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# THE VULNERABILITY OF MIGRANTS FROM BULGARIA TO HUMAN TRAFFICKING FOR LABOR EXPLOITATION

Radoslav Stamenkov,<sup>I</sup> Georgi Petrunov<sup>II</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

### The Vulnerability of Migrants From Bulgaria to Human Trafficking for Labor Exploitation

The article analyzes the vulnerability of labor migrants from Bulgaria to traffickers and exploiters. Based on in-depth interviews with victims and experts in the field of human trafficking, the authors identify the main factors for falling into trafficking and the methods of recruiting and exploiting victims. The article answers the question as to why this phenomenon remains so persistent over time. A worrisome trend has been observed where victims perceive exploitation as a regular aspect of their employment abroad. The authors point out that reducing migrants' vulnerability largely depends on the broader national socioeconomic context, global inequalities, and the demand for cheap labor.

**KEYWORDS:** migration, human trafficking, labor exploitation, inequalities, Bulgaria

## IZVLEČEK

### Izpostavljenost migrantov iz Bolgarije trgovini z ljudmi zaradi izkoriščanja delovne sile

Avtorja v prispevku analizirata ranljivost delovnih migrantov iz Bolgarije za trgovce z ljudmi in izkoriščevalce delovne sile. Na podlagi poglobljenih intervjujev z žrtvami in strokovnjaki s področja trgovine z ljudmi opredelita glavne vzroke za to, da ljudje končajo v rokah trgovcev z ljudmi, ter metode novačenja in izkoriščanja žrtev in odgovorita na vprašanje, zakaj je ta pojav še vedno tako pogost. Skrb vzbuja podatek, da žrtve pogosto dojemajo izkoriščanje kot običajen sestavni del svoje zaposlitve v tujini. Avtorja poudarita, da je zmanjševanje ranljivosti migrantov odvisno predvsem od širših socialno-ekonomskih okoliščin v državi, pa tudi od globalnih neenakosti in povpraševanja po poceni delovni sili.

**KLJUČNE BESEDE:** migracije, trgovina z ljudmi, izkoriščanje delovne sile, neenakosti, Bolgarija

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## INTRODUCTION

With the growth of globalization and in the context of the European Single Market, cross-border travel for tourism and seeking employment has increased drastically. This situation creates not only many benefits but also many risks for migrants. Studies (GAATW, 2010; Milkman, 2020) indicate that migrants looking for better employment opportunities far from home are disproportionately exposed to the risk of exploitation and abuse. In this respect, some regions of the world are significantly affected by this trend (US State Department, 2022). One such region is Eastern Europe, with high migration rates to the more affluent West European countries. Migration trends have developed with varying intensity since the early 1990s. The phenomenon has been enhanced by the large economic differences existing between countries (Dorn & Zweimüller, 2021), economic growth in the Western economies (De La Rica et al., 2015; Barslund & Busse, 2014), the demand for labor force in the aging European societies (Lemaître, 2013), and the poor social situation in home countries (Kaye, 2003).

Research shows that human trafficking happens in parallel with the general migration flows from Eastern Europe (Bezlov et al., 2007; Petrunov, 2014). It has also been established that trafficking affects men and women alike (Mahmoud & Trebesch, 2010). Intensified migration in the last few years resulting from military action in Ukraine and Syria raises with particular acuity the issue of the risks faced by people who seek a better life in foreign countries. Hence, special attention must be directed to the vulnerability of migrants in terms of human trafficking, which is a real danger in our turbulent times.

This article aims to examine the risk that human trafficking poses to migrants from Eastern Europe. For this purpose, we discuss the main aspects of human trafficking from Bulgaria. In the first part, we present the scale and the significance of the human trafficking issue. Then, we briefly describe the context in which many Bulgarians decide to migrate and seek work abroad. Following a description of the methodology, we present the research results, which offer valuable information for designing knowledge-based policies that can inform measures aimed at reducing migrants' vulnerability to human trafficking for labor exploitation and providing support to the identified victims.

## THE SCALE OF THE HUMAN TRAFFICKING ISSUE

Human trafficking<sup>1</sup> is not a recent problem, but it has increased constantly since the end of the 20th century (Outshoorn, 2015), so much so that it has been defined as the fast-growing activity of organized crime (Shelley, 2010). Experts have calculated that traffickers gain more than €29 billion worldwide per year (European Commission, 2021). The EU has defined human trafficking as a basic threat (Europol, 2021). Nicholson (2013) asserts that this category of crime brings back long-rejected practices associated with slavery (the restriction of the right to dignity and security, to fair and favorable working conditions, to access to healthcare, etc.).

Judging by the number of identified victims, the most widespread forms of trafficking are those aimed at sexual and labor exploitation. The US Department of State's annual report on human trafficking (US Department of State, 2022, p. 62) points out that, in 2021, there were 90,345 officially identified victims of trafficking, of whom 21,219 were victims of trafficking for labor exploitation. According to Europol (2021), trafficking in human beings remains significantly underreported, which implies that most cases remain invisible. Nevertheless, Europol experts assess that the trafficking of human beings for labor exploitation is increasing in the EU as a result of the constant demand for low-wage workers (Europol, 2021, p. 72). This issue is further exacerbated by the absence of effective prevention and state control in the countries of origin and by particular legislative restrictions imposed on foreign workers in the destination countries, as in Slovenia (Frangež & Bučar Ručman, 2017). In Italy, too, an Amnesty International report shows how the conditions created by migration policy increase the risk of labor exploitation (Amnesty International, 2012).

