

2024 Trafficking in Persons Report: Romania

ROMANIA (Tier 2)

The Government of Romania does not fully meet the minimum standards for the elimination of trafficking but is making significant efforts to do so. The government demonstrated overall increasing efforts compared with the previous reporting period; therefore Romania remained on Tier 2. These efforts included investigating more trafficking cases; convicting more traffickers; and establishing a financial investigations unit for organized crimes, including trafficking-related crimes, within the Department for Combating Organized Crime (DCCO). The government adopted procedures to identify and refer potential child trafficking victims in schools and implemented its new NRM. It amended existing laws to enhance protection measures for trafficking victims during criminal proceedings and passed an executive order allowing crime victims, including trafficking victims, to receive advance payments for emergency expenses as part of government-provided financial compensation. The Ministry of Interior (MOI) piloted a new training program on proactive identification of potential trafficking victims at police schools. Furthermore, parliament established a special anti-trafficking committee for analyzing the causes of the crime and drafting relevant legislation. However, the government did not meet the minimum standards in several key areas. Alleged complicity, misconduct, and negligence related to trafficking crimes, particularly the exploitation of children, elderly persons, and persons with disabilities living in government-run homes or residential treatment centers, by state employees and low-level officials remained a concern. Legislative changes and lengthy trial periods continued to impede prosecutions and led to impunity for some complicit officials in trafficking crimes. Authorities identified fewer trafficking victims and did not screen for trafficking indicators or proactively identify victims among vulnerable populations, such as asylum-seekers, migrants, individuals in commercial sex, or children in government-run institutions. Widespread child trafficking persisted with children representing nearly half of all identified victims for five out of the last six years. Finally, as in previous years, government did not provide funding to NGOs for assistance and protection services, leaving most victims without adequate services and at risk of re-victimization.

PRIORITIZED RECOMMENDATIONS:

Investigate all allegations of official complicity, misconduct, and negligence in human trafficking and hold complicit officials, including local authorities in law enforcement and social services, criminally accountable through prosecution and conviction. * Ensure swift application of justice by respecting pre-trial terms related to summons and case assessment to avoid statutes of limitations significantly undercutting efforts to combat trafficking. * Ensure all victims receive assistance, including medical care and psychological counseling, by increasing the funding, integration, coordination, availability, and quality of protection services. * Allocate funding to NGOs to support and expand integrated victim services, shelters, and other forms of customized victim assistance and protection. * Proactively identify trafficking victims by fully implementing the new NRM and screening for trafficking indicators among vulnerable populations, including Roma, asylum-seekers, migrants, children living in government-run institutions or under supervision of child protection services, and individuals in commercial sex. * Strengthen efforts to monitor and prevent commercial sexual exploitation of children, particularly in government-run institutions, and to enforce child labor laws, especially in rural areas and where social welfare services lack personnel and capacity to address violations. * Report the number of victims who received assistance from the government or government-supported NGOs. * Increase staff, training, and resources within the Organized Crime and Terrorism Investigation Directorate (DIICOT) and DCCO to effectively investigate trafficking cases. * Institutionalize an independent and effective mechanism to monitor

the rights of persons with disabilities and elderly persons living in government residential treatment centers. * Increase efforts to prosecute both sex and labor trafficking crimes. * Finalize and adopt the 2024-2028 NAP and the national strategy for combating human trafficking and dedicate resources toward their implementation. * Sanction recruitment agencies with criminal penalties for practices contributing to trafficking, such as charging workers with recruitment fees. * Provide knowledgeable legal counsel for victims assisting prosecutions. * Expand efforts to train investigators, prosecutors, and judges on trauma-informed, victim-centered approaches and online investigations.

