

**Organized Begging in Vienna, Austria:
Right-Wing Propaganda, Benevolent Necessity, Illicit Business,
Human Smuggling, or Human Trafficking?**

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Introduction: organized begging in Vienna and Austria

Over the last several years, organized begging, and begging in general, have been the subject of much debate in Austria. Some parts of the country have forbidden begging altogether (e.g. Tyrol and Salzburg)¹, whereas others are working to restrict it in certain areas (e.g. Graz). Most of them, including Vienna, have long since forbidden “organized” and “aggressive” begging, while permitting other forms perceived as benevolent.²

“Organized begging” refers to a situation in which begging is a business with a hierarchy. At the bottom of the pyramid are the beggars, who collect money on the street. Then there are those who collect the money from the beggars. These may be the “leaders” themselves or people working for them. At the top of the chain are the leaders. They presumably receive most of the money and organize who begs where and when. They are also responsible for acquiring the needed begging “staff,” either themselves or by paying others to “recruit” them. This last part is the most objectionable, as it is believed that it all too often entails human trafficking, which will be defined below.

The object of this paper is to sift through the data on organized begging and human trafficking in Vienna and determine three things:

1. Does organized begging even exist in Vienna?
2. Does organized begging (usually) involve trafficking?
3. How big is the problem? That is: how much of begging is organized (if any) and how many of the organized beggars are trafficked?

1. Claus Albertani and Heike Krusch, “Bettelverbot kommt für Teile von Graz,” *Kleine Zeitung* (Graz, Januar 13, 2010), Internet edition, Chronik section, http://www.kleinezeitung.at/nachrichten/chronik/2265296/bettelverbot-kommt-fuer-teile-graz_story (accessed February 18, 2010).

2. Donja Noormofidi and Thomas Wolkinger, “Die Verzerrung einer Debatte,” *Falter* 2009, no. 28 (July 8, 2009), <http://www.falter.at/web/print/detail.php?id=949> (accessed February 18, 2010).

Does organized begging exist in Vienna?

Definitional issues

In order to know if organized begging exists, one requires a definition of it that can then be used to identify it. The idea of what organized begging is seems fairly clear, but how does one identify it on the streets? How could, say, a police officer differentiate between a beggar who is out on her own, keeping the money she collects for herself and possibly her family, and one who is told where to go, must surrender much of his money, and who may have been coerced into begging and not be free to leave? It is impossible to make this distinction simply by looking at a particular beggar. This represents just one of the many difficulties police officers face when seeking to reduce organized begging. The definition set out in law, then, must be one that allows recognition of organized begging, while not generating too many “false positives” (cases where an independent beggar may be mistaken for one who has been organized).

According to the magazine *Falter*, organized begging exists in Vienna legally “when more than three people work together and distribute locations among themselves.”³ The intention of this law is presumably to give the police the statutory tools they need to fight organized crime in the form of organized begging. The article goes on to point out, however, that this law could also illegalize the activities of families working together out of necessity.

The focus of this paper is on criminal organizations involved in human trafficking. Although the legal definition may serve enforcement purposes well, this definition is not narrow enough. “More than three people” organizing where they beg together is not sufficiently exact. Most would probably agree that families begging independently for their own survival were likely not the intended focus of the law and that this is not what is meant by “organized begging.” For the purposes of this paper, therefore, organized begging shall refer to group *organizational structures* (i.e. a hierarchy with collectors and bosses) and *activities* that involve exploitation and coercion, not

3. Donja Noormofidi and Thomas Wolkingner, *Falter* 2009 (accessed February 18, 2010).

simply to the fact that beggars have organized themselves in a group of more than three.

Evidence of organized begging

Is there evidence of begging groups or rings that involve exploitation and coercion? There is less than might be expected or hoped for, but there is enough to prove that it does happen, regardless of how common it is. The UN Global Initiative to Fight Human Trafficking (UN.GIFT) reports that “[t]rafficking for begging is less frequently reported [than trafficking for other purposes like prostitution] and was found mainly in South-East Europe and in some Western European countries.”⁴ Official agency sources do not go into any further detail on the subject. They seem to be focused mainly on prostitution and forced labor (not including begging).

