

ARTICLE

Human Trafficking Dynamics and Prevention Efforts as an Outcome of Russia's War on Ukraine

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Abstract

Debates on the connection between human trafficking and war have been discussed in wars and conflicts across the globe. Russia's war on Ukraine has brought this relationship to the forefront again, questioning whether trafficking flows have increased, examining the types of trafficking in war, and determining the conditions (if any) that make it flourish. This article examines human trafficking in Ukraine before the war and during limited and total war to determine how governments with robust anti-trafficking institutions negotiate anti-trafficking responses over different stages of war. The main research question of this study aims to determine how different stages of the war in Ukraine have changed human trafficking dynamics and responses over time. Using data from interviews and participant observations from Ukraine, I analyze the different types of human trafficking characteristics and flows, conditions that create vulnerabilities, and prevention tools that have been used in different periods. I theorize that war fundamentally alters human trafficking prevention but a foundation of prevention tools before war means that governments are better able to respond to human trafficking dynamics and flows when war occurs. Ukraine offers a unique and important perspective from which to examine human trafficking dynamics and the consequences of war due to a stable government, external aggressor, and clear path for those fleeing the violence to the European Union. The results show that Ukraine's strong prevention efforts before the war helped shape responses after the war and full-scale invasion began. The data revealed that human trafficking is a longer-term form of gender-based violence in war because the exploitation is prolonged and there is a delay in identifying victims.

Keywords: Ukraine; human trafficking; war; migration flows; prevention tools

Soon after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, accounts of human trafficking¹ poured in via aid workers and volunteers on Ukraine's borders (BBC 2022). Although Ukraine has been a source country for human trafficking since the late 1990s and has a long track record of victim identification and rehabilitation, manifestations of the crime during war can be different. Consequently, human trafficking flows are not new for Ukraine, but the 6.9 million internally displaced persons (IDPs)² living throughout the country (International Organization for Migration [IOM] 2022a) and the 7.8 million people that have fled as refugees³ to neighboring countries since the war began in 2014 (UNHCR 2022) means that the number of people at risk for human trafficking has changed significantly with the full-scale invasion and total war in 2022. The unprecedented number of refugees and IDPs due to Russia's war on Ukraine has increased vulnerabilities and risks for human trafficking within the displaced population, though not all displacement leads to human trafficking. The main research question of this study is concerned with determining how different stages of war have changed human trafficking dynamics and

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responses over time. I question how responsive governments are to human trafficking during war and whether institutions before the war make a difference in prevention efforts during total war. The Ukrainian case is important because its government was relatively responsive to human trafficking before the different stages of war, and the example of Ukraine demonstrates how other transitioning democracies could respond to human trafficking during war in the future.⁴

Human trafficking is recognized as an outcome of war in many countries, including Colombia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Syria, and Iraq, although the linkages and dynamics are debated (Steele 2006; Nagle 2013; Healy 2016; Maloku and Maloku 2020). Most of the literature focuses on migration flows, which are uncertain and difficult to measure during war and peace. Consequently, this article focuses on concrete and measurable government responses and anti-trafficking institutions, examining how these responses change with different stages of war. Ukraine is an interesting case study to add to this literature because of the differences from previously studied wars and conflicts; there is a clear external aggressor from a neighboring country and former colonizer on the border of the European Union. Ukraine also offers real-time opportunities to examine the effects of war on human trafficking in a transitional democratic middle-income country with significant access to technology. Ukraine provides a before-and-after analysis during war, revealing what has changed with prevention efforts and the characteristics of trafficking. Human trafficking is a complex phenomenon that is difficult to detect and research. Measuring the scale of such an underreported crime is challenging due to the hidden nature of the crime, and wartime conditions make accurately studying this crime even more difficult. The complexity of studying this crime, especially during war, is why this article focuses on visible substantive changes over time to determine how prevention efforts shift during war. Examining this response over time allows us to see the evolution of trafficking trends and how attention shifts away from trafficking when confronted with different phases of war and invasion from an outside entity, a perspective lacking in previous studies.

This article is based on fieldwork in Ukraine, focusing on human trafficking developments that have appeared before and after the start of the limited war in 2014 and full-scale invasion or total war in 2022, as a within-case study comparison of three periods.⁵ Most research on trafficking and war focuses only on trafficking dynamics after the war has started, but I posit that research across time is important because it can help us understand how governments will respond to human trafficking in war. I theorize that war fundamentally alters human trafficking efforts. However, a foundation of prevention tools before war means that governments are better able to respond to human trafficking dynamics and flows when war occurs. The theoretical contribution of this article is the exploration of how existing anti-trafficking institutions can shape response efforts during and after war. I examine how these institutions evolved and survived during war and discuss their resilience when governments are confronted with war. Although forced migration flows are hard to predict in war, effective anti-trafficking institutions can mean that some governments, like Ukraine, are better able to respond when the war efforts shift the agenda. This challenges existing theory, which focuses on the lack of government response during previous wars in Colombia, the Balkans, and Syria and shows how studies before and after war can contribute to the literature linking human trafficking and war.

The article begins with an examination of the relationship between human trafficking and war and the debates surrounding these connections including trafficking flows, push and pull factors, and government capacity. Then, the Ukrainian case is presented via exploring the different human trafficking dynamics and prevention tools across time, providing an integral analysis of how the different phases of war have changed human trafficking responses by exacerbating vulnerabilities to human trafficking in this highly visible war. I then analyze prevention efforts with government capacity in Ukraine, focusing on measurable changes to human trafficking laws, the lead agencies coordinating the response, working groups formed to combine efforts, and victim rehabilitation, all aspects of the governmental response and prevention tools over time. I found that although some migration flows and types of trafficking have remained the same, the war has permanently altered Ukraine. Not only is there less government capacity and attention focused on trafficking; the

economic crisis has affected monetary support for trafficking activities, and fewer victims⁶ have been identified and have received assistance. The data showed that the development of anti-trafficking institutions before the war built a foundation of prevention tools and helped Ukraine respond to human trafficking dynamics and flows when the war occurred.

Connections between Human Trafficking and War

There is a small but growing literature on the connections between war and human trafficking, although the connection between war and increased trafficking flows remains ambiguous. Existing research shows the potential effects of war on human trafficking with different characteristics, dynamics, and prevention tools. According to the IOM, “crisis situations can exacerbate existing vulnerabilities to and manifestations of trafficking in persons,” which is why “trafficking should be seen as directly related to crisis situations and not just a side effect” (Judd 2015, para. 7). Heightened vulnerabilities are an agreed-upon outcome of war, leading to an increased supply of people at risk for human trafficking (Steele 2006; Healy 2016; Achilli 2017). War makes people more vulnerable to trafficking by “reducing their agency, constraining their alternatives and thus compelling them into making decisions they may well acknowledge as risky, but which nevertheless represent the ‘least worst’ option available” (Cockbain and Sidebottom 2022, 4). Understanding these vulnerabilities in violent conflict and war situations is an essential caveat in responding to and preventing the crime of trafficking in persons, where traffickers can operate with impunity in war and peacetime conditions (IOM 2023). Steele (2006) found that the war in Colombia amplified peace conditions that were favorable to human trafficking because the atmosphere of violence generated demand for trafficking and opportunities for armed groups to facilitate trafficking within the country, specifically to fight in the conflict. Human trafficking can be directly related to war when it is part of the violence perpetrated by groups in the war/conflict (IOM 2023). A study by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) reported four critical factors associated with conflict and increased vulnerability to human trafficking during war including “state collapse, deteriorating rule of law and impunity, forced displacement, humanitarian need and socioeconomic stress, and social fragmentation and family breakdown” (2018, 5).

