



Behind Closed Doors: An Extensive Analysis of Trafficking with Human Beings in Kosovo (2020-2023)

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Abstract: This research analyses human trafficking networks in Kosovo from 2020 to 2023, focusing on the current challenges. The objective is to uncover the patterns of operation of traffickers and identify the patterns of vulnerability among victims. The research is necessary as human trafficking continues to pose a significant challenge for Kosovo. The study builds on previous research regarding transnational organised crime and human trafficking in the Balkans. It compares the prior analysis of human trafficking. Expanding current research explores governance, socio-economic situation, and legal framework. Employing a mixed-method approach, analysing police annual reports, concluding interviews with law enforcement officials, statistical data, and analysis on recruiting patterns. The findings reveal the rise of human trafficking, extracted mainly by socio-economic challenges and weak institutional responses. The study suggests legal harmonisation, improved cross-border information exchange, more comprehensive policies to address human trafficking in Kosovo, enhanced victim protection services, and advanced digital tools for investigation purposes. These insights have implications for criminal justice scholars and policy-makers focused on human rights. The paper provides a unique contribution by presenting recent empirical data on human trafficking and offering insights into the current situation, highlighting urgent areas of policy reform and making it a valuable resource for academics and policy-makers.

Keywords: Human trafficking; criminal justice; victim protection; police enforcement

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1. Introduction

Human trafficking is a concerning crime affecting millions globally, with life-long consequences for victims, especially in countries that experience internal challenges and are still in the state-building process. Countries that face internal challenges also experience socio-economic instabilities, becoming an easy target for crime and illicit activities. As a country on the Balkan route, Kosovo is exposed to this significant challenge. Kosovo's history as a post-war country, with crime struggles in general, economic challenges, and a strategic geographical location, makes it a challenging area for investigating trafficking networks. Kosovo has been through the worst experience possible when it comes to war abuses and post-war criminality. Despite the efforts of enforcement authorities, combating human trafficking remains not an easy task due to organised crime in the region and the excellent cooperation between criminal group networks within the country and even cross-borders. Human trafficking does not only hinder the victim's lives but also has an impact on affecting also the socio-economic and state-building process. Human trafficking has been associated with transnational organised crime groups, small, more loosely organised criminal networks and local gangs, violations of labour and immigration laws, and government corruption. (Richard, 1999; U. S. Government Accountability Office, 2006; Vayrynen, 2003). Meanwhile, according to UNODC, human traffickers prey on people who are poor, isolated, and weak. Issues such as disempowerment, social exclusion, and economic vulnerability are the result of policies and practices that marginalise entire groups of people and make them particularly vulnerable to being trafficked. Natural disasters, conflict, and political turmoil weaken tenuous social protection measures. Therefore, understanding the dynamics of these trafficking networks is essential for developing strategic operations against human trafficking and protecting the citizens of the Republic of Kosovo. Finding the root cause and consequences is essential for providing solutions against human trafficking. Usually, while researching post-war countries, the concentration remains on the critical factors such as organised crime and poverty as the main reasons behind human trafficking. However, there is so much more to the root cause. This research aims to answer the following questions: How do human trafficking networks operate in Kosovo, and what changes are there from 2020-2023? The objectives are to analyse human trafficking patterns through the years, assess the law enforcement efforts in combating this specific crime, provide a clear legal perspective of the framework against human trafficking, and lastly, propose improvement policies. The significance of this research lies in the focus on 2020, a period of the COVID-19 pandemic, and 2021-2023 as post-pandemic challenges, which may indicate changes

specifically in 2020. Human trafficking, being a susceptible topic, consists of gaps concerning the COVID-19 pandemic, where there is insufficient information, the development in the direction of a victim-centred perspective, and the lack of gender-specifications and child experiences makes it harder to comprehend the age and gender of the victims. By analysing this specific time frame, the research aims to provide insights into how human trafficking has adapted, how law enforcement has evolved, and what changes have occurred in recent years. Furthermore, by offering a quantitative approach, the study will examine trafficking activities and the effectiveness of law enforcement and provide recommendations for improving the anti-trafficking situation in Kosovo. The study will begin with a literature review, followed by a detailed methodology that includes data collection methods, an analysis of the findings, a discussion, and recommendations for future policy writers and researchers. This research aims to fill existing gaps by providing a comprehensive quantitative study of the recent human trafficking trends, contributing to more anti-trafficking strategies.

