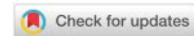


ACTIVITIES OF ORGANIZED CRIME WITH A SPECIAL FOCUS ON HUMAN TRAFFICKING

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Abstract: In contemporary times, there is a consensus that the increasingly prominent problem of organized crime must be addressed through the cooperation of competent institutions on an international level, as it has long demonstrated that national borders are not significant obstacles. Organized criminal groups are guided solely by financial interests and are prepared to commit various criminal acts, including human trafficking, drug trafficking, arms trafficking, money laundering, and similar offenses. These groups are founded on a well-organized internal structure in which all members have clearly defined roles. Given that organized crime has a detrimental effect on many aspects of society, it is unsurprising that experts from various scientific fields, such as law, economics, sociology, philosophy, and others, study this phenomenon. This paper focuses on human trafficking, a segment of organized crime that has been experiencing significant expansion in recent times. Human trafficking is an international criminal offense that violates fundamental human rights guaranteed by numerous legal instruments. It has been present in all stages of human civilization and will undoubtedly persist in the future. The goal of this paper is to define organized crime more precisely, with a particular emphasis on human trafficking in the context of its development and the forms it manifests. To this end, the author first addresses organized crime and its main characteristics. Specifically, the paper highlights its omnipresence in the XXI century and emphasizes the circumstances that further enable criminals to carry out illegal activities continuously. The author examines the detrimental influence of mass media and globalization processes, which have significantly contributed to the expansion of organized criminal activities. Regarding human trafficking, the paper first presents it as a constant companion of societal development in ancient and medieval times, as well as in the present day. Particular attention is given to its current state, as it represents one of the criminal activities that generate substantial profits for organized crime groups. Numerous circumstances lead to individuals becoming victims of human trafficking, with the most prominent being poverty, migration, unemployment, and armed conflicts. Difficult living conditions significantly contribute to individuals becoming easy targets for organized crime groups, which exploit them in various ways. The author specifically highlights types of exploitation and defines the characteristics of each (e.g., sexual, labor-related, etc.). The main intention is for the research results to emphasize the seriousness of human trafficking as a global threat by illustrating its devastating impact on the stability of society. Furthermore, the author aims to highlight that current global circumstances significantly provide fertile ground for the emergence of organized crime. As evidence, the paper warns of the pervasive glorification of crime in mass media and on the Internet, which serve as primary sources of information for all generations. Accordingly, criticisms directed at police, prosecution, and judicial bodies for allegedly inefficiently combating, prosecuting, and sanctioning human trafficking should not be entirely accepted. This is because there are circumstances, absent in earlier times, that further complicate their work. In conclusion, the author points out that globalization has brought many advantages to everyday life but also has a dark side: it provides the ideal terrain for organized crime groups to thrive. Finally, the author emphasizes that Europe is particularly affected by human trafficking, as migrants view its territory as a region offering promising living conditions. Unfortunately, this causes some of them to fall victim to human trafficking.

Keywords: Organized crime, human trafficking, constancy, exploitation.

Field: Social sciences (Law)

1. INTRODUCTION

Criminal activities represent a continuous threat to global stability. They are characterized by diversity and high levels of cooperation, which underscores the complexity of a problem that transcends borders and skillfully exploits the advantages of globalization. Drug trafficking, human trafficking, arms trafficking, and art smuggling are just some of the illicit activities carried out to increase capital, much of which is eventually integrated into legal financial systems. This further undermines societal stability and paves the way for the expansion of criminal acts, leading to severe economic, political, and security consequences. This undoubtedly impacts the development not only of individual states but entire regions, as the interests of criminal organizations successfully eliminate borders. Consequently, it is not surprising that both global and European efforts focus on achieving more effective cooperation among judicial, prosecutorial, and police bodies to minimize the influence of criminal groups, acknowledging that complete neutralization

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is unlikely. Organized criminal groups pose the greatest danger due to their strong ties with members of societal elites. In the XX century, prominent American criminologists asserted that the boundary between the worlds of legal and illegal business is thin and opaque. They argued that by financing political parties, the criminal underworld secures its societal position and untouchability (Sutherland, 1960). Since its inception, organized crime has not been devoid of political connotations and interactions with the state and its representatives, even though many contemporary definitions exclude the political sphere and focus solely on the economic dimension (Pavićević & Bulatović, 2017, 44).

