

Flygtningenævnets baggrundsmateriale

Bilagsnr.:	711
Land:	Rusland
Kilde:	US Department of State
Titel:	2022 Trafficking in Persons Report: Russia
Udgivet:	29. juli 2022
Optaget på baggrundsmaterialet:	15. september 2022

Document #2077591

USDOS – US Department of State

2022 Trafficking in Persons Report: Russia

Russia (Tier 3)

The Government of Russia does not fully meet the minimum standards for the elimination of trafficking and is not making significant efforts to do so, even considering the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, if any, on its anti-trafficking capacity; therefore Russia remained on Tier 3. Despite the lack of significant efforts, the government took some steps to address trafficking, including by prosecuting and convicting more traffickers, extending work and residence permits for foreign workers in response to the pandemic, and facilitating the return of Russian children from Iraq and Syria, some of whom may have been trafficking victims. However, during the reporting period, there was a government policy or pattern of trafficking. The government was actively complicit in the forced labor of North Korean workers. The government did not screen North Korean workers for trafficking indicators or identify any North Korean trafficking victims, despite credible reports in previous years that the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) operated work camps in Russia and exploited thousands of North Korean workers in forced labor. Citizens from the DPRK continued to arrive throughout the year, many of whom likely engaged in informal labor; the government issued 4,093 visas to North Koreans in 2021 in an apparent attempt to circumvent UN Security Council resolutions (UNSCRs). The government did not report how many North Korean workers remained in Russia in 2021. Separate from this complicity, the government did not report identifying any trafficking victims, and efforts to prosecute and convict traffickers remained weak compared with the estimated scope of the problem. Authorities continued to lack a process for the identification of victims and their referral to care, and the criminal code did not establish a definition for a victim of trafficking, hindering identification efforts and limiting access to victim services. The government's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 created significant vulnerabilities to trafficking for the millions of refugees fleeing Ukraine. The government offered no funding or programs to provide services for trafficking victims and took steps to limit or ban the activities of civil society groups, including some dedicated to anti-trafficking activities. Authorities routinely penalized potential victims, including by detaining and deporting potential forced labor victims for immigration violations, and prosecuted sex trafficking victims for commercial sex crimes, without screening for trafficking indicators. As in previous years, the government did not draft a national strategy or assign roles and responsibilities to government agencies to combat human trafficking.

PRIORITIZED RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Investigate and prosecute trafficking crimes and convict traffickers under the trafficking statutes, including complicit officials and suspected trafficking cases related to North Korean workers in Russia, respecting due process.
- Allocate funding to state bodies and anti-trafficking NGOs to provide specialized assistance and care to victims.
- Implement a formal policy to ensure identified trafficking victims are not punished or deported for unlawful acts traffickers compelled them to commit.
- Develop and implement formal national procedures to guide law enforcement, labor inspectors, and other government officials in identifying and referring victims to service providers, particularly among labor migrants and individuals in commercial sex, and screen for trafficking indicators among individuals arrested for commercial sex or immigration violations.
- Given significant concerns that the DPRK forces its citizens to work abroad, screen North Korean workers, students, and tourists for trafficking indicators and refer them to appropriate services.
- Create a national anti-trafficking action plan and establish a central coordinator for government efforts.
- Ensure victim identification and protection measures are not tied to the prosecution of a trafficker and allow all first responders to officially identify potential trafficking victims and refer them to care.
- Take all necessary steps to allow those forcibly relocated to Russia to travel freely and avoid falling victim to traffickers.
- Ensure screening of children returned from Iraq and Syria for child soldiering indicators and provide them with rehabilitation and reintegration support.

- Provide victims access to legal alternatives to removal to countries where they face hardship or retribution.
- Amend the criminal code to include a definition of human trafficking that is consistent with the definition under international law.
- Amend or repeal penal provisions of the criminal code to clarify that no penalties involving compulsory labor may be imposed for the peaceful expression of political views.
- Create a central repository for publicly available information on investigation, prosecution, conviction, and sentencing data for trafficking cases.
- Increase efforts to raise public awareness of both sex and labor trafficking, including among children.