Some argue that there is no link between war and human trafficking. Survey data from Russia revealed “that respondents could not satisfactorily explain [the war’s] precise link to human trafficking and certainly not to trafficking abroad or to the wider picture of trafficking within or from Russia” (Buckley 2009, 234). With fewer testimonials and victims coming forward, the deficiency of data on the topic makes it an opaque form of gender-based violence in war to document. This lack of identified victims 1.5 years into the total war in Ukraine has caused people to question whether trafficking flows have increased during war and conflict situations (The European Institute for Crime Prevention and Control, affiliated with the United Nations [HEUNI] 2023). Other research suggests that the quick response of numerous countries due to the Russian invasion in 2022 prevented widespread vulnerability to trafficking in persons in Ukraine (IOM 2023).

There are also significant debates on changing trafficking flows within and from countries as a result of war and conflict. In Syria, trafficking was not related to migration across borders; instead, traffickers “target the vulnerabilities caused by displacement post facto, with the trafficking process beginning when IDPs and refugees are already among host communities” (Healy 2016, 4). The war in Colombia produced large-scale rural-to-urban displacement of about three million people, mostly within the country (Steele 2006), but hard data on trafficking are difficult to obtain because of the conflict (Nagle 2013). The Balkan wars revealed that political and economic instability and extreme poverty were the main drivers for trafficking (Maloku and Maloku 2020). The war in Syria exposed different types of trafficking directly related to the war, such as survival sex, ISIS exploiting people for sexual slavery and forced marriage, domestic servitude before and after the war, and exploitation in armed conflict by several parties (Healy 2016). A typology on the kinds of human trafficking that exist during conflict included seven types: sex trafficking facilitated by peacekeepers

and humanitarian agencies, sex trafficking by armed groups, forced labor of children in armed groups, slavery practices, trafficking to extort ransom, forced labor into combat, and organ trafficking for the removal of organs (Muraszkiwicz, Iannelli, and Wietlschnig 2020).

Wars around the world have resulted in different criminal entities capitalizing on instabilities. The war in Chechnya documented the role of criminal groups facilitating trafficking with hostage-taking situations, abductions for money, slavery, and human trafficking of primarily men (Molodikova 2020). In Colombia, research found evidence of forced marriages, sexual slavery, child trafficking, and forced prostitution of women and children by armed groups (Steele 2006). Research from Syria suggests that trafficking linked to the war was “more often the consequence of the protracted condition of deprivation and irregularity than the precise criminal intents of mafia-like organizations” (Achilli 2017, 130). Russia’s private military and security organizations like the Wagner group, have a long track record of using child soldiers in Syria and different conflicts in Africa and Eastern Ukraine (van Rij, Mohay, and Bileišis 2020). Thus, in some wars criminal groups trafficked people, in others the armed groups involved in the conflict were the traffickers, and sometimes there were no organized entities facilitating trafficking.

Government capacity was also another element discussed in the literature on war and human trafficking. The lack of government responses (legislation, awareness campaigns, trainings) to human trafficking in the Balkans (Rathgeber 2002) was common as countries emerged from war and violence. Corruption was also discussed in relation to government capacity. Increased police and military presence in the Balkans led to payouts to police officers who were facilitating human trafficking by protecting traffickers or using free sexual services at nightclubs (Maloku and Maloku 2020). Garashchenko discussed that in Ukraine, “there is still a lack of help centers and capacity for qualified help to victims of both human trafficking and gender-based violence, as well as a lack of attention to key preventive measure—countering demand, mentioned in regulations, but not implemented in practice, not supported by action plans” (2022, 12). The research identified several issues with government capacity arising from the war in Syria including the humanitarian situation, legal status, lack of migration alternatives, child marriage, gaps in anti-trafficking response, sexual and gender-based violence, and discrimination (Healy 2016).

This section showed how existing research disputes the relationship between human trafficking and wars and conflicts in various countries around the world. The research centers on reasons for this increase, including the changing characteristics of human trafficking, increased conditions that create vulnerabilities in war, and government responsiveness or lack of response. Different typologies on trafficking types during war posit how war and conflict can introduce new and unique types of trafficking. Then, other theories on human trafficking in war suggest that “state collapse, deteriorating rule of law and impunity, forced displacement, humanitarian need and socioeconomic stress, and social fragmentation and family breakdown” are critical factors associated with human trafficking during war (UNODC 2018, 5). Existing research is limited in that it does not include transitional democracies or examine the trafficking situation before the outbreak of war or conflict, so there is no baseline for comparison, which limits the analysis. Consequently, I argue that war fundamentally alters human trafficking prevention, but a foundation of prevention tools before war means that governments are better able to respond to human trafficking dynamics and flows when war occurs. In this article, I look at how existing anti-trafficking institutions evolved and survived during the war and how they shaped response efforts during and after the war. Effective prevention frameworks with anti-trafficking institutions can mean that some governments like Ukraine, were better able to respond when the war effort shifted the government’s attention.

The Ukrainian case is an important addition to the literature because it shows the response of a middle-income transitional democratic country on the edge of Europe that does not fit well with the previous research and theories. First, Russia’s war on Ukraine is different from these previous wars in that it involves an outside aggressor invading another sovereign country, not a separatist, independence, or rebel movement from within its borders. As a result, there is no state collapse and minimal deterioration of the rule of law and impunity, so government capacity and prevention

efforts persist. Second, Ukrainians who are fleeing the full-scale war have a clear pathway and immigration status in bordering European Union countries (women, children, and men under 18 and older than 60), which limits the vulnerabilities of the displaced population outside of the country, although vulnerabilities inside Ukraine remain. These conditions create an interesting case for comparison with other countries who have experienced war or conflict and demonstrate why examining government response over time before and after war in Ukraine is vital. The establishment of prevention frameworks with anti-trafficking institutions like laws, shelters, designated government agencies, working groups with different entities, and victim identification before the war have helped Ukraine navigate the chaotic evacuation and mobility of people within Ukraine and across borders during the limited and total stages of the war.

Methods

To compare the human trafficking conditions in the three different periods, interviews and research from eight months of fieldwork during 2012–2013 were used as a baseline for this study. Then results from this period before the war were compared with those that were obtained from the fieldwork and interviews that were conducted during different stages of the war July–August 2015 and December–January 2022–2023. During 2012–2013, I conducted 49 interviews, 16 with government officials, 18 with local organizations, six with academics and journalists, and nine with international partners. I returned in 2015 during the limited war and conducted 10 follow-up interviews with one academic, three local organizations, and six international partners. Then, since the total war began in 2022, I have continued email correspondence with my previous interview subjects and attended several online briefings to receive updates on the evolving situation. Due to electrical- and Internet-connectivity issues, some respondents decided to write answers to my questions. In total, five respondents answered my questions via email, and I interviewed three more over Zoom, comprising three local organizations and five international partners. These entities working on the ground over time in Ukraine offer the best vantage point for understanding the changes that are happening in Ukraine during the war, as they work with the issue of human trafficking daily. Anti-trafficking organizations work to identify and rehabilitate victims, work on outreach campaigns, and observe the outcomes of prevention tools and anti-trafficking institutions, providing a bridge between the government and the people, so I chose to focus on interviews with this group. Large-scale displacement over time and vulnerability estimates are difficult to accurately research, and government institutions do not depict the messiness of human realities of people movement. Thus, research restraints during war limit the findings of my analysis, but I believe that local and international organizations in Ukraine are the most knowledgeable about the situation on the ground over numerous periods and offer a vital and underresearched perspective.

