

## **POVERTY IN MODERN SOCIETY - A CHALLENGE FOR MODERN SLAVERY AND A PROFITABLE "INDUSTRY" OF HUMAN TRAFFICKING IN THE BALKANS**

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### **Abstract**

Human trafficking is a widespread and complex issue, especially in the Balkans, necessitating further research and analysis to understand its causes and implications. This paper focuses on the punitive and criminological aspects of human trafficking in Serbia, Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, and the Republic of North Macedonia. The analysis reveals that human trafficking is a pervasive problem in these countries, posing significant challenges for suppression. Factors such as the migrant crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic, and poverty have exacerbated the difficulty of preventing human trafficking. The entire Balkan region is facing challenges in combating human trafficking, as underscored in recent reports by the United States State Department.

**Keywords:** *human trafficking, phenomenology, punitive legislation, prevention.*

### **I. HUMAN TRAFFICKING IN THE BALKANS**

Human trafficking, in all its elements, is "transnational" and "organized", appearing in new forms and modalities to operate through various profiles of work. Significantly, it is very discreet, applying the "law" of "silence". Criminal organizations mostly use victims for labor and sexual exploitation but also for other criminal activities, bringing them high profits, criminal power, and authority. Participants in the execution of human trafficking are connected with actors of different forms of organized crime with international reach (drug dealers, arms smugglers) and certain forms of social pathology (prostitution, pedophilia). Thus, it has all the characteristics of other forms of transnational organized crime with which it intertwines.<sup>1</sup> Hence, human trafficking structurally encompasses other forms of crime by using different sectors and spheres of the illegal economy, infiltrating the economic and political-administrative sectors.<sup>2</sup>

In principle, human trafficking is a complex criminal organization, and the hierarchical structure and essential characteristics of organized crime imply that it is often carried out in complicity.<sup>3</sup> One of the most dangerous and least known types of crime is what we denote as "organized", insufficiently scientifically researched, surrounded by secrecy, wealth, and power,

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<sup>1</sup> M. Bošković, *Transnational Organized Crime*, Police Academy, Belgrade, 2003, pp. 161-163.

<sup>2</sup> Z. Stojanović, *Organized Forms of Crime*, Security and Social Self-Protection, Belgrade, No. 5/1990, pp. 62-63.

<sup>3</sup> Milan Škulić, *The Relationship Between Organized Crime in a Criminal Law Sense and Complicity*, Original Scientific Work, Belgrade (2012), p. 81.

with a certain dose of mystique that relies on mass communication means.<sup>4</sup> The term "transnational" is used to emphasize the international element of the criminal group.<sup>5</sup> According to the Convention on Transnational Organised Crime, a criminal act is qualified as "transnational" when it is committed in more than one state; when it is committed in one state, but a significant part of the preparation, direction, and control takes place in another state; when the act is committed in one state, but involves an organized criminal group engaged in criminal activities in more than one state; when the act is committed in one state, but substantial effects occur in another state.<sup>6</sup> Transnational organized crime, although not a direct threat to the state, indirectly jeopardizes its fundamental values, calling into question internal stability.<sup>7</sup> Criminal activities that extend and violate the laws of multiple countries constitute a transnational crime.<sup>8</sup> Human trafficking, as an antisocial phenomenon that crosses national borders, violates human rights established by relevant international documents and has the character of transnational organized crime<sup>9</sup>.

Although we are currently in a period of relative political stability, human trafficking remains a persistent and complex challenge in the region. This is especially true for socially marginalized groups, including Roma communities and street children, as well as unemployed young people and those employed with low incomes.<sup>10</sup> As the main problem of human trafficking appears in the countries of the Western Balkans, the NGO ASTRA from Serbia, together with 6 partners and 13 collaborating NGOs from all over Europe, started the implementation of the project "Balkans ACT (Against Crime of Trafficking) Now". The project was supported by the European Union.<sup>11</sup> Within the project, the Balkan Declaration for the Suppression of Human Trafficking and Exploitation of Human Beings in the region was signed.<sup>12</sup>

## II. COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF PENAL LEGISLATION OF BALKAN COUNTRIES IN CORRELATION WITH MACEDONIAN PENAL LEGISLATION

In Macedonian penal legislation, human trafficking is criminalized as a criminal act under Article 418-a, which covers a wide spectrum of incriminations arising from the purposes of

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<sup>4</sup> Đorđe Ignjatović, *Criminology*, Belgrade (2005), p. 275.