2. Literature Review

Human trafficking legislation builds up in international, regional, and local instruments. Therefore, the research examines the approach to the legal framework and its incorporation into Kosovo's legal framework, as well as the statistical analysis of human trafficking cases in Kosovo from 2020 to 2023, which provides a clear understanding of the current situation in Kosovo in the concept of trafficking with human beings, as well as providing the current gaps in the legal framework that define the challenges and also the contribution into the field by providing improvement suggestions. The international concept of combating human trafficking aligns with the Palermo protocol, a key applied protocol. The UN Protocol is a part of the UN Convention against Transnational Organized Crime (OHCHR, 2000). The protocol assesses the EU countries to prevent, suppress, and punish human trafficking, especially regarding women and children. Where according to the Palermo protocol, "Trafficking in persons" proceeds as the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring, or receipt of persons by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, abduction, fraud, deception, the abuse of power, or a position of vulnerability or the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for exploitation.

Secondly, the Council of Europe Convention against trafficking in Human beings. The Convention establishes obligations to prevent trafficking, design a comprehensive framework for the protection and assistance of victims and witnesses, and ensure effective investigation and prosecution. (Council of Europe, 2005). Furthermore, the forms of exploitation covered are sexual exploitation, forced labour or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude, and the removal of organs. Following the EU Directive on Combating Trafficking in Human Beings and Protecting its Victims (2011/36/EU), where are the following forms of exploitation included: prostitution or other forms of sexual exploitation, forced labour or services- such as begging, slavery, or practices similar to slavery, servitude, the exploitation of criminal activities, and human trafficking for organ removal (European Union, 2011). While the directive applies only to European Union member nations, providing a clear and concise guideline for member states. Kosovo has adopted EU Directive 2011/36/EU principles into its legal framework. The adaptation came as a result of the SAA alignments (European Union, 2018). The Stabilization and Association Agreement (SAA), the agreement between Kosovo and European Union, supports the efforts of Kosovo to strengthen democracy and the rule of law, contribute to political, economic, and institutional stability in Kosovo, as well as to the stabilisation of the region; provide an appropriate framework for political dialogue, supporting the efforts of Kosovo to develop its economic and international cooperation, supporting the efforts of Kosovo to complete the transition into a functioning market economy. (European Union, 2018). The research assesses the effectiveness of these frameworks in Kosovo by examining police reports from 2020 to 2023. Providing a clear and concise insight into the current situation regarding trafficking with humans and how have these illicit activities evolved. Usually, for post-war countries, the process of legal assessment is a challenge due to organised crime, socio-economic challenges, internal challenges, and the COVID-19 pandemic. The research focuses on the current evaluation of the legal framework and traffickers' operations by assessing the impact of EU policies and measuring the success process by researching empirical data from 2020 until 2023.

3. Methodology

The research provides a mixed-method approach, firstly focusing on a quantitative approach, focusing on police annual reports to assess the differences between 2020 and 2023. Additionally, there is also the evaluation of international protocols and directives, taking a more direct approach to understanding clearly the current situation regarding trafficking with humans, where the evaluation is between the international approach and the effectiveness of incorporating it into Kosovo's legislation system. The primary data is provided by the police reports, the cases regarding trafficking with human beings from 2020-2023, followed up with the police interviews. Secondly, comparing the information by comparative analysis with the international reports. Potential limitations include needing more resources regarding the matter, as well as limited access to non-public documents. The data was collected by public access and interviews with police enforcement in the Republic of Kosovo. The connection to the legal framework provides a crucial assessment of law enforcement effectiveness. Assessing data about traffickers and victims' recruiting techniques to provide awareness and also to understand further the reason why Kosovo is battling with human trafficking aside from being a post-war country with open access to the Balkan route.

4. Results

To be able to assess the current situation in a country, it is more than essential to be able to foresee and analyse human trafficking's progressive or regressive correlation. The research was focused on the crime rate from 2020 to 2023. Through the focus on the human trafficking crime rate from the year 2020, it is possible to understand the challenges and as well understand the progressive or regressive crime rate regarding human trafficking. Through the years, measurements were taken by the Republic of Kosovo in the fight against human trafficking, and only by measuring the results is it possible to know if these measures have had an effect in the combat of Crime regarding human beings.