On the other hand, human trafficking is one segment of organized criminal group activities with an international dimension. It is conducted for various motives, including organ trafficking, sexual exploitation, adoption, and forced labor. The most vulnerable societal groups (women and children) are often the primary victims of this crime, though men are also exploited, frequently being forced to participate in armed conflicts. There are numerous ways someone can become a victim of human trafficking. For instance, individuals may be deceived, blackmailed, or kidnapped. In cases of deception, victims are often gullible individuals who, in search of better living conditions elsewhere, easily accept unrealistic promises. When blackmail is involved, victims are coerced into exploitation, often due to financial debts owed to criminal groups. Kidnappings are carried out with the use of force, targeting the most vulnerable groups for further exploitation, either domestically or abroad. It is important to note that the current era facilitates the expansion of human trafficking, characterized by mass human migrations. Many migrants view Europe as their ultimate destination, and their precarious circumstances make them easy targets for criminal groups. It must not be overlooked that economic and security instability in certain regions, exacerbated by frequent and prolonged armed conflicts, significantly contribute to migration crises. Therefore, combating human trafficking requires an active role at both national and international levels. This includes raising awareness about the significance, dangers, and consequences of this illegal activity to ensure the identification, prosecution, and sanctioning of perpetrators.

2. DEFINING ORGANIZED CRIME

Criminal groups are driven solely by lucrative interests, characterized by a lack of empathy toward the victims of criminal acts. In conditions of general interconnectedness, free movement of people, goods, and capital, there has been an evolution not only in general social development but also in the execution of numerous illegal activities, such as those related to organized and economic crime, terrorism, etc. (Jakovljević, 2024, 71). Organized crime is a highly structured entity, encompassing various forms of delinquency and a broad typology of criminal phenomena closely correlated with the activities of professional criminal organizations (Baumer & Gustafson, 2007, 637). Unfortunately, in the XXI century, it is difficult to find a state that can be said to be free from the threat of organized criminal groups. Today, organized crime is treated as a serious threat to the security of nations worldwide. Its activities involve violations of fundamental human rights guaranteed by international and national legal acts. Given that organized crime undermines the healthy foundations of society, it is no surprise that it is frequently discussed in public media. However, the subject of organized crime is primarily addressed by experts from various scientific fields, including law, economics, sociology, philosophy, and others, who attempt to define the concept from their perspectives. Regardless of the branch of science in question, experts agree that organized crime is characterized by its adaptability to diverse social relationships. This adaptability ensures its continued operation. Successful adaptation involves creating conditions for the uninterrupted engagement in various criminal activities, regardless of whether a country is labeled by international institutions as a territory with high rates of illegal activities. Organized crime is a permanent criminal enterprise rationally conducted for profit from illegal activities, and its sustained existence is maintained through the use of force, threats, monopolistic control, or corruption of public officials (Albanese, 2000, 415). The present era is undoubtedly marked by unfavorable economic conditions. Consequently, many countries resort to the infiltration of capital of dubious origin into their economic flows, treating it as a measure of economic recovery. This leads to situations where money obtained through various criminal acts becomes legal, achieved through money laundering—one of the crimes within the domain of organized crime. It cannot be denied that crime has always been present in society. However, one must not overlook that modern and advanced technical means allow criminal groups to carry out their activities much more efficiently than in the past. Observing global trends, Europe emerges as the primary target of organized criminal groups aiming to carry out illegal activities on its territory. The reason lies primarily in the economic development of European countries and the structured single market of the European Union Member States. As a result, Western European countries are particularly targeted by criminal groups from Latin America, the Balkans, North Africa, and Eastern Europe.

