Located in the Eastern Balkan region of Europe, Bulgaria remains primarily a source country for victims of human trafficking in the European Union.¹ Traffickers typically recruit Bulgarian women and children from particular regions of the country, exploit them domestically at first (including in the capital, resort areas and border towns), and then transport them to Western Europe for prolonged exploitation.

While the poor economic standing of Bulgaria renders much of the population vulnerable to trafficking, Bulgarians of ethnic Roma origin remain the highest victimised group, regularly constituting around 50% of the number of identified survivors of trafficking. Trafficking for sexual exploitation remains the vast majority of cases reported, with females constituting the majority of cases.² However, labour trafficking of Bulgarians abroad, particularly in Northern and Western Europe, is increasing in prevalence.³ Reports of domestic trafficking are also growing, according to official reports.⁴ The most common recruitment methods continue to be false job opportunities for both labour and sex trafficking, and the 'lover-boy's scheme, which involves long term grooming and false romantic relationships, for sex trafficking. In the last few years, reports of recruitment by force and violence have decreased, replaced by 'more sophisticated methods' such as emotional manipulation or deceit, coupled with more advanced means, such as use of social networks and the internet to facilitate the manipulation.⁵

COVID-19 Impact on Human Trafficking

On 13 March 2020, as a result of COVID-19, the Bulgarian Government declared a national state of emergency, including nationwide lockdown. The lockdown resulted in a prohibition of public gatherings, closure of restaurants, stores, and parks, intra-country travel restrictions, and a mandatory 14-day quarantine for all entering the country. The national state of emergency continued throughout 2020, so that entry into the country by non-Bulgarian citizens was periodically forbidden throughout the year. European partners located in countries of destination for Bulgarian victims, such as Germany, Austria, Italy, and Spain, informed A21 Bulgaria that due to the closure of brothels per COVID-19 restrictions, traffickers were forcing victims out onto the streets as they were becoming a liability, rather than a revenue-generating asset. Other traffickers increased physical abuse and required victims to provide sex-services in the 'client’s’ home. Even within Bulgaria, where sexual exploitation typically occurs indoors, there were similar trends of females at the street level seemingly endeavouring to find ‘clients;’ presumably to compensate for traffickers’ disruption of business due to COVID-19’s restrictions. Soon after the initial lockdown, unemployment in Bulgaria rose sharply, thereby increasing Bulgarians’ vulnerability to labour trafficking abroad. From March through December 2020, Bulgaria experienced two major unemployment peaks; both appeared to have been a result of economic strains caused by COVID-19’s restrictions.⁶ During this period, the employment screening services of A21 Bulgaria, which frequently screen job offers and contracts for risk of illegitimacy and exploitation for Bulgarians seeking work abroad, observed a significant increase in the number of individuals seeking job opportunities abroad. This increase occurred despite government restrictions on travel and closed borders, increasing the likelihood that the advertised employment opportunities were illegitimate and potentially dangerous.

A21’s Response

A21 Bulgaria pursues a three-pronged operational strategy in its anti-trafficking approach within the country: prevention, awareness and professional training to reduce the prevalence of trafficking; interventions and hotlines to assist those at-risk or currently being exploited; and restorative aftercare services and reintegration support for repatriated survivors of trafficking. In all areas, COVID-19 and the associated security measures affected A21 Bulgaria’s operations, requiring shifts in strategy in order to maintain the anti-trafficking mission.
**Prevention & Awareness**

