

“Close this market”

Tackling the sexual exploitation of
Romanian women by men in the UK



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“To begin with they were my friends but as soon as we came to England, they started to physically abuse me. He beat me many times because I was not earning enough money.

“After a while the beatings became routine. Even though the clients did not physically abuse me I felt abused because I was forced to have sex with them even when I did not want to do so. Sometimes that was painful.

“I felt disgusted by what I was doing and I wanted to stop but [he] wanted more money and forced me to continue. I was scared because he kept threatening me that he was going to hurt my mother.”

The words of a woman trafficked from Romania and sexually exploited by men in the UK¹.

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“Close this market”: Tackling the sexual exploitation of Romanian women by men in the UK

Report of an international online summit convened by UK Feminista on Monday 26 October 2020.

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The title of this report, “Close this market”, are words spoken by Laura Albu, President of the Romanian Women’s Lobby, during the summit on 26 October 2020. The full quote was: “Close this market. End demand in the UK and the perpetrators will move from the UK.”

Forewords

Kat Banyard

Director of UK Feminista

The minority of men who pay for sex in the UK are driving a brutal sex trafficking trade. Growing evidence indicates that a significant proportion of women trafficked to meet their demand are from Romania.

As a result, on 26 October 2020, UK Feminista brought together policy makers, frontline services and agencies in Romania and the UK to identify what measures are needed to stop the sexual exploitation of Romanian women by men in the UK. This report presents the results of those discussions.

A clear message from the summit was that the UK must take action to prevent sexual exploitation. That requires tackling demand for it. Romania's National Agency against Trafficking in Persons runs campaigns to deter Romanian men from paying for sex. Yet the UK Government is failing to challenge demand from sex buyers in Britain, while allowing pimping websites to operate with impunity – and traffickers are capitalising on this.

To turn the tide and start winning in the fight against sex trafficking, the UK Government must crack down on pimping websites and criminalise paying for sex. Victims of sexual exploitation must also be supported by decriminalising selling sex and providing exiting services. As Laura Albu, President of the Romanian Women's Lobby, said during the summit, "Close this market. End demand in the UK".

Ash Denham MSP

Minister for Community Safety,
Scottish Government

UK Feminista's Summit was an intelligent example of experts coming together to exchange learning and best practice. I was struck by the extent to which Romanian women are disproportionately affected by prostitution and human trafficking, and the need for our countries to work together to reduce harm. The speakers emphasised the importance of listening to the voices of those involved in exploitation, and the Scottish Government wants to continue this dialogue, specifically through our first national consultation on how we challenge men's demand for prostitution. This consultative process seeks to build a consensus on improving the support women need and effectively challenge men's attitudes towards the purchase of sex.

European countries and the global community are currently grappling with effects of COVID-19. By working together we will reduce the harms faced by women involved in prostitution, protect their human rights and close down the buyers' market which enables trafficking for sexual exploitation. I heard the call to arms from the panellists, and understand the need for Scotland to build stronger partnerships across agencies, provide sustainable funding options and create specialised policies which help women to exit prostitution.

I want to ensure Scotland is a leading nation in protecting women's rights, eliminating opportunities for trafficking and ensuring we contribute to making our country and Europe safe for all women and girls.

Dame Diana Johnson MP

Chair of the All-Party Parliamentary
Group on Commercial Sexual Exploitation

The industrial-scale sexual exploitation of Romanian women by UK men is a national scandal. Most men do not pay for sex, but the minority who do fuel sex trafficking, fund organised crime and cause untold damage to their victims. Without demand from sex buyers, there would be no supply of vulnerable women to be raped and sexually assaulted in brothels across Britain.

