



**GLOBAL
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AGAINST TRANSNATIONAL
ORGANIZED CRIME

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LABOUR EXPLOITATION IN
THE WESTERN BALKANS

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FROM VISION TO ACTION: A DECADE OF ANALYSIS, DISRUPTION AND RESILIENCE

The Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime was founded in 2013. Its vision was to mobilize a global strategic approach to tackling organized crime by strengthening political commitment to address the challenge, building the analytical evidence base on organized crime, disrupting criminal economies and developing networks of resilience in affected communities. Ten years on, the threat of organized crime is greater than ever before and it is critical that we continue to take action by building a coordinated global response to meet the challenge.



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Western Balkans is a region of origin, transit and destination for victims of labour exploitation, which can be broadly defined as workplace abuse for profit involving employers gaining from the unethical or illegal treatment of workers. Such abuses range from non-payment or underpayment of wages, to long hours and unsafe working conditions. They are also characterized by employers' disregard for labour laws.¹ Between 2018 and 2023, based on the US Department of State's annual trafficking in persons report, authorities and civil society in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia recorded 767 confirmed and potential victims of labour exploitation, including forced begging.² The number of recorded victims varies annually from 83 to 173, with an average of 128 per year.³ The highest number of victims was recorded in 2021.⁴ From 2018 to 2021, there was a steady rise in labour exploitation cases, followed by a substantial decrease in 2022. However, in 2023, the number of cases sharply increased again. Albania recorded the highest number of potential labour exploitation victims.⁵

A separate study of human trafficking by the Migration, Asylum, Refugees Regional Initiative (MARRI) found that forced begging was the most common form of trafficking for exploitation between 2018 and 2022 in the Western Balkans, constituting 27% of all victims, after sexual exploitation (the latter accounted for 49% of the total). Other forms of labour exploitation accounted for 16.5% of the total in the MARRI study, effectively resulting in labour exploitation accounting for 43.5% of total trafficking.⁶ This largely chimes with the State Department figures for the region, which show labour exploitation accounting for 46% of total trafficking.

Labour exploitation affects both foreign and local workers in the region, who are also vulnerable to exploitation when they leave the Western Balkans. Civil society assessments indicate that labour exploitation is a growing issue of concern in the region, and its true extent is difficult to estimate. Available data mostly reflects officially recorded cases, as there are no other comprehensive sources to supplement these figures. Many cases are not detected by authorities or reported by victims. A civil society activist from Serbia with 25 years of experience in this field emphasized that 'the number of cases could be 10 to 20 times higher' than those shown by the official figures.⁷

Recent allegations of labour exploitation support civil society claims that the issue represents a growing regional concern. In 2023, Montenegrin authorities arrested six individuals, including a government official who was a translator, for exploiting Turkish construction workers.⁸ In 2021, citizens of Taiwan were forced into online fraud operations in North Macedonia and Montenegro. They were coerced into making fraudulent calls to victims in China, falsely informing them of fictitious fines.⁹ In some cases,

Sordid sanitary and hygiene conditions in a facility used by Vietnamese workers at the Chinese Linglong tyre factory in Zrenjanin, Serbia. © A11 Initiative and ASTRA via Radio Free Europe



multilateral responses have followed, including from the European Parliament and United Nations in 2021 and 2022, notably centring on the alleged trafficking of Vietnamese workers to Serbia for labour exploitation.¹⁰

In addition to the foreign workforce, research carried out for this report shows that Western Balkan citizens endure exploitative working conditions, especially in construction, manufacturing and hospitality. For example, a construction worker from Bosnia and Herzegovina revealed that he and his 85 colleagues work with toxic materials in sweltering conditions from 7 a.m. to 5 p.m. daily, including weekends, for €350 per month, with their employer failing to provide legally mandated refreshments. Their plight remains unresolved despite their efforts to contact labour inspectors.¹¹

This report examines the prevalence of labour exploitation in the Western Balkans and how it manifests itself. It identifies the most susceptible sectors and the groups most affected, while also highlighting gender differences. The report discusses the risks and provides concrete examples of the most significant forms of labour exploitation. It covers how institutions, civil society and media address the problem, and provides recommendations for tackling this issue.

Key points

- **Labour exploitation is a pressing concern for the Western Balkans.** Officially, from 2018 to 2021, there was a steady rise in labour exploitation cases. Despite a dramatic decrease in 2022, the number of cases increased again in 2023. Efforts should be made to raise awareness of labour exploitation and to encourage civil society, victims and witnesses to report cases to authorities.
- **Labour exploitation affects both local and migrant workers, but remains largely concealed from public view and inadequately addressed by institutions, with corruption enabling and facilitating exploitation.** Policymakers should focus on enhancing regular data collection, raising awareness, strengthening legal and policy frameworks, improving law enforcement and oversight, collaborating with civil society, addressing corruption, supporting victims and extending international cooperation over this issue.
- **Civil society argues that there is substantial under-reporting of labour exploitation.** Implementing a harmonized data collection and reporting system that unifies information from various institutions is critical. Policymakers should work towards creating a standardized, comprehensive data collection mechanism. This will enable better monitoring of law and policy implementation, safeguard the rights of trafficking victims and provide a more accurate representation of the issue.

- **Labour exploitation in the region is marked by inadequate compensation, long hours and substandard environments, especially in the construction, textiles, hospitality and food industries.** Abuses like confiscation of personal documents, coercive fixed-term contracts, employer intimidation and psychological abuse are frequent, sometimes even accompanied by physical or sexual violence. Policymakers must prioritize robust labour inspections to monitor the implementation of fixed-term contracts and the enforcement of measures to combat coercion, harassment and violence by employers. Collaboration with civil society is crucial to improve workplace safety and safeguard labour rights.
- **Despite economic progress, the region continues to face socio-economic challenges, characterized by high poverty rates, significant youth unemployment and an informal economy. Inadequate social protection leaves many vulnerable families without essential support, contributing to the risk of labour exploitation.** Policymakers and the private sector should promote economic diversification and job creation (especially for young people); develop policies to formalize the informal economy; and reform social protection programmes to provide targeted support to the most vulnerable families.
- **Relatively low conviction rates suggest that traffickers largely operate with impunity in parts of the region.** Substantial variations in the number of cases across countries is very probably influenced by variations in the extent of corruption and resource disparities. To address this issue, policymakers should prioritize strengthening law enforcement capacity, address corruption, promote regional cooperation, enhance victim support mechanisms that account for gender dimensions, conduct awareness campaigns and regularly evaluate anti-trafficking efforts to ensure traffickers face the consequences, and victims receive adequate protection and assistance.
- **Civil society in the Western Balkans needs to increase capacities and specialization to tackle labour exploitation efficiently.** Civil society should also continue collaborating with journalists and trade unions to address labour rights violations and improve workers' knowledge of labour standards, while also encouraging information sharing and participation in coordinated initiatives. Policymakers should endorse and support these efforts, promote media collaboration to increase awareness and empower trade unions to champion labour rights and challenge exploitative employers effectively. They should allocate resources and provide legislative backing for initiatives that aim to combat human trafficking and labour exploitation effectively.

Methodology

In 2022, the GI-TOC's Observatory of Illicit Economies in South Eastern Europe collaborated with six civil society organizations, one in each of the Western Balkan countries (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia).¹² The primary objective was to enhance their research capabilities in understanding criminal trends and illicit markets, better enabling them to operate as risk and resilience monitors for labour exploitation within their respective countries. This initiative seeks to bolster community resilience against labour exploitation.

These six organizations collected data and conducted 111 interviews with academia, civil society, international organizations, judiciary, law enforcement, local government, media, private sector and trade union representatives, focusing on trends and instances of labour exploitation, as well as community responses to the phenomenon. Among these interviewees, 38 individuals, who were at risk of (or exposed to) labour exploitation, shared their experiences. We do not disclose the identities of these individuals due to concerns for their security.

This qualitative data, collected by civil society in the region, provides a more comprehensive understanding and complements the often limited official data provided by national authorities. However,

this data is often anecdotal and reliant on specific examples, perceptions and experiences. Additionally, official data on victims is not standardized across each country in the region, and the accuracy depends on the capacity of authorities and civil society to collect and classify it. In the US Department of State's annual reports on trafficking in persons from 2019 to 2024, data for each country in the region is not segregated on the basis of potential and confirmed victims, and not all countries separately record types of victims. For example, the number of potential victims of labour exploitation is known in Albania, while the number of officially recognized victims is not known. In Serbia, the number of officially recorded victims of labour exploitation is known, but the number of potential victims is not known. This report used data where possible to identify labour exploitation.

Therefore, despite its value of this research, there are data limitations, making it difficult to demonstrate changes in trends and prevalence rates of labour exploitation in the Western Balkans conclusively and reliably over time. Nonetheless, it is important to note that civil society activists across the region often infer a rise in labour exploitation cases in the last three years.

