

New report warns that labour exploitation is becoming a growing concern in the Western Balkans

7 August 2024

**The Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime (GI-TOC) has published a report that highlights the significant challenge of labour exploitation in the Western Balkans, affecting both local and migrant workers.**

Labour exploitation, defined as workplace abuse for profit involving unethical or illegal treatment of workers, is a growing issue in the region. Between 2018 and 2023, 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. During this period, labour exploitation accounted for 46% of human trafficking cases in the Western Balkans.

The prevalence of labour exploitation varies annually, with the highest number recorded at 173 cases in 2021. Research shows that the true number of cases could be significantly higher.

‘Victims are often unwilling or unable to come forward and report their exploiters because of the risk of retaliation, deportation, or the loss of livelihood. Civil society in the region argues that the underreporting of labour exploitation is substantial,’ explains Saša Đorđević, a senior analyst at the GI-TOC and one of the authors of the report.

Several recent incidents have shed light on the severity of the issue. In 2023, for example, Montenegrin authorities arrested six people, including a government official, for exploiting Turkish construction workers. In 2021, Taiwanese citizens were forced into online fraud operations in North Macedonia and Montenegro. In the same year, civil society and the media detailed a shocking story of exploitation and human trafficking involving hundreds of Vietnamese workers in Serbia. These cases underline the need for a coordinated response to address this growing concern.

‘Robust labour inspections, collaboration with civil society and increased awareness are necessary. Additionally, there is a crucial need for socio-economic reforms, including job creation, formalizing the informal economy and enhancing social protection programmes,’ said Vanja Petrović, a programme manager at the GI-TOC and co-author of the report.

This report is based on fieldwork carried out by six civil society organizations from the Western Balkans, which collected data and conducted 111 interviews. Of these interviewees, 38 people who were at risk of or had experienced labour exploitation shared their experiences.