



On a mud wall in the corner of the back room where Stefania Nastrut lives with her father, the names of the brothers and sisters she never sees are written in a colorful teenage scrawl. Nearby sits the car

battery that is the family's only electricity.

“I’m staying here only to finish my school,” said Nastrut, 18.

“After I finish school, I will leave somewhere. I will not expect no one to give me money, to criticize me that he gives me money,” she said.

Nastrut is a rarity in this hilly region of Romania, among the poorest in the European Union, simply because she is still there. By the time they reach her age, most teenage girls there — as young as 13 — have long quit school, with many disappearing into the realm of sex trafficking. According to the U.S. State Department’s [2014 “Trafficking in Persons” report](#), one-third of Romania’s trafficking victims are underage girls.

There, traffickers have a keen eye for those made vulnerable by their desperation to leave, making the girls ideal victims. The [Eurostat 2015 report](#) notes that Romania was one of the top five countries of origin for victims of human trafficking in the EU, as registered by organizations (governmental and nongovernmental) throughout the bloc.



Stefania Nastrut, 18, is a rarity in her region, the poorest in the European Union (EU), simply because she is still here. Teenage girls often quit school after the age of 13, many disappearing into the realm of sex trafficking. *(Click to enlarge images)*

According to ADPARE, a nonprofit group working to prevent trafficking and protect its victims in Romania, fueling the problem is the region's emergence as a sex industry destination. The country is routinely listed as a top destination on websites promoting and rating sex tourism.

Since its 2007 accession to the EU, Romania has become a major sex market in Europe — a development that can be seen on the streets of the capital, Bucharest, and in online advertising of Romanian erotic massage parlors. Strip club owner Gheorghe Anghel Alin, 30, said the market is booming. He has invested in two strip clubs in the past couple of years.

Some girls are trapped and sent to Spain, Italy or elsewhere, but most are taken to Bucharest because of the city's newly renovated allure and the ease of transportation.

“[As a foreigner], if you get your contacts right, you land at 9 in the evening on Friday, and by 11, you’ll be with a girl. So it’s faster, it’s safer, it’s cheaper. Not only sex-working, but everything — the hotels, the wine, the cigarettes,” said Dan Popescu, the harm reduction coordinator for the Romanian Association Against AIDS, an NGO that offers needle exchanges, condom distribution and rapid testing for HIV and hepatitis B and C for at-risk populations in Bucharest.



The quiet farmlands of eastern Romania smell of wood fire. Horse-drawn carts sprint along the highways of hilly Bacău County, Romania, disturbing the halo of smoke surrounding the farm where Stefania Nastrut lives with her father. *(Click to enlarge images)*

Romania’s response to trafficking, according to the [Global Slavery Index](#), is among the worst in the EU.

“It is very difficult to find the real number of victims. You can identify a girl that’s been trafficked for a year. You identify her this year, but she’s been trafficked for a year. When do you report her — as being trafficked last year or this year? It’s very difficult to keep track of victims,” said an anti-trafficking officer at the Romanian Directorate for Combating Organized Crime. She declined to be named because she works undercover on cases.

“Internal traffic is rising ... its exploitation on Romanian territory,” she continued. “It’s an invisible crime. Not only on the streets — in apartments as well as hotels ... Most of the time, you can’t walk by her on the street

and recognize she's a victim.”

In Romania, people who testify in court against their traffickers are publicly named by the police, making combating trafficking — an enterprise with strong ties to organized crime — even more difficult. Compounding the problem is the fact that the Romanian parliament in 2014 reduced sentences for traffickers from five to 15 years to three to 10 years.



Viola Tudor, a convicted human trafficker, served his sentence at the Timisoara prison in western Romania. Sitting in a visiting room, Tudor wasn't shy about explaining his role in trafficking, claiming that he helped the girls he sold – and boasting of the monetary temptations of a product that can be sold and resold, over and over, with high profits. *(Click to enlarge images)*

“With this new penal code changed last year, many people come here in our penitentiary, and they are accused of trafficking with minors and adults,” complained Viola Tudor, a convicted human trafficker serving his sentence at the Timisoara prison in western Romania. “They have been in prisons before, and they get three years. And you give me — arrested for

the first time but arrested two years ago — eight years?” he said.

Sitting in a visiting room, he was not shy about explaining his role in trafficking, claiming that he “helped” the girls he sold — and boasting of the monetary temptations of an industry in which girls and women can be sold over and over.

“I had girls from the whole country. I had a guy in a nearby village, and he was looking for the girls for me. He was asking for 500 euros [about \$750 at the time] per girl,” he bragged. “In the worst night, a woman would make you 300 euros. There were some nights when a woman made 1,500 to 2,000 euros.

Tudor was released in early May, after four years of imprisonment, for good behavior.

An air of shame and a culture of extreme privacy prevent most communities from confronting the traffickers who take away so many girls.

Despite the pronounced absence of young women in one village, when asked about sex trafficking, a local priest, who declined to be identified, whispered that the people in his community are very private.