An advantage for these criminal groups is that they face no difficulty in recruiting new members in Western European countries, as there is a large population of immigrants who have lived there for decades but maintain strong ties to their countries of origin. The easiest recruits are those who have not sufficiently integrated into Western European society, leaving crime as an occupation they readily embrace. Young people are particularly vulnerable, as joining a criminal group may appear attractive, providing them with a sense of empowerment, status in the community, and wealth otherwise out of reach (Mejdini & Amerhauser, 2022). The structure of organized crime often involves recruiting individuals on the fringes of society, characterized by poor socio-economic conditions and a disruption of social values. One of the main features of criminal organizations is an internal protection system, which involves taking care of members who come under legal scrutiny. This is achieved through various methods to ensure that arrested or convicted group members know their contributions will not be forgotten (Totić, 2022). Experience shows that criminals are always one step ahead of institutions tasked with preventing, combating, and prosecuting criminal acts. An additional challenge is the ease with which criminal groups recruit new members, with a constant influx of individuals willing to take risks for financial benefits. Alarming, the average age of criminal group members is decreasing yearly, highlighting the harmful influence of global crime glorification (films, music, etc.) on generations expected to drive societal progress in the future. Even countries that, until a few decades ago, were nearly free from serious criminal activities now face significant challenges in this area. A prime example is Sweden, long perceived as a synonym for societal security and stability, which now struggles to curb violent criminal activities on its territory, predominantly perpetrated by individuals of foreign origin.

3. HISTORICAL OVERVIEW OF HUMAN TRAFFICKING

Punishing offenders is a fundamental characteristic and *conditio sine qua non* for the functioning of the rule of law (Totić, 2024, 70). The United Nations Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children, supplementing the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime, is the first document that defines the concept of human trafficking in a comprehensive manner. However, human trafficking has been a constant companion of human society and has been legally permitted for a long time. Ancient Greece, the Roman Empire, and the Egyptian Empire were based on a hierarchical social structure, where slaves were at the very bottom as individuals deprived of all rights. Their masters could freely dispose of them and trade them, as slaves were considered objects, not living beings. As such, they were subjected to various tasks, and their owners could even take their lives without fear of potential sanctions. Slaves primarily performed hard physical labor, such as building structures or agricultural work. They were employed in mines, on private estates, and many were engaged in warfare during military operations. These were jobs that privileged social classes were unwilling to perform. The Middle Ages certainly represent significant progress in the development of human civilization, but this does not mean that human trafficking and various forms of slavery were absent. There was still a pronounced gap between the classes in society, with lords and serfs. The latter were in a subordinate position, working for free on the lords' estates, which guaranteed them a form of protection. Unlike ancient times, serfs could not be traded, meaning that lords could not sell them. They had the right to live on the lords' estates, but also to a portion of what they earned for their own survival. When it comes to human trafficking in the Middle Ages, it still played a significant role in Islamic states, where slaves were used for household work, military needs, and sexual exploitation. These states had a well-organized system of human trafficking, with slaves brought from Europe, Africa, and Asia. The further social order that followed the discovery of new territories only facilitated the development of human trafficking. The reason for this was that major maritime powers like Portugal and Spain began transoceanic slave trading. Most slaves were traded from Africa, where they were exploited on tobacco, cotton, and other agricultural plantations. The working conditions they were exposed to were inhumane, characterized by the absence of any form of protection.

The progress in abolishing slavery began at the end of the XVIII and the beginning of the XIX century, with the initiative originating from Europe and North America. These were abolitionist movements that led to the banning of the slave trade in many countries of the time. This implies that the activities of these movements led to the adoption of laws criminalizing the slave trade and abolishing slavery. However, even though significant progress was undeniably made compared to past times, the adoption of laws did not change much, as human trafficking continued in everyday life. The only difference was that its organizers had to find new ways to carry out their illegal activities, which involved adapting to the new socio-economic conditions that followed. From the perspective of the victims, nothing changed, as their position remained extremely precarious, marked by labor and sexual exploitation. The XX and XXI

