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2024 Trafficking in Persons Report: Lithuania

LITHUANIA (Tier 1)

The Government of Lithuania fully meets the minimum standards for the elimination of trafficking. The government continued to demonstrate serious and sustained efforts during the reporting period; therefore Lithuania remained on Tier 1. These efforts included prosecuting significantly more traffickers; developing virtual patrols to monitor for and collect information on online criminal activities, including trafficking; and introducing a new compulsory program on life skills that included trafficking prevention in Lithuanian schools. Furthermore, five government institutions updated an interagency agreement that required specialists from the police, prosecutor's office, and the Child Rights Protection and Adoption Service to form a group of experts for every pre-trial investigation involving child victims of sexual violence, including trafficking. The Ministry of Interior organized a national conference and workshop on identifying and protecting child trafficking victims and strengthening interagency cooperation in the process. In addition, the government amended the law to provide specialized training, including anti-trafficking training, for lawyers offering secondary legal aid and stipulate those who complete the training be paid double. Although the government meets the minimum standards, courts convicted fewer traffickers. In addition, authorities did not proactively identify and screen for trafficking indicators among vulnerable populations, particularly children and migrants, and inconsistently implemented victim identification and referral mechanisms throughout the country, leading to inconsistent quality of care across different municipalities, especially in rural areas. Moreover, access to shelters remained limited with the only specialized shelter closing, and victim identification data did not provide a comprehensive picture of the trafficking situation. Finally, the government did not adopt a NAP.

PRIORITIZED RECOMMENDATIONS:

Increase efforts to investigate trafficking crimes and prosecute and convict traffickers under the trafficking statute. * Enhance efforts to proactively identify victims, particularly among children and other vulnerable groups, such as individuals in commercial sex, migrants, and refugees. * Develop specific guidelines for identifying trafficking victims and screening among vulnerable populations and conduct joint trainings for relevant authorities, such as law enforcement and labor inspectors, on implementation. * Implement formal victim identification and referral mechanisms throughout the country, especially in rural areas, by establishing anti-trafficking working groups in all municipalities. * Expand access and availability to specialized shelters for all trafficking victims and allocate sufficient funding to NGOs providing services to trafficking victims. * Improve nationwide trafficking data collection across all government agencies to capture comprehensive information, including the number of identified victims. * Ensure victims are not inappropriately penalized solely for unlawful acts committed as a direct result of being trafficked. * Strengthen procedures on how to protect victims from threats and re-victimization during investigations and prosecutions. * Adopt and implement a new NAP. * Train investigators and prosecutors on victim-centered approaches and building cases, including collecting evidence to substantiate charges.

PROSECUTION

The government increased law enforcement efforts. Articles 147 and 157 of the criminal code criminalized sex trafficking and labor trafficking and prescribed penalties ranging from two to 12 years' imprisonment, which were sufficiently stringent and, with regard to sex trafficking, commensurate with penalties prescribed for other grave crimes, such as rape. In 2023, authorities investigated 10 new trafficking cases (one sex trafficking, four labor trafficking, and five unspecified forms of trafficking), compared with 12 in 2022. Authorities prosecuted 11 traffickers (eight sex trafficking and three unspecified forms of trafficking), a significant increase from two in 2022. Courts convicted 10 traffickers, a notable decrease from 16 in 2022. Courts issued all convicted traffickers sentences with prison terms, ranging from two years to eight years and six months. The government did not report any investigations, prosecutions, or convictions of government employees complicit in human trafficking crimes. Lithuanian authorities cooperated with foreign counterparts on 27 international investigations, including three extraditions. A police officer served as a special attaché for international cooperation in the Lithuanian embassy in the United Kingdom (UK) to assist in international criminal investigations, including by ensuring cooperation to prevent and investigate trafficking crimes involving Lithuanian citizens in Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

