The edge of the volcano

Irena Maryniak
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Trafficking in forced labour generates up to US$15.5 billion in the industrialised world. It attracts little attention and is widespread in Europe. But until policy makers recognise the need to manage the demand for migrant workers, there will continue to be a market for those prepared to risk exploitation, writes Irena Maryniak.

Schoolchildren in the Soviet Union were taught that slavery was not a feature of Russia’s past. It was prevalent in Western history of course, teachers would explain, but Eastern Slavic society had overstepped it. Instead, Russia had bounded from a “primitive” state into a relatively humane if unenlightened feudalism – just as Bolshevik Russia had leapt from the feudal system into Communism, bypassing the capitalist phase in between.

Many of these teachers might have been shocked and dismayed at the conditions in which millions are now known to have worked in Soviet corrective labour camps, the GULAG; but today, the International Labour Organisation (ILO) estimates that in free-market Russia, 1.5 million people are enslaved in their jobs and 50 000 trafficked into the country every year for forced labour. Among the exploited, mistrust of the police and fear of reprisals is so acute that only dozens of cases are officially noted annually.

The evidence remains largely anecdotal, gathered by NGOs, investigative journalists, or documentary filmmakers. Vadim Kondakov reported on the Moscow TV station REN-TV, for example, that in the Kirovsky region, Aleksandr Komin, an electrician, was alleged to have held a group of women locked up in a cellar 12 metres under a garage, and compelled them to sew clothes, which he later sold through a cooperative named Ideal. “He beat us every day,” one of the workers said. “He’d take our work. ‘Thanks girls’, he’d say. Then you’d get punched in the face.” After his arrest, Komin admitted maltreatment but hinted that the women had been complicit in agreeing to work for him.

The exploitation of human labour as a commodity predates written history, and the psychological subtleties of enslavement may often be hard to gauge. Dependency, isolation, and trauma can make victims feel they have no option but to stay, even when departure seems objectively possible. Threats, financial bondage, inability to make a phone call, a removed document, are enough – even without a key in the lock. And the type of work forced on the weak, the different, or on outsiders, remains remarkably
consistent: manual labour and craft, domestic service (now the “hospitality industry”), agriculture and food production, construction, prostitution, the army.

Over the last two years, the Russian press has noted several cases of the unauthorized use of conscript labour. Komsomolskaya Pravda reported that Oleg Terekhin, aged 19, was hired out by his commanding officer to a landlord in Ossetia to look after cattle and dig a kitchen garden. He was fed on boiled cow intestines, while his commander received a weekly pay packet. In April 2006, the Moscow Times reported that police were investigating the case of five young men with cerebral palsy who were terrorized, beaten, and shot at while employed at the Blindazh computer club in northern Moscow for USD 3 a day. Their employers were detained after attempting to sell them on. In Chita, southeastern Russia, the unemployed, the homeless, and people from the countryside new to the city have been coerced into work in agriculture, construction sites, looking after cattle, and selling drugs or doctored vodka. In Moscow, 31 per cent of illegal migrant workers are locked up to work, 20 per cent have their documents held by their employer, and 30 per cent of migrant women are forced into sexual bondage. In Samara, officials reportedly confiscate the passports of Central Asian labourers so they cannot leave. And so it goes on...

But according to the British NGO Kalyaan, in the UK today as many as 49 per cent of domestic migrant workers also have their documents taken away by employers. And, horrifically, three years ago, in Lancashire, 23 Chinese people died harvesting cockles at night against a rising tide in Morecambe Bay. Their gangmaster was later found guilty of manslaughter. So are political culture and geographical position to the point?

Western Europeans may sniff at reports from Central Asia that Kazakhstan is “swarming with Kyrgyz slaves”, but in May 2005, over 100 illegal Polish and Slovak men were released from a camp in Southern Italy where they had been working from 3.30am to 9.30pm without a break picking tomatoes. The camp, in Orta Nova, was surrounded by barbed wire and had armed guards. Its inmates slept on soiled mattresses, in barracks with no light or water. They were allowed out to the supermarket once a week. According to the Polish daily Gazeta Wyborcza, the Italian police took nearly three months to respond to calls for intervention. The honorary consul in Puglia, Domenico Centrone, told Gazeta that there could be more than a dozen camps like this in southern Italy holding as many as 20 000 people.