Understanding labour exploitation

Before analyzing the risks, prevalence and manifestation of labour exploitation in the Western Balkans, it is important to define the concept and distinguish it from related or overlapping terms used in literature and case law, such as human trafficking, trafficking in persons for labour or sexual exploitation, forced labour and modern slavery. Crucially, labour exploitation is not legally defined in international law, unlike human trafficking, forced labour and modern slavery.

However, labour exploitation can be broadly understood as the abuse of workers for profit, through conditions that deny the effective exercise of fundamental labour rights and/or endanger the life, health, freedom, dignity and safety of workers.¹³ It is a broader term than forced labour, but encompasses that extremity. It includes scenarios such as recruitment of workers for third parties under exploitative conditions, excessive work hours, poor remuneration (including wages below the minimum wage), exposure to life-threatening hazards, social protection violations and degrading working and living conditions. Labour exploitation exists when at least one of the scenarios cited above is evident.¹⁴ When coercion is involved, such as violence, threats, seizure of documents, or other restrictions of personal freedom, labour exploitation escalates to forced labour.¹⁵

While labour exploitation can involve many forms of unfair treatment, it does not always follow that trafficking

is involved, as the latter centres on recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons through force, fraud or deception. Some types of trafficking are not considered forced labour, such as trafficking for organ removal. Similarly, some forms of forced labour do not qualify as trafficking, like inherited debt bondage or forced labour used for political coercion.¹⁶ Modern slavery refers to situations of exploitation in which a person cannot refuse to work or leave because of threats, violence, deception, abuse of power or other forms of coercion; it encompasses various forms of exploitation, including forced labour, forced marriage, debt bondage and human trafficking.¹⁷

In this report, labour exploitation often centres on situations where workers are the victims of wage theft, with their employers or recruiters controlling their wages and documents. Additionally, it encompasses trafficking for the purpose of labour exploitation, in both the formal and informal economy. Workers may be isolated from outside contact and misled about their work conditions or immigration status. Threats, violence and bullying are used to control victims. They are often forced to work long hours without breaks in unsafe workplaces and poor conditions. They are denied proper protective equipment and charged excessively for substandard housing. Their movement may also be restricted.¹⁸ ■



UNMASKING LABOUR EXPLOITATION

Analyzing the crime of human trafficking, as well as the number of survivors and helpline data detailing the nature of exploitation, offers valuable insights into the trends and scope of labour exploitation. Nonetheless, deriving trends in the Western Balkans is challenging due to the lack of comparative data and the inherently covert nature of labour exploitation, which often leaves it hidden from even curious public eyes and thus vastly underreported. The real scope of labour exploitation is therefore unknown, as victims often do not wish or dare to come forward and report their exploiters, due to the risks of retaliation, deportation or the loss of livelihood. Exploitation runs the gamut from relatively minor labour rights violations to the alarming practice of forced labour, a form of human trafficking.

Given the status of the Western Balkans as a transit hub for people smuggling since the 2015 migrant 'crisis',¹⁹ a pattern of labour exploitation has emerged, exhibiting a disconcerting consistency across the region and becoming more visible, especially among migrant populations. All civil society organizations that participated in this study note that migrant populations are experiencing labour exploitation, frequently accompanied by human trafficking.²⁰

The exploitation of the local workforce is also a cause for significant concern. While the exploitation of both migrant and local workers has raised red flags for civil society across the Western Balkans, certain organizations in the region note that the exploitation of local workers constitutes a persistent and systemic issue, and one that often remains hidden from the public gaze. 'We, in a way, unintentionally legitimized labour exploitation,' said one Kosovan worker. 'We didn't unite as a society to address it.'²¹ Respondents in other Western Balkan countries expressed similar sentiments, highlighting that labour exploitation tends to go unnoticed and is inadequately addressed by institutions.

Establishing a direct link between organized crime and labour exploitation proves challenging. Still, the organized nature of this exploitation is evident through its entrenched presence, significantly benefiting unscrupulous employers. This exploitation is often enabled and facilitated by corrupt practices and is dishearteningly known as an 'open secret' among societies across the Western Balkans, yet curiously remains largely normalized and largely unchallenged, partly because employees of state institutions lack incentives to tackle it, in part due to lack of protection for whistle-blowers.²²



A house in which Taiwanese citizens were held captive in Podgorica, Montenegro; the detainees were forced to take part in online fraud.
© Radio Free Europe

Risks

The Western Balkans, a region of 17.6 million people,²³ consists of six small and highly open economies. In the 1990s, the region faced economic turmoil amid the wars stemming from the end of communism and the break-up of the former Yugoslavia. A generation later, the UN bestows the Western Balkan countries with high human development scores, indicating significant economic and societal progress. Montenegro and Serbia stood out in 2022 with very high scores, while Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina and North Macedonia achieved high scores.²⁴ This shows a generally elevated standard of living, healthcare, education and earning opportunities across these five countries.²⁵ However, these scores remain below EU standards (see Figure 1). Also, only Serbia and Montenegro improved their scores from 2021 to 2022.

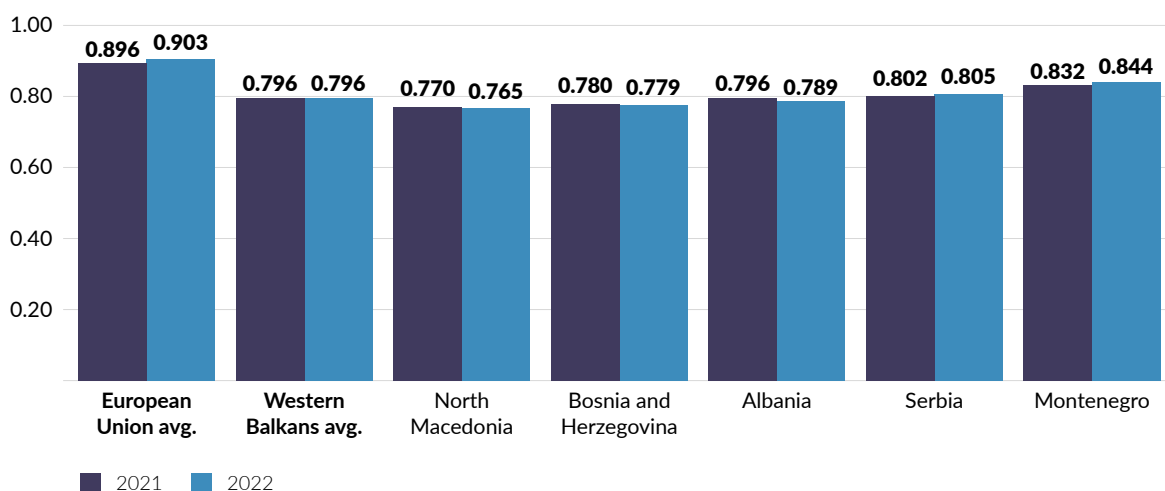


FIGURE 1 The 2021 and 2022 Human Development Index scores in the Western Balkans and the EU.

NOTE: A score between 0.80 and 1.00 is very high, 0.70–0.79 is high, 0.55–0.69 is medium, and low is below 0.55.

SOURCE: United Nations¹¹⁶

In the post-transition period, the Western Balkan economies have predominantly shifted towards the service sector, where forced labour is the most prevalent globally.²⁶ Services in 2020 constituted the largest portion of regional GDP, accounting for 52.2% of the total.²⁷ Among the sectors most susceptible to labour exploitation in the region – construction, hospitality and agriculture – the first two play pivotal roles in the economy of the Western Balkans. The industrial sector, encompassing construction, contributes 23.4% of regional GDP.²⁸ Hospitality and tourism are significant contributors in Montenegro and Albania, constituting 32.1% and 21.2% of GDP, respectively.²⁹ Despite a notable decline in the agricultural sector's share of regional GDP, down from 15.3% in 2000 to 8.6% in 2019, it remains an important source of employment, accounting for 18.6%.³⁰

Despite progress in the last two decades, the socio-economic situation in the Western Balkans remains a cause for concern. High poverty and unemployment rates persist, along with inadequate unemployment benefits and limited social assistance.³¹ The impoverished and vulnerable often miss out on targeted support; many work informally but are ineligible for essential benefits. Others face restrictions on combining seasonal or informal work in the service sector with formal employment earnings. Recent seismic events, like the COVID-19 pandemic, the war in Ukraine and regional natural disasters, have created further strains by increasing consumer prices and reducing remittances to families in the Western Balkans sent by relatives employed in more developed economies.³² The desperation triggered by these factors heightens the risk of local labour exploitation.

Prevalence

The Western Balkans is a region of origin, transit and destination for victims of human trafficking for the purpose of labour exploitation. The official data on human trafficking is limited and patchy, and does not correspond with civil society fieldwork and research results. According to statistics from the US Department of State's annual reports on trafficking in persons, labour exploitation accounted for 46% of human trafficking in the Western Balkans between 2018 and 2023. From 2018 to 2021, there were consistent annual increases in the number of labour exploitation victims: 25% in 2019, 16% in 2020 and 18% in 2021. However, in 2022 the number of recorded victims fell by more than 50%.³³ In 2023, the number of victims rose sharply again by 63% (see Figure 2).

