About the Bulgarian National Human Trafficking Hotline

The Bulgarian National Human Trafficking Hotline (‘The Hotline’) is a dedicated service that supports victims of human trafficking and provides advice and assistance on human trafficking issues. A21 Bulgaria officially launched the Hotline in 2015 in partnership with the National Commission for Combatting Trafficking in Human Beings. It is the only hotline in Bulgaria designated to handle solely human trafficking reports that are available to receive enquiries 24 hours a day, seven days a week. The Hotline is accessible from every European Union Member State, with a tele-interpretation service which enables call specialists to receive calls in over 200 languages. As Bulgaria is predominantly a source country,1 the majority of reports to the Hotline regard potential victims of trafficking located outside of Bulgaria. Therefore, the Hotline works in close partnership with national and European institutions to ensure rapid management of every report received.

‘Thank you for your good work, I appreciate your concern and the way you communicate with the Bulgarians with a careful approach. I am glad to have found you, I feel safer with you.’
—A Hotline Caller

Overview of Data

In 2021, the Bulgarian National Human Trafficking Hotline received 791 contacts, with the vast majority at 619 constituting human trafficking related contacts. The number of reports received online, such as through the dedicated Hotline website (www.080020100.bg), was 194% higher in 2021 than the previous year. This growth in digital reports is attributed to the general public’s increased ease in utilising online communication, especially in response to pandemic restrictions.

COVID-19 continued to impact the work of A21 Bulgaria in 2021. Border restrictions frequently changed as infection rates fluctuated, often causing difficulties for the Hotline call specialists when organising repatriations for victims of trafficking from Western Europe. Furthermore, almost all victims seeking repatriation back to Bulgaria were not vaccinated. As a result, upon their return to Bulgaria, these survivors were quarantined for several days and required to test negative for COVID-19 before continuing forth to any onward travel or placement in a care facility. For many sur-

Executive Summary

• The Hotline received a total of 791 CONTACTS

• The Hotline identified and assisted 90 VICTIMS of trafficking

• The majority of victims reported to the Hotline were FEMALE (57.8%)

• There were SIX TIMES MORE MALE VICTIMS of trafficking reported in 2021 compared to 2020

• The majority of victims reported to the Hotline were ADULTS (81.1%)

• The Hotline facilitated the repatriation of 53.3% of the victims identified from WESTERN EUROPE back to Bulgaria

• LABOUR EXPLOITATION was the main type of trafficking reported to the Hotline (54.4%)

• The most common method of control reported to the Hotline was THREATS (50%)

• The Hotline team submitted 28 HUMAN TRAFFICKING REPORTS to the police

• The Hotline team conducted 100 SCREENING INTERVIEWS with potential victims of human trafficking

‘Contacts’ to the Hotline comprise all incoming enquiries to the Hotline through any manner, including but not limited to phone calls, emails, SMS messages and online web submissions. These enquiries include all reports on potential human trafficking, various crimes both related and unrelated to human trafficking, and queries about human trafficking generally, as well as requests for various types of assistance related to human trafficking, such as safety planning or job vetting.

‘Reports’ only include contacts to the Hotline relating to a potential human trafficking situation.

The statistics below are exclusively drawn from substantive contacts made to the Hotline from January - December 2021 concerning human trafficking matters. This report is not a reflection of all substantive calls to the Hotline which may include calls related to other high risk crimes, labour exploitation and other non-trafficking issues.

Disaggregated data has been collected on each individual case on descriptive factors including gender, age, type of trafficking, methods of control and recruitment methods. The below data is based on the cases where the information was available. In the majority of cases, the call specialists were unable to glean full or specific details about the case. Therefore the data below is based on cases where the specified information was made available.

vivors of human trafficking, isolation can be re-traumatising as quarantine can trigger feelings of having restricted freedom of movement; thus, the process of repatriation and reintegration for survivors remained challenging in many areas, including psychological well-being, due to continuing COVID-19 requirements in 2021.

Caller Demographics
Since its inception in 2015, the Hotline has received reports from potential victims, concerned friends or family members, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), law enforcement partners, and the general public. In 2021, the largest caller demographic was friends or relatives of potential victims (37.2%). Seventeen percent of contacts came from the potential victim directly.

The majority of calls originated from outside of Bulgaria, with 30% of these international calls coming from Germany. The Hotline also received reports from numerous other countries, including the Netherlands, Austria, Sweden, and the United Kingdom.

Victim Demographics
In 2021, A21 Bulgaria successfully identified and assisted 90 victims of human trafficking in response to reports made to the Hotline. A21 then facilitated the repatriation of 48 of these identified victims from Western Europe to Bulgaria.

