
Human Trafficking During the Migrant Crisis in the Balkans (Case Study: Albania)

Nebojša Ćurčić¹, Žaklina Spalević², Anita Klikovac³ & Stefan Zdravković⁴

¹The Academy of Applied Studies Polytechnic, Belgrade, Serbia

²Singidunum University, Belgrade, Serbia

Faculty of Tourism and Hotel Management

³Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Republic of Serbia: Sector for
Emergency Situations, Belgrade, Serbia

⁴MB University Belgrade, Serbia

Faculty of Business and Law

Article Information

Review Article • UDC: 346.1:351.756-054.7(496.5)

Volume: 23, Issue: 1, pages: 11–24

Received: January 2, 2026 • Accepted: April 20, 2026

<https://doi.org/10.51738/kpolisa.2026.1r.nczsaksz>

Author Note

Nebojša Ćurčić  <https://orcid.org/0009-0005-2588-2710>

Žaklina Spalević  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8502-2038>

Anita Klikovac  <https://orcid.org/0009-0003-8616-7564>

Stefan Zdravković  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0047-3356>

Corresponding author: Žaklina Spalević

E-mail: zspalevic@singidunum.ac.rs

* Cite (APA): Ćurčić, N., Spalević, Ž., Klikovac, A., & Zdravković, S. (2026). Human Trafficking During the Migrant Crisis in the Balkans (Case Study: Albania). *Kultura polisa*, 23(1), 11–24, <https://doi.org/10.51738/kpolisa.2026.1r.nczsaksz>



© 2025 by the authors. This article is an open-access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Human Trafficking During the Migrant Crisis in the Balkans (Case Study: Albania)

Abstract

The migration crisis in the Western Balkans (2015–2020) has increased Albania's vulnerability to human trafficking. As a transit and increasingly destination country, Albania faced challenges in identifying, protecting, and reintegrating victims, particularly migrants, refugees, and unaccompanied minors. This study examines the legal and institutional framework, including the National Referral Mechanism and cooperation with NGOs, as well as the role of international actors (UNHCR, IOM, GRETA, OSCE). Despite progress in legislation and victim protection mechanisms, challenges remain in victim identification, professional training, and inter-agency coordination. The study highlights the need for regional cooperation, a human-rights-based approach, and technological tools for more effective anti-trafficking measures.

Keywords: Albania, human trafficking, migration, unaccompanied minors, international organizations, victim protection

Introduction

Transnational organized crime has emerged as a significant threat to national and international security, with profound social, economic, and political consequences that may contribute to state and societal destabilization (Eyo & Okebugwu, 2024). A defining feature of contemporary organized crime is its transnational character, as state borders no longer constitute an effective barrier to criminal networks. Consequently, the activities of organized criminal groups pose a threat not only to the countries in which they originate, but also to all states and societies in which they operate (Banović, 2016). In the context of the financial dimension of human trafficking, the issue of anonymous money flows and the concealment of the origin of funds takes on particular significance. (Bjelajac & Bajac, 2022).

This paper examines human trafficking in Albania during the migrant crisis of the past decade (2015–2020). The migrant crisis generated extensive political debate and controversy across Europe, particularly in the Balkan region, while simultaneously creating opportunities for criminal activities and serious human rights violations. One of the most severe violations at the international level is human trafficking. According to Article 3 of the United Nations Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children (Palermo Protocol), human trafficking encompasses the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring, or receipt of persons through coercion, force, deception, abuse of power, or exploitation of vulnerability for the purpose of exploitation (Russo et al., 2022).

The aim of this study is to analyze the characteristics of transnational organized crime in the context of human trafficking during the Balkan migrant crisis between 2015 and 2020, with particular emphasis on Albania. The paper first outlines the migrant crisis in Europe and the status of migrants within the European Union, followed by an overview of human trafficking as a phenomenon. Special attention is given to the Balkan route and Albania's role within this context. Finally, the paper discusses protection and prevention measures implemented by the Albanian government to safeguard victims and combat human trafficking.

The Migrant Crisis in Europe (2015–2020)

Causes and Onset of the Migrant Crisis

According to the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and other international bodies, there is no universally accepted definition of the term “migrant.” Generally, migrants are understood as individuals who move from one place to another in search of better living and working conditions (Joao, 2018). Freedom of movement is protected under international law, and host countries are obliged to ensure the protection of migrants (Margesson et al., 2019). The Human Rights Committee emphasizes that states in which migrants are identified must respect procedural safeguards and rights established by international human rights instruments, ensuring protection and non-discriminatory treatment regardless of migrants’ legal status (Metcalf-Hough, 2015).