However, empirical data gathered from fieldwork by civil society for this research and Balkans Act Now – a network of five civil society organizations from the region³⁴ – presents a very different narrative from the official one, including much higher estimates for trafficking for sexual exploitation compared to labour exploitation. Indeed, trafficking for sexual exploitation is estimated to account for 80% of regional trafficking cases, according to ASTRA, a Serbian civil society organization that has been combating human trafficking for more than 20 years.³⁵ 'Sexual exploitation has been the dominant form of human trafficking for 20 years, but labour exploitation cases have been increasing since 2020,' noted Marija Anđelković, ASTRA founder and executive director.³⁶

ASTRA also contends that the officially identified number of victims of human trafficking significantly understates the actual magnitude of the issue.³⁷ 'Official estimates substantially underreport the problem', according to Anđelković.³⁸ Over the years, the methods employed by labour exploiters have evolved in response to market dynamics; they have become increasingly cunning, resorting to tactics such as fictitious contracts and the establishment of sister companies.³⁹ For example, a female Filipino worker told the Independent Journalists Association of Vojvodina that she had initially received a contract from a purported consultancy agency for a job in professional services. However, upon

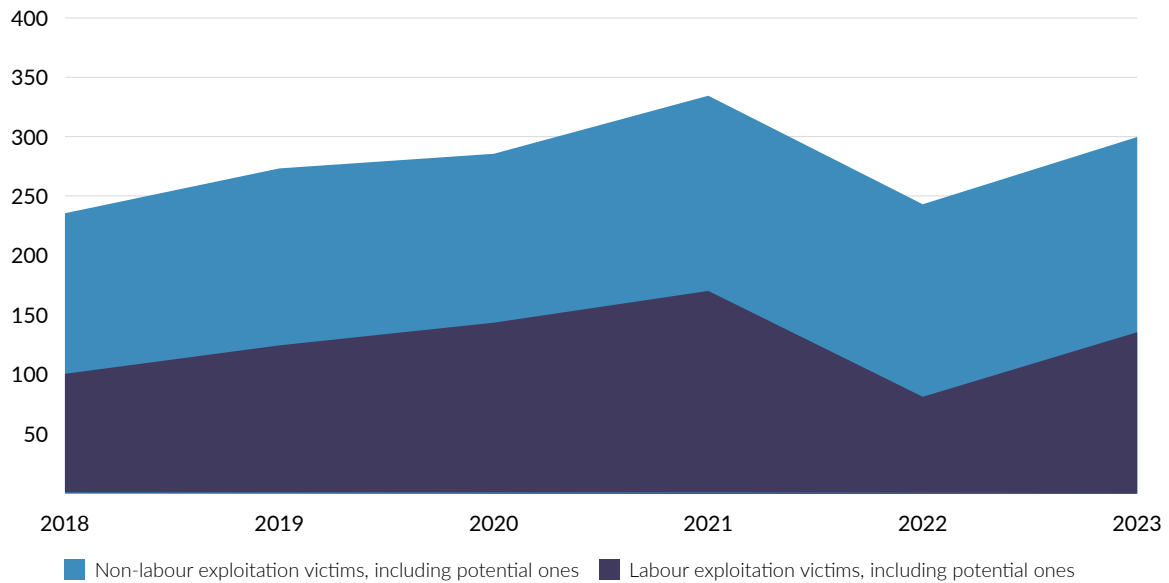


FIGURE 2 Victims and potential victims of human trafficking in the Western Balkans by category (labour exploitation victims and non-labour exploitation victims).

SOURCE: US Department of State, Trafficking in persons reports (2019, 2020, 2021, 2022, 2023 and 2024)

her arrival in Serbia, she was employed as a housekeeper for a wealthy family. Owing to its fictitious nature, the contract was unenforceable.⁴⁰

Official data suggests that between 2018 and 2023, Albania, and Bosnia and Herzegovina were the countries with the highest numbers of labour exploitation victims in the Western Balkans (see Figure 3). In 2022, these two countries collectively accounted for more than 60% of all recorded labour exploitation victims across the region, although it is important to note that Albania consistently subsumes data on potential victims and confirmed victims in its statistics. It is also vital to recognize that the extent of labour exploitation revealed in official data is significantly dependent on the capacity of institutions to identify victims. Consequently, GRETA, the Council of Europe’s group of experts on combating human trafficking, has advised all countries in the region to intensify efforts to identify victims of labour exploitation. This includes comprehensive training programmes for labour inspectors and other professionals to improve their ability to detect victims and ensure a more accurate representation of the issue.⁴¹

In Albania, the summer tourism boom creates a labour shortage, increasing demand for unskilled labourers, which has normally been the starting point for Albanians aged between 15 and 19 to gain work experience. During fieldwork, the Vlora Youth Centre noted that young people in Albania often suffer exploitation by summer seasonal employers, leading them to seek work in other countries, notably the UK. In Vlora, a 13-year-old boy⁴² told the GI-TOC that he worked in the hospitality industry for long hours with minimal pay, no contract and no age verification by the employer; he dreams of relocating with his family to the UK or Sweden.⁴³

The Balkans Act Now civil society network found that the dominant form of exploitation in Bosnia and Herzegovina is labour exploitation – and a striking 89% of victims are children.⁴⁴ According to civil society in Montenegro, official statistics suggest that authorities have seemingly ignored human trafficking issues, as the reported figures fall far short of reflecting the actual situation. Figure 3 shows a sharp decline in labour exploitation victims in Montenegro between 2020 and 2023, making it look

YEAR	NUMBER OF VICTIMS	ALBANIA	BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA	KOSOVO	MONTENEGRO	NORTH MACEDONIA	SERBIA
2018	Labour exploitation victims	52*	19*	4	4*	3	20
	All human trafficking victims	95*	36*	15	6*	9	76
2019	Labour exploitation victims	37*	36	6	39	2	7
	All human trafficking victims	103*	61	26	39	6	36
2020	Labour exploitation victims	27*	48*	10	46	2	14
	All human trafficking victims	86*	80*	17	48	7	48
2021	Labour exploitation victims	65*	54	3	2	40	9
	All human trafficking victims	159*	61	22	3	48	43
2022	Labour exploitation victims	35*	21	4	4	5	14
	All human trafficking victims	112*	38	21	7	7	56
2023	Labour exploitation victims	58*	27	6	7	2	35
	All human trafficking victims	165*	37	17	15	7	58

FIGURE 3 Victims of labour exploitation and human trafficking in the Western Balkans.

NOTE: Numbers marked with an asterisk (*) include both officially recognized human trafficking victims recorded by authorities and potential victims.

SOURCE: US Department of State, Trafficking in persons reports (2019, 2020, 2021, 2022, 2023 and 2024).

like an increasingly rare problem. However, most respondents for this research noted that this could not possibly be the case. The Women’s Rights Centre in Montenegro discovered during research for this report that in 2021, nearly 10% of seasonal workers (964 out of around 11 000 individuals, comprising 612 foreigners and 352 Montenegrin citizens) were employed illegally.

In North Macedonia, the most prevalent form of trafficking for exploitation is sexual, followed by labour exploitation.⁴⁵ Mreža, a North Macedonian civil society organization that participated in the research for this report, notes that the 2015 migrant crisis intensified labour exploitation because of migrants’ vulnerability and economic fragility. In response, the labour ministry introduced mobile

teams in 2020 to help migrant groups.⁴⁶ In 2022, these teams assisted 511 individuals, up from 260 in 2021; such assistance ranges from meeting basic food and shelter needs, to psychological and legal support.⁴⁷ However, the sustainability of these teams is uncertain, as the government has not allocated additional funding.⁴⁸

One significant challenge is the difficulty in collecting and analyzing data from various institutions when assessing labour exploitation. Varied data sources are essential to monitor how existing policies are implemented on the ground over specific time periods and whether they safeguard the rights of victims. Data provided by different institutions within the same country still exhibit qualitative disparities, making it challenging to harmonize with data on similar topics from other institutions.⁴⁹

Manifestations

Labour exploitation presents a spectrum of challenges that erode workers' fundamental rights, safety and welfare in the Western Balkans. Widespread resort to informal labour arrangements is prevalent across all six countries and is largely characterized by employers failing to provide formal contracts. This, in turn, translates into inadequate compensation, often falling well below the legally mandated minimum wage. Such informal arrangements also often translate into excessive working hours, unpaid overtime and denial of annual leave. Poor and hazardous working conditions, extending beyond the absence of robust safeguards, are also evident.

