

2025 Trafficking in Persons Report: Serbia

SERBIA (Tier 2)

The Government of Serbia 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, Serbia was upgraded to Tier 2. These efforts included convicting more traffickers and investigating government officials allegedly complicit in trafficking crimes. The government identified more victims, and the Center for Protection of Trafficking Victims (CPTV) adopted new SOPs for the identification, referral, and assistance of trafficking victims, which included the right for victims to appeal official identification decisions. The government allocated significantly more funding to CPTV, and for the first time, set aside funds for anti-trafficking NGOs providing most victim assistance efforts. However, the government did not meet the minimum standards in several key areas. The government prosecuted fewer alleged traffickers and continued to use crimes with more lenient penalties to prosecute traffickers. The government continued to lack proactive identification efforts and adequate screening procedures for victims among vulnerable populations and did not provide specialized support to child trafficking victims. Authorities continued to penalize victims with imprisonment, probation, and fines for unlawful acts committed as a direct result of being trafficked. The government did not enter into partnerships with civil society to assist victim protection efforts. While CPTV screened and interviewed some victims at a Chinese-national owned factory, the government made little progress on an open investigation involving hundreds of foreign workers who faced forced labor conditions at a Chinese-national owned factory and mine.

PRIORITIZED RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Vigorously investigate and prosecute trafficking crimes, including those involving complicit officials, and seek adequate penalties for convicted traffickers, which should involve significant prison terms.
- Fully investigate allegations of forced labor in the Chinese national-owned tire manufacturing plant in Zrenjanin and copper mines in Bor and provide assistance and protection to the workers.
- Partner with civil society on victim identification and protection efforts.
- Provide specialized support services for child victims and male victims.
- Increase efforts to proactively identify victims by screening for trafficking indicators among vulnerable populations, including migrants, Chinese workers, and individuals in commercial sex.
- Implement victim-witness assistance to increase protection services for victims participating in criminal proceedings.
- Train investigators, prosecutors, and judges on victim-centered approaches and establish formalized mechanisms to refer cases to trained prosecutors and judges.
- Take steps to address inappropriate penalization of victims solely for unlawful acts committed as a direct result of being trafficked.
- Fully implement and train relevant first responders on new SOPs on identification, referral, and victim assistance.
- Improve training for government personnel on victim assistance and referral and ensure access to victim assistance for foreign victims.
- Develop and consistently enforce strong regulations and oversight of labor recruitment companies, including by eliminating recruitment fees charged to migrant workers and holding fraudulent labor recruiters criminally accountable.
- Standardize data collection and create a database to collect statistics for sentencing and victim protection measures.

PROSECUTION

The government increased anti-trafficking law enforcement efforts.

Article 388 of the criminal code criminalized sex trafficking and labor trafficking and prescribed penalties ranging from two to 12 years' imprisonment for offenses involving an adult victim, and three to 12 years' imprisonment for those involving a child victim. These penalties were sufficiently stringent and, with regard to sex trafficking, commensurate with those for grave crimes, such as rape.

Police, prosecutors, and courts maintained different methods for counting cases, resulting in inconsistent statistics across databases. In 2024, police filed criminal complaints against 24 new suspects (15 for sex trafficking and nine for labor trafficking, including four for forced criminality), compared with 16 new suspects in 2023. The Public Prosecutor's Office (PPO) investigated 42 new suspects (27 for sex trafficking and 15 for labor trafficking, including six for forced begging and one for forced criminality), compared with 28 new suspects in 2023. PPO continued to investigate 41 suspects from previous years. PPO prosecuted 32 alleged traffickers (22 for sex trafficking and 10 for labor trafficking, including two for forced begging and three for forced criminality), compared with 33 alleged traffickers in 2023. PPO continued to prosecute 71 alleged traffickers from previous years. Courts convicted 21 traffickers, all for sex trafficking, compared with 18 convictions in 2023. Under anti-trafficking elements of the criminal code, judges sentenced six traffickers with imprisonment between three years and five years, seven traffickers with imprisonment between six years and 10 years, four traffickers with imprisonment between 12 years and six months to 13 years and six months. Courts also sentenced three traffickers to house arrest for one year and one trafficker with "psychiatric treatment and confinement in a medical institution." Corruption and official complicity in trafficking crimes remained significant concerns, inhibiting law enforcement action during the year. The government investigated two members of the Serbian Armed Forces for sex trafficking and four additional members for receiving services from a trafficking victim. Additionally, the government investigated two Center for Social Work (CSW) employees for receiving bribes from an organized criminal group to grant custody of a child victim to a member of the group.