Regarding EU migration policy, the process of European integration during the twentieth century resulted in several key legal instruments shaping immigration and asylum governance. Although the Single European Act aimed to establish a unified market without internal borders, it did not adequately address migration and asylum issues. Subsequent cooperation led to the adoption of the Schengen Agreement (1985), the Schengen Implementing Convention (1995), and the Dublin Convention (1990). While the Schengen framework focused on strengthening external border controls and judicial cooperation, its implementing conventions increasingly linked migration and asylum to security concerns such as terrorism and transnational crime. The Dublin Convention further reinforced this approach by limiting asylum applications, strengthening external border zones, and reducing entry opportunities, thereby revealing the restrictive nature of intergovernmental cooperation in this field.

The Maastricht Treaty (commonly referred to as the Treaty on European Union) placed immigration and asylum issues under the competence of the newly established European Union. It limited national autonomy and judicial oversight in these areas, while simultaneously linking immigration and asylum to illegal migration, organized crime, fraud, and police cooperation in combating terrorism, drug trafficking, and other forms of cross-border crime. In order to address the institutional confusion created by the establishment of the single European market and the intergovernmental management of migration and asylum, the Amsterdam Treaty (1997) later separated asylum and immigration law from organized crime and transferred these issues to the first pillar.

The protection of individuals from persecution laid the foundation for a more humanitarian approach to immigration. At that time, the only binding EU instrument in the field was the Temporary Protection Directive (2001), which reflected a balance between strict control measures and humanitarian considerations, with migration being less strongly securitized. Consequently, EU migration policy during the late twentieth century evolved through a compromise between restrictive security-oriented measures—initially shaped by the Schengen framework—and humanitarian principles promoted from the Tampere Conference onward. Another defining feature of this period was enhanced cooperation between EU member states and third countries, resulting in numerous bilateral readmission agreements.

Following the attacks of 11 September 2001, the EU adopted a more security-driven approach. Through initiatives such as the “Border Measures” directive, external border controls were strengthened, and asylum and immigration were increasingly associated with counterterrorism efforts. As a result, combating illegal immigration became a central EU priority, culminating in the adoption of the

Comprehensive Action Plan against Illegal Immigration and Trafficking in Human Beings in 2002. Terrorist attacks in France, Belgium, and Germany in 2015–2016 further intensified fears related to migration, leading to greater securitization and the criminalization of migrants and asylum seekers in political discourse. The revision of the Dublin Regulation in 2013 (Dublin III), which assigns responsibility for asylum processing to the first country of entry, proved unsustainable during the 2015 migrant crisis, particularly due to the limited capacities of peripheral EU member states.

The key strategic document guiding EU immigration policy is the European Agenda on Migration (Sekarić, 2016). Its core principle emphasizes collective action by all member states to provide protection to migrants in need of international protection, while ensuring the return of those without legal grounds to remain in the EU. The Agenda called for urgent measures to address the Mediterranean crisis and outlined long-term steps to improve migration governance. In parallel, the European Security Agenda (2015–2020) significantly shaped political responses to immigration, as reduced sensitivity toward migrants' rights risked framing the migration crisis primarily as an economic and security issue.

Regarding migrants' legal status, the use of the term "illegal" is discouraged, as it conflicts with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, particularly Article 6, which affirms that every individual has the right to recognition as a person before the law (United Nations General Assembly, 1948). Regardless of legal status, migrants should be treated with dignity, although in practice, especially in welfare-intensive states, irregular migrants are often blamed for their vulnerable situation.

Detention practices and conditions related to irregular border crossings significantly affect the protection of migrants' rights (Adamson, 2006), with women and children—particularly unaccompanied minors—being especially vulnerable. Given that these groups are frequently victims of human trafficking, border and migration authorities must apply appropriate training and screening procedures. Human trafficking, driven by high profits and the interaction of supply and demand, constitutes a serious violation of fundamental rights and is explicitly prohibited under Article 5(3) of the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights. It is criminalized under Article 83 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union as a form of "Euro-crime," often with a cross-border dimension.

