

Dramatic increase in worldwide illegal organ trade

By Sven Heymann
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Since the global financial crash in 2008, the worldwide illegal organ trade has increased dramatically. Until recently, those looking to sell parts of their bodies generally came from the so-called developing countries; now, the phenomenon can be found in large parts of Europe.

According to the World Health Organisation (WHO), in 2010 there were approximately 107,000 donated organs worldwide— both legal and illegal. Kidneys made up about two thirds of all transplanted organs. According to a report in the *Guardian*, WHO doctor Luc Noel expects that about 10 percent of all transplants are performed illegally. On the other hand, the California human rights organisation Organ Watch talks of 15,000-20,000 illegal kidney transplants per year.

But the transplants carried out represent only a fraction of the actual need. Only one in ten requests are currently realised, according to the *Guardian* report. The profits that can be achieved are huge, says Noel.

Gangs of organ traffickers conduct a million-dollar business in the illegal trade. Media reports consistently speak of up to US\$200,000 dollars (€160,000) being demanded for a single organ on the black market. The illegal traffickers exploit the social plight of the donors, who urgently need money but often receive only a fraction of the total. Many are cheated out of any money.

The economic crisis is the main cause of the surge in the illegal human organ trade. The European Union (EU) openly admits this. The website *BioEdge* quotes the EU special prosecutor Jonathan Ratel saying, “Thanks to the global financial crisis the organ trade is a growth industry”. He speaks about a mutual vulnerability to criminal organ dealers: on the one hand, chronic poverty prevails; on the other side, there

are well-off patients who would do anything to ensure their survival.

Jim Feehally, a professor of renal medicine at the University Hospitals of Leicester in the UK, brings out the class nature of trafficking in organs more clearly. The main problem is exploitation, the Austrian newspaper *Der Standard* quotes him saying. While the rich can buy not only organs, but also afford medical treatment, the donors are often denied such care.

The social dimension of the problem becomes particularly clear in the example of China. More than a million people there need a kidney transplant, but in the past year, just slightly more than 5,000 received one. Under such circumstances, those from the wealthier layers of society, as well as the rich from the Middle East or Europe, will pay US\$100,000-US\$200,000 for an illegally transplanted organ, plus the cost of the operation, transportation, etc. The vast majority of those affected from the poorer classes can do nothing other than hope to hear about a matching donor organ, while their health deteriorates further.

But such conditions no longer exist only in the so-called developing world. *BioEdge* reports that desperate individuals in financial need in Greece, Italy, Spain and the Balkan countries are offering their kidneys, bone marrow, lungs and even their corneas.

This tragic fact sheds a light on the situation in Serbia. Since the beginning of the world economic crisis in 2008, the country has experienced an increase in the official unemployment rate from 14 to 24 percent. Given the high average age of about 41, less than half the population over 15 years old are economically active. The aging population needs medical services urgently, but fewer people can afford them because of rising poverty.

An article in the *New York Times* describes the inhuman situation that many Serbs now face.

The piece describes the fate of Pavel Mircov and his wife Daniella. After the 50-year-old became unemployed during the winter, the father of two children could not find a job. When his own father recently died, he was no longer able to afford a gravestone. The phone has already been cut off.

Now, Pavel and Daniella are desperately trying to find a buyer for their kidneys over the Internet. A transplant could bring nearly \$40,000. Belonging to blood group O, Daniella could get a few thousand dollars more on the black market. "I need the money to pay for school for my two children", writes Pavel in his sales offer.

Officially, the trade in organs in Serbia is illegal, and is punishable by up to 10 years in prison. But the government ignores the barbaric situation that the population confronts. Government officials told the *Times* that poverty is not so bad as to justify people selling their body parts illegally. The police in Serbia claim that not a single case of illegal organ trading is known to them over the past 10 years.

The fact, however, is that a veritable network of organ traffickers has now formed in the Balkans. In the small southern Serbian town of Doljevac, the government had to intervene when local residents tried to organise and register an official agency for the sale of organs and blood. With an unemployment rate of about 50 percent, more than 3,000 people wanted to participate. Given the legal situation, many are now looking to link up to the organ trade through Bulgaria and Kosovo.

The *Times* also explained how the official bans are avoided. It describes the fate of Milovan, a former factory worker from southern Serbia. The 52-year-old donated his kidney to a wealthy local politician. In return, the man was supposed to put him on the payroll of his company and provide him with medication. In order not to get into legal trouble, the two pretended to be brothers. The transplant was finally completed in a public hospital in Belgrade. After the politician wanted nothing more to do with him, the heavily indebted Milovan is now on his own.

Serbia is by no means an isolated case. Kosovo in particular is considered a stronghold of the illegal organ trade. To this day, the Kosovo Liberation Army

(KLA), supported by the Western powers in the war in Yugoslavia, is accused of killing Serbs, and then removing and selling their organs. Illegal transplants were performed at the Medicus clinic in the capital of Pristina until 2008. A trial of seven men accused of organ trafficking, human trafficking and other offences has been running since autumn 2011, as *Focus* magazine has reported.

Nancy Scheper-Hughes, chair of *Organ Watch*, said the current conditions recall the situation after the collapse of the Soviet Union. At that time, chronic unemployment produced a new wave of willing donors.

The reemergence of such barbaric conditions in the heart of Europe is a direct indictment of the capitalist system. The dissolution of the Soviet Union and the reintroduction of the profit system in the former Stalinist-ruled countries led to an enormous decline in living standards. Capitalist restoration not only led to unemployment and poverty, but also to the collapse of public infrastructure and the health system.

The banking crisis is now bringing eastern European conditions to Europe as a whole. The trade in organs shows the incompatibility of the profit system with the basic needs of the majority of the people.

While technical and medical progress makes possible a high level of health care for the entire population, capitalism is forcing millions of people around the world to sell parts of their own bodies.

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