



BRIEFING NOTE

TRANSNATIONAL ORGANISED CRIME AND HUMAN TRAFFICKING:

"ALL AROUND US, IN PLAIN SIGHT?"

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INTRODUCTION



In a bleak statement on its website, [INTERPOL](#) states that, for criminals, humans are just another commodity that can be traded for financial gain. Such “commodities” attract opportunistic criminals of all degrees of sophistication, but although rogue agents - like the Bristol couple who exploited a number of Slovakian men working in their [car wash](#), confiscating their identity documents and applying for credit cards and loans in their names - may be easier to catch or prosecute, there is an increasing awareness of the extent to which human trafficking is becoming a transnational organised criminal enterprise and activity.

Modern slavery, human trafficking and smuggling are easily confused and often conflated terms. Modern slavery denotes holding an individual in servitude or debt-bonded labour, including forcing them to perform compulsory work for little or no wage, child labour and sexual exploitation. Human trafficking involves recruiting, transporting, harbouring or receiving individuals in order to exploit them, using coercion, deception or abuse of power, and smuggling indicates a willingness on the part of the individuals being illegally transported - like asylum seekers or migrants. There is a high degree of overlap between these distinct categories, however, which explains why the terms are often used interchangeably; willingly smuggled individuals are vulnerable to exploitation and can easily become victims of trafficking against their will, and many of those trafficked ultimately end up in conditions of modern slavery. Given these crossovers, modern slavery and human trafficking are often grouped together as one term (MSHT).

In light of current organised crime trafficking activity in the Ukraine, this briefing note examines the interlinkages between MSHT and transnational organised criminal activity, looking at the scale and nature of these endeavours and taking into account some of the ways in which smuggled individuals can be exploited by these crime gangs to become victims of MHST themselves.

CONFLICT REGIONS: a Ukrainian case study



The increasing involvement of transnational organised crime networks in MHST is unsurprising given the profitability of the crime, which is the world's third most lucrative, behind drugs and arms trafficking. It generates an estimated USD 150 billion globally in profits every year - and circa USD 46.9 billion in Europe alone. Economic damage and mass displacement wrought by the pandemic and conflicts - both long-standing and acute, like in Ukraine - have aggravated the situation and vastly increased potential victims' vulnerability to exploitation.

Indeed, Human Trafficking Search published a dedicated Ukraine Anti-Trafficking report on 10th May to assess the risks and gaps in the anti-trafficking response to the conflict, confirming that organised criminal groups, which have long operated in the Ukraine in relation to human trafficking, are using the current context to their advantage. An existing trafficking infrastructure, stretching back for decades, had already seen greater use during and post-pandemic, which increased the incidence of human trafficking in the country and worldwide. Even prior to the Russian invasion, the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) Mission in Ukraine estimated that over 300,000 Ukrainians had been trafficked since 1991.

With the conflict fuelling the fastest mass exodus in Europe since the Second World War, women and children are especially vulnerable to trafficking, given men between the ages of 18 and 60 are prohibited from leaving the country, the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) estimates that around 90% of the over 3.6 million refugees from Ukraine are women and children. In the past few weeks, online searches for Ukrainian women have reportedly skyrocketed, with organised trafficking rings seeing that demand as a strong financial incentive and sending on-the-ground 'reps' - also known as 'dickers' - to refugee camps and border crossings to take photos of women and children, which are passed up to the higher echelons of organised criminal structures to assess trafficking 'suitability'.

Women refugees are vulnerable not just to sex trafficking but also to labour abuse, ending up in less-regulated and more informal sectors like domestic and au pair work, which leaves them at risk of exploitation. A report by the anti-trafficking organisation La Strada, commissioned by Britain's Freedom Fund, has even called for the prevention of adoptions, warning that these could lead to child exploitation and illegal adoptions. Themis has also previously written specific blog posts addressing the emerging human trafficking and migrant smuggling risks in Ukraine in the current context of conflict. One of Themis' partners, RedCompass Labs, published earlier this month its latest RedFlag Accelerator MSHT typologies, looking particularly at child sexual exploitation. The online Child Sexual Abuse and Exploitation (CSE) typologies outlines the key features of this complex, global crime, as it has never before been easier for criminals to buy and sell child sexual exploitation content online, and hide in plain sight.



