

## 10 'I'll be safer in Yugoslavia than in the Netherlands'

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Former Yugoslavia has been both a sending and a target country. Because of the war and its specific economic and social conditions, the new Balkan states are becoming increasingly involved in worldwide sex trafficking. As with a real crossroads, they are currently at the intersection of many trafficking routes. Young women accept 'tempting' jobs in Greece, Cyprus, Italy, Germany, France, Sweden and so on. From Belgrade many go west, and some others go to the Middle East to work as dancers. Others have not returned home. Zarita, who comes from Serbia, talked to me just after she had gone to the police. 'In Yugoslavia we hear very little about criminal gangs abroad,' she said. 'My ex-husband, who had worked in Germany, once told me that Yugoslavian prostitutes have a hard time in the Netherlands and Germany and that few girls leave prostitution alive and well.'

As a girl, Zarita had taken up ju-jitsu because she wanted to be a policewoman. She hadn't achieved her ambition because her family did not have enough money for her education, but her training meant she wasn't afraid of reprisals. In Serbia she had had to make do with a job in a factory. She told me, 'I made about £30 a month. I changed my job to work as a waitress in Holland. I was to earn £1,250-£1,750 per month in an all-night restaurant and my 16-year-old niece was to come with me as a dishwasher. We saw the jobs in a magazine called *Advertisements*. It gave a Belgrade telephone number, which I rang. The phone was answered by Bata, who is the man I have just reported to the police. He explained the job's conditions and I decided to accept it. We arranged to meet at a bus stop, where he picked my niece and me up and took us to the house of a friend of his in Belgrade. Two other girls also going to the Netherlands were there. I didn't find any of this strange because I had found a job in a restaurant in

Germany before in a similar way. That first time I really worked as a waitress and stayed with a nice family.'

Other women were less fortunate in their first attempts to find employment in western Europe. Yasmin, who is a former Yugoslavian and now tries to help her fellow countrywomen, said, 'Usually the traffickers promise girls a job as a waitress.' From her career as a voluntary social worker, Yasmin has a vast body of knowledge of criminal networks in former Yugoslavia. 'These traffickers often promise the women work in restaurants. They even mention the restaurant by name to make the enterprise look trustworthy and so that the women's families can keep in touch with them. When parents phone, they are told, "So and so is out for a few minutes, but she'll call you back." Eventually she calls, with a gun pointed at her head. She is made to say cheerfully how well she is doing. The restaurant owner usually doesn't know what is going on, but thinks he is doing a regular customer a favour,' explained Yasmin.

Zarita took up her story again. 'Bata, which was his nickname, promised to take us from Belgrade to The Hague in Holland. After he had dropped us, he was going on to Belgium. I was glad that we were going straight to the Netherlands by car. I even offered him 300 German marks for petrol, which wasn't much considering that a train ticket is more expensive. Just before our departure I wanted to give him the marks, but he said, "Pay later, when you have earned enough money."

'A Bulgarian girl joined us. I was told later that she was travelling on a borrowed Yugoslavian passport, which Bata sent back after we reached Holland. Her own identity papers, which were only valid in Yugoslavia, were taken away from her.

'Bata's brother-in-law and his girlfriend, who helped Bata force women into prostitution, were to accompany us to Germany. Later it emerged that Bata could not travel through Germany because he was wanted by the German police.'

For Zarita the journey to Holland went without a hitch. 'When we arrived we stayed with a friend of Bata's. Nothing happened. After a few days I wanted to see the restaurant where we were supposed to be working. At first Bata said that the proprietor wasn't ready to receive us yet. Next he said we might not be able to work in the restaurant after all.'

When they heard this, the women wondered if they had really been taken on to work as waitresses. The Bulgarian woman thought that a co-operative attitude might help, and said that she was willing to accept other work, cleaning for instance. Bata

seemed pleased, although of course he did have another job in mind: behind a prostitution window.

When Bata finally told the women this, he locked them up and confiscated their personal belongings. He didn't allow them to make any more phone calls. In the meantime his friends were persuading them to give in. The brother-in-law's girlfriend worked on the Bulgarian woman, but she wasn't successful. The woman became upset and withdrawn. 'Don't make a fool of yourself. You already sold yourself in Belgrade,' she was told.

Zarita's niece nagged her, 'Let's do it just for a couple of months, no one will ever know.' Her niece had become co-operative because she was having an affair with Bata and was pregnant by him. 'These men promise the women the world. Sometimes they use their own girlfriends to draw unwilling women across the line,' Yasmin told me. Apparently the niece had taken it upon herself to persuade Zarita. 'I could tell from the blood on the sheets that he had deflowered her, but he certainly did not rape her,' Zarita said. 'I got irritated with Bata's bragging about his affair with my niece. I felt cheated, because at first she had told me there was nothing between them. She didn't tell me he had promised to marry her. To make matters worse, he never told my niece he was already married.'