The Lithuanian Criminal Police Bureau and the General Prosecutor's Office were responsible for investigating and prosecuting trafficking crimes. Neither the police nor the prosecutor's office had specialized trafficking units. However, the prosecutor's office had specialized prosecutors who worked throughout Lithuania investigating human trafficking, among other crimes, and the Police Organized Crime Investigation Unit conducted pre-trial trafficking investigations. Government representatives reported limited funding led to police utilizing funds from general budget allocations for pre-trial trafficking investigations. In 2023, five government institutions updated an interagency agreement to combat sexual violence against children, including sex trafficking, and required specialists from the police, prosecutor's office, and the Child Rights Protection and Adoption Service to form a group of experts for every pre-trial investigation started. The agreement also outlined roles and responsibilities of the police and child protection services and provided recommendations for interagency cooperation and assistance. With the rise in online exploitation, police conducted virtual patrols to monitor the internet for and collect information on criminal activities, including trafficking. In 2023, virtual patrols did not detect any trafficking cases. In addition to the patrols, police monitored open sources of information and worked with media and technology companies. Nonetheless, police continued to report difficulty investigating online cases and identifying and collecting digital evidence. Government officials reported collecting adequate evidence remained a problem in prosecuting trafficking cases, particularly since traffickers increasingly use online methods that did not include physical coercion. According to NGOs, police often started but eventually terminated investigations, especially in rural areas, because they lacked the skills or experience to substantiate charges against some suspects. Observers noted some police officers lacked a sensitive, victim-centered approach when investigating trafficking cases. In 2023, the government provided a range of trafficking-related trainings for police, prosecutors, and border guards on various topics, including anti-trafficking legislation and interview techniques. The Ministry of Interior (MOI) and the General Prosecutor's Office maintained an anti-trafficking online training platform, including topics on identifying indicators and victims, understanding risk factors, conducting investigations, collecting evidence, assisting and protecting victims, and compensation, for police, judges, and medical and social workers.

PROTECTION

The government maintained protection efforts. Authorities identified 16 trafficking victims (three sex trafficking and 13 labor trafficking), the same number of victims identified in 2022. The vast majority of identified victims were Lithuanian men exploited in forced criminal activities abroad, whereas five victims were foreign nationals exploited in Lithuania. Authorities did not identify any child trafficking victims in 2023, compared with three in 2022. By comparison, NGOs identified 132 potential victims,

notably 12 children and six persons with disabilities. NGO statistics included individuals with any presumed element of trafficking before police determined the circumstances of the crime. As in previous years, experts expressed concern the data collected across government agencies was inconsistent because of a lack of coordination among various institutions and did not provide a comprehensive picture of the trafficking situation. Authorities applied formal written recommendations for victim identification. According to NGOs, the recommendations did not always work effectively in practice and lacked best practices for how to interview victims, especially children. Furthermore, observers reported authorities in rural regions underutilized the recommendations and had less experience identifying victims. Some municipalities established anti-trafficking working groups, and authorities in those municipalities implemented the recommendations much more effectively. In 2023, 19 out of 60 municipalities had anti-trafficking working groups. The identification recommendations did not include guidelines on identifying vulnerable migrants and refugees. Therefore, the State Border Guard Service (SBGS) followed its written procedures to identify vulnerabilities among foreign nationals and migrants. Similar to previous years, NGOs noted government efforts to identify vulnerable groups was insufficient and authorities lacked the skills and experience required to conduct screening for trafficking among migrants and other vulnerable groups, including individuals in commercial sex. According to NGOs, in practice, police fined individuals in commercial sex much more often than consumers of commercial sex acts. Human rights defenders urged the government to abolish administrative liability for individuals in commercial sex and introduce criminal liability for consumers.