GLOBAL SCALE OF MSHT: Closer to home than you might think

More widely, an estimated 40 million people worldwide live in modern slavery today, with at least 136,000 of these estimated to be in the UK, working in nail bars, construction sites, restaurants, cannabis farms and across county lines. These figures are especially concerning given a survey by Themis published last year, which found that 30% of financial services professionals - and 45% of senior managers - do not think modern slavery exists in this country. Actually, it's on the increase, with the number of potential victims of modern slavery in the UK up by 20% from 2020 to 2021, and Scotland Yard noting that MSHT is "all around us, in plain sight."

However, even those living in modern slavery in the UK are often victims of a complex and sprawling set of organised criminal networks which span the globe and link to a vast number of other illegal activities. Indeed, human trafficking necessarily coalesces with and is propped up by other crimes: fraud, corruption and bribery are requisities for facilitating and concealing transport of victims, with regions often having a local "head" who may double as an "untouchable" figure in the community, blending both illegal and legal business.

RELIANCE ON PREDICATE CRIMES

In recent decades, the growth of public sector corruption in particular has strongly correlated with a rise in MSHT; many of the poorest rankers on Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index are also among the largest source countries for human trafficking victims, including Indonesia, Thailand, the Philippines, Pakistan and Nigeria. Fair Planet contends that the network of trafficking mafia extending between Europe and Nigeria, for example, consists of over 50 secret societies, including Nigerian politicians and top businessmen, making it difficult to dismantle.

Transnational trafficking routes also frequently rely upon networks of corrupt customs and border officials, and taxi, lorry, boat, plane and train drivers. Fraud is often evident both in the logistics, paperwork and transport of MSHT victims and also in terms of ESG commitments and metrics relating to supply chain fraud, with factories or companies misrepresenting worker conditions. Extortion, blackmail and threats of violence - both to the victims themselves and their families - are frequently utilised, often as a means of converting willingly smuggled migrants to trafficked victims, who may also become indebted to criminal gangs and be forced to pay off their alleged debt through slave labour. For instance, in the past year, police sources have said that most illegal Vietnamese migrants - many of whom pay handsomely for the privilege of being smuggled in terrible conditions in shipping containers or lorries, in some instances even remortgaging their homes to pay for passage - owe between £15,000 and £30,000 by the time they arrive in the UK, which they are then told must be repaid in debt-bonded labour, a type of modern slavery.

Certain trafficking operations, notably in Nigeria, also make use of “black” or voodoo ceremonies to exert further control of victims, with priests paid by criminals to “bind” trafficked individuals to gangs or threaten harm to their families if they fail to cooperate. Trafficked individuals, especially children or babies, are sometimes even used in voodoo ceremonies as sacrificial victims, as has been observed in the country's so-called “baby factories”. These represent complex organised criminal operations through which traffickers forcibly hold women and girls in buildings disguised as orphanages, religious centres or maternity homes, where they are raped and forced to carry and deliver children which are subsequently sold for black market adoption themselves, offered for ritual killings or forced into prostitution.

Such sex work is a key component of the global human trafficking industry and is closer to home than many might think; Scotland Yard warned in March 2022 that organised crime gangs are trafficking 1,000 women a year into London's burgeoning sex trade. In 2012, a criminal investigation was also opened into forced prostitution at Cara di Mineo, a Sicilian reception centre for asylum seekers, following a high number of requests for abortions, with the camp's director accused of collusion with the Mafia. Nigerian women are a highly trafficked group for forced sex work in the country, with Italian criminal groups further targeting migrants in camps for forced or illegally low-paid labour - like the seasonal harvest of citrus fruit and tomatoes, orchestrated by gangmasters called Caporali - and the transport of drugs and arms (the illicit economy comprises around 20% of Italy's overall GDP). One Italian crime gang boss was even reported to have told an associate that migrants are “more profitable than drugs.”