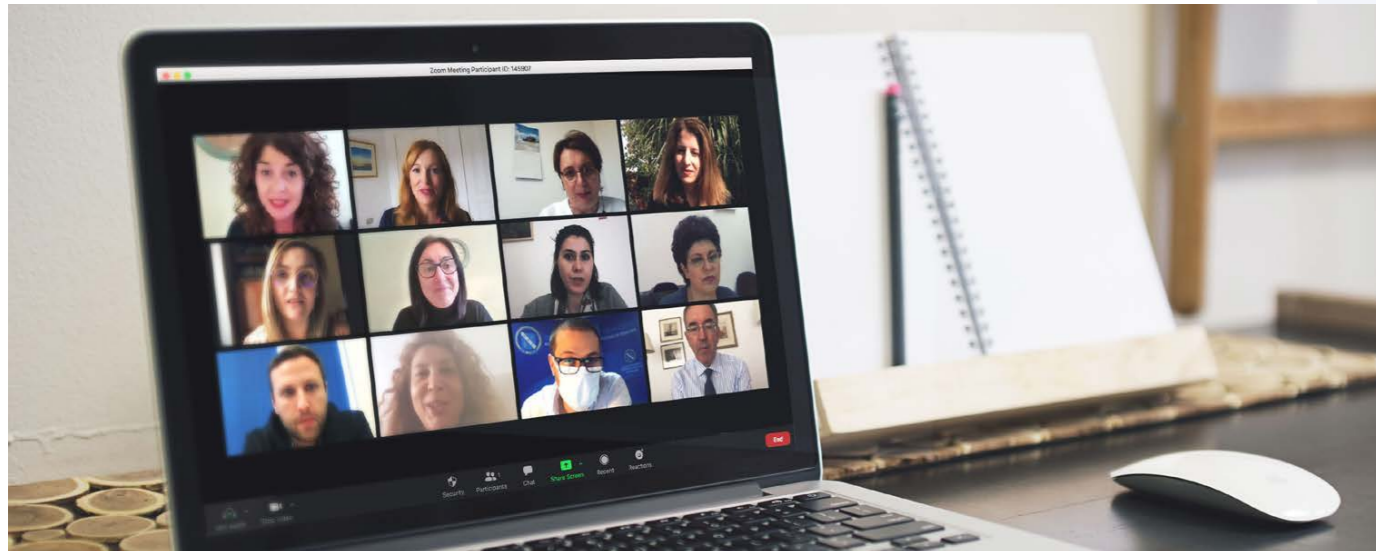
Other countries - such as France, Ireland, Norway and Sweden - have cracked down on the demand that drives sex trafficking by criminalising paying for sex, decriminalising victims and holding third-party exploiters to account. Yet the UK Government is allowing sex buyers to continue abusing and pimping websites to continue profiting. That has to end now.

To stop sex traffickers, we have to bust their business model. That means the Government must make paying for sex and online pimping criminal offences. Victims of sexual exploitation must also be decriminalised and given the support they need to rebuild their lives.

During the panel I chaired at UK Feminista's summit, Marius Burcea from Romania's National Agency against Trafficking in Persons said: "We are encouraging destination countries to take measures to discourage and reduce the demand that facilitates trafficking in human beings." The UK Government must heed this call.



Introduction



On Monday 26 October 2020, UK Feminista convened an online summit for policy makers, officials and organisations from the UK and Romania to discuss how to combat the sexual exploitation of Romanian women by sex buyers in the UK.

The summit was organised in response to an inquiry conducted in 2018 by the All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on Prostitution and the Global Sex Trade*, which UK Feminista provides the Secretariat for. The inquiry found that organised sexual exploitation is widespread across the UK, with organised crime groups advertising victims on pimping websites and moving them around networks of residential properties and hotel rooms to be abused by men who pay for sex².

Evidence obtained by the APPG's inquiry suggested that it is predominately non-UK national women who are the victims of organised sexual exploitation, and a significant proportion of them are from Romania.

Nearly three-quarters of registered victims of cross-border trafficking within the European Union are from Romania, with the majority (61%) trafficked for sexual exploitation³.

The summit on 26 October 2020 was convened to:

- further understanding of the scale and nature of the sexual exploitation of Romanian women in the UK; and
- establish how UK policy makers can most effectively tackle the sexual exploitation of Romanian women by sex buyers in the UK and collaborate with prevention efforts in Romania.

This report provides a summary of the contributions made by individuals and organisations that participated in the summit.

*The APPG on Prostitution and the Global Sex Trade is the predecessor group to the APPG on Commercial Sexual Exploitation.