Active research on human trafficking began in the last two decades. Researchers (Dragiewicz, 2008; 2015) found only a hundred or so publications on the topic published before 2000, including books, articles, and documents of international organizations and non-governmental organizations. In contrast, in 2014, 34,800 such publications were found. Despite the growing interest in the problem, Cockbain et al. (2018) indicated the strong need for more research, especially empirical, on trafficking aimed at labor exploitation in all its aspects. The authors show that such literature is sparse and fragmentary. Despite the considerable increase of interest in the problem in general, researchers do not focus sufficiently on this most widespread form of trafficking. The emphasis in research is mainly on trafficking for the purpose of sexual exploitation, while other forms are overlooked. In reviewing the literature on human

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1 An internationally accepted definition is given in the *Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons Especially Women and Children, supplementing the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime*: "The recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring or reception of persons, including the exchange or transfer of control over those 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" (UN General Assembly, 2000).

trafficking (6,106 identified and screened records), Cockbain et al. (2018) found serious gaps in knowledge about the fundamental aspects of workforce trafficking and even more so about the effectiveness of countermeasures. Despite the emphasis the EU and its institutions have placed on combatting human trafficking (in documents like Directive 2011/36/EU; EU Strategy on Combatting Trafficking in Human Beings 2021–2025), Cockbain et al. (2018) claim that the data basis is insufficiently developed: in their 15-year review period, they found only 152 publications containing empirical data on human trafficking for labor exploitation in Europe.

All this points to the need for more research on the issue and more empirical data, especially relevant to the most affected countries, such as Bulgaria. Bulgaria is predominantly a source country for victims of human trafficking, many of whom are transported to Western European nations (Mattar, 2009; Shelley, 2014; Petrunov, 2014). It should be noted that, according to Bulgarian law, human trafficking occurs even if the victim has given his/her consent (Petrunov, 2019).

Human trafficking is one of the most widespread and profitable criminal activities in Bulgaria, according to the assessment of organized crime threats in Bulgaria (CSD, 2019). Official data of the Supreme Cassation Prosecutor's Office regarding the victims of human trafficking in Bulgaria, as summarized in the office's annual reports, show that the numbers were relatively constant over five years: 508 victims in 2017; 443 in 2018; 487 in 2019; 458 in 2020; and 468 in 2021 (NCCTHB, 2022). These data cover only the officially registered victims of incomplete pretrial or criminal proceedings. Probably thousands of Bulgarians become victims of trafficking each year but remain outside the official statistics. Trafficking for labor exploitation is more latent (it is carried out in factories or homes, away from public view, where it is difficult to contact other people) than trafficking for sexual exploitation, which makes it additionally difficult to identify the victims of the former.

Concerning the state of the issue and the fight against human trafficking, in 2022, the US Department of State report placed Bulgaria on a Tier 2 Watch List.<sup>2</sup> This means that, compared with the year 2021 and despite the measures taken, the number of victims of severe forms of trafficking is excessively high, and there has been no improvement regarding the fight against this criminal activity and the assistance provided for its victims (US Department of State, 2022). Moreover, Bulgaria is in a worse position than in 2020 (US Department of State, 2021).

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2 The standards laid down in the Trafficking Victims Protection Act of 2000 have been used as a basis for assessment.

## THE SOCIOECONOMIC CONTEXT IN BULGARIA

Since the early 1990s, the socioeconomic development of Bulgaria has been characterized by ups and downs. From 2014 to 2020, there was a constant, albeit weak, growth of the GDP, decreasing unemployment, and a rise in incomes (Krasteva, 2019). The COVID-19 pandemic changed this positive trend: many businesses were forced to close, and many Bulgarians lost their jobs. Before this crisis, Bulgaria was—and still is—the country with the highest risk of poverty or social exclusion in the EU. In 2021, 31.7% of the population was at risk of poverty or social exclusion (Eurostat, 2023a). The country also has the highest levels of income inequalities among European countries measured by the Gini coefficient. In 2021, the index was 39.7, nearly 10 percent above the EU average (Eurostat, 2023b). Data from the Opinion of the Economic and Social Council of the Republic of Bulgaria show that the average annual income of the 50 percent poorest Bulgarians in 2020 was 5,787 BGN, or 482 BGN per month (around 240 EUR), while the average annual income of the 1% richest Bulgarians was approximately 320,000 BGN, or 26,666 BGN (around 13,000 EUR) per month (ESC, 2022). The share of the so-called working poor is large: in 2021, 10.0% of the employed were in this category (Eurostat, 2023c). The average hourly wage in Bulgaria in 2021 was the lowest in the EU: 7.1 EUR. By comparison, in Germany, one of the preferred target countries for emigration, the average hourly wage is 37.2 EUR (Eurostat, 2023d).