The case of Vietnamese workers at the Linglong factory in Serbia (see below) exposed distressing and severe alleged manifestations of labour exploitation, ranging from deplorable working conditions, to substandard accommodation, the absence of essential protective equipment in the workplace, unpaid wages and inadequate healthcare provisions, all reportedly compounded by various forms of coercion and harassment by construction site guards and the confiscation of personal documents. The Linglong case is not isolated; comparable instances of labour exploitation have also come to light in Serbia, notably within the construction sector,⁵⁰ where more than 30 Turkish construction workers reported to be 'working like slaves, under very harsh conditions'.⁵¹

Civil society organizations reported employers' pervasive abuse of fixed-term contracts in many Western Balkan countries, mostly to evade the responsibilities and statutory obligations that stem from permanent employment. Fixed-term contracts normally have two- to three-year terms. After this period, in accordance with the regulations of the respective country, the fixed-term arrangement is expected to transition into a permanent employment contract. However, employers often resort to recruitment of new personnel under fresh fixed-term contracts to avoid providing permanent employment.

Interestingly, respondents reported that fixed-term contracts are a feature of the public sector as well as the private sector – and in some cases on a rolling basis, contravening national labour law. In Montenegro, large numbers of women have been employed as cleaners by state entities over extended periods, sometimes for up to a decade, on repeated fixed-term or temporary contracts.⁵⁷ One estimate puts the number of women in this situation at more than 200;⁵⁸ another, by the country's trade union umbrella, tops 500.⁵⁹ This practice would constitute a potential violation of labour laws, but it does not necessarily qualify as labour exploitation.

Police in North Macedonia have highlighted the alarming issue of forced marriage, branding it as 'one of the most prevalent manifestations of labour exploitation' in the country.⁶⁰ Women and girls forced into these situations are not in a position to leave or refuse to work due to threats and violence. It is

THE LINGLONG CASE IN SERBIA

Media reports uncovered a dark secret that lay hidden in a construction site for a seemingly ordinary factory in Serbia. Documents obtained by civil society and media detailed a shocking tale of exploitation and human trafficking allegedly perpetrated by Linglong International Europe D.O.O. Zrenjanin (a subsidiary of China's Linglong Tire) involving hundreds of Vietnamese workers.⁵²

Lured by the promise of reasonable wages and a better life, these workers were hired to build Europe's first Chinese car tyre factory in Europe, but reported becoming trapped in a nightmare. Their passports were reportedly confiscated, they were housed in filthy and cramped dormitories and subjected to physical and verbal abuse, according to these reports. They were also reportedly forced to work long hours in unsafe conditions, and their pay was withheld.⁵³

Those who dared to speak out were reportedly punished, sometimes even allegedly beaten. One worker said he was forced to work 12 hours a day, seven days a week, for months. He was paid only a fraction of what he was promised, and he was repeatedly threatened with deportation if he tried to escape.⁵⁴



Several hundred Vietnamese lived and worked in 2021 in appalling conditions in Zrenjanin, Serbia. © Danilo Ćurčić via A11 Initiative

Civil society organizations urged the authorities to deal with the case, including by pressing criminal charges. However, the Serbian government, eager to court Chinese investment, seemingly ignored the reports of abuses.⁵⁵

The case – and more particularly inaction by the authorities – contributed to the United States placing Serbia on its human trafficking watch-list.⁵⁶ As of June 2024, there was no response from criminal justice institutions in Serbia regarding the media and civil society reports on this case. ■

important to note that forced marriage is a form of modern slavery, characterized also by increased risks of sexual exploitation, violence, domestic servitude and other forms of forced labour.⁶¹

Furthermore, forced begging has long been identified as a grave problem affecting children in the Western Balkans. Poverty and its causes and consequences, notably migration and discrimination, are central to the prevalence of forced child begging.⁶² Children coerced into begging are frequently susceptible to sexual exploitation and a range of other abuses.⁶³ The Vlora Youth Centre has emphasized the severity of exploitation of children and youths in Albania. Traffickers frequently coerce children into begging or selling small items, and sometimes lead them into criminal activities like burglary and drug distribution. Children from the Romanian and Balkan-Egyptian communities in Albania are often the victims. Sporadic incidents indicate Roma children face exploitation in illegal cannabis cultivation in Albania,⁶⁴ although at a reduced level compared to pre-2016 when police carried out an operation to curtail widespread cannabis production.⁶⁵

Throughout the region, organizations have consistently reported that unsafe working conditions have become a growing and pressing concern. Fundamental safety measures, most notably the provision of essential protective equipment, are often absent. It is important to underline that unsafe working conditions commonly occur within the context of human trafficking for labour exploitation.

The incidence of work-related injuries is alarming. In Albania, 165 accidents were reported in the construction sector, 94 in mining and 171 in production between 2019 and the end of 2022.⁶⁶ In 2020, 36 fatalities at work were reported.⁶⁷ In 77% of injury cases and 72% of cases resulting in fatalities, the root causes are directly linked to workplace safety.⁶⁸ In 2022, at least 10 people lost their lives in the workplace in Bosnia and Herzegovina.⁶⁹ At least five deaths and over 80 workplace accidents were reported in 2022 in Kosovo.⁷⁰ In Montenegro, four fatalities were reported in 2021, alongside 21 serious accidents at work.⁷¹ Over 90% of cases remain unreported in Montenegro, according to at least one civil society organization.⁷²

In every instance of labour exploitation, employers are ruthlessly capitalizing on the vulnerabilities of their workers. They exploit poverty to keep predominantly under-skilled individuals in degrading and exploitative working conditions. A construction worker in Bosnia and Herzegovina encapsulates the many factors that feed exploitation and reinforce it:

We work every day from seven to five, even on weekends. They sometimes ask us to work until seven, even though it's unbearable [...]. By law, you can work 180 overtime hours per year. My colleague at the company worked 150 hours more than that in two months, and the employer did not pay for that number of hours. They say they can't pay us more, and anyone who doesn't like it can go home. We've called the inspectors several times, but none of our problems have been solved.⁷³

Bullying, intimidation and psychological abuse by employers or company management emerged as a distressingly common trend in all countries. In Albania, interviewees revealed the harrowing reality of physical and even sexual violence. Direct coercion, involving threats and acts of violence, was a particular feature of the treatment of migrant workers. Notably, allegations of physical assault and violence were also documented in the context of Taiwanese nationals coerced into labouring in phone scam call centres in North Macedonia; the governments of these countries cooperated to repatriate 48 forced recruits in 2021 and the Taiwanese authorities indicted 92 suspects.⁷⁴ Equally alarmingly, the passports of Vietnamese workers in Serbia were widely reported to have been forcibly retained, effectively robbing them of their freedom of movement. These incidents emphasize the urgent need for action to address such severe human rights violations.

Sectors at risk

While labour exploitation can impact various sectors, the research for this project indicates that those characterized by physically intense labour are most affected in the Western Balkans, such as construction, mining and manufacturing (mainly in the textile, clothing, shoe and automotive sectors). Sectors that are either inadequately regulated or entirely unregulated, such as domestic work, agriculture, hospitality and the informal sector are also often rife with exploitation (see Figure 4).

The construction sector consistently emerges as one of the most vulnerable industries in all the countries, closely followed by the textile and clothing sector and the hospitality and tourism industries. The hospitality industry in countries heavily reliant on tourism, such as Montenegro and Albania, recorded notable surges in cases during the summer months. This highlights the critical need for heightened vigilance and protective measures – including regular unflagged inspections and the adoption of written contracts clearly setting out wages and other working conditions – within these sectors.

SECTOR	ALBANIA	BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA	KOSOVO	MONTENEGRO	NORTH MACEDONIA	SERBIA
Construction	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Trade	✓	✗	✓	✓	✗	✗
Textile and leather industries	✓	✓	✗	✗	✓	✗
Hospitality and tourism	✓	✗	✗	✓	✓	✓
Automotive	✗	✗	✗	✗	✓	✓
Mining	✓	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗
Chemical industry	✓	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗
Forestry	✗	✗	✗	✗	✓	✗
Agriculture	✗	✗	✗	✓	✓	✗
Domestic work	✗	✗	✗	✓	✗	✓
Informal sector	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

FIGURE 4 Sectors most affected by labour exploitation in the Western Balkans.

NOTE: This table is based on data from civil society organizations that participated in the research for this project. It marks with a tick the sectors reported to be most affected by labour exploitation, but categories marked with an 'x' should not be taken to imply the complete absence of exploitation.

Groups at risk

All demographic groups face the risk of labour exploitation, but their representation varies depending on the sector and type of exploitation they endure. Nevertheless, individuals facing economic hardship are the most susceptible to labour exploitation across all demographic groups. Desperate for any form of employment, they are far more likely to accept poor working conditions, low wages and exploitative job offers just to secure an income.

In the Western Balkans, foreign citizens, mainly economic migrants, are often recruited for physically demanding positions in countries where they do not speak the local language. Language barriers and lack of familiarity with local systems compound their limited access to services and support, placing them in a particularly vulnerable position. They frequently encounter conditions vastly different from the promises made during recruitment. For example, in Serbia, some foreign workers face extreme conditions and contracts resembling slavery.⁷⁵ In 2021, the labour inspectorate identified 7 831 foreign workers in Serbia, of whom 1 354 lacked the required work permits.⁷⁶

Gender patterns and dynamics of labour exploitation

Labour exploitation has a significant gender dimension, as women and girls have distinct vulnerabilities and exposure to it. Women and men are not necessarily trafficked in the same way or for the same purpose, and their experiences of trafficking can be very different.