The EU Directive 2011/36/EU established minimum standards for defining trafficking offenses, penalties, victim protection, and prevention measures. Recognizing the complexity of the issue, the European Commission adopted the EU Strategy towards the Eradication of Trafficking in Human Beings 2012–2016, followed by the Action Plan against Trafficking in Human Beings 2017–2019. Article 2 of Directive 2011/36/EU defines trafficking-related offenses, including recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring, or receipt of persons through coercion, deception, or abuse of power. The International Labour Organization estimates that traffickers exploit approximately 77% of victims within their countries of residence, prompting the UN to stress in 2018 the growing importance of national justice measures alongside international cooperation.

To address trafficking more effectively, many states have established National Referral Mechanisms aimed at identifying, protecting, and assisting victims (Hernandez & Rudolph, 2015). These mechanisms typically operate in three stages: identification and referral by first responders, assessment based on "reasonable grounds," and a final determination of victim status.

The Balkan Route in the Context of Migration and Human Trafficking

The Balkan route gained particular prominence in 2015, when several hundred thousand migrants—primarily asylum seekers from Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan—used this pathway to reach Western Europe. Its popularity stemmed largely from the fact that migrants could initially travel relatively freely, without relying heavily on smugglers, as borders along the route remained comparatively open until late 2015. However, from September 2015 onward, countries in the region progressively introduced border closures, fences, and restrictive entry measures, which increased demand for smuggling services and diverted migration flows to more dangerous routes.

Migration along the Balkan route has been predominantly transit-oriented, with Albania functioning mainly as a transit country. In 2018, 5,730 arrivals and 4,378 asylum applications were recorded, while only about 1% of migrants chose to remain in Albania. Most migrants originated from conflict-affected countries, with Syrians accounting for approximately half of all arrivals. Women and children represented around 18% of migrants, including 155 unaccompanied minors, whose protection needs required strengthened coordination between state authorities, NGOs, and international agencies (Schloendhardt, 2019; Benedetti, 2018).

Alongside the Mediterranean route, the Balkan route became one of the principal corridors during the European migrant crisis, which began intensifying in 2014 and was described as one of the largest population movements in Europe since World War II. Widespread fatalities along these routes underscored the severity of the crisis. Migrants often faced forced returns at EU borders, particularly from Croatia, leaving many stranded in the Balkans and exposed to significant risks. In this context, the convergence of large-scale migration and weak institutional capacities created favorable conditions for human trafficking networks (Kleemans, 2011).

As a transit country on the southern segment of the Balkan route, Albania faced additional challenges due to domestic political, economic, and corruption-related issues, as well as the presence of organized crime. At certain points, more than 25,000 migrants were waiting near the Greek border to continue their journey through Albania toward EU borders via Montenegro and Bosnia and Herzegovina (Benedetti, 2018). The scale and complexity of these movements revealed significant shortcomings in European migration systems, leaving many migrants and refugees in highly vulnerable situations (International Organization for Migration, 2019).

According to data from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), approximately one million migrants and refugees reached Europe—primarily via the Greek coastline—using smuggling networks in 2015 (Clayton & Holland, 2015). Unsafe travel conditions and inadequate transport resulted in numerous deaths and disappearances, most likely due to drowning. The majority of individuals traveling along irregular routes were men, although families and elderly relatives were also present. The fluidity of migration routes and shifting border restrictions facilitated adaptive strategies among migrants, while the disappearance of unaccompanied migrant children upon arrival in Europe raised serious concerns regarding human trafficking (Grupković, Jelačić Kojić, & Petronijević, 2016).

In 2016, nearly 370,000 migrants entered Europe by sea, with Syrians, Afghans, Nigerians, Pakistanis, Iraqis, and Eritreans constituting the largest groups (Migration Policy Institute, 2019). Border closures, particularly by Hungarian authorities, left many migrants stranded in Greece, forcing some to

seek alternative land routes through Turkey and Albania (Batha, 2016). Although the number of arrivals declined in 2017 amid rising populism and the reconfiguration of migration routes, this period was marked by the establishment of new policy mechanisms and governance structures (Henley, 2018). A persistent challenge throughout the crisis remained the coordination of decision-making, especially among frontline states such as Italy and Greece.

In 2019, migrant arrivals exceeded expectations due to renewed conflict in northern Syria, which displaced over 800,000 people (European Border and Coast Guard Agency, 2019). By contrast, 2020 saw a decline in arrivals, largely influenced by restrictive measures linked to the COVID-19 pandemic (European Border and Coast Guard Agency, 2019). Nevertheless, migration pressures persisted, particularly along the Mediterranean and Balkan routes. According to UNHCR, Europe's mixed migration flows continue to comprise asylum seekers, refugees, and economic migrants, posing ongoing challenges for European migration governance.

