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HUMAN TRAFFICKING TO NORTHERN AMERICA: THE BALKAN CONNECTION

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THE STUDY

- This paper draws on the results of a large multimethod study (2011-13) which examined human trafficking (HT) from the former Eastern Bloc to Northern America (Canada and the USA)
- Funder: Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC)
- Principal Investigator: Dr. Natalya Timoshkina
- For the purposes of the study, the ‘former Eastern Bloc’ was defined as comprising 14 post-socialist nations of Eastern, Central and Southern Europe, and 15 republics of the former USSR

*Post-Socialist Nations of Eastern,
Central, Southern Europe:*

1. Albania
2. Bosnia & Herzegovina
3. Bulgaria
4. Croatia
5. The Czech Republic
6. Hungary
7. Kosovo
8. Macedonia
9. Montenegro
10. Poland
11. Romania
12. Serbia
13. Slovakia
14. Slovenia

Republics of the Former USSR:

1. Armenia
2. Azerbaijan
3. Belarus
4. Estonia
5. Georgia
6. Latvia
7. Lithuania
8. Kazakhstan
9. Kyrgyzstan
10. Moldova
11. Russia
12. Tajikistan
13. Turkmenistan
14. Ukraine
15. Uzbekistan

9 Countries of the Balkan Region Covered by the Study

- Albania
- Bulgaria
- Nations of the former Yugoslavia:
 - Bosnia & Herzegovina
 - Croatia
 - Kosovo
 - Macedonia
 - Montenegro
 - Serbia
 - Slovenia

Context

- The former Eastern Bloc has been named by the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, the US Department of State, many NGOs & experts as the 2nd (behind Asia), if not 1st, primary source region for HT into Canada, and a major supplier of trafficked persons to the US
- Yet empirical research on HT from the region to Northern America has been scant, and the number of victims involved remains unknown
- Prior to our study, most identified and suspected victims have been females trafficked for the purposes of commercial sexual exploitation and, to a much lesser extent, domestic labor and forced marriage

Methods & Sources of Data

- **Review** of official reports, various documents, empirical studies, media articles & online resources (in English and the official languages of the Balkan countries) pertaining to HT in/from the Balkans and into Northern America.
- **Email and telephone inquiries** of 37 counter-HT organizations (31 in the Balkans, 6 in Canada) and 24 key informants (KIs) – police officers, government officials, academics, journalists (23 in the Balkans, 1 in Canada).
- In-depth qualitative phone and face-to-face **interviews** with 20 representatives from counter-HT organizations (16 in the Balkans, 4 in Canada) and 10 KIs (9 in the Balkans, 1 in Canada) – recorded, transcribed verbatim, analyzed using thematic coding.

Country	Final # of orgs contacted	# of orgs which responded	Response rate	# of org reps interviewed
Albania	15	5	33%	3
Bulgaria	13	3	23%	0
Bosnia & Herzegovina	10	3	30%	1
Canada	10	6	60%	4
Croatia	5	2	40%	0
Kosovo	14	4	29%	6
Macedonia	14	5	36%	6
Montenegro	9	3	33%	0
Serbia	6	4	67%	0
Slovenia	3	2	67%	0
TOTAL:	99	37	42%	20

Country	Number of KIs contacted	Number of KIs interviewed
Albania	3	2
Bulgaria	5	0
Bosnia & Herzegovina	0	0
Canada	1	1
Croatia	0	0
Kosovo	4	4
Macedonia	11	3
Montenegro	0	0
Serbia	0	0
Slovenia	0	0
TOTAL:	24	10

FINDINGS

(1) It appears that the Balkan region plays a rather insignificant role in HT to Northern America.

Despite the fact that each of the aforementioned Balkan countries has been identified as a source, transit and destination country for HT, and known criminals from the region have been arrested in the US and Canada, we found only a handful of HT cases pertaining to Northern America – mostly potential or indirect.

(2) Canada and the United States are barely visible on the counter-HT radar in the former Eastern Bloc in general, and the Balkan countries in particular.

The scope of HT from the region to Northern America is perceived as insignificant compared to what's happening within Europe (and, specifically, within the Balkan region), or between Europe, the Middle East, and parts of Africa and Asia.

Explanations Offered:

- a) Northern America, especially Canada, is too far and expensive to travel to
- b) People now know more about legal options for permanent immigration
- c) Trafficked persons remain in Northern America
- d) Victims who return to their home countries don't seek help, don't come forward
- e) Victims may not define themselves as trafficked or may not be classified as such
- f) Returned victims are being re-trafficked or migrate to other countries
- g) "It's not human trafficking, it's human smuggling and other forms of irregular/illegal migration"

(3) The virtual absence of communication and collaboration between governmental and non-governmental organizations in Northern America and the former Eastern Bloc, including the Balkan nations, is a major problem, as it impedes both the collection of accurate data on the nature and extent of HT, and effective responses to the problem.

Case Examples

Case 1: Direct Case of Labor Trafficking of Four Men from Serbia to Canada

- Men from a poor community were recruited by a community member known to them and closely tied to somebody in Canada.
- They were promised good, high paying jobs; private, paid-for accommodations; possibly opportunity to stay in Canada permanently, even though they didn't speak English.
- Traffickers took care of all the arrangements and the men were told they would have to pay off their debts – a very large amount of money.

- The men came to Ontario by plane, on work visas, but their documents were taken away from them.
- They ended up living in sub-standard conditions, at the place where they also worked.
- They worked 10-14 hours a day, with no days off.
- They were either not paid at all or there were numerous illegitimate deductions from their paychecks (e.g., \$30 for a bar of soap bought for them by the traffickers that cost under \$2, or completely unexplained deductions); so men were always in debt & dependent on traffickers.
- The men had virtually no freedom of movement; could call home only under the traffickers' watch.