Every year, A21 Bulgaria works actively in schools in predominantly high-risk regions to present the topic of human trafficking to both students and educators and to build a peer-to-peer educational networks for anti-trafficking advocacy. The Sofia Educational Inspectorate and the National Commission for Combating Trafficking in Human Beings have officially approved A21’s school program. In 2019, 3,114 high school students participated in A21 Bulgaria’s prevention curriculum. In 2020, this activity was not possible as the schools were closed nationwide due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Consequently, A21 Bulgaria developed new programs consistent with restrictions and delivered existing tools in an online format. These programs included the launch of an online dating safety campaign, a digital safety campaign on social media, and safety guides for children and parents. Despite circumstances, the increased efforts in raising awareness online resulted in an increased impact compared to the previous year, with a potential 300,000 people reached in 2020. In response to the rising unemployment in the country, A21 Bulgaria executed a Summer Jobs campaign and Safe Employment campaign that resulted in a substantial increase in employment screening calls to A21’s National Human Trafficking Hotline during their promotion period. A21 Bulgaria also collaborated with the Bulgarian National Employment Agency, educating 122 labour inspectors on the identification and reporting of potential human trafficking situations, the dangers of false job offers, and the job vetting services offered by the Hotline. More than 10,000 resources such as leaflets and posters with the Hotline number were distributed throughout the country in an effort to reach the highly vulnerable groups such as the unemployed.

**Identification & Intervention Efforts**

The Bulgarian National Human Trafficking Hotline (‘the Hotline’) is a resource to support survivors of human trafficking and provide advice and assistance on human trafficking issues. The Hotline was officially launched in 2015 by A21 Bulgaria in partnership with the National Commission for Combating Trafficking in Human Beings. The National Human Trafficking Hotline is open 24 hours a day, seven days a week, 365 days a year, and can respond in more than 200 languages. Calls to the Hotline are toll-free from any Bulgarian number both inside and outside of the country. A21 Bulgaria also operates an informational website that enables individuals to report trafficking-related tips online and deploys social media and public campaigns to educate the public of the availability and resources of the Hotline. During the periods where Bulgaria enforced stricter measures due to the COVID-19 pandemic, such as government-mandated travel restrictions, the Hotline experienced a significant drop in the number of calls. There were 22% fewer contacts received compared to 2019, with the lowest numbers corresponding with the national lockdown periods. In response to the increased vulnerability due to job losses caused by COVID-19, the Hotline shifted to raising awareness online, including the danger of false job opportunities, and to provide guidance on seeking assistance. As a result of targeted online awareness campaigns, the Hotline reported over a 400% increase of reports submitted through online means such as Facebook and through the dedicated Hotline website (www.080020100.bg) as compared to the previous year, demonstrating the positive impact of the shift to online campaigns and targeted audience demographics. More detailed analysis can be found in the accompanying Bulgaria Annual Hotline Report. Despite hurdles caused by COVID-19 restrictions, A21 Bulgaria’s collective Hotline and intervention programs resulted in the successful identification of 40 confirmed survivors, trafficked both domestically and abroad in 2020. Those identified abroad were successfully repatriated back to Bulgaria.