PROSECUTION

The government increased law enforcement efforts. Articles 210 and 211 of the criminal code criminalized sex trafficking and labor trafficking and prescribed penalties of three to 10 years' imprisonment for crimes involving an adult victim and five to 10 years' imprisonment for those involving a child. These penalties were sufficiently stringent and, with respect to sex trafficking, commensurate with penalties prescribed for other grave crimes, such as rape. Between June 2018 and October 2022, the Constitutional Court of Romania and the High Court of Cassation and Justice issued several rulings, changing calculations of the statute of limitations. Prior to these rulings, the law allowed for a pause in the calculation of statute of limitations during certain periods of the legal process, resulting in more time for authorities to investigate, prosecute, and adjudicate cases. However, the courts found these provisions unconstitutional. Consequently, in October 2022, courts changed the method for calculating the statute of limitations, resulting in the dismissal of hundreds of cases, including pending and fully adjudicated trafficking cases. This change led to case dismissals, no penalty for defendants, including complicit officials, indicted for various crimes, including trafficking, who had already undergone lengthy investigations and trials, and undermined efforts to combat trafficking. Although the government passed legislation eliminating statutory limitations for trafficking crimes in 2021, many perpetrators who committed crimes before 2021 benefited from the shorter statute of limitations. Sources in the judicial system noted several pending cases that would soon be subject to the statute of limitations and result in dismissals, including cases involving complicit officials.

DIICOT and DCCO were responsible for investigating and prosecuting trafficking cases. DIICOT maintained a dedicated anti-trafficking unit to prosecute trafficking crimes and provide training and support to prosecutors in DIICOT's regional offices. Similarly, DCCO operated a dedicated team of anti-trafficking police officers. In 2023, DCCO established a financial investigations unit to enhance its capacity to investigate organized crime, including trafficking-related crime, and confiscate assets. Additionally, DIICOT maintained a specialized unit for financial investigations, including trafficking-related crimes. The National Agency for the Management of Seized Assets provided support for financial investigations, traced assets internationally, and was mandated to manage a national fund of confiscated criminal assets available to finance trafficking victim compensation and grants to service providers. DIICOT prosecutors continued to report the need for legislative amendments to deconflict elements of the criminal code. Currently, the authority to investigate "trafficking in persons, trafficking in minors, and pimping committed by organized crime groups" remained with DIICOT, while other prosecutors were responsible for "regular pimping," "pimping through use of coercion," and "the exploitation of minors in forced begging and theft." These often overlapping elements of the criminal code and insufficient coordination in the prosecution service led to duplication of efforts, confusion, and subsequent inefficiency in the disposal of cases. Civil society experts agreed and advocated for a change, noting the overlap between the definitions led to some trafficking investigations being moved to a different department within the police, which did not maintain such expertise, and to more lenient penalties for perpetrators.

In 2023, authorities investigated 538 new trafficking cases (427 sex trafficking, 75 labor trafficking, 36 unspecified forms of trafficking), a notable increase from 458 in 2022. Authorities prosecuted 290 suspected traffickers (210 sex trafficking, 41 labor trafficking, 39 unspecified forms of trafficking), compared with 307 in 2022. Courts convicted 162 traffickers (143 sex trafficking, 17 labor trafficking, two unspecified forms of trafficking), an increase from 138 in 2022. The majority

of convicted traffickers received prison sentences that ranged from two years and four months to 23 years and six months. In 2023, DIICOT concluded seven joint investigative teams (JIT) with European counterparts and cooperated on numerous judicial assistance requests related to trafficking cases. In one JIT, authorities from Romania and Ireland cooperated on a trafficking investigation involving approximately 30 women forced into commercial sex and forced criminality, arrested six members of an organized crime group, and seized assets. In 2023, Romanian authorities, with the support of EUROPOL and EUROJUST, conducted multiple joint action days, including one with UK authorities involving the identification of eight Romanian sex trafficking victims; arrest of one suspect, who advertised the victims on various adult websites in the UK; and seizure of assets.