centuries brought further development of criminal activities, which understandably had implications for human trafficking. This is the time when organized criminal groups trade people, and the victims come from all layers of society. Therefore, social status is no longer a barrier to becoming a victim of human trafficking, as it was in the past. The technological advancement of society has created more favorable conditions that human traffickers efficiently exploit. Social networks and other forms of communication via the Internet enable various types of fraud, which organized criminal groups make extensive use of. In this way, the circle of potential human trafficking victims is expanded. The Internet also facilitates sexual exploitation in the context of travel and tourism, with tourists expressly traveling to areas where commercial sexual exploitation is common (Bigio & Vogelstein, 2021). What human traffickers skillfully exploit is the precarious position of the victims, which may be caused by a range of circumstances such as difficult economic situations, war events, adventurism, gullibility, and so on. Armed conflicts, in particular, amplify the social and economic vulnerabilities of the people affected. In addition, the erosion of the rule of law, which safeguards and protects individuals in peacetime, is a common consequence of armed conflict (International Organization for Migration, 2023).

4. EXPLOITATION OF HUMAN TRAFFICKING VICTIMS

Human trafficking and modern slavery are global phenomena (Financial Intelligence Analysis Unit, 2024). Regarding the exploitation of victims, there is a wide range of methods used by organized criminal groups to achieve profit. One of the most frequent and profitable forms of victim exploitation is sexual exploitation. Victims are primarily women and children, but nowadays, it is not uncommon for men to also be exploited for sexual purposes. Regardless of gender or age, victims are primarily forced into prostitution. As for other forms of exploitation, cases of child exploitation for pornographic purposes are becoming more frequent, while women are forced into arranged marriages and engagement in the sex industry. Organized criminal groups effectively maintain recruitment and control over victims using violent methods, blackmail or false promises. The latter particularly affect young women and girls, to whom they promise well-paying jobs and a comfortable life, either in a large city or abroad. Upon accepting such offers, victims enter a vicious cycle of exploitation that is inevitably accompanied by physical and psychological abuse. The consequences of the torture they endure manifest in trauma, mental illnesses, and personality disorders. Their position is further worsened by the lack of access to legal assistance, while organized criminal groups continue to expand the market for sexual services that they control through corrupt methods. One of the forms of human trafficking exploitation is forced labor. Labor exploitation involves the exploitation of people in poor material conditions. The poorest segments of the population and migrants are most often subjected to forced labor, being compelled to work in inhumane conditions without any protection. The work they perform is either poorly paid or unpaid, and they are kept in this position under threat and fear of potential punishment. Certain industries are particularly prone to labor exploitation, for example, meat processing, mines or construction (Haberstroh & Zaugg, 2023). Victims, as members of the most vulnerable social groups, easily fall for various offers and false promises that they naively believe will bring them prosperity and better living conditions. The result of this gullibility is usually hard labor in construction, on farms, or in various branches of production, which is far from what they had hoped for. Many examples show that victims are forced into labor to pay off debts they have incurred. However, they do not easily escape the debt slavery they are trapped in, as human traffickers use various methods to increase the debts (costs for accommodation, travel, etc.). This puts victims in a situation where they can never repay the debt that has led them to such a precarious position, while they perform work that is not subject to labor inspection and legal regulation.

Another form of human trafficking exploitation is organ trafficking, which involves the illegal extraction and sale of organs, as well as a well-organized system of recruitment and transportation of victims. Victims, in this case, are most often from the most vulnerable segments of society, such as children, the poor, and migrants. Organized criminal groups here have a network of collaborators, including those who perform medical procedures on the victims and those who mediate in the organ trade between sellers and buyers. The network of collaborators necessarily involves cooperation with corrupt medical staff and healthcare institutions where victim surgeries can take place. The consequences for the victims of this crime are extremely severe, often accompanied by psychological trauma, permanent physical damage, psychological problems, and, in some cases, death. Unfortunately, harsh living conditions and poverty often lead victims to voluntarily want to sell their organs. The reasons are purely financial, meaning that this is not a case of coercion, fraud, or other forms of manipulation. However, even in such circumstances, victims can be deceived, as they may not receive the full promised amount or the medical procedure may be performed by someone with insufficient medical experience. Given that the operations are often