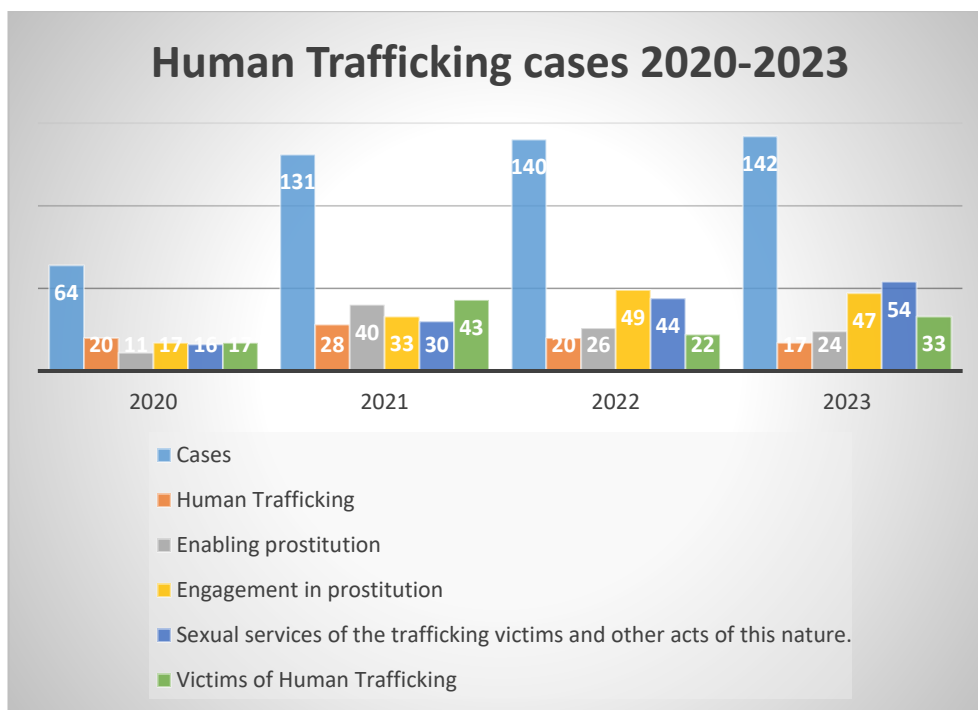


Figure 1. Crime Rates of Human Trafficking, including Human trafficking, Enabling Prostitution, Engagement in prostitution, sexual services of the trafficking victims, and other acts of this nature, Victims of Human Trafficking (2020-2023)

Source: Data retrieved from the Annuals of Police Work of the Republic of Kosovo from 2020 to 2023 (Kosovo Police, 2020-2023).

Figure 1 provides data from the crime rate in Kosovo regarding human trafficking in the year 2020 to 2023. The years reflect the cases of human trafficking in terms of explicitly examining human trafficking cases through the years and making a closer assessment of the differences regarding enabling prostitution and engagement in prostitution while following up with other art of sexual services and what is foreseen in the legislative framework of the Republic of Kosovo. Providing the victim numbers and the legislative framework that defines the victims' status. Focused observations in the year 2020 show the lowest number of human trafficking cases. The difference through the years shows only progress in human trafficking, and the operations of traffickers have improved their focus. Suggesting that the reason why in 2020, there were not so many cases of human trafficking is related to the movement restrictions, meanwhile, in 2021, there are in general 131 cases, progressing in 2022 with 140 cases and in 2023 with 142 cases. Meanwhile, the

highest numbers of Human Trafficking victims were in 2021, suggesting that there were better police efforts to combat these illicit groups or more operations of these illicit groups, which suggests improvement and progression in traffickers' illicit activities. According to GRETA (2021), the majority of victims of trafficking identified in Kosovo during the period covered by the report were females, primarily victims of sexual exploitation, and most were from Kosovo. The number of children among the identified victims was high (59%). However, the rise in 2022 and 2023 indicates higher numbers and persistence of these illicit networks to adapt to new circumstances, using the COVID-19 pandemic as leverage to update their operational techniques. These trends suggest a higher challenge for police enforcement in combating these illicit groups due to their newer strategies, such as using social media for recruitment. According to the interviews with police officers of the Republic of Kosovo, narcotic trafficking leads in ranking and is followed second by human trafficking.

