

2023 Trafficking in Persons Report: Bulgaria

BULGARIA (Tier 2 Watch List)

The caretaker Government of Bulgaria does not fully meet the minimum standards for the elimination of trafficking but is making significant efforts to do so. These efforts included convicting more traffickers, informally adopting new NAPs for 2022 and 2023, and utilizing seized assets to supplement shelters and specialized service centers directly assisting trafficking victims. Additionally, the prosecutor general mandated specialized trafficking training for investigative prosecutors and magistrates and required the assignment of trafficking cases to those individuals. The National Investigative Service (NIS) established a cyber unit, focusing on internet-based exploitation, including trafficking, and financial investigations, and assisted regional police in investigating crimes with online components. Furthermore, the Bulgarian and German ministries of labor cooperated on a bilateral work program to combat labor trafficking, including joint anti-trafficking activities, informational campaigns targeting the large number of Bulgarians seeking employment in Germany, and a bilateral referral mechanism for trafficking cases between the countries. However, the caretaker government did not demonstrate overall increasing efforts compared with the previous reporting period, even considering the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, if any, on its anti-trafficking capacity. Courts continued to issue suspended sentences for most convicted traffickers (68 percent), which weakened deterrence, did not adequately reflect the nature of the crime, and undercut broader efforts to fight trafficking. Authorities did not adequately screen for trafficking indicators or identify victims, particularly among vulnerable groups, such as Roma. In addition, a limited number of identified victims received assistance (29 percent). Moreover, the caretaker government provided limited funding to NGOs for victim services and to the National Commission for Combatting Trafficking in Human Beings (NCCTHB) for capacity building and implementation of anti-trafficking activities, limiting the sustainability of the government's anti-trafficking systems. The lack of resources, legal authority to pursue labor trafficking cases, and sufficient training impeded labor officials' ability to enforce laws effectively. Finally, corruption in law enforcement and the judiciary continued to hinder progress, and alleged complicity in trafficking crimes persisted with impunity. Therefore Bulgaria remained on Tier 2 Watch List for the second consecutive year.

PRIORITIZED RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Vigorously investigate and prosecute trafficking crimes, and convict traffickers, including complicit government officials.
- Seek adequate penalties for convicted traffickers, which should involve significant prison terms.
- Proactively identify potential trafficking victims, especially among vulnerable populations such as Roma, and ensure all identified victims receive state-funded assistance.
- Train employees of relevant institutions on understanding and applying NRM guidelines for referring victims to services.
- Introduce a sustainable financial mechanism for victim services and allocate adequate funding to NGOs for the victim protection program.
- Increase funding to NCCTHB for capacity building, including staff, and anti-trafficking activities, such as prevention campaigns.
- Expand labor inspectors' legal authority to identify and pursue labor trafficking cases and provide training for inspectors on recognizing trafficking indicators.
- Establish and implement a reliable comprehensive statistical system for collecting and collating victim identification and assistance data.

- Implement the non-punishment provision ensuring trafficking victims are not inappropriately penalized solely for unlawful acts committed as a direct result of being trafficked and provide guidance to authorities on its application.
- Develop a formal mechanism that utilizes financial assets seized from convicted traffickers to supplement victim services and victim compensation.
- Train authorities on evidence collection and investigating trafficking crimes, particularly labor trafficking and online sex trafficking crimes.
- Enhance efforts to train law enforcement officials, prosecutors, and judges to understand the severity of trafficking crimes and their impact on victims, particularly the negative impact of suspended or short sentences.
- Provide qualified legal counsel and courtroom protections for victims assisting prosecutions.

PROSECUTION

The caretaker government maintained law enforcement efforts. Articles 159a-159d of the criminal code criminalized sex trafficking and labor trafficking and prescribed penalties of two to eight years' imprisonment and a fine for crimes involving adult victims, and three to 10 years' imprisonment and a fine for those involving child victims. These penalties were sufficiently stringent and, with respect to sex trafficking, commensurate with penalties prescribed for other serious crimes, such as rape.

