Montenegro: Sex Trade Scandal

Author: Kacusa Krmanovic

Arrest of senior official over alleged involvement in human trafficking sparks claims that other leading figures may be involved in the racket.

A scandal over the alleged involvement of leading judicial figures in the trafficking of prostitutes from eastern Europe threatens to claim more victims, following the sensational arrest of the deputy state prosecutor, Zoran Piperovic.

Piperovic was arrested on November 30 with Bajram Orahovac, a restaurant owner, on suspicion of involvement in human trafficking after being mentioned by a Moldovan woman who had escaped from her captors in Podgorica and gone to the police.

The 28-year-old woman, known only as SC, fled from a flat in Podgorica on November 12 and went to the police for help.

Montenegro has long been known as a transit point for the profitable business of smuggling women to western countries to work as call girls and prostitutes. The victims mostly come from Russia, Moldova and Ukraine, seduced by the traffickers with bogus promises of work as waitresses, au pairs or babysitters.

The mostly Russian and Albanian traffickers pass their human cargo into the hands of their Montenegrin counterparts. By then, the women have handed over their documents to the smugglers, are given no money and effectively have no option but to work for them in the sex trade.

Irfan Kurpejovic, who comes from a well-known Podgorica family, and businessman Ekrem Jesavic were detained first on the basis of the Moldovan woman's statement to the police on November 23. According to an IWPR source, SC is claiming that she was "owned" by Kurpejovic who then sold her to Jesavic. The two suspects have denied all charges.

A week later, the deputy state prosecutor and Orahovac found themselves behind bars. The joint investigation into all four men began on December 3.

Neither the police, the investigative judge, Ana Vukovic, nor the prosecution have publicly explained the four suspects' involvement in the SC case, though the media has not been slow to produce its own versions of events.

According to the daily Vijesti, Piperovic's involvement with the Moldovan woman began in 1998 when he took her from a pimp in the Bosnian town of Bijeljina, brought her to Montenegro and then "sold" her to the owner of a nightclub in Podgorica called Oskar. It is not clear how Kurpejovic and Jesavic then came into possession of the woman.

The Moldovan girl also claimed that she worked in a restaurant owned by Orahovac, who was arrested together with Piperovic. How she came to work in his place is not known.

Orahovac's restaurant has gained a seedy reputation as a place where clients can use the services of prostitutes at any time of day or night. Its owner is well connected. Orahovac was frequently seen in the
company of judicial and police employees and gave the impression that he was untouchable. His restaurant has no name and has never been registered.

One police source told IWPR, "Several politicians used to go there, and orgies with the girls were organised. The guests were well known, so he [Orahovac] as well as Piperovic had these public figures under their thumbs."

Piperovic has strenuously denied all the charges against him, claiming he is the victim of a government set-up. Sources in the judiciary have said he also threatened that "someone would pay dearly" for his arrest.

Piperovic is not the only official likely to face charges of involvement in human trafficking.

Sources close to the investigation reported that when the Moldovan woman gave the investigative judge her account of her experience during her four-year stay in Montenegro, as well as mentioning Piperovic and the other three suspects, she named other figures in the judiciary, police and politics.

The sources said one name she mentioned during her testimony is that of the state prosecutor, Bozidar Vukcevic, claiming he was one of the clients.

Vukcevic told IWPR that he was a friend of Orahovac and that he visited his restaurant. "We are friends, I have visited his restaurant. However, I have never seen any prostitutes there and have never gone there with Piperovic," he said.

The state prosecutor categorically denied all the media claims against him and rejected any involvement with the woman or with human trafficking. He also rebutted assertions that the police had attempted to arrest him but were stopped by their superiors or others in authority.

In a statement, Vukcevic said he would resign only when it had been proved that his deputy was "legally and criminally responsible for the illegal acts he is being charged with".

In spite of his denials, non-governmental organisations, NGOs, and other bodies are demanding his resignation. Group for Changes, an NGO led by Nebojsa Medojevic, comprising many reformist intellectuals, said it was necessary to "immediately dismiss the state prosecutor and secure the conditions for court proceedings to be held without any pressure from outside".

Another judicial source predicted that if Piperovic admitted a role in the SC case, other public figures would soon be incriminated, as he is alleged to possess evidence of their direct involvement in the sex-trade network.

Vijesti has published reports on December 3, claiming that videotapes were found in Orahovac's apartment, which it said showed public figures taking part in orgies. However, police sources have denied any such tapes exist.

Law enforcement sources say police documents containing confidential information - so-called "official bulletins" sent only to a small circle of senior officials - were found in Orahovac's apartment, but they refused to comment on media claims that they were addressed to Vukcevic.
If an indictment is issued, the Moldovan woman is ready to testify in court, according to the head of the refuge where she is currently recuperating. Ljiljana Raicevic said SC was in a very poor state. She said it was clear she had been beaten and starved and that physical traces of the abuse she endured were still visible on her body.

The scandal looks set to spread. What remains unclear, however, is whether the recent arrests signal a new determination on the part of the authorities to crack down on an organised crime network that has incurred strong criticism from the European Union. The concern is that it may be no more than an internal struggle within the government structures.

Kacusa Krsmanovic is a journalist with the Podgorica daily Publika

Location: Africa

Source URL: https://iwpr.net/global-voices/montenegro-sex-trade-scandal