The government maintained a formal referral mechanism between the police and NGOs to refer victims to NGO-operated care facilities. Care facilities provided short- or long-term assistance, such as health care, psychological and social counseling, and shelter, to trafficking victims. According to NGOs, as with the identification recommendations, authorities in municipalities with anti-trafficking working groups implemented the victim referral mechanism more effectively, leading to different standards of care across the country. Lithuanian law entitled all victims of all crimes, including trafficking, to receive assistance before, during, and, if necessary, after criminal proceedings. Lithuanian law also entitled all crime victims, including trafficking victims, access to assistance, including counseling, regardless of whether victims sought assistance from or reported the crime to law enforcement. The government allocated €300,000 (\$331,500) to NGOs for victim assistance, the same as in 2022 and 2021. NGOs noted funding for victim assistance remained insufficient. Government-funded NGOs supported 182 trafficking victims, compared with 183 in 2022. This number included individuals vulnerable to trafficking and identified victims from previous years who continued to receive assistance. There were no specialized shelters for trafficking victims. The only specialized shelter closed in 2023 after the Vilnius

municipality did not extend the lease of the building. Consequently, NGOs reported they faced difficulties finding and arranging shelter for victims. When necessary, NGOs rented apartments that were not customized to the needs of trafficking victims and limited the ability to protect them from perpetrators. Authorities could place Lithuanian female trafficking victims in municipal and NGO-operated family support centers and social service centers for domestic violence victims. Five crisis centers provided assistance to male victims, including finding accommodations. Authorities could place child victims in foster care or community childcare homes, as there were no shelters specifically for child trafficking victims. Authorities referred child victims of sexual abuse, including trafficking, to the family care center for child victims and their mothers. At the center, experts conducted initial assessments and examinations of and made recommendations on assistance for child victims. Child protection services and NGOs provided a wide range of services to child victims, including medical, psychological, and psychiatric assistance. According to observers, identifying child victims and referring them to care remained a challenge, especially in rural areas. In 2023, child protection services organized a series of trainings for child rights protection specialists, case managers, representatives from childcare homes, police, and district court psychologists on identifying trafficking victims and providing assistance. In addition, the MOI organized a national conference and workshop on identifying and protecting child trafficking victims and strengthening interagency cooperation in the process. As part of an EU project, the National Education Agency provided a book for educational institutions on preventing trafficking, including information on identifying students among vulnerable groups and responding to cases. Child protection services operated a countrywide child helpline to assist child victims, including child trafficking victims. The government continued to slowly convert large childcare institutions into community homes to increase quality of care and decrease vulnerability. In 2023, approximately 1,340 children remained in state childcare institutions, of which 93 were from Ukraine. Foreign trafficking victims had the same access to care as Lithuanian victims. The government accommodated vulnerable asylum-seekers, including possible foreign trafficking victims at the Naujininkai refugee accommodation center in Vilnius and unaccompanied children at the refugee reception center in Rukla. Legislation allowed foreign victims a 30-day reflection period to decide whether to cooperate with law enforcement; foreign victims cooperating with law enforcement could receive temporary residency.

In recent years, Lithuania experienced a surge in irregular migration flows, which the Lukashenka regime facilitated, across the border with Belarus. In 2023, the government amended the Law on the State Border and Its Protection, denying entry to foreigners who illegally crossed the border into Lithuania during a state of emergency. International institutions criticized the new law, stating it fell short of offering sufficient protections and legal options and could authorize "pushbacks," such "pushbacks"

involve 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. Furthermore, in 2023, the government closed two checkpoints on the Belarus border to reduce travel between the two countries and closed two more in March 2024, leaving only two operating checkpoints open and hundreds of migrants at the border vulnerable to trafficking. To facilitate identification of at-risk persons, including trafficking victims, crossing the border, SBGS conducted vulnerability assessments; any identified trafficking victims among undocumented migrants could receive assistance, as needed, and a waiver for the provision on the non-admission of foreigners to Lithuania. To raise awareness on trafficking risks, SBGS circulated recommendations to its units to help identify victims among migrants and provide information on available resources to assist them. NGOs expressed concern there was a dearth of information for asylum-seekers and migrants arriving from Belarus about the legal framework applicable to them and the opportunities for assistance.

