Freedom at Midnight: Human Trafficking in Romania

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JURNALISMUL DE INVESTIGATIE ÎN PRESA LOCALA S-A TRANSFORMAT ÎN CÂINELE DE PAZA

Undercover investigation reveals how young girls are being beaten, abused and sold for a few hundred of dollars in Bucharest's back streets.

"Can I be sure you're not giving me back to them?" Diana whispered from the backseat of the car. "I'm scared."

The trembling figure, huddled in a blanket against a cold Bucharest night, had only minutes earlier been just one of the legion of girls for sale in Romania's human-trafficking market. Driven by fear, her words tumbled out, "They hit me. He stabbed me with a knife. You want to see the wound? I'm hungry. Do you like me? You want sex with me? Can I have your kids afterwards?

"I'll be a good wife. Do you want to marry me? You know, they starved me. Do you want me to take off my blouse? I need to eat something! Promise I will never be starved ever again? I want to smoke, too. And don't forget to buy me chocolate."

Diana - her name has been changed for the purposes of this story - cost us 400 US dollars. As part of a joint investigation by IWPR and the Romanian Centre for Investigative Journalism, RCIJ, we had just purchased her from a trafficker. A few days before, she had passed New Years Eve chained and freezing in a dog cage.

Now she was on the way to a shelter for victims of the sex slave trade. She could scarcely believe it - from a life of terror she was headed for a hot meal, warm bed, long bath and some human understanding, plus a chance for a new life.

Plucking Diana so dramatically from one world to another was the culmination of an extended investigation into the crime of forced prostitution and human trafficking in Romania. Driven in many cases by dire financial need, young women, such as Diana, are coerced into nightmare lives - tormented and tortured in Romania and sometimes sold on to indentured lives abroad in countries where they cannot speak the language or find any help. Only the extent of the crime compelled us as journalists to cross the line, rescue one of the victims and, in so doing, provide first hand evidence of the brutal trade.

Diana is also mentally retarded. She can't read or write and suffers from what is termed the "street kids' syndrome" - not knowing when to stop eating. Before she was handed over to a women's shelter, she consumed three Big Macs, two chocolate bars, three large sodas and then asked for more. But a few days on from her escape, her wounds - at least on the outside - were healing.

GOING UNDER.

Early last December, as part of a team of journalists, we attached hidden cameras to our bodies and entered the hidden world of the traffickers.

The idea for the project was to investigate the culture of police secrecy and complicity whereby glamorously code-named operations inefficiently targeted the human trafficking business, which seemingly continues to thrive in Romania. Despite tough laws against it, prostitution is booming in Bucharest. Newspapers, internet sites, city nightlife guides and many of the city's 10,000 taxi drivers all point you towards places where you can buy what they call "paid love".

Evenimentul Zilei, a Romanian daily paper, was planning to air a new investigative TV programme on the topic. RCIJ members who had worked for the title had already learned much about human trafficking, and were participating in a broader IWPR regional study into the issue. Information had been gained through law enforcement agencies, published reports and interviews with underworld figures involved in trafficking and with traffickers themselves.

The aim of this joint investigative would be to spark real public debate - and response - by focusing on the individual suffering caused by the crime, from a victim’s point of view. So a plan was devised to go undercover and record the whole story. One journalist would play the role of a foreigner and pretend to buy a girl. The foreigner ruse eased our entry into the world of the pimps, traffickers and middlemen. The foreigner needed a translator and so I took on this identity myself.

To the underworld figures we contacted through the course of the investigation, I was just another guy on the make, trying to get by. Two other two journalists were assigned to follow us unseen. They had the key role of watching over both of us, and monitoring the traffickers' movements.

More practically, we had to worry about our equipment, including hidden cameras, recorders and wires of various kinds, all of which had to pass unnoticed. At the same time, we would have to change videotapes and batteries from time to time, which limited our freedom of movement and sometimes spelled serious trouble.

THE SEARCH.

Our first encounter began with a taxi driver.

