



The exploitation of Moldovan diaspora in the UK

Briefing 1 from exploratory research into the circumstances and nature of Moldovan exploitation in the UK.¹

This briefing was developed as part of research aiming to understand Moldovan's experiences living and working in the UK, their exposure to exploitation, and their notable absence from the UK's National Referral Mechanism. Within, we summarise key findings resulting from a review of academic and grey literature, and initial consultations with governmental stakeholders in the UK.

Key findings

1. Moldovan diaspora is currently underrepresented in the UK National Referral Mechanism (NRM). We believe that Moldovans are being subjected to exploitation in the UK, including that which would be considered modern slavery. Moldovan citizens often enter the UK legitimately, as dual-nationals using Romanian passports – and are therefore commonly be recorded as Romanian in the NRM.
2. A large data gap currently prevents the prevalence of exploitation involving Moldovan victims in the UK from being accurately estimated. There is a scarcity of understanding regarding their living and working conditions, and to insufficient evidence to robustly underpin any prospective interventions.
3. Anecdotal evidence suggests that Moldova is a source country for workers in the UK's agricultural, food processing, construction, recycling, and waste disposal sectors. There is significant ongoing concern regarding labour exploitation in these sectors.
4. The UK does not currently have a Serious and Organised Crime assessment for Moldova. This may be contributing to evidence gaps regarding trafficking and the exploitation of Moldovans in the UK.
5. While there is some evidence of cooperation between UK and Moldovan authorities on human trafficking, input from stakeholders in both the UK and Moldova indicate there is still more to be done to ensure that it is systematic and effective.

Why is this important?

There is a lack of data and understanding regarding the scale and nature of exploitation involving Moldovans in the UK. Understandably, national attention has focused on groups with high prevalence in the country's NRM. This includes the criminal exploitation of British children, and the spectrum of exploitation experienced by Romanian and Vietnamese adults. As a result, there is little recognition or targeted work to understand the specific conditions and circumstances surrounding the exploitation of Moldovan diaspora. To build evidence in this area, our research aimed to:

- Outline the conditions that contribute to a lack of Moldovan representation in data relevant to UK anti-slavery efforts and discourse, including the NRM.
- Understand in more detail the specific circumstances of Moldovan's living and working in the UK, and the extent to which they are aware of, and have experienced exploitation.
- Draw attention to systemic issues which may fuel exploitative conditions.
- Identify promising avenues for remedial intervention by both UK and Moldovan authorities. This includes providing suggestions for targeted work that will assist in the prevention of Moldovan exploitation in the UK.

Recommendations

- [Coordinated assessment of Serious and Organised Crime by UK and Moldovan authorities.](#)

This should form the basis of more formalised and proactive cooperation between anti-trafficking and enforcement bodies in both countries, and should include measures to resolve challenges in progressing issues through existing law enforcement information request and exchange processes.

- [Ongoing analysis to fully understand the implications of the external socio-economic and political landscape.](#)

This should include assessing the likely medium and long-term impacts of UK's decision to leave the EU, the conflict in Ukraine, and the Covid-19 pandemic on the exploitation of Moldovan and other diaspora. The impact of these factors on the demand for labour in at-risk sectors - such as agriculture and construction should also be considered more broadly.

- [Continued research to develop further understanding of specific push and pull factors on Moldovan migration to the UK, as well as perspectives on the risk of exploitation.](#)

This work should include the voices of Moldovan citizens in the UK and in Moldova, in addition to NGOs and community leaders.

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Research overview

The wider piece of research to which this summary briefing contributes aimed to develop an understanding of to what extent, and why Moldovan diaspora are under- and potentially mis- represented in the UK's NRM. The research was underpinned by the following hypotheses:

- Moldovan people are currently being exploited in some capacity in the UK, as both victims of labour and sexual exploitation. The prevalence of this exploitation is currently unknown, as is the relative vulnerability of, and risk to Moldovan diaspora compared to other nationalities that feature prominently in the UK NRM.
- Moldovans that are identified as potential victims of exploitation, and who consent to enter the NRM are commonly 'identified' and recorded as Romanian.
- Most Moldovans enter the UK legitimately, as dual-nationals using Romanian passports. Moldovans in the UK whose status is more precarious (such as those residing on short-term visitation visas, or illegally) are less likely to consent to referral to the NRM due to fear of return. Like other precarious migrants, these groups likely constitute a highly clandestine population. These individuals would also be at increased risk of exploitation due to the unavailability of legal employment in the UK.