While the government ensured the physical safety of victims during criminal proceedings, according to NGOs, protection in some cases was insufficient, citing instances when traffickers verbally threatened victims to intimidate them into not cooperating with the authorities. NGOs reported the victim protection process was complicated and lacked a clear policy outlining how to protect victims during and after criminal proceedings. NGOs also reported police did not always utilize a victim-centered approach, contributing to victims' lack of trust toward officers. To address some deficiencies, courts frequently allowed victims to testify remotely and appoint individuals to serve as their representatives so their rights were defended without having to participate directly in court proceedings. In addition, authorities interviewed child victims in child-friendly locations with a psychologist and a child protection specialist present, and courts only requested child victims' presence in court in exceptional cases. In 2023, 17 identified victims cooperated with law enforcement. Although the government provided legal representation to victims, observers reported attorneys had little experience with trafficking issues as, typically, experienced attorneys were not interested in working on trafficking cases because the pay was low and cases were often complex. As a result, NGOs often hired private attorneys for victims. In 2023, the government amended the Law on State Guaranteed Legal Aid to provide specialized training, including trafficking training, for lawyers offering secondary legal aid and stipulate those who complete the training be paid double. The Ministry of Justice (MOJ), the Lithuanian Bar Association, and the State Guaranteed Legal Aid Service began developing the training program for implementation, which remained pending at the end of the reporting period. Lithuanian law entitled trafficking victims to apply for financial compensation from their traffickers. If traffickers did not have the funds to compensate for damages, compensation could be provided from the state. The MOJ operated the state victims of crimes

fund, and, in 2023, two trafficking victims received compensation from this fund, totaling €5,420 (\$6,000). NGOs noted compensation was generally low and had little deterrent effect on traffickers, and the procedure to obtain state compensation was rather bureaucratic. In most cases, courts ordered restitution, and it was awarded. In 2023, courts paid approximately €24,000 (\$26,500) for non-material damages to victims.

PREVENTION

The government increased prevention efforts. After years of experts' recommendations to establish an independent national rapporteur, in 2023, the government initiated the process to transfer the function of the existing national rapporteur from the MOI to the Seimas Ombudsperson's Office and establish its independence to actively monitor and assess anti-trafficking policies and actions and present independent opinions on issues. The MOI led the government's anti-trafficking efforts and chaired the anti-trafficking coordination commission, which provided government institutions and NGOs with anti-trafficking guidance and training. Experts noted not all institutions were active in anti-trafficking activities and the commission was ineffective in developing and streamlining cooperation between agencies and other stakeholders. In 2023, in consultation with local agencies and NGOs, the MOI developed a new NAP, which was pending approval; the previous NAP expired in 2022. In the absence of a NAP, government institutions continued implementing anti-trafficking activities funded from their own budgets but did not report the total amount spent in 2023. Experts expressed concern about limited financial and human resources dedicated to anti-trafficking activities and the impact on government's efforts to combat the crime. The government introduced a new compulsory program on life skills in Lithuanian schools for students to discuss the dangers of human trafficking, among other topics, understand psychological, economic, and sexual abuse, and learn where to seek assistance. In 2023, the government funded or contributed to several awareness campaigns and educational projects, including a photo exhibition and conference on understanding human trafficking, highlighting vulnerable groups, risk indicators, and interagency cooperation. In addition, the MOI published awareness materials on its website for the public on anti-trafficking legislation, how to report trafficking cases, and assistance available. The government funded an NGO-led, 24-hour national hotline to assist trafficking victims. The government also funded international outreach for Lithuanian communities in France and the UK, conducting a prevention campaign on the risks of trafficking and a seminar on child trafficking, respectively. Government representatives continued to participate in the Council of Baltic Sea States (CBSS) anti-trafficking task force, working to strengthen and improve anti-trafficking policies in the region, consolidate expertise from the national level with the international level, and exchange information on efforts and best practices. Through the CBSS task force, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania participated in a project aimed at strengthening the capacity of NGO professionals to assist and identify

trafficking and improve the cooperation of NGOs in the Baltic States; the project involved national studies, the publication of an e-booklet, and a training event. The government did not make efforts to reduce the demand for commercial sex acts.

