Dealing with Slavery and Human Trafficking in Belarus

On 6 February a Belarusian businessman received 5 years in prison for enslaving a group of Vietnamese whom he had earlier agreed to deliver to the European Union. Meanwhile, the Belarusian government has defined fighting human trafficking as one of its priorities both domestically and internationally, where it feels it has been successful.

The recent US report on trafficking, however, downgraded Belarus' performance in combating the problem due to its abusive legislation and a lack of open access to information on the issue.

The positive results from the anti-trafficking campaign are visible in Belarus, though some social groups remain vulnerable to trafficking: women from weak families and men from the regions who go to Russia to work. The government needs to develop both employment and professional education policies to boost jobs for these groups.

A Slaveholder from Belarus

Belarus has not seen slavery for almost two centuries, but recently a rare case of it occurred near Lida, a city in Western Belarus. On 6 February businessman Siarhej Stoliaraŭ was given five years in prison for organising the illegal migration of individuals. Stoliaraŭ and his Russian partners developed a plan to illegally move several Vietnam citizens from Moscow to the European Union. He took 16 of them to a truck and brought them to a village in the Lida district.

But instead of immediately delivering them to Lithuania, he ordered the Vietnamese to work off the services rendered to him. The migrants got accommodation in a shed and had to dig a
ditch and do other physical jobs. Stoliaraŭ kept them locked up for eight days, though his neighbours had no idea what was happening in the yard next door. The case was revealed only during a border guard check in the village for other, unrelated reasons.

A World Anti-Trafficking Activist

Belarus has engaged in actively combating human trafficking both at home and internationally since 2005. It became one of its major foreign policy initiatives, enjoying strong international consensus and a firm backing from many Western countries. The authorities claim they brought about a significant drop in trafficking inside Belarus. The following diagram from the Ministry of the Interior review these dynamics over the past decade.

The number of human trafficking and related crimes (2002–2014)

Sexual exploitation's victims are always on the minds of the leadership in Belarus. According to official sources, the number of victims decreased from around 1000 in 2006 to 81 in 2014. In general, this is a very positive trend, especially when compared to other countries in the region, like Ukraine, Russia, Kazakhstan and Moldova, where the trends are less
encouraging, according to a 2014 UN report.

Belarusian women are the most likely to be exported to Western Europe: Germany, the Netherlands, France, but also as Middle East and Russia. Traffickers have become more cautious and do not usually come to Belarus personally, though nine of them were detained inside the country in 2014.

Modern traffickers have changed their ways: if in the 1990s they attempted to deceive the victims by promising them legal highly paid jobs, today these schemes no longer work thanks to the spread of communication technology and educational campaigns. They openly invite women to work as prostitutes, and the women go in for these dirty jobs fully aware – they simply can earn more doing the same job abroad than in Belarus. And many surely hope to find a rich fiancé and start a happier life.

Belarusian Migrants Enslaved in Russia

Labour slavery has also been on the decline over the past decade, but the major reason for it remains the same. Thousands of Belarusians migrate to Russian giant cities of Moscow and Saint Petersburg in search of work. Unemployed men listen to the stories of neighbours who have been in Russian and made good money in construction, convincing the to pursue a similar journey. But they often find a less optimistic reality awaiting them when they arrive in Russia.

In June 2014 two Belarusians managed to escape from servitude in the Caucasian republic of Dagestan. Strangers knocked them at a
Moscow bus station with a spiked drink and brought them to a brick factory. They worked 15 hours a day and were forbidden from leaving the factory's territory under threat of a heavy beating.

The men managed to run away with the help of the Russian NGO Alternative, who received information about their presence in Dagestan. Russian media reported that Dagestan has 600 brick factories, and half of them use slave labour, 10-50 slaves at each factory. And no one knows why the Russian government does nothing to stop this outrageous crime.

**US Feels Belarus's Efforts Have Been Weak**

Despite the bright official statistics on trafficking from Belarus, the US Department of State has been placing Belarus in its Tier 2 watch list. This means that the government is making efforts to comply with the western standards of combating human trafficking, but the total number of victims remains significant and shows that the government is failing to resolve the problem.

The US report gives several instances where Belarusians are still vulnerable to being compelled to forced labour. It mentions the functioning of presidential decree No 9, which forbids leaving one's workplace in any mill from the wood industry without the employer's permission. Men who seek jobs abroad remain subject to falling victim to forced labour, as do women via sex trafficking.

The report criticises Belarusian officials, who allegedly understate the real number of victims in order to show the government's successful performance. The government also shows little interest in cooperating with NGOs who deal with trafficking issues.

**New Policies Needed to Fight Trafficking**

While the positive results in the broader anti-trafficking campaign can indeed be observed in Belarus, the government
still has a ways to go in developing its strategy of dealing with the problem. Belarus succeeded in fighting human trafficking at home, but it still proves itself incapable of preventing its citizens from servitude abroad. The authorities should thus focus on problems which do not touch migration directly and stem from social and economic conditions in the country.

Authorities should specifically target the most vulnerable groups with particular social or regional origin: women from poor or alcoholic families and men from the small towns and villages who seek earnings in Russia. The government should develop policies that help these groups find a decently paid job at home, and encourage their professional and personal development.