carried out in unsanitary conditions and by unqualified individuals, it is not surprising that they can have fatal consequences for the victims. In addition to the aforementioned forms of victim exploitation, forced begging and forced marriages should also be mentioned. Forced begging is frequently used by organized criminal groups. In most cases, the victims are children, and human traffickers resort to this form of exploitation because it carries a low risk of detection. Psychological and physical violence is applied to the victims, and what they earn must be handed over to those whose interests they beg for on the streets. The devastating impact of exposing children to such activities and the consequences for their mental and physical development cannot be overstated. Expert literature unequivocally indicates that begging is a result of pronounced inequality in society, as it clearly points to the existence of those who are completely marginalized and in difficult life circumstances. On the other hand, forced marriages also appear as a form of human trafficking. The victims are mostly young women who are forced into unwanted marriages. They are exposed to psychological or physical violence, and the reasons for being in such a position are varied (debt repayment, cultural pressure, economic benefit, etc.). Victims are often deprived of basic human rights, such as healthcare, access to education, and the right to socialize. However, as with other forms of human trafficking exploitation, this primarily concerns the poor segments of the population and migrants. Overall, migrants are the most vulnerable group, as official data shows that the Mediterranean is one of the deadliest routes for migrants and refugees. Tens of thousands of people have disappeared or lost their lives in the region over the past decade (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2023). Furthermore, significant research findings indicate that the scope of human trafficking is greatest in regions with high emigration rates, compared to regions with low or no migration movements (Pajić, 2024, 251).

5. DISCUSSION

Human trafficking is an international crime that leaves severe and long-lasting consequences for its victims. Therefore, it is not surprising that, on a global scale, judicial, prosecutorial, and police forces are working together to prevent it to the greatest extent possible. Coordinated actions by the competent institutions in the fight against human trafficking are yielding results in the current era, which is marked by migration movements, economic instability, and armed conflicts. One might question the legitimacy of the criticism directed at the institutions combating this illegal activity, particularly when they are criticized for failure and insufficient effectiveness. Namely, there should be no doubt about the sincere intentions of most members of the competent bodies combating human trafficking, as these are institutions facing numerous challenges, which are even more pronounced in today's world. If we consider the reasons that lead someone to become a victim of human trafficking, we will notice that the XXI century is an ideal period for the operation of organized criminal groups. Instead of being the peak of human development and the idea of peace, equality, and justice on a global scale, it has become the complete opposite. The most powerful countries in the world efficiently create living conditions for the weaker, making them even more dependent, while the media increasingly highlight and popularize violence and crime. Materialism, as a way of life, is at its peak, and unfortunately, the economic inequalities between developed and underdeveloped countries are also at their highest. These conditions provide fertile ground for the emergence of all forms of crime and the operation of organized criminal groups. Globalization processes, poverty, the destructive influence of social media and the mass media, and the desire for money are just some of the driving forces behind organized criminal activity. Human trafficking is shown in practice to be a highly profitable illegal activity, as it consumes these driving forces of illegal actions. Millions of people around the world are displaced from war-torn areas, impoverished, and disenfranchised, seeking refuge primarily in Europe, a traditionally well-organized continent that offers better living conditions. For this reason, they are willing to take risky endeavors that will provide them and their families with a dignified life, even though they are aware that they may become prey to organized criminal groups that will exploit them in a variety of ways to satisfy their lucrative interests. This is primarily about political factors as generators of human trafficking, among which corruption (in the judiciary, police, customs, etc.) certainly plays a role. However, the fact remains that people also leave countries not affected by armed conflicts but facing high unemployment rates and a pronounced gap between the rich and the poor. The lack of opportunities for economic advancement then becomes the reason why people are susceptible to the influence of human traffickers, as they often lack the means to meet basic life needs. This makes them easy prey for a well-organized international network that recruits, transports, and exploits victims of human trafficking.

