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Prostitution in Russia

Does the U.S. State Department back the legalization of prostitution?

By Donna M. Hughes

On Thursday, Presidents Bush and Putin will be meeting in Moscow. The trafficking and prostitution of women and children should be on their agenda.

In Russia, a grassroots coalition of groups known as the Angel Coalition is fighting a human-rights battle to save women and girls from trafficking and prostitution. Their expected opponents are organized-crime groups, corrupt politicians, and strip-club owners. But there are some shocking additional opponents, comprising what can be considered a pro-prostitution mafia: the U.S. State Department, U.S.- and Dutch-funded nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and a Russian political party — the Union of Right Forces. So far, President Putin has given some indication that he will side with the [Angel Coalition](#) against the pro-prostitution mafia, but the battle is still raging.

Russia has one of the worst trafficking problems in world. Each year, thousands, and possibly tens of thousands, of Russian women and girls are recruited to go abroad in search of work and other opportunities only to be deceived and coerced into slavery and prostitution. Russia is also a receiving country for trafficked women; there are an estimated 150,000 women from the former Soviet republics on the streets and highways around Moscow. To make matters worse, Russia does not have a law against trafficking.

A decade ago, Dr. Juliette Engel, an American physician went to Russia and discovered the scourge of epidemic trafficking while working with orphanages, from which groups of girls were mysteriously disappearing. Vans would arrive at the orphanages to take girls on field trips. They packed their lunches and overnight bags and hopped into the vans, never to be seen again.

Dr. Engel and the organization she founded, [MiraMed](#), received initial funding from the United Nations and the U.S. government to start trafficking-awareness programs in Russian high schools. As she described the trafficking industry's methods of operation, many mothers and teachers would start to cry as they realized the likely fate of their daughters and pupils who had gone abroad and not been heard of since. A survey conducted by MiraMed Institute found that in some regions of Russia 30 percent of people had a close friend or family member who had been trafficked.

Dr. Engel realized that a nationwide awareness campaign was needed. In 1999, she fostered the founding of the Angel Coalition, a coalition of 43 grassroots organizations from Russia and other former Soviet republics dedicated to fighting sex trafficking. The Angel Coalition held training conferences and prevention programs throughout Western Russia and Siberia. In 2001, the Angel Coalition launched a mass-media campaign in newspapers, radio, and TV to warn citizens about trafficking.

During this time, the pro-prostitution mafia was organizing. Their goal was to muscle out the Angel Coalition and install their own NGOs. They gave the Angel Coalition a chance to join them before they set out to destroy them. In late 2000, Dr. Engel and the Angel Coalition were asked if they would support the legalization of prostitution in Russia. They absolutely refused, and consequently were warned that they would not be doing anti-trafficking work in Russia in the future.

The pro-prostitution mafia's plan for Russia seems to have been formulated in August 2000 at a policy forum at the U.S. State Department hosted by an NGO that had previously financed academic exchanges, but done no anti-trafficking work. Their policy recommendations state that the "solution" to trafficking of women in the newly independent states and Central and Eastern Europe was to decriminalize prostitution and redefine it as "sex work" — i.e., a form of labor. They recommended that since "migrating sex workers are simply responding to a demand

for their labor," migration laws should be reformed to accommodate their transnational travel. Prostitution in foreign countries was described as potentially "empowering" for women because it would enable them to migrate to other countries and to achieve "greater economic independency and autonomy from men."

Since the Angel Coalition refused to go along with this "sex work" plan for women in Russia, the pro-prostitution mafia launched a campaign to destroy it. Pro-prostitution Dutch-funded NGOs refused to associate with the Angel Coalition because they claimed it will put their U.S. State Department funding at risk. Representatives at the U.S. embassy in Moscow that had previously supported the Angel Coalition turned hostile and accusatory. In the winter of 2001, a disinformation campaign was initiated against the work and reputation of the Angel Coalition began. The grassroots members of the coalition throughout Russia got telephone calls and visits from staff members of U.S.-funded NGOs and their subcontractors advising that their future funding would be conditional on withdrawing from the Angel Coalition. By spring 2001, all MiraMed grant proposals to the U.S. government had been rejected or cancelled. In June 2001, the NGO that hosted the pro-prostitution policy forum at the U.S. State Department received \$2 million dollars from the U.S. government to do "anti-trafficking" work in Western Russia.

In summer 2002, Duma Deputy Elena Mizulina from the Party of Rightist Forces announced she was introducing legislation to legalize prostitution in Russia. The pro-prostitution mafia announced that it would work with Ms. Mizulina to draft complementary anti-trafficking legislation. Currently, the U.S. embassy is setting up meetings to draft legislation that include only prostitution supporters. Representatives of the Angel Coalition have been excluded.

The Angel Coalition is fighting back. According to their representative: "Legalization of prostitution would ruin this country. Russian women have suffered enough exploitation. They do not deserve to become the [prostitutes] of the world."

In September, 185 people comprising a broad international coalition of human-rights and women's-rights policy organizations, churches, and faith-based groups wrote to President Putin urging him to stand against prostitution supporters, including the U.S.-funded NGOs and the U.S. State Department. (A copy of the letter was sent to President Bush.) They committed themselves to being President Putin's allies in the fight against trafficking, especially because their help will be needed in opposing their own State Department.

Although the U.S. State Department claims that it does not support the legalization of prostitution, it seems unable to stop its own officials at the Moscow embassy who continue to actively work with the pro-prostitution mafia and to support its legislative agenda.

At this point, President Putin may be the only hope for the women and children of Russia. When President Putin meets later this week with President Bush, perhaps he can ask him why the U.S. is supporting the legalization of prostitution in his country.

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