

2024 Trafficking in Persons Report: Bulgaria

BULGARIA (Tier 2)

The Government of Bulgaria 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 Bulgaria was upgraded to Tier 2. These efforts included prosecuting significantly more traffickers; increasing funding for anti-trafficking programs; and adopting the 2023 NAP. The government also adopted a four-year national program for the prevention of violence and child abuse and a corresponding implementation plan, including measures for child trafficking victims. Additionally, the Prosecution Service (PS) and the Ministry of Interior (MOI) established an interagency unit for combating human trafficking, among other crimes, to support pre-trial investigations and collect and analyze information regarding organized crime groups. The Ministry of Justice (MOJ) re-established its council on criminology, assembling police, prosecutors, judges, and academia to analyze criminal cases, including trafficking cases, and propose measures to improve the effectiveness of investigations and court proceedings. In addition, the government provided new services, including four counseling centers, one shelter for temporary accommodation, two shelters for overnight accommodation, and two crisis centers, to victims of violence, including trafficking victims, and licensed 20 social services providers, mostly NGOs, to operate the crisis centers and provide services. However, the government did not meet the minimum standards in several key areas. Authorities identified significantly fewer trafficking victims and provided a limited number of identified victims with assistance (29 percent). Moreover, the government did not provide adequate funding to NGOs for victim services and did not maintain a consistent funding mechanism to ensure the sustainability of the shelters from year to year. Reports persisted police inappropriately penalized trafficking victims for unlawful acts committed as a direct result of being trafficked. Furthermore, the lack of resources, legal authority to pursue labor trafficking cases, and sufficient training impeded labor officials' ability to enforce laws effectively. Finally, courts continued to issue a high number of suspended sentences for convicted traffickers, and corruption in law enforcement and the judiciary continued to hinder anti-trafficking efforts.

PRIORITIZED RECOMMENDATIONS:

Investigate and prosecute trafficking crimes, and seek adequate penalties for convicted traffickers, including complicit officials, 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. * Consistently 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. * Ensure all victims receive assistance by increasing funding and availability of services and training 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. * Ensure labor inspectors identify and report labor trafficking cases to law enforcement 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. * 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 government increased 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 grave crimes, such as rape. In 2023, the PS investigated 52 trafficking cases (44 sex trafficking and eight labor trafficking), compared with 57 in 2022. The PS prosecuted 31 traffickers (26 sex trafficking and five labor trafficking), a significant increase from 19 in 2022. Courts convicted 39 traffickers (35 sex trafficking and four labor trafficking), compared with 37 in 2022. As in previous years, the government did not report the range of prison sentences imposed on all convicted traffickers. However, the government reported judges issued custodial sentences for 19 convicted traffickers and suspended sentences for 20 traffickers; suspended sentences weakened deterrence, did not adequately reflect the nature of the crime, and undercut broader anti-trafficking efforts. Courts issued suspended sentences to most first-time offenders of a crime – a standard practice among judges. Moreover, 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. Some government and law enforcement officials criticized judges for not considering victims or the broader effects of lenient sentences for convicted traffickers. In order to clear case backlogs, prosecutors often agreed to plea bargains with traffickers (17 in 2023), and courts approved ensuing settlements as a cost-effective alternative to a full trial. A district court judge petitioned the Constitutional Court to disallow the practice of arranging plea bargains for traffickers during pre-trial investigations, which did not involve victims as they were not included in criminal proceedings until after the pre-trial phase, arguing it was unconstitutional and denied victims' right to defense. The Court dismissed the case, claiming only parliament had the power to allow or disallow plea bargains in certain phases of criminal proceedings. Authorities regularly seized financial assets from convicted traffickers. 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 2023, Bulgarian authorities cooperated with European counterparts on one joint investigation team with the United Kingdom, multiple judicial requests, and eight extraditions. Authorities participated in a joint action day against labor trafficking in the agricultural sector organized by EUROPOL and in an international police operation on sex trafficking and forced labor under the European Multidisciplinary Platform Against Criminal Threats. The MOI and its international partners maintained 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 some law enforcement and PS officials purposely failed to follow up on potential labor trafficking cases or sometimes investigated such cases as violations of domestic labor rules, which carry lesser penalties. 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. Nevertheless, in 2023, the government did not report any investigations, prosecutions, or convictions of government employees complicit in human trafficking crimes.