**Aftercare Services**

A21 Bulgaria operates a broad spectrum of restorative care services for trafficking survivors. As Bulgaria is a source country for trafficking, and survivors are often returning to their same vulnerable situations, A21 Bulgaria established a Freedom Centre to assist returning survivors with aftercare services. This drop-in day centre is designed to be a safe location for continued case management contact, learning, counselling, and skills training focused on safe reintegration back into society and equipping individuals to live independently. Over the years, A21 Bulgaria has seen the effect that this kind of long term integration support has on reducing vulnerability and re-trafficking. The A21 Bulgaria Aftercare program also offers medical, psychological and legal support to survivors, financial assistance for short-term and long-term accommodation, basic needs support, education and vocational training. In 2020, A21 Bulgaria was able to quickly shift methods in its delivery of aftercare services, adapting
to COVID-19 requirements to provide services unceasingly to survivors. The Freedom Centre continued to operate with specific requirements in terms of the number of concurrent visitors, required PCR testing, and sanitisation measures. For a period of two months, intra-country travel was forbidden, thus impeding assistance to visiting and supporting survivors who lived outside the Bulgarian capital of Sofia. As travel to other cities was forbidden, A21 Bulgaria began utilising partner networks to reach survivors in remote regions with provisions as well as deploying technology, such as tablets and smartphones to continue the psychological support that was being offered before the COVID-19 pandemic. As a result of changes in operational capacity of other NGOs in the country due to COVID, A21 Bulgaria experienced an increased number of survivors entering into A21's Aftercare program, commencing after the first quarter of 2020, and continuing through the rest of the year. Overall for 2020, the average caseload per quarter increased by 40% to 12.3 from 8.8 average cases per quarter in 2019. In addition, the Aftercare team assisted four survivors to find jobs, despite the rising unemployment in the country. A21 continued to offer the A21 Survivor Relocations Services (A21 SRS) program that aims to provide an avenue for worldwide referral of aftercare services for survivors of human trafficking, as well as domestic and international relocation and repatriation services. Within Bulgaria, almost all cases requiring repatriation are instigated via the Hotline. A21 then provides screening, translation support, pre-departure support, document restoration, and financial provision for the repatriation, culminating in ongoing aftercare support, to decrease the likelihood of re-trafficking. Despite complications in the COVID-19 affected year, A21 Bulgaria internationally repatriated 10 survivors back to Bulgaria and domestically relocated 12 survivors in 2020. Although a number of court proceedings were temporarily halted from March to late June 2020, by early July most had begun in-person proceedings with safeguarding provisions in place. One survivor receiving legal representation funded by A21, actually received her requested civil relief during the pandemic, after years of litigation. The COVID-19 pandemic required the delivery of additional services to both new and existing survivors. Additional costs and services included payment for COVID-19 PCR tests required for placement in shelters, purchasing sanitising equipment and personal protective equipment, assisting survivors in accessing medical treatment, and sending food vouchers and food aid to crisis centres and shelters across the country whose operational capacity was handicapped due to COVID-19 limitations. Placement of survivors of trafficking therefore became increasingly difficult with fewer shelters able to house survivors due to COVID-19 restrictions and health concerns, resulting in survivors being transported to shelters in locations further away or being placed in temporary accommodation such as hotels and hostels. Categories of survivors, such as males, who historically had placement challenges pre-pandemic, had even more difficulty finding accommodations during the pandemic due to these restrictions. During this period, A21 Bulgaria did not receive any government funding or COVID-19 specific grants to support those unexpected expenses.
**Survivor Repatriation During Lockdown**

**A21 Bulgaria continued to facilitate international repatriations of survivors despite significant barriers and delays due to COVID-19. Shutdowns of institutions affected survivor access to support in the country of identification and country of return, including delay in the issuance of travel and immigration documents; lack of facilities designated for quarantine/accommodation; and challenges in the formal identification and recognition as a victim of trafficking under the law to name a few.**

One such case involved a young survivor of human trafficking by sexual exploitation who escaped her trafficker in a Western European country during the height of the lockdown and called the Bulgarian Hotline for assistance. The Hotline immediately contacted partner NGOs to directly assist the survivor. Working collaboratively, A21 SRS services were activated to facilitate the safe repatriation and recovery of the survivor back to Bulgaria. However, a number of barriers stemming from COVID-19 restrictions arose during this repatriation. Borders were officially closed, issuance of identification documents necessary for travel from the in-country Bulgarian Embassy was unusually delayed, and with shelters unavailable, and many hotels closed, placement of the survivor in temporary accommodation was challenging. Through strong collaboration and advocacy with the in-country partner NGO, safe housing was secured, while the Bulgarian Hotline worked on resolving hurdles caused by the pandemic to ensure successful repatriation. Strict quarantine requirements meant the survivor needed to secure safe housing in Bulgaria prior to re-entry. Successful shelter placement requires a government certification of the survivor as an official ‘victim of trafficking’, however, closures delayed the Bulgarian Embassy from issuing the necessary certification in advance of travel, and border closures halted the regular screenings at the ports of entry. Fortunately, through a pre-existing relationship, A21 was able to arrange for the Bulgarian Border Police to conduct a special identification screening at the airport. Despite the hurdles, the survivor persevered through this process and ultimately A21 successfully facilitated the survivor’s travel back to Bulgaria, mandatory COVID-19 testing, and secured safe accommodation consistent with Bulgarian quarantine requirements. The prohibition of all intra-country travel pursuant to the lockdown required A21 to rely on partnership with Border Police to facilitate the survivor’s travel to the shelter. Coordinating the repatriation process to Bulgaria (including transport and accommodation) exceeded two weeks. This particular case was one of several that demonstrated the complications of survivor support in the wake of domestic and international COVID-19 security measures, and also the need for heightened coordination amongst parties.