I used semistructured, open-ended interviews, with different interview questions (see the Appendix) during the different stages of the war. I employed purposive sampling techniques to select a sampling frame of respondents based on my knowledge of the human trafficking entities as a guide. In addition to seeking out key individuals, I used a reputational snowball sampling where I identified interview subjects based on the suggestions of other interview subjects. I followed up with the people that I interviewed in 2012–2013, 2015, and then again via email or Zoom during 2022–2023. The interviews are anonymized, and the participants were given pseudonyms to show the breadth of interview respondents over time. Participant observation was also conducted at 18 different anti-trafficking organizations around Ukraine. The interviews were triangulated with various data sources that I obtained from archives, newspapers, humanitarian reports, international organizations, and government documents in order to support interview data.

The cross-case study comparison over time focuses on a method of difference, specifically what has changed over time with trafficking dynamics and prevention efforts. The three case study periods have different outcomes, and focusing on different conditions that are present in all the cases allows me to isolate that difference (George and Bennett 2005). A longitudinal study focuses

on comparisons over time and the variation of a case that “undergoes change in variables of interest” (Gerring and McDermont 2007, 694). In the Ukrainian case, I focus on the repeated observations of the same variables over different periods (Gerring and McDermont 2007), which allows for a comparison of the difference in dynamics and prevention efforts. The cross-case comparison focuses on migration dynamics and five measurable prevention tools because human trafficking is a messy phenomenon with migration flows and vulnerabilities in many directions, especially during war. The comparison focuses on the migration dynamics and prevention tools because during the war many of the prevalence estimates are flawed. Therefore, focusing on measurable human trafficking differences provides an objective way to show the differences with human trafficking that are created by war when so many aspects of human trafficking are unmeasurable. This cross-case comparison with interview data is important for governance because it shows how political institutions respond and allows me to assess their resiliency during crises like wars.

Prewar Human Trafficking

Before 2013, Ukraine was seen as a significant source country for forced labor, sex trafficking, and child begging (Pyshchulina 2003; Hughes and Denisova 2004) and it was identified as one of the leading countries of origin for victims of trafficking (IOM 2011). Ukraine was categorized as a source, transit, and increasingly a destination country for human trafficking of men, women, and children (United States Department of State 2013). Several industries have been identified as involved in forced labor including construction, agriculture, manufacturing, domestic work, lumber, and nursing (United States Department of State 2013). In the 1990s and 2000s, the majority of trafficking victims from Ukraine were young women ages 15–24 (IOM 2011). In 2008, the number of people trafficked for labor exploitation exceeded the number trafficked for sexual exploitation, marking a change in the type of victims and expanding at-risk groups for trafficking to include men of all ages and children (IOM 2011). Minor trafficking also increased significantly in Ukraine before the war, along with sex trafficking, forced begging, forced labor, and organ removal (Gerasymenko 2011). During this period, Ukrainians were trafficked to other countries such as Russia (39%), Turkey (13%), and Poland (14%) (IOM 2011).

Prevention Tools until 2013

Human trafficking laws lay the foundation for prevention tools and are often the first step in the creation of anti-trafficking institutions (shelters, hotlines, and other forms of government assistance) developed to combat human trafficking. Ukraine was one of the first countries in the world to make human trafficking illegal in 1998 (Dean 2020). Ukraine continued its pattern of legal development up until the limited war by adopting 13 policy changes including amendments to the criminal code, numerous national action plans in the 2000s, decrees by the Cabinet of Ministers, a national law in 2011, and numerous other laws adopted in between. The national law that was adopted in 2011 sought to standardize legislation, systematically combat human trafficking, and rehabilitate victims of this crime.

The Ministry of Social Policy was the lead government entity tasked with combating and implementing human trafficking policies. However, this responsibility was first given to the Ministry of Family and Youth Affairs in 1999, and administrative reforms changed the implementing body four times. It was finally assigned in 2012 to the Department of Gender Policy, Combating Human Trafficking, and Protection of the Rights of Deportees within the Ministry of Social Policy and named the National Coordinator for Human Trafficking Initiatives (Natalka, government official, interview with author, November 2012, Ukraine). A working group called the Interagency Coordinating Council on Combating Trafficking in Human Beings was established with the support of international organizations, NGOs, and stakeholders within the ministries in 1999 (Karpachova 2002, 220). Respondents told me in 2013 that there had not been a meeting since 2011, so they did not meet regularly (Natalka, government official, interview with author, November 2012, Ukraine).

A shelter, the Medical Rehabilitation Centre, was established in 2002 because advocates realized the need for a place where Ukrainian victims who were returning home could go to receive support and services. The center in Kyiv provided free short-term medical care and psychological assistance to victims of trafficking, and then 28 reintegration partners located throughout the country facilitated reintegration assistance with services including medical, psychological, legal, and financial assistance; shelter; and vocational training (IOM 2013). The Cabinet of Ministers also decreed the process and criteria for the victim of trafficking (VoT) status, which entitled victims to a one-time financial benefit and rehabilitation services (Dean 2020).

Human Trafficking and Limited War (2014–2021)

During the first phase of limited war, respondents discussed evidence of separatist forces using child soldiers (Yulia, international organization, interview with author, July 2015, Ukraine), with reports of forced recruitment and kidnapping of men and boys for exploitation (IOM 2015a). Other entities reported increased child begging (IOM 2015a) and kidnapping of women and girls for the “purposes of sex and labor trafficking” by the antigovernment forces (United States Department of State 2015, 346). Respondents also discussed a shift in labor trafficking from male victims to female victims during the limited war (Alla, international organization, interview with author, August 2015, Ukraine). Forced labor was still the most prevalent form of human trafficking, as it was prior to the limited war, but the shift in identified victims from majority male to majority female revealed the effects of the war and economic crisis on women (IOM 2015a).

War, displacement, and the economic crisis in Ukraine led to an increase in the number of people who are vulnerable to human trafficking. The percentage of the population that was considered vulnerable increased from 14% to 21% since the conflict began (GfK Ukraine 2015). Vulnerable people were those who identified that they were willing to work unofficially, cross borders illegally, surrender their passports, or work at an unregistered company (GfK Ukraine 2015). Within Ukraine during this time, there were 1.7 million internally displaced people and 1.4 million people fled to neighboring countries (Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs 2015), showing a large increase in the displaced population, which expands vulnerabilities but does not always lead to human trafficking. Although some of the IDPs fled to Russia (Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs 2015), it was no longer the preferred destination for Ukrainian labor migrants during this period, as most preferred Poland or Germany (GfK Ukraine 2015).

