

Modern Slavery and Human Trafficking: Albania to the UK

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The project was undertaken by Black Box Research and Consultancy whose members travelled to Tirana, Albania, to undertake primary research in September 2022.

Black Box is a nationally recognised criminal justice consultancy with a focus on Modern Slavery, specifically forced labour, criminal exploitation and County Lines drug supply. The central objective of Black Box is to provide support to victims of Modern Slavery, as well as enhance public awareness of this issue both domestically and internationally. By leveraging its expertise in expert testimony, training and grass-roots evaluations, Black Box endeavours to equip organisations and professionals with the necessary tools to assist children, young people and vulnerable adults who are ensnared in exploitative environments and entangled in the criminal justice system.

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The 'crisis'



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Monday 31st October 2022 - Suella Braverman, Home Secretary

- "People coming from safe countries are not welcome ... Some 40,000 people have arrived on the south coast this year alone, many of them facilitated by criminal gangs, some of them actual members of criminal gangs ... So let's stop pretending that they are all refugees in distress. The whole country knows that this is not true".¹
- With specific reference to Albanians, Braverman claimed that they were "abusing our modern slavery laws", and that the Home Office is working to remove them "as swiftly as possible". She added: "I note that we see a large number of Albanian migrants arriving here and claiming to be victims of modern slavery. Again I really am circumspect of those claims. If those victims are genuinely victims of modern slavery, they should be claiming that protection in Albania."¹

Monday 28th November 2022

- A letter from 50 Conservative MPs urges the Prime Minister to pass emergency laws to crack down on 'bogus' Asylum seekers.²
- "People claiming they have been unwilling victims of human trafficking or modern slavery" should be returned to "the villages from which they came ... If they have really been taken against their will, then they could not reasonably object to being returned to their own homes ... The quirks in our modern slavery laws that prevent this are clearly in defiance of the aims of that law and should be removed."²
- They argue that in the specific case of Albanian migrants, this would provide a "very strong deterrent" for anyone considering making the crossing across the Channel.²

Tuesday 13th December 2022

- Albania is added to the safe country list under section 94 of the 2002 Act. This is reasoned because, in general there are no serious risks of persecution of persons entitled to reside in Albania, thus making it harder for those coming from Albania to seek asylum without satisfactory claims in the eyes of the law.³

Wednesday 25th January 2023

- Robert Jenrick tells MPs that of the 4,600 child asylum seekers who have arrived in the UK since 2021, 440 had gone missing.⁴
- Over 200 of these children remain missing from the hotels housing them, 88% of whom were Albanian teenage boys.⁴



'Invasion on our Southern Coast'

The extent to which Albanians contribute to the population of identified migrants crossing the channel in small boats in 2022 is increasing:

- From January 2018 to June 2022, Iranian (28%) and Iraqi (20%) nationals represented nearly half of all small boat arrivals into the UK. However, in the first months of 2022, this has changed. Over half (51%) of small boat arrivals were from three nationalities – Albanian (18%), Afghan (18%) and Iranian (15%)⁵.
- Since May 2022, there has been a significant increase in the number of Albanians crossing the channel on small boats:
- From May to September 2022 Albanian nationals alone comprised 42% of small boat crossings, with 11,102 Albanians arriving by small boat in those five months.⁵
- In contrast, over the whole of 2021 there were a total of 815 Albanian nationals who arrived by this method. During the summer period, more than half of small boat arrivals claimed to be Albanian.⁵
- Most Albanians crossing the Channel in small boats are male – from 2018 to June 2022, 95% of Albanian small boat arrivals were male.
- 51.1% of small boat modern slavery (SBMS) referrals made in the first half of 2022 (Jan to June) were from Albanians (n=591 in 2022), up from 11.2% in 2021 (n = 218). This is five times more than the second largest group (Eritreans = 116).⁶
- The previous record for the most SBMS referrals for a single nationality comprised the 74% of referrals relating to Iranians in 2019. However, the number of Albanian SBMS referrals in 2022 is five times the 2019 Iranian total.⁶

'Bogus' Asylum Seekers

The UK has been identified, along with numerous Western European countries, as a destination of human trafficking from Albania. The number of individuals seeking asylum upon arrival at Britain's shores is increasing⁵

