

- **Girls from North Albania “victims” of fake mediators**
- **“Fatal marriages” Network**

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The grim scenery of poverty and other social conditions that describe a light surviving, but also the mentality based on the canon, have obliged a lot of girls from North Albania to enter the illegal trafficking in the name of marriages for a better life. This trafficking that is done through “illegal” forms of “matchmaking” includes an organized human and agency networks that profit from the destiny of these girls, who are promised a “heavenly” life from the marriages with widowers in Macedonia.

These agencies intermediate between girls from poor regions of North Albania and the interested “clients” in Macedonia and they function in a total illegality. The stories of a lot of girls that are now victims of this illegal trafficking verify the existence of these agencies in Tetovo and North Albania. Organized well, these agencies keep their functioning “untouched” from the police, which claims that there is no trace of this illegal activity, of the marriages between Albanian girls and Macedonian widowers.

The researches done in Albania and Macedonia, verify the existence of this illegal trafficking network, which is spread on sophisticated information channels and marriage proposals, that later transform in “fatal” relationships for a lot of girls. Beyond these “seducing” proposals for the North Albanian girls, stand the “mediators” who receive a lot of money for a “marriage relationship”.

Everything starts from the “seducing” proposals through which the girls and their families are promised a solution for their “destiny” but later, all this becomes a real “hell” for the “victims” who face unpredictable violence situations, immobilization and mental isolation. The whole background of this trafficking is “wrapped” with the girl’s own wish to get married, but inside this “profiting business” stands the fake and manipulation with the mentality of girls’ families that keep the “canon loyalty”.

Histories of trafficked girls

Vera has just turned 26. Most of these years she has spent in one of the most isolated villages of Puka. Tall bodied blonde, shinning blue eyes, she is so shy that she can’t even look the person whom she is talking to in his eyes. She is embarrassed every time she has to give an answer. It has to be a great sacrifice for her telling the story. A bad event in her life has pushed her feet to this Center, where a lot girls like her found a place to stay. In the many statistics of OJF in Tirana, she results simply in a violated and trafficked creature. For Vera, everything that she has gone through is a nightmare.

“I was 24 when a close relative of my family came together with another man to meet my father. They were locked in the dining room for hours. I don’t know what they talked about. Only after they left, my father told me that he had decided to give me in marriage. I didn’t know who my husband was. Only my father had some information about him and had seen his photo. He told me that he lived in a village in Macedonia, that they were a moneyed family and that I was going to live very nice there. In our house, food supply and other living things were very difficult. I hadn’t bought new clothes for years. We

worked the field and the garden to collect something, in those few summer months when there was no snow. My family, like most of the families in my village has sacrificed a lot for everything...”

Vera lived for three months dreaming about her husband. Maybe after the marriage she wouldn't have a lack of food any more, as well as clothes and also she would have the chance to create a family, what a lot of her friends in the village couldn't have.

According to the family, she was a lucky girl. At least her family would not have to suffer the shame of the daughter staying in their house. Thus, after three months in Vera's house they learned that some people from her future husband's family were going to come to take Vera with them as the bride. “My father thought of organizing a small wedding. With owed money, only to not take me out of the house as a non-valuable thing”. The day she left for her husband's house, Vera is never going to forget, especially the moment when she arrived at the new house. Her husband's name was Zoran and he was 48 years old, with a rude and authoritarian portrait. He had 4 married brothers and his two parents. Only he knew some words in Albanian, the others not even a single word. Vera had to use gestures in communicating with them, for everything. It was so difficult for her, especially when she had something to ask. But, soon she learned that in that family she wouldn't need the language that much. Firstly, no one noticed her. She knew her duties. Hard village works from morning to midnight. At the end, she herself was a village girl and she was used to the hard work. But, very soon she discovered that in the family which she had entered as a “bride”, violence was waiting for her. The nights with her husband were the lightest pain for her. One day, one of her brothers-in-law hit her strong in the head with a frying pan. He hadn't like the meal she had prepared. He had scolded her a lot in his language, words, the meaning of which Vera still doesn't know well, and after hitting her in the head he pushed her in one of the corners of the kitchen. From that day, all the family members hit her, even for the most ordinary reasons. Once her husband, once one of the three brothers, then her old mother-in-law, and so on...