This love did not last. Zarita said, 'Bata paid a man £300 to find a brothel where my niece and I could work. This man had a relative who owned a sex club in The Hague. So for him it was a piece of cake to earn £300. I considered my niece too young for that kind of work. On top of that I thought it ridiculous that this person got his £300 while we were paid nothing at all. Once a week Bata collected our money from the boss. After three weeks I said I needed my share to go back to Yugoslavia. The owner of the club said he would have to discuss it first with Bata. I told him that Bata had nothing to do with it. This conversation was in Russian, which the boss, although he was Dutch, could understand. Of course, we were never paid a single penny.' The niece soon went off by herself to work in a brothel, which she was taken from by the police. Bata was shocked on hearing this. 'A girl who carried his baby could not be a common prostitute,' Zarita said, although it was Bata who had set her up in prostitution in the first place.

'I kept hoping that Bata would give me my money, so that I could go home. He often promised me that I would have it as soon as other people had paid their debts to him. It turned out afterwards that he had borrowed money himself from a well-known

Yugoslavian bankrobber.' By then Zarita had realized that she would never be paid.

The sex-club owner who had leased the two women wasn't happy with Zarita, who was too rebellious, and asked Bata to find her work elsewhere. This wasn't a problem: Bata's contacts could put Zarita behind the windows and she started there soon after. Zarita wasn't very talkative about her work as a prostitute. She would only say, 'I disliked everything, and I mean everything, about it. Besides, I made very little money.'

When Zarita was working the windows, Bata would constantly check on her by phone. Zarita discovered that he worked with Turkish and Moroccan criminals: his brother-in-law warned her that she would be sold to a Moroccan if she continued to be a nuisance. Bata had already approached a Moroccan who was willing to pay £1,500 for her. When this prospective buyer arrived to inspect his merchandise, Zarita hit him with an ashtray. The Moroccan backed out of the deal. 'Too dangerous,' he told Bata afterwards. At a later point Bata tried to sell her to a second Moroccan, who was disabled. This sale also failed because by then Zarita had reported Bata to the police.

Zarita said, 'Just think of it, they simply sell you. I got goose pimples when I heard that this Moroccan would feed me so many drugs that I wouldn't be able to recognize my own child. I have no idea what drugs he was referring to.' At this point Yasmin added that many former Yugoslavian prostitutes in the Netherlands are transferred to Moroccan pimps.

Not long afterwards Zarita went to Vienna on Bata's orders with his brother-in-law. During the trip Zarita began to realize how well connected Bata was. Before they left, Bata had told Zarita with a grin that they were to collect a new girl, who thought she was going to work as a seamstress. Zarita had to go with the brother-in-law to inspire trust in the girl. The brother-in-law told Zarita that this was not the first time he had had to collect Bata's girls. Bata had tried to force a French girl into prostitution. He had learned French during a stay in France, which had been useful for trafficking French girls. However this girl owned a gun, which she fired at Bata before running off.

According to Yasmin, Vienna is an important transit point for rackets in former Yugoslavia. From here girls are taken to clubs with restricted admittance in Hamburg and other German cities.<sup>1</sup>

During the trip to Vienna Zarita questioned the brother-in-law. 'I wanted to learn more about Bata's group so I could tell the police

later on. But first I wanted to find out if there was any point in reporting to the police.' Zarita discovered that Bata had brought a man called Milos to the Netherlands to burgle houses for him. 'Milos was a dangerous man. He had eliminated a man nicknamed Pitbull and was reputed to be a rapist. He was arrested by the police, but the foreigners' police took over and let him go.' Zarita had every reason to be afraid of Milos, who had once called her to threaten her. 'I'll make a salad of your child,' he had said. Zarita was too frightened to tell the police this.

'I also heard that Bata and his friends had stolen crates containing weapons. In all Bata had spent seven years in prison. His group consisted of about 30 people. The police were looking for them in Belgium, France and Germany. Later on I visited a Yugoslavian club with the police and there were quite a few gangsters. They are supposedly well connected at embassies.'

After hesitating, Zarita went on, 'If I told you all the details, you would be in danger yourself. But I know who killed who and who is being looked for by the police.'

Zarita described Bata as a minor criminal, who would sooner or later be thrown out by the gang. Yasmin agreed: 'His bragging and boasting could have incited someone to shoot him. Besides, he was not qualified for traffic in women. He was no great organizer.' His brother-in-law thought that he was careless, which is possibly why he told Zarita so much, thereby estranging himself from Bata.