Sexual exploitation of Romanian women in the UK

- In 2019, 219 cases of sexual exploitation involving 421 potential victims were reported to the Modern Slavery Helpline⁴. **22% of the potential victims** (totalling 155 individuals) **were Romanian** - the single largest nationality group among potential victims. 93% of the potential victims indicated in cases of sexual exploitation were female.
- In 2018 there were 212 active, ongoing police operations in the UK into modern slavery cases involving sexual exploitation⁵. **The largest nationality group identified** among potential victims (39% of potential victims) and suspects (40% of all suspects) **was Romanian**.
- Between 1st January 2016 and 31st December 2017, Leicestershire police visited 156 brothels, encountering 421 women. **86% of the women in the brothels were Romanian**⁶.
- Northumbria Police visited 81 brothels between March 2016 and April 2018, and of the 259 women they encountered in the brothels, **75% were from Romania**⁷.
- Research by the Police Foundation identified 65 brothels operating in Bristol over a two-year period⁸. 83% of the women selling sex in the brothels were non-British nationals, and **the most frequently recorded nationality was Romanian** (43% of women).
- In September 2020, 24 people were arrested as part of a joint investigation by UK and Romanian police into a sex trafficking ring⁹. 10 Romanian nationals were arrested in the UK, while a further 14 suspects were arrested in Romania.

“ **What we've seen looking at the official numbers of trafficking victims here in Romania, we see that UK was for the past years on the top either first place or second place. ...This year UK is again first destination of trafficking victims. So we can ask ourselves...why is UK and Germany the top countries for trafficking destination? ...It's not just economics it's also the laws.** ”

- Laetitia Gotte, President of Asociatia FREE

Session 1:

The view from frontline agencies

Chair: Ash Denham MSP, Minister for Community Safety, Scottish Government

Panellists:

- Laura Albu, President of the Romanian Women's Lobby
- Laetitia Gotte, President of Asociatia FREE
- Ioana Sandescu Bauer, Director of eLiberare
- Cristina Huddleston, Director of European Operations at Justice and Care
- Corina Panaite, Social Worker at ADPARE



Ash Denham MSP, Minister for Community Safety, Scottish Government

Ash Denham is Minister for Community Safety in the Scottish Government. She is the Member of the Scottish Parliament for Edinburgh Eastern.

Ash Denham spoke about the importance of assessing how policy makers can tackle commercial sexual exploitation. The UK has international obligations to

take action on this issue, including as a signatory of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women. Equally Safe, the Scottish Government's strategy to tackle violence against women, recognises prostitution as a form of violence against women. Prostitution has a far-reaching impact on those directly involved and for wider society. The impact of COVID 19 has also exposed additional risks and barriers faced by victims of sexual exploitation.

On 11 September 2020 the Scottish Government launched a consultation on how to challenge men's demand for prostitution in Scotland. Ash Denham MSP highlighted that her vision for Scotland is a country where women are not exploited and harmed in prostitution.

“
My vision of Scotland would be one where women and girls are not being exploited and harmed in prostitution.



Laura Albu, President of the Romanian Women's Lobby

Laura Albu is President of the Romanian Women's Lobby and Vice-President of the European Women's Lobby. She is also Executive President of the Community Safety and Mediation Center Romania, a regional NGO dealing with violence against women and promoting laws related to violence against women.

Laura Albu highlighted the significant number of adults who have left Romania to seek work abroad due to economic difficulties, and the large number of children who are left behind with relatives and friends and who don't always receive the protection and care they need. This can make girls, in particular, vulnerable to traffickers and exploiters.

“
Our girls can be bought for nothing and sold on your market. Your market is paying well for these 'goods'. And not only your country market. Other countries in Europe are a good market as well.

Action must be taken on multiple fronts – summarised as: prevention, protection, prosecution, provision and partnership.

Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) in Romania working on tackling sexual exploitation receive very little funding. What money they do receive often comes from external donors. Action must be taken in Romania to create conditions so that victims are no longer economically and legally dependent on the perpetrators of violence against them. Protecting victims requires establishing high quality services which receive sustainable funding.

“Romania should set up a diversity of services, responding to the diversity of women's needs.”