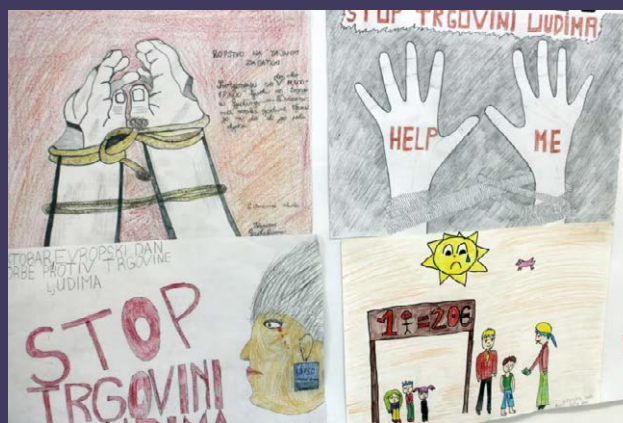
Women and girls represent the vast majority of victims of sexual exploitation, while the majority of victims exploited for forced labour are men. Women and girls account for one-third of victims trafficked for forced labour.⁷⁷ The number of detected male trafficking victims in Central and South Eastern Europe underwent a 38% increase between 2019 and 2020, mostly in male-dominated sectors, such as the construction, automotive and mining industries.⁷⁸

Traditional gender roles and norms also tend to limit the autonomy and decision-making power of women and girls,⁷⁹ making them more vulnerable to exploitation. With discrimination against women being one of the most prevalent human rights violations across the Western Balkans,⁸⁰ women face distinct challenges in accessing education, employment opportunities and legal protection, all constituting risk factors for various forms of exploitation.

Socialization and strong patriarchal norms tend to usher women and men into different activities and jobs. More women than men work in hospitality services, especially in the food and beverages sector; more women and girls are employed in domestic work, commercial cleaning, provision

of entertainment (including as hostesses or dancers) and in sex work. However, it is important to note that these jobs are also characterized by higher informality and generally lower wages.⁸¹ In the Western Balkans, women are often exploited in the textile and catering industries, as well as in domestic work and the care sector (ranging from babysitting to nursing and care for the elderly).

Overall, women are more likely to report incidents of sexual violence, harassment and bullying in the workplace. According to reports from civil society, unscrupulous employers also terminate the contracts of women who get pregnant or who plan to have a family. ■



At a Mostar event for the International Day Against Human Trafficking, school pupils recognized labour exploitation of women as a form of trafficking. © Mirsad Berham via Radio Free Europe

In Albania, civil society actors noted that children are particularly exposed to abuse and exploitation, frequently involving forced begging, sexual exploitation and labour exploitation in the catering and hospitality sectors in tourist hotspots.⁸² Girls are vulnerable to forced marriages. Across the region, adult men are typically more often victims of exploitation in construction, automotive manufacturing, mining and other precarious labour fields. However, boys are increasingly falling prey to labour exploitation in some of these sectors. Older individuals approaching retirement age are identified as a highly vulnerable group. They frequently endure exploitative practices due to the fear of not being able to secure another job beyond the official retirement age.

In Kosovo, child labour in the informal sector is prevalent in construction services and especially in informal waste collection, notably within the minority Roma, Ashkali and Egyptian communities. In

some instances, children are directly or indirectly compelled to work due to family poverty, often leading to sustained absenteeism or the early termination of schooling.⁸³ Standard practices include children accompanying their parents during waste collection, exposing them to various health risks, infectious diseases and the harsh winter cold.⁸⁴

Roma, Ashkali and Egyptian workers also frequently encounter discrimination and social exclusion across the region, rendering them particularly susceptible to labour exploitation.⁸⁵ Informal workers, a highly vulnerable group, often operate without the protection of labour and occupational health and safety laws, while governments fail to provide adequate social protection. Seasonal workers are also at risk due to their temporary status, wider economic vulnerability and social isolation, especially migrant workers who may be uninformed about their labour rights and the regulations that should protect them.

Labour situation

Unemployment increases vulnerability to labour exploitation, as jobless individuals, desperate for income, may accept substandard work conditions and low wages due to limited alternative prospects. An environment with high unemployment and few new job opportunities creates more opportunities for labour exploitation. Unemployment poses a risk in the Western Balkans, especially for young people.⁸⁶ Although the Western Balkans unemployment rate declined in 2023 compared to 2022 in all countries in the region, it is still higher than in the neighbouring EU. Additionally, economic growth in the Western Balkans slowed from 3.4% in 2022 to 2.6% in 2023.⁸⁷

In 2023, the unemployment rate in the Western Balkans was 5.5 percentage points higher than in the EU.⁸⁸ Youth unemployment in the region was 10.4 percentage points higher than in the EU, standing at 25.1%, compared to 14.7% (see Figure 5).

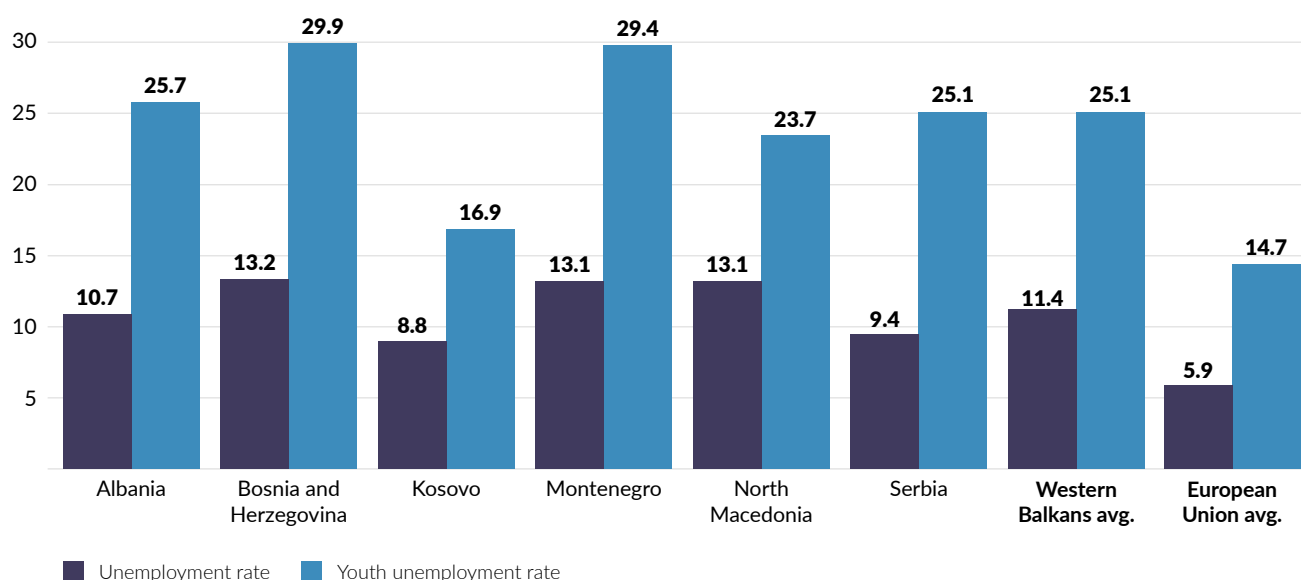


FIGURE 5 Unemployment and youth (aged 15–24) unemployment rates in the European Union and Western Balkans in 2023.

SOURCES: World Bank Group, Invigorating growth: Western Balkans regular economic report, No. 25, Spring 2024, April 2024, 47, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/region/eca/publication/western-balkans-regular-economic-report>; Eurostat, December 2023: Euro area unemployment at 6.4%, EU at 5.9%, 1 February 2024, <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/documents/2995521/18426688/3-01022024-BP-EN.pdf/13e802f5-a267-0b8a-6245-52f759f7cfe3>

In 2023, there were 824 500 unemployed people in the Western Balkans, which is 7.3% or 64 700 fewer than in 2022.⁸⁹ In 2023, there were 154 900 young people unemployed in the Western Balkans, 15 700 fewer than in 2022.⁹⁰ The disparity in unemployment rates, especially for youth, between the EU and Western Balkans is notable. Although the unemployment rate decreased, young people in the Western Balkans continue to face high rates of inactivity, significant informal-sector employment, skills mismatches and ongoing emigration.⁹¹ This difference between the Western Balkans and the EU underscores the economic challenges faced by the region and highlights the potential for labour exploitation.⁹²

Another challenge contributing to the risk of forced labour is the inadequacy of unemployment benefits in the Western Balkans. These benefits are very modest and are not uniformly available, leaving workers unsupported during job transitions. The eligibility criteria are stringent, and benefits often come with a limited duration, resulting in many long-term unemployed individuals losing their financial assistance. In the Western Balkans, excluding Serbia, unemployment benefits cover a small proportion of both minimum and average wages.⁹³