Status of Migrants and the Phenomenon of Human Trafficking within the European Union

Human Trafficking and Irregular Migration Flows through Albania

Albania has faced challenges similar to those experienced across Europe during the migrant crisis. The country operates a single National Reception Center for Asylum Seekers in Babrru, near Tirana, which is intended to provide accommodation and assistance to migrants arriving in Albania (Bregu, 2019). Albania primarily functions as a transit country for migrant smuggling across the Western Balkans or, less frequently, by sea to Italy. Maritime routes are considered more expensive and risky, making them less commonly used. Smuggling from Greece into Albania mainly occurs via land routes through rural and remote areas that bypass official border crossings. A Frontex report (2019) indicates that the scale of migrant smuggling through Albania largely depends on the level of border control along the Greek–Albanian frontier, with the city of Ioannina identified as a key hub for migrants seeking smugglers. From Albania, the main overland route leads toward Montenegro and further to Croatia or Serbia, forming a less frequented sub-route of the Western Balkan corridor due to difficult mountainous terrain and underdeveloped infrastructure.

Human trafficking is criminalized in Albania. Between April 2018 and March 2019, authorities identified 95 official and potential victims, including 28 adults and 67 minors, with women accounting for the majority of cases; 36 victims were subjected to sexual exploitation (Country Policy and Information Note, 2020). Although Albania is not part of the EU asylum system, it has adopted legal frameworks and mechanisms to manage irregular migration in line with international human rights and protection standards. Nevertheless, like other Western Balkan countries, Albania has experienced a sharp increase in migrants and refugees arriving from outside the region, which has strained institutional capacities.

Women and children constitute a significant proportion of irregular migration flows through Albania and are particularly vulnerable to human trafficking and sexual exploitation. Over the past decade, trafficking networks have become more structured, operating through distinct patterns. One type involves the transportation of refugees and irregular migrants of various legal statuses, including both foreign nationals and Albanian citizens. Another type focuses predominantly on the trafficking of women for sexual

exploitation, a process that differs fundamentally from migrant smuggling, as exploitation continues beyond arrival at the destination (Nushi, 2015).

The third form of trafficking involves children, who are forced into begging, sexual abuse, or organ trafficking, with girls often later exploited in prostitution. Albanian criminal groups are widely believed to cooperate across Europe and to display a high level of resilience to law enforcement, resulting in extensive transnational trafficking networks.

In 2015, Albania faced increased pressure from irregular migration flows following measures adopted by North Macedonia to reduce movements from Greece (Šelo Šabić, 2018). Owing to its strategic geographic position, Albania enables migrants to continue toward Montenegro or attempt maritime crossings across the Adriatic Sea to Italy. Economic underdevelopment, weak infrastructure, and mountainous border areas further facilitate irregular crossings, particularly during winter months. Since early 2018, Albanian border authorities have detected 2,311 irregular border crossings, confirming that Albania's terrain and relatively permeable borders sustain active irregular migration flows (Xhaho & Lleshi Tandili, 2019).

Despite efforts by the EU and national authorities, migrant smuggling remains difficult to suppress. The Ministry of Interior, through bodies such as the State Police, the Border and Migration Department, the Directorate for Organized Crime, and the Directorate for Anti-Trafficking, plays a central role in managing irregular migration. These institutions are responsible for integrated border management, monitoring the legality of foreign nationals' stay, implementing return and readmission procedures, conducting regional data exchange, and identifying and assisting victims or potential victims of human trafficking, including unaccompanied minors, in line with the National Referral Mechanism and standard operating procedures.

Alignment of the Albanian Government with Migration and Human Trafficking Protocols: Prevention and Victim Protection Mechanisms

Albania was heavily affected by the migration crisis as the collapse of the Balkan route redirected flows through Albania, Montenegro, and Bosnia toward Western Europe (Bregu, 2019). Between 2000 and 2010, Albania served as a destination for victims of nearly all forms of human trafficking, including prostitution, sexual exploitation, forced labor, and organ trafficking (Dottridge & Machel, 2004).