In 2022, authorities investigated 57 cases (35 sex trafficking, 20 labor trafficking, two unspecified forms of trafficking), compared with 53 in 2021. During the reporting period, the Prosecution Service changed its methodology for reporting prosecution data and only provided statistics on new prosecutions, whereas, in previous years, statistics included ongoing prosecutions. In 2022, the Prosecution Service reported prosecuting 19 traffickers (17 sex trafficking, two labor trafficking); it reported prosecuting 77 traffickers in 2021. Courts convicted 37 traffickers (31 sex trafficking, six labor trafficking), an increase from 27 in 2021. As in previous years, the caretaker government did not report the range of prison sentences imposed on all convicted traffickers; however, judges issued suspended sentences for 25 convicted traffickers (68 percent) and acquitted two, which weakened deterrence, did not adequately reflect the nature of the crime, and undercut broader efforts to fight trafficking. Bulgarian law allowed those convicted of a crime to be eligible for suspended sentences if the sentence received was for three years or less, which frequently happened in trafficking cases. Anti-trafficking advocates recommended amending the minimum sentence for trafficking from two to longer than three years to attempt to reduce the instances when convicted traffickers would receive suspended sentences. However, political instability prevented the passage of any trafficking-related legislation as the country had a caretaker government for two-thirds of the reporting period and lacked a working parliament for more than one-third of the reporting period. Some government and law enforcement officials criticized judges for not considering victims or the broader effects of lenient sentences for convicted traffickers. In 2022, Bulgarian authorities cooperated with European counterparts on one new joint investigation team with the United Kingdom, several international investigations, and multiple judicial requests. In one investigation, Bulgarian and German authorities cooperated on a sex trafficking case involving five women forced into commercial sex in Germany; authorities arrested 10 suspected traffickers. In 2022, the Ministry of Interior (MOI) and its international partners established joint contact centers on the borders with Romania, Serbia, North Macedonia, Greece, and Türkiye, and exchanged information about criminal activities, including trafficking cases.

Corruption in law enforcement and the judiciary, impunity or lack of meaningful sentences for complicit officials, and selective prosecution remained pervasive. Reports indicated law enforcement and prosecution service officials purposely failed to follow up on potential labor trafficking cases or sometimes investigated such cases as lesser violations of domestic labor rules. NGOs reported alleged complicity in smaller towns by law enforcement officials reluctant to investigate trafficking cases because they either knew the traffickers or feared retaliation. Additionally, media outlets reported some police officers took payments to turn a blind eye toward

women exploited in commercial sex. Nevertheless, in 2022, the caretaker government did not report any investigations, prosecutions, or convictions of government officials complicit in trafficking crimes.

MOI's General Directorate for Combating Organized Crime (GDBOP) was the primary law enforcement department responsible for combating trafficking. GDBOP maintained a specialized police unit for investigating trafficking cases involving organized crime. Other departments within MOI, including the National Police and the Border Police handled cases that did not involve organized crime. NIS maintained a specialized criminal department that investigated cases related to serious crimes, including trafficking, with specialized investigators, but had limited jurisdiction over trafficking cases. Observers reported investigators and prosecutors continued to lack sensitivity toward trafficking victims, referring disparagingly to minority groups and making broad generalizations about victims, especially those subjected to sex trafficking. Observers also noted uneven levels of knowledge about trafficking laws and referral procedures among investigators and prosecutors, particularly at the local level, and suggested it was easier for prosecutors to successfully prosecute immigration violations rather than trafficking crimes. Furthermore, authorities at all levels of the government continued to conflate human trafficking with irregular migration and human smuggling. According to an NGO, a major challenge to investigating and prosecuting labor trafficking cases was the lack of a common understanding among law enforcement and judges about what constituted forced labor. In July 2022, the government dissolved the specialized courts and prosecutors' offices, whose mandate included trafficking cases involving organized crime. Experts were split on the merits of the closure, but at least one expert prosecutor criticized the reform and lack of political will to address ways to support prosecuting trafficking cases and assisting victims, such as amending legislation to lower the burden of proof required to prosecute trafficking crimes and allow seized assets from traffickers to fund victim services. In October 2022, to address knowledge gaps and improve specialization, the prosecutor general issued an order mandating specialized trafficking training for some prosecutors and investigative magistrates and requiring the random assignment of trafficking cases to those individuals. According to observers, authorities regularly seized financial assets from convicted traffickers. In 2022, while there was no formal mechanism in place to allow seized assets to supplement victim services or victim compensation, government agencies, by way of an NGO, provided confiscated goods to shelters and specialized service centers directly assisting trafficking victims.