MOI's General Directorate for Combating Organized Crime (GDBOP) and the Border Police (GDBP) were the primary law enforcement departments responsible for combating trafficking. GDBOP maintained a specialized police unit for investigating trafficking cases involving organized crime. Although GDBP did not have a dedicated unit, it staffed specialized investigators for

trafficking cases. Other departments within MOI, including the National Police, handled trafficking cases that did not involve organized crime. The National Investigative Service (NIS) maintained a specialized criminal department that investigated cases related to grave crimes, including trafficking, with specialized investigators, but had limited jurisdiction over trafficking cases. NIS also maintained a cyber unit focused on internet-based crimes, including trafficking, and financial investigations to assist regional police in investigating crimes with online components. NGOs expressed concern authorities did not proactively investigate 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. The PS did not have a dedicated unit responsible for investigating and prosecuting trafficking cases, but specialized prosecutors worked throughout Bulgaria on human trafficking, among other crimes. In 2023, the PS and the MOI established an interagency unit for combating human trafficking, drug trafficking, and migrant smuggling to monitor and support pre-trial investigations and collect and analyze information regarding organized crime groups and persons involved in the aforementioned crimes. In a further effort to strengthen investigations, in 2023, the MOJ re-established the council on criminology assembling prosecutors, GDBOP, Supreme Court of Cassation judges, and academia to analyze criminal cases, including trafficking, and propose measures to improve the effectiveness of investigations and court proceedings. Additionally, in 2023, the government adopted amendments to the criminal code, requiring specific investigative bodies and prosecutors specialized in children's rights to conduct pre-trial proceedings for crimes, including human trafficking, involving juvenile offenders.

Investigating and prosecuting labor trafficking cases remained a challenge. Observers criticized some investigative efforts among police and prosecutors, citing the dismissal of a labor trafficking case by the prosecutor's office in Ruse despite allegedly having sufficient evidence to prosecute, and called for more training for authorities involved in the criminal process, including judges. According to an NGO, law enforcement and judges lacked a common understanding about what constituted forced labor and recommended including the definition in the criminal code or adopting an interpretative decision by the Supreme Court. Observers reported some 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 reported 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. To address knowledge gaps, the prosecutor general continued to mandate some prosecutors and investigative magistrates receive training on investigating and prosecuting trafficking cases. In 2023, the National Commission for Combatting Trafficking in Human Beings (NCCTHB), the agency that coordinated the government's anti-trafficking efforts, and the National Institute of Justice conducted several trainings and seminars for investigators, prosecutors, judges, and social workers on various topics, including anti-trafficking legislation, investigation methods, identifying labor trafficking cases, online investigations, and victim identification among vulnerable communities.

PROTECTION

The government slightly increased protection efforts. In 2023, the PS, NCCTHB, and State Agency for Child Protection (SACP) identified 191 trafficking victims (78 sex trafficking, 70 labor trafficking, and 43 unspecified forms of trafficking), a significant decrease from 298 identified victims in 2022. Of the 191 identified victims, 60 were child victims (20 sex trafficking, 19 labor trafficking, 21 unspecified forms of trafficking), a significant increase from 33 in 2022. Authorities identified five foreign victims, compared with seven in 2022. Observers noted victim data collection remained inadequate and unreliable, likely including double counting, and, in turn, inhibiting the government's ability to assess the scope of the trafficking problem. The NRM outlined the procedures for identification, referral, and victim assistance. The PS 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. 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, NGOs 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. Authorities, NGOs, and the NCCTHB referred victims to services after determining their immediate needs. In 2023, the NCCTHB reported assisting 56 of 191 identified victims (29 percent), compared with 86 out of 298 (29 percent) in 2022.

