

European Alliance Combats Human Trafficking

An Interview
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Law enforcement agencies in Southeastern Europe adopt an unprecedented level of cross-border cooperation to combat trafficking in persons in a region where organized criminal groups operate sophisticated networks engaged in a variety of illegal activities.

The Southeast European Cooperative Initiative (SECI) Center is a regional law enforcement organization with 12 member nations working to address a variety of criminal problems including human trafficking. The demise of communism and the Balkan wars of the 1990s created a turbulent environment in which organized criminal organizations were able to thrive, fluidly moving their activities across national borders. Recognizing that law enforcement needed to respond with the same agility, regional governments signed the Agreement on Cooperation to Prevent and Combat Transborder Crime in Bucharest in May 1999, and one year later the SECI Center began its activity.

General Ferenc Banfi is the Deputy Director of the SECI Center and Head of the Operational Support Department. **Zan Jovanovski** is a Macedonian liaison officer who has played a key role in counter-trafficking operations. *Global Issues* Managing Editor **Charlene Porter** conducted a telephone interview with the two officers who spoke with her from SECI headquarters in Bucharest, Romania.

Question: What are the particular social, geographic, and political factors that have contributed to human trafficking as a growing form of criminal activity in the region?

Banfi: The main reasons for trafficking in human beings start with economics. After the fall of the communist bloc, there was economic trouble in most of the countries of Southeast Europe. The high number of unemployed caused very great difficulties for families. They weren't able to find appropriate jobs, and they were seeking any way to find financial resources. Unluckily, one of the directions they might go was to become a victim of trafficking of human beings.

Also we should talk about educational reasons, especially the lack of appropriate education. While the economies of the countries were in trouble, at the same time, most of the victims of trafficking were not well educated. Poor education makes additional problems for potential victims who want to find appropriate jobs.

The public awareness of human trafficking must be mentioned. During the communist era, the public opinion was that prostitution is a part of criminal activity.

After that, when the trafficking in human beings became a problem, the public couldn't make the distinction between voluntary prostitution and trafficking in human beings. It was a huge problem. Society needs to know more about the difference between voluntary prostitution and the trafficking in human beings.

Q: How is human trafficking linked to other criminal activities and organizations?

Banfi: I'll give you an example. Women are recruited from Ukraine, Moldova, and Romania. The destination country is possibly a Western European country or Macedonia. It's possible they might go in either direction. The women need visas to enter Macedonia or the European Union. But usually it is not possible to get a visa by legal means. So there is a division of labor in the criminal groups. One part of the group is dealing with recruitment and transportation of women; the other part of the group is dealing with forged documents. It is a regular practice that the trafficked women have forged visas or forged passports. It is a link to another part of crime.

We find that the criminal groups working with the transportation of the victims of human trafficking are also involved in the smuggling of migrants. So there are several links between different types of crime that we have identified.

Jovanovski: The victims from Southeast Europe can

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be discovered in Central Asia or South America or Western Europe. We see a very, very strong movement of the victims. We can talk about the relation between organized crime and trafficking in human beings as one chain. We can talk about the involvement of criminal activities in all three phases—recruitment, transportation, and exploitation.

In all three of those phases, you can find a very large variety of criminal activities. Trafficking in human beings involves not only sexual

exploitation. We can talk about abduction, psychological violence, rape, enslavement, and deprivation of liberty.

We can talk about the use of forged documents, possession of narcotics and drugs. We are facing on a daily basis a relationship between trafficking in human beings and other forms of organized crime.

Criminals are cooperating with each other in the same way as we are, as law enforcement agencies.

Q: The SECI Center coordinated raids on brothels and hotels in the region last September. What were the successes of that operation?

Banfi: The regional operation of police raids on hotels, restaurants, and similar establishments was just one element. The main goal of the operation was to create an appropriate basis for further investigations. It was complex also because not just police forces were involved in this operation. There were nongovernmental organizations, the International Organization for Migration (IOM), and a specialized task force on trafficking in human beings.

Regarding the outcome, first we identified 237 victims of trafficking. Also we identified more than 293 traffickers against whom criminal investigations were initiated. Mr. Jovanovski can explain how law enforcement cooperation has continued since this operation.

It's a concrete example of how SECI Center has established the appropriate communications and exchange of information.

Also, 23 victims were repatriated with the assistance of IOM and NGOs. The operation showed that we could stop crime and remove these people from dangerous situations.

More than 200 criminals were under investigation, with some of those cases still going on with the cooperation of Macedonia, Romania, Moldova, and Ukraine. It's very important that this operation was the first one when law enforcement and other responsible actors worked together.