“I couldn't bear this anymore, - says Vera, fainting and sobbing. – They treated me like a slave, I served them the whole day and they beat me. My husband disappeared for weeks. He used to go in Germany. Later I discovered that he had another wife there”.

Vera says that after one terrible year in Zoran's family, she decided to escape. In one of the neighborhood shops, she had met Lindita, an Albanian from Macedonia, who had promised to find her a place to live and a job... Vera's story ends here, and then she starts to cry and says that she had made a mistake. She couldn't go back at her parent's family. “Better dead than returning there”, - she says... Through her new friend, she had met two men from Albania and after that meeting, alone and without a place to live, Vera had accepted any kind of work. “We used to go together with Lindita in a night music bar, when firstly we used to dance...” Vera says that soon the two men that “protected” them forced Vera to become friend with other men. “They often threatened me with a gun in my head and said to obey, only this”. She doesn't give details about her job. She doesn't even tell the names of the men that were “protecting” her. She is scared and continually begs the employee of the rehabilitation center not to ask for names. Although the men accompanying her are in prison now, she knows that one day they will get out and will find her. The social employee ensures her about the contrary, but Vera has heard and learned a lot, approximately one year of her work...

This was the history of Pranvera Gj., actually 26 years old. She told this story only few months ago, in one of the rehabilitation centers of raped and trafficked women. Currently,

Vera lives attracted, she works as a cleaner in one of the companies in the capitol city and almost nobody knows her history in the company where she works, not even where she comes from. Her history is only a fragment in the women trafficking road, a road that is becoming more sophisticated, more hidden and almost safe and far from the eye of the competent organs in Albania.

A clear trafficking scheme

In none of the Tirana police regions, they don't have any information for Vera's history. Not even in the police directory of Shkodra's county. This is because of the fact that Vera has never denounced this. She is simply one of the girls offered help in one of the centers that defend the raped and trafficked women in Tirana.

We ask for other cases and learn that for several months they have not registered any new case in the trafficked victims' rehabilitation centers. And, no denouncement in Tirana or Shkodra police regions (county, from where most of the girls that become victims are).

“It is almost impossible to prevent such cases. In general, everything is well organized”, - says an official source of Ministry of Internal Affairs in Tirana. He continues that “this trafficking way is very sophisticated. Traffickers have become unpredictable. They are very fast. They have a lot of information and cooperate perfectly between each other. We are sorry to say it, but they are many steps ahead from us”.

According to him, the scheme that they follow is very clear. In the areas around Shkodra, Puka or Kukës there exist special people that have correct information for the girls whom their families want to give in marriage under any conditions. These persons are mediators. They contact their cooperators in Macedonia, Montenegro or Serbia and choose grooms for these girls. They receive determined amounts of money, from 300 or 500 EUR up to 2.000 EUR in each of the families, that of the girl and of the boy. After the marriage they don't have any responsibility. They almost always predict the marriage cases that can't last. These are the cases when the offered men for marriage are old. But, they don't care much about the wellbeing of the marriage. Especially, in the cases when the girl's families are people who obey the rude traditions, that have strong laws regarding the shame, and families in which the married girl can never come back anymore if she is divorced. People that "sink" these girls in the trafficking circle, always receive information from these mediators. They don't leave any case escape. And, these girls are the easiest targets, they don't have any hope, they can't return to their families, not even in the nearest city of the area where they have lived, because of the shame.

The same official source in the Ministry of Internal Affairs in Tirana, tells us that two years ago they had the case of two girls from deep areas of Shkodra, who got married through this way in Macedonia. “Their husbands were almost old men. One widowed and the other divorced. Because they couldn't bear the marriage in the two new families, both girls decided to escape and they were stuck in the trafficking network”, - tells the official from the Ministry of Internal Affairs, and he adds that “from all the interviews and investigations done for these cases, it does not result that the marriage was a recruitment, that means to have married with the purpose trafficking them. But, the fact that these mediators and traffickers cooperate between each other, generally doesn't leave any other path for these girls, except becoming trafficking victims”.