Persistent, low-level official complicity in trafficking crimes remained a significant concern. Observers noted organized crime groups involved in human trafficking bribed members of law enforcement, local government officials, and politicians in exchange for protection and support. In 2023, authorities investigated and prosecuted 25 state-employees for alleged trafficking crimes. Courts convicted a teacher for child sex trafficking and issued a 10-year prison sentence. Recent cases highlighted deeply rooted systemic issues in the social protection system, including corruption, a lack of oversight and accountability, and human rights abuses. In one case, DIICOT prosecuted 21 public state-employees, including officials of a county-level directorate for social assistance and child protection, for trafficking; the suspects subjected persons with disabilities in government residential treatment centers to forced labor, servitude, violence, and lack of medical treatment. For six years, the Ministry of Labor (MOL) maintained a formal agreement with an NGO, allowing them to inspect and monitor residential centers, but, during the reporting period, rescinded the agreement and barred the NGO from conducting inspections after it released reports on systematic abuses in centers. Based on the NGO's reports, media outlets conducted investigations and reported on government complicity in residential centers in which officials ignored complaints about inhumane treatment, including labor trafficking, and falsified official documents to hide evidence of abuse or neglect. Following those reports, the government dismissed officials, opened an inquiry into the failure to investigate abuses, and started conducting inspections in residential centers for the elderly and persons with disabilities, closing some centers and imposing significant fines on others. The NGO resumed monitoring of institutions under a previous protocol and the government drafted a reform package creating a more robust legal mechanism for NGOs to monitor the rights of institutionalized persons, including persons with disabilities, the elderly, and children. Several NGOs and media outlets continued to express suspicion that staff working in government-run institutions for children facilitated trafficking. NGOs noted in certain counties Child Protection Services (CPS) officials acted as accomplices to traffickers. Unlike the MOL, the General Police Inspectorate and the National Authority for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, Children and Adoption (ANDPDCA) maintained an identification and referral mechanism for trafficking cases among children in government-run institutions, facilitating cooperation and the exchange of information among police inspectorates and county-level CPS to help identify vulnerable children in government-run institutions who were at risk of trafficking. However, observers noted uneven levels of screening and proactive identification at the county level; in 2023, CPS identified and referred 26 potential trafficking cases to police who started investigations into 16 of those cases. The police maintained a specialized unit dedicated to investigating child sexual abuse cases, including potential child sex trafficking cases, but investigators reported difficulty proving the sexual coercion of children, attributing it to a lack of child-friendly interview techniques and engagement. In 2023, after considerable urging by civil society and the international community, parliament passed a law establishing the age of consent for sexual relations to 16 years old. Previously, the law lacked a defined age of consent, allowing judges to rule that girls as young as 12 years old had legally consented to sexual relations with adult men. Observers noted the new law enhanced the protection of child trafficking victims by reducing the demand for commercial sex acts with children but noted children 17 years old remained vulnerable.

Perennial staffing shortages, resource constraints, overburdened courts, and knowledge gaps continued to limit progress. Both DIICOT and DCCO operated with limited staff and resources, preventing them from effectively covering anti-trafficking cases in all jurisdictions. The high number of police officers retiring and anti-organized crime units shifting resources toward the fight