Jovanovski: We're very proud of this at the SECI Center because it is the most complex activity in the region of Southeast Europe. I would like to stress that we organized the very first big regional operation last September, but prior to that we had several successful cases where we had bilateral and multilateral cooperation between countries in the region regarding the targeting of specific channels of trafficking in human beings.

For example, the Macedonian law enforcement agencies asked the SECI Center to support several investigations in Macedonia. The SECI Center was asked to coordinate activities in Ukraine, Moldova, Romania, Bulgaria, and Macedonia regarding the specific channels. As a result of that exchange of information, in Macedonia three criminals were arrested. All of them were convicted. That was in 2000.

In 2003, we are not only satisfied with the exchange of information, but also with organizing the police raids in the bars and the hotels. We also provided support in bringing witnesses to the courts in Macedonia. We try to avoid bureaucracy and the maze of problems that can occur in prosecuting crimes of human trafficking.

It is not a problem to organize simple police raids. But what after that? In all of our countries, we cannot keep the witnesses in our trafficked shelters or keep them in some safe location. It is against human rights principles. How can we obtain their testimonies and their appearance in the court? Now we have excellent examples of providing assistance

for the witnesses, and we are very happy that SECI Center is coordinating those activities.

I want to stress, specifically with regard to Macedonia, that we dismantled two criminal organizations that were internationally connected.

Banfi: If there is no victim in front of the court, there is no sentencing. What is so difficult for the Macedonian authorities is to persuade the victims to appear in front of the court. Through SECI cooperation, we were able to discover the victims of a specific case and rescue them. We provided the appropriate physical protection and transportation.

U.S. Supports SECI and Counter-Trafficking Campaign

The United States has been a strong supporter of SECI's efforts to improve regional law enforcement cooperation since the organization formed in 2001. The United States has assisted with start-up costs and equipment, providing about \$1 million in support although the center is governed wholly by the 12 member states.

Four SECI task forces focus on particular areas of organized criminal activity—human trafficking, narcotics, border issues, and financial crimes. Specialized U.S. law enforcement officers are assigned to each one of these task forces to provide assistance and technical advice to regional law enforcement.

SECI members are Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Greece, Hungary, Macedonia, Moldova, Romania, Serbia and Montenegro, Slovenia, and Turkey.

Then they could testify in front of the court. Their testimony was very critical, and that assured the appropriate sentences before the court.

Q: You identified almost 300 victims in the September operation, and repatriated 23. What happened to the rest of the victims?

Banfi: The identified victims should be able to go home. As I said, 23 were repatriated, and others were taken to safe houses operated by IOM and NGOs. Sometimes they make a statement that they need no further assistance from the police or these other organizations.

Q: Why is the multilateral cooperation you've discussed such a critical element in addressing the problems?

Banfi: Trafficking in human beings is characterized by the international nature of the criminal organizations. Look at the map. There are source countries, transit countries, there are destination countries. If law enforcement agencies are working separately, they will not be in a position to identify the whole network of criminal groups associated with each other.

It is very obvious that the criminals have established a high quality of cooperation on an international level. They have a division of labor on the international level. The globalization of this type of crime is established. If we want to provide an adequate response to this challenge, we should use the same globalization strategy.

Another thing is that the phenomenon of trafficking in human beings is unique. The victims need another form of assistance beyond just law enforcement investigation. That's just one part. Most of the victims are injured emotionally, psychologically, sometimes physically.

When we think about effectively combating organized crime in this regard, we should think about how we can make a complex response and adequately address all these problems; how we can provide appropriate assistance for the victims—medical assistance, psychological assistance, financial assistance, and educational assistance. It is not the same as the person who goes to the police station because someone has stolen his car.

Our victims are in a much more difficult situation, and establishing the trust between law enforcement and the victims is much more difficult. That is the reason why we need the assistance of NGOs.

Unfortunately, most of the victims of trafficking in human beings have also committed crimes. The pimps, the traffickers are telling the victims, "You entered the country illegally, you used a forged passport." Sometimes the victims are even using drugs and so on.

That's why we need a comprehensive approach to responding to this challenge.

Q: It's been a well-documented problem in many countries that legal structures regard the victims of trafficking more as criminals than as victims, focusing on their involvement with prostitution or immigration violations without recognizing the element of coercion that put the victims in the position of creating these crimes. How has the law changed in countries in your region to recognize these problems?

Banfi: The problem is identified. There are huge discrepancies among the laws of our member states. For example, we have EU member states among the SECI members. They have laws appropriate to the EU standard. In other countries that are expecting to join the EU soon, they have more developed national legislation. In other countries, they are just starting to develop national legislation on organized crime.

