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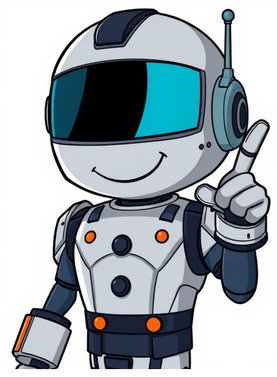

Human Trafficking and War Has the recent conflict between Ukraine and Russia caused an increase of human trafficking within Ukrainian residents fleeing war? This post aims to provide a discussion on how local organisations and volunteers are protecting vulnerable citizens. ###ENDARTICLEVolunteers play vital role in protecting vulnerable refugees, preventing human trafficking. Ambassador Madina Jarbussynova raises awareness on human trafficking in Ukraine, working with IDPs and the SMM to combat the issue. The history of slavery is a complex and multifaceted one that spans across various regions and cultures. From ancient civilizations to modern-day societies, slavery has taken many forms, including the Khazar slave trade, Ottoman Empire's Avret Pazarları, and the Trans-Saharan slave trade. ###ARTICLETrafficking in Ukraine: A Complex Issue with Limited Progress Ukraine is a country where various forms of labor trafficking and commercial sexual exploitation are prevalent. The majority of Ukrainian victims were men who were exploited in Russia, the Czech Republic, and Poland, primarily as construction laborers, sailors, and factory and agriculture workers. The government's efforts to combat human trafficking in Ukraine have yielded mixed results. Foreign and domestic victims of trafficking receive various forms of support, including shelter, medical care, and job placement assistance. However, the national government has not increased funding for victim services, leading to uneven support from local governments. The Kherson regional government has allocated a significant amount of funds for anti-trafficking activities, but some shelters are on the verge of being closed due to lack of support. In 2007, the government launched a public service campaign aimed at raising awareness about human trafficking, and since then, they have made progress in preventing trafficking. The Ministry of Interior has worked with Interpol to prevent known child sex tourism offenders from entering Ukraine. Additionally, organizations like NASHI have established vocational schools and shelters for victims of human trafficking. Despite these efforts, there are concerns that the government is not doing enough to protect its citizens. Many victims are still reluctant to testify against their traffickers due to a weak witness protection system and bias against sex trafficking victims. Courts in the Ivano-Frankivsk region have implemented a pilot program to develop a modern witness protection system, but more needs to be done. The government has also been criticized for not providing foreign victims with legal alternatives to removal to countries where they may face hardship or retribution. The lack of support for these individuals is a pressing concern. The UNHCR has warned that national authorities need to do more to tackle human trafficking and mitigate risks, particularly for women and children who are at the highest risk of being exploited. Human trafficking in Ukraine poses a significant threat to its citizens, particularly women and children. The country has made efforts to combat this issue, but there is still much work to be done. The UAE has been accused of exploiting the war in Ukraine to attract women for prostitution. This is a serious concern that must be addressed to protect vulnerable individuals. Ukraine's government has taken steps to improve its anti-trafficking efforts, including adopting a new national action plan and cooperating with European partners. However, there are still challenges to overcome, such as corruption and lenient sentencing for traffickers. The situation in Ukraine is complex, with many people facing displacement and violence due to the ongoing conflict. This has created an environment in which human trafficking can thrive. Increase protections for unaccompanied children, enhance the NRM's effectiveness, and provide alternative court arrangements to lessen the burden on victims. The Ukrainian government has been actively pursuing traffickers and prosecuting them under Article 149, which considers human trafficking as "adoption for commercial purposes" and "use in the pornography business". In 2023, a total of 35 traffickers were convicted compared to 18 in 2022 and 24 in 2021. However, only eight (23 percent) received prison sentences, while twenty traffickers got suspended sentences, three fines, and four were yet to receive their sentences. Observers pointed out that many judges underestimated the severity of trafficking crimes and held onto outdated stereotypes about what constitutes human trafficking. This leniency in sentencing weakened deterrence and created safety concerns. Corruption within the police and judiciary, as well as official complicity in trafficking crimes, remained significant concerns hindering law enforcement action. Although the government reported investigations and prosecutions of officials allegedly involved in trafficking, no convictions were made for the seventh consecutive year. This further exacerbated impunity for trafficking crimes. In 2023, several high-profile cases were brought to light. The Lviv prosecutor's office prosecuted a government official for alleged sex trafficking in France, while the Office of the Prosecutor General investigated a military commander for forced labor. Kyiv city police also investigated a former deputy police chief and police officer for sex