Moldova and modern slavery

Moldova is recognised as a significant source country for human trafficking, and has some of the highest recorded trafficking rates in Eastern Europe.² However, research into human trafficking in Moldova is limited, and primarily focuses on the sexual exploitation of females.³ Despite this, estimations made in 2014 suggested that forced labour (31,500) and domestic servitude (19,000) were likely far more prevalent than sexual exploitation (6500) among Moldovans.⁴

The Council of Europe (CoE) also recognises labour exploitation as the main form of exploitation in Moldova, and calculated that it accounted for 66% of all recorded victims in 2019. In total, 1,496 people were identified as potential victims of trafficking in Moldova between 2015 and 2019. Russia, Slovakia, Spain, Ireland, Portugal, and Turkey were identified as the most common destination locations for those that were trafficked. A quarter of all identified victims were believed to be victims of internal trafficking within Moldova itself.⁵

By Gross Domestic Product (GDP), Moldova is Europe's poorest state, acting as a factor that contributes to the trafficking and exploitation of its citizens. High levels of poverty, unemployment, low wages,⁶ aspirations of a prosperous life abroad, and comparatively higher wages in neighbouring EU countries act as factors that 'push and pull' Moldovans to seek out opportunities to live and work abroad.⁷ Seasonal agricultural labour is a prevalent form of employment in Moldova and is an area where there is also strong

demand for migrant labour in the UK. It is also an area where there are significant concerns regarding labour exploitation.

The scale of exploitation in the UK

There is currently insufficient data to quantify the likely number of Moldovans being exploited in the UK. The number of Moldovans residing in the UK is also masked, due to the presumption that the most enter the UK as dual-nationals using Romanian passports. These factors mean that while the absence of Moldovans in the UK NRM is notable given the high international figures of trafficking involving Moldovan citizens, it is not entirely unexpected because of the circumstances of their entry, and the way in which data is currently recorded.

International Organisation for Migration (IOM) data from between 2000 and 2014 recorded just 4 instances of trafficking from Moldova into the UK.⁸ An analysis of UK NRM data up-to and including the end of 2019, reveals that just 4 additional Moldovan victims have been recorded since then. We have thus far been unsuccessful in our attempts to retrieve descriptive information regarding the exact nature of those cases. Further open-source research did identify a small number of media articles describing the trafficking and sexual exploitation of Moldovan women in the UK, in 2003 and 2011.⁹

The Gangmasters Labour and Abuse Authority (GLAA) have highlighted that Moldova, alongside Lithuania and Romania are one of the primary countries of origin for recycling centre and waste disposal workers in the UK. They also suggest that there is evidence that workers in these sectors have, in some cases, been housed in shipping containers and porta-cabins - accommodation that breaches UK health and safety regulations. This could be considered a potential indicator of exploitation. They also suggest exploitation may be occurring in clothing recycling factories, and have previously reported the presence of juvenile workers.¹⁰

The Office of National Statistics currently estimates that there are roughly 18,000 Moldovans in the UK by nationality.¹¹ This figure is not recorded by country of birth however, and so does not include Moldovans who travelled to the UK as dual-nationals on Romanian passports. Therefore, the true number of Moldovans residing in the UK is likely to be significantly higher than this official figure. We do not currently have any data that shows how many Moldovans are travelling to the UK, and on what basis (work or visitation visa, Romanian passport/dual-nationality, or via clandestine means). This information could provide insights into the relative precarity of those arriving in the UK, and their susceptibility to exploitation. Research we conducted with key informants revealed that authorities in the UK did not currently suspect that the use of Romanian passports by Moldovans creates an additional safeguarding risk. However, a lack of data recording does hamper efforts to understand the specific demographics of diaspora in the UK, and their experiences.