Approximately 300 temporary employment agencies operated in Lithuania. To enable the State Labor Inspectorate (SLI) to better supervise the activities of these agencies and mitigate illegal practices, including labor trafficking, Lithuanian law required temporary employment agencies to provide monthly employment information to the SLI, including the number of temporary workers, and employ temporary workers for at least three consecutive months. Lithuanian law also prohibited worker-paid recruitment fees. However, experts noted, in practice, some employers required employees, especially third-country nationals, to pay recruitment fees. Labor inspectors investigated the use of such fees when conducting workplace inspections. SLI, the Migration Department, and the Employment Service trained inspectors on labor trafficking risks among foreign workers. To monitor potentially exploitative working conditions, SLI conducted regular inspections in at-risk sectors, including transport, service, manufacturing, hospitality, agriculture, and construction, and published anti-trafficking information on its website in four languages (Lithuanian, English, Russian, and Ukrainian). In addition, SLI maintained two specialized groups of inspectors in Vilnius and Kaunas to analyze labor trafficking cases, collect information, and cooperate with police and NGOs.

In response to the influx of refugees fleeing Russia's war against Ukraine, the government immediately mobilized efforts to help refugees and raise awareness about trafficking risks. SLI cooperated with the Ukrainian State Labor Service to prepare and publish information on employment opportunities, defending worker rights, and preventing labor trafficking. In addition, SLI carried out monitoring of Ukrainian refugees working in Lithuania and checked for cases of labor trafficking. The General Commissioner of the Lithuanian police maintained an anti-trafficking working group to protect Ukrainian refugees from trafficking. In 2023, the police organized an international conference focusing on human trafficking in the context of the war and subsequent migration. The police appointed coordinators in registration centers to register incoming refugees and raise awareness about trafficking. In addition, police developed a questionnaire in four languages for refugees at risk of trafficking and compiled a list of refugees most vulnerable for authorities to reference. In 2023, authorities identified one Ukrainian woman as a sex trafficking victim and, after conducting an investigation, indicted three traffickers. The Ministry of Social Security and Labor allocated approximately €2.7 million (\$3 million) to municipalities to implement integration projects, including trafficking prevention.

TRAFFICKING PROFILE:

As reported over the past five years, human traffickers exploit domestic and foreign victims in Lithuania, and traffickers exploit victims from Lithuania abroad. Vulnerable groups include asylum-seekers, third-country nationals, stateless persons, unhoused persons, and persons formerly in prison. Experts expressed concern that individuals with intellectual disabilities, psychological conditions, and/or alcohol or drug addiction are particularly vulnerable to trafficking. In addition, many adult and teenage victims, are survivors of sexual abuse and/or violence or grow up in orphanages, placing them at greater risk for trafficking. Traffickers also target the unemployed or individuals from low-income and at-risk families. Traffickers increasingly use the internet and social media to recruit victims through fake job advertisements and exploit victims in commercial sex. Traffickers exploit Lithuanian men and boys in criminal activities, such as shoplifting, and Lithuanian women and children in commercial sex in Scandinavia and Western Europe. NGOs note traffickers continue to exploit women and girls in sex trafficking in the country. Reports indicate foreign workers from Ukraine, Russia, and Belarus are at risk of labor trafficking in the service, manufacturing, hospitality, agriculture, and construction sectors. Companies operating in Lithuania increasing exploit third-country nationals from Central Asia in the transportation industry. Employers use illegal or verbal contracts and confiscate drivers' identification cards to establish debt-based coercion. The 1,340 children institutionalized in childcare institutions are vulnerable to trafficking. As a result of the Lukashenka regime facilitating irregular migration flows across the Lithuania-Belarus border, migrants from Africa, Asia, and the Middle East remain vulnerable to trafficking. Separately, more than 80,000 refugees fleeing Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine and arriving in Lithuania, are highly vulnerable to trafficking; approximately 41,000 refugees remain in country.

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