Until 1998, Albania lacked a legal framework addressing human trafficking. The first initiative came with the establishment of the Working Group on Combating Human Trafficking under the Ministry of Interior (Portanova, 2018; Townsend, 2019). In 2001, Albania formally criminalized human trafficking in its penal code, preceding ratification and implementation of the UN Protocol on Human Trafficking in 2002 (U.S. Department of State, 2002). Additionally, Albania adopted Council of Europe instruments against human trafficking on 20 November 2006, implemented as Law No. 9642 (Agolli Nasufi & Bruci, 2019), ratified the Palermo Protocol in 2002, and the Council of Europe Convention in 2007, reflecting the government's proactive stance. Further measures included establishing the State Committee against Human Trafficking in 2002 and, in 2017, implementing the National Referral Mechanism under the Prime Minister's office.

Albania implemented an action plan for 2011–2013, emphasizing legal frameworks, data collection, awareness-raising projects, services, and international cooperation to combat human trafficking (Balidemaj, 2019). The aim was to align Albanian law with international standards. While Albania criminalized human trafficking, identifying actual victims remains challenging due to varied exploitation methods (Simich, Goyen, & Mallozzi, 2014).

Legal gaps persist, as broad definitions from the UN Protocol on Trafficking complicate enforcement (Kranrattanasuit, 2014). The 2014–2017 strategy included victim restitution, rehabilitation, and compensation, but practical measures were limited (Asllani, 2018). Victims are both survivors and witnesses of suffering (Ward & Fouladvand, 2018).

Albania operates four shelters under the National Shelter Network, offering legal support, training, child assistance, and long-term accommodation for 115 victims (U.S. Department of State, 2020). In 2016, the government launched the “Action Plan for Social and Economic Integration of Women and Girls Victims,” targeting housing, education, social support, and reintegration (Gjebrea, 2016).

The Ministry of Interior and the National Coordination Office, in cooperation with IOM, developed an action plan aligned with organized crime strategies (UK Ministry of Interior, 2018b). The Victim Assistance Bureau, established in 2016, supports minors, disabled persons, and victims of sexual exploitation, with UN endorsement (UN Committee, 2016). Internationally supported projects include “Choose Opportunity, Not Illegal Migration” (Oct 2017–Mar 2018) in 12 regions of Albania (IOM, 2017).

Since 2020, the Albanian government has continued to strengthen its legal, institutional, and strategic framework to combat human trafficking and better manage migration flows. The revised National Action Plan against Human Trafficking (2021–2023) emphasized prevention, victim protection, and the reinforcement of local mobile teams (Government of Albania, 2021).

In 2021–2022, Albania enhanced cooperation with international actors, particularly FRONTEX, the European Border and Coast Guard Agency, improving the identification of vulnerable migrant groups, including potential trafficking victims (European Border and Coast Guard Agency, 2022). With support from IOM and UNHCR, reception and registration mechanisms for asylum seekers and migrants were also improved (UNHCR Albania, 2022; International Organization for Migration, 2023).

In 2023, Albania adopted a new Law on the Protection of Victims of Human Trafficking, ensuring victims’ access to emergency accommodation, legal and psychosocial support, and reintegration into local communities (Group of Experts on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings, 2022), marking a significant alignment with international standards.

In 2024, a digital registry of vulnerable migrants was launched, developed with UN support, facilitating better inter-agency coordination and directing at-risk individuals to appropriate services (International Organization for Migration, 2023).

In 2025, a pilot reintegration program was implemented, offering education, employment, and subsidized housing, particularly in rural and impoverished areas (Bami, 2024). These initiatives represent a key step toward a sustainable and humane approach to combating human trafficking.

Despite significant progress, challenges remain, including limited local capacities, insufficient training of some actors, and the need for improved inter-institutional cooperation (United Nations Office

on Drugs and Crime, 2023). Nonetheless, Albania's progressive and comprehensive policies have the potential to serve as a regional model.

The Role of International Organizations in Shaping Albania's Institutional Response to the Migration Crisis

Albania has developed procedures to combat crimes related to human trafficking, recognizing it as a severe violation of human and fundamental rights. By adopting legislative measures and ratifying the Palermo Convention and its protocols in 2002, Albania has reduced human trafficking (Xhaho & Lleshi Tandili, 2019).

Combating human trafficking requires a multidisciplinary approach, involving expertise from multiple agencies or ministries. Effective responses necessitate that all relevant authorities understand the mechanisms of trafficking and how traffickers interact with victims and perpetrators. Since the adoption of the Palermo Protocol, an increasing number of stakeholders, including governments worldwide, have enacted comprehensive legislation criminalizing traffickers while providing care to victims. Ensuring protection for all victims, including those of internal trafficking, requires proactive application of these laws, sometimes beyond standard frameworks.