“I’ve heard about it, but I’ve never seen evidence of it here,” he said.

Some police visit schools in an attempt to educate girls on the issue of sex trafficking, but it is often boiled down to a lesson to stay away from bad men.

Most girls remain unaware of the real fate that awaits girls who follow the often familiar faces of men known as lover boys.

The lover boy method is the technique most often used to recruit girls. A trafficker purports to fall in love with a vulnerable girl, offering romance, nice dinners, gifts and the promise of a fairy tale life far away.

The lover boy then claims to fall on hard times and persuades the girl to sell herself just to help make ends meet for a short time.

Once the girls are swayed into selling their bodies, manipulated into feeling obligated to repay the lovely meals and gifts, they are often too ashamed to return home, fearing they will no longer be accepted.

They are sometimes videotaped and threatened with blackmail, then prostituted from apartments, out of sight from police and society.

SLIDESHOW:

Christina said she is targeted constantly, by strangers, by friends, by relatives...even by police. Recently, she was lured away from her loved her. She started supporting him, then discovered he had a separate family, a wife and children, whom she was also supporting. (



The local police are often involved in the trafficking, and the girls have no governmental protection. Romanian police declined to give an official response to Al Jazeera's interview requests.

And when they stay in the trap, they don't see the money they earn," said Yana Matei, the director of Reaching Out Romania, an NGO.

“There are always some bad people,” said an anti-trafficking officer at the Directorate for Combating Organized Crime, who did not want to be named.

But, she said, she knows the work of only the 250 officers in her force, who, she said, are not involved in trafficking and are well educated in the different methods traffickers use.

For the police in Bucharest and across the rest of Romania, unless there is obvious physical evidence of restraint or coercion, sex trafficking is often conflated with prostitution. While both are illegal, prostitution implies consent by all (adult) participants; sex trafficking does not, and it frequently involves minors.

“We see only prostitutes on the street,” said a representative of the Bucharest police, who also declined to be named. He added that “those girls” do what they do by choice. “We don’t see trafficking.”

Hidden in another small village just a few hours from Bucharest is one of the few shelters for trafficked girls in the country, run by Reaching Out Romania. Matei, who manages the home, houses girls ranging in age from 13 to 18. Two sisters at the shelter tattooed the names of their family members on their bodies, “to keep them close,” one said (left). Girls at the shelter make money by selling clothes they've made. (right). *(Click to enlarge images)*

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She says the girls rarely talk with one another about the trauma they experienced. Instead, they attend school, learn how to be teenagers and discover the meaning of self-respect.

In the hallway of the shelter is a crib for girls who became pregnant while captives of the traffickers. Two sisters at the home tattooed the names of their family members on their bodies, “to keep them close,” one said.

The girls' stories are similar: Loveless homes. An attractive young man. Lost in guilt. Perhaps drug use, either forced on them by the traffickers or used as a means to forget. And a feeling that there is no one they can trust. Sometimes they are lured by another girl.

“I met a girl and mentioned my problems with Mom,” said one girl, who was 14 when she was trafficked from her village outside Timisoara.

“She then invited me to move into her house. I said yes because I couldn't live with my mother. The girl's father was invalid, in a wheelchair, and her

mother was doing the exact same thing, like her daughter. I found later, everybody knew what was happening there,” said the girl, now 15.

“Even my doctor told me that the house was like a nightclub, a bar,” she said. The girl stayed at the house for four months before she could escape.

“The worst things are the beating and the reputation. The most painful thing is to hear people shouting at you on the street that you did this or that,” she said, adding that there were other girls in the house, all from broken homes, too ashamed to go back.

“The girls feel guilty. They feel they don’t deserve any good coming their way,” said Matei. “They think they are stupid for falling for it ... They have low self-esteem. No self-worth. That is the biggest hard thing to go through ... and then to motivate to go to school.”

Teenage girls wait for a ride in Bacău's countryside. Bacău is one of the regions inside the EU with the greatest number of missing girls due to trafficking.

A 13-year-old girl displays her drawings at the shelter. She escaped her sex traffickers about 6 months ago. “The girls feel guilty. They feel they don’t deserve any good coming their way,” said Yana Matei.

“They think they are stupid for falling for it ... they have low self-esteem. No self-worth. That is the biggest hard thing to go through ... and then to motivate to go to school.” *(Click to enlarge images)*

Although the shelter’s location is kept secret, the local villagers know the girls there as the “whores on the hill,” said Matei’s son, Stefan Matei, who also works at the shelter.

“It’s organized crime. And they [law enforcement and government officials] choose not to react,” said Yana Matei.

“We should ask ourselves this question, ‘Are you going to do something about this, or are we going to look the other way?’ Where is the police? Where is the interest to fight this crime? It’s lip service.”

Some of the names in the story above have been changed to protect the privacy of the subjects.

Edited by D. Parvaz, Vaughn Wallace

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