

Human Trafficking in Russia

NGOs and Civil Society

By: Kayla McGill

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Introduction

Currently in Russia, nearly one million people are living in slavery and are victims of human trafficking daily.¹ Human trafficking in Russia impacts domestic and international relations at all levels of government and society. However, the Russian government has given minimum effort to combat human trafficking, even with pressure from the international community to do so. Instead, Russia's silence regarding human trafficking and its reluctance to pass laws to help trafficking victims, instead of establishing laws to close anti-trafficking shelters and NGOs², reveal a Russian government system where corruption and indulgence are the keys to success, and human trafficking is a vital component of the narrative. Russia's inaction does not negate the fact that "Russia is a source, transit, and destination country for men, women, and children [from all over the world who are] subjected to forced labor and sex trafficking."³ While many forms of trafficking are present in Russia, labour trafficking is the most prevalent.⁴

Russian human trafficking has international implications. The WomanStats Database found that sex trafficking of women for mail order brides or prostitution is "limitedly illegal and is practiced in Russia" where these women are sourced and sent out around the world (see Image 1).⁵ Russia is a transit country as well, illegal migration routes from Asia traffick people through. As for a Russia as a destination for human trafficking, people from poor Asian nations

¹ Laura A. Dean & Anastasia Dovgaia, *The Politics of Russia's Approach to Human Trafficking*, (The Russia File: A Kennan Institute Blog, January 2017)

² Laura A. Dean & Anastasia Dovgaia, *The Politics of Russia's Approach to Human Trafficking*, (The Russia File: A Kennan Institute Blog, January 2017)

³ U.S. State Department, *2017 Trafficking in Persons Report*, 337-338

⁴ U.S. State Department, *2017 Trafficking in Persons Report*, 337-338

⁵ The WomanStats Database <http://womanstats.org> *Trafficking of Women* Image 1

and places like, “Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Ukraine, and Uzbekistan” all use Russia as a destination country.⁶ Additionally, due to the no-visa rule along the borders of many states surrounding Russia, undocumented migration is a prevalent issue.⁷

Because trafficking is a critical issue of national importance, this paper will examine whether or not Russian NGOs and civil society have the capacity to push back effectively against human trafficking. We will examine current policies, law enforcement, and corruption levels; as well as efforts made by NGOs and civil society to combat human trafficking. Finally, we will determine whether or not Russian NGOs and civil society have the capacity to counter human trafficking.

Definition and Current Situation

Russian law defines human trafficking as, “The buying or selling of a person or other actions committed for the purpose of such person’s exploitation in the form of recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring, or receipt of such a person.”⁸ The U.S. currently ranks Russia as a Tier 3 Human Trafficking nation in its 2017 Trafficking in Persons Report. A Tier 3 classification means Russia is not fully compliant with the “minimum standards” according to the U.S. State Department (i.e. number of convictions, victim protection), and it has not taken sufficient steps to improve human trafficking in the past year. Russia was changed from a Tier 2 (i.e. complies somewhat) to a Tier 3 designation in 2013, an action received with annoyance by the Russian government. However, the U.S. State Department ranked Russia as Tier 3 because Russia fails to comply with minimum standards and consistently disregards international calls for action regarding their human trafficking crisis.⁹

Russia has not taken measures to reduce the number of human trafficking convictions or to protect victims of this issue. There is a general reluctance and refusal to create and promote

⁶ Laurel Mazur, *Human Trafficking in the Russian Federation*

⁷ Laurel Mazur, *Human Trafficking in the Russian Federation*

⁸ Mary Buckley, *Human Trafficking In and Out of Russia*, (Fair Observer, 2013)

⁹ Mary Buckley, *Human Trafficking In and Out of Russia*, (Fair Observer, 2013)

practices to eradicate human trafficking. By examining Russian political officers and law enforcement views, general corruption in the government, any legal actions regarding human trafficking, NGOs combating human trafficking in Russia, and civil society reaction to human trafficking, we can better understand the challenges Russia faces and how to potentially overcome them.

