

## **Macedonia: Sex Slave Racket Clampdown**

**Author:** [Zaklina Gorgevik](#)

Police raid nets top players in human traffic trade.

With tears in her eyes, the 21-year-old Romanian girl recalled how she was lured to Macedonia and forced to work in the country's flourishing sex trade.

"I was told that I would be found work in Greece, but I never thought I was being sold (to work as a prostitute)," she told IWPR. The girl arrived at the village of Velesta in western Macedonia two years ago, lured by traffickers who promised her waitressing jobs, but ended up being forced to work as a prostitute in a local bar, run by Dilaver Bojku, also known as Leku.

She was freed last week in a massive swoop by police on the sex trade, a roundup in which Leku was arrested and now faces trial on human trafficking charges.

Describing her life of sexual enslavement, the Romanian girl said, "Some girls managed to escape but they were caught, brought back and beaten. He (Bojku) gave us no money except on rare occasions when he was in a good mood. The clients paid 50 euro for every hour they spent with us."

After the police swoop, she was taken to a Skopje transit centre used by the Macedonian police, which is closely cooperating with the International Organisation for Migrations, IOM, to look after women caught up in the human trafficking racket. Since it was formed, the centre has helped nearly 600 young women to return home.

A spokeswoman for the interior ministry said Bojku had been arrested in a February 7 raid linked to a concerted anti-trafficking campaign.

Western experts viewed the clampdown as part of the pledge made by the new government to drive out corruption.

Police have concentrated their operations mainly on bars and nightclubs in the western part of the country, close to the Albanian border.

They have found dozens of foreign women who had been enticed into the country by promises of work as dancers or waitresses.

Velesta is a largely lawless village that boasts several luxurious bars and motels. Cameras survey all entrances and exits to the settlement. Police sources told IWPR there were organised patrols of gunmen who controlled who went in and out.

The latest police operation started after an armed clash between two gangs of human traffickers on January 24. Three foreign women were killed and one was badly wounded in the shooting at the Meli coffee bar in the Gostivar village of Dobri Dol. Two people were arrested.

After that police struck at nightclubs in Skopje, Tetovo, Gostivar, Ohrid, Struga and Bitola. About 40 foreign women were discovered to be in possession of false residential documents - eight were subsequently deported by court order.

At Leku's Hotel Bern, near Struga, police found four Yugoslav women working illegally.

The interior ministry said it had conducted three big operations to stamp out human trafficking in western Macedonia.

A source close to the police told IWPR that law enforcers had so far managed to wipe out several large prostitution chains. In addition to Leku, this source confirmed, several other suspected traffickers had been arrested, including Agron Memedi and Peco Taskov.

The IOM has reported that every year about 120,000 women and children in Europe are victims of human trafficking.

It says the Balkans has been at the centre of this trade and that a majority of victims have wound up in Kosovo and Bosnia-Herzegovina.

Macedonia was also noted as a profitable destination as well as a transit point for sex slavery. Police and relief workers said there are hundreds of brothels operating with impunity over much of the country.

The public prosecutor's office in Skopje told IWPR that so far three people have been convicted for human trafficking, and about 15 other cases were being examined.

Interior ministry statistics showed women from Russia, Moldova, Ukraine, Romania, Serbia and Montenegro or Kosovo were among those ending up in Macedonia.

Attracted by promises of high wages, they later find they have been sold for an average of 1,000-2,000 euro to trafficking bosses.

Beaten and otherwise mistreated, the women are virtually enslaved with little chance to escape.

Zaklina Gorgevic is a journalist with the Skopje daily Utrinski Vesnik. Klimentina Ilijevski at Semeen magazin contributed to this report.

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