<sup>5</sup> Conklin J. *Criminology*, Boston, 2010, pp. 52-57.

<sup>6</sup> M. Massari, *Transnational Organized Crime Between Myth and Reality: The Social Construction of a Threat in Organized Crime and the Challenge to Democracy*, ed. Allum, F. and Siebert, R. New York, London: Routledge

<sup>7</sup> Andrew Hurrell, *Security in Latin America*, *International Affairs*, 74 (3), 1998.

<sup>8</sup> Williams P., Vlassis D., *Combating Transnational Crime: Concept, Activities and Responses*, 2001, London and Portland: Frank Cass, p. 61.

<sup>9</sup> A. Bossard, *stance of the former Secretary General of Interpol* (in the book: *Transnational Crime and Criminal Law*, Chicago, 1990).

<sup>10</sup> Ž. Berman, D. Bradić, F. Mariol, *Needs Assessment: Human Trafficking in the Western Balkans, Introduction and History*, p. 22, available at:

[https://publications.iom.int/system/files/pdf/ct\\_needsassessment\\_western\\_balkans\\_mak.pdf](https://publications.iom.int/system/files/pdf/ct_needsassessment_western_balkans_mak.pdf) [accessed on: 30.12.2021].

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.astra.rs/balkans-act-crime-trafficking-now/> [accessed on: 20.12.2023].

<sup>12</sup> Balkan Declaration on Combating Human Trafficking and Exploitation of Human Beings, Zagreb (2013), <https://www.astra.rs/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/Balkanska-deklaracija-o-suzbijanju-trgovine-ljudima-i-eksploatacije-ljudskih-bi%C4%87a.pdf> [accessed on: 27.12.2023]. On September 19, 2013, in Zagreb, Croatia, the following non-governmental organizations signed the declaration: ASTRA – Anti-Trafficking Action (Serbia), Partnership for Social Development (Croatia), MFS EMAUS – International Forum of Solidarity (Bosnia and Herzegovina), and Open Gate La Strada (Macedonia). The declaration aims to encourage further development of national, regional, and international cooperation, and promote specific measures and standards, best practices, and mechanisms for combating human trafficking.

execution, such as exploitation through prostitution or other forms of sexual exploitation, pornography, forced labor or servitude, slavery, forced marriages, forced pregnancy, illegal adoption or a similar relationship, or illegal transplantation of parts of the human body, begging, or exploitation for a legally prohibited activity, punishable by imprisonment for not less than four years. Criminal liability is provided for both physical and legal entities. The provision also covers the confiscation of immovable and transport means used for the execution of the act. This provision allows leniency for victims of human trafficking forced to commit a criminal act.<sup>13</sup>

There is also incrimination of the criminal act of trafficking with a child contained in Article 418-d of the Criminal Code. The provision is identical but differentiates the age of the victim, with imprisonment for not less than 8 years for the basic form of the act, while for trafficking it is not less than 4 years, and for a child under 14 years, imprisonment of not less than 10 years. The provision specifies that the user of sexual services from a child under 14 years will be punished with imprisonment of not less than 12 years. It also provides leniency for a child victim forced to commit a criminal act.<sup>14</sup>

The incrimination of human trafficking in Serbian legislation is encapsulated in Article 388 of the Criminal Code of Serbia,<sup>15</sup> The difference is that for the basic form of the act, imprisonment from 3 to 12 years is provided, and for exploitation purposes, forced pregnancy and forced marriages are not included, while in Macedonian qualification, the purpose for adoption is included and imprisonment for not less than 8 years is provided, and in Serbian, it is regulated in a separate Article 389, with imprisonment from 1 to 5 years for taking a minor under 16 years. Serbian law provides for imprisonment of not less than 3 years if the act is committed by a group and not less than 5 years if committed by an organized criminal group, while Macedonian law does not contain such a provision in Articles 418-a and 418-d. The Serbian law includes a provision if the act resulted in serious bodily injury, it shall be punished by imprisonment from 5 to 15 years, and for a minor, not less than 3 years, and if death occurred, not less than 10 years, while Macedonian law does not include such a provision.

