period, i.e. until leaving the Center for Victims or the Reception Center for Foreigners. Undoubtedly, there is intense and dedicated activity of the institutions and the civil sector to identify potential victims of human trafficking and to reduce risks. There is also a process of strengthening the capacities to combat human trafficking with the formation of five mobile teams for the area in and around Skopje, Gevgelija, Kumanovo, Bitola and Tetovo.

Formal procedures have been established to ensure coordination of the activities of institutions according to a detailed methodology, in order to act in the best interests of victims of trafficking.

Protection and Combating Trafficking in Human Beings in the Republic of North Macedonia in the Period 2020-2024

The Republic of North Macedonia has increased its efforts to combat human trafficking by strengthening victim protection mechanisms. The Ministry of Labour and Social Policy has established mobile teams consisting of social workers, police officers, NGO representatives, and psychologists operating across five regions. These teams are responsible for identifying and assisting vulnerable individuals, including those at risk of trafficking. After being temporarily suspended due to the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, the mobile teams resumed their activities in August 2021.

Between August 2021 and January 2022, the teams provided assistance to 260 vulnerable individuals, among whom 68 were identified as potential victims of trafficking. In comparison, during 2020 they assisted 326 children living in street conditions, including six potential trafficking cases. The mobile teams are considered an effective model for early identification and cooperation between state institutions and civil society, although concerns remain about their long-term financial sustainability.

In addition, social workers continue to monitor vulnerable groups at border crossings and transit centres in cooperation with law enforcement authorities. Joint operations with the police and labour inspectors have led to inspections that uncovered cases of forced labour, particularly involving Roma children engaged in street begging and informal work, resulting in the identification of confirmed and potential trafficking victims.

Despite progress in combating human trafficking, challenges in inter-agency coordination remain. Authorities report that some institutions still lack consistent procedures for proactive identification of victims. In particular, law enforcement officers do not always systematically apply trafficking indicators during inspections of high-risk locations such as casinos, nightclubs, and bars. Similarly, border officials do not uniformly screen for trafficking indicators at entry points, and there have been documented cases of inappropriate treatment of migrants, including unlawful returns to neighboring countries.

Although standard operating procedures for victim identification and referral are established, coordination is managed by the Office of the National Referral Mechanism within the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy. Potential victims are referred by field officers to specialized units responsible for official identification. However, police officers and social workers are not always engaged at the earliest stages of identification, which may limit the effectiveness of the process.

Support services for victims are provided jointly by state institutions and non-governmental organizations, including shelter, food, medical care, psychological assistance, and reintegration programs. In 2021, assistance was provided to 10 victims, compared to 14 in 2020, including medical treatment for individuals affected by COVID-19. Social workers play a key role in supporting victims through guardianship, psychosocial care, education, and employment assistance. They also facilitated school enrolment for some victims and provided basic humanitarian support to

affected families. The shelter for victims of trafficking accommodated women and child victims, and had capacity for six victims, but the authorities did not have additional capacity to accommodate victims if the shelter was full. They also did not have options for long-term accommodation. The authorities placed identified Roma child victims in day care centers and admonished or fined their parents; in cases where the courts considered that the parents were unable to care for their children, the state placed the children in homes for orphans and parental care (U.S. Embassy in North Macedonia, 2021)

In relation to the number of identified victims of human trafficking, six child victims who were citizens of the Republic of North Macedonia were recorded in 2020. These children were subjected to various forms of exploitation, including sexual exploitation, forced labour, and forced marriages, often involving individuals known to the victims. Investigations and prosecutions were carried out under Articles 418-a and 418-d of the Criminal Code of the Republic of North Macedonia.

In 2021, a total of seven victims were identified under the same legal provisions. Among them, five were victims of sexual exploitation, two of forced labour, and one of forced begging. The victims included girls, one adult male, and all were Macedonian nationals. In addition, seven further victims were registered, including six adults and one child, with one being a foreign national. During the same period, the judiciary initiated three additional indictments, including one case involving nine individuals accused of child trafficking for sexual exploitation, and two cases involving two individuals each for child trafficking related to sexual and labour exploitation. Overall, six investigations were conducted against individuals and groups suspected of child trafficking and sexual exploitation, including one major case involving at least eight suspects, while the remaining cases targeted individuals.

In 2022, a total of 48 victims of human trafficking were identified, the majority of whom (40 individuals) were subjected to forced labour. Smaller numbers of victims were identified as being exploited through sexual exploitation (2 cases), combined sexual and labour exploitation (2 cases), and forced labour resulting from forced marriages (4 cases). The victims included males, females, and children of different ages, specifically 36 men, 6 women, 5 girls, and 1 boy, with one victim being a foreign national.

During the same period, one investigation was opened involving three suspects, and charges were filed in two separate cases concerning child trafficking for sexual exploitation. In addition, seven criminal offences of “Trafficking in a Child” under Article 418-d of the Criminal Code of the Republic of North Macedonia were recorded. Criminal proceedings were also initiated against 13 individuals under relevant provisions of the Criminal Code. The identified child victims included five minors, one of whom had a mental disability; four were female and one was male. Furthermore, three individuals were convicted for trafficking in children for sexual and labour exploitation, including two confirmed cases (*U.S. Department of State*, 2022).