Russian Politics, Law Enforcement, & Corruption

Human trafficking in Russia was an issue before the fall of the Soviet Union. However, in a post-USSR world, human trafficking exploded¹⁰ into a full-fledged business for organized crime, politicians, and even law enforcement to capitalize upon.¹¹ This is mainly due to the poverty, economic crises, and turbulent government structures in the former Soviet Nations and Russia that laid the framework for human trafficking. Since the fall of the Soviet Union, “corruption and organized crime have been staples of life in the Russian Federation,” because many officials and leaders could be bribed.¹² The opportunity to make easy money opened the door to human trafficking. Human trafficking was never addressed by Russian leadership until Russian President Vladimir Putin spoke about it in December of 2003.¹³ Relatively soon after President Putin’s remarks, two Articles were created and incorporated into Russia’s Criminal Code to address the problem. Article 127.1 states that human trafficking (either domestic or international) is “punishable by prison terms”, while Article 127.2 focuses on issues combating slavery and forced labor in Russia.¹⁴ Unfortunately, these articles cover other matters besides human trafficking, and are not very powerful or strongly enforced.

While the Articles have been helpful in recognizing human trafficking, they are not enough to combat it. Russia has not adopted any other laws or Articles to prevent human

¹⁰ Vladimir Mukomel, *Combating Human Trafficking: The Russian Federation*, (CARIM-East, April 2013)

¹¹ Mary Buckley, *Human Trafficking In and Out of Russia*, (Fair Observer, 2013)

¹² Laurel Mazur, *Human Trafficking in the Russian Federation*

¹³ Mary Buckley, *Human Trafficking In and Out of Russia*, (Fair Observer, 2013)

¹⁴ Lauren McCarthy, *Beyond Corruption: An Assessment of Russian Law Enforcement’s Right Against Human Trafficking*, (Demokratizatsiya, August 2009), 6

trafficking since 2003.¹⁵ Instead, Russian leadership focused on legislation to make it more difficult for migrant workers to become legal citizens (in 2015), and to cripple NGOs in the country.¹⁶ Currently, Russia does not have a national action plan regarding human trafficking. There is not a “designated lead agency to coordinate anti-trafficking measures” and legislation to help victims of trafficking is “stalled at the highest levels with the presidential administration.”¹⁷ Russia’s infrastructure and government is conducive to human trafficking since lack of appropriate legislation leads to more opportunities for trafficking. Additionally, the increased scale of illegal migration or an issue like the recent refugee crisis adds stress to Russia’s already weak infrastructure.¹⁸ The continual “scarcity of employment” and economic issues leave Russia vulnerable to increased human trafficking as people become more willing to put themselves in hazardous situations, even with the knowledge that these situations will lead to “exploitation and slave labour.”¹⁹

An example of Russia’s labour trafficking is with the citizens of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK/North Korea). Per a contract with Russia, citizens of North Korea may come to Russia to work in Russian labour camps with the result that the majority of their earnings are sent to the North Korean government.²⁰ Corruption is prevalent in this bilateral agreement. Russian border guards are often bribed to allow North Korean citizens in; once in, citizens are forced to work in slave-like conditions to complete Russian development projects, and then their earnings are sent back to their government. Several nations and international organizations have come out openly opposed²¹ to this type of slave-labour and

¹⁵ Laura A. Dean & Anastasia Dovgaia, *The Politics of Russia’s Approach to Human Trafficking*, (The Russia File: A Kennan Institute Blog, January 2017)

¹⁶ Global Slavery Index, *Russia - Global Slavery Index*, (2016)

¹⁷ U.S. State Department, *2017 Trafficking in Persons Report*, 337

¹⁸ Global Slavery Index, *Russia - Global Slavery Index*, (2016)

¹⁹ Vladimir Mukomel, *Combating Human Trafficking: The Russian Federation*, (CARIM-East, April 2013)

²⁰ Andrew Higgins, *North Koreans in Russia Work ‘Basically in the Situation of Slaves,’* (The New York Times, July 2017)

²¹ U.S. State Department, *2017 Trafficking in Persons Report*, 336

human trafficking Russia is sponsoring,²² especially with a somewhat volatile nation like North Korea.