Similar to Macedonian penal regulations, human trafficking is criminalized in Montenegrin<sup>16</sup> Legislation in Article 444. The distinction between these two provisions for the basic form of the act is that in the Criminal Code of Montenegro, forced pregnancy is not included in the purposes of the act, and imprisonment from 1 to 10 years is provided, and if the act is committed against a minor, imprisonment of not less than 3 years is provided. Unlike Macedonian law, both Serbian and Montenegrin legislation contains a separate Article 445 for the criminal act of trafficking a minor for adoption, with imprisonment from 1 to 5 years and, if committed in an organized manner, imprisonment of not less than 3 years. Similar to Serbian law, Montenegrin law, Article 444 of the PL<sup>17</sup> Envisages incrimination of the act in case there has been serious bodily injury with imprisonment from 1 to 12 years, and if death occurred, imprisonment of not less than 10 years.

We will also present the distinction between Macedonian and Croatian legislation from an axiological aspect of regulating human trafficking, which consists in the Croatian Criminal

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<sup>13</sup> Criminal Code of the Republic of Macedonia, "Official Gazette of the Republic of Macedonia," nos. 37/96; 80/99; 4/02; 43/03; 19/04; 81/05; 60/06; 73/06; 7/08; 139/08; 114/09; 51/11; 135/11; 185/11; 142/12; 166/12; 55/13; 82/13; 14/14; 27/14; 28/14; 226/15; 248/18.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Criminal Code of the Republic of Serbia, Articles 388 and 389, available at: <https://www.paragraf.rs/propisi/krivicni-zakonik-2019.html> [accessed on: 28.05.2024].

<sup>16</sup> Criminal Code of Montenegro, Articles 444 and 445, available at: <https://www.paragraf.me/propisi-crnegore/krivicni-zakonik-crne-gore.html> [accessed on: 28.05.2024].

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

Code in Article 106<sup>18</sup> "Human Trafficking" does not include forced pregnancy in the purposes of human trafficking, and for the basic form of the act, imprisonment from 1 to 10 years is provided, while Macedonian law does not include the purpose for use in armed conflicts, and for the basic form of the act, imprisonment for not less than 4 years is provided. There is also a difference in the prescribed punishment for trafficking of a child, which is the same for the basic form of the act and this provision is included in Article 106, paragraph 2, while in Macedonian law, it is included in a separate Article 418-d and provides imprisonment for not less than 8 years for the basic form of the criminal act. Hence, Croatian incrimination of human trafficking has a significantly narrower legal formulation encapsulated in only one article containing a total of 7 paragraphs. It is characteristic that in the analyzed penal legislations of Serbia, Montenegro, and Croatia, the incriminations of human trafficking do not contain special provisions for the non-punishment of the victim and the victim-child, as well as the provision that immovables and transport means used for the execution of the act are confiscated, while in Macedonian penal legislation, they are contained.<sup>19</sup>

The Criminal Code of Bosnia and Herzegovina<sup>20</sup> Article 186 criminalizes the act of "International Human Trafficking" with imprisonment of not less than 5 years for the basic form of the act, while in our Criminal Code, it is not less than 4 years, and the purposes of the act are stated only in a general formulation for the exploitation of the person in the state in which they do not reside or are not a citizen. If the act is committed against a child under 18 years, the perpetrator will be punished with imprisonment of not less than 10 years, while in our legislation, for the basic form of child trafficking, imprisonment of not less than 8 years is provided. The purposes of executing the criminal act are listed in a separate paragraph 7, with the difference that the Macedonian Criminal Code does not mention forced pregnancy, forced marriages, or begging for illegal activities. There is also a distinction in the Criminal Code of Bosnia and Herzegovina, which contains a separate Article 186-a "Organized International Human trafficking". If the act is committed by an organized group, imprisonment of not less than 10 years is provided, while the Macedonian Criminal Code does not contain such a provision. In Article 186, paragraph 6 of the Criminal Code of Bosnia and Herzegovina, imprisonment of not less than 10 years or life imprisonment is provided if the act results in serious bodily injury, severe health impairment, or death of any person, while our Criminal Code does not contain such a provision.

