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## [Human Trafficking: open question in the Shut-In Russia](#)



January is National Slavery and Human Trafficking Prevention Month in the United States. Although at first glance human trafficking does not seem to be a contentious topic, the issue of human trafficking is a political one in countries the world over. From the adoption of the [Palermo Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons](#) in 2000 to [tier placement](#) in the [U.S. Department of State's Trafficking in Persons \(TIP\) Report](#), human trafficking has become both a political and a politicized concept. Bipartisan support of anti-trafficking initiatives in the United States disguises the controversial nature of human trafficking, which is "[rooted in global patterns of economic and political injustice](#)." Instead of being recognized as a moral issue that requires politicians to "rise above" political calculations, human trafficking is linked to such controversial topics as national security, [illegal immigration](#), and prostitution. Though human trafficking might appear to be an apolitical issue that no one but the traffickers themselves would oppose, the anti-trafficking discourse and often the human rights discourse demonstrate that there is no consensus on the issue in international policymaking.

In Russia, where an [estimated one million people](#) are living in what's known as modern slavery, the politicized nature of human trafficking is also evident but deployed differently, as the Russian government has made the task of assisting trafficking victims a political one. From its policy of silence on human trafficking, the passage of a number of laws aimed at closing shelters that assist trafficking victims, and the promotion of government-sponsored media that politicize trafficking, it is clear that the Russian government views human trafficking as layered in political controversies. Our research on the media framing of [human trafficking](#) revealed that the latest event in this unfolding political saga was the U.S. Department of State's presenting its [TIP Report Heroes Award](#) the first time to a person working in Russia, while the Russian media remained largely silent on the award. Instead, the media focused on the report's accusations that Russian-led separatists utilized children as young as 12 as [informants and human shields](#) in the Ukrainian conflict, the methodology of the report, and the stereotypes of Russia it claimed were perpetuated in the report.

While the escalation in tensions between Russia and the United States in recent years might have contributed to the problem, human trafficking had become a political issue in Russia already by 2003, when the first legislation that made trafficking illegal was [adopted](#). The presidential administration sought to take its own approach and included two criminal code articles on human trafficking [in a bill already introduced in the Duma](#), rebuffing international pressure, mostly from the United States, to adopt encompassing legislation because of [financing concerns](#). Since then Russia has not adopted any other laws on human trafficking, whereas, all 14 other countries in the post-Soviet region have passed multiple [laws related to human trafficking](#), totaling over 100.

[Interviews conducted in Russia in 2012-2013](#) with key stakeholders in the anti-trafficking movement demonstrated how the issue of human trafficking had become politicized as a result of outside pressure to adopt policies and of Western intervention in Russian internal politics. Putin expelled the U.S. Agency for International Development in 2012 [amid concerns of infringement on Russian sovereignty](#). Then in 2013 Russia was downgraded to Tier 3 in the TIP Report rankings for not working to combat trafficking and failing to comply with the U.S. minimum standards.

The Russian government strongly disagrees with this ranking, questioning the methodology of the report,

which it claims results in “[preformulated conclusions based on fragmentary evidence obtained from dubious sources](#),” thereby dissipating the effectiveness of the “humanitarian and human rights aspects of the report into [slogans and labels](#).” These criticisms are reflected in a number of other stories published by [RIA Novosti](#) and the [Russian News Agency TASS](#), the largest news agency in Russia and part of the government-owned media. Thus the TIP Report rankings shaming the Russian government for its lackluster response and international pressure to adopt encompassing legislation have impeded policy adoption in Russia and [scared many politicians away from this issue and from further policy development](#).

As of 2016, the Russian government stopped providing prosecution or victim rehabilitation data for the TIP Report. Based on our research of 692 articles on human trafficking published in the Russian media since 1997, it is not surprising that with Russia’s low rating, the Russian media would not cover the TIP Report release. We believe that this demonstrates how political the issue of human trafficking in Russia has become. This controversy over human trafficking in Russia goes beyond the [fundamental flaws of the TIP report](#) and has contributed to the erosion of relations between the United States and Russia.

The winner of the TIP Report Hero Award from Russia, unveiled on June 30, 2016, by Secretary of State John Kerry, is Oluremi Banwo Kekhinde, a Nigerian-born activist living in Russia who helps Nigerians and other immigrants from Africa who are victims of human trafficking in Russia. He runs an organization called Help Services for Nigerians in Russia and provides protective services to African victims of human trafficking who are [recruited to Russia](#) and forced into prostitution. He has helped over 240 Nigerian women escape conditions of modern slavery in Russia, [often at his own expense and notwithstanding threats on his life](#). The [Facebook page](#) of his organization appears to be a testament to the many people his organization has helped.

Instead of reporting on the TIP Report Hero Award, the Russian media focused on other issues, including U.S. government accusations that the Russian government is not fighting human trafficking and its threats of sanctions for those assigned Tier 3 status. The Ukrainian country report was also discussed in the Russian media because the OSCE Special Monitoring Mission in Ukraine [reported](#) that “children as young as 15 years continued to take part in active combat as part of the combined Russian-separatist forces.” The TIP Report goes further, positing that Russian-led separatists employ children as young as 12 as [informants and human shields](#), a charge the Russian media called a [fantasy, outrageous, and absurd](#).

Although Secretary Kerry said that the tier rankings [do not take into account political and other factors](#), it seems evident that the decision to award Mr. Kekhinde, a person of Nigerian descent, the Hero Award from Russia was a political choice. The award choice underscores the controversy behind the entire TIP Report rankings, which are seen by many [as a political statement lacking transparency and promoting U.S. political interests](#). Consequently, the policization of human trafficking in Russia and the Russian government’s inaction on the issue, epitomized in the media silence on the Hero Award, make the situation more dire for the victims. The plight of these people has become politicized by geopolitical adversaries, which are thereby shaping conditions for human trafficking victims in Russia. These circumstances promote the anti-trafficking discourse in which measures to curb trafficking or to provide state support for victims are seen as promoting an American ideology and agenda as opposed to a human rights agenda. The silent treatment of Mr. Kekhinde’s achievement, therefore, serves as another reminder of the sociopolitical context within which the debates on human trafficking are located.

*Originally published as ["The Politics of Russia’s Approach to Human Trafficking"](#) by *The Russia File*, a Kennan Institute blog.*

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