trafficking, and two former police officers were indicted for labor trafficking. The National Police of Ukraine expanded its international and national partnerships despite taking on more national security tasks. The Migration Police established a dedicated unit for transnational investigations and international cooperation, including human trafficking. Authorities cooperated extensively with foreign counterparts to exchange information for investigations. Since the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, authorities have investigated trafficking cases among civilians while the Security Service of Ukraine investigated war crimes, including those with a trafficking nexus. Joint action days were held against online criminal activity, recruitment, and identifying Ukrainian and PRC-national trafficking victims. A new agreement on information sharing between authorities was signed between Ukraine and Poland in September. There has been widespread turnover in government institutions, including the NPU and judiciary, with over 3,500 judicial vacancies reported as of December 2023. This has exacerbated delays in court cases, although steps have been taken to address the shortage. The establishment of a specialized unit by OPG in 2023 marked a significant step towards combating human trafficking in Ukraine. The unit, consisting of five prosecutors focused on prosecuting trafficking cases, was complemented by regional prosecutors' analysis of over 60 trafficking cases. However, despite these efforts, the government's capacity to provide services to trafficking victims was severely impacted by Russia’s full-scale invasion. The Ukrainian government is struggling to provide adequate support to victims of conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV) due to a lack of clear policies and procedures. Authorities informed victims of their right to apply for official victim status, but experts are concerned that the government may conflate CRSV with sex trafficking. This could lead to misidentification and inadequate support for victims. The Ministry of Social Policy partnered with international organizations to expand the National Remembrance Resolution Mechanism (NRM), which is responsible for identifying and supporting victims. However, social services at the local level are often overwhelmed, and communities lack sufficient personnel, infrastructure, or financial resources to provide effective support. Some local officials responsible for identifying and screening victims are not trained on trafficking. The government continues to rely heavily on international organizations and NGOs to identify victims and provide assistance. While some anti-trafficking organizations in Ukraine reported an increase in the number of victims they served, including 374 in 2023, more work is needed to ensure that all victims receive adequate support. Repatriation efforts for foreign victims in Ukraine faced challenges, with some struggling to access services despite being legally entitled to benefits. The Witness Protection Law provided protections, but courts rarely utilized them. A new law expanded access to secondary legal aid for victims of crime, including trafficking. To protect victims' participation in criminal justice proceedings, 14 courts used video testimony systems. Regional specialized centers operated by the government and international organizations provided trauma-informed interviews, psycho-social care, and medical support to child victims or witnesses. The OPG maintained staff to assist children in the judicial process. Adult trafficking victims received a one-time financial payment of 8,052 hryvnia ($210), while victims with official status received this amount. However, no restitution was awarded to victims in 2023. The government increased prevention efforts and coordinated anti-trafficking planning sessions with international organizations and NGOs. Staff identified or referred 73 potential victims to protection services, while a separate government hotline continued to receive international calls from Ukrainians fleeing the war, including those at risk of trafficking. NGOs operated additional hotlines, receiving over 53,000 calls and identifying at least 77 potential trafficking victims. To combat child trafficking, OPG collaborated with partners to operate social media channels. Despite lack of funding for awareness campaigns, regional governments allocated $10,140 to support initiatives. Authorities, in coordination with NGOs and international organizations, conducted nationwide campaigns using various mediums, focusing on the risks of trafficking during the war for displaced persons and those abroad. High-risk groups included unaccompanied children, children in institutions, and those forcibly relocated to Russia and occupied Ukraine areas. To track these children, a register was maintained for "displaced" children; however, observers noted insufficient data on unaccompanied Ukrainian children abroad. NGOs observed similar gaps in data across Europe, which may have increased their risk of trafficking. Before the invasion, protection of children in government-run care systems was deemed inadequate. Human rights groups reported unsafe conditions and allegations of complicity or negligence by officials in institutions caring for girls and boys. NGOs highlighted increased trafficking risks for these children due to the conflict. The government evacuated Ukrainian children from institutions in