The UK Parliament should prevent the trafficking of Romanian women for sexual slavery by tackling demand from sex buyers.

“The solution is simple: end demand in the UK. Become the model for other countries in Europe who will want to follow you. ...The UK can end demand and prosecute buyers of sex and close this so-called market.”

Session 1: The view from frontline agencies



Laetitia Gotte, President of Asociatia FREE

Laetitia Gotte is the founder and President of Asociatia FREE. Asociatia FREE is a Romanian organisation that provides support to women exploited in the sex trade and those who want to exit. The organisation also works to prevent and raise awareness of sex trafficking.

Laetitia Gotte explained how one of the inspirations for founding Asociatia FREE was encountering a girl who had been trafficked to the UK for sexual exploitation. Asociatia FREE undertakes outreach to women involved in prostitution on the streets, indoors and online. The organisation operates a drop-in service, provides online programmes and runs a shelter.

The UK is one of the top destination countries for trafficking victims from Romania. Women who are trafficked for sexual exploitation can be recruited by

“
Like any market we can reduce the offer by reducing the demand. I believe the UK can take a position and make this shameful market less profitable.
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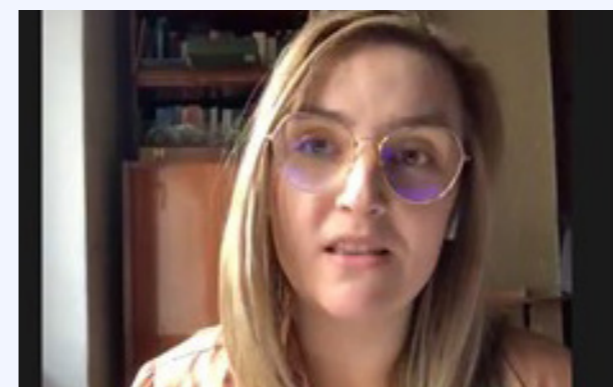
false job adverts or coerced by husbands and partners, and some women who are already involved in sexual exploitation are targeted by traffickers. This can make it difficult for women to accept that they are victims and can lead to them blaming themselves for their exploitation. Laetitia Gotte also highlighted how she had been approached by a trafficker while she was doing outreach work at Asociatia FREE.

“It happened to me one day. I was doing outreach online, and then a guy talked to me and offered me a job in Ireland. He said I would make good money. It was about sex in a house next to a club. ...Some guy would take care of all the details, like transportation, paperwork and clients.”

Asociatia FREE surveyed women involved in street prostitution in Bucharest. A third of the women reported that they had been trafficked at some point.

“83% of them told us that if they had the opportunity to do something else they would leave prostitution. ..It is really something they feel forced into doing for survival.”

France is now seen as a bad market for sexual exploitation because paying for sex is a criminal offence. This is a positive step, and the UK should follow suit.



Ioana Sandescu Bauer, Director of eLiberare

Ioana Bauer is the President of eLiberare, an NGO working in Romania on preventing and combatting human trafficking and sexual exploitation. Ioana is an Ashoka Fellow and a Resilience Fellow.

eLiberare is part of a platform in Romania that brings together 16 of the most active NGOs and institutions working in the field of trafficking. Together they have served over 6000 survivors.

“
Please coordinate with us on the campaigns that you are doing so that we address not only decreasing the vulnerability but also equipping people at risk with tools to report exploitation, and also addressing potential clients. Because ultimately this is the way that we will disrupt the business model of traffickers. The moment that trafficking in persons is no longer a profitable business, when the risks will outweigh the benefits, that’s when we are going to see how we can make trafficking the exception and not the norm.
”

Ioana Sandescu Bauer has found from speaking to victims of trafficking for sexual exploitation that many were aware this crime existed, but they felt it was a distant possibility and happened to other people. She questioned whether expectations about Romanian women coming to the UK for prostitution led to a tolerance of this exploitation.

“Are there certain cultural norms that lead us to look away and to just accept the status quo?”

Support services and agencies need to be victim centred. We need to learn, hear and listen to victims. For some, returning home from the country they have been exploited in may be a ticket to re-victimisation. Partnership and collaboration is vital in prevention and awareness campaigns.