In this context, many Bulgarians prefer to migrate for better pay for their labor. Data from the National Statistical Institute (NSI, 2022) indicate that, in the last decade, the number of Bulgarian citizens who have emigrated from the country has tripled. A large share of the labor migrants, especially the seasonal workers, who go and return, remains outside the official statistics. These people are especially vulnerable to human trafficking for labor exploitation.

## METHODOLOGY

The empirical information used in this article was gathered through in-depth interviews conducted with two groups of respondents. In one group, 38 in-depth interviews were conducted with victims of human trafficking for forced labor exploitation. The other group of respondents consisted of 29 experienced experts in the problems of this kind of human trafficking. The interviewed experts are representatives of different institutions and organizations who have knowledge of various aspects of the issue: prevention and support for victims (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, State Agency for Child Protection, International Organization for Migration, NGOs), investigation and law enforcement (Ministry of Interior, Prosecutor's Office of the Republic of Bulgaria, Court of Justice), expertise in various aspects of trafficking

(National Commission for Combating Human Trafficking at the Council of Ministers of the Republic of Bulgaria, GRETA, established by the Council of Europe).

The interviews were conducted during two periods: 2019–2020 and 2022. The criteria by which respondents in the first group were chosen was their participation in programs for the returning of victims of trafficking to their home countries and the provision of assistance to them, carried out by the International Organization for Migration Bulgaria. Interviewers familiarized the interviewees with the study's aim and acquired their consent to participate. To avoid additional stress for the survivors of human trafficking, interviews with victims were not audio-recorded. Instead, the interviewer took detailed and accurate notes throughout the interview. Interviews lasted from 30 to 50 minutes. The participation of experts in the study was ensured thanks to the authors' many years of contact with such experts through joint activities on the problems of migration and human trafficking. In-depth interviews with experts who consented to audio recording were captured on a dictaphone, while comprehensive notes were taken during sessions with other experts. Interviews lasted from 40 to 70 minutes.

In order to ensure the respondents' anonymity, when citing them, we have used pseudonyms, followed by their gender and age, for instance, Ivan (male, aged 40). For citations in expert interviews, the category of expertise is indicated, for instance, an investigation and law enforcement expert.

Interview materials are archived following Article 15(1) of the Code of Ethics of the Bulgarian Sociological Association, which mandates that the authors retain the primary information for a minimum of three years from the study's execution date.

We combined the information obtained from interviews with victims and experts to achieve greater veracity on the issue under study. Researchers have assessed that information obtained from people who have experienced trafficking is vital for a better understanding of the problem and for finding more effective solutions (US Department of State, 2022). In other words, the victims' perspective should be important in combating this criminal activity. This understanding has become a basis for incorporating victim-centered and survivor-informed approaches in anti-trafficking efforts.

The information gathered from the interviews has been organized into the following thematic codes: 1) factors contributing to the risk of falling into human trafficking for labor exploitation; 2) profile of victims of human trafficking for labor exploitation; 3) recruitment and control of victims; 4) exploitation of victims; 5) criminal activity of traffickers; 6) measures to support victims of trafficking; 7) challenges in implementing support measures; 8) prevention of human trafficking; 9) difficulties in addressing human trafficking for labor exploitation. In this article, we use information from the first four themes in order to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the main causes of labor migration and vulnerability to human trafficking?



2. Are there some characteristics (objective and subjective) that could form a victim profile?
3. How are people recruited into labor exploitation?
4. What forms of labor exploitation do victims experience?

The study concentrates exclusively on human trafficking for labor exploitation. Thus, the trafficking associated with the exploitation of individuals in prostitution, considered by sociologists (Weitzer, 2009) as sex workers, falls outside its purview. The study also excludes the trafficking of human beings for begging, although it is understood as a form of forced labor in Directive 2011/36/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council on preventing and combating trafficking in human beings and protecting its victims. The study's scope does not include human smuggling, a criminal activity different from human trafficking. In human smuggling, the aim is to get illegal migrants across the border, and at the end of the journey, they are free, while victims of trafficking end up in a situation of exploitation. Unlike smuggling, which is always transnational, human trafficking may occur within a country. A key distinction between the two is that human trafficking constitutes a crime against the person, whereas human smuggling is a crime against the state (UNODC, 2012).

The results of the empirical study are not representative. However, qualitative research is particularly valuable for studies of criminal phenomena, as Frangež and Bučar Ručman, following Noaks and Wincup, have pointed out: "...qualitative analysis provides possibilities for clarifying the context in which certain violations occur and determines the meaning that people attribute to such conduct" (Noaks & Wincup, 2003, as cited in Frangež & Bučar Ručman, 2017, p. 233).

## RESEARCH RESULTS

### Causes of labor migration and vulnerability to human trafficking

In the interviews, victims and experts pointed out that Bulgaria's poverty and unemployment are the basic factors that contribute to labor migration and vulnerability to human trafficking. One of many examples is the story of Tanya (female, aged 22). She told us about her motive for traveling abroad: "My father is sick ... without money. There's no way." Some acquaintances from her native city told her she could earn a lot of money as a waitress in the Netherlands. There, she started work in a restaurant without a work contract; she was promised a salary of 500 euros but received only 100. After three months, she went to the police and managed to return to Bulgaria.

