

Serbia: Booming Sex Trade Overwhelms Police

Author: [Slavisa Stijak](#)

Campaign against the vice industry seems certain to fail for as long as many women view escort work as a way out of the poverty trap.

Anastasija, a 24-year-old student from Belgrade, was arrested last month under suspicion of working as a prostitute in one of the many Belgrade escort agencies offering men sexual services.

Hundreds of girls shared her fate after police launched a massive campaign against prostitution in the autumn, which saw 10 of the largest agencies closed down.

The campaign, however, achieved little in the long term. After a brief spell in jail, many of the prostitutes, including Anastasija, are back at their old jobs.

She said police harassment won't drive her out of the escort business, as Serbia's average monthly wage of about 170 euro was not enough to live on.

"I am not ashamed of what I do," she said. "The boss behaves correctly, and I earn a nice living - around 500 euro a month. For a place like Serbia that's good. I don't have to think about problems such as bills or buying make-up or clothes."

Some human rights and women's groups believe the authorities take the wrong line with prostitution. Instead of the tough action called for by the general public and the international community, they want the trade legalised or at least decriminalised.

Two sorts of women get involved in prostitution: innocent victims of people-smuggling and those who have voluntarily joined escort agencies in search of a better standard of living.

This IWPR reporter spoke to four other young women working at Anastasija's agency - which operates from a three-bedroomed flat in the centre of Belgrade. They said they were willing volunteers, who were desperate for the money.

The agency owner, Dragan, aged 35, said he chose the premises, close to a police station, because they were "the least suspicious". He lives with one of the girls working for him, while the others "come to the agency when we have clients".

Dragan said the police crackdown had forced businesses like his to take evasive action, "We often switch locations, use mobiles phones instead of landlines and pay our contacts in the police to inform us about possible raids."

He takes home about 3,000 euro a month. Like the women in his agency, he wants prostitution legalised. They argue that this will provide greater safety for prostitutes and clients and drive out the more criminal elements that thrive on extortion rackets.

"It would be better paying taxes to the state, so we could work with fewer problems," said Dragan. "Unfortunately, knowing our society, I doubt that will be possible any time soon."

Official figures suggest around 2,500 prostitutes work in Belgrade, but the real number is thought to be far higher. Most are employed by escort agencies, earning around 50 euro for an hour of sexual services. Smaller numbers work the streets close to the main railway terminus and the Belgrade-Nis highway, making about the same but facing greater danger.

The human rights and women's groups agitating for legalisation argue that making the sex industry a legitimate business would decrease the crime rate. "Unfortunately the Serbian judiciary and police are not in favour of this for the time being," said Sandra Ljubinkovic, of the SOS Info Center Astra, a group set up to combat people-trafficking.

At the moment, the selling of sexual services remains a criminal offence in Serbia, warranting fines and one-month jail sentences for the prostitutes and five- to 10-year prison terms for their pimps and bosses.

Vladan Batic, Serbia's justice minister, told the newspaper Blic in December that major changes in the legal code were not on the horizon. "The mood in Serbia has not reached the point where such a measure would meet approval," he said. "The moment is not right for it."

Veselin Saric, of the police department fighting organised crime, said his colleagues had filed more than 200 criminal charges against those involved in prostitution since 2001. "We cannot get rid of the oldest trade in the world but we can cut it to a minimum," he said.

But the hundreds of advertisements in the backs of Belgrade magazines and newspapers tell a different story.

According to one retired Serbian police officer - who worked for years on combating prostitution and human trafficking - such campaigns on their own can achieve very little. "People who want to work in this trade will do so, however many raids there are," he said

The ex-officer said he also favoured separating the offences of people-trafficking and prostitution, so that the latter could be legalised, or at least decriminalised. "This would reduce the influence of organised crime, and improve the health and safety of the nation", he told IWPR.

Slavisa Stijak is a journalist with the television station, Yu Info.

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