PROSECUTION

The government maintained minimal law enforcement efforts. Articles 127.1 (trafficking in persons) and 127.2 (use of slave labor) of the criminal code criminalized sex trafficking and labor trafficking. Article 127.1 prescribed penalties of up to five years’ prison labor or up to six years’ imprisonment for crimes involving an adult victim and three to 10 years’ imprisonment for those involving a child victim. Article 127.2 prescribed penalties of up to five years’ prison labor or up to five years’ imprisonment for crimes involving an adult victim, and up to five years’ prison labor or three to 10 years’ imprisonment for those involving a child victim. These penalties were sufficiently stringent and, with respect to sex trafficking, commensurate with punishments prescribed for other serious crimes, such as kidnapping. However, inconsistent with the definition of trafficking under international law, these articles established the use of force, fraud, or coercion as an aggravating factor, rather than an essential element of the crime. There were reports authorities often prosecuted trafficking crimes under related statutes, including Articles 240 (involvement in prostitution), 240.1 (receiving sexual services from a minor), and 241 (organization of prostitution), the penalties for which were generally lower than the penalties prescribed for trafficking crimes. The government did not report comprehensive data on trafficking criminal cases, making it difficult to assess the adequacy or effectiveness of law enforcement efforts. Media reports and publicly available data revealed some details on trafficking cases investigated and prosecuted, including some conviction information, although the limited number of cases reported did not constitute an adequate law enforcement response compared with the scale of human trafficking in Russia. Publicly available data was also likely duplicative or contradictory of information from other sources, as no single agency was responsible for maintaining comprehensive law enforcement statistics.

Russia’s federal-level Investigative Committee and media publicly reported the government conducted four labor trafficking investigations in 2021 (the government initiated four investigations in 2020). The government and media publicly reported authorities conducted 13 prosecutions under Articles 127.1 and 127.2, compared with zero prosecutions in 2020. The government reported convicting five traffickers (four for forced labor and one for sex trafficking and slavery), compared with one conviction in 2020. The government reported judges sentenced the traffickers to four and a half to seven years’ imprisonment. The government reported investigating and prosecuting several cases involving baby-selling and surrogacy as trafficking, both crimes that without an element of exploitation fall outside the international definition of trafficking. In previous years, authorities prosecuted suspected traffickers under commercial sex and “pimping” statutes; the government did not report trafficking cases under these statutes in 2021. NGOs noted that hundreds of trafficking-related cases were reported to authorities, but the government processed most under other administrative or criminal codes, which suppressed statistics and masked the scale and scope of the problem. The government did not report if it trained law enforcement or judicial authorities on trafficking. Russian authorities did not report cooperating in any new or ongoing international investigations in 2021. In February 2022, the government signed a declaration with Azerbaijan to jointly combat several crimes, including human trafficking.

Official complicity in trafficking crimes remained a significant concern. NGOs reported government officials and police regularly accepted bribes in exchange for not pursuing trafficking cases and officials often benefitted financially or materially from trafficking crimes. The government did not report any investigations, prosecutions, or convictions of government employees complicit in human trafficking crimes. However, in prior years, civil society reported that the government intentionally investigated official complicity cases under non-trafficking statutes, such as Article 290 (bribery) of the criminal code. In the years following Russia’s 2014 invasion of Ukraine, Russia-led forces reportedly used children to perform armed duty at checkpoints and to serve as fighters, guards, mailpersons, and secretaries, as well as informants and human shields. Following Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, media highlighted new uncorroborated reports of Russian forces using children as human shields. Persistent and widespread but unconfirmed reports indicated Russia-led forces attempted to conscript or force many Ukrainians in eastern Ukraine to fight against their own country or engage in forced labor, such as to clear rubble and dispose of corpses. Observers reported Russia-associated military associations and clubs, registered as non-profit organizations, continued to routinely prepare youth in Russia-controlled areas of Ukraine for conscripted service in Russia’s armed forces. Multiple reports indicated Russia-led forces forcibly moved thousands of Ukrainians, including children, to Russia through “filtration camps” in Russia-controlled areas of Ukraine, where they were deprived of their documents and forced to take Russian passports. Once in Russia, widespread reports indicated thousands of Ukrainians were forcibly transported to some of Russia’s most remote regions, and Russian authorities reportedly forcibly separated some Ukrainian children from their parents and gave the children to Russian families. Ukrainians forcibly displaced to Russia were highly vulnerable to trafficking. During the reporting period, there were reports a Russia-backed armed group unlawfully recruited or used children in the Central African Republic.