against drugs created staff shortages and gaps in competency and impeded anti-trafficking efforts. DIICOT reported investigators and prosecutors avoided specializing in trafficking because of the complexity of the crime and the trauma and burnout associated with handling trafficking cases. As a result, overextended investigators and prosecutors handled multiple cases simultaneously, making it difficult to build strong and successful prosecutions within the six-month period allowed for suspects to be held in pre-trial detention. In addition, under-resourced prosecution units and overcrowded courts created deficiencies in the criminal justice system that led to lengthy trials with multiple hearings, including reinterviewing victims multiple times over many years, particularly in complex cases, such as trafficking cases, and overburdened victims, who were vulnerable to re-traumatization. Low retention and frequent transfers of prosecutors caused continuous reassignment of cases and, in turn, investigation delays. NGOs recommended amendments to the criminal code to reduce the length of trials, particularly the pre-trial case assessment, and improve the experience of victims during court proceedings. The police maintained a computer forensics system for detecting online sex trafficking and performing faster and more effective online investigations. However, authorities continued to report a gap in ways to track online criminal activities and identify and collect digital evidence. Observers also reported a lack of necessary resources and skills to perform fast and effective online investigations, resulting in police sometimes using their personal phones and computers to conduct online investigations. Subsequently, observers recommended training on identifying digital evidence and intercepting and decrypting online messages. While authorities developed some sensitivity to trafficking victims' situations and increasingly used a victim-centered approach, experts reported police, prosecutors, and judges continued to need training on trauma-informed, victim-centered practices as well as on current developments and trends, such as online trafficking. Experts also reported a need for training on financial investigations and the recovery of illegal assets. The government's ability to fund and implement training programs, however, remained limited. Consequently, the government relied mostly on donors, NGOs, and international organizations to pay for training activities for police, prosecutors, judges, labor inspectors, and other front-line workers. Throughout the year, the government, in partnership with other governments, NGOs, and international organizations, conducted training sessions on various topics, such as trauma-informed interview techniques, the legal context of trafficking crimes, and the new NRM. In 2023, the MOI piloted training for front-line law enforcement personnel in victim identification and support in the police schools across the country and developed a new curriculum to incorporate proactive detection of trafficking victims and trauma-informed interactions into training programs for all police, gendarme, and border guards.

PROTECTION

The government maintained overall protection efforts but increased protection for victims during criminal proceedings. In 2023, the Ministry of Education adopted procedures on the identification and referral of potential child trafficking victims as part of a broader campaign to manage violence against children in schools. Additionally, the government began implementing its newly adopted NRM, which outlined procedures for victim identification and referral and clarified the roles of institutions and organizations that interacted with potential victims. In 2023, the government identified 428 victims (279 sex trafficking, 50 labor trafficking, 99 unspecified forms of trafficking), a modest decrease from 492 in 2022. Of the 428 victims, 218 were children (51 percent), and 139 were girl sex trafficking victims. The vast majority of identified victims were Romanian citizens, of which 320 were exploited in country and 123 were exploited in Western Europe. Authorities identified five foreign victims (two in 2022), including two refugees from Ukraine exploited for labor trafficking, but observers estimated there were numerous unidentified foreign victims, particularly among labor migrants and asylum-seekers. The General Inspectorate for Immigration maintained procedures for identifying victims among asylum-seekers and migrants and referring those victims to the National Agency against Trafficking in Persons (ANITP), the government's lead agency for coordinating anti-trafficking efforts. NGOs reported victim identification remained mostly reactive and authorities did not generally screen for trafficking indicators in a proactive or systematic way among members of vulnerable groups, such as Roma or migrant workers, mostly due to widespread bias. NGOs also reported authorities were reluctant to identify victims among asylum-seekers and migrants because of the significant time and resources that an investigation would entail. According to NGOs, authorities lacked specialized training on

the psychological trauma of trafficking on victims, which hindered their ability to correctly identify potential victimization among individuals in commercial sex and continued to fine persons in commercial sex without screening for trafficking indicators. However, authorities typically dropped charges or fines once investigators and prosecutors realized a suspect was a trafficking victim. Victims could also challenge fines after they were identified.

During the identification process, authorities worked with ANITP to refer victims to assistance, and ANITP consulted CPS if a child trafficking victim was involved. Victims were not required to participate in criminal proceedings to access assistance. However, civil society reported in practice it was nearly impossible for victims to be identified or receive any government-supported assistance unless they participated in criminal proceedings. In 2023, of the 428 identified victims, authorities referred 274 to assistance, but the government did not report the number of victims who received assistance from NGOs. In 2022, authorities referred 227 victims to assistance but only 180 (37 percent of identified victims) received assistance from NGOs. The main government entities providing services to victims were county-level directorates for social assistance and CPS. However, the quality of and access to services differed throughout the country. Reports indicated some directorates, due to limited funding, staff, and training, stopped offering services altogether. In addition, some counties did not have any shelters for trafficking victims. Throughout 2023, the government maintained three government-run shelters dedicated to trafficking victims, including one for child trafficking victims, and a limited number of government-run shelters designated for adult victims of domestic violence and other abuses, including trafficking. The government provided psychological counseling, legal assistance, and career counseling to domestic and foreign victims through multi-disciplinary teams and reported allocating 66.6 million Romanian lei (RON) (\$14.8 million) for general victim assistance and protection services. NGOs continued to report the quality of government-provided assistance was overall inadequate, especially medical services and psychological counseling. Despite Romanian law entitling all victims to psychological and medical care, the government did not provide sufficient mental health counseling sessions or finance medical care costs. Moreover, access to medical care and social services required Romanian victims to return to their home districts to receive care; the process presented safety, logistical, and financial hurdles for many trafficking victims. The government maintained a working group on increasing the quality of medical assistance for trafficking victims, composed of public and private health care providers and government officials and focused on providing tailored medical services to victims and training medical service providers to identify victims.