While CPTV screened and interviewed 14 Indian workers at a Chinese national-owned factory, the government made little progress on an open investigation into allegations of forced labor at this factory; and it did not report investigating similar concerns at a Chinese national-owned copper mine, including inhumane working and living conditions, wage withholding, debt bondage, and passport confiscation. According to observers, the government dismissed the allegations, delayed responding, and continued to state foreign workers were not trafficking victims despite not screening or fully investigating allegations. In 2022, the Chinese national-owned factory replaced the majority of the original 500 Vietnamese workers with new foreign workers, and in February 2024, media and civil society reported an additional 14 Indian workers in forced labor conditions from 2022 to 2024. In April 2024, an international NGO reported the Chinese national-owned factory continued to confiscate passports, withhold wages, surveil its workers, and maintain harsh working conditions. International organizations and civil society urged the government to take immediate action.

The Criminal Police Directorate (CPD) operated an Anti-Trafficking Unit with specialized officers within the Directorate to Combat Organized Crime. Separately, the Labor Inspectorate maintained five specialized inspectors to investigate forced labor in Belgrade, Nis, Novi Sad, and Kragujevac. PPO maintained specialized prosecutors for trafficking cases, who provided operational guidance and acted as points of contact for investigators and care providers; however, the government did not have a system to consistently refer trafficking cases to these prosecutors or to judges trained or experienced on trafficking issues. The government, at times in cooperation with international organizations, provided training for judges, police, and prosecutors on various anti-trafficking issues. The government cooperated with authorities from Austria, Belgium, Slovenia, and Switzerland on international cases and extradited one suspected trafficker to Montenegro.

PROTECTION

The government increased victim protection efforts.

CPTV assessed and officially identified adult victims and developed a protection and assistance plan for each victim, while CSW assessed and officially recognized child victims. First responders referred 184 potential victims to CPTV, compared with 168 in 2023. CPTV officially identified 64 victims from the 184 potential victims, compared with 58 victims from the 168 potential victims in 2023. Of the 51 victims, traffickers exploited 24 in sex trafficking, 37 in labor trafficking, including 13 in forced begging and eight in forced criminality, and three in multiple forms of trafficking; 25 were women, 11 were men, 20 were girls, and nine were boys; and 11 were foreign national victims. CPTV adopted new SOPs for identification, referral, and assistance of victims, which expanded CPTV's availability to 24 hours, required CPTV to initiate a case and inform relevant participants within 24 hours, and updated the assessment report. Additionally, new SOPs created multi-disciplinary teams with police, prosecutors, and NGOs, to coordinate victim placement and support. However, implementation remained "recommended" rather than required. Additionally, at times, officials did not engage in consistent proactive victim identification efforts in some communities highly vulnerable to trafficking. CPTV launched a new mobile application to assist staff at social welfare centers and the Commissariat for Refugees to identify victims, which included trafficking indicators, and an ability to directly submit cases to CPTV. CPTV maintained a panel with a psychologist, a pedagogist, and a social worker to conduct the official victim assessment. However, CPTV lacked consistency regarding the official victim assessment, and identification procedures were sometimes lengthy and lacked transparency.

The government allocated 50.5 million dinars (\$449,610) to CPTV for victim assistance, a significant increase compared with 34 million dinars (\$302,710) in 2023. For the first time, the government allocated 22 million dinars (\$195,870) for NGOs to provide victim assistance; however, the government did not disburse funds largely due to delays in licensing NGOs. NGOs continued to provide the majority of victim support and reintegration services. The government and NGOs provided psycho-social, legal, educational, medical, financial, and reintegration support. All victims in 2024 and 2023 received some form of government assistance.