Prevention Tools 2014–2021

After the war began in March 2014, much of the attention shifted to supporting the government’s war efforts. It was not until a significant number of people were displaced by the annexation of Crimea and the start of the war in Donbas that the government-initiated assistance to people fleeing the conflict and shifted some of its attention to IDPs. Ukrainian organizations that were already working on the ground when the war started were the first to respond with assistance. Although many had limited capacity and finances, they worked to help displaced people through an established anti-trafficking NGO network, local contacts, and social media. Anti-trafficking NGOs expanded their missions, using contacts around the country by relying on their knowledge of the regions to help facilitate international assistance and referrals to other organizations. The anti-trafficking organizations once located in the occupied territory relocated to new regional centers in Kramatorsk and Severodonetsk (Alla, international organization, interview with author, August 2015, Ukraine). Ukrainian NGOs have repeatedly demonstrated their ability to pick up the slack when the government is unable or unwilling to respond even during war (Dean 2020), something evidenced in both stages of the war.

In total, 16 pieces of legislation in the form of decrees or resolutions were adopted during this period, but most of these legal documents were updates and clarifications of previous documents.

The previous state program expired and the *Concept of the State Programme on Combating Human Trafficking until 2020* on October 7, 2015, was adopted 10 months after the previous national action plan expired and signed by the Cabinet of Ministers in February 2016. The next *Concept of the State Targeted Social Program to Combat Trafficking in Human Beings until 2025* was approved on July 14, 2021, a year and a half after the previous one expired. The pandemic slowed human trafficking legal development in Ukraine. The *Trafficking in Persons* report rankings from the United States (US) were also important to the Ukrainian government because the rankings are connected with foreign aid packages. Linking anti-trafficking work and policy implementation to foreign aid was one reason why human trafficking was a priority for the Ukrainian government in theory, but in practice their actions seemed to reveal that they were doing the bare minimum to keep their international aid and visa-liberalization incentives.

The National Coordinator for human trafficking remained in the Ministry of Social Policy during this period, but this ministry was overwhelmed by the registration process of the 1.5 million registered IDPs in the country. As a result, the focus on human trafficking victims during this period dwindled. Interview respondents also mentioned that there were changes within the bureaucracy, as supporters of the new regime were appointed to positions replacing anyone associated with the previous regime (Yulia, international organization, interview with author, July 2015, Ukraine). These new bureaucrats were more open to working with NGOs than were bureaucrats in the previous regime, but there was less progress made on legislation and less efficiency (Yulia, international organization, interview with author, July 2015, Ukraine). In 2020, the National Social Service under the ministry was established to implement state policy in the field of social protection of the population and children's rights, and they took over awarding the VoT statuses (Natalka, international organization, online interview, December 2022).

Before 2014, working groups rarely met, but the first stage of the war saw a renewed emphasis on interagency efforts to combat trafficking. The Ministry of Social Policy formed an interagency working group on the "protection of civilians during counter-terrorist operations" in June 2015 "to prevent the involvement of civilians in armed conflict, particularly women and children, and the prevention of violence and trafficking" (Ministry of Social Policy 2015). Thus, compared with the period before 2014, there was a working group that met regularly to discuss the issue of human trafficking, but their attention was likely focused on other immediate issues such as displaced persons and domestic violence. Additionally, the United Nations activated the cluster approach in December 2014 to aid in the humanitarian crisis,⁷ which signified that the Ukrainian government needed assistance (Protection Cluster 2015) to coordinate a strategic response to the crisis (Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs 2013). One of the cluster groups was about gender-based violence (including human trafficking), which met monthly to examine the situation in Ukraine as a result of the crisis.

Despite Ukrainians' increased vulnerability during this period, the number of identified victims in the first half of 2015 was down by 30% relative to the first half of 2014 (IOM 2015a). The IOM identifies the reason for this as "an outcome of the diversion of the attention and resources of civil society and government at the local level to other pressing issues, such as mass internal displacement and the ongoing armed conflict in the Donbas region" (IOM 2015a, 1). Because human trafficking is a fluid occurrence that does not produce victims directly after the push factors that enable trafficking to occur happen, there is often a lag of two years between the time that economic crises or conflicts occur and when victims begin to appear. Table 1 shows the progression of VoT statuses during the limited war. However, Table 1 does not show the 72 applications that applied for the VoT status and were rejected by the government because police did not categorize the crime as trafficking (United States Department of State 2020). The pandemic worsened existing problems with VoT status and victim identification because the paperwork had to be submitted in person and the government diverted funding earmarked for human trafficking to pandemic assistance (United States Department of State 2021).

Table 1. Number of Identified Human Trafficking Victims across Sectors in Ukraine 2012–2023

	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	Total
Ministry of Social Policy	12	41	27	83	103	195	214	185	134	64	47	1,105
Ministry of Interior	187	107	126	111	112	346	275	297	203	222	115	2,101
IOM rehabilitation center	951	932	899	742	1,150	1,245	1,192	1,345	1,680	1,010	179	11,325

Source: IOM 2020, United States Department of State 2011–2022, Ministry of Social Policy 2020, and interview data from 2022.

The human trafficking hotlines were active during this period, with both governmental and nongovernmental hotlines. There was the government-sponsored Counter-Trafficking and Migrant Advice Hotline 527, which assists over 20,000 persons annually (United States Department of State 2016). The 527 hotline “reported a 14% increase in the number of calls from IDPs within the six months of 2015 compared to the entirety of 2014” (IOM 2015b, 1). In 2020, the hotline observed a 33% increase in calls to 29,344 but “fewer than 40 percent of the calls were from victims or potential victims” (United States Department of State 2021, 575). La Strada Ukraine (2022a) has also run a hotline for the prevention of domestic violence, human trafficking, and gender discrimination since 1997, and in 2017 it started operating under the single harmonized European number for psychological assistance.

Human Trafficking and Total War (2022–Present)

Evidence of human trafficking since the invasion is tangential, but there have been reports of forced deportations, gender-based violence, illegal conscription, and abductions, which create vulnerabilities for exploitation in Ukraine. Respondents discussed an increase in exploitative practices since the start of the total war including exploitation of prisoners or detainees on the occupied territories, firing people after a couple of months of work without payment by stating they did not pass the probation period, and survival sex in exchange for housing (Olha, international organization, email correspondence, December 2022). Evidence has been reported of the use of child soldiers in combat, as well as the forced recruitment of men and boys (United States Department of State 2023). Forced labor in the Russian-occupied territories was also found in mines, clearing debris and corpses, and drug trafficking (United States Department of State 2023). There have been reports that women and girls have been kidnapped for sex and labor trafficking. As trafficking dynamics are a fluid phenomenon, migration flows have changed over the course of the total war. Natalka from an international organization said,

Risk factors during the first stage when people were fleeing included finding an apartment and looking for food, putting them at risk of sexual exploitation. However, as time goes on, people start looking for a job, and of course then, the next step would be a risk of labor trafficking. Risks of online trafficking have also increased, and so have online searches for sexual services from Ukrainians. (online interview, December 2022)