Despite credible reports of the forced labor and slave-like conditions perpetuated by the DPRK government on North Koreans working in Russia, the Russian government did not report any investigations into those conditions. In violation of UNSCRs 2375 and 2397, migrant laborers from the DPRK continued to work in Russia, especially in the Far East, often under conditions of forced labor. The government previously reported approximately 500 DPRK workers remained in the country at the onset of the pandemic in March 2020; the government did not report how many North Korean workers remained in 2021. Despite the government claiming it would cease issuing new work permits to North Korean laborers, observers noted many laborers continued to enter the country via fraudulent channels to work informally, for example by obtaining tourist or student visas. The government issued 4,093 visas to North Korean citizens in 2021, roughly 2,600 of which were student visas (the government issued 2,609 student and 256 tourist visas to North Korean citizens in 2020); experts noted that many of these visa holders worked illegally in Russia, making them vulnerable to trafficking. Authorities did not report screening North Korean workers for trafficking indicators or offering victims options to legally remain in the country. A February 2016 agreement between Russia and the DPRK enabled Russian authorities to deport North Koreans residing “illegally” in Russia, possibly even those with refugee status. Observers noted this may increase the risk of labor trafficking for North Koreans working in Russia and might subject victims to grave harm, as DPRK authorities reportedly arrested, imprisoned, subjected to forced labor, tortured, and sometimes executed repatriated trafficking victims.

PROTECTION

The government decreased already negligible efforts to protect victims. The government did not develop or employ a formal system to guide officials in proactive identification of victims or their referral to available services. The law did not specifically define who was a trafficking victim or differentiate trafficking victims from victims of other crimes; experts noted this hindered identification measures and limited access to victim services. The government did not report identifying any trafficking victims in 2021, compared with 52 in 2020. NGOs estimated the actual number of victims to be in the thousands; they reported a significant number of cases go unreported due to the lack of a formal referral mechanism, victims’ credible fears of authorities, and the lack of government assistance to victims. Observers noted police regularly avoided registering victims in criminal cases that were unlikely to be solved in order not to risk a lower conviction rate. The government also did not have a program to protect or support victims who participated in the investigation or prosecution of their alleged traffickers. In recent years, authorities reportedly pressured some victims to cooperate in investigations without any offer of protection. The government did not report if it repatriated trafficking victims to Russia under a previously established readmission agreement with the EU, which was intended to assist in the repatriation of Russian citizens.

As in previous years, the government did not provide funding or programs for protective services dedicated to trafficking victims. NGOs provided all protection services, including shelter, food, legal services, basic medical and psychological support, interpretation, facilitating the return of documents or wages, and assisting in the resettlement or repatriation of victims, though few were able to provide specialized assistance for trafficking victims; an NGO also ran a 24/7 hotline. While in prior years government-funded homeless shelters provided medical and psychiatric aid and referred trafficking victims to international NGOs and other homeless shelters located in many of Russia’s regions, NGOs reported they no longer sent victims to these shelters because of their poor conditions, the lack of screening for trafficking indicators, and the risk that victims may be vulnerable to further trafficking; as in previous years, there were no reports of victims assisted in these shelters in 2021. The government did not report if courts ordered compensation to victims; publicly available data showed that trafficking victims did not receive compensation in civil suits in 2021. The government continued the repatriation of Russian children, including potential trafficking victims, whose parents were alleged fighters with ISIS. ISIS was known to use child soldiers and perpetrate other forms of trafficking. The government did not report screening specifically for indicators of trafficking, but past media reports indicated the children received counseling. In July 2021, the government reported it had repatriated 341 children from Syria and Iraq since the start of its repatriation program in 2017, including all Russian children who had been held in prisons in Damascus, Syria.

The government did not actively cooperate with civil society. Similar to previous reporting periods, the government took steps to limit or ban the activities of civil society groups, including some dedicated to anti-trafficking activities, through measures such as “foreign agent” laws. In March 2021, the government stripped a prominent migrant rights activist of his Russian citizenship and deported him to Tajikistan, where he was sentenced to nine years’ imprisonment on fraud charges; observers dismissed his expulsion and subsequent conviction as politically motivated. In September 2021, another prominent migrant rights activist was arrested at the airport upon returning to Russia, was threatened with deportation, and subsequently voluntarily departed the country. Additionally, the Yarovaya package of anti-terror laws made it a crime for individuals or organizations to provide material assistance to people considered to be in Russia illegally; authorities could prosecute NGOs that assisted undocumented victims of trafficking. Authorities also penalized victims for unlawful acts traffickers compelled them to commit. Authorities treated foreign victims as illegal migrants and criminally charged them with “prostitution” or “unlawful presence in country;” many victims were detained or deported without being screened for trafficking indicators. Authorities frequently prosecuted Russian and foreign victims of sex trafficking for engaging in commercial sex and did not take proactive measures to identify victims during raids on brothels. Authorities punished child victims of forced criminality, often together with the traffickers who forced them to commit these crimes. Authorities did not screen other vulnerable populations, such as migrant workers or foreign women entering Russia on student visas, despite evidence of their intention to work or other vulnerabilities to trafficking. In prior years, authorities reportedly prosecuted Russian citizens returning from Syria and Iraq, where some were subjected to trafficking, under anti-terror laws, without screening them for indicators of trafficking. The ILO Committee of Experts again noted its deep

concern in 2020 that some provisions of the Russian criminal code, which include compulsory labor as possible punishment, are worded broadly enough to lend themselves to application as a means of punishment for the expression of views opposed to the government.