areas of armed hostilities and conducted site visits, working with international law enforcement to identify possible victims. Experts expressed concerns about the government's protection efforts, citing reports of vulnerability among Ukrainian children and exploitation, including trafficking. Concerns were also raised about protections for institutionalized children evacuated to refugee host countries, particularly those with disabilities. Observers noted abuse and neglect of Ukrainian refugee children in a hotel in Türkiye, although no trafficking victims were confirmed. The Ministry of Economic Development and Trade oversees labor recruitment agencies, conducting regular inspections to ensure compliance. In October 2023, the government passed a law requiring registration with the government and prohibiting agencies from collecting fees from job seekers for employment abroad. The State Labor Service resumed planned and unplanned inspections, identifying 25 potential labor trafficking victims. The labor market in Ukraine continues to be plagued by a lack of effective oversight, with NGOs reporting an insufficient number of inspectors to meet their mandate. This has led to concerns about the exploitation of workers, particularly those who are vulnerable or migrant workers. The government's failure to address this issue has been criticized for allowing human traffickers to thrive. Recurring reports highlight the risks faced by Ukrainian workers abroad, including the lack of protection and oversight. The website of the State Labor Service (SLS) provides valuable information on trafficking risks, but more needs to be done to support those who are exploited. The government's inaction on reducing demand for commercial sex acts has been particularly egregious. Article 149 is intended to combat human trafficking, but its language has been criticized for being too broad. This has led to confusion and difficulties in prosecuting traffickers. Human traffickers continue to exploit victims in Ukraine and abroad, with the majority of cases involving forced labor or sex trafficking. The Roma community is disproportionately affected by human trafficking, with an estimated 10-15% lacking identification documents. This leaves them vulnerable to exploitation, as they are unable to access state social assistance programs. Children and adults who are trafficked into forced begging are particularly at risk. Traffickers increasingly use online platforms to recruit victims for sex trafficking or forced labor. Anymized accounts are being used to lure potential victims into exploitative situations. The situation is even more dire for children living in institutions, many of whom have been evacuated abroad, and those who remain in Ukraine. The ongoing conflict with Russia has led to a significant increase in human trafficking. IDPs (internally displaced persons) face significant barriers to obtaining or renewing identification documents, making them vulnerable to exploitation. Russian authorities have been reported to confiscate Ukrainian passports and force adoption of Russian ones. The ongoing conflict in Ukraine has led to a massive influx of refugees and displaced persons, who are disproportionately vulnerable to human trafficking. According to various reports, traffickers have been targeting these individuals at border crossings and transit centers, exploiting their desperation and vulnerability. Some NGOs warn that the economic impacts of the war will exacerbate the risks of trafficking, particularly for unaccompanied children and those with disabilities. A 2022 survey found that nearly half of Ukrainians were at risk of exploitation, and a similar number remained willing to accept a risky job offer in 2023. This includes men, educated individuals seeking to support their families, and women and girls being recruited for sex trafficking abroad. Online searches for "Ukrainian escorts" have increased, indicating the growing demand for trafficked persons. Traffickers use various tactics to recruit victims, including false claims about temporary protection status, job offers, or housing. They then confiscate identity documents or force victims into exploitative labor situations, such as domestic work, childcare, cleaning, hospitality, and agriculture. Despite efforts to track down potential trafficking cases, authorities have identified only a few confirmed cases across Europe. Russian forces have forcibly transferred thousands of Ukrainians, including children, elderly persons, and those with disabilities, to Russia, Belarus, and occupied territories in Ukraine. Many were forced to work on the front lines or renovate prison premises under threat of violence. International reports also allege that Russian authorities recruited Central Asian migrants and others through coercion, deception, or force to fight in their war against Ukraine. Children as Young as 12 Recruited by Russia-Led Forces in Ukraine Russia-occuppied Ukrainian territory has become a breeding ground for human rights abuses, particularly when it comes to children. A disturbing trend has emerged where Russia-led forces are recruiting and using kids as young as 12 for intelligence gathering. According to reports, the Russian armed forces have established a network of military camps in eastern Ukraine where they prepare conscripted Ukrainian children to serve in their ranks. These youngsters are forced to perform various roles such as guards and combatants at