Due to the total war, Ukraine is no longer a destination country because people who are migrating to the EU will likely choose other routes. However, forced labor in the construction industry was prevalent before the war and during the limited war, so it will likely be a factor in reconstruction efforts during and after the war. Reports of exploitation in the occupied territories with workers from Central Asia sent to reconstruct destroyed buildings in Mariupol have already been published in the media (Current Time 2022). There was also an investigation by the Cuban Ministry of Foreign Affairs into organized trafficking rings directed at recruiting Cubans to fight for

Russia (BBC 2023). Within Ukraine and beyond, critical vulnerabilities remain. Olha from an international organization said,

Family separation exacerbates the risks faced by children but also of persons with disabilities or older persons who are dependent on a caregiver and have specific needs. Unaccompanied and separated children, adolescents, and children in institutional care are at particular risk. Roma fleeing Ukraine are at increased risk of exploitation, owing to factors such as discriminatory attitudes and lack of documentation, thus excluding them from social support systems. Roma children are of specific concern, as they have historically been trafficked within Ukraine and neighboring countries. (email correspondence, December 2022)

A survey commissioned by the IOM found that 59% of Ukrainians are at risk for human trafficking and indicated that they would accept a risky job offer (IOM 2022b). This shows a 321% increase in the vulnerable population from 14% before the war and a 180% increase from 2015 (21%) after the first stage of the war, revealing an alarming increase in vulnerabilities. The rise in unemployment to 35% due to the war, coupled with inflation and a looming monetary crisis in Ukraine increased vulnerabilities to human trafficking within Ukraine, especially among IDPs (Olha, international organization, email correspondence, December 2022). There was also evidence of vulnerabilities due to secondary displacement during this period, as people from Donbas or Crimea were displaced again to other regions in Ukraine or beyond during the most-recent escalation of the war (Protection Cluster 2022).

During the first months of total war, most of the refugees were women (50%) and children (40%) (UNODC 2022) because men aged 18–60 were banned from leaving the country due to mobilization laws, but as the war dragged on, more men arrived in Europe as refugees via filtration camps in Russia. These initial trafficking reports reveal ideal victim tropes and stereotypes of human traffickers that do not fit the norm for Ukraine, as discussed previously. Karina from an international organization said that “initial reports of sex trafficking and survival sex in the first few months have now moved onto forced labor cases or a combination of the two” (interview with author, December 2022). Anna from a local organization discussed that there has not been a lot of discussion or resources to counter internal trafficking within Ukraine, with minimal social media and prevention campaigns (online interview, January 2023). She said, “When people speak about human trafficking after the full-scale invasion they are focusing on the cross-border trafficking and not internal trafficking which is equally, if not more prevalent” (Anna, local organization, online interview, January 2023). Transnational organized crime was not found in Ukraine; instead, recruitment dynamics are “more casual, localized, smaller-scale activity embedded within pre-existing relationships [such as] family members, acquaintances, neighbors, etc.” (Cockbain and Sidebottom 2022, 4).

One positive prevention tool in the war is the Temporary Protection Directive, adopted by the EU in 2001 but used for the first time with Ukrainians fleeing the war by providing “immediate and temporary protection in the event of a mass influx or imminent mass influx of displaced persons from non-EU countries who are unable to return to their country of origin” (European Union 2022, para. 1). Immigration status is a method of coercion used to keep people in trafficking situations, so this directive is undoubtedly one of the most important aspects deterring increased trafficking in countries that border Ukraine during the war. Anna said, “to be legal in the country, having the legal grounds to get a job, and having some rights in the legal sphere is extremely important for any crisis situation” (local organization, online interview, January 2023). The Temporary Protection Directive also “reduces the need to travel by irregular routes (e.g., using smugglers), which can itself increase exposure to risks of trafficking and exploitation” (Cockbain and Sidebottom 2022, 9).

Destination countries for migrants have changed during the total war period. Ukrainians fled first to bordering countries such as Poland, Slovakia, Czech Republic, Moldova, and Romania, and then they began to move farther west to places like Germany, and some went to the United

Kingdom (Olha, international organization, email correspondence, December 2022). Russia forcibly deported Ukrainians, so Russia is also hosting a large number of refugees (Associated Press 2022). It is unclear what their immigration status is and whether they were allowed to claim asylum when they crossed the border, again revealing the messiness of large-scale displacement. Although we do not know the exact numbers of the people forcibly deported to Russia, some have found their way to the EU, including many men, which is another reason why limiting the response to include only sex trafficking of female victims can be problematic as the war continues. Also, one interesting dynamic about the war in Ukraine that was not seen in previous conflicts like Syria or Chechnya is return migration. As the Ukrainian army takes back territories, more people are returning to Ukraine; an estimated 4 million have returned from neighboring countries since February 2022 (UNHCR 2022).

Prevention Tools 2022

The legal responses since the 2022 invasion have been limited because policy development during war takes time and is less important than defending territorial integrity. In June 2022, the Cabinet of Ministers said that they were finalizing an updated program because martial law presents challenges to the aforementioned policy that was approved before the total war (2022). The program was finally adopted in June 2023, devoting 10 million UAH to anti-trafficking initiatives in the national and local budgets. This sum is much lower than the 85 million UAH outlined for the 2015–2020 period, suggesting diminished resources and government capacity. In fact, in March 2022 the Ukrainian government sent a communication to the Secretary General of the United Nations that it was unable to guarantee full implementation of its obligations in the Palermo Protocol due to the war and martial law (United Nations 2022). This communication suggests that no matter how encompassing a country's legal approaches to human trafficking are, war and large-scale displacement can hinder any progress made as the government turns its attention to fighting the war.

The national coordinator was still housed in the Ministry of Social Policy, but again, attention has shifted to the full-scale invasion. As Ukraine has freed territories from occupation, the attention of the Ministry has turned to potential gender-based violence victims who were exploited under occupation, and their website outlines different kinds of trafficking during the war such as forced labor, slavery, and exploitation in armed conflicts (Ministry of Social Policy 2022a). Since the invasion, 47 people have been registered as VoT with the Ministry of Social Policy, a decline from the 64 people who were registered in 2021. Bureaucratic changes in the ministry have led to a lack of leadership, and there is evidence that there is no specific individual in the ministry identified as the national coordinator, weakening its anti-trafficking leadership (United States Department of State 2022).

The UN cluster approach remains activated since December 2014 and resumed online meetings in May 2022 (Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs 2022). The protection cluster established an Operational Group for Combating Human Trafficking, which focuses on countermeasures for human trafficking during the total war, “recognizing the need to systematize the inclusion of human trafficking response measures in humanitarian emergencies” (Protection Cluster 2022, 1). An Anti-trafficking Task Force cochaired by IOM Ukraine and La Strada-Ukraine met online every two weeks in 2022 and planned to meet monthly in 2023 to step up coordination with the governmental anti-trafficking response and scale up capacity building of humanitarian actors on trafficking in persons screening and referral (Olha, international organization, email correspondence, December 2022). These meetings have been integral during the total war because participants are informed regarding what is happening on the state level, including the police, so it has provided vital information sharing from different regions near the fighting, in occupied territories, or on the border with lots of displaced people (Anna, local organization, online interview, January 2023).

