

## How Conflict in Europe Advances Hidden Criminal Enterprise: The Gendered Dimension in Ukraine

On 24th February 2022, the Russian Federation launched an invasion on Ukraine. This marked a stark escalation in action and aggression - and prompted outrage across Europe. In the weeks and months that have followed, we have stood witness to the collapse of homes; the demolition of schools; countless breaches of human rights; and an unmeasured loss of life predicted into the tens of thousands. What we haven't seen - as is the hidden nature of the beast - are the victims of the criminal enterprises; the enterprises for whom this conflict has presented as one of the greatest opportunities in modern Europe.

For those of you that do not know me, as a Valencian and as a member of this University, I am concerned with the criminological. For me and my colleagues, dealing with the victims and survivors of harrowing ordeals that breach their human rights is the coat-stand on which we place our academic caps. For others, their 'stories' exist only on a Netflix 'must-watch' docuseries lists. Regarding the issue I shall speak of today, it would be a misnomer to assume that the victims aren't known to you. Most are women, and 1 in 4 are children. So, for each of you that have a mother, sister, wife, female friend, or child of any gender; this is an issue that should concern you: the gendered dimension of the invasion of Ukraine, and the advances in hidden criminal activity that the situation is affording.

Europe is the modern day home for human trafficking. Why? It's culturally diverse; it's geographically interlinked; and it's economically and socially unequal. In other words, it lacks social cohesion within and between nations meaning that the missing aren't always noticed, or the victim isn't always considered a likely victim. Freedom of movement and accessibility to international travel means people can be transited easily without the heavy burden of oceans to cross. And, people are desperate. In fact, in 2021, it was recorded that 21.7% of Europe's total population was at risk of poverty or social exclusion. That's approximately **95.4** million people. The result, is an annual flow of new victims into human trafficking of around 70,000 per year across Europe. That's every student at this University, nearly four-times over, each year, in Europe-alone - that we know of, which doesn't even begin to represent the full extent of the crisis. To the criminal enterprises, it is an activity that generates an anticipated £3 billion per year. In other words, it's something they invest in.

The most common questions that I hear in my field from those not subject to the circumstances that make the 'ideal' victim - and yes, there is a typology for the 'ideal' victim - is, *why?* Why did they not 'see' it? Why did they not find an alternative? Did they know they were being trafficked? Why can they not simply *go home*? Well, if you were so desperate, and the promise of something better was offered, how easily could you say no? Fast-forward to the realisation that you've been coerced, you don't *entirely* know where you are, your identity is gone, you have no means or methods of contacting anyone *not* involved in your coercion, and your life - and those that you love - was being threatened, how easily could you get out? Some do, and that helps in the fight against these activities, but so many do not. The other important thing to note is that we so often perceive criminals in a way that results from our exposure to media, or what can be *seen* in society: the opportunistic thief; the hard-up shoplifter; and occasionally, the serial killer with the personality disorder. They present as impulsive and opportunistic members of society; but, this doesn't even begin to represent the criminal activity that most often shapes and influences our everyday. The most successful criminals are the ones we never apprehend, with the practices we know not of and cannot measure. They are smart, strategic, considered, and highly-organised. They exist in patterns akin to astronomical filaments throughout our societies and communities, and run business that could rival or surpass Microsoft and Amazon -- and testament to the complexity of these covert operations and practices, the trend for prosecution is decreasing. Between 2003-2009, we saw a year-on-year decrease across three quarters of European countries in prosecution rates - a decrease of around 17%, in fact. By contrast, we've seen a marked increase in the volume of victims by around 18%. The gap is growing, and for those involved in the fight against these enterprises, the issue is simply too big, and too complex. And now, for the criminal enterprises, the Russian-NATO war and the geographical positioning of the conflict is one of the greatest opportunities for the growth of this criminal enterprise.

Prior to the conflict in Ukraine, the single-biggest "contributor" to human trafficking was reported as the Balkans and former Soviet Union. In practice, the four largest state contributors, in order, are: Romania, Bulgaria, the Republic of Moldova, and the Russian Federation. Needless to say that the positioning of this conflict falls in favour of an already-established criminal structure that houses the most "successful" human trafficking organisations in the world. Even prior to the invasion, Ukraine was a target for criminal enterprises concerned with the trafficking of humans. Extreme economic vulnerability as a result of on-going risks from the Russian Federation saw the standard typology of victim in Ukraine. Unsurprisingly, the most successful incentive used by criminal enterprises that were recorded and measured on the people of Ukraine was the promise of employment. Does anyone have an idea of what the second most-successful incentive was? [Ask audience for engagement]

Education. The chance for a promising future. To better themselves. To achieve something they valued and respected. Shameless campaigns targeting young, often women, with promises of education to gain independence. In poorer taste, one might see this as the peak of irony for what subsequently happened to these victims: the very opposite of education, a promising future, and an independence for themselves. And once you're a part of the hidden architectures of crime, it is almost impossible to get out - you almost certainly never recover from the trauma, much less regain your identity and sense of self.