checkpoints, leaving them vulnerable to exploitation and abuse. The use of children by Russia-led forces is a stark reminder of the devastating impact of war on innocent civilians. In 2022, an international organization revealed that Ukrainian armed forces had recruited and used one child for intelligence gathering purposes. Despite efforts by Ukraine's Ministry of Social Policy to combat human trafficking, the situation remains dire. The government's action plan has been slashed by 30 percent due to funding constraints, leaving NGOs to bear the brunt of raising awareness and assisting victims of trafficking. The reliance on international donations to fund anti-trafficking initiatives is a concerning trend. In 2020 alone, outside contributors provided $1.47 million, accounting for over 92 percent of the entire budget. The lack of funding from local governments has led to a significant burden on NGOs like La Strada–Ukraine. The situation highlights the urgent need for increased investment in anti-trafficking efforts and support for vulnerable populations. As the conflict continues to ravage Ukraine, it is essential that we prioritize the protection of children and prevent further exploitation by armed forces. While the government of Ukraine has consistently pledged reform to meet international obligations—for example, as a signatory of the United Nations's Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children—it has failed to adequately support anti-trafficking organizations that do the bulk of the work. Our government so far has not given civil society a defined role in the national referral mechanism," says Hanna Antonova, a counter-trafficking coordinator at the IOM. The referral mechanism is the process by which law enforcement refers alleged victims of trafficking to anti-trafficking organizations to receive psychological, legal and social support. For the past four years, the number of trafficking victims referred to the IOM for assistance by Ukrainian law enforcement agencies has decreased by roughly half annually.In 2012, 2013, 2014 and 2015, there were 232, 105, 52 and 27 victims referred, respectively. These numbers are dramatically different from those of the IOM; the average number of victims identified annually by the IOM has remained close to 1,000.Moreover, President Petro Poroshenko's effort to push through legislation that would decentralize authority and empower Ukraine's regions threatens to reverse progress in efforts to combat trafficking. If passed, NGOs may have to collaborate with officials from more than 20 different oblasts. Each regional administration would decide how to prioritize anti-trafficking prevention efforts and assistance to victims, if at all, throwing nationwide coordination efforts into disarray."We don't know what decentralization will look like," says Antonova. "If the local administration does not believe that trafficking is a problem for this specific region, then they are not going to allocate any funding, or they will allocate so little funding that it is not going to make any difference."International bodies such as the U.S. Department of State and the Council of Europe's Group of Experts on Action Against Trafficking in Human Beings (GRETA) have also criticized Ukraine's government for not devoting enough attention to the issue.For instance, for the third straight year, Ukraine has been placed on the State Department's Tier 2 Watch List, avoiding an otherwise mandatory downgrade to Tier 3. The State Department notes with concern the decreasing number of prosecutions of traffickers, as well as "poor coordination at the national level" between the 15 ministries responsible for anti-trafficking work.GRETA's first-ever report on Ukraine's anti-trafficking program, published in September 2014, also acknowledged poor coordination among government ministries. The executive interdepartmental council on human trafficking—headed by ministers, deputy ministers and representatives from civil society—has not convened for five years.Despite the government's shortcomings, some positive steps have been taken. The Ministry of Social Policy plans to re-adjourn the interdepartmental council in early 2016, and has sent letters to NGOs in the anti-trafficking coalition requesting that they nominate representatives to the council. And throughout the past few years, the ministry has implemented campaigns to raise awareness about human trafficking through television and radio broadcasting, and the publishing and distribution of books and pamphlets.Yet more needs to be done, especially since the war in the east has created a large population of individuals prone to exploitation."We have a proverb," warns La Strada–Ukraine's Taturevych. Translated from Russian, it states: "Sink or swim; if you are drowning, you are on your own." Currently, only NGOs—and not the Ukrainian government—are struggling to keep those vulnerable to trafficking afloat.Officials from Ukraine's Ministry of Social Policy did not respond to interview requests. The persistence of crimes like human trafficking, smuggling, money laundering, and cybercrime poses significant challenges for Ukraine, particularly during its ongoing invasion. The complexity of these issues can be attributed to the instability that creates opportunities for organized criminal groups to exploit. To combat these threats effectively, Ukraine requires strong international partnerships, modern investigative tools, and practical knowledge-sharing