Many trafficking shelters in different regions of Ukraine have continued to operate, but some organizations have moved to Poland (Tatiana, local organization, online interview, December 2022). Various sources reveal that the IOM rehabilitation center in Kyiv was not open during the entirety of the total war (Olha, international organization, email correspondence, December 2022) and closed from February 24 until April 18 (IOM 2022d). Since reopening, it has expanded to accept victims of exploitation and/or gender-based violence, who can receive comprehensive medical and psychological assistance, including consultations with medical specialists, examinations, and treatment (Ministry of Social Policy 2022b). Of the 28 reintegration partners located throughout the country before the invasion, only 18 are still operational, a 36% decrease in organizations. With the reduction of support systems across Ukraine, everyone was overwhelmed, but many NGOs around the country have stepped up efforts during the total war, despite damage to their offices and infrastructure during street fighting (Anna, local organization, online interview, January 2023). This overload, in turn, leads to fewer programs and trainings and minimal victim self-identification. Natalka said, “This is why we see fewer victims now. Self-identification happens through NGOs and social service providers, but they are focused on helping IDPs and displaced individuals, so we will see a delay in identifying victims” (online interview, December 2022). Consequently, many local organizations still exist because, unlike international organizations, they could not evacuate abroad when the invasion started. Anna said, “It is our country. We could not just pick up and leave. We had to evacuate the office in Kyiv, but we are not a big international organization so it’s not possible to create a new office in a different country” (Anna, local organization, online interview, January 2023).

Since February 2022, 61 trafficking survivors, 47 victims of exploitation, and 104 people at high risk of being trafficked or exploited were assisted by the IOM (IOM 2022c). Table 1 shows the significant drop in identified victims since the start of the total war in 2022. The numbers from all of the entities are down, but it is particularly noticeable at the IOM rehabilitation center, which observed an 82% decrease from 1,010 to 179, with only 61 of those people identified since the invasion (Olha, international organization, email correspondence, December 2022). The 82% decrease in identified victims in 2022 is a much greater decrease than the 17% in 2015 and is the lowest number of identified victims since they started tracking data in 2000. Of the 47 VoT statuses awarded by the Ministry of Social Policy in 2022, 66% were given to men, 31% were awarded to women, and 3% were awarded to children. One-third of the cases were for labor trafficking (9), forced begging (8), exploitation in the armed conflict (7), and sex trafficking (1) (Olha, international organization, email correspondence, December 2022). During the total war, there have been discussions of simplifying the VoT process and making it available online, especially when so many Ukrainians are displaced abroad, Anna explained. This has only been discussed and there are no concrete plans to change the process (Anna, local organization, online interview, January 2023).

The National Toll-Free Migrant and Anti-Trafficking Hotline 527, located in Western Ukraine, provided over 115,000 consultations to 30,000 callers on safe migration, protection, and other assistance for survivors of trafficking between February 24, 2022, and October 16, 2022 (IOM 2022c). According to Olha, more consultants had to be added because this is a 100% increase relative to the same period in 2021, 69% of the callers are IDPs and approximately 65% are women (email correspondence, December 2022). There is also a 527 chat bot on Telegram about safe migration and human trafficking where hotline consultants provide consultations for people inside and outside Ukraine (Alla, international organization, email correspondence, December, 2022, Ukraine). However, the bombing of the power grid and vital infrastructure in Kyiv in October and November 2022 have led to interruptions with the hotline that is operated by La Strada (La Strada Ukraine 2022b). This hotline operated and had consultations throughout the invasion. Only the phone line was closed for two weeks when there was fighting in the streets near the office, but emails, Facebook, and Telegram chat continued despite the displacement of the staff (Anna, local organization, online interview, January 2023). Anna said,

It was really hard to work, and it was really important for us [to continue our work during the war].... The consultations were in demand and difficult for the consultants because they had calls with victims of sexual violence, domestic violence, and people were calling with complex cases of psychological trauma while they were hiding in basements. In some cases [in the occupied regions], there was nothing we could do practically apart from offering emotional and psychological support. (local organization, online interview, January 2023)

Consequently, prevention tools have also changed since the start of the total war, as displacement efforts transitioned from immediate needs, such as housing, to long-term needs, like jobs and educational materials about risks (Tatiana, local organization, online interview, December 2022).

Analysis of Cross-Case Comparison across Time

The data show that there is a connection between human trafficking and war. Even if victims are difficult to find in the Ukrainian case, the war has changed human trafficking dynamics and prevention efforts. The research across periods provided a vital baseline for examining efforts before the war because they can help us understand how governments will respond in different stages of the war. The data revealed that the dynamics of human trafficking in Ukraine have changed during both stages of war, which aligns with the literature from Syria (Healy 2016), Colombia (Steele 2006), and the Balkans (Maloku and Maloku 2020). Forced labor is still the primary type of trafficking identified among victims in the IOM rehabilitation center, as it was before both stages of the war. Ukraine is no longer a destination country for human trafficking, and the war and invasion have fueled the push factors compelling people to leave their homes. The primary destination countries have changed from Russia during the prewar period to other countries such as Poland, Germany, and Turkey. The EU Temporary Protection Directive increased flows in that direction, but people are also returning to Ukraine. Reports of forced deportations of an estimated 900,000 to 1.6 million Ukrainians from the temporarily occupied territories (Associated Press 2022) and trafficking in reconstruction and forced recruitment efforts have revealed Russian state-sponsored human trafficking during the total war. Although the number of rehabilitated victims decreased after the outbreak of the limited war in 2014, the pandemic in 2021, and total war in 2022, the number of female victims has changed since the war started, and this could signify the war's effects on women. This shortage of identified victims has led people to question whether trafficking flows really increased during war and conflict situations (HEUNI 2023). The interview data showed that trafficking is a longer-term form of gender-based violence in war because the exploitation is prolonged and the delay in identifying victims means that we will not understand the effects of exploitation happening during the Russian invasion until years later. Few victims are identified during war, even in other wars in Syria, Colombia, and the Balkans (Steele 2006; Healy 2016; Maloku and Maloku 2020). Although the quick response could have prevented widespread vulnerability to human trafficking in the EU (IOM 2023), there is also evidence of trafficking rings with forced military service and reconstruction efforts in the occupied territories, similar to Syria (Healy 2016), which suggests that there are many avenues for exploitation by Russian authorities. The dynamic of male and child trafficking has also changed because of the war, as men have been subject to forced recruitment into the military and children were forced to serve as child soldiers, similar to Colombia where armed groups facilitated trafficking (Steele 2006). Thus, trafficking in the Ukrainian case is directly related to the war because it is perpetrated by armed groups in the war/conflict (IOM 2023).