The lack of work prospects in small settlements in Bulgaria motivates people to seek work abroad. One of the interviewed experts pointed out: "Before it comes to trafficking, these people [the victims] have found no solution at the local level." An example of this is the story of a young woman, aged 21, who, while looking for a job,

was told by some friends that she could earn good money as a seasonal farm worker abroad. The trafficker organized the trips for the girl and other people seeking work abroad. The job was on a farm in Germany, where they picked and sorted fruits. After she started working, she found that a large part of her pay was being withheld—first to cover the travel costs, then for utility bills and accommodation. Under threat that she would receive no pay, she was forced to work without rest for a whole week. Although she was a victim of exploitation, the young woman is convinced that “In Bulgaria, I would not have earned even that much.”

The conviction that, no matter how low the pay is in a foreign country, it is still better than in Bulgaria is related to high inequality levels in the country. One of the victims, a middle-aged man, said his acquaintance had offered him a job at a circus in Belgium, promising him a good salary. He quickly agreed because, “You know how it is, it’s impossible without a job. It’s better everywhere than in Bulgaria.” The trip was organized by the trafficker, who withheld part of the salary to cover this expenditure. The man’s accommodation was extremely miserable: he slept in the stable with the animals. He could not leave the confines of the circus, regularly failed to receive his monthly salary, and was given only small sums, and not every day at that. Despite these working conditions, the man’s situation in Bulgaria is so bad that he is willing to look for a job abroad again:

They gave me 20 euros per day. That’s not much, but in Bulgaria, I didn’t earn even that much ... The Italian [the employer—author’s note] at times didn’t pay when there weren’t any people or the weather was bad. Here [in Bulgaria—author’s note], I have nothing. I will go again. There is no life for me here. (Nasko, male, aged 37)

While poverty and inequality in Bulgaria are push factors for labor migration, the pull factor is said to be the significant difference in the standard of living between Bulgaria and Western European countries. An interviewed expert stated, “The large economic disproportions at the global level and the growing global mobility are motors of labor exploitation.” The disparities in development among nations are particularly evident in the realm of modern internet opportunities. Many of the interviewed victims hold an idealized view of life and people in foreign countries, which prevents them from questioning the conditions of their employment. Consequently, numerous Bulgarians believe that life in foreign countries is invariably positive.

In addition to the economic factors and high inequality rates, the analysis of interviews with experts and victims also shows some important sociocultural factors. It becomes apparent in the interviews that traffickers, promising high salaries and easy work abroad, take advantage of people’s inability to speak a foreign language and their illiteracy because of lack or low education and lack of social skills. The interviewed experts consider that an important factor of vulnerability to human trafficking is the fact that many people who decide to work abroad entirely trust the person offering them a job and believe in his/her promises. One of the experts

summed up the problem: “Naivete, limited information, this lack of interest about where you will work, who will take charge of you and what kind of work you will be performing, are the basic factors that make a person traveling abroad to work, vulnerable to human trafficking for labor exploitation.” (investigation and justice expert) Contributing to this, as mentioned above, is an idealized picture that people in Bulgaria have of life abroad.

Another factor we identified in analyzing the empirical information was the search for cheap labor. Many interviews enable us to clearly distinguish this factor: the victims are trafficked by Bulgarians and left to work either as servants in private homes or as hired workers on farms and in construction firms. These people were performing a legal economic activity. Their employer was paying them much less than what one would pay local citizens.

Some of the experts proposed an interesting interpretation of the factors that make Bulgarians vulnerable to human trafficking for labor exploitation. According to experts, an important reason for this vulnerability is that “many of them are in a situation of various forms of exploitation in their own country.” In more than a few cases, people can hardly recognize the features of labor exploitation: “Very often, the victims are not aware that they are the subject of a crime; they often think that the working conditions will improve and their employer will fulfill the informal commitment he has made to them.” They put up with the exploitative situation for a long time because of their experience with dishonest employers in their home country, i.e., they accept such exploitation as a regular part of work relations. People who have worked in their own country under conditions of violated labor rights have accepted this as a regular part of their lives and are less sensitive; they can hardly feel when a specific limit is passed and labor exploitation becomes a fact. The experts make it clear that in the last few years, victims have tended ever more rarely to be aware they were victims—as if “it’s not a problem for them that they are victims of trafficking” and ever more rarely to turn to them for support. This perception of the issue inevitably enhances the risk that people seeking work abroad may find themselves in a situation of labor exploitation.

### **Profiles of human trafficking victims**

In most cases, people who have become victims of human trafficking for labor exploitation are unemployed and go abroad voluntarily, convinced they will work for pay and under conditions they cannot find in Bulgaria. The age of the victims of human trafficking interviewed for this study varies widely: from 17 to 69 years. The interviewed experts pointed out that there has been a rise in the upper age limit of victims. It is above 60 years and even reaches 70 in some cases. Very often, these are people who have had some experience with migration for work, i.e., they have migrated to more than one country and have been earning their livelihood this way for years.