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 participation in investigations or prosecutions. The NCCTHB contracted two NGOs to operate seven 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. The four shelters accommodated only female trafficking victims. The government did not operate or fund any specialized shelters for male victims, but they could stay in the reintegration shelter as needed. In 2023, the Inspectorate to the Council of Ministers conducted an audit of the NCCTHB, whereupon the NCCTHB froze payments to shelters providing assistance to trafficking victims throughout the country. After the audit's completion, the NCCTHB provided shelters with back payments. In 2023, the NCCTHB reported providing 233,628 Bulgarian lev (BGN) (\$132,070) for shelters and services. By comparison, in 2022, the NCCTHB allocated 157,612 BGN (\$89,100) for services in Burgas and Varna, and the MOI funded the services in Sofia, allocating 156,000 BGN (\$88,190). The NCCTHB provided the Varna shelter funding through the end of 2023 but noted future funding required a new procurement that could take at minimum six months to complete. Local officials in Varna lamented over the lack of funds for the shelter and called for the government to rework the funding mechanism for victim services and provide funding directly to municipalities. 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 end up providing critical needs 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 some 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 and shelters available to trafficking victims, they were foremost intended for victims of violence. In 2023, the government provided new services, including four counseling centers, one shelter for temporary accommodation, two crisis centers for adults, and two shelters for overnight accommodation, to victims of violence, including trafficking victims. Additionally, in 2023, the Agency for the Quality of Social Services (AQSS) newly licensed 20 social services providers, mostly NGOs, totaling 36 nationwide, to operate crisis centers and provide social services funded by municipalities. AQSS also monitored and conducted inspections of service providers, municipalities, and local bodies for compliance with requirements and quality of services.

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 the Agency for Social Assistance (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. The Social Assistance Directorate created a multidisciplinary team for every child trafficking case to develop an action plan for protection; social workers, in coordination with the team, were responsible for evaluating cases within 24 hours. Child protection departments of the 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. The State Agency for Refugees or municipal social service centers provided specialized support services to foreign child trafficking victims. SACP provided support services to unaccompanied children and maintained an interagency coordination mechanism to improve identification, referral, protection, and support of unaccompanied children and repatriated 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. The government registered more than 3,400 unaccompanied children from third countries in 2023. SACP regularly monitored places where unaccompanied children were accommodated to ensure their safety. In 2023, the government adopted a four-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, providing information, counseling, assistance, and a means to identify potential victims. In 2023, the hotline received 153 reports of children at risk of trafficking and exploitation.

Bulgarian law allowed foreign victims participating in criminal proceedings to receive long-term residence permits and work in Bulgaria for the duration of the proceedings before deportation. For foreign victims who chose not to participate in criminal proceedings, the government provided a 30-day recovery period (60 days for foreign child victims) before repatriation. Observers noted many victims did not participate in criminal proceedings 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 observers noted police generally did not understand individuals in commercial sex were vulnerable to trafficking or 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 2023, an NGO reported local police in northwestern Bulgaria inappropriately penalized a woman for unlawful acts committed as a direct result of being trafficked and issued multiple fines instead of identifying her as a sex trafficking victim. While the law provided free legal assistance to victims, qualified legal aid was difficult to access, and NGOs noted lawyers required more training working on trafficking cases. The National Office for Legal Assistance continued to implement 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 (\$830,980) for the duration of the project. The project provided legal aid to persons from vulnerable groups, improved coordination between different municipal and local authorities, supported various administrative units helping victims, and improved the capacity of lawyers in this area. The process for seeking compensation remained overly bureaucratic and discouraged victims from filing civil suits. In addition, the law only entitled trafficking victims to financial compensation for material damages after the completion of criminal proceedings. NGOs noted victims were responsible for providing proof of damages, which they typically could not prove, to receive compensation, which could not exceed 10,000 BGN (\$5,650). NGOs called for the government to use seized assets to fund victim compensation and raise the maximum amount allowed. In 2023, the NCCTHB, along with other institutions, developed a training program on victim compensation for lawyers, employees of the national legal aid register, social workers, psychologists, and representatives from service providers. Courts did not award restitution to any trafficking victims in 2023.

