

Sex Slaves: Trafficking in human beings from Moldova to Italy

Introduction

As the British Helsinki Human Rights group has noted in previous reports, NATO attacks on Yugoslavia in the spring of 1999 led to a rapid increase in refugees and asylum seekers leaving the war-torn Balkans for the West. Since then, the issue of asylum seekers has not been resolved: figures released for Britain on 25th January 2001 show that the number of asylum seekers in the United Kingdom reached record levels in 2000. There are now over 75,000 such applications a year, even more than the previous record of 71,000 in 1999.

However, in addition to the problem of large movements of people as refugees or migrants, a new and even more unpleasant phenomenon has accompanied NATO's military intervention: the dramatic increase of trafficking in human beings, most of which are women captured and forced into prostitution. Trafficking in women for the purposes of sexual slavery now forms part of a multi-million dollar business linked to the better-known forms of illegal trade like drug smuggling and arms running. Some experts even claim that trafficking in humans has overtaken drug smuggling in terms of profitability, to the extent that a smuggled drug can be consumed once while a sex slave is, from the point of view of the pimp, a re-usable commodity.

Trafficking in women has attracted a certain amount of publicity in the Western press in recent months, and it is also a subject to which the big fashionable international organisations have also devoted considerable attention. One often reads of international initiatives to combat the problem. There is a danger, however, that such initiatives might prove rather self-referential activities, providing more jobs for international workers without necessarily addressing the root causes of the problem itself.

The most intractable reason why these root causes are not addressed is that they are mostly phenomena to which the international community has made a significant contribution. For the West has indirectly helped to create the supply of sex slaves, in that it encouraged countries like Moldova and Ukraine (the country which supplies the second largest number of forced prostitutes) to undertake economic reforms which have devastated these countries and reduced their populations to misery. In addition, the West has helped to create the demand, by stationing tens of thousands of troops in the Balkans. Not all of these sex slaves' clients are soldiers and international workers, but their presence has greatly fuelled the demand for brothels in the Balkans. Certainly, the volume of trafficking, which picked up in the spring of 1999 as soon as NATO troops arrived in Macedonia in anticipation of military strikes against Yugoslavia¹, has greatly increased since the Kosovo war. Finally, the West has helped to create the link between the supply and the demand by supporting, in the Kosovo war, the very Albanian mafia which now controls this market. The fact that there is so much reporting now on the matter of sex slaves may be an indication that the powers that be in the West are beginning to ditch those whom they portrayed during the spring of 1999 as passive, innocent victims.

Moldova

The former Soviet Republic of Moldova declared independence from the Soviet Union in 1991. Since then, its history has not been happy: the republic effectively lost part of its territory (and much of its industry) when the Dniestr Moldavian Republic on the left bank of the River Dniestr declared independence and fought a brief but bloody war of secession in 1992. Since then, the standard package of IMF loans and privatisations has impoverished the population to such an extent that many Moldovans emigrate, even to countries which are themselves poor, like Romania. After ten years of economic reforms, at the beginning of 2000, the GDP of Moldova was a mere 40% of its level in 1990. Unemployment is extremely high, especially among women,

¹ Giuseppe Rolli, *Le schiave dei soldati di pace*, Il Manifesto, 18th April 2000

some 44% of whom are unemployed for 6 months or more. Moldova has the lowest average salary in the former Soviet Union at around \$30 a month, an income on which it is extremely difficult, if not impossible, to live. Women's salaries are 70% - 80% that of men and 80% of the population lives below the poverty line.²

Consequently, a flood of emigrants has left Moldova in a desperate search for work and a living, of which some 70,000 – 80,000 are women. Of these, many women will have left for the purposes of, or been forced into, prostitution. Over 60% of the tens of thousands of girls now believed to be in sexual slavery come from Moldova. The next largest nationality is Ukrainian. There are three main reasons for the pre-eminence of Moldova in this sad tale. First, Moldova is mainly Romanian-speaking, and so pimps and slave-traders from Romania (where there is also the same phenomenon) can operate easily there, either themselves or through contacts. Secondly, Moldova is nearer to the Balkan destination points for trafficked girls than Ukraine. Third, Moldova has been reduced to grinding poverty and so girls have every incentive to want to get away.