The interviews revealed cases of both unemployed people above the age of 50 years and of young people wanting to gain experience and save money and who are motivated by the spirit of adventure. The story of Stefan (male, aged 17) shows that anyone can become a victim of human trafficking for labor exploitation. He left for the Netherlands, where a relative had promised him a dishwasher job in a restaurant. His parents helped him buy a ticket. He started work immediately but did not sign a contract: "We were working hard, but the bosses were never satisfied. The salary was supposed to be 500–600 euros. But what happened is that I got nothing." After working for about one month without getting any pay, he started to get into ever sharper conflicts with the employers, who tried to prevent him from quitting by threatening him and taking away his identity document.

Experts talk about cases of underage children who have been taken to foreign countries. Some migrate with their parents and work with them in the "grey economy," for instance, in construction. In other cases, the children travel accompanied by traffickers, with the permission of their parents, who have been deceived that their children will do work suitable to their age and be able to send money to their family and younger brothers and sisters. Usually, these are low-income families with many children.

Regarding the gender of these people, although men and boys are the usual victims, in recent years, there has been a visibly growing number of cases of labor exploitation trafficking of women and girls to EU countries (NCCTHB, 2018).

Another trend noticed in the study is that besides the classical group of vulnerable people (permanently unemployed, with low skills and education, living in small settlements with high unemployment and poverty rates), a new group is emerging and constantly growing. These are educated people of active age who are dissatisfied with their work in Bulgaria (in terms of profession or pay) and seek opportunities abroad. Moreover, an increasing number of cases have been registered in which people with comparatively good jobs here are inclined to work for two or three months as seasonal workers abroad to gain more money in a brief period and thereby cover some specific expenses they have. In some cases, the remuneration they are promised for picking strawberries in Greece or blueberries in Sweden for one season is more than their salary for the whole year in Bulgaria.

## **Recruitment in human trafficking for labor exploitation**

The experts pointed out that it was increasingly rare for traffickers to use physical violence in recruiting their victims: "Since we [Bulgaria] became members of the EU, the so-called soft methods for recruitment and control over the victims are being used ... the exceptions are very few in my practice, especially regarding labor exploitation." (investigation and justice expert)

Traffickers make promises about a good life and lots of money and draw a picture of the many chances a person will have to fulfill his/her dreams for a better life. What

contributes to easy inclusion into trafficking is the idealized image Bulgarians have of life abroad. These dreams are combined with low income in Bulgaria.

In most of the stories told by the interviewed victims, the person who offered a job abroad was an acquaintance from the village or city that the victim lives in, and in cases of female victims, an intimate partner. In one in-depth interview, the expert talked about a court case in which it was found that the victims of labor exploitation had been recruited while waiting in front of the employment office. Traffickers would engage them in conversation and offer them a job abroad. The narratives of interviewed victims showed that in some cases, the victims had responded to internet advertisements for work abroad and organized and paid for their trip by themselves. The common feature in most cases is that the recruiters do not personally participate in the exploitation. They recruit and organize the travel and accommodation at the place of exploitation.

The experts informed us of a number of cases in which Bulgarians had been included in human trafficking for labor exploitation by Bulgarian intermediary firms that were officially registered as go-betweens for employers abroad. Such companies have contacts with foreigners abroad seeking cheap labor from Eastern European countries. The intermediaries find the workers and organize the travel formalities, after which they often stop all contact with the victims. In many cases, the victims do not speak the local language. They often sign documents whose content is incomprehensible to them. If they wanted to complain, firstly, they would not know whom to turn to, as the firm that recruited them has disappeared, and secondly, they would find they have no formal grounds for complaint because they have agreed to the employer's terms.

The interviewed victims were often controlled through debt to the traffickers. Debt accumulation begins with the victim's travel expenses, where the travel costs are deducted from future pay. Traffickers strive to maintain and enlarge the victims' debts by adding costs for accommodation, food, etc., so that, after a certain period, they will have control over the victims. People in a situation of labor exploitation often have no contact with anyone but their exploiters; they work in places that are remote from cities or in enclosed spaces. In many cases, the victims fear being delivered to the authorities and punished for irregular documents or violating local laws. Some of the interviewed victims had been threatened that their families in Bulgaria would suffer if they did not repay the sum they owed.

### **The exploitation of victims of human trafficking for labor**

The interviewed victims of trafficking had been exploited in various European countries: Belgium, the UK, Germany, Greece, Spain, Italy, Poland, Hungary, France, the Netherlands, Sweden, and Switzerland. The economic sectors in which they experienced exploitation included agriculture, construction, the restaurant industry, services, cleaning services, and domestic aid. Gergana (female, aged 30) went to

Poland with a female friend, where the two intended to find jobs. They arranged the bus trip by themselves. When they arrived in Poland, they quickly found work as waitresses in an establishment. When they started working, they found out they would have to work 12-to-13-hour shifts and often had to substitute for absent colleagues without being paid extra. They were paid small sums—not regularly, but whenever the owner was in the mood. Gergana worked for three months and wanted to return to her family in Bulgaria. The owner did not stop her but did not pay her for her work.