PREVENTION

The government maintained negligible efforts to prevent trafficking. The government had neither a designated lead agency to coordinate its anti-trafficking efforts nor a body to monitor its anti-trafficking activities or make periodic assessments measuring its performance. Russia did not have a national action plan. The government continued to operate regional migration centers where foreign migrants who did not need visas to enter the country could obtain work permits directly from the government; however, an international organization estimated only half of eligible migrants obtained these permits as they entailed large upfront and monthly fees and sometimes required multiple time-consuming trips to the center. The international organization noted migrants who were not able to complete the permit process were increasingly vulnerable to labor exploitation and trafficking due to their lack of proper documentation. In March 2021, the government reported it would create a unified information platform to register foreign citizens with the stated intent to promote employee-employer relations and facilitate job training and access to information. In August 2021, the government reported it would simplify the procedure for migrant workers to obtain a social security number, facilitating legal employment in the country. In June 2021, the government issued a decree extending through September 2021 the pandemic-related ban on deporting undocumented foreign nationals; foreign nationals from Eurasian Economic Union countries could work during this time. The decree also extended foreign nationals’ legal status by not counting time in the country from June 2021 through December 2021. Recruitment agencies that sought to employ Russians overseas were required to obtain a license from the Ministry of Internal Affairs, but no such requirement existed for agencies recruiting foreign workers, which increased the vulnerability of such workers to forced labor. In previous years, authorities conducted scheduled and unannounced inspections of businesses employing foreign workers to check for violations of immigration and labor laws—with penalties in the form of fines and/or revocation of foreign worker permits; the government did not report conducting inspections in 2021. In spite of frequent inspections in past years, the use of undocumented or forced labor remained widespread due to complacency and corruption. The government provided no funds to NGOs to carry out prevention and awareness campaigns. Prevention campaigns were hampered by a law that made it a crime to talk to children younger than 16 about sexual issues and exploitation. The government did not make efforts to reduce the demand for commercial sex acts. The government did not make efforts to reduce the demand for participation in international sex tourism by its citizens, despite allegations of such actions by its citizens. The government did not report providing anti-trafficking training to its troops prior to their deployment as peacekeepers.

TRAFFICKING PROFILE

As reported over the past five years, human traffickers exploit domestic and foreign victims in Russia, and victims from Russia are exploited abroad. Although labor trafficking remains the predominant form of human trafficking in Russia, sex trafficking also occurs. Traffickers exploit workers from Russia and other countries in Europe, Central Asia, Southeast Asia, the People’s Republic of China (PRC), and the DPRK in forced labor in Russia. Instances of labor trafficking have been reported in the construction, manufacturing, logging, textile, transport, and maritime industries, as well as in sawmills, agriculture, sheep farms, grocery and retail stores, restaurants, waste sorting, street sweeping, domestic service, call centers, and begging. Labor traffickers also exploit victims in criminal activities, such as drug trafficking, facilitation of illegal migration, and the production of counterfeit goods. According to an NGO, foreign nationals increasingly enter the country illegally with the help of criminal groups, which subsequently increases the migrants’ vulnerability to trafficking. In previous years, there were reports of widespread forced labor in brick factories in the Dagestan region. After a sharp decrease at the onset of the pandemic, labor migration to Russia began to increase in 2021; media reported more than 7.8 million migrants from the Kyrgyz Republic, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan entered Russia in 2021. Many migrant workers experience exploitative labor conditions characteristic of trafficking cases, such as withholding of identity documents, non-payment for services rendered, physical abuse, lack of safety measures, or extremely poor living conditions. To offset the shortage of labor migrants, the government increased the use of convict labor, particularly for large construction projects; observers expressed concern that prisoners working for private businesses may not be doing so voluntarily in spite of government claims that its correctional labor programs comply fully with its international obligations. According to an international organization, children of migrant workers are vulnerable to forced labor in informal sectors. Prior to Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, media reported more than two million Ukrainians resided in Russia, including more than one million who escaped Russian aggression in Ukraine. Many of these migrants work unofficially and are vulnerable to both forced labor and sex trafficking; most identified victims of forced begging in recent years are Ukrainian. Subcontracting practices in Russia’s construction industry result in cases of non-payment or slow payment of wages, which leave workers at risk of labor trafficking. Organized criminal groups often recruit victims from within their own ethnic communities. Traffickers have been known to pose as landlords renting rooms to migrant laborers to recruit victims and coerce them into forced labor. Traffickers lure children from state and municipal orphanages into forced begging, forced criminality, child pornography, sex trafficking, and use by armed groups in the Middle East. Organized criminal groups recruit victims for forced begging from state institutions for the elderly and people with disabilities; these institutions are not trained on how to identify trafficking and sometimes facilitate the exploitation.