Colonel Tatzgern, Head of the Austrian Criminal Intelligence Service’s (Bundeskriminalamt) Central Service Combating Alien Smuggling and Trafficking in Human Beings, asserts that police in Vienna have, on multiple occasions, observed beggars turning over money to third persons who were not related to them. This is confirmed by media reports, which, however, also have the police as their source.⁵ To further support his claim, Mr. Tatzgern relayed the story of one man who was brought to Vienna expecting to work as a janitor, but who was then forced to beg. When he at first refused, he was beaten. He later escaped and was repatriated to his home country upon his request.⁶ According to police reports, beggars can expect to bring in an average of around €100 (\$135) per day. Mr. Tatzgern even reported one “queen” who was able to rake in up to €1,000 per day.⁷

Outside of sources within the police and those associated with them, however, there is very little information indicating the existence of organized begging, at least among adults. This has led some to assert that it does not exist or is very rare. Ulli Gladik, who interviewed around 50 beggars

4. “Western and Central Europe,” *UN.GIFT*, http://www.ungift.org/ungift/en/about/western_central_europe.html (accessed January 24, 2010).

5. “Weniger Bettler, mehr ‘Abkassierer,’” *ORF*, August 22, 2006, <http://wien.orf.at/stories/131232/>.

6. Colonel Gerald Tatzgern in interview with the author, January 28, 2010. Unfortunately, the author did not note the man’s home country and can no longer remember. Romania is likely.

7. *Ibid.*

for research for a film, reported, in stark contrast to reports by the police, that “[the beggars] earn around €5-15 per day. It wouldn’t be at all worth it to organize them and collect their money.” She said further that the beggars are “only organized in the sense that they have to buy a ticket to Vienna and find a place to sleep. But that is the most I have seen in organization.”⁸ She did not say, however, whether buying tickets and finding places to stay involved anything that could be deemed debt bondage, for example.

Farther south, in Graz, a priest who works with beggars stated in 2006: “I would swear that 95% of beggars in Graz are acting on their own. I know almost all of them personally. They are Roma from Slovakia who cannot survive in their homeland.”⁹ Furthermore, *Der Standard*, a Viennese daily newspaper, reported that the district attorney in Graz investigated “organized and trained” begging for an entire year without results.

This might give the impression that conspiracy theorists are right about the police. Recently, however, there have been additional reports from sources who work directly with beggars and the homeless that indicate that it is a growing problem. For example, another priest, who works in the same parish as the one quoted above, two years later expressed concern that there were a number of new arrivals among the beggars in Graz and that he doubted that many of them were partaking voluntarily. He added: “the new ones seem to be from Romania or Bulgaria, but they don’t come to us in the parish.”¹⁰

Moreover, there are a number of cases from previous years involving children that were easier to investigate. These cases are also convincing. In 2008, Vienna passed a law against begging

8. “www.wienweb.at,” February 10, 2009, <http://www.wienweb.at/content.aspx?menu=11&cid=160366> (accessed January 21, 2010).

9. Eric Kocina, Klaus Stöger, and Andreas Wetz, “Bettlerplage in Wien: Rufe nach Verboten,” *Die Presse*, July 11, 2006, http://www.lexisnexis.com.library3.webster.edu/us/lnacademic/results/docview/docview.do?docLinkInd=true&risb=21_T8363785965&format=GNBFI&sort=BOOLEAN&startDocNo=1&resultsUrlKey=29_T8363785968&cisb=22_T8363785967&treeMax=true&treeWidth=0&csi=274856&docNo=14 (accessed January 21, 2010).

10. Colette Schmidt, “Grazer Gesetzesnovelle gegen organisiertes Betteln,” *Der Standard* (Vienna, July 3, 2009), Burgenland edition, Inland Chronik section.

with children. Since then, the number of children begging on the streets has dropped dramatically.¹¹

As Colonel Tatzgern of the Austrian Criminal Intelligence Service explained, the children were previously all under 14 years old and could therefore not be prosecuted or even questioned under Austrian law, as no crime was visible. This meant that the police could do nothing. The children were turned over to the “Drehscheibe,” (“German: Hub”) a Viennese organization to aid endangered children, and subsequently sent back to their home countries. The police could not ascertain their identities nor keep record of which children they had picked up. According to Mr. Tatzgern, they often saw the same children returning again and again.

Since 2008, however, the approach of the Austrian police has changed fundamentally. They now work together with the Drehscheibe to determine the identity of the children, facilitated by the fact that the children are now officially victims of an illegal activity: begging with children or forcing children to beg (the children themselves are not breaking any laws). In addition, Austria and the EU now work together and provide funds for centers in countries like Romania and Bulgaria to house and provide for the children when they return there. Officials there also keep track of whether the children stay there and, if not, who picks them up.

The effect of this policy is twofold: it makes begging less attractive to the children because they are given alternatives, and it makes the children less attractive to traffickers because they are picked up quickly and are difficult to re-traffic. The existence of child beggars being exploited for organized begging, the decline in their numbers, as well as the effectiveness of the shelters in source countries, are all well documented.^{12 13 14} It is therefore clear that organized begging with children exists, and there are indications from sources outside of the police that organized begging among adults exists and that this is probably not voluntary.