Another example is the story of Victor (male, aged 39). An acquaintance from his native village offered him a job on a construction site in Germany, with a work contract and for good pay. He agreed and left for Germany. Upon arrival, he contacted his employer who lodged him near the site in a small room together with three migrants from Vietnam. He immediately started work but found that neither the agreed-upon working hours nor the pay was what had been promised: “We worked in shifts of 10 to 12 hours. They make the schedule without asking you. They were supposed to get paid every two or three days, but sometimes they delayed. The money was not enough for anything. Nothing that I had been told in Bulgaria was true. They lied to me” (Victor, male, aged 39).

In one case that the interviewed experts in investigation and law enforcement had worked on, a Bulgarian citizen had been exploited for labor in a foreign country for nine years. His friend offered him work as an unskilled laborer in a private estate in Belgium; the friend made the travel arrangements and led him to the employers. The latter transferred the remuneration for work to the intermediary, who paid hardly anything to the worker. The latter was only given food and clothes, and his documents were taken away.

In some cases, Bulgarians are exploited by other Bulgarians who have a business in a foreign country. The story of Zlatka (female, aged 22) is an example of a severe violation of her rights and human dignity. She had been looking for work in Bulgaria for half a year when a female friend from her village told her she could earn money by working as a waitress in a restaurant in Spain. They contacted a Bulgarian family in Spain through a social network. The family offered her a job and offered to pay her travel expenses and lodge her for free in their house. Zlatka agreed and started working soon after she arrived. The shifts lasted 12 hours, but she received no money. All the money she earned was withheld under the pretext that it covered the expenses for the room and the utility bills. They did not allow her to leave when she refused to work anymore. After about a month, they told her that she was not learning the language and there was not much work in the restaurant, so the only way she could remain there and earn money would be to offer paid sex services. She refused but was coerced. The exploitation was accompanied by violence and threats concerning her family. She succeeded in escaping when she saw a police car and told the police what had happened to her.

This example shows that in the course of human trafficking, one kind of exploitation can very easily pass into another; in this case, labor exploitation turned into

sexual exploitation. Women are particularly vulnerable in this respect, as their desire to work abroad and earn money for their families exposes them to the risk of both labor and sexual exploitation. In the case of men seeking work abroad, the risk is often about forced servitude, coercion to beg, or participation in criminal activities.

## DISCUSSION

The present article analyzes the vulnerability of labor migrants to traffickers and exploiters using data from in-depth interviews with victims of human trafficking and experts working on this issue. It is argued in the literature (Bales, 2004; Chuang, 2006; Outshoorn, 2015; Petrunov, 2023) that toward the close of the 20th century, a significant number of developing nations faced a steep drop in job opportunities and income from traditional sectors. Consequently, more and more people turned to alternative means of livelihood and income generation, such as migration and employment within the informal sector. Limited job opportunities combined with poor living conditions and poverty are described as some of the main causes of vulnerability to human trafficking (Kaye, 2003).

Concerning RQ1, our findings also revealed that the leading causes for migration and risk of labor exploitation are poverty, unemployment and the lack of work prospects (especially in the villages and small towns) in the home country. Our findings convincingly show that poverty among some groups of people is so severe that, for them, exploitation abroad is preferable to life in their own country.

Furthermore, the analysis of empirical data indicated that a very significant factor is the high levels of inequality within the country and the vast economic disparities between countries. This is in accordance with other studies (Jac-Kucharski, 2012; DiRienzo & Das, 2018; Mo, 2018) that indicate income inequalities as a significant factor motivating people to seek a better life in a foreign country. The gap in the quality of life between the poor and the rich is increasing at an even faster pace, resulting in numerous adverse effects for people and the societies in which they live (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2009). Milanovic (2012) notes that in the 19th century, the primary division lay between the workers and capitalists within a country, marked by income disparities. However, in the 21st century, stark differences arise from the significant disparities in average incomes across countries, resulting in vast differences in remuneration for the same activity in wealthy and impoverished nations.

In addition to RQ1, we found that most victims had an idealized picture of life and work abroad. Many people in Bulgaria believe life is easier and better in Western European countries (Petrunov, 2019). This is confirmed by the results of a national representative survey conducted by the agency Mediana (Mediana, 2009). One of the questions asked in the survey was, "Do you think that a London taxi driver lives better or worse than one in Sofia, for instance?" More than half (56%) of the respondents indicated the London taxi driver has a better life, only 1% of the surveyed

persons stated that the Sofia driver lives better, 7% stated both live at equal levels, and a considerable part (36%) could not assess. The researchers concluded that what lies at the source of human trafficking is the understanding that a normal life is something “that exists there, in other countries, but not here” (Mediana, 2009, p. 4). Thus, exploited people usually fall into the trap of labor exploitation under the pressure of their social and economic situation while guided by the desire for a new and better life (Petrunov, 2018). Also of importance here is the existing demand for cheap labor in richer countries and the willingness of some employers to use the labor of victims of human trafficking (Skrobanek & Sanghera, 1996; Wheaton et al., 2010).

We also identified some other factors related to the sociocultural environment in Bulgaria—illiteracy because of low education and lack of social skills—aspects that increase the vulnerability of migrants to falling into a situation of labor exploitation.

