

Modern Slavery in Europe

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Human trafficking is the 21st century's modern form of slavery, and it concerns the entire European Union. Trafficking in human beings is an extremely profitable business for organized crime and can take different forms of exploitation; from sexual exploitation and illegal adoption to forced labor, domestic work, illegal trade in human organs and begging. Human trafficking can target men and women as well as girls and boys of different nationalities, relying on threats, fraud, deception, and different forms of coercion and abduction.

The question to address is how to overcome this dramatic phenomenon and what measures to take to diminish the number of victims in the EU in general, but particularly in the Eastern Partnership countries.

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Very often the root of this phenomenon lies in economic disparity, lack of opportunities and employment, poverty, gender inequality and discrimination. Today, unemployment particularly affects women who, striving to survive in their home countries, take up and leave their homes in search for work and a better life elsewhere. Their helplessness can be exploited by traffickers looking to sell cheap labor abroad.

Lithuania has become the most important country for transit between Eastern and Central Europe, as well as a destination country for women and girls subjected to human trafficking. Lithuanian women are victims of sex trafficking in Germany, the Netherlands, Greece, Sweden, Finland and Norway. Women from Eastern bloc countries are transported from these countries through Lithuania to Western Europe, with about 12 percent of them remaining and working as prostitutes in Lithuania. Once they are entangled in the prostitution business in Lithuania, they suffer from discriminations and sexual exploitation before perhaps being trafficked onwards to Western Europe.

Lithuania is trying to combat all forms of human trafficking and to protect the rights of victims. The government has strengthened anti-trafficking laws, but large challenges still remain.

Anti-trafficking activities undertaken in cooperation with the Eastern Partnership countries can help to build networks between Lithuania and other countries in the battle against human trafficking. In November, the Eastern Partnership summit will take place in Vilnius. The countries involved have placed their hopes for commercial integration into the European family on this meeting. However, factors like deficiencies in human rights, the rule of law, the fight against corruption and human trafficking are getting in the way of Eastern Partnership countries' integration into Europe.

To overcome these shortcomings, we need to boost coordinated actions against human trafficking between European Parliament member states and Eastern Partnership countries to cooperate effectively with each other across borders.

In Lithuania and other EU member states, as well as in Eastern Partnership countries, the main effort has to go towards raising the population's awareness and making the profile of the trafficking problem clear and understood. These public awareness actions should target potential adult victims of trafficking and in schools and universities, where they can take different forms like seminars, public lectures and other anti-trafficking events. My country is undertaking such a public awareness action by filming a movie about a Lithuanian girl who becomes a victim of human trafficking, which will hopefully contribute to understanding the trends of human trafficking both inside and outside a country.

Legislation against human trafficking is an effective legal instrument but further coordinated

actions among member states and non-EU countries to address the issue must be taken in order to put these legal instruments into practice. These coordinated actions can include the establishment of partnerships and training among government agencies and groups both inside and outside the EU.

Despite the implementation of different legislation targeting human trafficking, the working methods of human trafficking can change and can adapt to these legal frameworks and provisions. But a better understanding of the human trafficking phenomena and an effective reaction from citizens can help to diminish its flow. Identifying the extent of the problem in the EU as well as outside can be the key to stemming the increased levels of human trafficking. In Lithuania, Europe and outside the EU it is time for everyone of us to act on each level — local, national and European — in order to eradicate the slavery of the 21st century: human trafficking.

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The views expressed in opinion pieces do not necessarily reflect the position of The Moscow Times.

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