In 2022, NIS established a cyber unit focused on internet-based crimes, including trafficking, and financial investigations to assist regional police in investigating crimes with online components. Previously, regional police only received assistance from national agencies for online exploitation cases with an organized crime nexus. According to an NGO, traffickers' use of the internet for online sexual exploitation, including trafficking, had increased more than 100 percent in the last 18 months. NGOs expressed concern authorities were not proactive in investigating online cases and the government lacked active policies for online child protection. Moreover, the increasing use of encrypted communications hindered authorities' efforts to gather evidence for successful prosecutions, particularly involving online trafficking cases. Government officials expressed hope the new cyber unit would help address some of these shortcomings. In 2022, the NCCTHB, the agency that coordinated the government's anti-trafficking efforts, conducted several trainings for investigators, prosecutors, judges, and social workers on various topics, including approaches to investigations and prosecutions, trafficking legislation, coordinating on labor trafficking cases, financial investigations, and victim identification among vulnerable communities, such as Roma.

PROTECTION

The caretaker government maintained protection efforts. During the reporting period, the Prosecution Service changed its methodology for reporting statistics on identified victims. Prior to 2022, the Prosecution Service reported cumulative statistics, whereas in 2022 they only reported newly identified victims. In addition, in 2022, multiple agencies reported statistics on identified victims, contrary to previous years, when only the Prosecution Service reported statistics. The

Agency for Social Assistance (ASA), NCCTHB, and the Prosecution Service reported 298 identified victims (115 sex trafficking, 123 labor trafficking, 60 unspecified forms of trafficking) in 2022. The Prosecution Service reported 416 identified victims in 2021. Experts continued to express concern the victim data collection system remained overall unreliable, likely including double counting and, in turn, inhibiting the government's ability to assess the scope of the trafficking problem. Of the 298 identified victims, 33 were child victims (20 sex trafficking, one labor trafficking, 12 unspecified forms of trafficking), compared with 42 in 2021. Authorities identified approximately seven foreign victims, six Ukrainian women, who were fleeing Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, and one Filipina woman, in unspecified forms of trafficking, compared with one foreign victim in 2021. NCCTHB reported assisting 86 of 298 identified victims (29 percent), of which 12 were children, compared with 42 out of 416 (10 percent) in 2021.

The NRM outlined the procedures for identification, referral, and victim assistance. The Prosecution Service was responsible for formally identifying potential trafficking victims, while government employees and NGOs could informally identify victims, allowing victims to access services and support programs immediately. NGOs alleged some authorities did not proactively screen for trafficking indicators and could not effectively identify victims, especially among vulnerable groups, such as asylum-seekers, migrants, children in residential care, individuals exploited in commercial sex, and members of the Romani community. NGOs and international organizations reported stigma and fear of isolation among migrants and cultural issues among the Romani community created extreme difficulties for all practitioners in identifying trafficking crimes. The State Agency for Refugees maintained guidelines to identify potential victims among foreigners seeking international protection, carry out risk assessments, assess immediate needs, and assist identified victims with accommodation, medical examinations, interviews, and special status pursuant to the Asylum and Refugees Act. Authorities, NGOs, and NCCTHB referred victims to services after determining their immediate needs. While NGOs and international organizations reported greater NRM awareness and generally good coordination, some NGOs remarked the referral process was inflexible and bureaucratic, citing different agencies' multiple and overlapping requirements. In addition, one NGO noted the NRM provided clear guidelines on referring victims to services but questioned whether employees of relevant institutions were familiar with the guidelines and knew how to apply them routinely.

Under the NRM, all formally or informally identified domestic and foreign trafficking victims received access to services, including counseling, shelter, medical support, and reintegration assistance, regardless of their cooperation in investigations or prosecutions. NCCTHB supported seven NGO-operated dedicated centers and shelters – three counseling centers, three shelters for temporary accommodation, and one shelter for reintegration – in Sofia, Burgas, and Varna, providing specialized services for adult trafficking victims, and allocated 157,612 Bulgarian lev (BGN) (\$86,130) for services in Burgas and Varna. MOI funded the services in Sofia, allocating 156,000 BGN (\$85,250). However, there was no consistent funding mechanism in place to ensure the sustainability of the shelters from year to year. Civil society emphasized the need for a sustainable source of funds for NGOs, which have a wealth of experience in the sector and end up providing critical needs that the government cannot. Experts noted the victim protection program, in general, was chronically underfunded, hampering implementation of a fully-fledged victim-centered approach, and the financial resources invested did not correspond with the actual needs. Observers asserted shelter staff lacked sensitivity and a victim-centered approach, citing incidents of re-traumatization among victims. Observers also noted the limited number of dedicated shelters for trafficking victims throughout the country remained problematic. While there were other crisis centers available to trafficking victims, they were foremost intended for victims of violence. The Agency for the Quality of Social Services (AQSS) licensed 16 NGOs to operate crisis centers and provide social services funded by municipalities. For instance, Sofia Municipality allocated 387,803 BGN (\$211,910) toward an NGO-run crisis center with a mother and baby unit for pregnant trafficking victims or female trafficking victims with children younger than three years old. AQSS also monitored and conducted inspections of service providers, municipalities, and local bodies for compliance with requirements and quality of services. ASA funded eight crisis centers for adult victims of violence, including trafficking.