It was during the trip to Vienna that Zarita decided to go to the police. She already knew too much and her life was in danger. She met a Yugoslavian punter, who allowed her to hide at his home. Zarita said, 'But the gang soon found me. Bata telephoned my new friend and said that he was going to tell the police that this boy was my new pimp. Bata and his friends also tried to blackmail me with photographs of me behind the window.' She laughed as she added that she had been smart enough to take the films. 'They never expected that.'

In the Netherlands Zarita could only find work as a prostitute. The boy she was living with tried to find her a job in a regular Yugoslavian bar. But the bars were all well staffed with refugees from former Yugoslavia. Zarita saw no other option to working the windows again. One day two Yugoslavs whom she knew to be important came by her window. They said, 'We know you have talked to the police. We'll follow you wherever you go.' 'Mind your own business,' Zarita answered. 'That did not stop them. On

the day I filed my complaint with the police, a few of them were hanging around the police station.'

Bata made a last clumsy attempt to revenge himself on Zarita. He phoned her to say he had told her family that she had run away with stolen money. But nobody believed him.

After she had seen the police, Zarita was anxious to return to former Yugoslavia, but she had to stay in the Netherlands for a few weeks for medical treatment. She was suffering from internal bleeding after being kicked by Bata. 'When I'm back in Yugoslavia, I am going to write a book about these gangs myself,' Zarita announced. 'My family is going to move so I can live with my parents again. The gang won't be able to find me. I'll be safer in Yugoslavia than in the Netherlands. These criminals can never enter Yugoslavia. If Bata comes back, he will be sentenced to another ten years in prison,' she said optimistically.

Several weeks after Zarita's departure, the Bulgarian woman also denounced Bata and his friends to the police, who had removed her from a shelter for refugees. The statements of the two women led to a police investigation and a court case. At the trial, in August 1992, the Bulgarian woman testified against Bata, although she was terrified because he had threatened her. Afterwards she said she had found it difficult because she had had to relive her experiences. 'I wished I would never have to think about it again. But that's impossible. I'll never forget it as long as I live.'

Bata was sentenced to two years' imprisonment in his absence. The Bulgarian woman said, 'Two years, 20 years, it will never be enough for what he did to me and the others.' The brother-in-law got off scot-free because he had been a witness for the prosecution. The police were present in court in force. Policeman Nico van der Geest said, 'If Bata had appeared we would have taken him in immediately. Unfortunately after Zarita filed her complaint, we had to let him go. Next the Bulgarian woman turned up with fresh evidence. But we had no proof of his international connections. We only knew that he was *persona non grata* in Germany. Still, we have always considered this a real case of traffic in women. Such a pity that it only resulted in his conviction in his absence.'

The police and the Bulgarian woman left the court house disappointed. It is true that a relatively small-time criminal, Bata, had been convicted, but he had to be caught first. The other members of the network had escaped unharmed. In 1994 Bata finally did go to prison. According to Yasmin, one of his associates was found dead in an Amsterdam canal.

Also in 1994 there was another victim of a gang from former Yugoslavia who preferred to return to Bosnia to get away from her traffickers. She had gone to the Netherlands, where acquaintances of hers already lived, to escape from the war. She couldn't find a job, but met some friendly people who invited her to stay with them because she was a refugee. As she didn't want to outstay her welcome, she went to live with a friend of a friend. This woman gave her a fatal introduction to her brother, who, with help from another man, made her go on the game. The woman's brother took her to a cheap hotel, locked her up and threatened her: 'Whore, I'll kill you if you don't obey.' He extorted £16,000 from her.

At the subsequent trial he denied everything. He said in his own defence, 'I was involved in a relationship with her. She asked me to rent a window for her. She was down and out. She had spent all her money on drugs and in the discothèque. A Dutch boy found a prostitution room for her. I disagreed with her working in prostitution. They may say my friends and I brandished firearms. I didn't and I don't know how my friends got them. If my friends have said that the girl was afraid of me, they only said it because they were jealous. I made contradictory statements because the war had made me confused.' He denied being in the hotel where the girl was kept under lock and key, but this was refuted by other witnesses and the two young men were found guilty. All the cases and even the statements about Balkan syndicates have the depressing ingredients of personal resentment and violence.

### Escalation in traffic from former Yugoslavia

STV began to notice an increase in trafficked women from Yugoslavia from 1988 onwards. Up till the present time, women haven't played a major part in these groups, which is possibly why rape and macho behaviour are rampant. Yugoslav crooks terrorize both female and male prostitutes. A rent boy said, 'I avoid Yugoslavian clients for my own safety. They'll do anything for next to nothing.' Dutch criminals are also afraid of those from former Yugoslavia.

In trafficking cases there is a sharp division of labour in Yugoslavian gangs: one section recruits the girls, a second collects them and a third guards them. Sometimes the guardians may enter into friendly relationships with the girls. Male procurers, who operate

in the background, are more prestigious than the ordinary working pimps, who stand out because of their vulgar behaviour. 'Bata was such a hard-working, vulgar pimp,' Yasmin said.