Common to all penal legislations of the analyzed Balkan countries regarding human trafficking is that they do not provide for criminal liability of legal entities, unlike the Macedonian Criminal Code, which contains such a provision in Article 418-a, paragraph 6, and Article 418-g, paragraph 9. Despite many similarities, precise legal formulations, and prescribed high prison sentences, there is still a distinction between the compared penal legislations of the Balkan states and the Macedonian legislation. In all the analyzed countries, the national penal legislation is largely synchronized with international standards regarding human trafficking. However, an exponential fact is that its consistent application in criminal practice is lacking in all these countries. This implication stems from the reports of the United States State Department.

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<sup>18</sup> Criminal Code of Croatia, Article 106, available at: <https://mpu.gov.hr/pristup-informacijama-6341/zakoni-i-ostali-propisi/zakoni-i-propisi-6354/kazneno-pravo/kazneni-zakon/6602> [accessed on: 28.05.2024].

<sup>19</sup> Vlado Kambovski and Gordana Lažetić, "Guidelines for the Application of the Principle of Non-Punishment of Victims of Human Trafficking and Child Trafficking" - Definition of a Victim of Human Trafficking and Basis for Non-Punishment, Skopje, February 2020, p. 12.

<sup>20</sup> Criminal Code of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Articles 186 and 186-a, available at: [https://advokat-prnjavorac.com/zakoni/Krivnici\\_zakon\\_BiH.pdf](https://advokat-prnjavorac.com/zakoni/Krivnici_zakon_BiH.pdf) [accessed on: 28.05.2024].

### **III. ETIOLOGY AND PHENOMENOLOGY OF HUMAN TRAFFICKING IN THE BALKANS**

The migrant crisis, poverty, and the COVID-19 pandemic negatively affect the state's efforts to suppress human trafficking, and the instability and lack of a true institutional approach contribute to the rapid increase in the number of people exposed to exploitation by traffickers. Migrants and refugees traveling or being smuggled through Macedonia are vulnerable to human trafficking, especially women and unaccompanied minors. The most common victims are women and girls involved in sexual trafficking and forced labor in restaurants, bars, and nightclubs, exploited for forced begging, and sexual trafficking through forced marriages.

According to the State Department Report, the Government of the Republic of North Macedonia does not fully meet the minimum standards for the elimination of human trafficking but is making significant efforts compared to the previous period. Our country is at the second level. The government has formed an Operational Team for the identification of victims of human trafficking for the official recognition of potential victims and assistance in coordinating the care of victims. Our state adopted the Law on Compensation for Victims of Violent Crime, which provided victims with the right to compensation and increased resources for NGOs to assist and protect victims. The government identified significantly fewer victims, and the Public Prosecutor's Office for Organized Crime and Corruption (OJO GOCC) did not have sufficient resources to address all the cases under its jurisdiction and qualified lighter criminal offenses for the prosecution of traffickers. The government did not allocate financial resources for the mobile teams that identified most of the potential victims. Local and border police do not identify indicators of human trafficking, and the authorities are likely to deport unidentified victims without referring them to appropriate services and protection from re-trafficking. The national rapporteur lacked resources and a legal mandate for systematic monitoring and evaluation of anti-trafficking efforts. It is necessary to vigorously investigate, prosecute, and convict traffickers and impose stricter prison sentences. Allocate sufficient funds for victim protection, mobile identification teams, shelter support for specialized services for adult male victims, and proactive investigation and timely prosecution by the Ministry of Interior and the Public Prosecutor's Office. Increase proactive efforts to identify and recognize victims of commercial sex, migrants, refugees, and other at-risk populations. Ensure the application of the principle of non-punishment of victims. Provide accommodation for potential foreign victims in appropriate conditions and allow them to leave shelters at will with the possibility of alternative housing when the shelter is full. Institutionalize advanced training for judges, prosecutors, and law enforcement. Improve mechanisms for victim compensation, including the implementation of the new Law on Compensation for Victims of Violent Crime. Establish a fund for victim compensation and inform them. The national rapporteur should successfully monitor anti-trafficking efforts.<sup>21</sup>