with global counterparts. In mid-May, a study visit was led by the European Union Advisory Mission (EUAM) Ukraine for ten prosecutors and investigators from Ukraine's liberated regions. The primary objective of this visit was to enhance Ukraine's ability to investigate and prosecute cross-border crimes, protect victims, and engage more effectively with international networks and digital platforms. During their visit, Ukrainian participants gained valuable insights into Ireland's approaches to combating human trafficking, which were guided by prosecutorial standards, international obligations, and strong victim protection mechanisms. The Office of the Director of Public Prosecutions (ODPP) provided a comprehensive overview of how Ireland handles trafficking cases, including asset seizure, cross-border cooperation, and the principle of non-prosecution for victims. The Garda National Protective Services Bureau complemented this information with practical insights on distinguishing trafficking from smuggling, identifying signs of exploitation, and uncovering organized prostitution networks. Irish participants also gained knowledge on how to identify cases involving Ukrainian nationals as victims. The visit's impact was evident in the comments of Alona Salomatina, a prosecutor from Dnipropetrovsk regional prosecutors office, who stated that the trip provided a powerful source of ideas and inspiration for implementing new approaches in their system. The Irish justice system's approach to combating human trafficking was found to be extremely useful. The protection of victims is paramount beyond prosecution. At Dublin's Criminal Courts of Justice, Ukrainian prosecutors and police officers observed murder trials and toured specialized suites for vulnerable witnesses and child victims. These facilities provide a safe environment during testimony through video link rooms and child-friendly areas. The visit also focused on investigating financial and cybercrime with precision. Participants learned about Ireland's approach to online abuse cases, digital evidence preservation, and IP-based investigations. The economic crime team detailed how money laundering schemes operate across Europe, often involving transnational organized crime groups. Ireland's Cyber Intelligence Unit presented its work on dark web investigations, child exploitation cases, and cyberattacks on critical infrastructure. Stepan Okopnyi, a prosecutor from Luhansk regional prosecutors office, shared that the visit provided valuable information specifically on combating human trafficking and using databases available to the Irish National Police. A rare look into how a major tech platform cooperates with law enforcement revealed new insights on data requests, user information access, and human trafficking or child exploitation cases escalation. The Law Enforcement Response and Trust & Safety Teams explained their handling process, including what types of user info can be accessed, and how cases involving human trafficking or child exploitation are escalated. Until recently, many Ukrainian investigators lacked clear procedures or confidence when dealing with tech companies. This visit bridged that gap, establishing cooperation that goes beyond borders. Participants met with officers from EUROPOL, INTERPOL, the SIRENE Bureau, and the Mutual Legal Assistance section to review how European Arrest Warrants are issued, information flows through the Schengen Information System, and streamline cross-border legal requests. Ireland’s authorities confirmed that requests from Ukraine are now treated as a priority. Contact points were exchanged, creating direct professional channels that will strengthen investigations going forward. EUAM Ukraine is committed to strengthening Ukrainian capacity through tailored training programs, which went beyond classroom-based learning by providing practical insight and cooperation. This visit transformed theory into practice for Ukrainian prosecutors and investigators, gaining invaluable practical tools and trusted partners in a fight that spans borders. The Government of Ukraine made significant efforts to align its justice system with European standards, including adopting a 2023-2025 NAP, resuming labor inspections, and cooperating with European counterparts on anti-trafficking investigations. Despite diminished resources and capacity due to Russia’s invasion, they identified potential trafficking cases during inspections and created a specialized anti-human trafficking prosecution unit. Awareness raising campaigns were also conducted in coordination with international organizations. However, the government did not meet minimum standards in several key areas. Judges issued lenient sentences that weakened deterrence, and corruption fostered impunity for traffickers. The government also failed to secure convictions of complicit officials for the seventh consecutive year. To address the glaring deficiencies in government oversight, it is imperative to increase the risk assessment for children evacuated from Ukrainian care institutions, thereby mitigating their vulnerability to trafficking. Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) continue to flag systemic shortcomings in the implementation of the National Referral Mechanism (NRM) and victim services. A crucial step forward would be to officially recognize and certify more victims, ensuring they can exercise their rights under the trafficking law. Moreover, the procedure for granting victim status must be streamlined to alleviate the burden on victims to self-identify and divulge sensitive information. ###ARTICLEIn 2023, Ukrainian authorities investigated 115 suspected human traffickers, with the government prosecuting 126 individuals – a significant increase from 70 in 2022 and 101 in 2021. The cases included sex trafficking, labor trafficking, as well as "adoption for commercial purposes" and use in the pornography business, both considered under Ukrainian law as forms of human trafficking. Out of the total prosecuted, 35 traffickers were convicted, with only 8 receiving prison sentences – a rate lower than previous years. Notably, corruption within the judiciary and police forces remained prevalent issues that undermined the effectiveness of anti-trafficking efforts. Corrupt practices continued to lead to lenient sentences for traffickers, weakening deterrence and failing to accurately reflect the severity of trafficking crimes. Despite the challenges, the Ukrainian government took steps to address its human trafficking issue, including expanding partnerships with international organizations such as Norway, Lithuania, and Türkiye, and establishing a dedicated unit within the Migration Police. These efforts aimed to enhance cooperation in transnational investigations and combat trafficking through better information sharing. However, authorities also faced difficulties due to institutional changes, including significant turnover rates among government officials. As of December 2023, over 3,500 judicial vacancies persisted, contributing to delays in court cases and hindering the efficient administration of justice.The criminal code needed all victims of crime, including trafficking victims, to be present in court for preliminary court hearings; this caused more than 80 trafficking cases to stop moving in the courts, many of which involved victims who were moved because of the full-scale invasion. In 2023, OPG made a special team with five prosecutors who only focus on human trafficking cases and gathered regional prosecutors to look at more than 60 trafficking cases. The government, with donor funding and international partners, trained law enforcement, civil servants, prosecutors, legal aid providers, and other officials on investigative techniques, victim identification, child sex trafficking, trauma-informed approaches, legal aid for victims, prevention, cybercrime, and the higher risks of trafficking after the full-scale invasion. All new police recruits received trafficking training. However, observers said MIPOL staff and NPU investigators were not enough trained on trafficking. The government kept victim protection. Russia’s full-scale war against Ukraine reduced the government’s ability to give services to trafficking victims, as it used resources for the humanitarian response, and services were not available to trafficking victims in Russia-occupied areas or near the front line. In 2023, the government reported giving official victim status to 110 victims – a status that let victims access government services after approval of an application – an increase compared with 47 officially identified victims in 2022 and 64 in 2021. The government also found six victims of “use in the pornography business” and two victims of “sale of a child” which is considered human trafficking under Ukrainian law. The government did not report how many potential victims police found. Observers said Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine slowed down the time to give official victim status because of big problems with resources and staff moving. While some observers said the government used anti-trafficking resources for the humanitarian response, others assessed the overall increase in humanitarian service provision, including shelters and aid to people in need, may have lessened the risks of human trafficking, as coordination among service providers increased. The government reported checking undocumented foreign migrants for trafficking signs; however, observers noted authorities did not do this consistently. Authorities did not report finding any foreign national trafficking victims in 2023. The government did not report continuing efforts, in cooperation with international organizations, to visit and check for potential trafficking victimization at facilities for IDPs and children. However, the government reported checking Ukrainian children returnees among those forcibly deported to Russia for human trafficking signs. The government approved 88 percent (118 of 134) of applications for official victim status in 2023, compared with 81 percent (47 of 58) of applications in 2022. The National Social Service continued its role of giving official victim status to potential victims. The government made a bill to simplify the process for certifying official victim status by giving this task to local authorities; however, this bill was still waiting at the end of the reporting period. Officials noted several factors, because of the war, might affect victims’ ability to apply for victim status, including some victims not being able to report trafficking crimes themselves, some who may not have realized they were exploited, or Ukrainian refugees exploited abroad who may not have reported exploitation to authorities upon their return to Ukraine. Observers noted male trafficking victims may have been hesitant to seek help from the government because of a fear of being forced