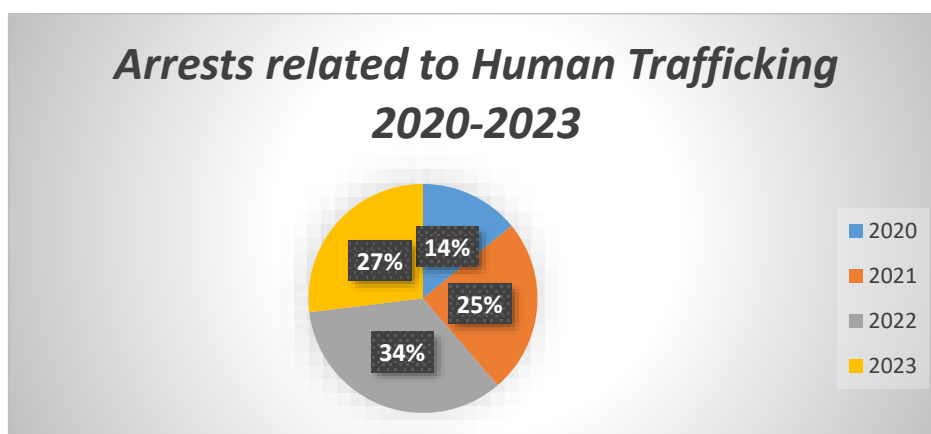


Figure 2. Arrests related to Human Trafficking in Kosovo (2020-2023)

Source: Data retrieved from the Annuals of Police Work of the Republic of Kosovo from 2020 to 2023 (Kosovo Police, 2020-2023).

Figure 2 provides data on arrests from 2020-2023 in Kosovo, showing that the arrests in 2020 followed the low case rate by only 14%. In 2021, there is a progression in police efforts to 25%, followed by 2022, which shows the progression of the police effort to combat human trafficking. However, in the year 2023, the results are not as expected, showing stagnation regarding the arrests while there is a rise in human trafficking cases. Suggesting better-adjusting techniques of human traffickers to avoid the police of Kosovo or corruption as a tool to avoid the justice system. Therefore, understanding that Human trafficking victims can be of any age, race,

ethnicity, sex, gender identity, sexual orientation, nationality, immigration status, cultural background, religion, socio-economic class, and education attainment level is essential because even though in Kosovo, woman and girls are posed as the main victims as a result of human trafficking, it does not leave behind the possibility for men to be victims of these illicit networks. Traffickers can be strangers, acquaintances, or even family members, and they prey on the vulnerable and on those seeking opportunities to build for themselves a brighter future (U. S. Department of State, 2024). The focus on human trafficking leads to the interest in understanding traffickers' methods of recruiting victims in Kosovo. According to Europol (2024), there are attractive ways to "lure victims" into falling into the "traps" of traffickers, starting with fake job adverts, which are deceptive schemes where scammers post job listings to lure unsuspecting jobseekers into exploitative situations. They do this by posting attractive job listings from fake companies or misrepresenting working conditions. Once job seekers arrive at the workplace, they find themselves in a completely different job or working under completely different conditions than those in the advert. Another very popular way of recruiting women in an easy way is the "lover boy" technique, which is widely used by criminals to recruit victims facing economic and social hardship into forced prostitution. The suspects prey on their victims' vulnerabilities, enticing them with expensive gifts or promises of a better life. The scam starts with the perpetrators approaching potential victims with the false pretence of wanting to build a relationship with them. Eventually, perpetrators convince victims to move away from or cut ties with their families. Once isolated, the victims are forced into prostitution to earn money for their handlers. They are often kept in this situation through a combination of affection, violence, and threats against them and their families (Europol, 2024). Supporting also U. S. state report (2024), wherein the report states that human traffickers exploit domestic and foreign victims in Kosovo, and traffickers exploit victims from Kosovo abroad. Criminal networks exploit victims in sex trafficking internally. Many sex trafficking victims in Kosovo are girls, although traffickers also force women from Albania, Moldova, Montenegro, Romania, Serbia, and other European countries into sex trafficking. Traffickers recruit women and girls with promises of marriage or employment as dancers and singers and force victims into sex trafficking in private homes and apartments, nightclubs, and massage parlours. Supporting the source that women and young girls are mostly the victims of human trafficking in Kosovo, and there is the involvement of foreign women. Another way of trafficking is the exploitation of children from Kosovo, Albania, and other neighbouring countries in forced begging (United States Department of State, 2024). The U. S. Department report profiles