Some significant problems that contribute to the growth of human trafficking for labor exploitation are the working conditions in Bulgaria. The context in which Bulgarians decide whether to work in their native land or look for a job abroad is not only a push factor for labor migration but also creates conditions conducive to accepting exploitation as a regular part of labor. We identified a disturbing trend: the exploited people do not recognize themselves as victims of labor exploitation. This is because the violation of labor rights is a common practice in Bulgaria: many people work extra hours without pay or have signed work contracts for part-time work but actually work full-time, receive their salaries with delay, etc. (CITUB, 2018). Many Bulgarians are inclined to live under dire conditions as long as they receive some pay, even if much less than the standard local salaries in the destination country. The causes for this may be related to the following: as bad as the working conditions are, the money received is more than they would earn for the same amount of work in Bulgaria; the victim’s tolerance to violation of working rights, something they are used to in their native country; people leave together with the trafficker voluntarily, having accepted the idea that they are going abroad to work and earn money at all costs.

The finding that labor exploitation conditions are becoming normalized for some populations contributes to the debate on human trafficking and labor exploitation issues. This observation highlights two critical elements: the significance of socioeconomic conditions in the origin country (supply side) and the impact of the demand side’s quest for cheap labor, even if it results in labor exploitation.

According to RQ2, we found that anyone seeking a livelihood abroad can become a victim of human trafficking for labor exploitation. This finding was confirmed by the stories of the victims and by the observations of the experts who participated in the study. We observed worrying trends: a rise in the upper age limit of victims, victims who had comparatively good jobs in their home countries, growing number of cases of labor exploitation trafficking of women and girls.



Regarding RQ3, we found that in recruiting the victims, traffickers mostly employ manipulation and promises for future payment of the full work remuneration. Our study discovered that the activity of legal intermediaries is also used. In this way, as other studies have established (Berbec et al., 2019), the agencies cover up the connection to the supposed trafficking activity, while the false documentation for work abroad is arranged directly between the employing firms and the potential victims.

Answering RQ4, we found that traffickers recruit victims who are exploited in legal and economic sectors by employers in the legal economy, even in the homes of families of ordinary citizens. Regardless of the specifics of the different economic sectors, each has the same goal—gaining profit by exploiting another person. For this purpose, they often use coercive means for control—putting the victims in debt, depriving them of their identity documents, and limiting their possibility for unrestricted movement.

## CONCLUSION

Human trafficking for labor exploitation is a crime that grows more frequent under conditions of global migration, rising income inequalities, and cheap labor. It results from numerous economic and non-economic factors, of which traffickers take advantage when they seek to gain money regardless of the means used and the violation of human rights and liberties. Designing and implementing a successful strategy for fighting human trafficking requires understanding its key components, the connection between them, and the context in which it occurs. The present article contributes to awareness of the need for knowledge on the phenomenon. It reveals disturbing trends regarding the causes of vulnerability to labor exploitation and the way victims perceive it.

The results of the study presented here lead to the conclusion that more effective measures against the labor exploitation of migrants must be taken at the national and global levels. Human trafficking from Eastern to Western Europe concerns not only the source countries of the victims but is also closely connected with labor migrant policies in the destination countries and the local legislation regarding people who exploit the labor of the trafficking victims.

At the national level, it is necessary to work toward reducing the high rates of poverty, regional discrepancies, and inequality (Petrunov, 2018) and to focus on Bulgaria's living and working conditions, especially for people with low qualifications. For this, various stakeholders should be engaged, including not only politicians and decision-makers but also educational institutions, NGOs, trade unions, and employers. The commitment of all these is essential for improving the quality of labor market relations in a given country with regard to fighting discrimination against women and older people seeking work or against ethnic minorities. On the

other hand, each one of us can make efforts to discourage human trafficking and exploitation. As consumers constantly seeking a better balance between the cost and quality of goods and services, we should think about the workers who produce a given commodity or enable a service to reach us; think about the conditions in which they work and the pay they get for their labor.

At the international level, it is necessary to effectively apply the adopted international documents aimed against human trafficking. Also needed are efforts to implement in practice the Sustainable Development Goals 2030 adopted by the UN in September 2015. Three goals explicitly concern human trafficking: Goals 5, 8, and 16. Namely, to achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls, to promote decent work and economic growth and development, to promote peaceful and inclusive societies, to provide access to justice for all, and to build strong institutions. These goals were adopted in the context of the so-called migrant crisis, which revealed that European societies lacked mechanisms for dealing with the intensified migration movement. Whether those societies have learned the lesson and succeeded in preparing working instruments against the negative aspects of an intensive and extensive movement of people remains an open question.

The appeal to put the problem of trafficking and exploitation of people on the agenda of decision-makers is especially relevant to the present situation, in which thousands of women and children are moving from Ukraine to other countries in Europe. This requires taking urgent measures to guarantee the safety of migrants, as these people are highly vulnerable to the activities of traffickers and exploiters.

Regarding the human trafficking issue, several directions for future research could be proposed. The first is related to further developing the analysis of the conditions that facilitate the operation of criminal networks engaged in human trafficking, both on national and global levels. The second would be to deepen the analysis of what could be effective strategies to diminish the vulnerability of migrants to trafficking and exploitation. Such research should inevitably focus on the effectiveness of anti-poverty policies and an analysis of national and global migration policies to manage migration more equitably and securely for everyone.