Albania's National Strategy against Human Trafficking (2018–2020) outlines systematically structured measures. It provides procedures for both victims and traffickers. Victims are recognized in criminal legislation as harmed by crime, and their vulnerability is addressed to prevent exploitation. Psychological assessments are conducted, and minors may be examined in the presence of parents or legal guardians. Upon leaving the National Reception Center for Victims of Trafficking, regional social services develop individualized reintegration plans. GRETA has been informed that victims receive priority access to services, while NGO-managed shelters collaborate with employment agencies and potential employers to facilitate access to the labor market. Databases are regularly updated to allow stakeholders to track victim progress and support reintegration (Xhaho & Lleshi Tandili, 2019).

The National Reception Center for Victims of Human Trafficking is located on the outskirts of Tirana and its security is ensured by the national police. Victims formally identified and assessed to be in particularly dangerous situations are accommodated in this center. In the first six months of 2015, the center provided shelter for 10 individuals. In addition to risk assessment, counseling, medical care, and legal advice, the center offers vocational training in partnership with the Ministry of Social Affairs and Youth, either within or outside the shelter if the victim's safety is not at risk.

By ratifying the Palermo Convention and its two supplementary protocols on human trafficking (Law No. 9820, 11 July 2002), Albania joined international efforts to coordinate anti-trafficking measures. Key organizational initiatives included establishing specialized structures to combat organized crime, including human trafficking. Rehabilitation measures include standardized questionnaires to assist police units in first contact with victims. At all border crossings where deportees are returned, border police interview individuals to identify and protect potential trafficking victims. The National Reception Center also raises awareness about human trafficking victims.

Other influential NGOs include UNHCR, CARITAS Albania, and IOM. Mixed migration flows in Albania began in 2017 with fewer than 2,000 border crossings. By 2018, the number of migrants reaching

Albania's borders reached approximately 11,000 (Xhaho & Lleshi Tandili, 2019). Albania has officially become a transit country, with almost 80% of border-crossers seeking asylum. Standard procedures and identification mechanisms vary from other regional countries. Through interviews and biographical data, migration and border authorities distinguish between trafficking victims, asylum seekers, unaccompanied minors, and irregular migrants.

Identified irregular migrants are typically returned to their country of origin, usually Montenegro. UNHCR procedures ensure that all migrants are interviewed according to official protocols, regardless of crossing location. Depending on the results, individuals are sent either to detention centers or to the National Reception Center for Asylum Seekers in Babru, near Tirana (UNHCR, 2019). Victims of human trafficking, however, are transferred to the National Center for Victims of Human Trafficking in Tirana, where specialized care and services are provided (UNHCR, 2019).

Most human trafficking cases involve unaccompanied women and children. Established trafficking routes suggest organized networks facilitating these crimes. While UNHCR's mission is not problem-specific, the illegal transport of migrants from southern to northern Albania clearly implies the risk of human trafficking. The Albanian government plays a key role but heavily relies on international organizations due to limited resources.

A practical challenge is the low number of female border officers. Since unaccompanied women are primary targets for traffickers, having more female officers would create a safer environment in which victims could disclose their situation more comfortably. Although international support has been valuable in recent years, effective procedures remain constrained by resource gaps, including a shortage of translators for rare languages such as Hindi and Pashto.

Albania lacks a formal referral mechanism for unaccompanied children. Traffickers can exploit this vulnerability because border and migration authorities do not have a structured system to interview and identify unaccompanied minors. Intervention only occurs if a child is formally recognized as unaccompanied. Effective protection requires not only identification systems but also coordination with local municipalities, social services, and the national child protection unit. Cooperation challenges arise due to insufficient government capacity and social workers.

International organizations support the renovation of social facilities and shelters for vulnerable groups, including trafficking victims. However, the absence of dedicated centers for trafficked minors or unaccompanied children indicates an unsustainable protection environment. International and NGO assistance includes training for border and migration police to prevent human rights violations by traffickers, yet gaps remain.

A positive example of collaboration involved three unaccompanied children from Afghanistan who were eventually reunited with their mother in Sweden. CARITAS Albania provided shelter, food, and medical care, while UNHCR managed bureaucratic procedures. After three years, all visa requirements were met, and the children were successfully reunited with their mother (UNHCR, 2019).

