



Together Against Human Trafficking: The Situation in Slovakia

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Ladies and gentlemen, dear friends

I am honoured to attend this event and represent Caritas Slovakia anti-trafficking work.

Caritas Slovakia's Stop Human Trafficking Project has been established in 2008. It consists of three subprojects: Identification of victims, Prevention and Reintegration.

Last year on this occasion I talked to you about a 22-year-old Slovak Roma girl, abused by an older man who forced her to prostitute in Italy. Her case meant a historic moment for Caritas.

Her story was strong and we believed in a positive result at the court. She was brave and determined to turn her personal nightmare into the benefit of others and get justice. We got her a lawyer, supported her, prepared for interviewing and accompanied her to testify at the court.

The judge has finally sentenced her perpetrator to 15 years in jail for sex trafficking. This finally happened after 1 year of criminal proceedings and 5 months of trial. In Slovakia convicted traffickers usually receive just suspended sentences, pay a fine, or are given a low prison sentence of two years at maximum.

This case demonstrates that the courts are starting to approach this phenomenon as a serious crime.

Most vulnerable groups

SURVIVORS we have been working with represent the most vulnerable groups to trafficking in Slovakia: we have young adults who leave institutional care facilities, divorced men unemployed over a long period, undereducated Roma girls and young women from marginalized communities. But what they have in common is that they are broken individuals and feel like they are less worth than other people. They are desperate for being loved and taken care for, they long for being accepted and they want to be a part of something, belong somewhere. In their naivety they easily become vulnerable to manipulation. Girls dream about good husbands or loving fathers. Men strive for decent work and want to provide for their family.

Roma situation in Slovakia, Usury & Trafficking

60% of all the Slovak victims are Roma citizens. We have one of the largest Roma populations in Europe which represents 8 to 9% of all the country's population. In numbers it is around 450,000 people and they live mostly in eastern Slovakia.

An estimated 200,000 of Slovakia's Roma live in the isolated and marginalized settlements on the outskirts of towns and villages. They live below the poverty line, in terms of education and health status, housing conditions and access to opportunities in the labour market. Very few of them continue on to secondary education. With a 99% unemployment rate social welfare is the only income for many Roma families, which they become dependant on. The situation is then passed from one generation to the next.

Isolated Roma communities in Slovakia are considered to be a time bomb – a problem that for a long time hasn't been dealt with and has now increased to such an extent that the situation seems to be unsolvable. This became a breeding ground for all sorts of criminality among which we encounter usury and trafficking. These go hand in hand exploiting the vulnerability of the poorest to get rich.

For the poorest Roma a loan from a usurer is often the only way to survive. And the very first loan is the start of the vicious cycle. It is almost impossible for the indebted individuals and their families to free themselves from it. Usury deepens poverty and causes helplessness and fear. Methods of repaying the payments are often drastic. In many settlements usurers organise the sale of young girls abroad as a form of repayment of high debts.

For example one of our survivors, Zoltán, is a deaf Roma man who was being forced to give all his disability pension to the usurers. When he refused, they threatened him, then attacked and broke all his teeth. Lastly, they sold him to the UK.

After the UK opened its labour market it enabled hundreds of people from Slovakia come to the UK and settle in. Roma people mostly from Eastern Slovakia profited from this situation and started to build networks of trafficking people to the UK, exploiting those that were already in Britain. They have formed organised crime groups and ganged up with Pakistanis and Indians to set up a highly lucrative illegal business.

A) Forced Marriages

Last year Europol identified within the field of human trafficking **forced marriages** as an “emerging phenomenon”. In Slovakia the victims of this form of trafficking are usually women living in desperate conditions in eastern Slovakia. Many of them are also vulnerable due to mental disabilities. They are told they will work in restaurants or fruit farms in the UK. It’s always promises of better life or promises of big and fast money. Instead women are kept in an apartment until the wedding is arranged, often raped by their “husband-to-be” and his friends. When the men, most often Pakistani and Indian, get their residency permit, they get rid of them or sell them into slavery. They use them, so to speak, then throw them away like old clothes.

B) Sham Marriages

But there are also hundreds of cases of **sham (fake) marriages** reported each year. These mean that “brides-to-be” agree to wed for money and are considered accomplices. In Slovakia they can be prosecuted as smugglers. To understand why these women do this, you only need to go to one of the villages and see the conditions they live in. Women are usually promised a clean place to stay in Britain and money. They don’t fully realise what they’ve gotten themselves into until they arrive. To our frustration some Roma women are so poor that they would rather be exploited abroad than stay at home. Their situation is so dire that they’re willing to take that risk. Such life seems to them more acceptable than life in extreme poverty and exclusion with no vision of better future.

Forced Labour

This year there was a large increase in the number of identified Slovak men – victims of **forced labour** – in the UK. They returned back home after many years of life in slavery.

Twenty men of Slovak nationality were rescued during a Police raid in a number of properties across the city of Peterborough in June. All of them were promised a better life in the UK with well-paid work but ended up in over-crowded housing and working extremely long hours in a factory or construction site for little or no wages.

The trafficker’s family kept control over their bank account. When they weren’t working in the factory, they were ordered by means of beatings and threats to clean up, do all kinds of work around the house and in the garden.

The **situation of Human Trafficking in Slovakia:**

Slovakia is mainly a source and transit country and most of the Slovaks have been exploited in the UK, then Ireland, Germany, Austria and Netherlands. The most common forms are forced labour, sex trafficking, forced begging and forced marriages. Slovakia counts as one of the top five countries of origin of victims trafficked into the UK, estimates are that there are 100s/1,000s Slovaks being trafficked in the UK today. The forms of trafficking are often combined. Usually it is combination of labour and sexual exploitation. Sometimes traffickers not only exploit the victims, but also claims benefits on their behalf.