Child victims of violence, including trafficking, could stay in municipality-operated crisis centers for up to six months at which point SACP could place them with relatives, a foster family, or another residential care facility. The crisis center for children in Sofia granted priority to child trafficking victims. Mobile crisis intervention teams were available to provide immediate socio-psychological assistance when necessary, through ASA. ASA, in conjunction with regional education departments and health inspection directorates, provided guidance on reporting potential child victims to all schools, kindergartens, nurseries, support centers, residential care facilities, and medical facilities; social workers investigated any reports. Child protection departments of the Social Assistance Directorate actively monitored child trafficking cases for one year, with the possibility of an extension, to provide necessary support and prevent children from being re-victimized. In some cases, the Directorate created a multidisciplinary team to develop an action plan for protecting the child. NGOs reported challenges in the coordination and referral of child victims due to an overly bureaucratic approach of child protection officials who sometimes prioritized paperwork over children's needs. SACP maintained a coordination mechanism for unaccompanied children to coordinate among relevant government agencies and improve identification, referral, protection, and support of child trafficking victims. SACP tracked unaccompanied children registered in the national system and maintained a database of unaccompanied and separated children from third countries who were seeking or had already received international protection. More than 3,000 unaccompanied children from third countries were registered in 2022. SACP regularly monitored places where unaccompanied children were accommodated to ensure their safety. In 2022, SACP's interagency working group continued developing a three-year national program for the prevention of violence and child abuse and a corresponding implementation plan, including activities for child trafficking victims, such as reintegration. SACP operated the 24-hour national hotline for children at risk, including trafficking, until September 2022, when ASA began operating the hotline. In 2022, the hotline received 70 reports of children at risk of trafficking and exploitation.

Bulgarian law allowed foreign victims who cooperated with law enforcement to receive long-term residence permits and work in Bulgaria for the duration of criminal proceedings before deportation. For foreign victims who chose not to assist in investigations, the government provided a 30-day recovery period (60 days for foreign child victims) before repatriation. Observers noted many victims did not cooperate with law enforcement because they did not believe the judicial system would protect them, effectively administer justice, or convict perpetrators with meaningful sentences. The law exempted trafficking victims from punishment for unlawful acts committed as a direct result of being trafficked; however, practitioners noted this law did not provide full exemption as force was not always applied. Some experts said police generally did not understand individuals in commercial sex were vulnerable to trafficking or that the non-punishment provision for crime victims could apply to them. For instance, observers reported law enforcement often viewed members of the Romani community as voluntarily engaging in commercial sex and did not consider them trafficking victims. In 2022, upon the recommendation of the prosecutor general and judges from the Supreme Court of Cassation, the Constitutional Court invalidated an old provision of the criminal code that punished persons, who generated income through "immoral activity," with penalties of up to two years' imprisonment or probation; authorities mostly used the provision to initiate criminal proceedings against persons who begged or engaged in commercial sex. The government provided repatriation assistance to Bulgarian citizens despite having no designated funds, and sometimes relied on an international organization or institutions in the destination countries to cover costs. While the law provided free legal assistance to victims, qualified legal aid was difficult to access, especially when victims were outside of the jurisdiction of the court reviewing the case. The National Office for Legal Assistance published and distributed a brochure on the terms and conditions for receiving legal aid. The National Office for Legal Assistance also funded and implemented a three-year project to improve access to justice for persons living below the poverty line, with a focus on women, children, and Roma, allocating 1.47 million BGN (\$803,280). The project provided legal aid to 250 persons from vulnerable groups, improved coordination between different municipal and local authorities, supported various administrative units helping victims, and improved the capacity of 300 lawyers in this area. The process for seeking compensation remained overly bureaucratic and discouraged victims from filing civil suits. In 2022, there were no cases of restitution.