² International Organisation for Migration (IOM), "FIRST UNIVERSAL PERIODIC REVIEW OF THE REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA," 2011, <https://lib.ohchr.org/HRBodies/UPR/Documents/session12/MD/IOM-InternationalOrganisationMigration-eng.pdf>.

³ Tatiana Fomina, "Trafficking in Persons in Moldova: Comments, Trends, Recommendations," *Waraw Centre for International Relations*, 2006, https://childhub.org/en/system/tdf/library/attachments/320_386_EN_original.pdf?file=1&type=node&id=7306.

⁴ Sarosh Sattar et al., "Moldova: Gender Disparities in Endowments and Access to Economic Opportunities," *World Bank*, 2014, <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/bitstream/handle/10986/18251/760770ESW0P1310r0Assessment0020140.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>.

⁵ GRETA, "EVALUATION REPORT: REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA," *Council of Europe*, 2020, <https://rm.coe.int/greta-2020-11-fgr-mda-en/1680a09538>.

⁶ Mariana Iatco and Elena Balan, "Traficul de Fiinte Umane Si Capital Social," in *MoldoscoPie: Probleme de Analiza Politica*, 2006, 13–29; Valeriu Mosneaga and Tatiana Echim, "Counteraction towards the Trafficking of 'Human Beings': The Experience of The Republic of Moldova," *Migracijske i Etničke Teme* 19, no. 2–3 (2003): 223–38, <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/14381657.pdf>; Vladimir Ganta, "Human Trafficking in Moldova," *CARIM EAST – CONSORTIUM FOR APPLIED RESEARCH ON INTERNATIONAL MIGRATION*, 2013, http://diana-n.iue.it:8080/bitstream/handle/1814/62819/Explanatory_Notes_2013-56.pdf?sequence=1; Valeriu Mosneaga, "POLITICA MIGRAȚIONISTĂ A REPUBLICII

MOLDOVA: ETAPA ACTUALA," *MOLDOSCOPIE (Probleme de Analiză Politică)* 2 (2009), https://ibn.idsi.md/sites/default/files/imag_file/Politica_migrationista_a_RM.pdf; Rebecca Surtees, "Labour Trafficking in South-Eastern Europe : Developing Prevention and Assistance Programmes Labour Trafficking in SE Europe," *NEXUS Institute to Combat Human Trafficking*, 2007, <https://nexushumantrafficking.files.wordpress.com/2015/03/trafficking-for-labour-nexus-paper-2007-final.pdf>.

⁷ Iatco and Balan, "Traficul de Fiinte Umane Si Capital Social."

⁸ IOM Moldova, "Victims of Human Trafficking: A Statistical Profile," 2014.

⁹ Hugh Muir, "'Ruthless' Human Trafficker Jailed for 10 Years," *The Guardian*, December 23, 2003, <https://www.theguardian.com/uk/2003/dec/23/ukcrime.hughmuir>; Amelia Gentleman, "Katya's Story: Trafficked to the UK, Sent Home to Torture," *The Guardian*, April 19, 2011, <https://www.theguardian.com/law/2011/apr/19/sex-trafficking-uk-legal-reform>.

¹⁰ Gangmasters & Labour Abuse Authority, "The Nature and Scale of Labour Exploitation," 2018, <https://www.gla.gov.uk/media/3537/external-nature-and-scale-of-labour-exploitation-report-final-version-may-2018.pdf>.

¹¹ Office for National Statistics, "Population Estimates," accessed January 27, 2021, <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/populationandmigration/populationestimates>.

Requiring UK authorities such as police and Border Force to routinely record country of birth would assist efforts to estimate the scale of Moldovan exploitation. Such information would not necessarily impact upon victims' ability to access referral and support provisions through the NRM. However, it could provide valuable insights for use in prevention work and efforts to address transnational organised crime.