Another factor affecting human trafficking in Russia is the law enforcement. There have been some steps forward. For example, in 2017 Moscow police helped a few victims of trafficking stay in Russia rather than face further repercussions if they were sent back home. Also, to “reduce vulnerability to trafficking,” law enforcement officials made efforts to “ease the acquisition of work permits for citizens from select countries.”²³ By easing the process to obtain a work permit, more people who were illegally trafficked into Russia will be able to find jobs. As legal migrants, more people will be willing to come forward and speak out against trafficking because their status will protect them from detrimental consequences such as deportation.

Unfortunately, those efforts are small compared to the entirety of Russia’s corrupt law enforcement. There is a definite lack of necessary skills and training required for police to enforce laws properly. Many members of the Russian police force do not share information on all trafficking cases and do not keep detailed notes regarding other cases.²⁴ This lack of documentation obviously hampers future investigations and the ability for many traffickers and other criminals to be prosecuted. Additionally, the inability to share information, and the lack of collected data (in addition to other influences), resulted in a low number of cases that were brought to trial in 2017. The limited number of people who were tried for human trafficking “did not appear to constitute an adequate law enforcement response” when taking into account all of the known numbers for human trafficking in Russia.²⁵ The weakness in law enforcement is an obvious contributor to the continued practice of human trafficking, but that alone does not explain the persistence of the issue.

²² Maksim Blinov, *Moscow Preparing Inevitable Response as US hits Russians with new Sanctions over North Korea*, (Russia Today, August 2017)

²³ U.S. State Department, *2017 Trafficking in Persons Report*, 336

²⁴ U.S. State Department, *2017 Trafficking in Persons Report*, 336

²⁵ U.S. State Department, *2017 Trafficking in Persons Report*, 337

Corruption in law enforcement is rampant. It is true that “corrupt law enforcement officials enable trafficking networks to operate.”²⁶ Because of this, combating human trafficking in Russia is very difficult. Unfortunately, while there are laws prohibiting trafficking, the laws are never truly implemented in practice²⁷, and the police themselves are more often part of the problem rather than part of the solution. This is especially true because there are rarely repercussions against police officers if they are complicit in human trafficking, which they often are.²⁸

There is another underlying cause to the prevalence of human trafficking and corruption, and that is the structure of Russian law enforcement. In some cases “the basic structure of law enforcement creates a series of barriers that deters prosecution of many crimes in Russia.”²⁹ This structure is the process where law enforcement officials and officers receive promotions and advance their careers. In Russia, processing (opening and closing) many cases is cause for advancement. However, trafficking cases often take longer to process than other cases, and so they are left open more often (due to corruption in most instances).³⁰ Logically, it makes sense that police officers would tend to turn away from human trafficking cases and focus on quicker to close cases in order to advance their careers. Additionally, the system is hierarchical - meaning people take orders unquestioningly from their superiors.³¹ This also ties into the length of time a case on trafficking is open. If a corrupt person is a leader in the system, people underneath them will unquestionably do what they are asked or told, even if they are told to forget about a case. These actions are condoned by corrupt people in positions of power to ensure that human trafficking remains a “low-risk, high profit crime.”³²

²⁶ Global Slavery Index, *Russia - Global Slavery Index*, (2016)

²⁷ Danielle Mossbarger, *Corruption and Crime in the East: Organized Crime and Human Trafficking*, (Human Rights & Human Welfare)

²⁸ Phil Turoff, *Human Trafficking and Potential Solutions in the Russian Federation*, 21

²⁹ Lauren McCarthy, *Beyond Corruption: An Assessment of Russian Law Enforcement's Fight Against Human Trafficking*, (Demokratizatsiya, August 2009), 6

³⁰ Lauren McCarthy, *Beyond Corruption: An Assessment of Russian Law Enforcement's Fight Against Human Trafficking*, (Demokratizatsiya, August 2009), 16-17

³¹ Lauren McCarthy, *Beyond Corruption: An Assessment of Russian Law Enforcement's Fight Against Human Trafficking*, (Demokratizatsiya, August 2009), 15