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5. Ibid.
6. Svobona Evropa (Free Europe), A sharp increase in unemployment in Bulgaria is reported in December, Dec. 8, 2020, https://www.svobodnaevropa.bg/a/30989877.html
After seven years of sexual exploitation and four more in searching for justice I had lost my trust in people completely. It is only since I call you that I started to feel as if there is hope I can move forward.

—Survivor, 36 y.o.

Executive Summary

- **The Hotline received a total of 432 CONTACTS**
- **The Hotline identified and supported 25 CONFIRMED VICTIMS OF TRAFFICKING**
- Over half of identified victims were **DOMESTICALLY TRAFFICKED** within Bulgaria (58.6%)
- The majority of reports to the Hotline were regarding **ADULT VICTIMS** (89.7%)
- The majority of victims reported to the Hotline were **FEMALE** (93%)
- **SEXUAL EXPLOITATION** cases comprised the main type of trafficking reported to the Hotline (86%)
- **COMMUNITY MEMBERS** constituted the main callers to the Hotline (73%)

The COVID-19 pandemic resulted in unprecedented challenges for the Hotline in 2020. During the first and second wave of COVID-19 in the country, the Hotline experienced a decrease in calls compared to previous years. The Hotline also noticed a preference for reporting through the dedicated website and via social media platforms over direct phone calls. New trends observed by the Hotline included an increase in domestic trafficking cases compared to previous years and the prevalence of employment screening requests and individuals seeking job opportunities abroad, despite government restrictions on travel and border closures. Despite the challenges caused by COVID-19, the Hotline continued to operate services uninterrupted. Reports to the Hotline continued to be referred to law enforcement, resulting in the identification of victims, both within Bulgaria and internationally.

Contacts’ to the Hotline include all forms of incoming enquiries, made via various channels, such as by telephone, email or other online means. ‘Contacts’ include reports on a potential human trafficking situation, related and unrelated crimes as well as more general enquiries about human trafficking, requests for assistance or job vetting requests. Non-substantive ‘contacts’ are excluded from this report.

‘Reports’ refer to contacts to the Hotline relating to a potential human trafficking situation, via any communication channel.

The following statistics in this report are based solely on substantive contacts related to human trafficking made to the Hotline from January - December 2020. Substantive contacts exclude hang-ups, missed calls, wrong numbers and instances where the reason for calling is unknown. Disaggregated data has been collected on each individual case on descriptive factors including gender, age, type of trafficking, methods of control and recruitment methods. The below data is based on the cases where the data was available. In many cases, the call specialists were unable to acquire full or specific details about a case. Therefore the data below is based on cases where the specified information was made available.

Bulgaria Hotline | 05
Overview of Data

In 2020, the Bulgarian Human Trafficking Hotline received a total of 432 contacts. These ‘contacts’ include all calls and enquiries made through online means, as well as any follow-up calls on existing cases regarding assistance and general requests for information. While there were fewer phone calls to the Hotline in 2020, there was a 433% increase in reports through online means, such as through the dedicated Hotline website, as compared to the previous year.¹

Age and Gender

Ninety-three percent of reports to the Hotline in 2020 related to female victims. While the Hotline on occasion receives reports involving minors, the vast majority of reports related to adult victims. In 2020, child trafficking comprised only 10.3% of reports to the Hotline, and of which primarily involved the sex trafficking of minors.

