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Russian 'Slave' Freed by Rights Group After 18 Years in Captivity

By Anna Dolgov

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The anti-slavery rights group Alternative say they helped Sergei Khlivnoi escape from a sheep farm in the Dagestan republic, after he spent 18 years in captivity.

Human rights activists have freed a Russian man who said he was held as a slave for 18 years in the North Caucasus, escaping a number of times only to be caught and handed over to different owners, a news report said.

The anti-slavery rights group Alternative helped former captive Sergei Khlivnoi escape from a sheep farm in the Dagestan republic, accompanying him by bus to his home in northern Russia to ensure police did not detain him for lacking identity papers, local news site Kavpollit reported Sunday.

Khlivnoi, who was born in 1971, said he was captured in 1996 when he was working for a Murmansk-based shipping company and sailed to the southern port of Astrakhan in the Volga

delta, the report said.

It was there, according to the former sailor, that he met a group of men from Dagestan, had a few drinks with them, and woke up to find himself at a brick factory in Dagestan's port of Kaspiisk — trapped behind a barbed wire fence, surrounded by guards and without his passport.

Khlivnoi escaped from the factory a few months later — the first in a series of escape attempts — but was captured by another group of Dagestani men and taken to a cattle farm in the mountains, where he was chained up at night and forced to tend to livestock during the day, Kavpollit reported.

As incredible as modern-day slavery sounds in a country with a permanent seat on the UN Security Council, Khlivnoi's story is far from unique. Scores of reports and witness accounts in the Russian media attest to "slaves" being freed after many years of forced labor in Dagestan and other regions.

The sheer number of Khlivnoi's escape attempts — three — which ended in his being caught by another group or detained by police for lacking identity documents and falling into the hands of other captors, also indicates the scope of the problem and the difficulty of eradicating it.

"You see, when a man is walking along a highway, it's immediately obvious that he is Russian, that he is in trouble, and he can be put to some kind of work," Zakir Ismailov, the coordinator of Alternative's Dagestan branch, told Kavpollit.

"They promised many times that they would ready [the necessary] documents for Sergei, but [why do this] when he can be exploited?" Ismailov was quoted as saying. "He was chained, he was beaten, he had his nose broken. He worked for his passport for a year or two, and when he realized that it wasn't being readied, he ran away and ended up in another place."

Few cases of slavery are prosecuted in Russia. Andrei Popov, a soldier who had been missing for a decade and resurfaced in 2011, claimed he had been held against his will at several brick factories in Dagestan. He was accused of desertion from the army and sentenced to two years in a penal colony.

Alternative, with the help of elite police troops and prosecutors, freed eight people last year leading to the opening of eight criminal investigations, Ismailov told Kavpollit.

"A month later, they all fell through," Ismailov was quoted as saying, "because a criminal case of any kind would be a blow against the head of Dagestan's government."

Khlivnoi has no plans to press charges his former captors, Kavpollit reported.

Contact the author at newsreporter@imedia.ru

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