The Hotline Collaborates with the Bulgarian Ministry of Foreign Affairs to Assist in the Successful Recovery and Repatriation of 36 Bulgarian Survivors of Agricultural Trafficking
The Consular Relations Directorate at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs contacted the Hotline to ask for assistance for over 30 Bulgarian victims of trafficking discovered in Western Europe. Families from a Northern Bulgarian village had received an offer for seasonal work in the agriculture sector in Western Europe. In response, the Bulgarians all boarded a bus and travelled across multiple European borders in pursuit of this potential employment opportunity. Upon their arrival, these individuals were sent into the forest to pick berries without being provided the promised shelter, food or payment. A passer-by noticed the families’ exploitative living conditions and called the police. The Hotline team assisted in screening the 36 individuals, identifying them as victims of trafficking and ultimately organising their return to Bulgaria. As it was not possible to transport such a large group from a remote area by plane, the Hotline organised a bus to facilitate the repatriation of the survivors back to Bulgaria. Additionally, the Hotline team coordinated the accompaniment of a medical specialist to facilitate the PCR testing required for their re-entry into Bulgaria. This repatriation exemplifies how governments and NGOs can utilise their strengths collectively, to ensure the safe recovery of trafficking victims.
Age and Gender
The Hotline received over four times more cases with identified adults than minors. It is not unusual for the A21 Hotline to receive fewer calls concerning minors because callers should report these cases to the State Agency for Child Protection (SACP) Hotline. Interestingly though, the A21 Hotline received a significant increase (466%) in calls and contacts about minors in 2021 from 2020. In all cases involving trafficking of minors, the Hotline works in conjunction with the SACP to facilitate repatriation of minors back to Bulgaria and ultimately into the care of SACP.

During 2021, the Hotline observed a trend whereby parents of Bulgarian female minors of ethnic Roma origin appeared to be trafficking their daughters to Western Europe. In this phenomenon, families would sell a minor as a ‘bride’ to a wealthier ethnically Roma family, originally from Bulgaria but currently residing in a Western European nation, such as the United Kingdom or Germany, for financial gain. Underage marriages are common, and the parents, in some instances, even sign over their power of attorney to allow the child to travel with this more wealthy family. This puts the child at risk of being trafficked for sexual exploitation or domestic servitude.

Since 2020, the Hotline has observed an increase in the percentage of identified male victims of trafficking. While the majority of victims reported to the Hotline in 2021 were female, the percentage decreased significantly from 2020. In 2020, almost all reported victims were female, constituting 93.1% of the cases reported to the Hotline, whereas in 2021, females accounted only for 57.8% reports. In 2021, men accounted for almost half of the victims of trafficking identified by the Hotline in Bulgaria, which is a significant increase. Men may have become more open to self-reporting labour exploitation, even historical exploitation.

The Hotline surmises that these male victims and potential victims may have been encouraged by awareness campaigns sponsored by the Hotline in certain Facebook groups focused on potential employment opportunities targeted at Bulgarians, such as ‘jobs in Germany’, ‘jobs for people without language requirements in the Netherlands’, and the like. Many of the participants in these Facebook groups are Bulgarian men looking for work abroad or already living and working abroad. Callers to the Hotline confirmed their awareness of the Hotline’s existence and services through the Hotline’s Facebook advertisements.

Victim Nationality
Ninety-seven percent of victims reported to the Hotline were Bulgarian nationals. Over half of these reported victims were Bulgarian nationals of ethnic Roma origin, constituting 54.4% of all human trafficking-related cases received by the Hotline.

These figures are not unusual as the ethnic Roma are the most vulnerable ethnic group in Bulgaria. Interestingly though, the Hotline did receive more reports of trafficking of non-Roma Bulgarian nationals in 2021 (42.2%) than the previous year (34.5%).

Exploitation Type
In 2021, the Hotline observed a significant increase in the number of trafficking victims of labour exploitation reported to the Hotline. As sexual exploitation typically accounts for most reported cases, this increase in labour exploitation represents a remarkable shift.

While the reason for the increase is not definitive, A21 attributes the increase in any reports of labour exploitation to the Hotline as a direct result of the ongoing promotion of the Hotline on social media in online groups which offer jobs abroad. Due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, widespread unemployment increased in Bulgaria throughout the past two years, exacerbating job seekers’ vulnerabilities to labour exploitation.
exploitation. Fraudulent job postings are appealing to those in vulnerable circumstances as they may require no experience, have no language requirements, but offer a large salary. Typically, these false advertisements require travel abroad and impose debt bondage on the applicant upon arrival, requiring the individual to pay back the ‘debt’ of their travel to, and accommodation for, the ‘job.’ False job opportunities may be in agriculture, factories, construction, or caring for the elderly. Individuals who seek temporary jobs abroad are especially vulnerable to exploitation, particularly when unaware of human trafficking.

