

Anxiety Over Growing Trade of Women in Eastern Europe

By Ed Holtd

BRATISLAVA—Trade in women through Slovakia has become a growing problem, according to the European Parliament, Slovak police and concerned groups.

The national police force estimates that between 1,500 to 2,000 Slovak women and young girls head abroad into prostitution dens every year. Between 10 and 20 cases of crime connected with illegal human trafficking are dealt with by the Slovak police each year, just under the 30 cases worked on by police in Vienna.

But that is just one-tenth of the cases in Slovakia that go unreported, according to groups monitoring the problem. The International Organisation for Migration (IOM) says that the police annually crack less than 10 percent of the total number of trades in women.

The prostitution underworld has thrived in Europe since the Iron Curtain fell in 1989, according to some independent bodies. Each year, at least 500,000 women from former Eastern bloc countries are trafficked as prostituted women into Western Europe, drawing millions of dollars for the gangs behind the sales, says the European Commission's European Forum

for Urban Safety. The United Nations estimates that human trafficking as a business generates gross earnings of US\$5 to 7 billion annually.

Until recently, Slovakia was seen as a transit stop for many women brought from Eastern Europe and even Asian states by gangs on their way to cities like Vienna. Now it has become a country of origin for trade in women, according to the European Parliament and Slovak police.

Vienna, only 60 kilometres from the Slovak capital, Bratislava, is a popular destination for many prostituted women. Dafne, a Slovak NGO, estimates that in the Austrian capital alone, every second prostituted woman is from the former Eastern bloc. Dafne helps Slovak prostituted women, who have been sold into prostitution abroad and who were lucky enough to return home, reintegrate into Slovak society.

Dafne also claims that there are at least 300 Slovaks working as prostituted women in France, and that more than 80 percent of prostituted women in Germany are from Eastern Europe.

The problem has drawn the attention of senior European bodies. A European Parliament resolution last 5 September warned that Slovakia's failure to curb the illegal trade of

women could jeopardise its chances of gaining entry into the EU in 2004.

"The European Parliament points out that Slovakia is a country of origin and transit for widespread trafficking of women, although the number of cases detected by authorities is low," the resolution read. "The European Parliament urges the Slovak government to take forceful measures to combat human trafficking and to ensure that victims and witnesses are guaranteed protection."

But while the EP has criticised Slovakia for not combating the trade, the trafficking of women has a cross-border dimension, making it harder for police forces to crush the criminal activities.

Studies in Slovakia carried out by Germany's Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (FES) pinpoint gangs supplying women to be traded across Slovakia as consisting "characteristically of citizens from the former Yugoslavia, Germany, Russia, Ukraine, Albania, Italy and Poland."

International organisations monitoring the trade, such as the UN, point to various routes for organised crime gangs to transport women into Western Europe. Some run from Asia through Russia, from across the

Ukraine and Poland, and from Russia and the Balkan states up to Slovakia. All, however, end up in the West.

Stefan Omasta, head of the violent crime department of Slovakia's Police Force Presidium, a top police body, estimates that every year his men investigate 10 to 20 cases of trade in women; 16 were investigated in 2000.

Omasta confirmed that while the gangs transporting women across Slovakia have partner operations in other countries in the region bringing women into Slovakia, there are some gangs now working directly from Slovakia as direct suppliers.

The trafficking of women has increasingly become a crime of choice among syndicates because "gangs are realising that unlike drugs or weapons, women are a reusable commodity," says an expert in the field.

Many Slovak women, along with their East European counterparts, are duped into prostitution abroad, says Marian Kolencik of Dafne. Advertisements offering work as models, dancers, barmaids and au-pairs, often tempt poor women from Eastern European nations with promises of rich salaries that can deliver their families out of poverty.

"For eastern Europe and Slovakia typically, it is common that young women answer ads in papers and 'friendship' columns for jobs offering 'good pay' and 'work' as models and

barmaids," says Kolencik. "In reality, what happens is that the people who recruit them sell them abroad, take away their passports and force them into prostitution." Many are subjected to a life of brutality and servitude by those who have brought them to the West.

Experts on human trafficking say that the illegal trade in women is a huge problem, but one that is exacerbated by the little protection some women are given in countries. In Slovakia, as in other states across eastern Europe, violence against women is an issue that is largely hushed up.

"There are real problems in getting women to come forward and report this. They're just too scared often. Prosecution is a huge issue," said one expert.

"There are often cases where a woman is forced into prostitution after a compromising video is made of her as she is raped. A woman blackmailed in this way realises that the blackmailers can get in touch with her family, which makes her even more reluctant to testify against traders," reads an FES Foundation report.

Some that do report what has happened to them also fall back into crime as the adjustment back to normal life becomes hard to bear. According to the Dafne organisation, one Slovak who did return home was immediately ostracised by her friends and fell into drug addiction, later dying

from an overdose.

International police forces and other organisations are beginning to work on countering the problem of trade in women, though. Police across Europe are working to create an international database to locate victims in different countries, and to complete and process investigations more quickly.

The United Nations' Centre for International Crime Prevention (CICP)—an anti-crime organisation set up by the UN with a special mandate to focus on combating transnational organised crime, corruption and illicit trafficking in human beings—in 1999 launched its "Global Programme Against Trafficking in Human Beings."

The CICP has tried to develop databases on routes, structures, and modalities used by traffickers as well as improve law enforcement and cooperation between police and anti-crime bodies at national and international levels.

It has also tried to promote awareness within the law enforcement and judicial communities and among the population at large, while improving protection and support system for victims and witnesses of trading. The results of the programme are expected to be announced at a global forum some time next year.

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