Relationships between group members are strictly regulated according to certain codes. Yasmin again: 'It is not done to treat women exceedingly badly, for instance by giving them no money at all. In that case women have nothing to lose. Women without money will walk out and go to the police. So to keep the women quiet, the traffickers sometimes give them small sums of money. That's why Bata sent Zarita's father enough money to buy a cow. It also quietened any suspicions Zarita's father might have.'

Yugoslavian criminals were always free to travel to the west and settled in western Europe long before the Berlin Wall came down. After 1989 they could profit more easily from their knowledge of Slavonic languages, which enabled them to contact women in several eastern European countries, like the Bulgarian woman who was Zarita's partner in misfortune.

There have been many more women since Zarita, for instance one Russian woman was promised a job in Belgrade but was exploited in prostitution by a Bosnian recruiter. A young girl who was trafficked by a Bosnian was forced to invite her sister. She then disappeared into thin air, so we'll never know if she had come to terms with feelings of guilt she expressed after her release. A Croatian man lured women into prostitution from former Yugoslavia and Austria. Several Yugoslavian girls had to work in prostitution with a gun pointed at their heads. One of them was driven alongside an Amsterdam canal. 'Do what I say, or otherwise you'll be drowned,' her 'special protector' told her. The gang also used the old weapon of threatening the family at home. They even managed to recruit a Polish girl who was looking at a bulletin board at the orthodox church in Vienna.

According to the police, the gang was a large one with about 200 members,<sup>2</sup> although the women had only counted 40 or so. They didn't know all of them, but were terrified when two of the gang were murdered. One had fled from Sarajevo because he had killed a policeman, and his body was later found cut in pieces in a rubbish bag. The gang also dealt in arms, drugs, gambling, murder and kidnapping. When police raided one of their gambling dens, a policeman was shot and seriously wounded. The gang had no political background and all the different Yugoslavian nationalities worked together. For them the civil war didn't matter, except in one respect: it made it easier to recruit women.

Not all gangs are politically neutral. 'Some ex-Yugoslavians in western Europe, who are dabbling in arms smuggling, drug traffic and the prostitution racket, are financing the unruly militias waging war in former Yugoslavia. Those gangs don't necessarily have to ship the weapons themselves. In Germany there is a group which wants to realize the goal of a Greater Serbia,' Yasmin said.

In the Netherlands the Criminal Intelligence Unit suspects, but has no proof, that the war is being financed by the profits from drugs and other crimes.

### Picking up the pieces

In former Yugoslavia women's groups are having to cope with the effects of the war, including wartime prostitution. One of these organizations is the SOS Hotline in Belgrade, where Violetta Krasnic, a psychologist, and Zorica Mrsevic, a criminologist, both work. They said, 'Since the war the number of calls to the hotline has increased by 30 per cent. The violence the women report is becoming heavier. Due to the war men have more weapons, and are now experienced killers and experts on torture. One man told his terrified wife, "I could kill anyone, I am a criminal." Women who have fought in the war also have problems; sometimes they go out at the weekend to kill people.

'Though it is formally forbidden, trafficking in women is a crime with little risk attached. Organized criminals are increasingly involved in pimping in our own country. They don't only control the traditional areas, but also recent developments like escort agencies: last year more than 100 new agencies advertised in local papers, all run by criminal organizations. You only have to call them once and that is the end of your freedom. We know of one girl who went to see what it was like. The management stopped her leaving. She only escaped by pretending she had a sexually transmitted disease.

'Many gypsies also call our hotline. Some gypsy families are involved in trafficking. Albanian girls are sold by people from their own community through two channels. Since 1991 at least 70 Albanian women have been trafficked inside Kosovo and from Albania to Yugoslavia and other countries. During the last decade Yugoslavia has been a target country for traffickers from eastern Europe. As far as we know the first group of trafficked women were Ukrainians who thought they were going to work in restaurants.

When they were naïve enough to come to the west, they had to entertain lorry drivers.

'Now we are dealing with refugee women, who are abused in the war zones. We have heard that in Serbia Bosnian women are trafficked when they arrive in the refugee centres. There are special networks, based in Kiev in Russia, which procure women for the soldiers at Unprofor [United Nations protection force] headquarters in Croatia. In the brothels there are also women captured from "the other side".

'Another problem is the trade embargo and the opportunities it offers organized crime to control the situation. Oil is smuggled by the Yugoslav mafia and other eastern European gangs. For oil smuggling you need a high level of corruption, otherwise it is too difficult. It's controlled by war veterans, who will never be satisfied with the status quo. When the embargo is lifted, Yugoslav organized crime will spread throughout Europe.'