In 1986, Nils Christie posited the 'ideal victim', and since then, while our society has changed, the ideal victim - largely - has not. In an updated version in conjunction with the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, the ideal victim for human trafficking has been established. The key risk factors externally are: citizens of nations with political instability; subjects of economic inequality; and those experiencing national displacement. Internally, the key risk factors are: lacking in official documentation or tracing-abilities; being in a state of familial separation; and lacking in employment, education, or living-factor stability. Simply put, the displaced persons resultant of the invasion of Ukraine meet the ideal criteria for exploitation - I doubt anyone would disagree.

As at 25th October of this year, 7,751,169 Ukrainians have fled for neighbouring countries across Europe. 6,243,000 people are internally displaced, rendered stranded inside the country. For criminal enterprises, that is near 14 **million** people that represent a target of the 'perfect victim'.

The Regional Refugee Response Plan enacted by the United National Human Rights Council aimed in February of this year to record the displacement of Ukrainians to their new national homes. By March, Romania recorded over 1.6 million Ukrainians registered: over 95% them women and children. To remind you, Romania has long been top of the most active countries for human trafficking in the world. In October, only 83,000 of these Ukrainians were still registered in the country. Now, of course, it would be reasonable to believe that some have moved on to other countries in Europe, some may have left the continent altogether, and some may simply have opted to continue unregistered. However, we are not seeing registrations in other countries that account for the missing. 1,517,000 people, unaccounted for overall - *just* from displacement to Romania. Some of these will undoubtedly now be the victims of human trafficking without any future registration through which we can intervene. Some, will not, but they nonetheless now present as something equally concerning...displaced and vulnerable individuals, unregistered, and unaccounted for. In the eyes of the criminal enterprise...*targets*.

We, too often, measure the impact of war and conflict in terms of lives lost on the battlefield. A valuable metric when each individual is remembered accordingly. We class victims of war as those that have lost their homes, and face the rebuilding of their country and sanctuaries. We speak of those with lost loved ones, and those lost to fatal and definitive ends. Globally, we measure the economic impact, the international political changes, and what this means for international relations and future security policy. We analyse the personalities of the decision-makers, known to us, and how different it might have been if someone else were in charge. We approach the end of war as an opportunity for political, economic, and social post-mortem - and how to avoid history repeating itself. But what about when history hasn't yet started? When it isn't yet in the past in order to be evaluated?

When the invasion ceases, the conflict stops, and an end point is reached, believe not that the war is over. For the displaced victims of conflict, their war continues: economically,

geographically, socially, personally. Their 'victim' status will become another number in Europe's recording of humans 'lost' with unknown endings. They will no longer answer to themselves, and all semblance of freewill and personal identity will be eradicated, much like the cities from whence they originated. Their names changed, their nationalities hidden, and their lives measured only by the value of labour, entertainment, and *compliance* that they offer. Lost and alone, they will forget themselves - and too often we are able to forget them, too. If you've taken any time in the last 9 months to reflect or consider the situation in Ukraine, I implore you to take the time to consider the situation faced by those no longer in Ukraine; those in the possession of another hidden system, not reflected in the data or figures we are presented with as the measure of this crisis. Not doing so would be a failure in understanding the totality of crisis we are facing in Europe: which is arguably the greatest breach of the European Convention on Human Rights this continent has ever seen.

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Links (for the purpose of statistics included):

<https://humantraffickingsearch.org/human-trafficking-on-the-rise-in-the-eu/>

<https://www.schengenvisainfo.com/news/every-fourth-human-trafficking-victim-in-europe-is-a-minor-report-shows/>

<https://www.maplecroft.com/insights/analysis/20-eu-countries-see-rise-in-modern-slavery-risks/>

<https://www.unodc.org/documents/human-trafficking/Trafficking in Persons in Europe 09.pdf>

[https://reliefweb.int/country/ukr?gclid=CjwKCAjwh4ObBhAzEiwAHzZYU69wUh2zQTDMWTeSfGixZ6X51SBzmVUYaR-IvHMGAJ3C\\_ILNHU7xGRoCRx0QAvD\\_BwE#key-figures](https://reliefweb.int/country/ukr?gclid=CjwKCAjwh4ObBhAzEiwAHzZYU69wUh2zQTDMWTeSfGixZ6X51SBzmVUYaR-IvHMGAJ3C_ILNHU7xGRoCRx0QAvD_BwE#key-figures)

<https://www.eurofoodbank.org/our-mission-impact-values/poverty-in-europe/#:~:text=In%202021%2C%2095.4%20million%20people,slight%20increase%20compared%20with%202020>

[https://www.researchgate.net/publication/272681788\\_Ideal\\_victims\\_in\\_human\\_trafficking\\_awareness\\_campaigns](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/272681788_Ideal_victims_in_human_trafficking_awareness_campaigns)

<https://www.europol.europa.eu/crime-areas-and-statistics/crime-areas/trafficking-in-human-beings>

<https://www.statista.com/chart/4947/the-eus-hotspots-for-people-trafficking/>

[https://www.unodc.org/documents/publications/TiP\\_Europe\\_EN\\_LORES.pdf](https://www.unodc.org/documents/publications/TiP_Europe_EN_LORES.pdf)

<https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/headlines/society/20171012STO85932/human-trafficking-nearly-16-000-victims-in-the-eu>