



June 28, 2012

Black Market for Body Parts Spreads Among the Poor in Europe

By **DAN BILEFSKY**

BELGRADE, Serbia — Pavle Mircov and his partner, Daniella, nervously scan their e-mail in-box every 15 minutes, desperate for economic salvation: a buyer willing to pay nearly \$40,000 for one of their kidneys.

The couple, the parents of two teenagers, put their organs up for sale on a local online classified site six months ago after Mr. Mircov, 50, lost his job at a meat factory here. He has not been able to find any work, he said, so he has grown desperate. When his father recently died, Mr. Mircov could not afford a tombstone. The telephone service has been cut off. One meal a day of bread and salami is the family's only extravagance.

"When you need to put food on the table, selling a kidney doesn't seem like much of a sacrifice," Mr. Mircov said.

Facing grinding poverty, some Europeans are seeking to sell their kidneys, lungs, bone marrow or corneas, experts say. This phenomenon is relatively new in Serbia, a nation that has been battered by war and is grappling with the financial crisis that has swept the Continent. The spread of illegal organ sales into Europe, where they are gaining momentum, has been abetted by the Internet, a global shortage of organs for transplants and, in some cases, unscrupulous traffickers ready to exploit the economic misery.

In Spain, Italy, Greece and Russia, advertisements by people peddling organs — as well as hair, sperm and breast milk — have turned up on the Internet, with asking prices for lungs as high as \$250,000. In late May, the Israeli police detained 10 members of an international crime ring suspected of organ trafficking in Europe, European Union law enforcement officials said. The officials said the suspects had targeted impoverished people in Moldova, Kazakhstan, Russia, Ukraine and Belarus.

"Organ trafficking is a growth industry," said Jonathan Ratel, a European Union special prosecutor who is leading a case against seven people accused of luring poor victims from Turkey and former communist countries to Kosovo to sell their kidneys with false promises of payments of up to \$20,000. "Organized criminal groups are preying upon the vulnerable on both sides of the supply chain: people suffering from chronic poverty, and desperate and wealthy patients who will do

anything to survive.”

The main supply countries have traditionally been China, India, Brazil and the Philippines. But experts say Europeans are increasingly vulnerable.

An estimated 15,000 to 20,000 kidneys are illegally sold globally each year, according to Organs Watch, a human rights group in Berkeley, Calif., that tracks the illegal organ trade. The World Health Organization estimates that only 10 percent of global needs for organ transplantation are being met.

Nancy Scheper-Hughes, the director of Organs Watch and a professor of medical anthropology at the University of California, Berkeley, said the attempt by poor Europeans to sell their organs was reminiscent of the period after the collapse of the Soviet Union, when chronic joblessness created a new breed of willing sellers.

Trade in organs in Serbia is illegal and punishable by up to 10 years in prison. But that is not deterring the people of Doljevac, a poor municipality of 19,000 people in southern Serbia, where the government refused an attempt by residents to register a local agency to sell their organs and blood abroad for profit.

Violeta Cavac, a homemaker advocating for the network, said that the unemployment rate in Doljevac was 50 percent and that more than 3,000 people had wanted to participate. Deprived of a legal channel to sell their organs, she said, residents are now trying to sell body parts in neighboring Bulgaria or in Kosovo.

“I will sell my kidney, my liver, or do anything necessary to survive,” she said.

Hunched over his computer in Kovin, about 25 miles from Belgrade, Mr. Mircov showed a reporter his kidney-for-sale advertisement, which included his blood type and phone number.

“Must sell kidney. Blood group A,” the ad said. “My financial situation is very difficult. I lost my job, and I need money for school for my two children.”

After six months of advertising, Mr. Mircov said, his days are punctuated by hope and disappointment. He said a man from Mannheim, Germany, had offered to fly him to Germany and cover the transplant costs. But when Mr. Mircov tried to follow up, he said, the man disappeared.

A woman from Macedonia offered \$24,000 for a kidney from his partner, Daniella, but that was \$12,000 below her asking price. She noted that she has blood type O, which can bring a \$12,000 premium on the organ market because the blood is safe for most recipients.

Mr. Mircov said he had no fear about an eventual operation or legal strictures forbidding organ sales. “It’s my body, and I should be able to do what I want with it,” he said.

Government officials insisted that Serbia was not so poor as to reduce people to selling their body parts, while police officials said not a single case of organ trafficking in Serbia had been prosecuted in the past 10 years. Experts who study illegal organ sales said prosecutions were rare because transplants usually took place in third countries, making them difficult to track.

Dr. Djoko Maksic, a leading nephrologist who runs the transplant program at the Military Medical Academy in Belgrade, expressed disbelief that illegal organ selling was taking place in Serbia, saying every potential donor was scrutinized and vetted by a hospital committee consisting of doctors, ethicists and lawyers.

But Milovan, 52, a former factory worker from a rural village in southern Serbia, said he "gave" his kidney to a wealthy local politician who, in return, put him on his company payroll and offered to buy him medication. The kidney was extracted at a public hospital in Belgrade, he said, with both men using forged donor cards indicating they were brothers.

Debt-ridden, Milovan, who declined to give his last name for fear of being ostracized by his neighbors, lamented that the recipient had recently cut him off, and his family said he had spent his money so quickly that he was reduced to selling eggs at a local market.