into military service. NGOs reported victims exploited in the occupied territories might fear coming forward to Ukrainian authorities for fear of being labeled as “collaborators” with Russia, under a law The Ukrainian government has made efforts to provide official victim status to those affected by conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV), but there are concerns that these services may be overwhelmed due to the ongoing full-scale invasion. Authorities have informed victims of CRSV about their right to apply for official victim status, but some experts worry that this may lead to a conflation of CRSV with sex trafficking. The newly devolved local administrative structures were intended to improve service delivery, but civil society reports suggest that they are not functioning effectively due to war-related capacity limitations and decentralization. The Ministry of Social Policy has partnered with international organizations to expand services nationwide, despite the challenges posed by martial law. However, social services at the local level are often overstretched, with some communities lacking sufficient personnel, infrastructure, or financial resources to provide adequate support to trafficking victims. Trained officials are needed to identify and screen victims, but this is not always the case. The government continues to rely on international organizations and NGOs for victim identification and protection, which receive funding from international donors. According to reports, one organization assisted 374 victims in 2023, compared to 361 in 2022 and 1,010 in 2021. Most of these victims were exploited in labor trafficking in agriculture, construction, or the service industry after the full-scale invasion. The government allocated significant funds for victim protection efforts in 2023, but some observers suggest that more needs to be done to support vulnerable populations, including trafficking victims. The country's trafficking law entitles victims with official victim status to various forms of assistance, but it is unclear how many trafficking victims actually received these services. Foreign victims in Ukraine continue to face challenges in accessing necessary services despite being legally entitled to the same benefits as Ukrainian citizens. Many foreign nationals, particularly those from underserved communities, struggle to access these services due to various barriers. However, authorities have established measures to provide protection and support to foreign victims of trafficking. The Witness Protection Law offers safeguards for victims, but its implementation is sometimes limited. The government has taken steps to expand access to secondary legal aid for victims of crime, including those affected by human trafficking. Courts have started utilizing video testimony systems to protect victims' participation in criminal justice proceedings. Furthermore, specialized regional centers have been established to provide trauma-informed care and support services to child victims or witnesses. In recent years, the government has increased financial assistance provided to adult trafficking victims, but it appears that some victims did not receive this aid. The Ministry of Social Policy (MSP) continues to lead anti-trafficking efforts at various levels, despite facing criticism for ineffective coordination and engagement on these issues. MSP worked with international organizations and NGOs in 2023 to develop a new National Action Plan (NAP) aimed at addressing human trafficking and its impacts during Russia's war against Ukraine. Despite efforts by the government to combat human trafficking, particularly among children, the issue remains largely unchecked. The government hotline received over 7,400 calls in 2023, identifying or referring 73 potential victims to protection services. However, this has not been enough to address the scale of the problem. NGOs operated additional hotlines, receiving more than 53,000 calls and identifying at least 77 potential trafficking victims. The government also continued to operate anti-trafficking channels on social media platforms, while regional governments allocated a total of $10,140 for awareness campaigns. Authorities conducted public awareness campaigns, available in Ukrainian and English, throughout the country, including via television, news outlets, and social media. However, observers noted that there was insufficient data on unaccompanied Ukrainian children abroad, which may have increased their risk of trafficking. Experts expressed serious concerns about the government's protection efforts, citing consistent reports highlighting Ukrainian children's vulnerability to exploitation, including trafficking. The Ministry of Economic Development and Trade oversaw the licensing of labor recruitment agencies and conducted regular inspections on their activities. In October 2023, the government passed a law requiring recruiting agencies to register with the government and prohibiting agencies from collecting fees from job seekers for employment abroad. Despite this, experts continued to raise concerns about the protection of institutionalized Ukrainian children evacuated to refugee host countries, including those with disabilities. Service (SLS) restarted both planned and unplanned labor inspections, which had been halted due to the ongoing conflict. The SLS carried out 313 inspections, both planned and unplanned, resulting in the discovery of 25 