Conclusion

Human trafficking represents one of the most serious consequences of contemporary migration, and the migrant crisis affecting the Western Balkans between 2015 and 2020 further exposed existing

vulnerabilities in the region. Albania, as both a transit and increasingly a destination country along the Balkan route, faced significant challenges in identifying, protecting, and reintegrating victims of human trafficking, particularly among migrants, refugees, and unaccompanied minors. Although Albania had established a solid institutional framework prior to the crisis—including the National Referral Mechanism, cooperation with NGOs, and ratification of key international instruments—the crisis revealed operational weaknesses. Victim identification remained fragmented, and intersectoral cooperation was at times formal, without substantive data exchange.

Between 2015 and 2020, Albania intensified its efforts through updated strategies, action plans, and alignment of national legislation with European standards. Cooperation with organizations such as OSCE, UNHCR, and GRETA played a critical role in providing technical assistance and evaluating the institutional response.

Despite progress, the number of prosecuted cases remains low, and restitution for victims is almost nonexistent. Systemic weaknesses are evident in insufficiently trained professionals, fragmented evidence collection, and the lack of specialized prosecution teams for trafficking cases within migration contexts. Coordination gaps between security structures and social services impede early identification of victims among transit migrants, especially along informal routes. Unaccompanied minors remain the most vulnerable group, frequently exposed to forced begging, labor, and sexual exploitation. While the migration crisis did not create human trafficking, it exacerbated conditions for its proliferation, particularly in countries with limited capacities such as Albania. This underscores the necessity of regional and cross-border cooperation in detection, prevention, and prosecution, with a stronger role for international organizations and EU agencies.

Modern victim protection approaches must be grounded in human rights, gender equality, and the specific needs of vulnerable groups. Technological tools, such as digital forensics and risk databases, offer new opportunities for more effective anti-trafficking measures. Political will and institutional sustainability remain key factors for long-term success. Albania has demonstrated readiness to reform its system, but further progress depends on consistent law enforcement, adequate budgeting, and transparent monitoring.

Human trafficking within the context of the Albanian migration crisis is a complex phenomenon, rooted in socio-economic vulnerability, institutional deficiencies, and the country's geostrategic position. Addressing this issue requires not only national reforms but an integrated regional approach that links security, justice, and human rights.

References

- Batha, E. (2016). Europe's refugee and migrant crisis in 2016. In numbers." World Economic Forum, <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2016/12/europes-refugee-and-migrant-crisis-in-2016-in-numbers>
- Banović, B. (2016). Organized crime as a current security threat. *International Problems*, 68(2-3), 172–192.
- Benedetti, E. (2018). The Balkan Route of Illegal Migration and the Role of EU in Facing this Emergency: a Stimulus or a Brake for Enlargement?" *the Balkan route of illegal migration* 49– 61.

- Birleşik Krallık İç İşleri Bakanlığı. (2018b). Report of a home office fact-finding mission Albania. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/681071/Home_Office_FFM_Report_-_Albania.pdf
- Bjelajac, Ž., & Bajac, M. (2022). Blockchain technology and money laundering. *Pravo – teorija i praksa* 39(2), 21–38. DOI: 10.5937/ptp2202021B
- Bregu, M. (2019). The Effects of the Migration Crisis in Albania: The Syrian Refugee Case. *Research and Study Today*, 64-66.
- Clayton, J., & Holland, H. (2015, December 30). Over one million sea arrivals reach Europe in 2015. UNHCR. <https://www.unhcr.org/news/latest/2015/12/5683d0b56/million-sea-arrivals-reach-europe-2015.html>
- Country Policy and Information Note. (2020). Albania: Trafficking of women for sexual exploitation (pp. 1–79). Home Office. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/896134/Albania_-_Trafficking_-_CPIN_-_v9.0_June_2020_.pdf
- Dottridge, M. and Machel, G. (2004). Kids as commodities? Child trafficking and what to do about it. International Federation Terre des Hommes.
- European Border and Coast Guard Agency (FRONTEX). (2019). Migratory routes: Illegal border crossings on the Western Balkans route in numbers. <https://frontex.europa.eu/along-eu-borders/migratory-routes/western-balkan-route/>
- European Border and Coast Guard Agency (FRONTEX). (2020). Situation at EU external borders – Arrivals down in first half of 2020. Frontex. <https://frontex.europa.eu/media-centre/news-release/situation-at-eu-external-borders-arrivals-down-in-first-half-of-2020-UdNxM5>
- European Border and Coast Guard Agency (FRONTEX). (2022). Operational cooperation with Albania: Annual overview. <https://frontex.europa.eu>
- Eyo, I., & Okebugwu, G. C. (2024). Analysis of fundamental challenges in the combat of transnational crimes. *International Journal of Research and Innovation in Social Science*, 8 (4), 1297-1318.
- Gjebrea, L. (2016). National action plan for the socio-economic re-integration of women and girls victims of trafficking in the Republic of Albania.
- Government of Albania. (2021). National action plan for the fight against trafficking in human beings 2021–2023. Ministry of Interior. <https://mb.gov.al>
- Group of Experts on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings (GRETA). (2022). Report concerning the implementation of the Council of Europe Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings by Albania – Third evaluation round. <https://rm.coe.int>