11. “Betteln mit Kindern: Verbot in Wien wirkt,” *Die Presse* (Vienna, Austria, Dezember 17, 2008), Internet edition, <http://diepresse.com/home/panorama/wien/438346/index.do> (accessed February 20, 2010).

12. Ibid.

13. Interview with Gerald Tatzgern, January 28, 2010.

14. Petra Stuibler, “Viele Kinder existieren offiziell gar nicht,” *Der Standard* (Vienna, Austria, October 16, 2009), Lower Austria edition, Inland Chronik section.

Problems in collecting evidence of organized begging

Why is it so difficult to gather the hard evidence to back up these assertions? The police have a number of credible explanations that are backed by experiences common to trafficking cases documented elsewhere. One reason is the threat or actual use of force from the “bosses” of begging groups and/or trafficked persons. Beggars are told not to speak to the police, that the police are corrupt and only mean them harm. In *Selling Olga*, Louisa Waugh documents cases where these sorts of the threats were employed. Trafficked prostitutes in the Balkans often had police officers (or men dressed like them) as their first clients in order to show them (whether true or not) that the police would not help them.¹⁵ In earlier cases of child begging, where the children were simply repatriated, there was no protection offered to them (meaning there was little incentive to cooperate). Today, there is also little protection for adult beggars unless they speak out against their tormentors. They are often afraid to do this.

In addition, there are a few factors that are specific to begging in Vienna (or the EU) that make it more difficult to determine if beggars are organized or were trafficked. Begging is not illegal in Vienna. It is also not illegal for citizens of Slovakia, Bulgaria, Hungary, or Romania to be in Vienna, since these countries are part of the European Union. This means the police are powerless to do anything in most cases. One might point out that the beggars themselves are victims, not criminals, so it is good that the police can do nothing. The problem is, they also cannot investigate further if they cannot ascertain that any crime is being committed. It is all too easy to organize begging groups in secret. An organizational structure, after all, is not openly observable. Detecting them requires a good deal of time and resources, two things that generally are not overly abundant among police officers looking out for theft and other crimes usually perceived as having a higher priority than some poor beggars who are neither citizens nor taxpayers.

15. Louisa Waugh, *Selling Olga* (London: Phoenix, 2007).

A final, and centrally important, factor is that many, or even all, of the beggars may feel better off in Vienna as part of an organized group, even one in which they are subject to violence, coercion, and deception, than in their home countries. They do not WANT the police to intervene. As a theoretical example: If they were picked up by the police for organized or aggressive begging and questioned, refusing to answer might, in the worst case, perhaps lead to repatriation. From there, they could easily return to Austria and their traffickers might even reward their silence. This makes it very unlikely that any organized beggar would talk to the police.

Should organized begging even be considered a crime?

If many beggars do not even want help, is organized begging simply a “victimless crime?” Has a crime been committed if the victim does not see him- or herself as such? The short answer is yes. Regardless of whether a victim accepts his or her fate, or even of whether she or he is better off due to the acts of a criminal, this has no bearing on the fact that the victims are kept in slavery-like conditions, and very possibly experience violence, coercion, deception, or even abduction. These are all criminal acts, regardless of how victims interpret them. Moreover, for cases where they are involved, there is the additional fact that employing children to work to collect money is illegal in Europe and most other parts of the world and would almost universally be considered immoral.

The purpose of this segment was to determine if organized begging exists and to answer the entailing question of whether it is even a crime. The two sides of the argument have been weighed in this section (police vs. people who work closely with beggars and the homeless on a charitable basis). Both sides might be accused of bias. On one hand, one might argue that the police are overly cynical and tend to see crimes where none exist. On the other hand, it is easy to imagine that those working with beggars might not see past the initial stories they hear because of suspicion of police motives. The latter has likely been intensified by accusations of police insensitivity and brutality

against beggars in Vienna and elsewhere.^{16 17} In the end, however, there are clear indications that organized begging does indeed exist in Vienna and that it is a crime and should also be seen as such.

Organized begging, human trafficking, and smuggling

The UN definition of human trafficking is probably the most commonly accepted, internationally valid definition, and it is the one used for the purposes of this paper. It is defined as:

“the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring, or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of 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 labor or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude, or the removal of organs.”¹⁸

Organized begging, in the sense of a hierarchical business, therefore meets at least the requirements of the last portion of the UN definition if it includes forced labor or “practices similar to slavery.” It then only remains to determine if beggars in organized groups were transported for that purpose, and if they were coerced or deceived into doing so, for this to be considered human trafficking.