PREVENTION

The caretaker government maintained prevention efforts. During the reporting period, NCCTHB informally adopted NAPs for 2022 and 2023 but did not submit them to the Council of Ministers for formal adoption. NCCTHB also convened in-person for the first time in two years and implemented anti-trafficking activities, such as conducting informational and educational campaigns and organizing methodological guidance for local commissions. While the caretaker government allocated 220,500 BGN (\$120,490) toward anti-trafficking activities and some agencies funded activities through their own budgets, observers noted overall funding for anti-trafficking activities was insufficient. Observers also reported most laws and mechanisms had not been updated in 20 years and that Bulgarian institutions did not actively engage with European counterparts on new trends and areas of concern to inform best practices and updated legislation for combating trafficking. Furthermore, the caretaker government did not consider trafficking a major problem in Bulgaria and, consequently, lacked political will at the highest levels to address the situation, which was exacerbated by often changing Commission members. NGOs asserted the government's lack of support undermined the NCCTHB's role and negatively impacted its staff. In general, NCCTHB struggled with limited financial and human resources, impeding its ability to execute critical functions and work on long-term projects, such as amendments to trafficking legislation and strategic planning, and questioning its sustainability. Since NCCTHB was a political body, some of its members changed with each new government, and, with four caretaker governments in less than two years, there were frequent changes to its structure, most notably its chairperson – assigned from among the deputy prime ministers. Separately, to help resolve chronic staffing gaps in the NCCTHB's expert-level secretariat, NCCTHB hired three new experts in 2022. In addition, the deputy prime minister, who chaired the NCCTHB, appointed an advisor with international experience in trafficking issues. NCCTHB maintained a permanent working group with anti-trafficking experts from relevant government institutions, civil society, international organizations, and NGOs. NCCTHB devolved regional efforts to 10 local anti-trafficking commissions, comprising judges, prosecutors, law enforcement officials, municipal employees, and other civil servants. NCCTHB funded an academic institute to assess the implementation of the 2017-2021 national strategy. Experts interviewed government officials, NGOs, and independent observers and prepared a report with recommendations for the next five-year national strategy.

In 2022, NCCTHB and the local commissions conducted multiple awareness campaigns and information sessions, including a campaign on sex trafficking targeting students and children. NGOs noted most campaigns did not target vulnerable communities but rather aimed to raise awareness among the general public. Furthermore, NGOs asserted there was no comprehensive prevention strategy that corresponded to current trends, such as online recruitment, and called for more research into this area and the creation of strategies addressing this new trend. The NCCTHB maintained a phone line, email, and website for the public to inquire about or report trafficking-related crimes through which it identified 112 potential trafficking victims. The Ministry of Justice continued to support an NGO-run hotline for victims of violence, including trafficking, allocating 64,980 BGN (\$35,510), and received 17 calls related to potential trafficking cases. Separately, the caretaker government supported a dedicated NGO-run hotline through burden sharing, such as transportation costs, and consultative services, including advice on assistance and identification, and promoted the hotline through social media. The hotline referred 31 trafficking-related cases to authorities who identified 27 potential victims. The caretaker government did not make efforts to reduce the demand for commercial sex acts. In 2022, UNHCR, NGOs, and media outlets reported cases of violent pushbacks of asylum-seekers and migrants along the border with Türkiye – an illegal practice under international and EU human rights laws that potentially increased a person's vulnerability to trafficking, exacerbated distrust of foreign officials, and disallowed for the reporting of any exploitation experienced.

Experts noted systemic issues, such as the lack of resources, limited legal authority to identify and pursue labor trafficking cases, and insufficient training impeded labor officials' ability to enforce laws effectively. Bulgarian labor laws prohibited employers and labor agents from charging

recruitment fees, withholding identity documents, unilaterality changing employment contracts, and delaying payment of workers' wages. NGOs criticized the government for failing to identify and prosecute cases of severe labor exploitation, alleging the government focused instead on labor law violations that carried administrative sanctions. The General Labor Inspectorate (GLI) conducted inspections to oversee implementation of labor regulations, including subcontractors who employ "posted" or temporary workers. GLI operated two national hotlines for reports regarding labor legislation and workers' rights violations, respectively. In suspected labor trafficking cases, GLI conducted joint actions with GDBOP. In 2022, GLI received no reports or information that led to trafficking cases. The caretaker government continued outreach work on labor trafficking, including information sessions and workshops with the Romani community, on safe labor migration and protection from labor exploitation. The Bulgarian and German ministries of labor cooperated on a bilateral work program to combat labor trafficking for 2021-2022, including joint anti-trafficking activities, informational campaigns targeting the large number of Bulgarians seeking employment in Germany, and a bilateral referral mechanism for trafficking cases between the countries. The Ministry of Labor and Social Policy maintained labor offices in EU countries with large Bulgarian communities and considered high-risk trafficking destinations; the offices provided information and advice to job seekers on trafficking and reported cases to the NCCTHB for repatriation.