In Shkodra, where tens of interethnic marriages are registered within a month...

We are going to Shkodra, where we have arranged a conversation with a character, who knows closely some of the girls that got married in Macedonia and Montenegro through mediators, as he calls them “matchmakers”.

Gjon Gj. is an inhabitant of a new neighborhood, created after the 90s in the periphery of Shkodra. Almost all the inhabitants of his neighborhood come from mountain areas of Shkodra and Puka. They have arrived here immediately after the fall of communism. “It was a possibility for freedom and better life” - Gjon says. He doesn't see anything wrong in these marriages. According to him, this is a good chance for the girls to create their own families in these difficult conditions, when Albanian males have emptied the north villages and almost everyone has migrated.

According to the inhabitants of these areas, when the girl reaches her 25 years, she is considered as “left at her parent's home”, that means that she doesn't have any chances of getting married, or the chances are very small. Coming to town and the difficulties which these inhabitants face, has raised the number of girls from this community who have reached the age of 25. Our character says that the phenomenon of these marriages is spread especially the last 5-6 years. “I can mention round 10 cases of girls from this neighborhood who got married in Macedonia recently”, - says Gjon, he also adds that it is sufficient to have good relations to find a good groom and the families agree to send their children marry outside Albania. “Even my relatives have arranged such marriages for their daughters”. He says that in any case the girls don't see their future husbands. “In most of the cases the relations are created in a chain. If someone has organized a marriage relationship and this relationship has resulted to be a good one, girls than influence their relatives and create other marriage relationships. But, in the most classic cases, special persons that are determined to do this job come to the families that have unmarried daughters and show them photos and other information for boys in Macedonia and Serbia. Only when the parents agree, the chance of the groom to come and see the bride and then come and take her becomes real”. According to him, persons that come to create these relationships are mainly Albanians from Macedonia that know a lot of persons in Albania. “The last ones are those who have built such a network of matchmakers from distance, and in cooperation with matchmakers from Macedonia they create these marriages”, - says Gjon, while he tells us about the case of one his close relative, who got married this way in Bitola, Macedonia. “One of the Albanian mediators knew her family, with origin from Shllak. He talked with the girl's father for the possibility of getting engaged in Macedonia. The girl was 27 years old and unmarried. After two weeks the mediator from Macedonia came, who together with the Albanian whom he had talked firstly, showed to him the photo of the groom that they had found. Except the photo and the address, they gave him also other information. Later they took a photo of the girl to show it to the boy. The father of the girl, through the daughter of a close relative of his, married two years ago in Bitola, showed interest and asked for the boy. Then they asked him to come to Albania. The boy, who lived in a village, came together with two matchmakers and they were welcomed in the girl's house. There the couple saw each other, talked, and the boy that was 43 knew Albanian because he was an Albanian from Macedonia, but everything happened in front of the relatives and the two matchmakers. The same happened in two other cases, when the boy and the girl stayed in

a room and talked, but in the presence of the others. After this, the engagement was announced and than the marriage”. According to Gjon, there are cases when the groom doesn't come at all, but everything is done through the photo and the common relations that serve as guarantee. Starting from the trust they have in the matchmaker, the couple know each other only through photos and they can also communicate by phone. Gjon tells us about a similar case that was registered a year ago, when E. D., 28 years old, married a man from the villages of Struga, and where the matchmaker was her aunt's daughter, married three years before in the same family, who brought together her cousin with her brother-in-law, her husband's brother.

According to our informatory, in all these cases the matchmakers are paid by both sides. He doesn't tell the amount that they pay, but we learn that this amount is around 500 EUR. Regarding these payments, we learn that they never declare about this in public. The receiving of money for such services is done secretly and in close conversations.

In Shkodra, where the girls are afraid to denounce...