- Grupković, B., Jelačić Kojić, M., & Petronijević, V. (2016). Srbija na izbegličkoj ruti – Humanitarni odgovor i pravna prilagođavanja. Fondacija Fridrih Ebert; Evropski pokret u Srbiji. <http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/belgrad/12941.pdf>
- Gruszczak, A. (2019). Migration and security in 2018. In Security outlook 2018 (pp. 27–51). Księgarnia Akademicka.
- Henley, J. (2018). What is the current state of the migration crisis in Europe? The Guardian, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/jun/15/what-current-scale-migration-crisis-europe-future-outlook>
- Hernandez, D., & Rudolph, A. (2015). Modern day slavery: What drives human trafficking in Europe? European Journal of Political Economy, 38, 118–139.
- International Organization for Migration (IOM). (2023). Annual report: Migration management and reintegration in Albania. <https://albania.iom.int>
- International Organization for Migration. (2019). World migration report 2019. IOM https://publications.iom.int/system/files/pdf/wmr_2020.pdf.
- IOM. (2017). Choose migration! opportunities, not irregular http://www.mb.gov.al/wpcontent/uploads/2018/01/Choose_opportunities_not_irregular_migrati_o_n.pdf
- Joao, E. (2018). Migration crisis in the EU: developing a framework for analysis of national security and defense strategies. Comparative Migration Studies.
- Kleemans, E. R. (2011). Expanding the Domain of Human Trafficking Research: Introduction to the Special Issue on Human trafficking. Trends in Organized Crime: 95-99.
- Kranrattanasuit, N. (2014). ASEAN and human trafficking: Case studies of Cambodia, Thailand and Vietnam. Brill Nijhoff
- Margesson, Kristin Archick and Rhoda. (2019). Europe's Refugee and Migration Flows. In Focus, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/row/IF10259.pdf>
- Metcalfe-Hough, V. (2015). The migration crisis? Facts, challenges and possible solutions. London: ODI Briefing, <https://www.odi.org/sites/odi.org.uk/files/odiassets/publications-opinion-files/9913.pdf>

Trgovina ljudima tokom migrantske krize na Balkanu (studija slučaja: Albanija)

Nebojša Ćurčić¹, Žaklina Spalević², Anita Klikovac³ i Stefan Zdravković⁴

¹Akademija strukovnih studija Politehnika, Beograd, Srbija

²Univerzitet Singidunum, Beograd, Srbija

Fakultet za turistički i hotelijerski menadžment

³Ministarstvo unutrašnjih poslova Republike Srbije: Sektor za vanredne situacije, Beograd, Srbija

⁴MB Univerzitet Beograd, Srbija

Poslovni i pravni fakultet

Sažetak

Migrantska kriza na Zapadnom Balkanu (2015–2020) povećala je ranjivost Albanije u kontekstu trgovine ljudima. Kao tranzitna i sve češće destinacijska zemlja, Albanija se suočila sa izazovima u identifikaciji, zaštiti i reintegraciji žrtava, posebno migranata, izbeglica i maloletnika bez pratnje. Rad analizira pravni i institucionalni okvir, uključujući Nacionalni mehanizam za upućivanje i saradnju sa nevladinim organizacijama, kao i ulogu međunarodnih aktera (UNHCR, IOM, GRETA, OSCE). Iako su postignuti napreci u zakonodavstvu i mehanizmima zaštite, ostaju izazovi u identifikaciji žrtava, obuci profesionalaca i koordinaciji institucija. Naglašava se potreba za regionalnom saradnjom, ljudskim pravima zasnovanim pristupom i primenom tehnoloških alata za efikasniju borbu protiv trgovine ljudima.

Ključne reči: Albanija, trgovina ljudima, migracije, maloletnici bez pratnje, međunarodne organizacije, zaštita žrtava.