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## POVZETEK

### IZPOSTAVLJENOST MIGRANTOV IZ BOLGARIJE TRGOVINI Z LJUDMI ZARADI IZKORIŠČANJA DELOVNE SILE

Radoslav Stamenkov, Georgi Petrunov

Delovne migracije iz manj razvitih držav v predvsem zahodnoevropske države so zelo razširjen pojav. Trgovci z ljudmi in izkoriščevalci spretno izkoriščajo ljudi, ki si želijo boljšega življenja. Avtorja v prispevku predstavitata rezultate raziskave o trgovini z ljudmi za izkoriščanje delovne sile kot tveganju in resnični nevarnosti za migrante. Raziskava obravnava primere bolgarskih državljanov, ki so bili izkoriščani v zahodnoevropskih državah. Ti primeri iz Bolgarije so lahko dober pokazatelj tega pojava tudi v drugih vzhodnoevropskih državah.

Rezultati raziskave potrjujejo druge podobne študije in kažejo, da so glavni razlogi ljudi za iskanje dela v tujini gospodarski – revščina, brezposelnost, pomanjkanje razvojnih perspektiv. Ti dejavniki vplivajo zlasti na ljudi, ki živijo zunaj velikih mest in prestolnice, kar je posledica velikih regionalnih razlik v Bolgariji. Medtem ko na odločitev za migracijo pomembno vplivajo ekonomski dejavniki, pa druge značilnosti, na primer nizka stopnja izobrazbe, nezaupanje v institucije, občutek nepravilnosti in nižja kakovost življenja v Bolgariji v primerjavi z drugimi državami, povečujejo tveganje za izpostavljenost migrantov izkoriščanju na delovnem mestu. V raziskavi se je pokazal močan vpliv lokalnih okoliščin, zlasti stanja na trgu dela ter nadzora nad spoštovanjem delavskih pravic. Sistematično kršenje delavskih pravic v matični državi znatno vpliva na večjo ranljivost migrantov za to, da v tuji državi padejo v položaj izkoriščanja in v njem tudi ostanejo. Takšna situacija povzroča trend, ki sta ga v raziskavi zaznala avtorja: »normalizacijo« izkoriščanja in sprijaznjenje žrtev s njihovim položajem. Mnogi med njimi so prepričani, da je bolje biti izkoriščen v tujini kot delati v svoji domovini.

Drugi dejavnik, ki pomembno vpliva na večjo ranljivost migrantov za izkoriščanje, je povpraševanje po poceni delovni sili v razvitih državah. Raziskava je pokazala, da so ljudje v zakonitih poslovnih dejavnostih izkoriščani v vseh sferah gospodarstva.

Vsi ti izsledki kažejo, da so za zmanjšanje tveganja za izkoriščanje ljudi, ki se z delom preživljajo v tujini, potrebni ukrepi na nacionalni, regionalni in globalni ravni ter na različnih področjih – izobraževalnem, gospodarskem, socialnem in pravnem. Pri tem pa ne smemo pozabiti, da morajo biti vsi ukrepi, povezani s politikami in ukrepi za preprečevanje trgovine z ljudmi zaradi izkoriščanja delovne sile, usmerjeni v zagotavljanje varnosti migrantov, ne pa v omejevanje prostega pretoka ljudi.

## TEMATSKI SKLOP / THEMATIC SECTION

**NAPOTITVE DELAVCEV: PROFILI PODJETIJ, DOSTOP DO INFORMACIJ IN SPOŠTOVANJE PRAVIL / POSTING OF WORKERS: COMPANY PROFILES, ACCESS TO INFORMATION, AND RULE COMPLIANCE**

***Sonila Danaj***

Introduction: Posting of Workers – Company Profiles, Access to Information, and Rule Compliance

***Frederic De Wispelaere, Lynn De Smedt***

Unraveling the Profile of Posting Companies: A Case Study for Slovenia

***Sonila Danaj, Elif Naz Kayran, Eszter Zólyomi***

Access to Information on Labor and Social Regulations and Compliance in the Posting of Foreign Workers in Construction in Austria

***Mojca Vah Jevšnik***

Access to Information on the Posting of Third-Country Nationals: The Case of Slovenia

## ČLANKI / ARTICLES

***Dejan Valentinčič***

Stanje in spremembe v slovenski skupnosti v Clevelandu med letoma 1950 in 2015 ter obeti za prihodnost skupnosti: Primerjava pogledov Tonyja Petkoviška in Vinka Lipovca

***Radoslav Stamenkov, Georgi Petrunov***

The Vulnerability of Migrants From Bulgaria to Human Trafficking for Labor Exploitation

***Javier García Castaño, Cristina Goenechea Permisán, María Rubio Gómez***

Evidence of the Disproportionate Representation of Foreign Populations in Special Education in Spain: An Approach to Statistical Data

***Sofia Laiz Moreira***

The Role of Ethnic, Family, and Social Capital in Intergenerational Social Mobility Among the Argentines and Moroccans in Galicia, Spain

## KNJIŽNE OCENE / BOOK REVIEWS

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