Many prostitution rings deal in organ harvesting and trafficking, too, with those in forced labour or sex work killed and sold in parts if they become problematic, uncooperative or unprofitable. Organ trafficking is a lucrative industry in its own right given the increasing incidence of diabetes, cancer and ageing populations in developed countries, which has driven up global demand for and value of organs in relation to supply - Global Financial Integrity estimates that 10% of all organ transplants globally utilise trafficked organs.

HUMANS AS VESSELS: The nexus with drugs trafficking



Trafficked humans are used not just for their organs but also as “vessels” or mules for other smuggled goods, with cartels diversifying and complementing their trade by spreading the risk across multiple product groups. They often transport illicit goods like gold, drugs, arms and wildlife along the same routes as, on, or inside human victims. The illegal trafficking of firearms and ammunition in this way provides both profits and essential assets for other organised criminal activities, propping up existing endeavours by intimidating victims of exploitation and protecting illicit goods. In addition, conflict zones, which form key destination areas for arms, simultaneously act as lucrative sources of people vulnerable to trafficking.

As well as being used to smuggle drugs, trafficking victims can be forced into taking black market narcotics and medicines themselves, be this to increase their pliancy or perceived value, or to foster addiction as a means of further increasing debt-bondage. In [Bangladesh](#), for example, many forced underage and malnourished sex workers are forced to take Oradexon, a drug used to increase the proportion of flesh in cattle, to which they become addicted and which can cause bone decay, tuberculosis, high blood pressure, nephritis and psychosis.

ENVIRONMENTAL CRIMES AND TERRORIST LINKS

In addition, smuggled products can be derived from MSHT victims, who may be forced to undertake illegal activities to de-risk them for their criminal enslavers and generate wider profit margins. For example, players in the Thai fishing industry often exploit debt-bonded migrants from Cambodia and Myanmar as a way to reduce labour costs in the face of the economic pressure caused by depleted fishing stocks and labour shortages associated with unregulated fishing. This forced labour further exhausts marine reserves, driving up prices and making fish a scarce and valuable commodity. It is also closely linked to other criminal practices, with illegal fishing vessels and transport routes simultaneously used to traffic drugs and humans, and pirate crews deploying all manner of forgery, misreporting, serious identity fraud, bribery and manipulation of electronic identification or tracking systems to cover their tracks.

Illicit mining, unlawful waste disposal, deforestation and logging are all known to be carried out by MSHT victims (40% of deforestation is estimated to be carried out by enslaved workers), and have a knock-on effect on climate change. Indeed, modern slavery is thought to be the third highest carbon emitter globally. Palm oil deforestation and conflict mineral mining - notably for lucrative coltan in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) or palm oil in Indonesia - often undertaken by trafficking victims, also fuel regional violence and human rights abuses. MSHT is an attractive prospect to terrorist entities in its own right, too, and is central to the modus operandi of the Islamic State, ISIL/Da'esh, Boko Haram, Al-Shabaab and the Lord's Resistance Army - which glean funding via slave auctions, ransom payments for victims or children used in organised begging rings, domestic servitude and forced marriage to their militants, and by forcing victims to fight for them. Indeed, the profitability of MSHT in this context of conflict is so extensive that it is often acknowledged as a 'weapon of war'.

Closer to home, the UK's Environment Agency, National Crime Agency and INTERPOL have all confirmed that serious and organised crime groups have used waste management activities as a cover for human, drugs and firearms trafficking, fraud and money laundering in the UK. They also note that MSHT has, in turn, been used to facilitate the illegal disposal of hazardous and electronic waste, with the Secretary of State even commissioning a review into organised criminality in the waste sector. Organised retail crime is another growing industry in the West, deploying MSHT victims in endeavours like professional shoplifting, cargo theft, retail crime rings, and other retail based-organised criminal activities. This goes beyond the scale of prolific petty theft to the level of trained career criminals operating in highly organised networks and moving round from shop to shop, city to city, country to county, and state to state to stay ahead of law enforcement.