Since the start of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, more than 1.25 million Ukrainian refugees arrived in Bulgaria with approximately 51,000 remaining in country. Experts raised concerns the government's support to Ukrainian refugees had been insufficient and inconsistent. Nonetheless, several agencies and local governments continued to combat trafficking among this vulnerable population. For example, local officials worked with NGOs and international organizations to establish integration centers known as Blue Dot and Light Blue Dot hubs, offering information, legal advice, psycho-social support, identification, and referral to services for refugees fleeing Ukraine. According to an NGO, as of December 2022, these hubs welcomed 3,000-4,000 Ukrainians weekly. Additionally, NCCTHB and an NGO conducted information sessions for Ukrainian refugees, raising awareness on the risks of sex and labor trafficking and labor rights. NCCTHB and UNHCR developed guidelines for the identification of potential victims among Ukrainian refugees and other third-country nationals, and distributed them to front-line personnel. NCCTHB and UNHCR also developed and distributed informational material on preventing trafficking, in Bulgarian, Ukrainian, and Russian. Moreover, SACP cooperated with other agencies and organizations on cases involving Ukrainian children and families, with a particular focus on unaccompanied children, and registered all Ukrainian children, who applied for temporary protection in Bulgaria, in their national registration system, to monitor for signs of abuse or trafficking. In 2022, 147,719 Ukrainian refugees registered for temporary protection status and, in turn, received access to free emergency medical services and access to the labor market. While experts recognized the government's efforts to register and accommodate refugees, they noted the need to focus on long-term contingency planning and include comprehensive budgeting that matched resources to needs.

TRAFFICKING PROFILE:

As reported over the past five years, human traffickers exploit domestic and foreign victims in Bulgaria, and traffickers exploit victims from Bulgaria abroad. Bulgaria remains one of the primary source countries of human trafficking in the EU. Vulnerable groups include Bulgarians with little education and income, the unemployed, children in residential care, homeless individuals, individuals in commercial sex, migrants, and Roma. According to the NCCTHB and shelter staff, most victims are Roma or individuals with disabilities or mental health conditions. Bulgarians of Turkish ethnicity and Romani women and girls account for most of the sex trafficking victims identified in Bulgaria. Family- or clan-based organizations and independent traffickers are overwhelmingly of Romani ethnicity and usually know the victims, who are also Roma. According to authorities, sex trafficking rings typically consist of Bulgarian traffickers who cooperate with foreign nationals in destination countries but have no direct ties to foreign organized crime groups. Reports indicate a rise in the number of cases of women and girls from marginalized communities

forced to marry third-country nationals. Traffickers increasingly use the internet and social media to recruit victims, through fake advertisements and various forms of employment, and to advertise victims for commercial sex. Traffickers exploit Bulgarian women and girls in sex trafficking throughout Western Europe and in Bulgaria, particularly in the capital, resort areas, and border towns. Traffickers exploit Bulgarian men and boys in forced labor across Europe, predominantly in the agriculture, construction, and hospitality industries. The government reports an increase in labor trafficking among women exploited in the service sector, such as cleaners and caregivers, and unemployed, middle-aged men. According to an NGO, traffickers involved in legitimate businesses control victims by confiscating identity documents and threatening them. Traffickers force Bulgarian men with disabilities into street begging abroad. Reports indicate an increase in child trafficking cases. Traffickers exploit Romani children in forced labor, particularly begging and pickpocketing in Austria, France, and Sweden. NGOs report the exploitation of children in small family-owned shops, textile production, restaurants, and construction businesses. A UN special rapporteur report found child sexual exploitation prevalent among children living in government-run institutions, particularly children from marginalized communities. Asylum-seekers and migrants from Afghanistan, Syria, and Iraq, some of whom may be or may become trafficking victims, transit Bulgaria en route to Western Europe. Thousands of Ukrainian refugees fleeing Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine and seeking sanctuary in Bulgaria are highly vulnerable to trafficking. Government corruption in law enforcement and the judiciary continues to enable some trafficking crimes, and officials have been investigated for suspected involvement in trafficking in previous years.