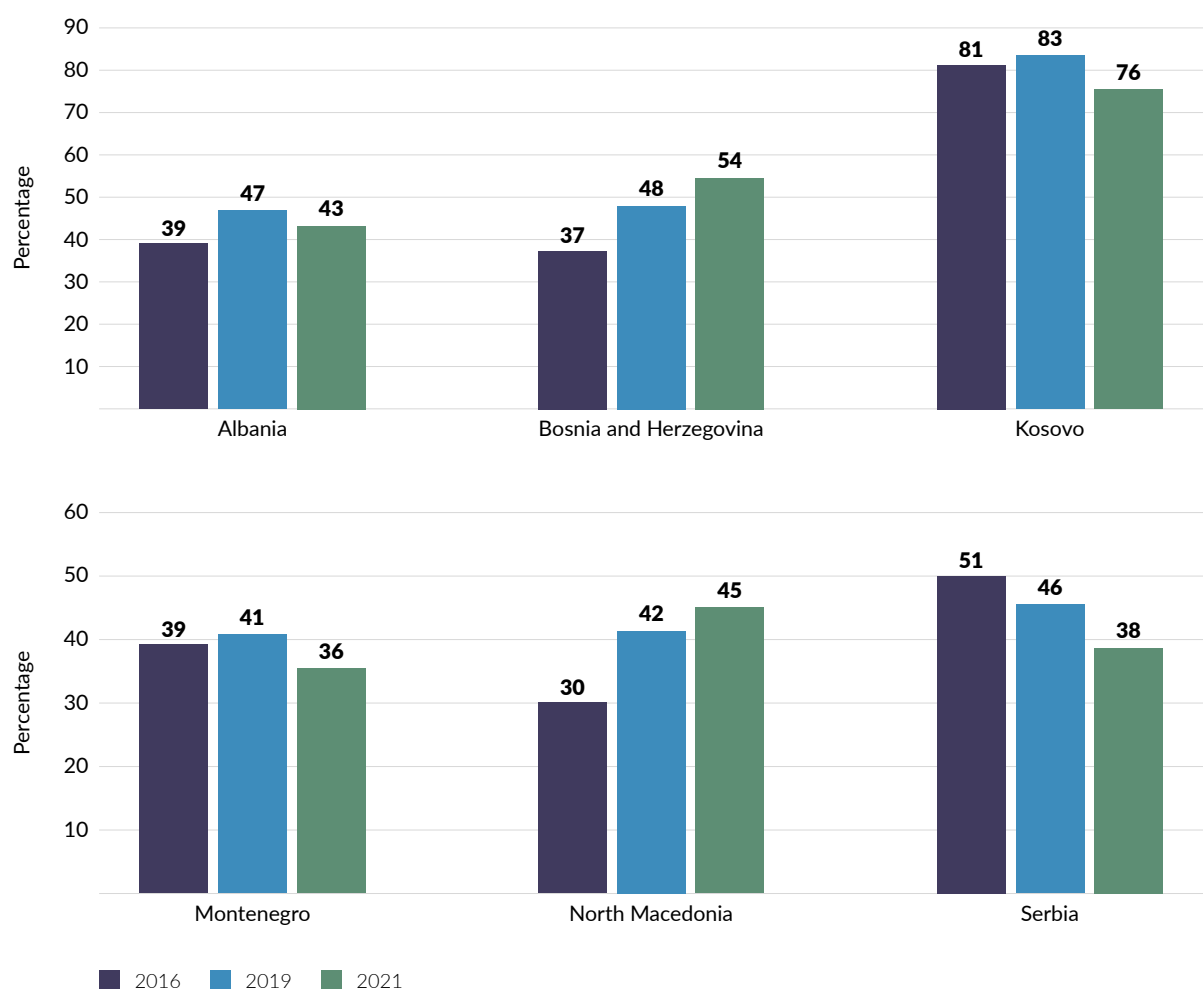


FIGURE 6 Hidden employment in the Western Balkans, 2016–2021.

SOURCE: Southeast Leadership for Development and Integrity, SELDI policy brief, The hidden economy in the Western Balkans in a time of crisis: Friend or foe, 14 June 2022, <https://seldi.net/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/SELDI-PB-14-The-hidden-economy-in-the-Western-Balkans.pdf>

The prevalence of informal employment further complicates access to unemployment benefits. According to the SELDI Hidden Economy Monitoring System, informal employment practices remained prevalent in the region between 2016 and 2021. The 2022 Hidden Employment Index for the Western Balkan ranges from 36% in Montenegro to 76% in Kosovo.⁹⁴ Compared to 2019, the situation has improved in Kosovo, Albania, Serbia and Montenegro, while a notable deterioration has been observed in Bosnia and Herzegovina and North Macedonia.⁹⁵ The situation in Kosovo is particularly stark, with nearly 80% of employees engaged in informal employment in 2021 (see Figure 6).⁹⁶

Concurrently, the proportion of workers without a formal labour contract has declined, while the proportion not fully disclosing their earnings and social security payments has increased. Undeclared work meanwhile feeds into inadequate health insurance, especially in Kosovo, where 60% of workers need more cover.⁹⁷

Two common forms of informal employment in the Western Balkans are working without a formal contract and receiving higher pay than stated in the contract, which indicates possible labour exploitation (in the latter case by partially depriving employees of their social entitlements). In 2021, Bosnia and Herzegovina had the lowest percentage of workers without contracts but the highest reporting wage discrepancies. While Kosovo has a high rate of informal employment, the proportion of workers whose actual remuneration deviates from the contract is among the lowest in the region.⁹⁸

Living conditions

The poverty line is a measure used to identify individuals and families likely to experience poor living conditions due to insufficient income and limited access to essential resources and services. People living in poverty and facing limited financial options are at higher risk of exploitative working conditions. The World Bank has developed three thresholds to monitor poverty in low-income countries and those experiencing economic growth and improving living standards: less than US\$2.15, US\$3.65 and US\$6.85 per day.⁹⁹ Given the economic progress in the Western Balkans, as reflected in the Human Development Index, this research uses the highest poverty line of \$6.85 per day.

In 2018, according to the World Poverty Clock, the poverty rate in the Western Balkans was 6.23 percentage points higher than in the EU.¹⁰⁰ That year, 7.89% of the Western Balkans population, excluding Kosovo, lived on \$6.85 or less per day, compared to just 1.66% in the EU.¹⁰¹ Over the next five years, the region reduced poverty levels. By 2023, the poverty rate in the Western Balkans was 3.99 percentage points higher than in the EU (see Figure 7).¹⁰² The slower rate of poverty reduction in 2023, with only a 0.51% decrease from 2022, was due to the ongoing impact on finances of the COVID-19 pandemic, and rising food and energy costs disproportionately affecting low-income households.¹⁰³ The World Bank expects the poverty rate in the Western Balkans to continue declining but at a slower pace than prior to the pandemic.¹⁰⁴

In addition to poverty, social protection – or social security – is another factor affecting labour exploitation. Social security aims to prevent, manage and overcome situations that adversely impact well-being. It provides benefits to individuals based on risks or absences faced throughout the life cycle, such as unemployment, disability and maternity, while also protecting those experiencing general poverty and



A civil society campaign in Serbia, under the slogan 'How close are you?', sought to raise awareness that anyone can be a victim of labour exploitation. © Radio Free Europe

social exclusion. The Western Balkans allocates social protection predominantly towards pensions, leading to a lack of effective targeting that leaves many of the poorest families without essential support and at risk of labour exploitation. Government investment in social assistance programmes remains below 2% of GDP in all countries, except Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina. On average, only 0.3% of GDP is dedicated to last-resort income support initiatives across the six Western Balkan countries, accounting for just 15% of overall social assistance spending.¹⁰⁵

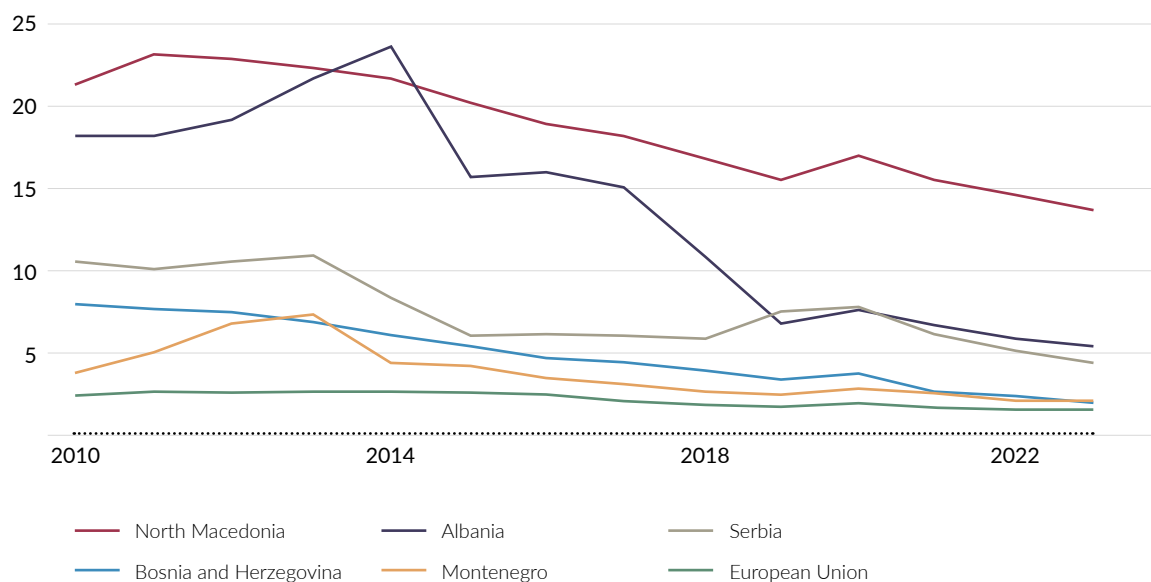


FIGURE 7 Percentage of population in the Western Balkans and the EU living on less than \$6.85 per day.