CPTV maintained an emergency shelter for trafficking victims with the capacity to accommodate six victims. Civil society continued to report CPTV relied on scant resources of NGOs to support the shelter with food, toiletries, and access to vehicles. The CPTV-run shelter provided only short-term, emergency assistance, and NGO-run shelters accommodated most victims requiring long-term support. The CPTV-run shelter accommodated 16 victims in 2024 (14 in 2023). The government did not provide any specialized support for child victims and referred them to foster care or placed them in orphanages or group homes that were not adequately trained to work with trafficking victims. The government also returned child victims to their families, including when their parents were involved in their exploitation. The government assisted 27 child victims in non-specialized institutions (28 in 2023) and placed 13 victims in foster families (10 in 2023). The government did not provide any specialized support for male victims.

The government reported providing equal protection to foreign national and Serbian citizen victims. However, foreign victims faced obstacles in accessing support, such as interpretation services and medical assistance, and some local communities limited accommodation in social welfare institutions to Serbian nationals. The government provided nine foreign victims with temporary residence permits renewable up to one year and allowed potential foreign victims to stay for three months (none in 2023). The government, in cooperation with an international organization, repatriated one victim (three in 2023). Authorities penalized at least two victims of forced criminality, including one child, with imprisonment, probation, and fines. While victims' ability to access support services and assistance was not contingent on cooperating with law enforcement, some authorities required victims to participate in investigations and prosecutions.

The law allowed prosecutors to designate officially recognized victims as a "particularly vulnerable group," eligible for the status of an "especially vulnerable witness" and/or "protective witness" with

special assistance and procedural considerations, such as testifying without the defendant present or via video link and access to witness protection. The government granted the “especially vulnerable witness” status to 30 victims (37 in 2023) and did not grant “protective witness status” to any victims in 2024 or 2023. CPTV acquired video equipment for victims to provide statements and testify from their office and the emergency shelter. While the government reported interviewing 12 victims via video (six in 2023) and 16 victims with the inclusion of social workers and psychologists, most courts did not have the technical capacity to offer video testimony or consistently include social workers and psychologists. The government reported the 30 victims with “especially vulnerable witness status” did not appear in front of the alleged traffickers during trial. Courts held 12 closed trials for victims with “especially vulnerable witness” status, but most trials remained open to the public with an absence of victim confidentiality measures. For example, media often reported details of victims’ exploitation and public records from trials included names of individuals and organizations representing victims. CPTV provided free legal aid to victims but often relied on civil society organizations or lawyers with no experience on trafficking cases due to a lack of resources. Judges rarely issued restitution in criminal cases and encouraged victims to seek compensation by filing civil suits. However, courts ordered restitution in five convictions as part of the issued sentences in 2024 (three in 2023); courts sentenced traffickers to pay restitution between 150,000 dinars (\$1,340) to 1,000,000 dinars (\$8,900).

PREVENTION

The government maintained prevention efforts.

The government maintained the Anti-Trafficking Council (ATC) composed of six ministerial level officials to coordinate anti-trafficking efforts; the ATC convened once in 2024 and 2023. The Office of the National Anti-Trafficking Coordinator (ONAC) led and coordinated overall anti-trafficking efforts, including the implementation of the 2024-2029 National Program and Action Plan to Counter Trafficking (NPAP); however, some observers claimed the government lacked overall coordination and effectiveness, particularly the national coordinator and ONAC. The government allocated €500,000 (\$520,290) to implement the NPAP from 2024 to 2026, including 23,743,000 dinars (\$211,390) for 2024. The government also allocated 950,000 dinars (\$8,460) to four municipalities to develop and implement local action plans and 19 municipal governments maintained informal multidisciplinary anti-trafficking teams to implement local efforts. The government held 13 working group meetings to draft a new anti-trafficking law with relevant government institutions and NGOs. The Ombudsman also served as the national rapporteur on trafficking tasked to independently monitor and assess anti-trafficking efforts; however, experts report the national rapporteur focused more on reporting efforts rather than monitoring and evaluation implementation. CPTV published monthly and annual reports on its website and maintained a 24-hour hotline for trafficking. The CPTV hotline received 27 trafficking-related calls and identified nine victims. The Ministry of Information and Technology allocated 1,650,000 dinars (\$14,690) to radio stations for awareness campaigns, compared with 1,400,000 dinars (\$12,460) to two media organizations and 600,000 dinars (\$5,340) to an NGO in 2023. The government also organized awareness campaigns targeting students and the public. The government licensed and regulated private employment agencies; labor inspectors conducted 10 inspections and issued seven misdemeanor proceedings and 14 bans on recruitment activities. However, the government did not prohibit workerpaid recruitment fees. Additionally, civil society reported recruitment agencies reformed under different names after authorities revoked their licenses and reported instances of the translations of contracts into English and/or Serbian being substantively different from the original contract in the origin country’s language. The Law on Employment of Foreigners allowed migrant workers to change employers within 30 days after the termination of employment on the same work permit. The government did not make efforts to reduce the demand for commercial sex acts.