Women and children from Europe (predominantly Ukraine and Moldova), Southeast Asia (primarily PRC and the Philippines), Africa (particularly Nigeria), and Central Asia are victims of sex trafficking in Russia. NGOs report an increasing number of sex trafficking victims are from Africa, arriving either illegally or legally as students. Sex

trafficking occurs in brothels, hotels, and saunas, among other locations. During the 2018 World Cup, Russia relaxed its visa requirements, allowing all Fan ID holders to enter and exit Russia without a visa through December 31, 2018. Traffickers exploited this system to bring foreign sex trafficking victims into the country, especially from Nigeria; NGOs report many victims remain in Russia. Observers note migrant workers are also vulnerable to sex trafficking. Children experiencing homelessness are exploited in sex trafficking. Russian women and children are reportedly victims of sex trafficking in Russia and abroad, including in Northeast Asia, Europe, Central Asia, Africa, the United States, and the Middle East. Traffickers use social media to recruit, monitor, and control victims. Russian criminal groups threaten family members to coerce women into commercial sex in Russia and abroad. Women from Russia’s North Caucasus region and women from Central Asia residing in Russia have been recruited to join ISIS through online romantic relationships and are then subjected to exploitation. Wives and children of foreign fighters are sold after their spouse or father is killed in action.

Corruption among some government officials and within some state agencies creates an environment enabling trafficking crimes. In recent years, criminal cases have involved Russian officials suspected of allegedly facilitating trafficking by enabling victims’ entry into Russia, providing protection to traffickers, and returning victims to their exploiters; in some instances, officials have engaged directly in trafficking crimes. Employers sometimes bribe Russian officials to avoid enforcement of penalties for engaging illegal workers. Prior to 2018, the DPRK sent approximately 20,000 North Korean citizens to Russia annually for work in a variety of sectors, including logging in Russia’s Far East. An estimated 500 North Korean workers remained in Russia as of March 2020, as did approximately 4,093 North Korean citizens who entered with visas in 2021; observers note a growing trend in the use of non-labor visas to bring DPRK workers to Russia. Many of these North Korean citizens are subjected to conditions of forced labor by the North Korean government. Following Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, multiple reports indicate Russia-led forces have forcibly moved thousands of Ukrainians, including children, to Russia through “filtration camps” in Russia-controlled areas of Ukraine, where they are deprived of their documents and forced to take Russian passports. Once in Russia, widespread reports indicate thousands of Ukrainians have been forcibly transported to some of Russia’s most remote regions and Russian authorities have reportedly forcibly separated some Ukrainian children from their parents and given the children to Russian families. Ukrainians forcibly displaced to Russia are highly vulnerable to trafficking.

Russia-led forces reportedly recruit Syrian children to guard installations and fight in Libya. In the years following Russia’s 2014 invasion of Ukraine, persistent and widespread but unconfirmed reports indicate Russia-led forces have attempted to conscript or force many Ukrainians in eastern Ukraine to fight against their own country, and following Russia’s full-scale invasion in 2022, Russian forces have reportedly forced many Ukrainians in eastern Ukraine to engage in forced labor, such as to clear rubble and dispose of corpses. Since 2014, Russia-led forces have reportedly used children to perform armed duty at checkpoints and to serve as fighters, guards, mailpersons, and secretaries; uncorroborated reports indicate Russia-led forces have used children as informants and human shields. Following Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, media highlighted new uncorroborated reports of Russian forces using children as human shields. Observers report Russia-associated military associations and clubs, registered as non-profit organizations, continue to routinely prepare youth in Russia-controlled areas of Ukraine for conscripted service in Russia’s armed forces. During the reporting period, there were reports a Russia-backed armed group unlawfully recruited or used children in the Central African Republic.

ecoi.net summary:

Annual report on trafficking in persons (covering April 2021 to March 2022)

Country:

Russian Federation

Source:

[USDOS – US Department of State](#)

Original link:

<https://www.state.gov/reports/2022-trafficking-in-persons-report/russia/>

Document type:

Periodical Report

Language:

English

Published:

29 July 2022

Document ID:

2077591

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