³² Lauren McCarthy, *Beyond Corruption: An Assessment of Russian Law Enforcement's Fight Against Human Trafficking*, (Demokratizatsiya, August 2009), 9

In addition to corruption in the police force, government officials are known to be unethical, and they work with crime syndicates allowing them to run their entire trafficking operations without penalty. In the organized crime syndicates in Russia, corruption is used to their advantage. Anything from falsifying travel documents to crossing the border³³ illegally can be bought with the right person.³⁴ Essentially, organized crime syndicates exploit the people being trafficked, and government officials and law enforcement members use their positions to enable the traffickers to continue to profit. “At the worst, these policemen and politicians are complicit in the business of human trafficking, and at the best they turn a blind eye.”³⁵

Corruption is vital to this narrative because “human trafficking is a large industry and would not be able to survive without the complicity of Russian officials.”³⁶ The fact that there are many corrupt Russian government officials and leaders leads to the next matter of concern regarding NGOs and civil society. Some actions desired by civil society and striving to be enforced by NGOs are presumed to be at odds or in violation against the practices of the Russian government officials.

Russian Civil Society

Civil society is defined by the United Nations as the “third sector of society, along with government and business, it comprises civil society organizations and non-governmental organizations” including the family and private sphere.³⁷ This section will focus on how civil society and the private sphere influence human trafficking, and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) will be discussed later.

In 2016, after publishing their Trafficking in Persons report (TIP report), the United States nominated the Oluremi Banwo Kehinde as the 2016 TIP Hero. Oluremi Banwo Kehinde

³³ Mary Buckley, *Human Trafficking In and Out of Russia*, (Fair Observer, September 2013)

³⁴ Lauren McCarthy, *Beyond Corruption: An Assessment of Russian Law Enforcement's Fight Against Human Trafficking*, (Demokratizatsiya, August 2009), 9

³⁵ Phil Turoff, *Human Trafficking and Potential Solutions in the Russian Federation*, 20

³⁶ Laurel Mazur, *Human Trafficking in the Russian Federation*

³⁷ United Nations, Civil Society Definition and Sources

is a Nigerian who lives in Russia and he is very focused on anti-trafficking. His organization 'Help Services for Nigerians in Russia' supports African victims of human trafficking, specifically sex trafficking.³⁸ Kehinde is responsible for helping over 240 women escape and helped secure their release from human trafficking. Numerous non-corrupt law enforcement officers and NGOs have cited him as an exemplary human being. There are many people like Kehinde in Russia, working to combat rather than promote the issue of human trafficking. Unfortunately, the state offers no funding or programs for trafficking victims, so it is up to NGOs and civil society to pick up the slack.³⁹

The Russian government influences civil society through the media. The prominent news sources in Russia, i.e. News From Russia, The Moscow Times, and Russia Today, do not discuss human trafficking as it relates to Russia's national issues or security. Instead, the issue of human trafficking is discussed in relation to successful arrests of suspects, or Russian support of anti-trafficking in the EU or other locations. For example, in The Moscow Times only a few articles in the past year were published regarding human trafficking. Those articles related how 13 Russians were arrested for human trafficking (September 2016)⁴⁰, and the arrest of a Belarusian Russian Orthodox Priest who was trafficking women to be prostitutes (August 2017)⁴¹. Or The Moscow Times was criticizing the U.S. government for their appraisal of Russia's human trafficking status (July 2017),⁴² and 'de-bunking' the perception of North Korean labour camps saying that the U.S. "portrayal of migrant labour in Russia as slavery is disingenuous"(July 2017).⁴³

³⁸ U.S. State Department TIP Heroes, *Oluremi Banwo Kehinde: Russia, Class of 2016*

³⁹ U.S. State Department, *2017 Trafficking in Persons Report*, 336

⁴⁰ Fabrizio Bensch, *13 Russians Arrested for Human Trafficking*, (The Moscow Times, September 2016)

⁴¹ The Moscow Times, *Russian Orthodox Priest Detained for Trafficking Prostitutes*, (August 2017)

⁴² The Moscow Times, *Russian State Media Ridicules U.S. Government for Mistaking 'Russian Atlantis' for Real City*, (July 2017)

⁴³ Andre Lankov, *The Real Story of North Korean Labor Camps in Russia (Op-ed): The United States' effort to portray North Korean migrant labor in Russia as slavery is disingenuous*, (The Moscow Times, July 2017)

* I only examined this last year on The Moscow Times, Russia Today, and News From Russia. Russia Today and News From Russia held much of the same material or themes.