NOTE: Kosovo is excluded due to unavailable comparable data.

SOURCE: World Poverty Clock via Europe Sustainable Development Report 2023/24



LABOUR EXPLOITATION: THE RESPONSE

Non-state initiatives

Western Balkan countries have a vibrant and active civil society sector despite the seemingly shrinking civic space in which they operate.¹⁰⁶ Nonetheless, there is a scarcity of organizations in the region dedicated primarily to labour rights and combating human trafficking. Numerous organizations, however, focus on broader human rights and social justice issues. Together with journalists, they work hard to address violations of workers' rights and through media and public forums share the stories of victims of trafficking for sexual or labour exploitation.

In Albania, a network of civil society organizations backed by the Olof Palme International Center – the Swedish labour movement's umbrella body for international solidarity and advocacy – has been enhancing knowledge of labour rights among workers, trade unions and civil society organizations. This initiative has focused on access to fair employment and labour rights rooted in international labour standards. These efforts fed into the establishment of the Centre for Rights at Work, a think tank dedicated to labour and trade union matters.

In North Macedonia, the Fair Wear Foundation, a non-governmental organization, and the local labour rights advocacy group Glasen Tekstilec, have collaborated to advance labour rights in the country's textile industry. In October 2022, they launched the Declaration of a Living Wage in North Macedonia, signed by 15 stakeholders. This highlighted the need to incorporate the concept of a living wage into domestic legislation.¹⁰⁷ This initiative focuses on lobbying the government to work on a living wage as a benchmark in local law and as an official statistical indicator to measure the standard of living across the country.

In Montenegro, an 'SOS' phone line for victims of trafficking is operated by the Montenegrin Women's Lobby. This initiative is funded through the National Office for the Fight against Human Trafficking. The Montenegrin Centre for Investigative Journalism and the Alliance of Citizens have been active in researching human trafficking and work-related violations.

Serbian civil society has been highly proactive in tackling labour exploitation in recent years, responding to documented reports and incidents. Illustrative examples include strikes undertaken by Turkish workers at the Belgrade Waterfront and Indian labourers involved in significant infrastructure projects throughout Serbia, among others. Still, public attention has primarily focused on the Linglong case.¹⁰⁸ Citizens and activists, led by organizations like Gradjanski preokret, have staged demonstrations, expressing concerns about environmental issues and the lack of wastewater treatment. The Renewables and Environmental Regulatory Institute raised questions about the legality of financial assistance provided to Linglong, suspecting non-compliance with state aid control regulations. The Initiative for Economic and Social Rights (A11) and ASTRA jointly submitted a complaint related to potential human trafficking for labour exploitation.

The Centre for Policy and Advocacy in Kosovo has reported increased media and civil society engagement on the topic of labour exploitation. This has included amplified media coverage of workers' rights violations and various civil society initiatives to raise awareness of the issue. However, the impact of these efforts appears limited, primarily due to shortcomings in institutional commitment and state capacity to address the problem effectively. Capital, the partner civil society organization for this project from Bosnia and Herzegovina, noted that only a few civil society groups had undertaken specific projects on labour rights, which also tend to be short-term in nature.

Trade unions in the region are active, addressing labour exploitation risks and violations and advocating for workers' rights. Nevertheless, there is a prevailing perception in the region that the strength of trade unions has dwindled in recent years, rendering them less capable of challenging employers effectively or robustly championing workers' rights. However, Serbian and Indian trade unions jointly complained to the International Labour Organization against Serbia over the alleged exploitation of Indian nationals who worked on constructing the Corridor 10 highway during 2019 and 2020.¹⁰⁹

State response

While specific data about labour exploitation is lacking, civil society and affected workers continue to view the criminal justice response to cases of labour exploitation as inadequate. Despite progress in establishing a strong legal framework aligning with international labour standards, Western Balkan governments must now focus on the full implementation of regulations to combat abuse. Anticipated new regulations, such as Serbia's new law on the employment of foreigners, which came into effect in February 2024, signal a more complex environment. These changes, which include faster approvals of work permits, are likely to facilitate increased migration of workers into Serbia, but might also create challenges due to insufficient protection mechanisms in various states.

In 2024, all Western Balkan countries are categorized as Tier 2 in the US Department of State's human trafficking report, meaning that governments in the region are not yet in full compliance with minimum standards for combating human trafficking, including labour exploitation, but are actively making substantial efforts to meet these standards. However, Serbia fell onto the watchlist in 2022 and has remained under enhanced scrutiny in 2023 and 2024 (see Figure 8). This designation indicates that the number of victims subjected to severe forms of human trafficking is increasing or that there is insufficient evidence of increased efforts to combat severe forms of trafficking compared to the previous year.

YEAR	ALBANIA	BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA	KOSOVO	MONTENEGRO	NORTH MACEDONIA	SERBIA
2019	Tier 2	Tier 2 Watch List	Tier 2	Tier 2 Watch List	Tier 2	Tier 2
2020	Tier 2	Tier 2	Tier 2	Tier 2	Tier 2	Tier 2
2021	Tier 2	Tier 2	Tier 2	Tier 2	Tier 2	Tier 2
2022	Tier 2	Tier 2	Tier 2	Tier 2	Tier 2	Tier 2 Watch List
2023	Tier 2	Tier 2	Tier 2	Tier 2 Watch List	Tier 2	Tier 2 Watch List
2024	Tier 2	Tier 2	Tier 2	Tier 2	Tier 2	Tier 2 Watch List

FIGURE 8 US Department of State's assessment of human trafficking in the Western Balkans.

NOTE: Tier 2 denotes significant efforts towards compliance but not full adherence; Tier 2 Watch List signifies the need for heightened scrutiny.

SOURCE: US Department of State, Trafficking in persons reports

Although effective comparisons of regional data on law enforcement and court performance on human trafficking are rendered difficult by variations in reporting (some data refers to the number of cases, while other datasets refer to the number of suspects, defendants or traffickers), an examination of data from 2018 to 2023 reveals some trends in human trafficking investigations, prosecutions and convictions in specific countries (see Figure 9 and Figure 10). However, the analysis of human trafficking trends cannot be fully applied to labour exploitation trends. These trends mainly reflect the performance of the police, prosecution authorities and courts in handling human trafficking cases. They can indirectly relate to labour exploitation cases, especially when such cases are linked to human trafficking.

In Albania, the number of opened investigations varied significantly between 2018 and 2023, peaking in 2022. However, statistics show that many investigations do not lead to indictments. For instance, in 2022, only eight suspects were prosecuted, while 112 were investigated. This potentially indicates a lack of law enforcement capacity to collect sufficient evidence for court trials and convictions, which remain very low – three out of six monitored years ended without any convictions in Albania.

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, the number of investigations has been relatively stable, peaking in 2019. Between 2018 and 2023, the number of indictments stood at just over half the number of investigations, while annual convictions increased over this timeframe. However, court proceedings often lasted several years, and in earlier years, judges frequently opted for sentences below the minimum penalties.¹¹⁰ In Kosovo, the number of prosecutions between 2018 and 2023 was only about 20% lower than the number of investigations, but the number of convictions stands at only 25% of the number of prosecutions. However, there has been an increase in convictions in the last couple of years. Like Bosnia and Herzegovina, judges in Kosovo have imposed sentences below the minimum penalty.¹¹¹

In Montenegro, the number of investigations, prosecutions and convictions rose significantly in 2023 compared to previous years when the numbers for indictments were generally low and convictions were consistently low. In North Macedonia, the number of opened investigations has remained relatively low, with minor fluctuations. Although prosecutors filed the most indictments in 2022 and 2023, they did not routinely use specialized investigative measures, such as wiretapping, for trafficking investigations. As a result, authorities relied almost exclusively on victim testimony with little corroborating evidence.¹¹² This said, convictions reached a high of 16 in 2023.