Though trafficking remains widely understood as the smuggling of women and children for sexual slavery, a study of European countries by the International Organization for Migration (IOM) has suggested that in some regions – Hungary, Poland, and Ukraine, for example – the primary victims are men. The UN Protocol to Prevent, Suppress, and Punish Trafficking in Persons (2000) acknowledges that “trafficking” embraces the movement of all people – men, women, and children – for their exploitation by coercion, deception, or abduction. They may become workers, slaves, prostitutes, or organ donors. ILO figures indicate that at least 2.4 million people worldwide are in forced labour thanks to trafficking, which generates up to US$15,500 billion in the industrialised world. Profits are thought to approach those generated by the arms and drugs trades, but the risk for the clandestine agents, who arrange travel, documents, cross borders and find jobs for their customers or victims, is far lower.
The difficulty is that coercion, deception, or indeed abduction can happen at any moment in the cycle of recruitment, transportation, and receipt that migrants endure, or in subsequent employment. You enter a country legally, but your papers are confiscated by your employer. You find yourself in debt, unpaid and threatened with denunciation in a system you do not understand. In rural areas of Europe, people are approached by relatives, boyfriends, or shady fixers with promises of money or better lives abroad. Borrowing money to pay traffickers is common, but the promised job doesn’t always materialize at the other end and the initial debt may be inflated by charges for accommodation, documents, food, and interest. Yet there is often willingness to work long hours for several years to pay off a debt and eventually send some money back to the family. Bonded labour conditions in a wealthier destination country may seem preferable to impoverished freedom at home. In Moldova, which has up to 1 million (25 per cent) of its citizens working abroad, remittances have been estimated to account for between 50 per cent and 150 per cent of GDP. “People feel ashamed to go back with nothing because they represent the hopes of a whole community. So they remain trapped,” Marek Effendowicz of IOM, London, said.

In a strange environment, where the language is unfamiliar, informal networks may seem preferable to official channels. Favours are done and have to be returned - though the consequences of allowing a new friend to, say, deposit some money in the bank account she helped you open can be unpredictable and devastating. Coercion into fraud, shoplifting, pickpocketing, or selling pirated discs has been documented in the Netherlands and the UK.

In destination countries, the authorities view trafficking as a security concern rather than a matter of exploitation. “It’s because illegal migration is such a hot issue,” Beth Herzfeld of Anti-Slavery International says. “The UK does not give guaranteed assistance or protection to victims of trafficking because there is a fear of creating a back door for illegal entry.” The number of people identified as “trafficked” rather than “illegal” is disturbingly low: estimates for Europe rarely go above thousands. Unrecognized and unassisted, irregular labour migrants remain hugely vulnerable.

Making the leap from one country to another is a hazardous business and carries a degree of risk and anxiety that trafficking networks love to exploit. And, increasingly, migrants know that on arrival they are likely to encounter protectionism and indifference at best. At worst they risk maltreatment, enslavement, and death. “Thirty years ago things were much safer. Life has changed so much that we have had to change our mindset, our whole way of thinking,” Klara says. Last October, she deferred a law course, and left her family in Hungary, for a job in a Swindon warehouse. She knows she has been lucky.

In December, Magda and Jarek, a Polish couple hoping to buy a flat in Warsaw, responded to an advertisement in Gazeta Wyborcza for workers in a UK crisps factory where English was “not required”. At Heathrow, they were met by a professional-looking young woman, with a man, in a Renault Mégane. They were asked (in Polish) for identity photographs and their shoe and clothes sizes, so that appropriate kit could be supplied the following day. They were also required, in the nicest possible way, to pay GBP 500 (USD 1000) up front to cover accommodation and insurance. In a suburban street in Tottenham their luggage was unloaded, the car speeded off, and they were left stranded.
and penniless, with no option but to appeal for help, in Polish, to the police.

Their case is reminiscent of another, perhaps more apocryphal, tale reported last September in Cooltura, a weekly for Polish migrants published in London. Four Poles arrive at Victoria and are immediately recruited by a prospective employer seeking painters ready to start right away. He takes an agent’s fee of GBP 100 per person, drives the workers to London Bridge, gives them overalls, brushes, and paint, shows them where the bridge needs to be touched up, and is well away by the time the police turn up to investigate.

Both these stories carry shades of the black humour that characterized resistance in Communist Poland, where private citizens’ initiatives were very largely about demonstrating that the system was an ass. The aesthetic side of the sting lies in the way the law is woven in to ensure that a potentially disastrous situation is transformed into something verging on farce.

Sergey’s case, reported by Anti-Slavery, is considerably less funny. In 2001, he saw an advertisement in a newspaper in Perm, Russia, for construction workers in Spain, offering a salary of USD 1200 per month. He was earning just USD 200, so he applied and the agency in the ad booked him a ticket to Madrid. The agreement was that he would pay back the money when he started work. Sergey arrived in Spain and was met by an agency representative who took his passport. He was taken on to Portugal and forced to work on a construction site without pay for several months. He escaped and begged his way to Germany. There he was arrested because he did not have identification. According to his account, the police beat him and took away the little money he had. He was then deported back to Russia and left to recover alone, psychologically traumatized, without help or counselling.