I can tell you generally that the SECI Center has established a close cooperation with the Stability Pact on Organized Crime (SPOC) initiative. The SPOC Secretariat moved to Bucharest, and we agreed that it would provide assistance to the SECI Center because we recognize the gaps regarding the legislation. That is the obstacle in front of us, to solve this problem.

Q: Attempting to raise local law enforcement awareness of trafficking as a crime is also a critical part of the effort to shut down the practice. How is the SECI Center doing that? How well do you think you're succeeding?

Jovanovski: This is a criminal phenomenon of the 21st century. In the last three years, we have had a very strong development of the law enforcement

agencies and their success in combating this type of crime. In all of the countries in Southeast Europe, we have national commissions for combating trafficking in human beings, each with a national coordinator. In all of our countries, we have laws for combating trafficking of human beings, or special articles in the existing criminal codes. In all of our countries, we have specialized departments at the ministries of interior for combating trafficking in human beings.

For the very first time, the customs administration is a very strong partner with the police of the region in combating this criminal phenomenon. We're involving the customs administration as a partner. We're involving our colleagues from nongovernmental organizations and international organizations.

Law enforcement is very much changing its mentality on how to combat this criminal phenomena. We're trying to develop an approach appropriate for the 21st century. We are trying to develop our police forces on a more modern level to respect human rights and especially the rights of the victims of trafficking, but also to change our approach and our attitude.

The SECI Center is involved as a partner in a U.N. Development Program effort to create a manual for training law enforcement officers. The center is also a partner with the International Center for Migration Policy Development (ICMPD) for creating a manual on basic law enforcement education.

In all of our police academies in the region, trafficking in human beings is included in regular education and in specialization programs for law enforcement personnel. We can see that law enforcement is very much involved in changing their mentality and their actions to combat trafficking.

In all of our activities, the most attention is paid to local law enforcement because they are on the frontline. They have the very first contact with the victim, they are doing the raid, they have to decide how the cases will proceed.

Banfi: I will summarize the outcome of our cooperation in the first two years of SECI Center's existence. First, we have regional development on

legislation in our countries. Secondly, we established a communication channel including contact persons in each SECI member state, in Kosovo at the United Nations Mission, and in observer states like Ukraine. If we need any type of law enforcement cooperation in any country, we shouldn't wonder about who should be called, or who should be reached. We have partners in 12 countries. The third thing is that we already show real law enforcement results including sentences and punishments by the courts in the countries. We have established a larger cooperation network involving NGOs, international organizations, and other institutions

We have organized several training sessions in close cooperation with the ICMPD and the Stability Pact Task Force on trafficking in human beings. We have developed a comprehensive training project that is due for implementation in certain SECI member states. This comprehensive training project means that law enforcement personnel and representatives of NGOs take part in common trainings, in order to get to know each other, in order to affect each others habits and approaches. It's very important.

In order to support law enforcement activity, the U.N. Development Program, with the leadership of Romania, has developed a manual of best practices for law enforcement in combating the trafficking in human beings.

What are our weaknesses? What we have experienced is that unfortunately our member states don't have financial resources to support concrete and coordinated investigations. That's why we are seeking external financial resources, so that we may distribute them to our national law enforcement agencies.

We have special financial support from the U.S. State Department, but also professional support from the U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation, the Drug Enforcement Agency, immigration authorities, and others.

Another weakness is that we need to further develop and urge our member countries to develop legislation regarding witness protection, victim protection, and supplementary fields of legislation.

Q: Many studies identify trafficking in human beings as the fastest growing form of criminal activity to emerge on the international scene over the last few years. Are you on the road to slowing, even reversing that trend?

Banfi: Law enforcement cooperation is one tool in the hands of our governments. But the general solution can be found in development of the economies and the educational systems of the countries. All the social reasons that generate this phenomenon must be addressed. Law enforcement will never be able to solve these types of problems. We need peace in Southeast Europe, we need peace in all of Europe, we need peace around the world. We need assistance from the developed countries to provide stronger development in all aspects of these

countries. If we have that support, I have no doubt we will reach our final goal.

Jovanovski: We are very proud of what we are doing here. I am sure there are many areas where we can improve our activities. We need support from the media, from our member countries, and from the developed countries. But I am thinking we are on a good road.

Porter conducted a telephone interview from Washington with Banfi and Jovanovski at SECI headquarters in Bucharest, Romania.

The opinions expressed in this article are those of the interview subjects and do not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the U.S. government.