Session 1: The view from frontline agencies



Cristina Huddleston, Director of European Operations at Justice and Care

Cristina Huddleston is Director of European Operations at Justice and Care. She oversees a number of areas for Justice and Care that seek to prevent trafficking in 'at risk' communities, disrupt and dismantle criminal networks and rebuild the lives of those impacted by the crimes of human trafficking and slavery.

Cristina Huddleston spoke about there being three key headlines present both pre-exploitation and post-exploitation: resilience, culture and realistic opportunities.

Regarding resilience, by the time women are found in brothels, they will have already gone through multiple traumas, such as domestic violence, child sexual abuse or loss of parental care. Cristina Huddleston emphasised that some individuals can become resilient to trauma and won't always see themselves

“**They will accept that is all they are good for.**”

as victims. It can be hard to tackle this acceptance. Services and agencies do not meet the support needs resulting from the level of trauma that women have experienced.

The culture of the sex industry can result in both victims of trafficking for sexual exploitation and those who do not identify themselves as victims refusing to speak about the abuse, violence and exploitation in the sex industry. Victims will provide cover stories for what they have experienced and will not speak out about what has happened.

Women need realistic opportunities to meet their financial and family needs. Recognising this is important to understanding how they were recruited into exploitation in the first place. This vulnerability must be tackled early.

“Quite often it's that person that they trust or know of [who recruits them]. It's not going to be big mafia groups driving through in their big cars and just targeting them. It will be a subtle process of recruitment, very legal-looking models of recruitment. But that means there's already a vulnerability there. There's already a need for something there. A need to follow a man grooming them or a need to follow a job offer.”



Corina Panaite, Social Worker at ADPARE

Corina Panaite is a Social Worker with a Masters degree in social work counseling. ADPARE is a Romanian organisation that provides complex assistance programmes to reintegrate victims of trafficking.

ADPARE was launched in 2003 to support victims of trafficking. The majority of people they support are women who have been sexually exploited. The organisation provides support tailored to each individual. This can include material assistance, legal assistance, and psychological support. A significant number of victims referred to the charity have been exploited in the UK.

Traffickers exploit a range of vulnerabilities in order to recruit and retain victims, including emotional needs and desires,

“**They need to know that they are wanted, they are loved, and that they are appreciated. And everybody as a human being is looking for this - to be appreciated and to be wanted. ...Traffickers are looking on this personal vulnerability.**”

drug addiction and community level vulnerabilities such as not being accepted in the community or not having trust in state institutions.

In order to support victims of trafficking ADPARE works with people in communities who are close to the victims, such as family members, in order to support reintegration.

“We can provide specific services for victims of trafficking, but we cannot provide and replace a family.”

It is important that agencies and services in destination countries are respectful of victims and build trust. When victims are part of official investigations, they need time, support and guidance through the process. Corina Panaite highlighted cases where victims of sex trafficking have not been informed as to the progress or outcomes of the UK investigation into their case.

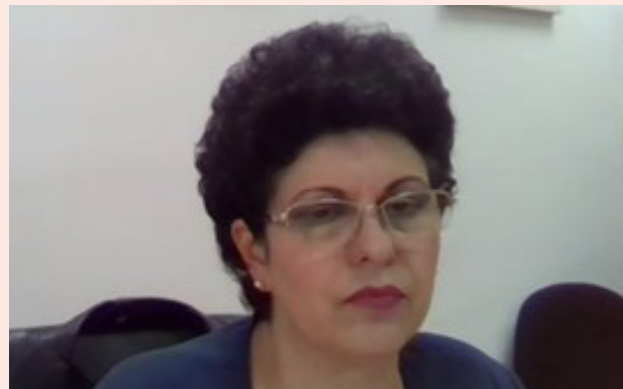
Session 2:

The view from prevention and law enforcement agencies

Chair: Dame Diana Johnson MP, Chair of the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Commercial Sexual Exploitation

Panellists:

- Monaliza Cîrstea, National Agency for Equal Opportunities between Women and Men
- Detective Sergeant Stuart Peall, Lancashire Constabulary
- Madalina Vlangar, Chief Superintendent, Police & Home Affairs Attaché, Romanian Embassy in London
- Marius Burcea, Head of the Inter-institutional Cooperation and National Prevention Project, National Agency against Trafficking in Persons
- Andrew Noble LVO, British Ambassador to Romania



Monaliza Cîrstea, National Agency for Equal Opportunities between Women and Men

Monaliza Cîrstea is Director of the Directorate for Prevention and Combating Domestic Violence at the National Agency for Equal Opportunities between Women and Men in Romania.