While this type of news reporting may not seem out of the ordinary, the fact that nothing about corruption in the government or human trafficking as reported by other organizations was in the news this past year* shows that there is underreporting in the state controlled media. This type of government controlled news media has been shown to sway public opinion and potentially influence people to think there is nothing wrong. Or, alternatively, if there is something wrong, the government leaders are taking care of the problem (i.e. they are taking care of human trafficking issues).

General public opinion of human trafficking in Russia varies by gender. As an example, in June 2007, a survey of 1,600 citizens in Russia revealed that 43% men and 38% women believed that the individual women and girls were at fault if they ended up being trafficked. However, there was also an awareness of government corruption and the supported criminal network because around the same percentage of men at 31% and women at 35% women “recognized that the trafficked may have been duped by criminal gangs.”⁴⁴ The conflicting views indicate the perception of the public at large. Namely, there is corruption, but nothing can be done about it because that’s just the way life is. Education of the issue and crime of human trafficking is vital.

NGOs & Human Trafficking

While corruption is a detrimental factor of Russian law enforcement and politics, NGOs have taken many steps to combat human trafficking. There are many notable NGOs that operate in Russia or were created in Russia. For example, MiraMed⁴⁵ and the Angel Coalition are active NGOs that focus primarily on victim assistance and rehab programs.⁴⁶ NGOs provide a vital backbone to the anti-human trafficking network in Russia. NGOs are primarily in Russia because the government systems are not enough to support the population, especially

⁴⁴ Mary Buckley, *Human Trafficking In and Out of Russia*, (Fair Observer, September 2013)

⁴⁵ MiraMed Foundation

⁴⁶ The Angel Coalition

in light of rampant corruption.⁴⁷ Many efforts by NGOs in Russia focus on the victims of human trafficking, and the support necessary to get them back on their feet and ‘reintegrate’ into society. Unfortunately, a number of NGOs, most specifically anti-trafficking NGOs, are being ‘frozen out’ through political and legal pressure.⁴⁸ The lack of funding and governmental support means that NGOs in Russia have somewhat limited options.⁴⁹

The Foreign Agents Act (2012) states that any NGO receiving help monetarily or in any other form outside of Russia will be targeted. This targeting consists of adding “political and legal pressures” to limit resources, time, and capabilities.⁵⁰ The detrimental aspect of this Act is that those locally formed Non-Profit Organizations cannot be supported with funding outside of Russia or the Russian government will label it as a “foreign agent”. This label limits their actions and capability to help victims of human trafficking within the country, and basically dismantles the NGO.

Since the Foreign Agents Act passed in 2012, many NGOs have already had to either close their doors or downsize.⁵¹ As one example of how the the Act works, NGOs labeled as foreign agents require extra reporting and auditing. Whereas non-foreign agents are audited once every three years, foreign agent NGOs are audited formally once a year and then informally throughout the year.⁵² Not only is this time consuming, but it is also expensive for the NGOs. In 2017, the Russian Government added at least a dozen NGOs to their list as foreign agents requiring payment of various “fines.”⁵³ This policy of the government is harmful, time-consuming, and expensive. It would be far more beneficial for the government to focus on other issues, especially because most of the anti-trafficking NGOs they are eliminated

⁴⁷ Europe Aid, *Institutional Reform and Human Rights: Preventing Human Trafficking in the Russian Federation*

⁴⁸ Marianna Kosharovskiy, *Foreign Agents Act Chills Anti-Trafficking Efforts*, (Strategic Resources Alliance at The Human Trafficking Center, November 2014)