Widespread child trafficking persisted throughout the country as children repeatedly represented half of all identified victims, and limited resources, expertise, and support created vulnerabilities in the country's child protection system. Authorities placed child victims in need of residential care in the dedicated shelter for child trafficking victims, emergency centers for vulnerable children, or foster care centers. County-level CPS provided services for child trafficking victims in public shelters, which included counseling, social and psychological assessment, health care, and other types of services, through multi-disciplinary teams of social workers, psychologists, lawyers, and pediatricians who were responsible for advising case managers and conducting prevention activities. According to NGOs, services, especially counseling, in emergency centers or foster care centers were rarely customized to the needs of trafficking victims. In addition, NGOs reported county-level CPS did not have adequate expertise in trafficking or resources to provide quality care. In an effort to provide consistent quality care, the law required minimum standards of assistance for child victims of crime, including trafficking, in which licensed service providers offering shelter and assistance to identified child victims followed a set of specific requirements, including providing safe environments, specialized psychological counseling, and visitations with families. However, a media source reported only one county directorate and one NGO maintained a license for providing services to child trafficking victims. The law also required local governments to include training programs for staff involved in providing services to child victims of crimes, including trafficking, in their annual budget requests. Perpetual problems of abuse and neglect of children in government-run institutions, including government residential treatment centers for persons with disabilities, coupled with the lack of proactive identification and assistance in government facilities, left children in placement centers vulnerable to trafficking. Experts reported CPS employees who oversaw children in government-run institutions not only neglected to prevent trafficking, but were sometimes complicit in the trafficking. Observers reported local government

institutions were reluctant to intervene when underage Roma girls were “sold” into marriage, hindering authorities’ ability to correctly identify victims among this vulnerable group. Furthermore, a senior government official claimed “cultural traditions” made it difficult for the government to address trafficking concerns among Roma children.

Overall, the process for providing services to trafficking victims was mostly informal and highly reliant on donor funding due to fundamental issues in the government’s service provision structure. Therefore, government funding, including at the local level, for NGO assistance and protection services remained insufficient. The government depended on NGOs to accommodate and assist victims but did not allocate grants directly to NGOs due to legislation precluding direct funding at the national level and NGOs’ lack of necessary licensing. According to several NGOs, obtaining the necessary license entailed complying with unrealistic standards, such as requiring NGOs to divulge personal information about victims and burdensome bureaucratic procedures. NGOs noted complying with such standards required additional work that would limit their ability to perform their core missions; thus, they preferred to operate without such a license and seek non-governmental funding. NGOs emphasized the need for an updated licensing mechanism for service providers and a more flexible funding mechanism in the anti-trafficking space.

