

## **Child trafficking among vulnerable Roma communities – evidence from Bulgaria**

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### **Background**

Trafficking in persons is a lucrative crime and a gross human rights violation, which affects all EU Member States. Trafficking in children merits special attention of anti-trafficking efforts as children are especially vulnerable to trafficking, re-trafficking and victimisation<sup>1</sup>. Investigation, protection and prevention measures for child trafficking are especially needed as the exploitation of children and violation of their rights have dramatic negative effects on children and society as a whole.

While there is some empirical evidence on child trafficking for the purpose of sexual exploitation, other forms of trafficking have not drawn much attention of researchers, academics and policy makers in Bulgaria and in EU as a whole. This means that victims of exploitation fall outside the radar of identification and thus cannot access the available assistance. Having this in mind, a consortium of seven partner organisations sought to explore three specific under-researched forms of child trafficking in order to contribute to the knowledge on how and why children fall prey to exploitation within the CONFRONT project<sup>2</sup>. The three forms studied are child trafficking for the purpose of begging exploitation, child trafficking for the purpose of pick-pocketing and child trafficking for the purpose of sexual exploitation of boys.

Expert opinions and previous studies reveal a significant overrepresentation of Roma children among the victims of trafficking for begging and pick-pocketing. The overrepresentation of Roma among trafficking victims calls for specific attention to be devoted to the vulnerabilities of Roma persons to child trafficking, as well as to the mechanisms of recruitment and exploitation of Roma children from vulnerable Roma communities. Against the background of limited data and high sensitivity of the topic of trafficking in persons among Roma as a group of risk, participatory research methods are best fitted to gather knowledge on the phenomenon of child trafficking. Participatory research, ensuring that Roma experts take part in the formulation and conduct of qualitative research, minimise the risk of stigmatisation of Roma communities by ensuring sensitivity of the research instruments and also by providing a highly contextualized analysis. Last but not least, participatory methods are also useful in bringing knowledge back to the communities on how they can protect themselves from trafficking and exploitation.

### **Factors of vulnerability**

There are no specific culturally ingrained practices that make Roma vulnerable to trafficking. Rather, socio-economic factors such as poverty, large-scale unemployment and low levels of education, resulting from a history of social exclusion of the Roma, make the minority group especially vulnerable to trafficking. In segregated and impoverished environments the risk of criminalisation is substantially higher.

Particular **traditional practices** encountered within the Roma communities, such as early marriage, child labour and mobility, may also render children more vulnerable to trafficking. Such practices may make parents and caregivers less aware of the risks and the problems when children are expected to work to contribute to the family income instead of regularly attending school. Entrusting a child to a relative, friend or acquaintance who promises to find him/her work, may appear

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<sup>1</sup> A study by the International Organization for Migration (IOM) from 2010 shows that of a 79 sample re-trafficking cases, 84 per cent involved children or young adults under 25 years old. IOM, *The Causes and Consequences of Re-trafficking: Evidence from the IOM Human Trafficking Database*, 2010.

<sup>2</sup> Center for the Study of Democracy (BG), Ludwig Boltzmann Institute for Human Rights (AT), Censis (IT), Hellenic Foundation for European and Foreign Policy (EL), Center for Policy Studies at Central European University (HU), People in Need (SK) and Soros Foundation Romania.

acceptable to parents who are unaware of the actual conditions that will be encountered in a foreign country. In addition, reliance on loan sharks for money can be employed as recruitment strategies for child trafficking. The low level of education of parents and children makes them especially vulnerable to deception.

Other factors, such as **history of physical and sexual abuse, growing up in state institutions and previous involvement in prostitution** also increase the chance of children falling prey to trafficking exploitation. In Bulgaria, a report based on testimonies of trafficking victims found that 9 out of 26 trafficked persons reported having suffered domestic violence and sexual abuse at the hands of parents, grandparents, husbands and boyfriends prior to their trafficking.

### **Child trafficking for begging**

Although information from previous investigations is limited and cases involving child victims are outdated, it reveals the **lucrative nature of child begging activities**, which makes them appealing to organized criminal groups. Moreover, uncovered cases of child trafficking for begging reveals the **vulnerability of impoverished Roma families to exploitation** through recruitment through bonded labour. Expert assessments point out that more **than 90% of the children begging on the streets of EU countries are of Roma origin**. Service provider in Austria alerts that around 20 % of begging could be related to a criminal network and could be considered as child trafficking.