- The victims experienced physical assault, humiliation, threats to themselves & their families back home.
- They had no access to health care, social services, places of worship.
- The men somehow managed to escape and literally walked into an office of a Canadian NGO (community legal clinic).
- The staff had to get on the phone, call a local multicultural council, find somebody who could speak Serbian and put them on the speaker.
- All four men wanted to return home and were assisted with repatriation by the NGO.
- The men's current circumstances are unknown.

Case 2: Indirect Case of Trafficking for the Purpose of Organ Removal

- In summer 2008, Raul Fain, 62, a Canadian investment consultant from North York, ON, received a kidney transplant, for which he paid €87,000 (about CND \$127,000), in a Kosovo clinic Medicus.
- Fain's live donor was a 45-year old Russian woman, Anna Rusalenko, from a small town in Siberia.
- Rusalenko and two dozen others from Russia, Kazakhstan, Moldova & Turkey were lured by a sophisticated organ-trafficking ring spanning three continents.

- The victims were promised up to USD \$20,000 (€15,100) for an organ, but were paid a fraction of that amount or nothing; received no post-op care.
- The transplant team was led by Dr. Yusuf Sonmez, a notorious Turkish surgeon dubbed “Dr. Frankenstein” and “Dr. Vulture.”
- 7 members of the ring went on trial in Pristina in October 2009; trial was spearheaded by a Canadian, Jonathan Ratel, the EU special prosecutor in Kosovo. Mr. Fain was a key witness for the prosecution.
- It’s unknown how many North Americans received organ transplants through this trafficking ring.

Cases 3 & 4: Potential Sex Trafficking

- Two young unemployed women, aged 20 and 22, from poor families in different small towns/villages in southern Serbia were recruited by different men for work abroad.
- One was recruited by an acquaintance (through a girlfriend) - young man, slightly older than her, who's resided with his parents in Canada since 1992 (Yugoslav wars).
- She thought she would work on a farm and would in due course be able to establish her own farm. She was told that Canada would give her free land and she could buy a house on credit on very favorable conditions, because there is a great demand for farmers in Canada. She intended to take her parents and sister to Canada as soon as she could find a job and receive paperwork.

- She couldn't get a visa (or was told so by the recruiter), so her recruiter suggested traveling through Croatia (which had a visa-free regime) to be transferred to Canada.
- The other woman, also through an acquaintance, connected with a man who promised to get her a work visa and other documents for work in Canada or Australia; she agreed to pay him \$5,000 upon getting a job. She also was told it would be easier to travel through Croatia.
- To get to Zagreb, they had to travel through Bosnia & Herzegovina.
- One was transported in a car through a regular border crossing; the other - across River Sava on a boat.

- Once they crossed the B & H border, each woman was handed by the trafficker to a pimp, apparently in a nearby forest.
- The women ended up in the same apartment-style brothel; their documents were taken away, they weren't paid, were subjected to control, violence, threats, etc. Many of their clients were cops.
- The women escaped with the help of a male client who called the SOS phone line of a Bosnian counter-HT NGO.
- NGO provided the women with the range of services for 2 months.
- Women eventually went home to Serbia; their current circumstances are unknown.

The Albanian Mafia

- There are suspicions that members of the ethnic Albanian organized crime groups are involved in HT operations in the US and Canada, but we could not find hard evidence.
- It appears that the Albanian Mafia is involved mainly in drug trafficking and other non-HT criminal activities.



Ermira Hatija, a U.S. permanent resident from Albania, believed to be involved in drug and human trafficking across the U.S.-Canada border

2003 – Hatija, 18, was involved in what is described in the media as an HT case, but it could've been a human smuggling case:

- She allegedly arranged for a 13-year-old-boy and his mother to cross the Canada-US border on a jet ski
- The boy fell off and drowned; the mother was arrested by the Coast Guard
- When Hatija went to collect her money for trafficking the boy and mother, the person who had hired her refused to pay up because of the drowned boy.
- Hatija then beat up the payer, and the Canadian police arrested her for the assault
- Without enough evidence to hold her for the boy's death, she was released and returned to the US

April 2006:

- Hatija was arrested in her apartment in Wixom, MI for trafficking Ecstasy from/through Canada to the US
- She fled after being released on bond
- Was featured on *America's Most Wanted*

July-August 2007:

- Hatija, 22, flew from Calgary to Frankfurt and tried to enter Germany with a forged passport
- She was detained and sent back to Calgary
- She was subsequently deported to Detroit, MI



Kujtim “Jimmy” Lika (47 in 2012),
ethnic Albanian from Macedonia

- Lika was a powerful figure in the Albanian mob
- He was residing illegally in the US
- Was featured on *America's Most Wanted*: wanted by the FBI on charges related to organized crime and drug offences
- **May 2012**: Lika was arrested in Toronto in a joint operation by the border services and the Toronto police, and subsequently extradited to the US
- Lika is rumored to have been involved in transporting prostitutes into Italy, which implies HT, so he could've been involved in HT operations in Northern America

'The Corrupt Five Case'

- **2012-13:** Investigation and arrest of 5 officials from different levels of government in Kosovo for involvement in issuing illegal guarantees on behalf of their offices to at least 10 persons, enabling them to obtain US visitor visas; charged up to €20,000/person
- The US Embassy in Pristina collaborated with the Kosovo Prosecutors Office on the investigation
- The whereabouts of the persons who obtained the US visas are unknown
- The case is still being tried, few details have been made public, so we don't know if HT was involved