"Hi mate,” I offered. “My friend is a foreigner and he'd like to have some fun with girls tonight. Can you help us?"

"Sure, sir. Hop in. I know a girl you will like a lot,” the driver replied. “She's not one of those working the streets. No sir, she's a friend. She lives in a flat close by, near the national football stadium. She chooses her own clients. She's clean and young and she charges 800,000 lei (25 dollars) per hour at most. You can tell your friend that if he doesn't like this girl, we can go see some others."

The taxi driver was not aware that his car was being followed by another member of the RCIJ team, who was supposed to interfere if the situation got ugly.

But the situation didn't get ugly. The taxi driver was happy to take the money for the ride, even though the foreigner said he did not fancy the girl. The driver was only sorry he couldn't reach a friend who had other girls available. The pimp's mobile phone was turned off.

After visiting a few other places where prostitutes were available, we felt we had taken enough footage for the night. But we had nothing new. On videotape, Bucharest was just another illegal version of Amsterdam's famous red-light district. We tried to find cab drivers who would offer underage girls, but they all said this was too tricky.

Over the following days, we had similar experiences with hotel security men from four expensive Bucharest hotels. They all offered prostitutes and a discount price for the hotel room if we took the girls they offered. The girls were either in the hotel lobby or bar or just a telephone call away. The men said it was no problem if we brought in girls they did not know, though we would have to pay the full price for the room.

After a few nights, it was time to move from the streets and the front men to confront the system’s key figures: the traffickers themselves.

THE TRAFFICKERS.

The police car was just in front of us. For a moment, we thought we had been unlucky. We knew the Matasari neighbourhood, near central Bucharest, would be packed on a Friday night with pimps offering their services on street corners. And now the car bearing the number plate of the 8th Bucharest police station was just in front of us.

But to our surprise, the group of pimps on Pache Protopopescu Street did not vanish when officers pulled over, only 15 metres away.

Our curiosity grew, and we stopped the car when we noticed someone get out of the police car and join the pimps' gang. We stopped our vehicle too and the same man - the one who had got out of the police car - asked us if we would like a prostitute.

"Hi man. Would you like to try one for yourself," he asked. "It's cheap and you'll be satisfied. Don't worry about the police. They're my friends." After briefly repeating the story about my foreign friend seeking some fun, I insisted the police car might get in the way. It had not moved, however, and the cops seemed uninterested in our conversation. At this point, the pimp wanted to deal directly with the foreigner. Tired of my complaints about the police presence, the pimp then called a friend who could speak a little English.

"Police. No problem. Police friends," the woman said, while urging us to follow her to an adjacent street where she and the pimp were minding the girls.

By now the group of pimps started shouting at us, so we had no choice but to let them get into our car and follow their directions. After a short drive through dark, narrow streets, they told us to stop. In front of an old rusty iron gate, we were told to wait.

One by one, the girls started coming to our car. They were shivering from the cold. The expressions on their faces were utterly indifferent, as if they could see through us. From then on, I noticed the same look on all the prostitutes' faces.

We decided to call the show off.

"Look man, you have really nice girls here," I said. "But we have to go eat and we'll come back later. OK?"

"Sure. I can recommend you a restaurant just around the corner. You can take the girl there, too," the pimp said. He looked disappointed when we turned down the offer.

We took off in a hurry. It was enough for the night. We had decided Matasari was the right place to look for trafficked women, and returned a few days later. The first thing we had to do was avoid the same street corner where the pimps hooked us last time. We decided to head down the back streets and avoid the main boulevards.

Our plan paid off. We noticed a bearded little man smoking in front of what once had been a beautiful house in the "Little Paris" of pre-Second World War Bucharest. Now the house was only a memory of former times and the little man in his thirties, like the owner, probably did not care about architecture or history. We suspected that he was a pimp and trafficker, and made our approach.

THE DWARF.

"Do you have girls?" I asked.

"Yes, I do. Who's asking?" the man replied.