Now I would like to share one of my strongest experiences of this year: I couldn’t even imagine there might exist a modern slavery of such an extent within my country involving Slovak citizens kept in such tremendous conditions. What happened? In April this year I was called to assist the police of the National Unit for combatting Human Trafficking during an operation they had been preparing for several months.

It was 6 o’clock in the morning when police raided a Roma household in a small town the Rimavská sobota. It resulted in rescuing 11 victims from slavery which took place both in Germany and Slovakia. I remember being paralysed looking at 11 human beings squeezed in a dark tiny courtyard shack. They were confused and poorly dressed. There were dogs and rats everywhere.

A Roma family of 2 men and 3 women were arrested. They worked as a criminal group. They were picking suitable persons for begging – homeless people. They recruited them by promising them a well-paid job at construction sites, good wages, housing and food. They abused peoples’ vulnerable situation, serious health issues and alcohol addiction. For a period of three months they repeatedly transported them to Germany where these victims aged from 23 to 82 were forced to beg on the streets. Each was given a dog to better arouse the compassion of Germans who are very dog friendly. They slept near a highway in an open shelter. Back in Slovakia they kept them in the courtyard and were taking their social and disability benefits. It is the first time that this kind of cooperation between NGO – Caritas and the police had taken place in Slovakia. And it seems to be a good ground for future quite revolutionary cooperation which the Ministry of Interior supports.

Why? I was able to attend the first interview with the trafficking victim and helped to conduct it. It was a new and useful experience to stand by the survivor from the first stage of an investigation, make him feel as comfortable as possible and explaining to him what was going to happen in the interview. Although the investigators are

specifically trained in interviewing vulnerable victims they sometimes incur difficulties in approaching them or finding a common language.

Based on this joint operation we strive to create a network with professionals working with Roma communities including field social workers, priests in Roma missions and workers in children's homes mainly in eastern Slovakia with the goal of finding out more and better understanding the situation in communities. The risky thing about this is that they might get in danger when disclosing sensitive information about traffickers and usurers and sometimes they even face corrupted police. But once we want to end modern-day slavery, government officials, police, NGOs, social and community workers and ordinary individuals, all have to work TOGETHER!!

Strategies – How Can Youth Fight Slavery?

As for the strategies, we all know we need a modern response to modern slavery. In our case that stands for an **inspiring, unique and relevant** response. The strategy is simply said: giving relevant information, inspiring for action and giving everyone the opportunity to do something in their unique way.

Last year I highlighted that Caritas Slovakia keeps prevention as the key to combating human trafficking and exploitation. We keep on raising awareness among young people that are the most **vulnerable**. We bring prevention campaigns to secondary schools, children's homes, and Roma communities. Activities like Lectures, Workshops, Film screenings, Role playing, Theatre play are effective tools to educate not only potential victims but also potential perpetrators, their peers, teachers and assistants who are in close contact with them and would be in a position to identify warning signs if they knew how to.

On the other hand young people are also the most **powerful**, so in our efforts we aim to engage them in our activities. The **goal is to fight against modern slavery TOGETHER!**

We decided to use the power of film to sensitize society on this matter and organize a film festival with a symbolic title:

1. Together Against Human Trafficking

This year it was its second edition and it took place in eastern Slovakia. We picked this region since it is most affected by human trafficking in general and most of our victims from last year were recruited here. In this year's festival we put a special emphasis on the various forms of forced labour depicted in films and the issue of forced labour was also discussed in the panel as one of the current problems most related to the Slovak men. At the same time, this festival was supposed to play an **inspiring** role. We encouraged young people to organize their own film events. We prepared **FILM packs** that included **FREE DVDs** with the movies screened at the festival and an **Event manual** which gave people the tool to start their own awareness-raising event and this way fight against modern slavery.

2. Campaign Using Youth Power and Social Media

In July we participated in the most famous multi-genre festival in Slovakia and one of the biggest in Central Europe called **Pohoda**. One of our activities was to engage people to take a picture with a message **STOP Human Trafficking** to express our common statement against global enslavement and our commitment to fight TOGETHER against it...

We encouraged them to post the photo on social media using a STOP HUMAN TRAFFICKING hashtag. This is how social media can be a powerful tool to inspire social good. We want to build a community of people who are passionate about making a difference.

Social media is also one of the tools we started to use to sell the colourful handbags that were made by women survivors in one of our shelters, engaging young people to share the post and opportunities to help.

3. Bakhita Day

Finally, I would like to mention an event organized on the occasion of the First International Day of Prayer and Awareness against Human Trafficking or so-called Bakhita day.

Working for **Caritas Slovakia** as a church-based organisation we placed special emphasis on gathering people for a prayer service. It was accompanied by Taizé songs and broadcasted live on national radio. This way we could raise awareness of human trafficking among a large number of people and enable them to join it actively.

Through prayer we reflected on the experiences of our clients who have suffered in slavery, we read their stories and accompanied them by Psalms. Candles of hope, freedom and dignity were lit and placed on a world map, which symbolized the global extent of human trafficking. Intercession prayers were read for individual and all victims, but also for traffickers, pimps, government and church representatives as well as for all of us to take a step away from indifference to solidarity with all the victims of trafficking.

At the end we distributed prayer cards with the image of St. Josephine Bakhita and a prayer for victims of trafficking that everyone could bring home and pray individually or in a prayer group.

We can say we want to tackle modern-day slavery by shining a light on the horrors of human trafficking, amplifying the voices of the victims, highlighting success stories and sharing ways that everyone can make a difference. But apart from these strategies and projects what we as Christians need the most is to have all our efforts first anchored in prayer and entrusted to God.