PREVENTION

The government increased prevention efforts. In 2023, the Council of Ministers adopted the 2023 NAP, which included several anti-trafficking activities, such as awareness and training programs. The NCCTHB implemented the NAP, governed national anti-trafficking policies, facilitated international cooperation, and, in 2023, developed a new 2024 NAP, which was pending approval by the Council of Ministers at the end of the reporting period. In addition, the NCCTHB maintained a permanent working group with anti-trafficking experts from relevant government institutions, civil society, international organizations, and NGOs. The NCCTHB devolved regional efforts to 10 local anti-trafficking commissions, comprising judges, prosecutors, law enforcement officials, municipal employees, and other civil servants. Over the past two years, under multiple caretaker governments, the NCCTHB struggled to execute critical functions and work on long-term projects due to limited financial and human resources. However, after the formation of the new government in 2023, the government appointed a permanent secretary, hired six new employees, and allocated additional funding for anti-trafficking programs. In 2023, the government allocated 326,900 BGN (\$184,790) to the NCCTHB for anti-trafficking programs, including shelters, services, trainings, and prevention activities, a significant increase from 220,500 BGN (\$124,650) in 2022. Some municipalities funded and conducted separate anti-trafficking activities but did not report the amount allocated. Observers continued to note overall funding for anti-trafficking activities remained insufficient. Moreover, observers 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. To address this concern, the deputy prime minister hosted a national conference on preventing and combating human trafficking focusing on best practices and sustainable solutions, convening high-level government officials and intergovernmental organizations, and underscoring the government's commitment to addressing trafficking issues. In addition, in 2023, the NCCTHB and the local commissions conducted multiple campaigns and information sessions, including raising awareness about online trafficking and trafficking risks, targeting vulnerable groups, such as children, migrants, and Roma. The NCCTHB maintained a phone line, email, and website for the public to inquire about or report trafficking-related crimes. The MOJ continued to support an NGO-run hotline for victims of violence, including trafficking, allocating 64,718 BGN (\$36,590), and received 21 calls related to potential trafficking cases. Separately, the government supported a dedicated NGO-run hotline through consultative services, including advice on assistance and identification, and promotional materials; the NCCTHB also trained the hotline's employees. The hotline referred 20 trafficking-related cases to authorities who identified 22 potential victims. The government did not make efforts to reduce the demand for commercial sex acts. In 2023, reports persisted of violent "pushbacks" of asylum-seekers and migrants along the border with Türkiye; such "pushbacks" involved a practice 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, unilaterally changing employment contracts, and delaying payment of workers' wages. NGOs criticized the government for failing to identify and prosecute cases of severe labor exploitation, including labor trafficking, 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 2023, GLI was not aware of any reports or information that led to trafficking cases. The government continued outreach work on labor trafficking, including information sessions and workshops with vulnerable groups, on safe labor migration and protection from labor exploitation. The Employment Agency retained 89 Roma labor mediators to conduct consultations with individuals predominantly of Roma ethnic origin, assist with work placement, advise on labor rights, and inform of trafficking risks. The Bulgarian and German ministries of labor extended a bilateral work program to combat labor trafficking for 2023-2024, 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.

More than 1 million refugees arrived in Bulgaria since the start of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine with nearly 73,000 remaining in country. In response, in 2023, the government created a national task force to coordinate the interagency response to combat trafficking and support refugees. Additionally, local officials worked with NGOs and international organizations to maintain 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. 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. The NCCTHB and an NGO conducted information sessions for Ukrainian refugees, raising awareness on the risks of sex and labor trafficking and labor rights. The NCCTHB and UNHCR continued to distribute informational material on preventing trafficking in Bulgarian, Ukrainian, and Russian. The NCCTHB and UNHCR also maintained guidelines for the identification of potential victims among Ukrainian refugees and other third-country nationals and distributed them to front-line personnel. In 2023, the NCCTHB identified two Ukrainian women as trafficking victims (one sex trafficking and one labor trafficking) and referred them to authorities. In 2023, 165,000 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 children in residential care, individuals in commercial sex, migrants, persons with disabilities, persons experiencing homelessness, persons with little education and income, and the unemployed. Sex trafficking remains the most prevalent form of trafficking in Bulgaria; most identified sex trafficking victims are young women and girls from the Romani community or of Turkish ethnicity. Family- or clan-based organizations and independent traffickers are overwhelmingly of Romani ethnicity and usually know the victims, who are also Roma. 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, increasing their vulnerability to exploitation in sex trafficking or labor trafficking within these marriages. Traffickers increasingly use the internet, social media, and messaging applications to recruit victims through fake advertisements and exploit victims in 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. Traffickers involved in legitimate businesses control victims by confiscating identity documents and threatening them. Traffickers exploit Bulgarian men with disabilities in forced begging abroad. In recent years, reports indicate a rise in child trafficking cases with authorities identifying more than twice as many child trafficking victims in 2023 compared with 2022. 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, and restaurants, and construction businesses and the exploitation of children living in vulnerable situations, particularly Roma children, in the agriculture, hospitality, and service sectors. A UN special rapporteur report

found child sexual exploitation, including potential sex trafficking, 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.