MSHT also has a tangible nexus with cyber crime, which is more broadly linked to - and is an enabler of - terrorism and transnational organised crime, including drugs, arms and wildlife as well as human trafficking. Cyber activities act as a gateway crime, allowing the modern slavery operations to scale dramatically by identifying, isolating and luring vulnerable victims in through the dark web, social media or online forums or as a means of organising trafficking logistics or advertising services, like forced sex or labour work, child pornography, mail order brides or babies, or trafficked organs. For instance, violent and serious organised Albanian "poly criminals" involved in the smuggling and trafficking of drugs, humans and firearms, are known to lure children and young adults into the UK via fake social media accounts which promise profitable work and a glamorous lifestyle, before forcing them into slavery in lucrative cocaine and cannabis markets or prostitution rackets.

LAUNDERING AND ORGANISED CRIME COLLABORATION



At the other end of MSHT activity, organised crime groups use a range of laundering mechanisms, like the trade in counterfeit products, to clean dirty proceeds from the illicit practice. European syndicates and Italian mafia groups, including the 'Ndrangheta (which dominates over 80% of the European cocaine trade and whose operatives have been detected at major ports on nearly every continent) and La Cosa Nostra (a global operation with established networks in Canada, South America, the US, Europe and Australia) have both engaged in and profited from MSHT, and have been tied to laundering schemes through illegal gambling activities and unlicensed casino operations.

These mafia syndicates are also known to collaborate with other international organised crime groups the world over on drug and human trafficking activities; necessary given the breadth and depth of operations and the scale of infrastructure required to transport victims. The well-worn trafficking route from Vietnam to the UK, for example, encompasses a network of agents and facilitators across Germany (with Berlin, Munich and Frankfurt representing vital staging posts), Hungary, Poland, Romania, the Czech Republic and Russia - many of these the legacy of the legal labour export programmes which sent workers from Vietnam to Soviet states before the fall of the Iron Curtain. Even across the border between Mexico and the US, organised crime groups from as far afield as Japan, Central America, Russia, Mexico and the Ukraine have all been caught attempting to traffic victims.

The practice is extensive and not just orchestrated or dominated by a scant number of monopolistic gangs; it's as competitive a market as any legitimate one. Germany's Federal Criminal Police Office, for example, has found at least 23 separate Vietnamese organised crime groups involved in everything from human trafficking, drug smuggling and embezzlement in the country. There are thought to be around 3,600 organised crime groups in Europe alone, which are becoming increasingly international and adaptive to global economic trends in order to transcend geographical boundaries and operate simultaneously across multiple trafficking routes and jurisdictions. Indeed, the nature of these transnational trafficking operations, which require the cooperation of numerous agents and actors across a breadth of regions, has forced organised criminal gangs like the Italian Mafia and Chinese triads to evolve, changing the nature and landscape of hitherto traditionally hierarchical syndicate structures. Circa 70% of these groups are now multinational in membership, enabling them to penetrate new illicit markets, and these transnational networks also collaborate with each other to extend their reach. In 2013, for example, Italian Mafia mobsters were found to have been working with Egyptian crime syndicates to imprison migrants and extort cash.

Although the extent of the convergence of MSHT with other organised unlawful endeavours is staggering, the involvement and centrality of this activity to them does at least provide a starting point for unpicking and tracing these other crimes - and hope for tackling the practice worldwide. Indeed, given this interconnectivity and also the extent to which cyber space, which can leave a digital trail or fingerprint, is used to facilitate the crime, MSHT data has been described as 'one of the richest publicly available data sets for criminal network discovery'. Law enforcement agencies are now able to harness and utilise this intersectionality: last year, for example, a human trafficker was identified in Madeira thanks to a tax evasion trail.