It was anecdotally suggested to us that some Moldovan citizens may perceive that there is an advantage to be gained from presenting as Romanian while in the UK. This is due to several factors, such as Romania's status as an EU country (important prior to the UK's departure from the EU), and the UK's Romanian embassy being better resourced than its Moldovan counterpart. Some citizens may also identify with Moldova being a part of 'greater Romania'.

UK / Moldova cooperation

Cooperation between UK and Moldovan authorities arose as a key area of interest through our exploratory work. Stakeholders we spoke to within the UK's statutory services indicated that some cooperative mechanisms were in place between the UK in Moldova. These were primarily in relation to the investigation of serious and organised crime. Cooperation is commonly facilitated through the National Crime Agency Liaison in Bucharest. However, it remained unconfirmed whether, and in what quantity, Modern Slavery or Human Trafficking (MSHT) cases were raised through this mechanism.

We did, however, receive information regarding cooperation through INTERPOL. Respondents in both the UK and Moldova highlighted limitations, and in some cases expressed frustrations with current information request and exchange processes, which in their view often made it difficult to pursue investigations. Issues included agencies being unresponsive to requests, confusion over what was being requested, or challenges in the ability for agencies to establish the origins of intelligence that was received. It seemed clear that participants on both sides felt that there was more to be done to ensure that information requests and responses were more consistent, efficient, and less transactional. Such steps could help to facilitate meaningful dialogue regarding ongoing investigations, where additional information may be requested from one side to the other.

Additionally, of note is work conducted between 2006 and 2009 by the International Labour Organisation (ILO), and supported by the GLAA.¹² The project '*Elimination of human trafficking from Moldova and Ukraine through labour market-based measures*', aimed to address gaps in Moldova's national anti-trafficking action plan.

However, further research is needed to better understand the long-term impact of this initiative and the specific nature of the activities undertaken with it.

We were not able to identify through the research any other instances of cooperative, proactive and targeted work on prevention and victim protection between the UK and Moldova. Stakeholders we spoke to indicated that joint work was mostly responsive and related to ongoing criminal investigations. The extent to which these mechanisms were victim- rather than crime- centred was also unclear.

Knowledge gaps and next steps

Stakeholders we engaged with presented and highlighted several additional risks, knowledge gaps, and suggestions for further work in this area.

The UK's departure from the European Union has no doubt created additional uncertainty related to labour exploitation. We were able to find several instances where businesses recruiting for the UK Seasonal Workers Pilot in 2021 were indicating a preference for non-EU labour from Ukraine, Belarus, Georgia, Russia, Morocco, and Moldova.

Through further work, we have engaged directly with Moldovan diaspora in the UK to understand more about their experiences living and working in the UK, and contexts that fuel exploitation. This work is summarised in a follow up briefing which contains a discussion of our findings from those interviews, and further recommendations.

Moldova and the Russian invasion of Ukraine

The Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 began after the conclusion of our research, and thus it was not possible to fully assess any potential impacts on Moldova, and Moldovan migration to the UK.

Previous research however has established that transit routes from Moldova commonly involve initially crossing into Romania and Ukraine.¹³ Therefore, the Ukraine conflict potentially has significant implications on Ukraine as a viable transit country for Moldovan's seeking to enter countries to its North and East (such as Poland, Lithuania, and Latvia). However, as the conflict is ongoing, it is not possible state with any confidence the extent to which it will have long term implications on Moldovan migration into north-eastern Europe, or indeed Russia, or whether it will fuel further migration to countries in Western Europe, including the UK.

¹² International Labour Organization, "Elimination of Human Trafficking from Moldova and Ukraine through Labour Market-Based Measures," 2006, https://www.ilo.org/global/topics/forced-labour/WCMS_082036/lang-en/index.htm.

¹³ Valerii Mosneaga, "Irregular Transit Migration of Moldovan Citizens to the European Union Countries," in *Transit Migration in Europe*, ed. Franck Düvell, Irina Molodikova, and Michael Collyer (Amsterdam University Press, 2014), 185–204.