Monaliza Cîrstea highlighted the need to collaborate in order to support victims of sex trafficking and to prevent this crime.

all international and national authorities that will provide permanent institutional cooperation and collaboration in order to identify, deconstruct, as well as counteract specific criminal activities...

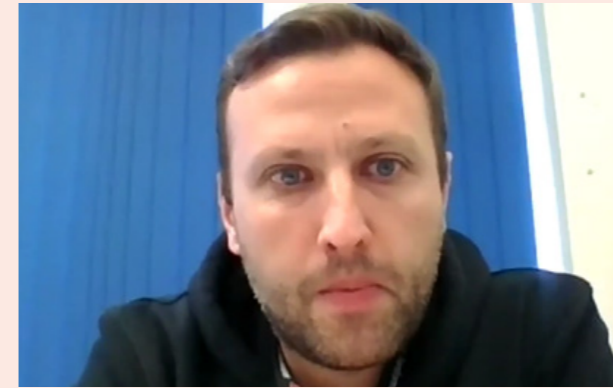
Human trafficking is recognised in Romania as gender-based violence. It is important to take into account the gendered nature of the crime.

“Women’s vulnerability is greater for sexual exploitation and pornography, while men to exploitation through labour and forced begging.”

The National Agency for Equal Opportunities between Women and Men has collaborated with agencies to develop a national strategy on tackling sexual violence. The general legal framework on this issue must also be improved.

“I would like to emphasise the imperative need for prevention actions and education activities on a long-lasting basis”.

“The transnational, multinational dimension and the special dynamics of this issue require sustained efforts from



Detective Sergeant Stuart Peall, Lancashire Constabulary

Detective Sergeant Stuart Peall joined Lancashire Constabulary in 2004 and moved to the East Lancashire Trafficking and Exploitation Team in 2016. He led the two largest victimless sex trafficking prosecution cases in the UK with over 20 Romanian persons convicted of sex trafficking.

Detective Sergeant Stuart Peall highlighted that Lancashire Police secured what is currently the largest conviction for sex trafficking in the UK. They differ from most forces in proactively running sex trafficking investigations in the absence of a complaint from a victim. The investigations are evidence-led due

to the barriers victims face in disclosing what has happened to them. This approach was developed in response to the repeated cover stories that officers were told when they visited brothels.

“Continuously we were going to addresses and women were saying in essence the same thing at every address we went to, that we’re happy to be in the UK, we’re not forced to do anything, we’re here of our own free will. And you were constantly leaving those addresses knowing full well that that wasn’t the case.”

The long-term aim of an evidence-led approach is to give victims the confidence to disclose their exploitation to the police. Lancashire Police’s sex trafficking investigations include Operation Ludlow, Operation Magician, Operation Iris, Operation Ecuador and Operation Laval. In the most recent sex trafficking investigation – Operation Brixton – seven Romanian suspects have pleaded guilty.

In order to prevent trafficking for sexual exploitation it is necessary to tackle demand from sex buyers.

“ **There is massive demand around the north west... But I think as a country we’re doing very little about that. ...We’ve been saying for years we think we should be doing more, there should be some deterrent against those using [sexual] services - because realistically if we didn’t have the demand, then there wouldn’t be such popularity over sites such as Vivastreet and Adultwork [which host prostitution adverts].** ”

Session 2: The view from prevention and law enforcement agencies



Chief Superintendent Madalina Vlangar, Police & Home Affairs Attaché, Romanian Embassy in London

Chief Superintendent Madalina Vlangar's role includes facilitating cooperation at the policing and judicial level – which involves working with NGOs and agencies in both the UK and Romania. Chief Superintendent Vlangar provided an overview of the work of the special prosecutor's office in Romania that deals with organised crime, including human trafficking.