There are other possibilities, however. In addition to the possibility mentioned above that a case of organized begging might in fact be simply a matter of a family organizing itself for survival, it is also conceivable that organized begging may be a case of migrant smuggling in which smugglers receive benefits for their transportation services, which are in turn accepted voluntarily by those smuggled. According to the UN, “Smuggling of migrants’ shall mean the procurement, in order to obtain, directly or indirectly, a financial or other material benefit, of the *illegal entry* of a

16. Mrijana Miljkovi and Michael Möseneder, “Pfui, du stinkst, du dreckiger Zigeuner,” *Der Standard* (Wien, November 18, 2008), Lower Austria edition, Inland Chronik section.

17. Mr. Sommer of the *Augustin*, who is quoted later on in this paper, highlighted accusations against the police wherein the officers were accused of taking beggars’ money. He stated that they were working with lawyers towards pressing charges. E-mail to the author, Feb 11, 2010.

18. “Human Trafficking,” *UNODC*, 2010, <http://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/human-trafficking/what-is-human-trafficking.html>.

person into a State Party of which the person is not a national or a permanent resident.”¹⁹ This would mean that the beggar voluntarily crosses into Austria either with full knowledge that he will be begging once he arrives, or that the passage to Austria and the begging are two separate events. In either case, this could mean that the begging, even if organized, is fully voluntary. This would mean the organized begging is simply an illicit activity, but does not entail trafficking and may not entail smuggling.

In fact, the “smuggling” possibility is likely to be quite rare, since most foreign beggars found in Vienna come from EU member states and can therefore travel to, and remain in, Austria legally, making smuggling superfluous. It is therefore more likely that, if beggars are transported to Austria for the express purpose of begging, begging is either a case of trafficking or, if it is voluntary and the subject is free to leave, simply an illicit activity.

The final possibility, expressed by the editorial staff of Vienna’s newspaper for homeless people, the *Augustin*, is that organized begging has nothing to do with human trafficking and should not even be considered illegal.²⁰ They maintain that beggars may attain transportation to Vienna by borrowing money from family members and beg independently or in organized, usually family, groups once they arrive for their own security and to raise more money. In his email to the author, however, Mr. Sommer, speaking on behalf of the editorial staff, admits that some arrive with debts to one “asshole” or another, who will have charged them exorbitant amounts to transport them to Vienna. Mr. Sommer seems completely unaware of the fact that this practice constitutes debt bondage, which is illegal in its own right, if the people in question then have to work *for* the person to whom they owe their debts.²¹ Moreover, this can be viewed as one important piece of what,

19. *Protocol against the Smuggling of Migrants by Land, Sea and Air, supplementing the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime*, 2004, <http://www.unodc.org/documents/treaties/UNTOC/Publications/TOC%20Convention/TOCebook-e.pdf> (accessed February 18, 2010) (emphasis added).

20. Robert Sommer on behalf of the *Augustin* editorial staff, e-mail message to the author, February 11, 2010.

21. “Supplementary Convention on the Abolition of Slavery, the Slave Trade, and Institutions and Practices Similar to Slavery,” *Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights*, April 30, 1957, <http://www2.ohchr.org/english/law/slavetrade.htm> (accessed February 18, 2010).

combined, constitutes human trafficking. If the people in question were also lied to, threatened, or tricked when recruited, or were simply abducted, and all this was done to profit from them once they were in Vienna, this definitely *is* human trafficking, as debt bondage to the organizers constitutes a practice “similar to slavery.”

Is organized begging human trafficking?

It is one thing to determine that organized begging exists and that violence and coercion are used as tactics to keep it running. It is quite another to figure out if all this constitutes human trafficking. As mentioned above, organized begging satisfies at least some of the conditions outlined in the UN definition of human trafficking: namely the means (coercion, deception, the threat or use of force, etc.) and the purpose (exploitation, e.g. in conditions akin to slavery). The missing segment of this definition is the first part: the act itself. Are beggars in Vienna trafficked here for the purpose of begging or to be sold to begging rings?

There is general acceptance that organized beggars are indeed victims of trafficking. Much of this is simply common sense. The beggars are poor, which suggests they would have needed some way to get to Vienna in the first place. Beggars are known, at least some of the time, to be here against their wills, to suffer punishment by their “bosses,” and there has been evidence that they are recruited in less than truthful ways. This certainly suggests trafficking. Moreover, it is abundantly clear, given the conditions forced upon them and the fact that they must presumably surrender a large portion of their earnings, that organized begging is exploitation.

