

Human trafficking

Oxana's broken dreams

In a landmark sex trafficking case, a Russian girl's father wins a small victory over her death in Cyprus

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The Moscow News

Oxana Rantseva, a pretty, 20-year-old languages student from Chelyabinsk, thought she had found her dream job when she was offered the chance to work as a translator in Cyprus.

But just over three weeks after she flew out to Limassol, the Greek Cypriot capital, she was found dead in a fall from a fifth-storey window. She had been trying to escape a job in a nightclub that had little to do with translating.

That was in March 2001. To this day, no one in Oxana's case – in Cyprus or in Russia – has faced any trafficking charges, while the Cypriot authorities have refused to launch a criminal investigation.

But last month Oxana's father, Nikolai Rantsev, won a small victory. In a landmark ruling last month, the European Court for Human Rights in Strasbourg found that Cyprus and Russia had failed to protect Oxana from human trafficking, and fined the countries 40,000 euros and 2,000 euros, respectively.

He hopes that the ruling, together with the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) urging Russia to ratify an anti-human trafficking convention, may prompt Russian authorities to take action. Currently, it is estimated that the majority of people trafficked to the European Union either come from or via Russia.

Tricked into dancing job

Oxana's story is a harrowing glimpse into the modern slave trade, and the indifference migrants often face from law enforcement agencies in various countries.

Rantsev said he had twice refused to let his daughter work abroad.

"Then her friend in Moscow found this translation contract in Cyprus and I let her go," he said in a telephone interview on Monday. "When she arrived they cancelled her translation contract and made her sign a dancing contract."

"Oxana didn't expect that she would have to work as a dancer, and she especially did not expect that she would have to perform [sexual services]," Lyudmila Churkina, Rantsev's lawyer, said by telephone last week from Strasbourg, where she addressed a PACE committee that aims to combat human trafficking.

A week after starting work, Oxana fled, after leaving a note with fellow dancers that said: "I'm tired. I'm leaving for Russia."

No help from police

Nine days later, in the early hours of March 28, 2001, Marios Athanasiou, the manager of the nightclub, Zigos Cabaret, found her in a disco and took her to the police. He hoped to have her deported so that he could get another dancer to replace



SEEKING JUSTICE – Nikolai Rantsev and a photo of Oxana

her, according to documents Rantsev filed to the Strasbourg court in his May 2004 complaint.

But the police found that Oxana's status was legal, and asked her employer to take her to an immigration office at 7 o'clock that morning. Athanasiou brought Oxana to the fifth-storey apartment of another Zigos Cabaret employee at 6 am. Half an hour later she was found dead in the street below the apartment, with the balcony open and a bedspread tied to a railing, according to the police report of her death.

A Cyprus court in 2001 ruled that her death was caused by an accidental fall, but a separate autopsy conducted in Russia found Oxana may have been killed, Churkina said.

Russian forensic officials found "that Ms. Rantseva had died in strange and [unclear] circumstances requiring additional investigation,

Cypriot police found that Oxana's status was legal

[which] were forwarded to the Cypriot authorities" and requested a new investigation, the Strasbourg court said in its ruling.

Cyprus said initially that the 2001 ruling was final.

Going after the 'recruiters'

Based on his own investigations, Rantsev believes his daughter may have been killed "for refusing to grant sexual services".

Apart from seeking justice for his daughter in Cyprus, Rantsev also went after the "recruiters" who hired Oxana in Chelyabinsk. But Russian law enforcement agencies have yet to respond.



ANGER – Feminists protest against the booming sex industry in Eastern Europe

After the Strasbourg court ruling, Cyprus acknowledged that it violated articles on a European convention against human trafficking, and agreed to pay damages to Rantsev. The country will this month appoint independent experts to probe Rantseva's death, a court statement said.

But Russia, which is not a signatory to the European convention, has not yet responded to the court's ruling.

PACE has asked Russia and other countries to sign and ratify the convention, which will improve legislation aimed at tackling the problem, PACE representative Jannick Devaux, of the assembly's Equal Opportunities Committee, told The Moscow News.

"Russia will have to change its legislation," Devaux said. Because the State Duma has to ratify it, "it will take some time, but the faster they do it the better," she said.

It is clear that Rantseva was recruited in Russia, by Russian or

Cypriot traffickers, Devaux said.

She added that her committee had applied to PACE to provide statistics about people trafficked out of Russia, but there were no figures because the situation was so difficult to monitor.

"We have no statistics about how many girls – and they are predominantly girls – have been trafficked [from] Russia."

Support for convention

Russia has voiced its support for the anti-trafficking convention, so there is nothing keeping Russia from joining it, Leonid Slutsky, deputy chairman of the State Duma's Foreign Affairs Committee, was quoted by RIA Novosti as saying.

"Only by uniting can we make a considerable contribution in fighting this [international] problem," he said, noting that some 700 bilateral and multilateral agreements have already been signed.

Even so, Russia still does not have a separate law specifically targeting human trafficking, only a sub-clause of the Criminal Code. This makes it more difficult to investigate and prosecute recruiters, and to aid victims, said Churkina.

"There is only article 127.1 of the Criminal Code, which stipulates up to 15 years in prison for human trafficking," she said.

Rehabilitation centres closed

Russian NGOs also lack funding to help the victims, said Alyona Arlashkina, director of the Angel Coalition, which helps trafficking victims recover. Last year alone, nine rehabilitation centres operated by the NGO in Russia were closed.

"If relatives asked us, we would try to find the victim abroad and help her get home," she said, noting that after counselling victims were much more likely to speak to law enforcement agencies.

During the 1990s, an estimated 500,000 Russian and Ukrainian women were trafficked into Europe, according to the International Organisation for Migration, a multinational non-profit organisation that monitors trafficking. ■



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