

# BULGARIAN MOTHERS TRICKED TO SELL THEIR BABIES

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***Yanna Dobrena Yordanova is 23 years old, heavily pregnant and deeply distraught. She is the youngest of four expectant mothers sitting in a bleak hospital ward in the small town of Lamia in central Greece.***

All from Bulgaria, they have the same harrowing story to tell. "We came here to work", says Ms Yordanova. "But there was no job." Alexander, the man who had brought them to Greece, had a far more profitable plan in mind: he wanted to sell their babies, and pay them each €3,000 (?2,000). "He said as soon as one of us gave birth they would get rid of us immediately," one of the women says. The European baby-trafficking industry is booming. Every year, hundreds of women are duped into making the desperate journey from Bulgaria to Greece hoping to earn money for a better life. Alexander was just one member of a notorious criminal gang that makes its money from trafficking pregnant women and selling their babies on for up to €20,000 on the black market.

Now, police on both sides of the border are trying to clamp down on the trade. More than 20 suspected baby-traffickers and prospective buyers have been arrested in a series of police raids across Greece in recent months.

In its most recent report, Interpol says that Bulgarians have become the ringleaders of the European baby trading circuit and are being investigated in Greece, Italy, France and Portugal.

But demand is increasing and the gangs are becoming wealthier, according to Greek police. "The phenomenon is well organised," said Dimitris Tsiodras of Athens police's organised crime unit. "The gangs consist of five, 10 or even more people. You need such numbers in order to locate pregnant women [in Bulgaria], transport them through countries such as Austria and Italy to Greece, take them to

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hospital to deliver the baby and find a place for them to stay until the buyer is found." Most of the buyers - usually childless couples - are found in advance, and the baby is given away as soon as the mother leaves the hospital.

Ms Yordanova and the three other women rescued in Lamia were treated as trafficking victims and, after Alexander's arrest in a police raid, were soon able to return home to the Black Sea port of Burgas in eastern Bulgaria.

The town, in one of the wealthiest parts of Bulgaria, has an attractive centre with smart bars and restaurants catering to a local elite and growing numbers of Western tourists.

But behind the sophisticated facade lies a more sinister reality. Burgas is fast becoming one of the hubs of south-eastern Europe's criminal networks.

According to one of the region's top police officers, criminal gangs here have been investing heavily in the tourist industry alongside the more traditional pursuits of selling drugs, organising prostitution and racketeering. "Maybe 10 to 15 per cent of tourism in the region is financed by money laundering by criminal gangs," said Commissioner Kupa Kupaev, the head of the regional organised crime unit.

Ms Yordanova lives in a suburb of Burgas known locally as "the ghetto", home to more than 3,000 members of the Roma community, most of whom are unemployed and impoverished. Here, in a dilapidated bedsit, she is only days from giving birth and will soon have three children to look after. She lives off money from the state - and even that adds up to less than the €2 a day that the World Bank estimates Bulgaria's Roma live on.

It is not hard to see why women such as Ms Yordanova are prepared to follow anyone offering her a ticket out of this poverty. "I was told that I would earn up to €45 a day if I took the job in Greece. What do you think I should have done? I decided to leave the children with a neighbour and go earn some money. But I was lied to," she says. She was not the only one.

Cracking the baby-trafficking rings is not easy. They were not made illegal until 2004 and the maximum penalty is just two years in prison. Bulgaria has charged at least 33 people in the past three years with coercing women into selling their babies. But, as Commissioner Kupaev admits, this is just the tip of the iceberg. "It is a difficult crime to tackle successfully because it is invisible. How do you stop this? If you don't have a witness you don't have a case."

It is hard to find a witness, he explains, because most of the women are so desperate for a better life they agree to follow the traffickers voluntarily. "They only come to us when they don't get their cash." There have been at least eight baby-trafficking cases in Greece this year, and "conditions are such that I only foresee a rise in the phenomenon" says Grigoris Lazos, a criminology professor at the Panteion University in Athens.

Demand for babies is high in Greece, a country with one of the lowest fertility rates in the EU. Experts say there are 500 couples across the country who have applied to adopt just 54 babies. Adoption procedures are so bureaucratic that it is not uncommon for an application to take up to five years to process.

Dimitris Bolis, a lawyer, describes the situation as "absurd". "Legislation is so flawed that it pushes people who have never broken the law before to look for alternative routes."