"This might be a little unusual. But I'm here with this foreigner and he is interested in taking a girl home for the holidays. You know Christmas, New Year's Eve. What do you say?" I said.

"So he wants her for a couple of months? Okay. Nice. Call me the 'Dwarf'. Friends call me this. We could do good business. Come inside. I might have something for you," said the short, bearded fellow, pointing to a narrow corridor.

We followed him into a small, dark room that had no door but only a curtain leading off it. We were told to wait, until the Dwarf re-appeared from another room with a blonde girl in a miniskirt.

"Ask him if he likes her. She has no marks, no plagues. Tell your friend to touch her breasts to see they are firm," he said, slapping her bottom. The blonde did not say a word, though a bitter smile flashed across her face for a moment. I felt the poor girl had been humiliated enough and told Dwarf to go outside to discuss business. He let the girl return to the other room.

In the meantime, a taxi driver, who had parked his company cab in front of the house, came in and followed her. He was there for what Dwarf called a "quickie".

"You know what? Your friend can try her, too. I tell you she's good," Dwarf said, describing what she was capable of doing in graphic terms. We had heard and seen enough. We told Dwarf we would return with money. But back in the car we found our battery, wires and recorder were not working, so that we had only poor quality images and sound on the mini-DV tape. We would have to go back. This time a third RCIJ member accompanied us, posing as the landlord of the apartment that the foreigner was renting and claiming he also wanted to see the girl.

Dwarf agreed and showed us the girl again.

"Hey, me and my wife have decided something. We are going to give you the girl for good. We're going to sell her to you for 300 US dollars. You pay the money and can do whatever you want with her," he said, looking straight into my eyes.

"Well," I hesitated. "Let me ask my friend. We could be interested." I enquired about her age, where she was from and whether she had identity documents.

"What do we do if the police question us about her? How do we take care of her? You need to tell us," I said. "We're beginners and could learn a lot from you."

Feeling proud that he could teach us something, Dwarf started talking and this time the electronic recording equipment was working properly.

"If anyone questions you about the girl's age, you just say she's 18 and she has no documents because they were stolen. Just feed her, keep her in your apartment and don't let her outside unaccompanied. You'll have no problems. I didn't have any problem so won't have any either," the trafficker insisted.

After a further lecture about handling the girl, we told him we'd go get the money and be back in no time. As Dwarf and his wife approached our car, another RCIJ member - who had not left the car - got into conversation with Dwarf, asking if the girl he wanted to offer us was the one standing next to him.

"No, this is my wife," Dwarf replied coldly. The tension eased when I asked if he wanted payment in Romanian lei or dollars. He said it did not matter.

"Just don't make me wait too long," he said. "I'm not going to offer her to clients for two hours. This means I lose money if you don't come back." We took off and left Matasari. We had no intention of coming back.

It was still December, and we spent the next few days investigating in other parts of Bucharest. We talked to pimps, and almost every one had girls for sale.

A trafficker in the main Bucharest railway station wanted to sell us a girl for 1,000 dollars - indicating the price with broad marks sketched with his foot in the thick snowdrift.

RETURN TO MATASARI.

After the New Year, the logical next step for the investigation was, inescapably, to go through with a "purchase".

No professional reporter would want to cross legal bounds or provide funds directly to criminals participating in the trade. But to get to the heart of the trafficking story, and provide images that could drive home the enormity of it all, we would have to return to Matasari.

For this purpose, the editor of Evenimentul Zilei handed us the equivalent of 600 dollars. We consented with mixed professional and personal feelings. But we felt the public interest, as well as that of the girl herself, were overriding. The girl, it was agreed, would be immediately released into the care of the NGO Reaching Out, which tends to prostitutes and sex slaves.

The final part of the plan was laid in place when Iana Matei, the director of the organisation, confirmed that she was ready to take in any girl we were able to rescue.

The NGO, which had started work in 1998, had so far taken in 74 victims of trafficking. Each spent about a year in a shelter, attending courses and gaining qualifications. The programme has been a success story, as only five girls have since returned to prostitution. One is now a psychology student at university.