The disintegration of Yugoslavia, poverty, and the problems faced by the Western Balkan countries during that period were additional reasons that contributed to the dissemination of human trafficking in these areas. The poor economic situation in the 1990s, marked by rising unemployment and changes in social relations, led to greater marginalization of women (low representation of women and their discrimination in the labor market), and increased violence, especially domestic violence. These were some of the main reasons for migration, especially for the female population. However, instead of the expected work, many were forced into

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<sup>21</sup> Available at: <https://www.state.gov/reports/2023-trafficking-in-persons-report/%20%20north%20macedonia> [accessed on: 25.05.2024].

prostitution. In Serbia, baby trafficking is particularly prevalent, and it is considered an origin country.<sup>22</sup> Despite significant steps to synchronize penal legislation with international standards, according to the State Department Report for 2023, Serbia is on the Tier 2 Watch List because it does not fully meet the minimum standards for combating human trafficking, although significant steps are being taken in that direction. The government should make greater efforts to proactively identify victims, including migrants, individuals in commercial sex, refugees, asylum seekers, and unaccompanied children engaged in street begging. Allocate appropriate financial resources for NGOs supporting victims. Implement access to justice measures and victim-focused approaches such as confidentiality protection, legal representation, and prevention of re-traumatization, etc.<sup>23</sup>.

At the beginning of the 1990s, Montenegro was mainly a destination for human trafficking due to the increasingly poor economic situation. It easily transformed into a transit country for victims of human trafficking. Sexual exploitation and forced labor are some of the most prevalent forms of human trafficking. When it comes to child trafficking, most commonly, children of Roma nationality appear, mainly from environments where discriminatory attitudes towards the female gender are deeply rooted, reflecting on the labor market. According to the report, Montenegro is on the Tier 2 Watch List, which means it does not fully meet the minimum standards for combating human trafficking but is making significant efforts to do so. These efforts include prosecuting more defendants and identifying more victims. The government adopted the National Action Plan for 2022, and governmental coordinating bodies meet regularly. However, the government has not shown overall increased efforts compared to the previous reporting period, even considering the impact of COVID-19, if any. The government should provide victim protection, including specialized accommodation, assistance, and support for victims. Vigorously investigate and prosecute criminal acts of human trafficking and convict traffickers using Article 444 of the Criminal Code instead of lesser offenses, including providing adequate personnel and specialization for the police. Allocate sufficient funds, establish standards and guidelines for victim protection, etc.<sup>24</sup>

Bosnia and Herzegovina is designated as a country where internal human trafficking is dominant, and the victims are mainly domestic citizens. This means that human trafficking continues to occupy a significant place in the criminal practice of this country. The overall situation contributes to generating a politically unstable and economically difficult situation in the country, thus a mild penal policy before judicial institutions. According to the already mentioned report, Bosnia and Herzegovina is on the Tier 2 Watch List because it does not fully meet the minimum standards for combating human trafficking but makes significant efforts to do so. The State Prosecutor's Office added a specialized prosecutor and investigator to the Department for Combating Human Trafficking and Illegal Migration, and the government allocated financial resources to seven shelters operated by NGOs. With financial and technical assistance from NGOs, the government formed five additional mobile teams to identify vulnerable populations and allocated funds to three local NGOs to raise awareness of combating human trafficking. The government did not have proactive identification efforts, resulting in victims sometimes being punished for illegal actions committed as a direct result of trafficking, especially with misdemeanor charges for petty crimes or begging. Potential cases of forced child begging and forced labor were not investigated. Authorities should vigorously

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<sup>22</sup> Misa Ristic, BORN TO DISAPPEAR – Baby Trafficking in Serbia, <https://www.korisanaknjiga.com/rodjeni-da-nestanu-trgovina-bebama-u-srbiji-naslov-47646> [accessed on: 27.12.2021].