TRAFFICKING PROFILE:

Trafficking affects all communities. This section summarizes government and civil society reporting on the nature and scope of trafficking over the past five years. Human traffickers exploit Serbian women and girls in sex trafficking within Serbia and exploit Serbian nationals, primarily men, in forced labor in labor-intensive sectors, such as the construction industry. Traffickers exploit Serbian children, particularly Roma, within the country in sex trafficking and forced labor. Traffickers often use fake job advertisements via social media platforms to recruit victims. In 2024, foreign victims identified in Serbia were from Brazil, Colombia, China, and Nigeria. In previous years, foreign victims identified in Serbia were also from Afghanistan, Burundi, Cameroon, Democratic Republic of Congo, Germany, India, Iran, Mali, Nigeria, Pakistan, Philippines, Tunisia, Türkiye, Uganda, Ukraine, Uzbekistan, Vietnam, and neighboring countries in the Balkans. Traffickers exploit Serbian nationals in neighboring countries, Western Europe, and in the United Arab Emirates.

In 2021, credible allegations indicated Vietnamese workers faced forced labor at a construction site for a Chinese national-owned tire manufacturing plant in Zrenjanin. Recruitment agencies in Vietnam organized transportation, visas, accommodation, and charged the Vietnamese workers an exorbitant recruitment fee between \$2,000 to \$4,000 for their services. Approximately 500 Vietnamese workers came to Serbia with expectations to work in a factory producing aircraft parts for €775 (\$810) per month. Local NGOs and media outlets reported indicators of forced labor starting in November 2021, including passport confiscation, restriction of movement and communication, threats and intimidation, denial of repatriation requests, withholding salary, forced overtime, inadequate housing, and insufficient food. In 2022, the Chinese national-owned factory replaced the majority of the original 500 Vietnamese workers with new foreign workers and published plans to increase the size of the factory and number of workers. The Chinese workers at the factory went on strike in July 2022 because the Chinese national-owned factory failed to pay their wages. In February 2024, media and civil society reported the Chinese national-owned factory exploited an additional 14 Indian workers in forced labor conditions from 2022 to 2024. Recruitment agencies in New Delhi charged the Indian workers a fee of \$3,500 for transportation, visa, and accommodation, which the Indian workers paid with loans and borrowed money. Upon arrival in Serbia, the Indian workers signed a contract with the Chinese management company of the tire manufacturing plant for a salary of approximately \$700 per month. The Chinese management company confiscated passports of the Indian workers, and local NGOs and media outlets reported similar indicators of forced labor experienced by the Vietnamese workers. In April 2024, an international NGO reported the Chinese national-owned factory continued to confiscate passports, withhold wages, surveil workers, and maintain harsh working conditions. The government did not fully investigate these allegations of forced labor and instead continued to claim the migrant workers were not trafficking victims. Similarly, NGOs and media outlets reported foreign workers experienced forced labor conditions in a Chinese national-owned copper mines, such as passport confiscation, threats and intimidation, withholding salary, and forced overtime. Traffickers exploit women from China in sex trafficking, primarily targeting demand for commercial sex from workers at Chinese-funded projects, including copper mines.