The problem, once again, is a paucity of truly hard evidence. The police can provide utterly believable stories of people who have claimed to be trafficked, like the one man who thought he was coming to Vienna to work as a janitor. This man eventually returned to his own country.²² There is little reason to suspect that either he or the police are lying, but without a prosecutorial or judicial

22. Colonel Gerald Tatzgern in interview with the author, January 28, 2010.

record, it is hard to be 100% certain.

The best support for these reports comes from cases that have gone to trial. Although they do not prove anything with respect to current cases, they do illustrate the fact that the problem exists. Clear cases of child begging were shown above. There was also a recent case that led to the conviction of a married couple charged with forcing a Bulgarian girl and her older, mentally handicapped sister to beg on the streets of Vienna.²³ The girls were promised jobs as babysitters and cleaning women. In addition, the couple rented the apartment used for the trafficked girls from a Serbian man who disappeared before the case went to trial. Authorities report that the apartment had been used by South-East European organized begging groups for years.²⁴ Although it is not clear that the Bulgarian married couple was necessarily involved in an entire “begging mafia,” this does not stretch the imagination much. The clear evidence in this case leads this author to conclude, beyond a reasonable doubt, that organized begging does exist in Vienna. It also seems logical that if there are organizations involved in it that reportedly have large networks to maintain, the number of beggars in the network would have to be fairly large to make the entire business profitable.

If organized begging exists in Vienna, supported by trafficking networks, then it should also be found elsewhere. It is. The world media, as well as publications from organizations like the UN, are full of reports of organized begging from countries as far afield as Nigeria and India. Colombia, Ecuador, and Peru are also mentioned, having recently initiated legislation forbidding forced begging.²⁵

The point of this paper was to discover whether organized begging actually exists in Vienna, if it involves trafficking, and what the likely proportion of organized begging to begging, and trafficked beggars to organized beggars, is. It is clear that organized begging exists. This paper has

23. Petra Stuibler, “Viele Kinder existieren offiziell gar nicht,” *Der Standard* (Vienna, Austria, October 16, 2009), Lower Austria edition, Inland Chronik section.

24. “Mädchen mit Eisenstange zum Betteln geprügelt,” *Der Standard* (Vienna, July 15, 2009), Vienna edition, Inland Chronik section.

25. “South America,” *UN.GIFT*, http://www.ungift.org/ungift/en/about/south_america.html.

also shown and reasoned that the proportion of those involved in organized begging that are trafficking victims is likely to be high. Moreover, and as suggested by the Viennese police, the number of beggars that are part of organized groups is probably likewise very high. However, determining exact numbers is extraordinarily difficult, and that some beggars may be on the streets of their own volition certainly cannot be ruled out.

Fighting organized begging and its inherent trafficking

No paper on the subject would be complete without some suggestions for future courses of action. Although a comprehensive analysis of such possibilities is beyond the scope of this paper, a few reasonable suggestions put forth by Colonel Tatzgern of the Austrian Criminal Intelligence Service are relayed below. He recommends introducing a Europe-wide “victim database” for suspected victims of trafficking.²⁶ This would allow the police to identify cases of re-trafficking where the victim is returned to the same country or simply brought to another. Identifying likely victims would bring the police one step closer to being able to investigate the organizations behind them. Currently, such a database is merely wishful thinking. European privacy laws would prohibit the storing of such information. Although privacy laws are extremely important, maybe this particular situation merits a closer look.

The second recommendation made by Mr. Tatzgern was to act against the underlying conditions that lead to begging.²⁷ In this, the centers set up to aid trafficked child beggars in South-Eastern Europe could serve as a model. Perhaps they ought to be extended to adult victims of trafficking. For this to work, however, there would have to be more progress in identifying trafficking victims. If the word got out that there were better alternatives, perhaps more forced beggars would speak out against their captors in order to get a better life for themselves and their

26. Tatzgern interview.

27. Ibid.

families. At the same time, this would help bring down the organizers behind the trafficking itself.

To prosecute them, witnesses are needed.

Regardless of what happens, Mr. Tatzgern spoke out against an all-out ban on begging. This would simply drive organizers to different models, like playing music or giving out “free” flowers for a donation, and would do nothing to fight the underlying causes. This author might also add that, if there are indeed any independent beggars left on the streets of Vienna, that this would target them, as well, which is presumably not the point of such legislation.

Conclusion

Trafficking for organized begging exists. It is likely a fairly large problem. It can be addressed better than it is being addressed now, but proper discussions and information are needed to develop a sensible legislative and administrative (i.e. aid) foundation for fighting this twin phenomenon. Without a proper foundation, there is little more the police, NGOs, or anyone else can do to stop or slow trafficking for organized begging. Creating this foundation should be the next step.

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