The competitive market and globalization have made everybody’s lives more risk ridden, sociologist Ulrich Beck argues in *The Brave New World of Work* (Polity 2000). Wages, conditions, security, and safety can all suffer when the competitiveness of good employers is undercut for a quick profit. Developed countries where populations are getting older and need visiting workers to fill the gaps in skills and labour are, according to Beck, taking on the characteristics of less-regulated societies. Today, far more people endure precarious and fragmented working conditions, or are “labour nomads” shuffling between different fields of activity.” Beck calls it the “Brazilianization” of the West, “the incursion of the precarious, intermittent, fluffy, and unsanctioned in the Western bulwarks of the full employment society”. We are all, he suggests, dancing on the edge of the volcano.

To stabilize the size of the working population in the 27 EU member states, there needs to be an inflow of 68 million foreign workers and professionals by 2050, IOM tells us. Unless policy makers recognize the need to facilitate and manage the call for migrant workers, demand will be filled by those prepared to risk coping on their own and challenging the restrictive, complicated systems of migration policy in European countries.

The ILO’s worldwide estimate for forced labour today is 12.3 million, and the EU has acknowledged a “worrying trend in industrial countries to use cheap and undeclared
labour forces, as well as exploiting women and children in prostitution and pornography”. Allegations against companies such as Nike and Gap Inc. suggesting that they use child labour and sweatshops to manufacture cheaply in developing countries have been well publicized. Subcontracting creates opportunities for large employers to ignore the conditions, and earnings, of an invisible but wholly indispensable work force abroad, and indeed at home.

Exploitation such as this is mostly out of the spotlight. Few NGOs are involved, unions have been reticent, and there is little political will to probe into the recruitment and employment conditions of new arrivals in the labour market. Migrants may provide much of the muscle in the economy, but governments – the UK is a case in point – still fail to offer minimum standards of protection and support.

Following the tragedy at Morecambe Bay, laws were passed in the UK making trafficking a criminal offence and obliging gangmasters – the agents who control casual workers in the food industries – to register. But there has been little sign of willingness to implement and prosecute. Rights to the National Minimum Wage, Trade Union recognition, or holiday pay aren’t consistently protected and labour standards can remain unenforced. Payslips fail to give details of deductions, hours, even names; employers claim to send identity documents to the Home Office to comply with the Workers Registration Scheme, but don’t.

Within the EU, member states were obliged to harmonize domestic criminal legislation on trafficking by 2004, but compliance has been patchy. Law enforcement agencies in Europe seldom acknowledge trafficking for anything outside the sex industry, and many countries don’t have the laws in place to prosecute. What if a pile of passports is discovered in a factory supervisor’s office, for example? In Britain, social workers and police find themselves at a loss and remain predisposed to view migrants as criminals or violators of immigration rules rather than as potential victims. The Council of Europe Convention on Action Against Trafficking in Human Beings (2005) does guarantee minimum standards of protection for trafficked people. But it requires ten ratifications to enter into force. Though the convention has 30 signatories, the only countries to ratify so far have been Austria, Romania, and Moldova. The UK has not yet signed.

At Europe’s other extremity, Russia, too, is positioning itself as a recipient country. The emerging middle class is crying out for more workers in household services and construction, but integrating migrants and providing security for them is way down the agenda. Elena Tyuryukanova of the Institute of Socio-Economic Problems of Population at the Russian Academy of Sciences, says figures for illegal migration to Russia in 2006 are estimated at 5 million-7 million, possibly more. Visiting workers are generally promised pay on completion of a job but “non-payment is becoming institutionalized,” Tyuryukanova says. The Tajik community seems particularly vulnerable. Over the past seven years, Russian cities have been a primary destination for Central Asians trying to address the problems of unemployment and poverty. Sultan Sharipov, a Tajik working for the Donstroy construction company, told the UN news agency IRIN in Moscow that he had to work 16-18 hours a day “like other migrants” and up to 70 per cent of his salary was taken by the foreman. He received USD 250 a month.

A chaotic market, official corruption, economic instability, a substantial shadow
economy, and migration law riddled with gaps and loopholes, make survival in a marginalized sector possible for irregular migrants, while dealers manipulate and make huge profit. The fine for employing an illegal worker is smaller than the duty an employer pays for legally hiring one, Tyuryukanova points out, so it is easier to pay a fine right away than to submit a pile of documents to the authorities requesting permission to take workers on.

There is, manifestly, nothing historically or geographically specific about the human urge to grasp the wheel, take advantage, mistreat people if necessary and come out on top. But in a Europe faced with “a creeping or galloping threat to human civilization and civil spirit, a catastrophic possibility that progress will swing round to barbarism”, as Ulrich Beck says, the questions remain. How much exploitation, pain, and deception in employment and earnings are we prepared to tolerate? And when will distinctions between exploitable outsiders and secure insiders cease to constrain our thinking, now that homogenous societies are so largely, and challengingly, a thing of the past?

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