Consequently, Russia's war in Ukraine has introduced new kinds of trafficking to the country (forced deportations, illegal conscription, child soldiers, kidnapping for sex trafficking, and abductions) and left a significant amount of the population at risk for human trafficking, as people are fleeing conflict zones and looking for work elsewhere. This aligns with the literature that shows that war amplified peace conditions that are favorable to human trafficking (Steele 2006), and the

push factors in the different stages of the war against Ukraine were similar to those of other conflicts around the world (Maloku and Maloku 2020). Ukraine somewhat fits the typology for different kinds of trafficking, as three of the seven types of trafficking in war (sex trafficking facilitated by armed groups, forced labor of children in armed groups, and forced labor into combat) were found in Ukraine. As of 2023, there has been no evidence of sex trafficking facilitated by peacekeepers and humanitarian agencies, slavery practices, trafficking to extort ransom, or organ trafficking, as were found in other wars (Muraszkiewicz, Iannelli, and Wieltschnig 2020). The war in Ukraine also differed in the type of war from an external aggressor and state-sponsored human trafficking from the Russian side. Most refugees in Ukraine are women and children, similar to refugees from conflicts in Colombia (Steele 2006) and the Balkans (Maloku and Maloku 2020), but the forced deportation of Ukrainians to Russia has led to an increased number of men declaring refugee status in the European Union. Trafficking occurred in all stages of displacement, so the Ukrainian case differs from research in Syria, which showed that trafficking materialized not along the migration route but when the refugees were settled in the host community (Healy 2016). The longer the war goes on, the more protracted displacement will become, and “delayed vulnerability” will increase as countries accepting refugees cut benefits, and this may render them newly vulnerable to traffickers (IOM 2023).

The changes over time reveal different prevention tools during each period, especially related to legal responses, national coordinator, working groups, shelter, and VoT status, are displayed in Table 2. The table shows how these different prevention tools have responded and evolved up to the

Table 2. Comparison of Anti-trafficking Prevention Efforts in Ukraine 2013–2022

	Prewar before 2013	Limited war 2014–2021	Total war 2022
Legal responses	Very comprehensive response to trafficking, with 13 different policies on human trafficking.	Policy adoption was delayed and only spurred by international monitoring.	War delayed adoption, but program was finally adopted 3.5 years after the previous one expired.
National Coordinator	Established in 1999, but administrative reforms changed agency four times until 2012 when the Ministry of Social Policy was assigned.	Still housed in Ministry of Social Policy, but attention has shifted to IDPs.	Still housed in Ministry of Social Policy, but attention has shifted to war effort.
Working group	Interagency Coordinating Council on Combating Trafficking in Human Beings meets intermittently, and a coordinated response is lacking.	Formed a new interagency working group on the protection of civilians during counterterrorist operations.	Protection Cluster established Operational Group for Combating Human Trafficking.
Shelter	Established 2002 by the International Organization for Migration, supported by international funding, and facilitated by local NGOs.	IOM was still the main organization facilitating the rehabilitation of trafficking victims with the help of local NGOs and international funding.	IOM rehabilitation center has expanded to accept victims of exploitation and/or gender-based violence.
VoT status	53 people were granted the status and given a one-time monetary benefit.	1,005 people total have been awarded the status and limited government funding has led to the rejection of many applications.	Registered 47 persons as VoT. Ministry of Social Policy has information on their website for people who might have been trafficked in the temporarily occupied territories.

Note: This table shows the various human trafficking prevention efforts in Ukraine over time and how the different stages of war have affected their effectiveness.

total war. Some entities, like the national coordinator and shelter, have developed more effectively than others, like legal responses and the VoT status, which have been delayed due to the war. Since then, the working group has actually improved since the full-scale invasion due to international entities that have developed a new group that meets to deal with the new trafficking outcomes. Thus, the table shows that the prevention tools before the war built a foundation for the response efforts during and after war.

Legal developments during the first stage of the war were slow and linked to visa liberalization and foreign aid. Although the government continues to be committed to adopting trafficking legislation, without those requirements it is likely that trafficking would be much farther down the government agenda as a result of the war. The Ukrainian government's communication to the UN about its inability to meet its obligations in the Palermo Protocol due to the war and martial law (United Nations 2022) demonstrates that war and large-scale displacement can virtually eliminate any progress combatting human trafficking before the war as the government turns its attention to fighting the war. Thus, government legislation and response in Ukraine was delayed, but compared to other wars in the Balkans (Rathgeber 2002), Ukraine had a good foundation before the war, which will help during postwar reconstruction. Corruption and links to the trafficking rings on the Russian side of the war have been identified, but on the Ukrainian side there is no evidence of police or military facilitating human trafficking like in the Balkans (Maloku and Maloku 2020). Political instability has proven minimal in the Ukrainian case because the war is against an outside power and support for the government is high among the local population.

The National Coordinator for human trafficking is still a part of the Ministry of Social Policy. In the Ministry of Social Policy, the IDP and refugee crisis has also taken the emphasis off human trafficking. Human trafficking was never high on the government's agenda before the war, and now it is even farther down the list of importance. The working group meetings continued to be as sporadic into the first stage of limited war. Alla said, that although the working group had existed in different capacities for a very long time, they "only meet when something needs to get done, an international monitoring organization points out that they should be meeting, or when an international organization makes the group meet" (interview with author, August 2015, Ukraine). However, the establishment of expanded working groups to deal with the results of the war met more often especially after the 2022 invasion. The total war has brought together international organizations, NGOs, and the Ukrainian government to facilitate initiatives and streamline the humanitarian assistance.

The IOM rehabilitation center in Kyiv continued to receive and treat victims, closing only for two months after the invasion of 2022. Most rehabilitation programs are still sponsored by international organizations, and the same network of local NGOs assists victims when they leave the rehabilitation center, although some of those NGOs and their workers are displaced within Ukraine or abroad. Anti-trafficking NGOs have continued to adapt to the transformations of this crime, and now many of them assist IDPs and victims of other forms of gender-based violence as well as trafficking victims. The presence and continued work of these rehabilitation centers seem to counter findings from Garashchenko (2022), who argued that there was a lack of assistance centers in Ukraine. The VoT status has fluctuated during the different stages of the war. One respondent said that sometimes the government does not have the money to make the payment, but the Group of Experts on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings monitors came to Ukraine, and only then did the Ministry of Social Policy start approving people again (Alla, international organization, interview with author, August 2015, Ukraine). Thus, economic conditions in Ukraine will likely dictate whether more VoT statuses are approved in the future, and the decrease in funding dedicated to the current program likely means that less will be spent on victims.

Overall, the data show that Ukraine somewhat aligns with the literature but does not match the existing theory on human trafficking and war. Only three of the four critical factors associated with conflict and increased vulnerability to human trafficking during war, as purported by the UNODC (2018), are present in the Ukrainian case. Social fragmentation and family breakdown due to forced

displacement of women and children have been seen in the Ukrainian case. Although the Temporary Protection Directive has eased immediate humanitarian needs and socioeconomic stress with refugees in the EU countries (IOM 2023), there is humanitarian need and socioeconomic stress within Ukraine and the occupied territories. Due to the type of war by an external aggressor, Ukraine has not seen state collapse, deteriorating rule of law, and impunity like other countries have during war (Maloku and Maloku 2020), which can also help combat trafficking. Although there is less emphasis in the government, most prevention tools established before the war continue to operate in a somewhat diminished capacity. The different stages of war have changed human trafficking dynamics and responses in Ukraine, but the development of anti-trafficking institutions leading up to the start of the war in 2014 has made them more resilient during later the stages of the war. Therefore, the data from interviews and fieldwork support my theory that a foundation of prevention tools before war leads to a better response to human trafficking dynamics and flows when war occurs. Existing anti-trafficking institutions evolved, and this shaped response efforts during both stages of the war as the Ukrainian government's attention was focused on war.