possible instances of labor trafficking. NGOs previously reported there was an insufficient number of labor inspectors to effectively meet their mandate. Observers expressed concern about the lack of oversight of the labor market, with reports of workers not receiving payments, although the SLS continued awareness efforts and informal monitoring. The SLS published recommendations for Ukrainians contemplating working abroad, including information on trafficking risks on its website. The government did not make efforts to reduce the demand for commercial sex acts. Article 149 reportedly criminalized the act of knowingly soliciting or patronizing a sex trafficking victim, but an NGO noted the language in the statute is broad. As reported over the past five years, human traffickers exploit domestic and foreign victims in Ukraine, and traffickers exploit victims from Ukraine abroad. Traffickers exploit Ukrainian victims in sex trafficking and forced labor in Ukraine as well as in Russia, Poland, Germany, and other parts of Europe, the PRC, Kazakhstan, and the Middle East. Ukrainian victims are increasingly exploited in EU member states. Traffickers exploit some Ukrainian children and vulnerable adults in forced begging. Child sex trafficking in Ukraine remains underreported. NGOs estimate 10 to 15 percent of the Roma community lack identification documents, leaving them unable to access state social assistance programs and thereby increasing their vulnerability to trafficking. Traffickers exploit victims in forced labor in Ukraine and abroad, including in the construction, manufacturing, and agriculture sectors, and in forced criminality and forced begging. Traffickers force some victims to participate in the illegal production of counterfeit tobacco products, and well-established criminal groups force some Ukrainian victims to engage in other illegal activities abroad. Traffickers target low-skilled workers transiting Ukraine; increasingly, well-educated workers are vulnerable to labor exploitation. Traffickers increasingly use anonymized accounts to recruit potential victims online for sex trafficking or forced labor, including for forced criminality in fraudulent appropriation of social benefits. Children institutionalized in state-run orphanages, many evacuated abroad, and more than 3,000 who remain abroad, during Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine, are at especially high risk of trafficking. Officials of several state-run residential institutions and institutions have allegedly been complicit or willfully negligent in the sex and labor trafficking of girls and boys under their care. Prior to Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine, employment options were limited in areas of eastern Ukraine occupied by Russia-led forces; Russia’s proxies placed restrictions on international humanitarian aid intended to help meet civilian needs. IDPs, those living in Russia-occupied territory, and residents of Crimea face significant barriers to obtaining or renewing identification documents, increasing their vulnerability to exploitation. Widespread reports indicated Russian authorities confiscate Ukrainians’ identification documents and force adoption of Russian passports. Observers reported Russia-led forces conscripted those living in eastern Ukraine to fight or engage in forced labor, such as clearing rubble or disposing of corpses. International organizations report the demographics of Ukrainian trafficking victims have shifted since 2014 to include more urban, younger, and male victims. They are increasingly exploited in forced labor, including in forced criminality for drug trafficking and as couriers. Traffickers reportedly kidnap women and girls from conflict-affected areas for sex and labor trafficking in Ukraine and Russia. Traffickers target IDPs and subjected some Ukrainians to forced labor, forced conscription, and sexual exploitation in Russia-occupied areas, often via kidnapping, ###Human Trafficking Risks Persist Amidst Ongoing Ukraine Conflict Reports are emerging of Cuban and Syrian citizens being recruited to fight in Russia's war of aggression in Ukraine. Additionally, allegations surface that Russian authorities are using coercion, force, and fraud to recruit Central Asians, including prisoners, for the war effort against Ukraine. Migrants are said to be at risk of being subjected to forced labor in Ukrainian territories occupied by Russia. There are also claims that Ukrainian children have been recruited and used for intelligence gathering purposes by Ukrainian armed forces in 2022. Moreover, there are persistent reports that Russia-led forces have been utilizing children as soldiers, informants, and human shields. In areas of the Donbas under Russian occupation, children have reportedly been involved in the armed conflict. They have been used for various roles, including performing armed duties at checkpoints, serving as combatants, and acting as guards. The Russian armed forces have also been reported to routinely prepare Ukrainian children for conscripted service in Russia's armed forces through military camps, both in Russia and in occupied eastern Ukraine. The recruitment of children by Russia-led forces has occurred in territories under Russian occupation, as well as in areas where the government has been unable to enforce national prohibitions against the recruitment or use of children in armed conflict.


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