⁴⁹ Laurel Mazur, *Human Trafficking in the Russian Federation*

⁵⁰ Marianna Kosharovskiy, *Foreign Agents Act Chills Anti-Trafficking Efforts*, (Strategic Resources Alliance at The Human Trafficking Center, November 2014)

⁵¹ Europe Aid, *Institutional Reform and Human Rights: Preventing Human Trafficking in the Russian Federation*

⁵² Marianna Kosharovskiy, *Foreign Agents Act Chills Anti-Trafficking Efforts*, (Strategic Resources Alliance at The Human Trafficking Center, November 2014)

⁵³ Amnesty International, *Russian Federation 2016/2017*

also provide valuable services to the community in the form of women's health or family support.⁵⁴

A few NGOs that closed their doors were very important anti-trafficking shelters. Two of these dedicated "trafficking shelters that provide protective services to trafficking victims remained closed,"⁵⁵ and in Moscow a shelter run by the Russian Orthodox Church also had to close due to funding issues.⁵⁵ These shelters were not only set-up to protect victims, but they were also meant to train Russian leaders about the warning signs to detect human trafficking and the dangers of this practice. One of the main initiatives of anti-trafficking NGOs in Russia is to "educate law enforcement officers on the psychological care of victims of human trafficking that they may be insensitive to."⁵⁶ Due to lack of funding, NGOs in St Petersburg were unable to teach law enforcement and politicians this essential trafficking training, and there just are not any other organizations able to step up to take that position.⁵⁷ The lack of shelter from NGOs and the lack of officials and law enforcement training from NGOs only exacerbates the existing issue of human trafficking in Russia. Because NGOs now have an administrative or governmental cap on what they can provide and accomplish, and they are punished if they attempt to do more than allowed, the number of NGOs has fallen in the past few years. This has made the matter of combating human trafficking by NGOs and outside groups even more difficult.⁵⁸

NGOs must be able to bridge the gap between civil society, government, and law enforcement. One attempt is through educating law enforcement officials and officers on how to identify and help trafficking victims. Additionally, "the identification of trafficking victims should not be the job of law enforcement alone; it should also be undertaken by NGOs and civil society to make sure that the victims' interests are accounted for."⁵⁹ Additionally, the negative perception attributed to human trafficking victims in society and by law enforcement

⁵⁴ Phil Turoff, *Human Trafficking and Potential Solutions in the Russian Federation*, 31

⁵⁵ U.S. State Department, *2017 Trafficking in Persons Report*, 337-338

⁵⁶ Laurel Mazur, *Human Trafficking in the Russian Federation*

⁵⁷ U.S. State Department, *2017 Trafficking in Persons Report*, 336

⁵⁸ Vladimir Mukomel, *Combating Human Trafficking: The Russian Federation*, (CARIM-East, April 2013)

⁵⁹ Laurel Mazur, *Human Trafficking in the Russian Federation*

needs to be changed. NGOs have a large impact on educating people regarding the criminal act of human trafficking and the responsibility that should or should not be borne by those affected by it. However, none of the progress forward to help victims of human trafficking can come to pass if the Russian government continually neglects or limits the capabilities of NGOs. To date, the government has not been supportive of NGOs or civil society if they counter the interests (corrupt or not) of its leadership.⁶⁰