A few days later we found ourselves back in Matasari, Dwarf's turf. This time, though, we hired two bodyguards to protect us.

I knocked on the door but nobody answered. Dwarf was not at home. But we located him not far away, on the street corner together with other pimps and prostitutes.

"Hi Dwarf! How are you? Get in the car!" I told him. With a superior smile on his face, Dwarf hopped in. The rest of the guys stared enviously, as Dwarf was driven away. The foreigner, Dwarf and I sat in the back.

"Hey man I waited for you two weeks ago. You said you'd come and you didn't? What happened? I lost money that night," the trafficker said, with a serious expression.

I cut in, "I apologise, something unexpected. . . . Anyway the past is the past. Let's get back to business. Do you still have the girl?"

"No man, I don't. I sold her," he said. "And yesterday evening I sold another one. But what is this. Who is the driver? Is he a cop? I can sense he's a cop. What's wrong with you man? I liked you the last time. You came to me by yourself, no problem. But now? What's this?"

Dwarf was nervous. In a sense, he was right. The driver was an ex-policeman in the special action unit who'd left his job for a better salary in the private sector. I assured Dwarf that everything was all right and he had nothing to fear. Finally, he relented.

"It's God's will man. I put myself in your hands. I trust you because you seem all right. But I don't have a girl for sale tonight. Maybe you can come some other time. Just give me your phone number and I'll call you up when I have something," he said.

I insisted that the foreigner had the money on him and wanted to buy a girl that same night. Convinced, Dwarf agreed to take us to a few places where girls might be on sale.

"We'll start first with the place where I sold a girl the other night. Maybe I can get her back," he said. " You must come with me alone, without the driver or the foreigner, and you don't say anything. You'll pay me 400 US dollars for the girl and you don't care how much I pay myself for her. Agreed?"

I accepted and we set off. Unfortunately, these traffickers had sold her, too. But they told us who had bought her and we drove to another house, still in the Matasari neighbourhood.

We entered a house and an almost surreal scene presented itself. Dwarf introduced me to Bila, a drug dealer also in the human trafficking business. Bila was lying on a sofa with a needle in his left arm. He was so high he could hardly shake hands. He said he didn't know about the girl we were looking for.

"See man. I don't do drugs. Drugs make you look stupid. Isn't it better to just drink a good vodka and get drunk like hell?" Dwarf asked, nodding his head with disapproval.

The trail had gone dead, so I asked Dwarf if he knew other traffickers who might have girls that night. After a moment of hesitation, he said we'd better go to the main railway station area. We stopped our car very often in this new area and Dwarf, who seemed to know everyone on the street, finally came up with a lead.

"We'll go to Buric," he announced triumphantly. "He has a girl on sale."

FINDING DIANA.

Minutes later, we met Diana inside Buric's house. She was on sale.

"The competition is so tough lately. They are bringing in beautiful girls from Ukraine and I'm losing my business," Buric's wife complained to Dwarf. She was carrying a baby in her arms. "Nobody wants my girls anymore. They'd rather pay extra and go with those long-legged girls. We're living hard times."

She talked very openly, as Dwarf explained that I was a good friend and that he wanted to buy the girl for himself. "OK, Dwarf, do you want her or not?" the woman asked, pushing Diana forwards into the light. She looked about 16 but the woman insisted she was 19. "She's not sick. The only thing is that she eats too much. She always asks for food," Buric's wife added.

We returned to the car, took some of the money and Dwarf paid the woman for Diana.

The temperature outside was minus five degrees Celsius and the girl was wearing only a thin skirt, high heels and no socks.

"Please give her a jacket or something. It's too cold outside for her," I told the woman who was counting her money after handing the baby to Dwarf.

"We don't have any other clothes for her. Don't you see we are poor? She won't die. She's used to cold," the woman replied without even a glance. Happy with the money she had got, she told us she could sell us some other girls, too.