In 2019, the prosecutor's office signed 23 joint investigation agreements with judicial units in Europe. During the first six months of 2020, Romania only signed three joint investigation agreements due to the impact of COVID 19. During the first six months of 2020, Romania also

received 28 investigation orders from investigative units across the European Union. The UK ranks at number five on the list of judicial cooperation with Romania - after Germany, Italy, Spain and Belgium. In 2019, Romania received 11 investigation orders from the UK.

The prosecutor's office has implemented a project aimed at improving the investigation of money laundering in connection with human trafficking.

Chief Superintendent Madalina Vlangar voiced concerns about the potential impact of Brexit on cross-border cooperation in the investigation of sex trafficking cases and underlined the importance of seeking an agreement on such cooperation.

“
My personal message as I work on daily basis with the British partners is that I am a bit worried about what's going to be [the arrangements] after Brexit.
”



Marius Burcea, Head of the Inter-institutional Cooperation and National Prevention Project, National Agency against Trafficking in Persons

As head of the prevention unit within the National Agency against Trafficking in Persons (NATP) in Romania, Marius coordinates the actions of cooperation and prevention of human trafficking, carried out at a national level. He also coordinates the Anti-Trafficking Helpline.

NATP initiates awareness raising campaigns in order to prevent human trafficking. Sexual exploitation is the most common and widespread form with the highest number of victims.

One of the aims of NATP's prevention work is to reduce people's vulnerability to trafficking. However, another key aim is to discourage and reduce the demand that facilitates the trafficking in human beings.

“
We are encouraging destination countries to take measures to discourage and reduce the demand that facilitates trafficking in human beings.
”

“Measures to reduce vulnerability – if we are talking about economical, social, educational measures and so on – must always be complimented by concrete measures to reduce and discourage the demand that facilitates human trafficking.”

A recent online campaign run by NATP was designed to inform, raise awareness and reduce the demand for trafficking in persons. The campaign message was: 'Don't pay for sex. The demand for sexual services increases the number of trafficking victims.'

In addition to public awareness campaigns, NATP trains specialists and professionals that come into contact with victims of trafficking. They have also collaborated with other Romanian institutions such as the Ministry for Education, and organisations such as the Federation of the Hotel Industry and the National Union of Transporters.

“It is not enough to know who the victim is to save her, and who the trafficker is to punish him. It's important to know who the final beneficiary is – the one for whom the victim is recruited and transported, the one who guarantees the deception, fraud, violence and abuse – because the client is the one who pays for all of this.”

Session 2: The view from prevention and law enforcement agencies



Andrew Noble LVO, British Ambassador to Romania

Andrew Noble is the British Ambassador to Romania. He joined the Foreign & Commonwealth Office in 1982. Andrew was most recently Her Majesty's Ambassador to Algeria and has also served in Germany, South Africa and Greece.

Andrew Noble paid tribute to the efforts of organisations and agencies working to tackle trafficking for sexual exploitation and thanked Dame Diana Johnson MP for her leadership on this issue.

“We as a British Government office in Bucharest have the tackling of human trafficking right at the top of our priorities.”

The UK has a good track record of bilateral police action with Romania. In September 2020, 24 arrests were

made in relation to a sex trafficking ring, with the involvement of police in both Romania and the UK.

There is a full-time liaison magistrate in the British embassy to facilitate joint working and ensure perpetrators are brought to justice.

The area that needs particular attention is the prevention of sex trafficking. There are enduring patterns of poverty in Romania, which serve as a significant driver of exploitation. Victims do not always realise that they are being trafficked, particularly as it is often individuals known to the victim who are coercing them.

The embassy is in communication with the Romanian government on this issue. The government is increasing its efforts to counter trafficking. It is crucial to improve housing, education and life prospects. One million people live on under two dollars a day in Romania.

15 Romanian-based NGOs have come together as a task force to work on human trafficking. The embassy is working with them and supporting discussions.

“We as a British Embassy in Bucharest will continue to do everything that we can to advance the cause of women who are brought into a barbaric and very brutal world.”

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