In 2023, the government amended existing legislation to enhance protection measures for trafficking victims during criminal proceedings. Under pre-existing legislation, victims had the right to mandatory legal counsel; to ensure enforcement, amendments stipulated non-compliance would result in the nullification and reprise of relevant stages of the criminal proceedings. Other amendments required authorities to interview victims in separate rooms, provide psychological counseling during court proceedings, expedite cases involving child trafficking victims, and order closed courts at the request of victims or prosecutors. In addition, the government passed an executive order allowing crime victims, including trafficking victims, to receive advanced payments equivalent to five times the yearly minimum wage – 15,000 RON (\$3,330) – for emergency expenses, as part of government-provided financial compensation. Furthermore, under the law, prosecutors and judges could order measures to protect victims’ physical security and privacy, including through witness programs and video testimonies. In 2023, authorities included 322 trafficking victims, who participated in criminal proceedings, in the victim witness coordination program, which offered services such as emotional support, physical protection, and transportation, and included two victims in a witness protection program. To mitigate re-traumatization, prosecutors conducted extensive initial hearings and argued against requests for in-person hearings made by defendants. Additionally, to mitigate re-traumatization, more judges than in previous years allowed video testimonies during court proceedings, but most judges continued to rely heavily on victims’ in-person testimony. Moreover, authorities did not consistently enforce measures to keep victims’ identities confidential. There were incidents when social workers and school officials disclosed victims’ information, creating stigma. Additionally, some judges lacked awareness of child trafficking and showed bias against victims who came from socially disadvantaged groups, such as Roma. While the government offered free legal aid to victims, court-appointed lawyers often lacked experience working with trafficking victims, were not aware of the special laws on compensation for trafficking victims, and did not inform victims, who could unknowingly renounce compensation claims during proceedings. The law allowed trafficking victims to receive restitution from their trafficker in a criminal case, file a civil suit against the trafficker, or receive compensation from the government. Throughout 2023, courts ordered compensation to 136 victims, totaling 1.1 million RON (\$244,500), €1.5 million (\$1.66 million), and £5,000 (\$6,400) for moral damages and 36,640 RON (\$8,140), €316,598 (\$349,800), and \$31,300 for material damages. However, NGOs and the government reported that few of the 136 victims received court-ordered compensation.

Romanian law permitted foreign victims who cooperated with authorities to receive a renewable, six-month temporary residence permit and entitled them to the same benefits as Romanian citizens. Additionally, the law granted asylum-seekers the right to work after three months and permitted foreign victims “tolerated status” for up to six months. However, foreigners with “tolerated status” were not entitled to victim services, had no legal right to stay in Romania, had their movements restricted under certain circumstances, and could not depart the country for selected reasons, such as participation in criminal proceedings. According to NGOs, non-EU foreign labor trafficking

victims were not protected from receiving “tolerated status” even after being identified and while participating in criminal proceedings.

PREVENTION

The government increased prevention efforts. The Prime Minister’s Office oversaw the government’s monitoring committee for combating human trafficking, composed of government and civil society. In 2023, the committee assessed implementation of the NAP and national strategy, both of which expired in 2022, and drafted a new, four-year NAP and a new national strategy (2024-2028) for combating human trafficking. Despite the absence of both in 2023, the government continued to carry out its anti-trafficking efforts based on the national strategy to combat organized crime and recommendations of foreign and international partners. According to the government, most agencies did not have a mandate focused exclusively on combating trafficking and, consequently, struggled to disaggregate expenses based on anti-trafficking activities. Thus, the government provided an estimated global figure – 106.2 million RON (\$23.6 million) – for its 2023 anti-trafficking funding but did not clarify the expenses covered and whether overhead costs or salaries were included. In 2023, parliament established a special anti-trafficking committee and voted a member of the Roma community as chair; the committee focused on analyzing the causes of human trafficking, assessing the activities of authorities working in the field, and drafting relevant legislation. Throughout the year, the government systematically collected and published data on the prosecution and conviction of traffickers; however, NGOs noted detailed data about traffickers, the socio-demographic profile of victims, and the number of individuals re-victimized (an important indicator for assessing the efficiency of anti-trafficking efforts) were unavailable. As in previous years, ANITP published an annual report with information on trends, statistics, and efforts to combat trafficking and organized several awareness campaigns and educational projects, including raising awareness about online trafficking and reducing stigma and bias toward victims, targeting different social and professional groups. Additionally, ANITP worked with a telecommunications company to develop a mobile application, providing users with information on victimization, ways to protect themselves from traffickers, and contact points for assistance. In 2023, Romanian and UK officials signed a joint action plan on preventing and combating trafficking, including an awareness campaign on trafficking risks targeting vulnerable Romanians in London. In addition, Romania’s diplomatic missions abroad organized meetings with Romanian communities and NGOs and disseminated information about Romania’s anti-trafficking legislation and anti-trafficking efforts to judicial bodies in foreign countries. The government maintained a missing child alert system and a national hotline focused on strengthening the government’s capacity to identify child abuse, including trafficking. ANITP managed a 24-hour hotline and staffed an operator only during regular business hours. The hotline provided services in Romanian and English and primarily focused on informing Romanians about working abroad safely. The hotline received 13 calls that led to criminal investigations (20 in 2022). The government made efforts to reduce the demand for commercial sex acts by investigating three new cases involving individuals suspected of purchasing commercial sex from trafficking victims. In addition, ANITP conducted awareness campaigns focused on reducing demand for commercial sex, including a campaign featuring a trafficking survivor sharing their experiences to help sensitize the public on the plight of exploited persons.