We held Diana's hand going back to the car because the narrow street was covered with ice and she was stumbling in her high heels. She was confused and kept asking us what we were going to do with her. Dwarf assured her that she was going to be OK and that “her stars had just changed”.

We left the grateful trafficker in front of the railway station after he counted his money on our hidden camera. With the money in his hands he seemed relieved.

"Wow. Good. Good business. I was so afraid I'd be arrested. Give me your phone number and I'll call you when I have another girl on sale," he said. We declined and headed off.

GIMME SHELTER.

In the car, Diana burst into conversation. "Are you sure you're not giving me back to Buric? Who's going to marry me? Buric and his wife beat me, “ she said. “ He cut me with a knife. He kept me in the dog kennel on New Year's Eve. They forced me in there naked and it was so cold. I don't want to return there. Ever. Why did he turn this way? You're driving back to Buric. I'm scared. Please, don't give me back."

Diana continued to voice her fears throughout the one-hour journey to the women’s refuge in Pitesti. She was so confused that she couldn't believe she was on her way to a shelter where she would be taken care of. Sitting in the back seat, she offered the one thing she was forced to surrender continually while in the traffickers’ hands: sex.

She couldn't believe her eyes when we stopped at a petrol station and bought chocolate, sodas and cigarettes. She didn't even smoke but wanted to see if we would buy her everything she asked. I knew she did not smoke when she asked me to buy a cigarette brand that had vanished a long time ago. She ate the chocolate in seconds and asked for food.

Finally, we met Iana Matei. It was after midnight. She let Diana finish her Big Mac and fries before introducing herself. Then we all went to an apartment owned by the shelter organisation. It would become Diana’s home, shared with five other girls picked up from the streets, but - to her delight - including her own bed.

At the shelter, Diana started telling us her story. She had been on the streets for years since disaster struck her family in Timisoara, in western Romania and she was separated from her brother and parents. While working as a prostitute, a client had promised to marry her.

"But he never came back. I don't know why. I wanted to take care of him. I want to wash for my man. I want to cook for him. And I want six children. Twins." Diana said, while showing us the wounds from the chain with which she was beaten.

The shelter director explained that her story could be exaggerated. "It's normal that she would lie. Everybody lied to her and took advantage of her. Why would she even believe me when I tell her I want to help her?" Iana asked.

"Lots of people told her the same thing and they didn't keep their promises. I do believe what she said the pimps did to her. The chain wounds are there. In my experience, these girl only lie about their identity and background, not about what happened while being forced into prostitution," she said.

Diana is one of the toughest cases the shelter has handled. "She doesn't know to read or write. I cannot put her in a school. She never went to school in her life. She's also mentally handicapped so we're looking for a programme for children with special needs," Iana said.

The organisation is continuing to search for an appropriate full-time programme to care for her needs, while also working with the Timisoara police to try to track down her real identity.

The scale of human trafficking is immense. A recent OSCE-sponsored meeting in Skopje, Macedonia, heard how an estimated 200,000 women in the Balkans are victims of human trafficking each year, with the US State Department itself estimating last year that between 700,000 and four million individuals were bought, sold, transported and held against their will worldwide.

According to its latest Trafficking in Persons Report, published in June last year, the State Department found that while the Romanian government has improved its efforts to combat the cross-border crime "it still does not yet fully comply with minimum standards for the elimination of trafficking".

It notes that Bucharest's efforts to investigate and prosecute public officials involved in trafficking "remain limited". And according to a Human Watch Report last year on Romania, the government's response to both domestic violence against women and trafficking was "inadequate".

For now, Diana is doing well at the shelter. She's helping the other girls with the cleaning and the cooking. Her case has not been solved entirely, but for the first time perhaps in years she is at last safe from abuse and is not being traded as if she were an animal.

Paul Cristian Radu is a member of the Romanian Centre for Investigative Journalism and coordinator of an ongoing IWPR investigative report on human trafficking across eight countries in the region.

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