- 2017 to 2021: the number of Albanian asylum applicants increased from around 1,900 to just over 5,100.⁷
- April to June 2022: Home Office figures show 4,147 potential slavery and trafficking victims were referred into the National Referral Mechanism (NRM). Of those, 1,130 (27%) were Albanian nationals (not including dual nationals).¹



- When it came to adult victims, Albanians comprised 40% of referrals, or 910 out of 2,268 victims.¹
- July to Sept 2022: Albania was the most common nationality represented, accounting for 28% (1,294) of all potential victims of modern slavery referred to the NRM.⁸
- Despite claims that this is a new phenomenon, end-of-year figures for 2019, 2020, 2021 and 2022 show that Albania has always been one of the three most common nationalities amongst those claiming asylum.¹

Despite claims that Albanian nationals seeking asylum are entering Britain under false pretences, NRM figures indicate that of those Albanians referred, the majority are genuine victims of modern slavery or trafficking subsequent to a Home Office Assessment.

Home Office Assessment:

When a referral into the NRM is made, a rigorous assessment programme is applied by the Single Competent Authority (SCA) to identify if the individual is a potential trafficking victim: The SCA decides firstly whether there are “Reasonable Grounds” to suspect that a person has been trafficked, and where such reasonable grounds exist. The second part of the process is to consider whether there are “Conclusive Grounds” to accept that the person is a victim of trafficking.¹

Data from the Home Office reveals that Albanians referred into the NRM are recognised as being victims of exploitation at a very similar rate to that of other nationalities, in terms of the proportions of positive Conclusive Grounds decisions. Therefore, claims that Albanian nationals are exploiting modern slavery laws stand on thin evidence, with the large majority deemed to be victims by the Home Office.

- Between 2019-2022, 89% of Albanian children with positive Reasonable Grounds decisions received positive Conclusive Grounds decisions compared with 93% of all children.⁹
- Between 2019-2022, 85% of Albanian adults received positive Conclusive Grounds decisions.⁹
- Discrepancy in gender does appear though: In the year ending June 2022, the overall grant rate for Albanians was 53%; for Albanian adult men the grant rate was 14%, however for Albanian women and children it was 90%.⁵

Lost but not found

Of more concern should be how the individual cases of those seeking asylum in Britain are handled. A large backlog has been identified for all applications of asylum waiting to be processed through the Home Office assessment and reach Conclusive Grounds decisions. Whilst this is an issue felt by all nationalities seeking asylum, Albanian nationals face the longest wait, especially children. This has inadvertently aided the loss/missing of Albanian children. Recent accounts of which have featured in the mainstream media and been proliferated since Immigration Minister Robert Jenrick told MPs that over 200 children were missing from government-approved accommodation after being housed in hotels since July 2022.



The majority of Albanian refugees have successfully claimed asylum in the UK and are deemed to be in genuine need of protection.

- In the first half of 2022, 55% of all decisions returned for Albanian applications for asylum resulted in a grant of protection or a grant of other leave. Of the 45% that were refused, some will successfully appeal against their initial decision and will therefore be granted asylum or another form of leave.⁷ Over the last six years, approximately half of these appeals have been successful.

However

- When compared with other countries, 65% of all asylum applications from Albanian unaccompanied asylum-seeking children (UASC) were pending for more than twenty-four months whilst just 19% for the remaining top 7 UASC-producing countries were pending for more than twenty-four months.⁹
- More specifically, in 2021, of the 512 Albanian applicants who received an initial Home Office decision on their asylum claim, two-thirds (66%) had waited at least two years for that decision, and 35% had been waiting three years or more.^{9,10}
- Home Office statistics also reflect that the large majority of Albanian UASC are no longer children once they finally receive a decision. This not only sees children in vulnerable situations denied access to support and protection, but also increases the risk of exposure to re-trafficking and exploitation, leading some to argue that, combined with the huge delays in decision-making regarding trafficking, the system is abusive toward young Albanian migrants.⁹

Albania as a 'safe' country

Identification of Albania as a safe country by the UK government has been implemented to limit reasonable grounds for those seeking asylum. Albania's 'safe' country status is awarded on the pretence that 'there is no serious risk of persecution of persons entitled to reside in Albania'.³ Nevertheless, those seeking refuge from modern slavery should not be discredited on the assumption that their country is safe. Modern slavery is a hidden and complex crime that can occur within any country regardless of whether it is at peace or at war and regardless of its wealth. According to government statistics, much like 2019, UK nationals were the most common nationality of potential victims of modern slavery in 2020, comprising 34% or 3,560 of all referrals to the NRM.¹⁰

Albania, whilst not at war, is identified as having significant and longstanding economic and political issues which contribute to an inability and/or lack of political will to resolve human trafficking and modern slavery.