Information provided to the Hotline supported that the COVID-19 pandemic caused sexual exploitation to become an even more hidden and consequently underreported crime. According to reports to the Hotline, when COVID-19 caused the closure of brothels in some European countries, victims were commercially sexually exploited in private homes and Airbnbs. Later, when restrictions eased, they were trafficked in hotel rooms. During restrictions, victims were rarely exploited in clubs, brothels or off the street, but mainly advertised online.

Methods of Control

Human traffickers use complex control methods to manipulate and force victims into staying in an exploitative situation. The methods of control reported here include threats, isolation, emotional, physical, sexual, and economic abuse, and the withholding or destruction of personal identification documentation.

Data from reports to the Hotline in 2021 support the use of threats as the most common primary method of control, involved in 50% of the cases reported to the Hotline, particularly in cases of labour exploitation. Traffickers threaten to harm the victim, their family members, or other loved ones to extract compliance from the victim. In many cases reported to the Hotline, the trafficker will know the location or phone number of the victim’s family. Other reported methods of control are economic, physical, sexual, and emotional abuse and isolation. Based on data received through the Hotline, traffickers rarely utilise a singular method of control, but rather employ a complex variety of different methods to coerce and manipulate victims.

In 8.9% of cases, the primary method of control was withholding or destroying the victim’s legal documents. Without official identification, victims can be prevented from obtaining safe employment, getting their own residence, or travelling freely, forcing a dependency on the trafficker. As previously noted, the Hotline routinely assists Bulgarian trafficking victims exploited outside of Bulgaria. Often, by the time these victims have reached out for assistance, they no longer have their official documents to enable their travel back to Bulgaria. In these instances, A21 will work with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to obtain a temporary, one-month passport for the individual to travel to safety.

Recruitment Methods

Human traffickers use recruitment tactics that deceive and coerce victims into exploitative situations. According to Hotline data, the leading recruitment method utilised by perpetrators in 2021 was through false job opportunities, as reported in 63.3% of cases. This figure is consistent with previous reports from Bulgaria, where the socio-economic status of many is often lower than the rest of the European Union, particularly for the ethnic Roma community. After false job opportunities, Hotline data identified the ‘loverboy’ method as the next main type of recruitment scheme, accounting for the main recruitment tactic in 20% of cases. In ‘loverboy’ schemes, traffickers groom and manipulate victims into a false romantic relationship in order to exploit them. The Hotline also noticed the increased use of online grooming as traffickers exploited the internet as a recruitment tool.

Other recruitment methods reported to the Hotline include the promise of a better life (8.9%) and being sold by family members (4.4%). Other unreported unknown tactics could also be used as Hotline data does not capture the whole picture of this hidden crime.

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1 Threats include threats of harm to the victim, the victim’s family or other individuals; to the victim’s reputation; or to report the victim to a government authority.
2 Isolation may include physical isolation or deprivation of liberty, denying access to medical support, surveillance or control of the victim in public, isolating the victim by moving the victim frequently from place to place.
3 Economic abuse includes situations of debt bondage or where traffickers limit the finances of the victim either in whole or in part.
The Hotline Successfully Assists in the Repatriation of 9 Survivors of Trafficking from Northern Ireland to Bulgaria

The Hotline received a call from a Northern Irish organisation asking for assistance in repatriating nine Bulgarian human trafficking survivors. A trafficker had used social media (Facebook) to deceive the men with a false job, offering work on a farm in Northern Ireland. The trafficker promised a good weekly wage, accommodation, and transportation. However, the men were charged a debt for their travel expenses that was fifteen times higher than the actual cost of the ticket. Additionally, the trafficker withheld their identification documents and debit cards. The men were only paid £30 per week and worked between 4-16 hours a day. The living conditions were poor, and the trafficker threatened them every day. After five months, one of the victims seized the opportunity to contact the local police. The police successfully conducted a raid and assisted the Bulgarian victims to safety. Despite this successful raid and extraction, the trafficker continued to threaten the victims and their families via phone calls. The survivors were temporarily supported by an organisation helping migrants in Northern Ireland but urgently needed to return to Bulgaria. The Bulgarian Embassy in Northern Ireland was informed about the case, and a few days later, the Hotline safely repatriated the survivors back to Bulgaria, where they entered A21’s Aftercare Program. An investigation is currently ongoing.

As a service situated to support those in exploitative situations, the Bulgarian National Human Trafficking Hotline is at the forefront of understanding emerging human trafficking trends in Bulgaria and the European Union. Each year the Hotline commits to expanding its networks and partners across Bulgaria to ensure that an accurate scope of trafficking is reflected in the data collected. The Hotline welcomes new partners interested in counter human trafficking efforts in Bulgaria. Partnerships are vital not only to provide services to identified trafficking survivors and communities requesting training, but also to increase awareness about the services provided by the Hotline across Bulgaria.

The observations contained in this report are limited to information communicated to the Bulgarian National Human Trafficking Hotline during the reporting period. Nothing arising from the data should be interpreted as showing the full extent or prevalence of human trafficking in Bulgaria.