The law prohibited Romania-based recruitment companies from charging recruitment fees and facilitating the exploitation of citizens abroad; violations were considered a misdemeanor and punishable by a civil fine. Romanian law required foreigners with work permits, who worked less than a year for an employer, to obtain a written consent from that employer to change jobs. Romanian law also required employers of foreign workers to submit applications for work permits and the General Inspectorate for Immigration to issue work permits within 30 to 45 days of receiving an application. Before issuing work permits, the inspectorate verified job offers and employers’ profiles to prevent fraud. Observers also reported the government tolerated practices through which employers confiscated foreign workers’ residence permits and travel documents to limit their freedom and facilitate potential deportations. Experts noted a continued lack of awareness about labor trafficking among stakeholders and insufficient attention to identifying cases among labor law violations. According to observers, enforcement remained the biggest hurdle to

improved protections for Romanian workers abroad, and, in trafficking cases involving foreign victims, authorities continued to ineffectively implement the law. In 2023, the Labor Inspectorate carried out inspections aimed at identifying illegal work practices, including trafficking, in various at-risk sectors, such as construction and transportation. Throughout 2023, the government conducted multiple awareness campaigns on labor trafficking risks and immigration laws targeting foreigners seeking employment in Romania and Romanians seeking jobs abroad, including one on detecting fraudulent employment practices. Additionally, the government organized a learning session to raise awareness about Romanian employment practices and trafficking among foreign workers with embassy representatives of countries of origin, including Bangladesh, Egypt, India, Morocco, Pakistan, and Vietnam. Also, in 2023, the MOL signed an MOU with its Spanish counterpart, raising awareness about trafficking risks among Romanian workers in Spain and establishing a mechanism to conduct joint inspections and identify vulnerable workers, including trafficking victims. Over the past several years, to overcome labor shortages, the country gradually increased the number of non-EU migrants allowed to work in Romania. In 2023, the government approved an admission quota of 100,000 migrant workers, most of whom worked in the construction and hospitality industries and were at particular risk of trafficking because of the lack of access to information in their native language and deceptive employment practices.

ANDPDCA monitored and coordinated all programs for the prevention and elimination of child labor and investigated child labor abuse reports, some of which may have been forced child labor. The MOL could impose fines and close businesses where it found exploitation of child labor. However, the government did not effectively enforce child labor laws, especially in rural areas and where social welfare services lacked personnel and capacity to address violations. Government efforts focused on reacting to reported cases, and ANDPDCA directed its limited resources to prevention programs. Observers believed incidents of child labor were much higher than official statistics indicated.