Indeed, the country is so poor that the local police are quite incapable of dealing with the trafficking. The Vice Squad in the Moldovan capital, Chişinău, consists of seven policemen who have no car nor any other dedicated equipment. This is no match for the powerful criminal networks who control this lucrative trade and, in any case, the suspicion must be that poorly-paid policemen take bribes. It would indeed be a useful aim of the international community to pay local policemen a decent salary: instead international projects tend to go to more politically correct purposes, usually involving the employment of foreigners.

Many of the women have chosen to be prostitutes. Others leave their home country thinking that they will work in bars or hotels in the West, and only discover the ugly reality when it is too late. Yet others are literally kidnapped: BHHRG representatives were told of one occasion when a busload of tourists on its way to Greece was hijacked and the young women and girls taken at gun-point from their parents. One young woman, aged 16 at the time, returned home after a year of enforced prostitution, a psychological wreck.

In some cases, the parents themselves are complicit in the trade. There are reported cases of pimps paying parents to be allowed to take away their daughters, and other cases of parents initiating the contact for the purposes of selling their offspring. In many cases, the women themselves make an approach to any one of the myriad organisations which advertise openly in the Moldovan press, usually in euphemistic terms for work in “saunas” and the like. There have even been advertisements on the radio, encouraging girls to seek a life of adventure and foreign travel, although the real nature of the work is left to the imagination.

Often a young woman's odyssey begins with a suggestion made to an unsuspecting village girl by a friend of a friend that they leave the country together to go and work in Italy. They cross into Romania where they are delivered into the hands of a pimp: the friend of the friend usually dissolves out of the picture at this moment. The pimp then takes them, in secrecy and often by force, to a slave market where the girls are sold on to other pimps and taken to Kosovo, Bosnia, Macedonia or Albania. Their passports are removed and they are forced to work as sex slaves, with the pimp taking all the money.

The sex trade is also flourishing in Moldova itself. There are said to be 253 brothels in Chişinău alone. Given the grinding poverty of the local population, it seems fair to assume that this may have something to do with the burgeoning NGO population in Moldova. NGOs, indeed, form a large part of what precious little economy there is in this impoverished place, their fleets of white jeeps and armies of assistants and interpreters forming one of the new common

² *The Current Situation on Trafficking in Women in the Republic of Moldova*, unpublished report by Ala Mîndîcanu, Member of the Moldovan Parliament.

denominators in the former communist countries which are the beneficiaries of the West's attentions.

Indeed, according to a Moldovan deputy who campaigns on the issue of trafficking, Ala Mîndîcanu, Moldova has now also become a country of transit for the trafficking business. The networks which are in operation there are now also being used to bring girls from other countries, usually Ukraine, but also from further a field in the former Soviet Union. In Moldova, they are then "distributed" to the Balkans and Italy. There are in Chişinău several apartments where girls from the countryside or from outside Moldova are taken prior to "distribution" by their pimps.

The route through the Balkans to captivity

By whatever means the women leave Moldova, the pattern of events by which young women get into captivity is fairly common. When they cross the border into Romania, they are usually taken by networks of Romanian pimps and "sold" at markets. One of these markets is said to be just outside Timișoara, near the border with Serbia. The price for a sex slave ranges from between \$800 to up to \$5,000 for an under-age virgin. Once bought, the girls are typically drugged and have their passports removed. They are then smuggled across Serbia into Kosovo, Bosnia, Macedonia or Albania, and in some cases also to Italy.

During BHHRG's recent trip to Moldova, an hour long TV broadcast on trafficking and enforced prostitution was shown on Romanian TV. This fact alone indicates the growing prominence of the problem. Among the many interviews conducted, was one with a convicted trafficker. He boasted of his "trade" and confessed that it was "very profitable". Indeed, sex slavery is profitable not only for the pimp, whose earnings are immense, but also for the "dealers" who, according to this particular man, can make \$500 or \$600 on each girl he sells on for \$1,000 or \$1,500. Typically, girls are sold several times before they reach their end destination where they are put to work. During a trip to the Adriatic coast of Italy in 1999, BHHRG representatives were told of a recent case in which a girl had been released by the police from slavery after having been bought and sold seven times.