traffickers as subjecting Kosovans to sex trafficking and forced labour throughout Europe, suggesting the involvement of cross-border routes, known as the “Balkan route.” Meanwhile, those protected from human trafficking are not marginalised groups, migrants, or asylum seekers, providing clarification that, first and foremost, the victims of human trafficking are people with vulnerabilities. According to the interviews with the police officers, the recruitments of women and young girls involve bars, nightclubs, and social media such as Snapchat, Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, and other platforms. Furthermore, the other categories, such as migrants and asylum seekers, are more likely to fall into the category of fake job advertisements. As for the marginalised groups, the traffickers are often their parents or relatives. Supporting also the U. S. Trafficking in Persons Report (2024), where it is also stated that the trafficking profile in Kosovo for marginalised groups, particularly children, are vulnerable to begging and sex trafficking, including traffickers such as parents and relatives. Another challenge for Kosovo remains the justice system, where, according to the U. S. Department of State, trafficking in persons report (2023), Sentences below minimum penalties and fines alone undercut efforts to hold traffickers accountable, weakened deterrence, created potential security and safety concerns for victims, and was not equal to the seriousness of the crime.

5. Discussion

The findings reveal the rise in human trafficking in recent years, taking into consideration 2022 and 2023. Meanwhile, the difference in numbers between 2020 and 2021 suggests that the COVID-19 pandemic and the restrictions in movement aligned with the lack of COVID-19 vaccine in 2020 were responsible for the higher difference between these two years. The outburst with the highest numbers in 2021 suggests the ability of human traffickers to adjust to the recent trends in recruiting techniques and methods, such as those mentioned above by Europol, police interviews, and the U. S. Department report of 2024. In comparing the recruitment techniques, the two most applied ones are, according to Europol’s report of 2024, social media and traditional methods such as the “lover boy” technique. Results indicate that in Kosovo, there are dual strategies used to attract victims to fall into the traps of these traffickers. Further, this suggests that it is being dealt with by highly intelligent professionals who can adapt quickly to changes and know how to combine both techniques. The legal framework adopted into the Kosovan legislation indicates the willingness of Kosovo to combat human trafficking. Still, the lack of police enforcement training and judicial system hinders the process. Moreover, the cross-

border movement of the victims suggests the present existence of the “Balkan route” and also the collaboration of trafficker networks of Kosovo with other Balkan countries. The research addressed the question of how these criminal groups have evolved from 2020 to 2023 period. The findings indicate that traffickers adapted swiftly to the COVID-19 pandemic, utilising more favourable ways of recruiting, such as digitalised platforms, while also keeping their traditional ways of recruitment. The data further highlights the operational direction of criminal networks’ but also emphasises the need for digital monitoring and enhanced victim protection policies. Additionally, the underreporting of trafficking cases, a common challenge in this field, may affect the accuracy of statistical trends.

6. Conclusion

This research explored the dynamics between 2020-2023 in human trafficking, focusing on socio-economic challenges, legal framework, and the operational techniques of trafficking networks. The findings revealed steady changes between the years 2020 and 2021, highlighting the COVID-19 pandemic and the adaption of these trafficking networks to digital platforms while traditional techniques remained prevalent. The research further underscored the marginalised groups, including women, children, migrants, and asylum seekers, as key targets of these trafficking networks. The findings concrete the urgent need for stronger digital monitoring, cross-border collaboration of police enforcement, and more advanced victim policies in Kosovo. In addressing socio-economic challenges, it is critical to concentrate on dual practices in reducing trafficking with humans while enhancing law enforcement’s capacity to combat and adapt to traffickers’ new techniques and methods. Additionally, the research provides valuable insights into the evolution of human trafficking in Kosovo and provides a clear direction of the methods used by traffickers to attract victims and the scope was limited by the availability of public data and also the underreporting of human trafficking cases. Future research should explore the perspective of survivors in long-term effects and socio-economic interventions. As for other recommendations, there is an urgent need to invest in digital tools for monitoring trafficking activities. Furthermore, policy-makers should prioritise the harmonisation of the legislation in accordance with the international framework and provide training for the judicial system since the sentence system is not applied in accordance with the current legislation. As for the police of Kosovo, there should be an improvement in the cross-border control system and better collaboration with other Balkan countries. As human trafficking remains a challenge

that primarily affects the most vulnerable part of society, combating trafficking networks remains a priority.

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