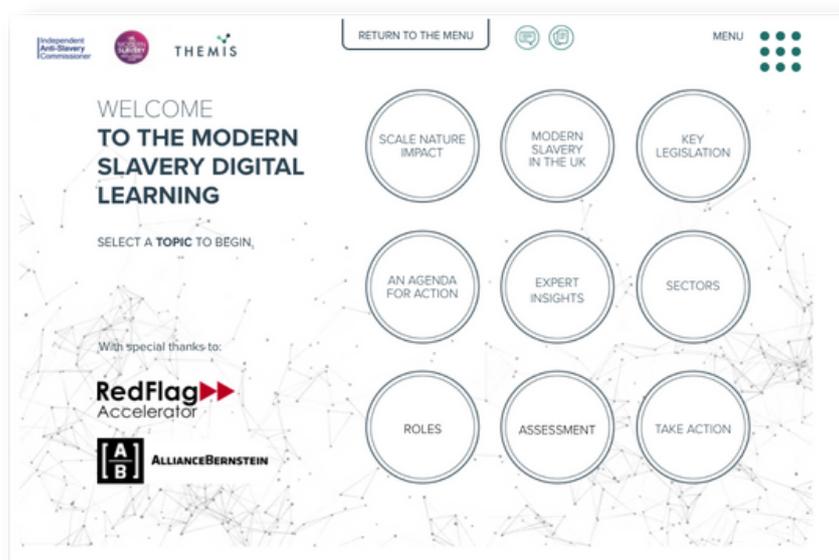
THEMIS KNOWLEDGE AND TRAINING

Themis curates its own unique and specialist dataset of MSHT convictions in over 200 countries worldwide, on the Themis Special Interest List. This database, which underpins Themis Search, is unparalleled in its comprehensiveness and reliability as it draws exclusively on official conviction data published by national and international authorities, helping to supercharge your customer due diligence capabilities while reducing the impacts of financial crime. Our database includes both the official records of the criminal conviction and sentencing, supporting media articles, target details and identifiers, as well as links to other serious and organised crime gang members and other key counterparties. Our specialist researchers are continuously investigating MSHT and updating the Special Interest List weekly, which allows you to screen your clients, suppliers, investors and other relationships through Themis Search, to check against any possible links, to as many degrees as you choose.

The Head of Modern Slavery Strategy at the [Ethical Trading Initiative \(ETI\)](#), has stated that “organised crime simply takes advantage of the factors that allow modern slavery to thrive in the global economy”. Given the vulnerability of the current global landscape to MSHT, we all have a part to play in reducing the ease or profitability of the practice. The UK’s national [Anti-Slavery Digital Learning](#), launched at the end of March, is intended to help with this, and is freely available to everyone working in the financial services industry and beyond. It features interactive guidance for ten industry sub-sectors, including insurance, crypto, retail banking, corporate banking, investment and accountancy, using diverse multimedia supports and taking a sector-specific approach that reflects the range of challenges faced by different financial institutions.

The training includes insights and video clips from Karen Bradley MP, Caroline Haughey QC, and experts at [HSBC](#), [Nationwide](#), [Fidelis](#), [Anti-Slavery International](#), and [Transparency International](#). It was developed by the UK Government’s National Modern Slavery Training Delivery Group, the [UK Independent Anti-Slavery Commissioner](#), and [Themis](#), with support from [Unseen](#), [RedCompass Labs](#) and [AllianceBernstein](#), and is accredited by the [London Institute of Banking and Finance](#).

We very much encourage all readers to complete this short digital training. The module can be accessed either directly via [Themis Knowledge](#) or via a SCORM package that organisations can take onto their own Learning Management System if they have one.



Get in touch with Hope Sherwin, Head of Social Impact and Modern Slavery Lead at Themis to find out more.

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ABOUT THEMIS

Themis helps clients identify and manage their specific financial crime risks, through a combination of:

INNOVATION



Pioneering RegTech tools to manage financial crime risk

INSIGHT



Threat-based analysis that educates and drives change

INTELLIGENCE



Preventative steps to avoid damaging links to financial criminals

Financial crime is a very real and evolving problem. It has been described as “a cancer on our society” and “an issue of international security.” Not only is the scale of illicit activity in the trillions of £s, but the impact on all of our businesses, the economy and society is profound.

Themis is a financial crime technology platform built around deep threat based expertise and knowledge.

Our cutting edge technology helps organisations understand these strategic threats through an ESG and socio-economic lens and protects their customers, staff, suppliers and shareholders from criminal attacks or association.

In this way, we are fuelling sustainable change in the public and private sector.

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