Conclusion

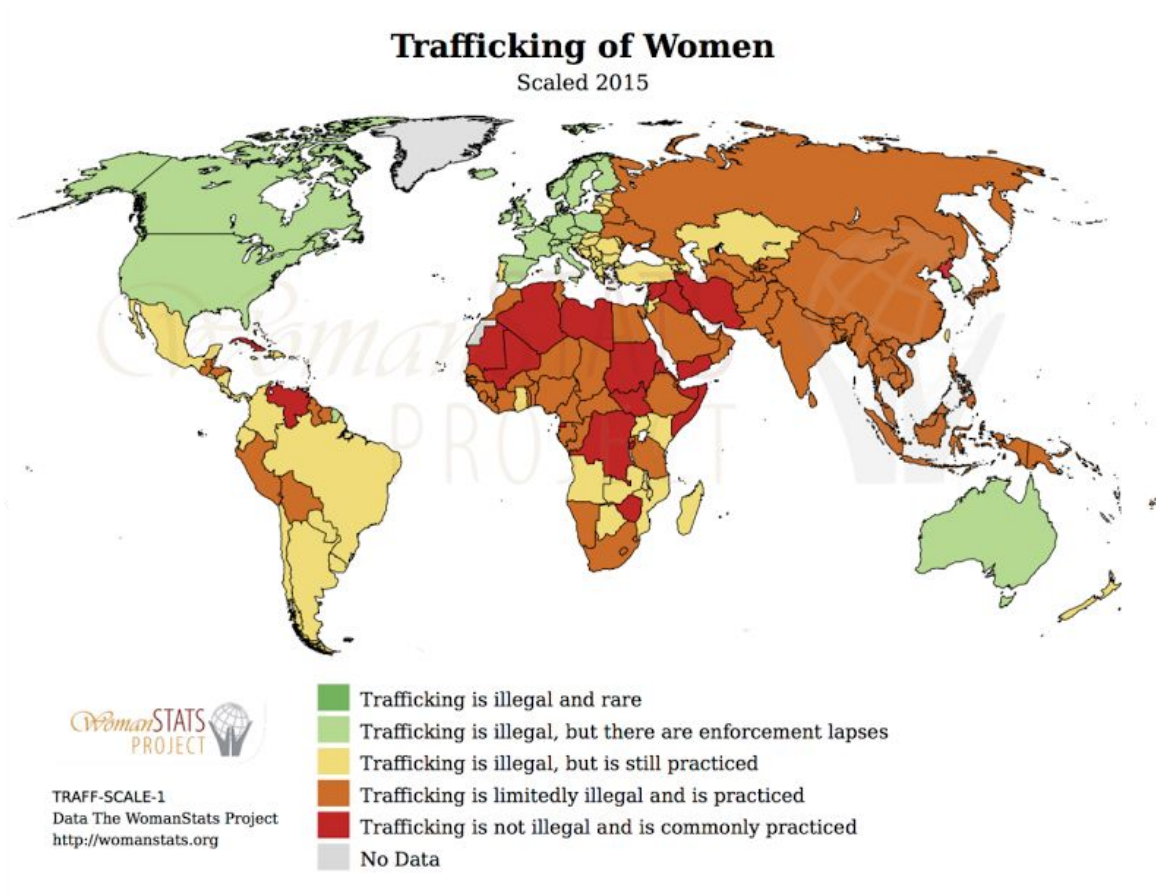
In conclusion, efforts are being made by NGOs and civil society to combat and eradicate human trafficking in Russia. For example, NGOs are one of the few organizations that focus on the human trafficking victims and attempt to educate society on how to support them. Additionally, there are people like Oluremi Banwo Kehinde who are making personal efforts to help victims. These efforts are pushing back at the underlying corruption and they do have the capacity to bring about positive change. However, none of the changes will endure if NGOs, civil society, and the Russian government, law enforcement, and other actors do not work together.

While NGOs and civil society have the capacity to push back, corruption at all levels of government and a weak law enforcement are major hindrances. Policies such as the Foreign Agents Act limit NGO capabilities by reducing or eliminating funding and support. A weak law enforcement system results in less criminals being prosecuted, and it opens the door for organized crime and corrupt politics to support human trafficking. Further, a state controlled media influences attitudes and perceptions of society towards issues such as human trafficking. Human trafficking is not merely a Russian security crisis, but an international one. Civil society and NGOs are one part of the equation, but human trafficking will remain a prevalent harmful issue until all levels of Russian government and society coordinate and work together to create reforms and determine a positive collaborative process to move forward together.

⁶⁰ Mary Buckley, *Human Trafficking In and Out of Russia*, (Fair Observer, September 2013)

Maps

Image 1



WomanStats Project <http://womanstats.org>
Trafficking in Russia is limitedly illegal and is practiced.

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