Another factor that further promotes human trafficking is various forms of discrimination (gender, racial, educational, etc.), with women being particularly vulnerable, especially in societies where tradition dictates that they hold a subordinate position to men. Unequal access to education creates a segment of society with limited business opportunities, which implies that even suspicious job offers will be viewed

leniently. Perhaps the biggest contribution to the rise of human trafficking on a global scale has been made by the development of information and communication technologies, embodied in the Internet and social media, which are ideal tools for recruiting potential victims. Technological advancement, especially when combined with psychological factors, has a particularly devastating effect on the recruitment of human trafficking victims. These factors indicate that the individual belongs to a vulnerable group that is especially prone to becoming a victim due to depression, trauma, or low self-esteem. A comprehensive analysis of the conditions and factors that lead to the expansion of human trafficking shows that the XXI century is a time when organized criminal groups skillfully exploit the weaknesses of the systems in which we live, and that the challenges faced by competent institutions are more demanding than ever before. Therefore, it is of paramount importance to establish functional cooperation between domestic and international actors who will work together to reduce the negative consequences caused by human trafficking. Of course, addressing the issue of the popularization of crime and materialism, to which we are constantly exposed and which significantly shapes our daily lives, is crucial, as it represents a significant resource from which organized criminal groups recruit new members.

6. CONCLUSION

As part of organized crime, human trafficking represents a negation of basic human rights and freedoms, which are a civilizational achievement. The desire for increased power and illegally acquired capital serves as the driving force behind the actions of organized criminal groups. The main characteristic of these groups is their ability to adapt to changing socio-economic relations, which guarantees their continuity. Over the past decades, organized crime has demonstrated its ability to effectively exploit the advantages of globalization processes, the elimination of borders between states, and the technical-technological advancement of society. What was initially intended to be used in a positive and legally permitted manner has taken on a completely different dimension, undermining the security foundations of states and regions around the world. Criminal activities today are taking on new, more modern methods of execution, which further complicates the work of the competent authorities tasked with combating them. Most of these crimes were previously known and legally prohibited, but new forms have emerged, such as cybercrime, which is the reflection of society's progress in the field of information technology. Organized criminal groups operate in a way that they have a well-structured internal organization and a network of collaborators prone to corruption, who are part of state institutions. Employees in the police, judiciary, prosecution, banking sector, or customs are a key factor in the survival and successful operation of organized criminal groups. Their motives are also of a lucrative nature, which has taken precedence over the honest performance of duties for the benefit of the community in which they live. Given the fact that a certain part of people is prone to illegal activities, it is reasonable to conclude that individuals entrusted with responsible positions will continue to enable the operation of organized crime through their dishonorable actions.

In this context, human trafficking should also be considered, which has reached alarming proportions in the time we live in. The illegal transportation of human trafficking victims would be difficult to achieve without the assistance of certain parts of the competent state authorities, especially when it has an international dimension. A number of reasons work in favor of human traffickers, leading millions of people around the world into a precarious position, and some will undoubtedly become prey to organized criminal groups that will exploit them. Economic instability, poverty, high unemployment, or armed conflicts are just some of the causes of large-scale migration movements worldwide. The consequences are visible in almost all parts of the world, although it should be noted that Europe has been most affected by the influx of migrants from other continents. Europe is the continent where the largest number of people in difficult life circumstances will seek better living conditions, which will be skillfully exploited by organized criminal groups that lack empathy for others. In practice, there are various forms of exploitation of human trafficking victims, such as sexual or labor exploitation. Organized criminal groups also engage in human trafficking for the extraction and sale of organs, as well as for forced marriages. The methods they use are primarily violent and involve coercion, but it is also true that someone may become a victim out of naivety or a desire for adventure. Human trafficking has always been a constant companion of mankind, existing in all stages of human civilization, and it will continue to do so in the future. Therefore, the activities of competent institutions must be focused on improving mutual cooperation, while on the international level, it is necessary to work on eliminating the causes of human trafficking.

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