The limited caseload of identified victims of child trafficking for begging in recent years can be correlated with the **increased involvement of parents and relatives** in the organisation of begging activities across the countries studies. The tendency of involvement of parents in begging activities leaves confusion among authorities as to whether exploitation exists and whether cases could be considered as child trafficking. Two main typologies of begging children can be delineated – children between 0-5 years old, begging with an adult (usually a mother), and children aged between 5-18 begging alone, in groups, or accompanying an adult. The Bulgarian children, repatriated for begging in 2013, were predominantly in the age group between 8 and 16, with only 3 cases of children aged between 16 and 18. As older children are less successful in begging, it is less frequent for them to be involved in such activities. The exception to this rule is **children with disabilities**, who are considered among the „more successful” groups for begging regardless of the age group. In many cases, children begging on the streets have strong loyalty and emotional attachment to their families, even if they are involved in these activities under their control. This challenges significantly any efforts for identification of exploitation, as children may not consider themselves victims.

### **Child trafficking for pick-pocketing**

In Bulgaria, service providers and experts signal that most child victims of trafficking for pick-pocketing originate from one Roma subgroup. According to service providers, child victims of trafficking for pick-pocketing are from well-off families, are literate and have finished some degree of education. As illustrated also in the State Agency of Child Protection’s data, children are most often girls, aged 13-18 years old. Children trafficked for pick-pocketing are **first exploited for such activities within the countries, after which they are transported abroad**. Elements of a “**rotation system**” have been observed, whereas children remain in one place/country only for a short period of time, and once they are registered by the authorities, the children are transferred immediately to

another country. In Bulgaria, profits are returned to the family operating a pick-pocketing network, thus contributing to considerable wealth of some of the “clans”<sup>3</sup> involved in pick-pocketing.

Children became victims of trafficking as the parents had handed them over to so-called “uncles” to whom they were required to bring the proceeds of their activities each day. Children assisted at the Drehscheibe shelter in Vienna, who had been caught committing pick-pocketing, are almost entirely of Roma origin and mostly girls. The girls would be forced to make up to 350 Euro a day. If they do not deliver, they have to experience violence or may be forced into prostitution. Significant language barriers further add to vulnerabilities of those children, making reaching-out for assistance and building trust by service providers more difficult.

In many cases, pick-pocketing is organised within extended families of closed communities, which diminishes significantly opportunities to devise prevention actions and to address the issue with a bottom-up community approach. A typical **recruitment strategy** for children victims of pick-pocketing is **early marriage** into a family operating a pick-pocketing network. Other strategies employed are similar to the recruitment of children for begging and may involve “bonded labour” whereas the child is used to return a debt by a family to a member of criminal network.

### **Child trafficking for the sexual exploitation of boys and transgender persons**

While victim caseloads and expert opinions based on assisted child victims of trafficking for begging and pick-pocketing allow some empirical discussion on the **profiles of the children** involved, there is no such reference point for determining the profile of boys, trafficked for sexual exploitation. Statistical evidence was provided in Bulgaria, where court decisions reveal that the period 2011-2013 there were between 10 and 14 boy victims of trafficking for sexual exploitation each year. This constitutes about one fifth of the victims of sexual exploitation. Nevertheless, the **victims identified in criminal proceedings had not been referred to assistance**. Similarly, in Romania few cases of boys were officially registered as victims of sexual exploitation in recent years. Eight cases of boy victims of trafficking were recorded by the Romanian authorities in 2012 and 14 were registered in 2010. Previous studies in Bulgaria reveal a growing number of Roma transgender persons selling sexual services on the street<sup>4</sup>. This phenomenon is attributed to the relative lack of stigma towards same sex sexual activities within the Roma communities studied and were also explained by a pattern of impoverished men engaging in sex for money<sup>5</sup>. According to a report on HIV and sex work, most of the transgender sex workers are transvestites of Roma origin, working in hidden environments, due to the stigma attached to male prostitution. Roma boys enter prostitution as minors and some of them are HIV positive and suffer heroin addiction<sup>6</sup>. The “lover boy” method used to recruit female victims was also applied to approach boys and transgender persons, victims of sexual exploitation. The boys and transgender persons are approached by a known person with promises for protection, luxury items and personal wellbeing are used to convince victims to travel abroad. A significant factor of vulnerability to sexual exploitation of boys detected in all countries of origins is growing up in state care. The lack of adequate care and attention toward children growing up in so called “institutions” or “orphanages” – a legacy of the communist organised system for children deprived of parental care – leads to development of deviant and high risk behaviour at an early age.

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<sup>3</sup> The term “clan” is used in throughout the report to signify the perceptions of respondents of Roma families and extended families belonging to the Kardarashi subgroup.

<sup>4</sup> Amir Khanian, Yuri, Kelly, Jeffrey [...], and Khoursine, Roman. (2013) High-Risk Sexual Behavior, HIV/STD Prevalence, and Risk Predictors in the Social Networks of Young Roma (Gypsy) Men in Bulgaria

<sup>5</sup> TAMPEP Bulgaria, National report on HIV and sex work 2007

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

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