According to the Global Organised Crime Index, Albania's 'criminality' score ranks 9th across the whole of Europe, as well as ranking 6th out of 17 for other Central and Eastern Europe countries. Involvement in the cocaine and cannabis trade by those involved in criminal networks and mafia-style groups in Albania comprise some the most pertinent issues surrounding criminality¹¹, with vulnerable adults and children exploited to facilitate the successful operation of these trades nationally and internationally.



Albania is a country identified by multiple sources to have a human trafficking problem.

- Numerous historical and structural factors have impacted Albania's socio-economic development which has increased vulnerability to human trafficking, including but not limited to: The fall of communism in 1991, the collapse of pyramid schemes in the 1990s, the transition to a neo-liberal economy and the development of a civil society. All are seen as important contextual features (Vullnetari, 2012; Bekteshi, Gjermeni and Van Hook, 2012; Ngucaj and Elezi, 2014; Mece, 2016) which have contributed to the challenges witnessed over the past 30 years, including; unemployment, decaying physical infrastructure and corruption (Milkani, 2013), alongside transitions within gender, family structures and intra-family care arrangements (Vullentari and King, 2016a, 2016b).¹²
- Despite adopting legislative procedures against human trafficking in 2001, with numerous policies implemented since, there still appears to be a gap between existing policy and practice, therefore Albania remains a Tier 2 country of the US Trafficking in Persons Report. This recognises that whilst the country is making significant efforts to address modern slavery and trafficking, it does not yet fully meet the minimum standards for the elimination of trafficking.¹³

Interviews with Albanian natives conducted in a study by the University of Bedfordshire identified a series of interlinked individual, household and family, community, structural and situational factors that increase the vulnerabilities of an individual who may be at risk of human trafficking¹²⁶:

- **Individual:** Gender as a risk factor was repeated with regard to the large number of women being trafficked from Albania. Victims also had limited formal education and were from deprived backgrounds.
- **Household and family:** A large number of victims are recruited by family members. Family breakdown such as single mothers and divorcees are identified as key vulnerabilities that increase trafficking risks for both those persons and their children.
- **Community:** This was closely linked to household and family factors, with the prevalence and acceptance of household violence rife in certain communities of Albanian.
- **Situational:** In particular, the first moment of mass migration from Albania to Italy in 1991 and the collapse of the government investment scheme in 1997 were tremendously important changes from the 'normal circumstances' in Albania. The impact and consequences of these moments still have relevance in understanding why people may be vulnerable to trafficking in Albania today
- **Structural:** A lack of coordination between different agencies and across policies is considered to be a key aspect in the creation of vulnerability. Moreover, vulnerabilities are further increased by the financial strains currently being experienced:
 - The EU's statistics agency (Eurostat) revealed in 2020 that 51% of the Albanian population are at risk of poverty or social exclusion, the worst in Europe¹⁴.
 - Inflation caused by the Russian-Ukrainian war has resulted in 42% of Albanian households' monthly expenditure being spent on food and drink, well over the European average of 13%.¹⁵
 - 'Mafia-style' assassinations, distrust in 'corrupt' politicians and local police amongst a backdrop of a large-scale black economy and established drug-trafficking networks paints a bleak picture for Albanian natives seeking refuge, which has contributed to widespread protests against the government^{16, 17}.
 - Those from rural areas are particularly affected, with access to social assistance, health and educational services considered to be particularly poor. Access to accommodation for Roma and Egyptian communities was outlined as a difficulty due to low social integration and education levels.⁸



Victims of human trafficking in Albania: Women and Girls⁸

Whilst it is not possible to set out a typical profile of trafficked women from Albania (trafficked females come from all areas of the country and from various social backgrounds), several core themes do emerge

- Most victims of trafficking in Albania are females, the majority of whom are trafficked for sexual exploitation.
- Victims are often lured into trafficking by promises of marriage or employment, although coercion is sometimes used.
- Children are mainly exploited, particularly those from the Roma and Egyptian communities, into begging and providing their labour e.g. in cannabis farms.