Although the histories of Gjon Gj. don't relate to the cases of these girls that end up very bad, we learn that this category is the luckiest one. In this town they tell us about other cases of girls that got married using this formula and had ended up in the street. Starting from these histories, we talk to a high police officer in Shkodra, who is very surprised when we tell him about one of the histories of our research. He says that they always knew about this problem, but the police forces are currently in a deadly road regarding the investigations of these cases. We learn from him that in the section against illegal trafficking there is not evidenced statistically at least one case of this nature, starting from the date that this section is created, 2002. The reason, according to him is a very simple one. They can't initiate any investigation without having a denouncement, at least one single case, which would discover later on, if not the whole trafficking network at least one its segment.

“You should understand that it is impossible for these girls to make a denouncement. They, not even return to their houses, villages from which they come from, not even in the town. They are afraid and don't believe that will solve something for their future.” – says this police officer, closing with the words that this situation is very desperate and requires maximal commitment of the competent organs.

The traces of the illegal trading with Albanian girls remain safely locked in Macedonia. The agencies and mediators take care that this trafficking is done in a complete legacy. But, the girls that by now are “victims” of this trafficking, and that despite all misfortunes remain in their “fake” marriage relationships, because they don't have any other choice, time after time they “issue” information when they meet different people in different places for individual needs, like the case when they are admitted in a hospital. In general, these girls are kept isolated from the community, because most of them live in peripheral residences.

According to the unofficial information it is believed that the number of girls that have stepped into a marriage through illegal agencies is above 400 only in the city of Tetovo. Unofficially we learn that these agencies function as “stations” for marriage mediating between girls from Albania and other persons from different categories of Macedonian

community, while the sum of this mediation reaches the amount of 500 EUR. All those persons in Macedonia that can't marry due to different reasons apply in these agencies, and later on they receive offers by the mediators.

Unofficially we learn that in Tetovo, functions an agency for marriage mediation, which remain camouflaged as a lawyer's office. Several times the written media in Macedonia has written about the functioning of this office, but the Ministry of Internal Affairs has not managed to identify the same. In the questions addressed to the Sector of Internal Affairs in Tetovo, for the functioning of this office that is located in the second floor of the Green Market, known under the name of "Vanilla Sky" and managed by a Macedonian lawyer, for three months didn't give a concrete answer for the functioning of this mediation office.

According to this section, this office is not involved in criminal activities and human trafficking, not only in a local level, but in a wider context. Marjan Josifovski, the responsible person for public relations in the Sector of Internal Affairs in Tetovo, says that we will investigate further, and in the moment that we will find out about law violation we will undertake law activities and publish them. However, according to him the act of the couples for getting married is their right and it is done according to their wish and here this sector cannot intervene as long as there is no denouncement from the persons involved in marriage.

The Center for social work in Tetovo, officially doesn't give information about these types of marriages despite the fact that we have addressed them questions regarding this phenomenon. According to the leaders of different sectors of this institution, this center under the new law doesn't have information regarding the marriage of the couples and they don't have information for the marriage relationships of the girls from North Albania with Macedonians from Tetovo.

However, years ago in 2006, according to this center, only in Tetovo more than 300 girls from Albania have married Macedonians from Tetovo. The number of such marriages till 2000 has been very symbolical, but their number has raised a lot after the year of 2001. Nada Vlazevska, sociologist in the Center for Social Works in Tetovo, in 2006, has declared for a local newspaper that the marriages between girls from Shkodra and north parts of Albania with Macedonians from Tetovo and the region, is growing up. According to her, the reasons for the growing of these marriage relationships still remain unknown.

"In the conversations we have had with these girls, none of them hasn't declared that they has stepped into marriage as a result of pressure or fear, on the contrary all have declared that they married Macedonian citizens based on their own wish and with the permission of their families", declared Vlazeska.

Although apparently everything looks alright, still a large number of these marriages are motivated by the profit of the mediators. Beyond the declarations for marriage based on their own wish and the few information of the institutions, remain the terrifying facts of a lot of girls from Albania, who cannot denounce and tell about their lives in these relationships.