Particularly unpleasant treatment is reserved for any captives who resist or who refuse to prostitute themselves. They are beaten repeatedly and deliberately raped in order to break their will. There are also reports of murders, committed both to dispose of unwanted "merchandise" and also to threaten recalcitrant newcomers. One report speaks of the severed limbs of dead prostitutes being shown to women who resist as a threat of what will happen to them too.³ The common theme in all reports on the matter, confirmed by interviews conducted by BHHRG, is that the Albanians who control the trade act with a brutality matched by no other criminal organisation.⁴

Once they are in captivity, the women work for the benefit of their slave-owner/pimp and not for their own gain. They are encouraged to receive as many clients as possible in order to increase profitability and turnover. One Romanian girl on the above-mentioned TV programme said that she had been denied food for days and forced to prostitute herself while chained to a bed.

Italy

The final destination of many trafficked prostitutes is the Balkans, especially Kosovo and Macedonia. But a large number of prostitutes are also taken to Italy. Indeed, many of the girls who leave Moldova do so with the desire to get to Italy, even if it means becoming a prostitute. In the last two years or so, there has been an exponential increase in the power of the Albanian Mafia in Italy. The man who for seven years was the head of the Italian anti-drug unit, Prefect

³ Marion van Renterghem, *Filles esclaves venues de l'Est*, Le Monde, 1st December 2000

⁴ *Eastern Europe's Impoverished Girls Fall Prey to Sex Trade*, Albanian Daily News, 5th October 2000

Pietro Soggiu, submitted a well-documented report on this for the United Nations in 1998. He worked together with the UN's anti-drug chief, Pino Arlacchi: Arlacchi declared in 1999 that, "The Albanian Mafia has reached an remarkable level of organisation, with branches in Italy and Germany and it has succeeded in obtaining control of the Balkan route for drug trafficking, to which it has added the trade in illegal immigrants, arms and munitions."⁵

These reports were highly embarrassing for the Italian government, which pays very considerable sums of money to the Albanian government in aid. When Soggiu's report was submitted in 1998, the then Under-Secretary for Foreign Affairs, Piero Fassino, now Minister of Justice, told the author, "You are embarrassing the Italian government."⁶ It was this same Fassino who, in 1996, had been heard to say in a public meeting, "We must hunt down Berisha," a reference to the then president of Albania who was subsequently overthrown in a Western-supported violent uprising in 1997. Soggiu was dismissed from his post.

It is clear that the Albanian Mafia controls prostitution in Italy, and that a very large number of prostitutes there are effectively slaves. Although not all the girls in Italy are from Moldova – many come from African countries like Nigeria – it has been affirmed by one of the leading authorities on prostitution that they are kept in captivity. "All the women currently on the streets (of Italy) are slaves. The proof is that the Nigerians, the Albanians, the Romanians and the women from Eastern European countries all have their passports taken away by their pimps. There is not one metre of street in which prostitution is not controlled by criminals," according to Don Oreste Benzi, a priest in Verona who has founded a charity which works with prostitutes. Benzi goes on, "The Albanians operate in family clans, in 'joint ventures' with the Mafia in Eastern Europe and Italy. No new pimp can start operating in Italy without paying a percentage to the person who already controls the territory. Any mistakes are punished by death. For the Albanians, vendetta is second nature: the concept of forgiveness does not exist."⁷ According to Benzi's charity, the Association of the Community of Pope John XXIII, 48% of the prostitutes in Italy are from Eastern Europe; 35%-40% are minors (from 12 to 18 years old); and 26% have been kidnapped and taken from their countries of origin by force.⁸

Sexual exploitation of children

An especially appalling aspect of the trade in human beings is the sexual exploitation of children. BHHRG representatives interviewed Mariana Petersel, the Director of Save the Children in Moldova, whose organisation has started to house and rehabilitate young women and girls who have been forced into sex slavery. The youngest victim with whom they have dealt was nine years old. 260 victims of sex slavery have been housed and helped by Save the Children during 2000. They had been in various Balkans countries: Kosovo, Albania, Macedonia, Italy, and Greece.

Mrs. Petersel attributed some of the problems to the families themselves. Family structures had been broken down by 70 years of communism, she said, and this meant that parents were sometimes prepared to sell their own children into slavery. As she mentioned figures of \$7,000 - \$8,000, it is to be assumed that this is the price for under-age slaves, since, as has been shown above, the price for adult girls is much lower.

