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Russia's Poor Rating on the Global Slavery Index

By Nick Grono

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Slavery has been with us for thousands of years. It is documented in records scratched on 4000-year old tablets. But while it would be comforting to think that slavery is a relic of history, sadly that is not the case. Despite being outlawed nationally and internationally, it remains a scar on humanity here in Russia, throughout Eurasia, and in every continent in the world.

Modern slavery may not be as visible as in the past, but it is found in the richest and poorest countries, in our major cities and in the countryside. As our societies have developed, slavery has evolved as well. Victims are now transported on 747s as well as oxcarts. It is used to produce everything from electronics, steel, food and the cotton in our clothes, turning its victims into pliable servants to be used and discarded.

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Violence is at the heart of all slavery. Whether the victims are coerced to work in quarries and factories, forced into marriage, or tricked into working in brothels — the common thread is that they are not free to walk away. But while we know enough to recognize that slavery in its modern forms is all around us, it remains poorly understood. This helps slavery remain hidden and hampers the fight to end it.

Without accurate information, we do not know where to focus our efforts or what works best in tackling it. This lack of information also makes it easier, sadly, for governments, businesses and communities to ignore the problem.

That is why it is important to shine a light on modern slavery by gathering as much authoritative information as possible. This is what has been drawn together in the first Global Slavery Index published by the Walk Free Foundation, which is dedicated to ending modern slavery in this generation.

By collating information, the report enables the most accurate estimate yet of the numbers caught in slavery globally, regionally and nationally. It goes further in ranking 162 countries based on a weighted measure of the prevalence of modern slavery by population, the extent of child marriage and the scale of trafficking in and out of the different countries.

The findings make bleak reading. The report estimates that there are at least 29.8 million people living in modern slavery. Most of those denied their freedom live in Asia, with India, China and Pakistan having the greatest absolute numbers of people enslaved. India alone accounts for almost half the total, with millions trapped in debt bondage and bonded labour.

But when looked at as a proportion of the population, it is Mauritania that has the worst record. The West African country has a deeply entrenched system of hereditary slavery, with 140,000 to 160,000 slaves out of a population of only 3.8 million. Haiti, a Caribbean nation where child slavery is also widespread, is in second place, with Pakistan appearing one place below.

Even countries that perform best in the index — Iceland, Ireland and the Britain — cannot be considered to be free of modern slavery. It is estimated, for example, that there are as many as 4,000 modern slaves in Britain, and more could be done to help them and prevent others suffering their fate. The index also examines the priority given in each country to rooting out modern slavery, the methods used and how they could be improved.

So what does this first index say about the extent of modern slavery in Russia and its neighboring countries? Russia ranks 49th on the index by proportion of the population enslaved, just ahead of Nigeria and one place behind Georgia. Russia is the only G8 country in the top fifty and falls well behind China, which at 84th is the only other in top 100. But with an estimated half-a-million people living in conditions of modern slavery, Russia has the sixth largest slave population anywhere in the world.

Many of these people enslaved are economic migrants drawn from the former Soviet Republics and Eastern Europe, with Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Azerbaijan singled out as having a very high risk of enslavement. Indeed, for two months of the year, Uzbekistan has the second highest prevalence of modern slavery in the world, when up to 1 million citizens are forced by the government to work in the cotton harvest.

Additional research conducted in Belarus, Moldova, and Ukraine suggests tens of thousands of victims exist in this region — far more than the number of cases reported by governments.

This is the first year of the index. As each year passes, it will be refined and improved. But this information can already shape national and global efforts to root out modern slavery in Russia and across the world. We now know, for example, that just 10 countries are home to 76 percent of those trapped in modern slavery. These nations must be the focus of global efforts. Russia, in particular, has so far been inconsistent in its efforts to combat modern slavery and must do more to provide victims of trafficking with protection, while also ratifying key national and European laws against trafficking.

This is the aim of the index. The Walk Free Foundation intends it to be a powerful weapon for all in the fight against modern slavery. Governments must be at the heart of this effort, putting in place effective measures and providing the resources to support and enforce them. But it is all of us as citizens, consumers and individuals who can use the information to take part in this battle and press our leaders for action in Russia and around the world.

Nick Grono is CEO of Walk Free Foundation, an organization founded in 2012 to focus on ending modern slavery.

The views expressed in opinion pieces do not necessarily reflect the position of The Moscow Times.

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