



protecting children everywhere

Child Sex Tourism in Bulgaria

1. Background

There is little evidence to show that sex tourism is a problem in Bulgaria. However, this may simply indicate the difficulty of detecting the crime or the lack of attention given to it by authorities since many children, especially girls, are exploited in the sex industry and trafficked to, within and through Bulgaria for sexual exploitation. A 2005 report by the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) has found that Bulgaria is one of the main countries of origin for victims of trafficking in South Eastern Europe. In addition, children from ethnic minorities are amongst the majority of those being commercially sexually exploited.

In 1997, the monitoring body for the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) expressed concerns about the rise in child prostitution and pornography and the Governments failure to coordinate a response to it. Research indicates that the growth of child pornography often goes hand in hand with child sex tourism.

Bulgarian Legislation

Bulgaria ratified the CRC on 24 January 1997. Since then the Government has amended and introduced legislation designed to eliminate and improve the conditions exposing children to various forms of abuse. It has also signed many of the international conventions relating to the elimination of all forms of slavery, including the UN Protocol to Prevent, Suppress, and Punish Trafficking in Persons, especially Women and Children. The Penal Code of Bulgaria includes provisions that prohibit the organisation and advertising of sex tours and specifically those targeting children. In 2003, Parliament adopted the Law on Combating Trafficking in Human Beings and at the end of 2004 the National Commission was created. Under this Commission a National Program for Combating Trafficking in Human Beings was adopted in January 2005.

The Government created the State Agency for Child Protection to promote and implement the Child Protection Act of 2000. In addition, the act of carrying out trafficking is a criminal offence under the Human Trafficking Act. In relation to prostitution, compelling or procuring a female in the sex industry is prohibited by the Penal Code and the penalty for this offence is a fine and a prison term of one to eight years. The punishment increases if abduction of a child is also involved.

UK Legislation

While British tourists who commit sexual offences in Bulgaria can be prosecuted in that country, they can also be prosecuted in the UK for crimes committed while abroad. Under the UK Sexual Offences Act, 2003, article 72, persons can be prosecuted for a crime that is viewed as a criminal offence in both countries. Therefore, if tourists sexually abuse a child in Bulgaria, they can be tried in the UK as both countries legislate against this offence. This Act is intended to cover crimes that may be committed by the traveller against either a travelling child companion or a child living in the country, but in which the crime is not detected until returning to the UK.

Additionally, the Sexual Offences (Conspiracy and Incitement) Act, 1996, allows for the prosecution of those who conspire to commit a sexual offence outside the UK, or incite someone else to commit the offence. Therefore if one person either helps or pushes another to commit the offence, they too can be prosecuted in the UK.

2. Who are the children and aspects of vulnerability?

The children most vulnerable to commercial sexual exploitation, including sex tourism:

Child labour: Many children from poor families often work in various industries with little protection and as such are vulnerable to all forms of abuse, including being compelled into the sex industry or being trafficked by criminal networks. According to a national survey in 2002, of a total of 1,294,000 children in Bulgaria, about 83,000 or 6.4 percent work in the private sector, 418,000 or 32.3 percent work at their family farms and 611,000 or 41.8 percent are engaged in housework.

Ethnic discrimination: The Roma minority is particularly vulnerable to discrimination and a systemic and widespread lack of opportunities in education and employment. They are also frequent targets of violence by skinhead gangs, ethnic violence and mistreatment by the police.

Street children: An estimated 12,000-14,000 children live on the streets in the cities of Bulgaria. Most of these are of Roma ethnic identity and leave their homes due to family violence or poverty. Many of them end up supporting themselves through begging, odd jobs and prostitution. Their extreme vulnerability exposes them to physical and sexual violence.

Trafficking: According to the US State Department trafficking report Roma children are disproportionately vulnerable to abuse by the organised sex industry and trafficking gangs. It is not only local children who are vulnerable to such abuse because foreign children are also trafficked into the country. The US Trafficking report states that, 'It is widely believed that some law enforcement officers or other government authorities were complicit in human trafficking, including local authorities and customs officials'.

3. Who are the abusers?

There is very little documentation on the characteristics of foreign child sex abusers entering Bulgaria. Greater evidence exists of children within the sex industry being abused by local men. However, given the vulnerability factors for children and the international dimension of child sex tourism it is probable that they are exposed to this form of abuse as well.

Research from other countries shows that sex tourists seek out children already being exploited within the prostitution industry. Other sex offenders approach children directly, especially those who live on the streets.

4. How is the travel industry involved?

According to the Bulgarian Tourist Chamber tourism is growing in the country and accounts for 8.9 percent of GDP. The tourism sector in Bulgaria appears to be growing despite the predicted worldwide downturn after the September 11, 2001 attacks in the United States. NGOs are concerned that the rise in tourism will inevitably lead to increasing levels of child abuse, if nothing is done to monitor, document or prevent it.

In response to the growing problem of the abuse of children the Government developed a National Plan of Action against Sexual exploitation of Children, which is coordinated by the State Agency for Child Protection. With respect to trafficking, in 2005, the National Anti-Trafficking Strategy was introduced to support the work of the National Anti-Trafficking Commission. The Government has also worked with national and international nongovernmental organisations and other agencies to raise awareness of the problem of child abuse. It has also worked with the IOM in providing shelters and safe houses for victims of trafficking. A hotline for victims of violence or trafficking is operated by the women's NGO, Animus Association Foundation.