<sup>23</sup> Available at: <https://www.state.gov/reports/2023-trafficking-in-persons-report/%20serbia> [accessed on: 25.05.2024].

<sup>24</sup> Available at: <https://www.state.gov/reports/2023-trafficking-in-persons-report/%20%20montenegro> [accessed at: 20.12.2023].

investigate, prosecute, and convict traffickers with stricter prison sentences, train specialized teams for the identification and referral of victims, especially for migrants, refugees, asylum seekers, and members of the Roma community, and apply the principle of non-punishment of victims for illegal actions committed as a result of trafficking.<sup>25</sup>

In recent years, Croatia has been a destination and transit country for women and children for sexual exploitation and men, women, and children for forced labor, mainly from the Balkans and Central Europe. Namely, the policy for addressing the problem of human trafficking focuses on the crime itself, and efforts to care for victims follow only after the crime and harm.<sup>26</sup> According to the already mentioned report, Croatia is in Tier 2 because it does not fully meet the minimum standards for eliminating human trafficking. However, it is making significant efforts, including convicting more traffickers and identifying more victims, and unlike previous years, judges imposed prison sentences on all convicted traffickers. The government adopted a new Criminal Code that enabled victims to testify remotely and be accommodated in state-funded shelters. Authorities should vigorously investigate, prosecute, and convict traffickers and impose higher prison sentences. Ensure the application of the principle of non-punishment of victims, training for prosecutors on victims' rights and approaches, etc.<sup>27</sup>

The public's focus of attention highlights relevant information, such as unofficial scientific data, about the current situation in our country, the wider Balkan region, and Europe, which indicates the prevalence of this type of crime. In this context, we will mention an article from 2020, published in the daily newspaper Nova Makedonija, titled "Child Traffickers Follow the Balkan Migrant Route," which states: "On the path of hope for a better future, 10,000 migrant children have disappeared after arriving in Europe, despite being officially registered. Many of the children were unaccompanied and traveled through the Balkan migration route."<sup>28</sup>

#### IV. CONCLUSION

For the analyzed Balkan countries, the assessment is that they do not fully meet the standards of the U.S. Victims of Trafficking and Violence Protection Act for the elimination of human trafficking, although significant efforts are being made on this issue. The impact of COVID-19 is present but not decisive from an axiological aspect of the ranking of these countries on the Tier 2 Watch List according to the State Department report. The influence of the pandemic is not confirmed, conditionally and hypothetically noted, but numerous shortcomings in the proactive role of the authorities in the fight against human trafficking persist. However, it implies causality with the pandemic crisis and the global economic crisis. Based on the observation of human trafficking in the Balkans, we conclude that it is deeply rooted in many sectors of society, present in the Balkans from where it disseminates, and it is difficult to find a method of action towards its suppression. The entire Balkans are in an unenviable position in the fight against human trafficking internationally.

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<sup>25</sup> Available at: <https://www.state.gov/reports/2023-trafficking-in-persons-report/%20%20%20%20%20bosnia%20and%20herzegovina> [accessed at: 25.05.2024].

<sup>26</sup> *Trgovina ljudima: ne vjerovati oglasima za posao koji zvuči predobro*, available at: <https://vijesti.hrt.hr/643072/trgovina-ljudima-ne-vjerovati-oglasima-za-posao-koji-zvuci-predobro> [accessed at: 27.12.2023]; M. Miloshevska, op.cit., p. 57 and 58.

<sup>27</sup> Available at: <https://www.state.gov/reports/2023-trafficking-in-persons-report/%20croatia> [accessed at: 25.05.2024].

<sup>28</sup> Daily newspaper Nova Makedonija, "Child Traffickers Follow the Balkan Migrant Route," October 8, 2020, p. 7.

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