Conclusion

As a transitional democratic, middle-income European country, Ukraine is a unique case for the examination of the relationship between human trafficking and war. Although these findings are limited by research capabilities during war, the data reveal that human trafficking is directly related to Russia's war in Ukraine, not just a side effect (Judd 2015) because of evidence that the Russian side perpetuates trafficking in the occupied territories. I argued that research on human trafficking and war needs to examine the phenomenon over time because prevention efforts that were implemented before the war in Ukraine built a foundation for the response during the war. Thus, research over time can facilitate understanding of how governments will respond in war. The data showed vulnerabilities to human trafficking during all stages of Russia's war on Ukraine, similar to that from other wars in Syria, Colombia, and the Balkans. However, a solidified immigration status and path for escape to the EU due to a shared history and kin-state relationships with other countries in Eastern Europe have decreased these vulnerabilities. War and its aftermath fuel the push factors that entice people to leave Ukraine. The war, coupled with the worst economic crisis in recent years, means that there are increased risks for human trafficking (IOM 2022b), aligning with previous research from around the world (Healy 2016; Kidd 2020;).

The data showed how the war changed human trafficking dynamics. Some types of trafficking, such as forced labor, have remained the same, but as a result of the war, Ukraine has experienced new forms of trafficking such as child soldiers, forced recruitment of male combatants, and sexual exploitation. These new aspects of human trafficking are similar to those that have emerged in other wars (Steele 2006). The emphasis in Ukraine, as it was with other conflicts in Colombia and Syria, was on the sex trafficking of women and children (Nagle 2013; Maloku and Maloku 2020), but this does not fit the norm for human trafficking in Ukraine during the other two periods. Mafia-like organizations that facilitated trafficking during other wars in Chechnya and Syria (Achilli 2017; Molodikova 2020) have also not manifested during the three periods, but there was evidence of Russian state-sponsored trafficking in the occupied regions. Destination countries have changed, and Ukraine itself is no longer a destination country for human trafficking because of the total war.

The theoretical contribution of this article focuses on how war fundamentally altered human trafficking prevention efforts in Ukraine but a foundation of prevention tools before the war revealed that the government was better able to respond to human trafficking dynamics and flows when war occurred. This theory challenges existing theory, which focuses on the lack of government response during previous wars around the world and reveals how studies before and after war can contribute to the literature linking human trafficking and war. The data show how anti-trafficking prevention work has shifted over time depending on the different stages of the war and the type of exploitation. Some prevention tools have proved more resilient than others during the full-scale

invasion and total war, including the national coordinator, shelter, and working group. At the same time, the legal responses and the VoT status have been delayed due to the war. One positive difference due to the war was the increased cooperation and openness throughout the government, which has helped facilitate efforts to combat trafficking and streamlined humanitarian assistance. Government legislation and response in Ukraine were delayed, but Ukraine had a good foundation before the war, which will help during postwar reconstruction. Human trafficking was not high on the government's agenda during any of the periods, and now, due to the war, it is even farther down the list of importance. Economic conditions in Ukraine will also influence how much money and government work is devoted to anti-trafficking efforts in the future. However, anti-trafficking NGOs have continued to adapt to the changes of human trafficking in the different periods, expanding their assistance to IDPs and other forms of gender-based violence.

In conclusion, human trafficking is a fluid phenomenon and much has changed through different stages of war in Ukraine to alter the dynamics and flows of migration. Despite this, Ukraine's strong anti-trafficking prevention efforts via different local and international organizations and anti-trafficking institutions have helped ease the pressure during the different stages of the war. Though the emphasis on trafficking has dwindled and other forms of gender-based violence have taken center stage, human trafficking remains a significant outcome of Russia's war in Ukraine. I argued that it is important to examine human trafficking prevention tools and their evolution over time because they lay the groundwork for challenges that the government and civil society will have to face during the postwar reconstruction years to come. Future studies could build on this article and focus on mobility and immobility, the messiness of human realities with displacement, and broader migration themes related to war.

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Notes

- 1 Human Trafficking is defined as “the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons by the means of threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, or abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation. Exploitation shall include, at a minimum, the exploitation of the prostitution of others or other forms of sexual exploitation, forced labour or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude or the removal of organs” (United Nation's Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children, supplementing the UN Convention Against Transnational Organized Crime 2000, article three).
- 2 An internally displaced person (IDPs) is someone who is forced to leave their home but has not crossed an international border and remains within their country's borders. IDPs “are not protected by international law or eligible to receive many types of aid because they are legally under the protection of their own government” (UNHCR 2023, para. 3).
- 3 A refugee is “someone who has been forced to flee his or her country because of persecution, war or violence. A refugee has a well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, political opinion or membership in a particular social group. Most likely, they cannot return home or are afraid to do so” (UNHCR 2023, para. 1).
- 4 Ukraine is categorized as partly free and a transitional or hybrid regime under the Freedom House level of democratic governance scores (2024) which is why I refer to the country as a transitioning democracy.

- 5 A limited war is a war where the battlefield does not span the entire country and only military entities are targeted. Total war is one in which vast resources are used, the battlefield can span the entire country, and civilians and infrastructure are targeted (Hawkins 2000).
- 6 I use the term “victims” because this the terminology that is used most often Ukraine by anti-trafficking stakeholders. The term survivor of human trafficking is not often used in Ukraine and indicates that a person has started the healing process. I use the commonly used term “victim” for the purposes of this article which is also the legal terminology recognized in Ukrainian law.
- 7 The following clusters were activated in Ukraine Education: Emergency Shelter and NFIs, Food Security and Nutrition, Health, Livelihoods/Early Recovery, Protection, and WASH.

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Appendix: Interview Questions

Questions in 2012–2013

1. Tell me about your organization? What kinds of programs do you have related to human trafficking?
2. How did human trafficking policies and programs unfold? What was the order of events? Why do you think the policies were adopted when they were and in the way that they were?
3. Are you aware of any individuals who have played a key role in building support for anti-trafficking policies?
4. What factors might account for Ukraine having a more extensive human trafficking policies compared to other countries in the region?
5. Have these policies been implemented? If yes, then who is in charge of implementing them? What checks and balances for you have to ensure that these policies are implemented?
6. Has the policy been effective at combating the problem?

Questions in 2015

1. How has the situation with counter trafficking changed since the conflict began?
2. Do you still work with the NGOs that were in Donetsk and Luhansk?

3. Does the Ukrainian Coalition Against Trafficking still exist?
4. Does the new government see trafficking as a priority?
5. How is the VoT status working? NRM? Working Group?
6. What is being done to formulate the new trafficking program?
7. Are you seeing any new forms of trafficking as a result of the conflict?

Questions in 2022–2023

1. How has the counter trafficking situation changed since the full-scale war began?
2. Has the new Programme of the State Targeted Social Program to Combat Trafficking in Human Beings until 2025 been adopted?
3. Does the Operational Group for Combating Human Trafficking (Operatyvna hrupa z protydiv torhivli liūd' my) meet? Tell me about their work?
4. Has the VoTs status been affected by the war? Have the VoT payment has increased for victims over time?
5. Has decentralization happened with the VoT status?
6. Are rehabilitation centers and shelters for human trafficking victims open?
7. Are you seeing any new forms of trafficking as a result of the full-scale invasion?