YEAR	INDICATOR	ALBANIA	BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA	KOSOVO	MONTENEGRO	NORTH MACEDONIA	SERBIA
2018	Investigations	54	7	29	4*	13	22
	Prosecutions	6	12	34	0	8	20
	Convictions	5	5	8	0	7	19
2019	Investigations	72	27	80	7*	10	47
	Prosecutions	3	3	0	2	9	47
	Convictions	5	7	8	2	5	15
2020	Investigations	36	12	62*	4*	13	22*
	Prosecutions	16	9	32	5	0	42
	Convictions	0	10	3	1	11	18
2021	Investigations	27	23	50	2*	3	35
	Prosecutions	19	17	60	3	2	26
	Convictions	11	11	7	1	1	16
2022	Investigations	112	20	39	3*	4*	31
	Prosecutions	8	9	79	6	10	20
	Convictions	0	18	14	0	5	14
2023	Investigations	29*	14	17	19	9*	28
	Prosecutions	9*	5	10	16	18	33
	Convictions	0*	26	14	3	16	18

FIGURE 9 Tracking human trafficking interventions in the Western Balkans.

NOTE: Numbers marked with an asterisk (*) include the number of cases while numbers without asterisk concern the number of suspects (investigations), defendants (prosecutions) and traffickers (convictions).

SOURCE: US Department of State, Trafficking in persons reports

In Serbia, despite some fluctuations from year to year, the number of investigated suspects, indicted defendants and convicted traffickers has shown little overall change between 2018 and 2023. However, there are significant concerns about lenient penalties for traffickers.¹¹³ Additionally, high-profile cases have not been fully investigated, such as credible allegations that approximately 500 Vietnamese workers and 14 Indian workers were subjected to forced labour at the Linglong factory. Instead, authorities continued to state that these workers were not trafficking victims.¹¹⁴ The capacity of civil society to provide support and drive policy changes is not fully utilized.¹¹⁵ These factors have all fed into Serbia remaining on the U.S. Department of State's watchlist for three consecutive years (2022, 2023 and 2024).

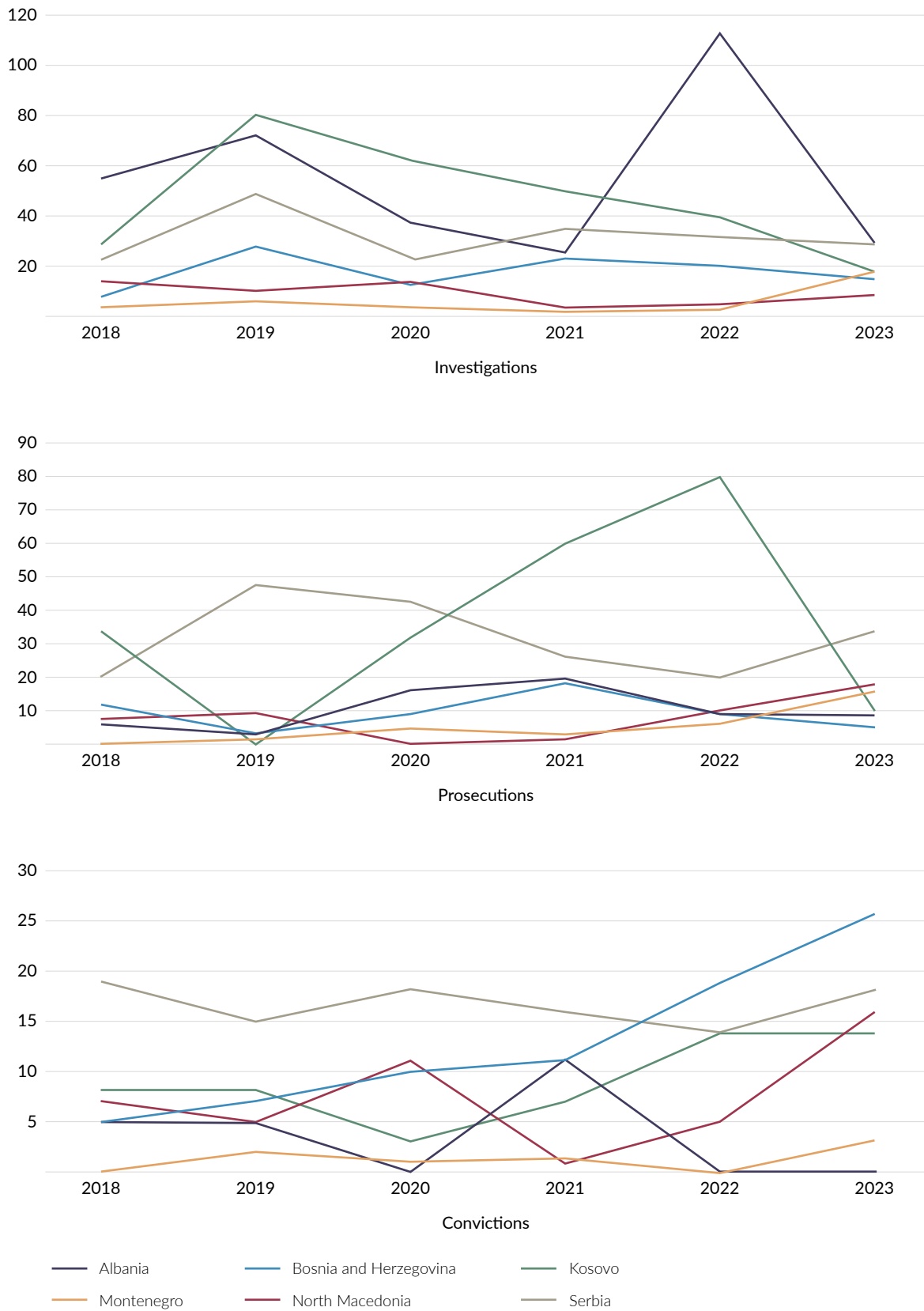


FIGURE 10 Trends in investigation, prosecution and conviction of human trafficking in the Western Balkans.

SOURCE: US Department of State, Trafficking in persons reports



CONCLUSION

Research for this report shows that labour exploitation generates economic and human rights challenges in the Western Balkans. However, establishing a direct link between labour exploitation and organized crime is challenging. This is because many cases go undetected and unreported by authorities and victims, according to civil society actors and other experts. Nevertheless, the organized nature of labour exploitation is evident through its entrenched presence, and the phenomenon benefits unscrupulous employers significantly. Exploitation of workers is often enabled and facilitated by corrupt practices, and is dishearteningly known as an ‘open secret’ across the Western Balkans, yet remains largely unchallenged, in part due to poor protection for whistle-blowers.

Raising awareness, improving data collection and promoting a comprehensive response are vital to addressing labour exploitation effectively. Combating corruption, supporting victims and substantially increasing international cooperation are also key if meaningful progress is to be made. Socio-economic challenges, including high poverty rates and youth unemployment, contribute to the risk of labour exploitation. Policymakers should prioritize economic diversification, formalize the informal economy and improve social protection to reduce vulnerabilities across the region. The efforts of civil society organizations collaborating with journalists are commendable, and policymakers should continue to support these initiatives, by fostering media collaboration and empowering trade unions to champion workers’ rights.



NOTES

- 1 For a comprehensive understanding of the international legal framework on labour exploitation, refer to Livia Wagner, Dianna Siller and Rosalva Landa, *People and forests at risk: Organized crime, trafficking in persons and deforestation in Chihuahua, Mexico*, Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime (GI-TOC), 21 April 2020, 7–9, <https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/oc-trafficking-deforestation-mexico/>; International Labour Organization, *Hard to see, harder to count: Survey guidelines to estimate forced labour of adults and children*, 1 June 2012, https://www.ilo.org/global/topics/forced-labour/publications/WCMS_182096/lang-en/index.htm; United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime and the Protocols Thereto, 15 November 2000, <https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/organized-crime/intro/UNTOC.html>.
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- 3 Ibid.
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- 10 European Parliament, *Forced labour in the Linglong factory and environmental protests in Serbia*, 16 December 2021, https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2021-0511_EN.html; United Nations Office of the High Commissioner, *UN experts deeply concerned by alleged trafficking of Vietnamese migrant workers to Serbia*, 21 January 2022, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/2022/01/un-experts-deeply-concerned-alleged-trafficking-vietnamese-migrant-workers-serbia>; United Nations, Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, *Concluding observations on the third periodic report of Serbia*, 6 April 2022, <https://docstore.ohchr.org/SelfServices/FilesHandler.ashx?enc=4sIQ6QSmIBEDzFEovLCuW54MWm13CZ4%2BVqIQ1kU7YRzBQZIIQfGpoDDOLYIhb50luhKelSKvm3XVlUTG5ikTw%2BN3DS3JcCPAe%2BStor8WpKMIUovu5Xza%2FEY2W8YySbMm>.
- 11 Interview with a construction worker, Bijeljina, Bosnia and Herzegovina, November 2022.
- 12 The relevant civil society organizations are Vlora Youth Centre in Albania; Capital in Bosnia and Herzegovina; the

- Centre for Policy and Advocacy in Kosovo; the Women's Rights Centre in Montenegro; Mreža in North Macedonia; and the Independent Journalists' Association of Vojvodina in Serbia.
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