Victims of human trafficking in Albania: Men and Boys⁸

There is limited information about the experience and treatment of male victims of trafficking, including the scale, nature, and frequency of trafficking and other harm. Men and boys who are from poor backgrounds, have low/poor education, have physical or mental disabilities, have experienced domestic violence including sexual abuse, and/or who live in remote areas are more likely to be vulnerable to being trafficked, re-trafficked or face reprisals than men and boys generally. Albanian society is also deeply patriarchal and masculine. Many Albanian boys coming to Britain may have realised they are being exploited but are unaware of the criminality of this, where a very low level of awareness of trafficking, healthy relationships and safety are apparent.

Albanian Trafficker Profiles⁸

Traffickers are generally Albanian national and relationships are key. Most victims of trafficking are trafficked by close family members or people with whom they have close social ties, including those with links to criminal networks:

- From an analysis of 99 human trafficking cases presented by Vatra PsychoSocial Centre between 2015 and September 2017, 68% of traffickers were either close family members or had close social ties. Of these, 31% were reported to be cases in which “boyfriends” had exploited victims, 25% were friends and other people known to the victim, and 12% were related to the family. In 19% of cases, victims were exploited by people that they had met on Facebook. Only 13% of cases involved a trafficker who was not known to the victim²¹.
- Victims who are trafficked as children by family members appear to be at a heightened risk of re-trafficking by the same perpetrators ... Some of the interviewed survivors who were trafficked as children reported regularly running away from home, only to return to the situation of exploitation soon afterwards because they felt obliged to support their family. This feeling of obligation was usually combined with a feeling that they had nowhere else to go, and that there was no support available to them or their family.

Social media platforms such as Snapchat, Facebook and Instagram are now heavily used to facilitate this relationship building⁸. Reports of posts appearing on Tik Tok and Instagram offering transit to the UK with payment after arrival are increasing. Some advertised “Black Friday deals”; others juxtaposed their discounted crossing rates (between £3,000-£15,000) over photos of mainly young Albanian’s crammed into dinghies and sporting bright orange lifejackets. Albanian Tik Tok, Facebook, and Instagram is full of promises of jobs and visas. Videos of Big Ben and the Union Flag, interspersed with large quantities of cash and stories featuring stamped passports, all promise a better life for Albanian youth.¹⁸



Traffickers usually encourage coercion through the promise of marriage or jobs. Traffickers also seek to exploit the financial situation of their victim, targeting those going through hardship.

Trafficking routes: It was suggested by one participant that trafficking routes from Albania have remained consistent over time with the following routes outlined¹²:

- Albania > Belgium > UK
- Albania > UK > Norway
- Albania > Italy > Netherlands
- Albania > Kosovo > Macedonia > Switzerland
- Albania > Italy/Germany
- Albania > Montenegro > Italy/Belgium/Germany
- Albania > Greece > Italy > France > Netherlands > UK
- Albania > Greece/Kosovo > USA
- Albania > Macedonia

Case Studies

Case Study One

A young woman from central Albania was from a marginalized and impoverished family. She left school early to work as a seamstress, earning enough money to get by, but she was under pressure from her family to get a job that paid more. A friend introduced her to a man who became her boyfriend and who promised to marry her. The boyfriend provided her with fake Italian documents for citizenship in Italy and they travelled to Italy via plane. When she arrived, she met a friend of her boyfriend who then sexually exploited her for one year. This man then sold her to another man in the UK who exploited her in a bar as a dancer and sex worker. She was held in the bar for several years where she was emotionally and physically abused, forced to use alcohol and drugs and denied access to healthcare. She was eventually identified by the police and was treated in a mental health hospital. She returned to Albania and was received at the airport by a local NGO who began providing her support service.¹³

Case Study Two

“Anita,” whose name has been changed to protect her identity, is now living in the UK with her husband and their daughter. He has been granted asylum while she awaits a decision. She told VICE World News that her husband fled to the UK after being targeted by a local gang. She stayed behind but the gang raped and assaulted her to intimidate her husband.

“They didn't go to prison because they [bribed] the police and the judges and were left free to harm all of us,” she said, referring to her teenage daughter, who the gang threatened to traffic into the sex trade. “You are living in Albania, and you see with your own eyes the Albanian reality, the organised crime and blood feuds, domestic violence, especially the honour killings of girls and women, their prostitution and trafficking, corruption, the lack of protection from the state police.”

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