Millions of refugees arrived in Romania since the start of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine with approximately 77,000 remaining in country. In response, the government provided generous assistance programs and adopted several measures to combat trafficking, including disseminating information on trafficking indicators to first responders providing assistance to refugees and conducting awareness campaigns in Ukrainian at border crossing points, asylum centers, and accommodation centers. The government also set up and continuously updated an official online platform with all information on the rights and services available to refugees, including information specifically for children and potential trafficking victims. In addition, ANDPDCA continued to register all Ukrainian refugee children in a database developed with UNICEF, which included mandatory child trafficking screenings. In collaboration with UNICEF and UNHCR, the government established Blue Dot Centers – safe centers installed at border crossing points that provided children and families with essential information and services on a range of issues, including education, psycho-social support, referrals to health care, and legal support. To prevent and identify potential trafficking, the Ministry of Interior performed daily safety checks at places of accommodation and inspections at traffic checkpoints. Police and social services utilized formal written procedures to identify trafficking victims among newly arrived Ukrainian refugees. In 2023, authorities identified two refugees from Ukraine as victims of labor trafficking and opened a criminal investigation. Despite all these efforts, budgetary constraints and competing priorities caused the government to delay or suspend assistance programs for refugees since June 2023. UNHCR raised concerns that the government's decision, coupled with decreasing international donor support, left a growing portion of the 77,000 Ukrainians still in Romania vulnerable to exploitation or considering a return to Ukraine due to their inability to cover housing, food, health, and education expenses.

TRAFFICKING PROFILE:

As reported over the past five years, human traffickers exploit domestic and foreign victims in Romania, and traffickers exploit victims from Romania abroad. Romania remains a primary source country for sex trafficking and labor trafficking victims in Europe. The vast majority of identified victims are female sex trafficking victims exploited in Romania and other European countries,

including Austria, France, Germany, Italy, Spain, and the UK. Vulnerable groups include children in or aging out of government-run institutions, children whose parents travel abroad for work, members of the Roma community, women with little education and income, migrants, and asylum-seekers. Reports indicate a rise in the exploitation of the elderly and persons with disabilities in government-funded residential treatment facilities by complicit officials, who subject victims to years of sexual abuse, forced labor, servitude, and violence; ignore complaints about the inhumane treatment and poor living conditions; and falsify documents to hide evidence of abuse or neglect. Authorities report fewer cases involving large, organized crime groups with a strict hierarchy and powerful leader (approximately 20 percent in 2023). Typically, traffickers are Romanian and operate individually or in small groups based on familial ties or common interests. The recruitment of victims through violence has significantly decreased as traffickers engage more in emotional manipulation, blackmail, and the “lover-boy” method – a trafficker initially pretends to be a loving boyfriend to a young adult and over time forces them into commercial sex. Trafficking networks tend to specialize in a range of criminal activities, including economic and financial crimes, drug trafficking, or online crime. Traffickers increasingly use the internet and social media to recruit victims, particularly children, and advertise victims for commercial sex. Five out of the last six years, children have represented nearly half of identified trafficking victims in Romania. Children in government-run institutions, particularly girls living in homes and placement centers for persons with disabilities, remain vulnerable to sex trafficking. NGOs and media report cases of Roma girls and boys, as young as 11 years old, “sold” into marriage by their families. Several NGOs note former residents of government-run homes or residential centers serve as recruiters of underage girls from the same facilities. Traffickers exploit Roma children in sex trafficking and forced begging. Child labor abuse continues to be underreported, with children as young as five exploited in child labor, including forced child labor. Media reports continue to reference cases of seasonally employed children in the hospitality industry along the Black Sea coast. Traffickers subject Romanian children and adults to labor trafficking in construction, hotels, manufacturing, and domestic service, as well as forced begging and theft in Romania and other European countries. Authorities note an increase in the number of victims exploited in the agriculture sector in 2023. In contrast to previous years, the majority (60 percent) of labor trafficking cases occurred in Romania as opposed to abroad. Traffickers exploit migrants from Central Africa, East and South Asia, and Europe in sex and labor trafficking in Romania. Migrants from East Asia, who work in the construction and hospitality industries, are at a particular risk of trafficking due to the lack of access to information in their native language and deceptive practices by employers. Thousands of refugees fleeing Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine and seeking sanctuary in Romania 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.