There is also the partially related question of organ transplants. Young men are prevailed on to agree, for a few hundred dollars, to have one of their kidneys removed. This is

⁵ Tino Oldani, *Tirana? Come una Colombia sotto casa*, Panorama, 1st July 1999.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Don Oreste Benzi, *Le prostitute sono schiave: ecco la prova*, <http://www.mess-s-antonio.it/msahome/ita/riviste/rivnaz/a2000/Ott/Art/53%20Prostitute.htm>

⁸ *Presidente Ciampi, Ecco come fare per sconfiggere il racket della prostituzione*, <http://www.exodus.it/ASSOCIAZIONI/AP23/sempr/00ott/00ott03.html>.

often done in Israel, whither they are flown for the operation. Prices on the open market for a human kidney are in excess of \$10,000 so this trade is also very profitable. According to Mrs Petersel and Mrs Mîndîcanu, young men are practically “hunted down” until they agree to this operation. In one village, Ningir, a total of 300 people sold their kidneys in this way.

Mrs Petersel imparts to her branch of Save the Children the warmth and professionalism which are her own most noticeable characteristics. Girls who return to Moldova from enforced prostitution can be housed by Save the Children where they receive assistance including medical attention, and they are placed within a rehabilitation programme involving job training. Save the Children can also help the women find their families again. BHHRG representatives met one young woman who had been trafficked via Romania and Montenegro to Albania: she recounted her treatment at the hands of the Albanians with horror, for like so many she had been kidnapped in Romania and taken to Montenegro, where she was sold on and then transported down the coast to Albania in a terrifying boat ride. But she emphasised to BHHRG how deeply grateful she was to Mrs Petersel for taking her and her baby son in and giving her shelter. This particular woman had worked willingly as a prostitute; under Mrs. Petersel's guidance, however, she had resolved to turn over a new leaf and is now looking forward to working for Save the Children herself.

Conclusion

In the light of such constructive work, it is with great regret that BHHRG must criticise the NGO community in Chişinău. The BHHRG report on Moldovan prisons has shown how one group, Pharmaciens sans Frontières, is devoting considerable effort to providing a few small comforts for prisoners on remand. Such worthy activity is all too rare. Instead, BHHRG representatives received frequent complaints from those who work in “hands-on” activities like Save the Children that the NGOs were, in large measure, a means by which people could receive a lot of money for doing very little. Considerable grants can be obtained (tens of thousands of dollars) for organising a few seminars, no doubt usually with members of other like-minded NGOs. There are already literally hundreds of such NGOs in Moldova, no doubt for his very reason. In Kosovo, there has been such a proliferation that NGOs frequently refer to the needs and activities of “the NGO community” as if they were their own *raison d'être* rather than the local population. The suspicion must be that the same problem bedevils many NGOs operating in Moldova. Under these circumstances, it is tragic to see excellent and worthy projects like Save the Children putting in budget proposals for projects costing tiny amounts of money, when far larger sums are being wasted on organising conferences. How many trafficked women and girls can be helped for the \$25,000 or so it costs to organise a conference, in a country where people scratch a living on ten or twenty dollars a month?

A similar reproach can be made of the numerous other international organisations which take an interest in the tragedy of trafficking in human beings. Many of the large international organisations, including the United Nations and the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe, have set up working groups and issued reports on the question of trafficking. One is often left with the impression, however, that these initiatives make little real difference to the fates of those actually trapped in this trade. As Don Benzi in Italy and others repeatedly emphasise, trafficking is a criminal problem which needs to be tackled with vigorous and efficient police action in accordance with existing laws. This is the principal way to protect weak and vulnerable girls from poor countries and should be given priority over other more bureaucratic procedures.

Finally, attempts by the West to deal with this issue are doomed to failure unless they are accompanied with significant policy changes in two other areas which cause the problem in the first place. The first of these, as has been said, is the stationing of tens of thousands of young male troops, and armies of international workers, in the Balkans. The second is the support given by the West for groups with known links to the Mafia like the Kosovo Liberation Army and

members of the governments of Albania and Montenegro.⁹ Despite the anti-corruption rhetoric emanating from Serbia, it should not be assumed that the problem of the Mafia has been dealt with there either. Until the West's proclaimed anti-crime initiatives are underpinned by different policies, rather than by a *raison d'état* which seems to enjoy pre-eminence over all other considerations, then those policies will be little but empty postures.

⁹ The Italian Finance Minister, Ottaviano del Turco, has also recently attacked the Mafia activities of the Montenegrin president, Milo Djukanović. See *La Repubblica*, 12th January 2001.

References for further reading:

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