In order to detect foreign citizens who illegally reside and work as dancers and singers, according to Article During 2022, 27 operational inspections were conducted in 38 catering establishments under Article 418-b of the Criminal Code of the Republic of North Macedonia. As a result of these controls, two individuals were identified without valid documentation for legal residence in the country.

In 2023, seven victims of human trafficking were identified. Two female victims were subjected to sexual exploitation under Article 418-a of the Criminal Code, including one girl with a disability. In addition, five individuals were identified as victims of labour exploitation under Article 418-a of the Criminal Code and Article 9 of the Law on Labour Relations. Overall, 87 potential victims received assistance. During the same period, four investigations were initiated under several legal provisions, including Articles 418-a and 418-c, while five indictments were filed against ten individuals. Out of these cases, five persons were convicted under Article 418-a of the Criminal Code (*U.S. Department of State*, 2023).

In the current reporting period, nine indictments were brought against 18 individuals involved in human trafficking, while 16 persons were convicted under Articles 418-a and 418-d, including 10 cases related to child trafficking and 6 cases involving adult victims (Criminal Code of the Republic of North Macedonia, 1996/2023, art. 418-g).

The data presented above summarize key statistics on identified victims, criminal offences, court proceedings, investigations, and enforcement actions related to human trafficking.

Table 1: Statistics on the number of victims, criminal offenses, court proceedings, investigations and controls for the period 2020-2024 at the level of the Republic of Macedonia

Year	Identified victims	Registered crimes	Initiated legal proceedings	Investigations	Controls
2020	7	/	/	/	/
2021	48	/	3	6	/
2022	9	7	3	/	27
2023	7	/	5	4	/
2024	40	/	25	/	/

Source: State Statistical Office

3. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Efforts to combat human trafficking in North Macedonia have increasingly emphasized both prosecution and victim-centered approaches designed to minimize re-traumatization. Preventive measures have been strengthened through the adoption of the National Strategy and the National Action Plan (NAP) for 2021–2025, which incorporate feedback and recommendations from trafficking survivors. Within the Ministry of Interior, the National Unit for Suppression of Migrant Smuggling and Trafficking in Persons has undertaken investigations with the support of 16 specialized officers. In addition, the Ministry employs 16 further officers across eight regional offices who are dedicated specifically to addressing trafficking cases. The OJOGOKK prosecuted all trafficking cases, but with only 13 prosecutors handling all crimes under its jurisdiction, lacking the capacity to review cases in a timely manner. The Skopje Criminal Court and the Skopje Court of Appeal retained the authority to review all trafficking cases. Experts reported that prosecutors routinely did not authorize special investigative measures, such as telephone tapping, in trafficking investigations; consequently, the authorities relied almost exclusively on victims testimonies without much supporting evidence.

In addition, GRETA stated that the authorities had never closed, fined or suspended businesses used for sex trafficking, and the owners or managers of such businesses had been convicted in only two cases to date.

Observers reported that cases were weak or mishandled due to the lack of a digital case management system for transferring trafficking cases between different police services and prosecutors' offices.

However, the authorities failed to meet minimum standards in several key areas. The authorities convicted fewer traffickers, and the police remained underfunded and underequipped to conduct proactive investigations. Similarly, the Public Prosecutor's Office for Organized Crime and Corruption (POOCC) lacked sufficient resources, both in terms of staff and a digital case management system, to handle all cases under its jurisdiction. Although the authorities have reactivated the mobile teams, which identify the largest number of potential victims each year, they have not allocated funds for the mobile teams despite promises. Local police and some border officials did not consistently check for indicators of trafficking, and as a result, authorities may have deported some unidentified victims of trafficking without referring them to appropriate services or protective measures to prevent them from being trafficked again.

Key recommendations for strengthening the prevention of human trafficking include intensifying investigations, prosecutions, and convictions of traffickers, including complicit officials, and imposing stricter prison sentences. Adequate resources should be allocated to law enforcement and prosecutors to enable proactive investigations, as well as to victim protection measures such as mobile identification teams, shelters, and specialized services for adult male victims. Efforts to identify victims must be expanded, with systematic screening among high-risk groups including commercial sex workers, irregular migrants, refugees, and other vulnerable populations. Field officers should receive training on standard operating procedures (SOPs) for victim identification and referral, with social workers consistently involved in all potential cases.

Furthermore, written guidelines must be fully implemented to ensure victims are not penalized for crimes committed under coercion. Safe and appropriate accommodation should be provided for foreign victims, with the option to leave shelters voluntarily, and alternative housing must be available when shelters reach capacity. Advanced training for judges, prosecutors, and law enforcement officials should be institutionalized to improve the investigation and prosecution of trafficking cases. Finally, mechanisms for compensating victims should be enhanced through the adoption of specific legislation and by informing victims of their legal right to seek monetary compensation.

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