Victim Demographics

In 2020, after responding to various reports of potential human trafficking situations, the Hotline confirmed that at least 25 victims of trafficking were identified and assisted.

Caller Demographics

Since its inception in 2015, the Hotline has received reports from potential victims, concerned friends and family members, non-governmental organisations, law enforcement partners and the general public. In 2020, the majority of contacts to the Hotline originated from Community Members, composed of the general public, friends or family members of the potential victim, and victims who call the Hotline directly. Fifty percent of those contacts included reports from concerned friends or relatives of potential victims. The Hotline often receives reports from callers who are located outside of Bulgaria. In 2020, the Hotline received reports from numerous countries, including Germany, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom, amongst others. Most reports to the Hotline from outside Bulgaria originated from Germany.

Recruitment Methods

Traffickers use certain recruitment methods to deceive and coerce victims into situations of exploitation. In the cases where a recruitment method was identified, the two most common recruitment tactics were false job opportunities and the ‘loverboy’ scheme, where traffickers groom and manipulate the victim into a relationship in order to exploit them.

Victim Nationality

The majority of human trafficking victims identified were predominantly from minority groups, such as the Roma community. A high proportion of reports to the Hotline involved transnational trafficking cases, with 41.4% of victims reported having been exploited abroad.
Methods of Control

Traffickers use certain means of control to manipulate and force their victims into staying in an exploitative situation. The methods of control reported here include threat, isolation, emotional, physical or economic abuse and the withholding of personal identification documentation, amongst others. From the data available from reports submitted to the Hotline, the most common method of control was physical abuse, most typically seen in cases of sexual exploitation. Other reported trends included traffickers using threats, isolation and induced substance abuse to coerce and control their victims. However, the Hotline rarely observes a single method of control as traffickers use a combination of different methods to coerce and manipulate victims.

Exploitation Type

In 2020, 86% of reports to the Hotline were cases of sex trafficking. Reports of labour exploitation were predominantly related to the agricultural sector. The Hotline also received several employment screening requests where individuals sought assistance about the legitimacy of job opportunities. Almost every report to the Hotline regarding a suspicious job opportunity had significant indicators of risk for potential trafficking. Due to COVID-19 non-essential travel restrictions, employment agencies offering jobs abroad would more likely be illegitimate organisations. Of all reports received related to human trafficking in 2020, the Hotline identified a connection to Germany in 61% of cases, where the trafficker either exploited the victim in Germany or attempted to transport the victim to Germany. All these cases involved sexual exploitation. This observation by the Hotline is consistent with the fact that Bulgarian citizens are one of the top nationalities reported to be trafficked in Germany. The Hotline also noted a connection to Germany in reports received concerning Bulgarian citizens that were ultimately unrelated to human trafficking such as domestic violence or labour abuse cases.

The observations contained in this report is limited to information communicated to the Bulgarian National Human Trafficking Hotline during the reporting period. Nothing arising from the data should be interpreted as showing the full extent or prevalence of human trafficking in Bulgaria.

¹ To ensure data integrity, the data presented is extracted from reports submitted to the Hotline consisting mainly of those confirmed and assisted as identified victims of trafficking. Therefore, this report takes a conservative approach in presenting the Hotline data and analysis, for the most part omitting reports of potential victims of human trafficking which were unable to be substantiated or confirmed.


³ Threat includes threatening to harm the victim, the victim’s family or other persons, threat to expose or shame the victim, threat to report the victim to the police or immigration.

⁴ Isolation may include physical isolation or deprivation of liberty, denying access to medical support, surveillance or control of the victim in public, isolating the victim by moving the victim frequently from place to place.

⁵ Economic abuse includes situations of debt bondage or where traffickers limit the finances of the victim either in whole or in part.