Church stand against prostitution puts it debate

BUCHAREST, Romania – The Catholic Church's stand against prostitution and trafficking puts it in the middle of public policy debates heating up in Eastern Europe.

Pope Benedict XVI's homeland, Germany, has legalized prostitution and is accused of luring women from poorer countries – mainly the Czech Republic, Moldova, Romania and Ukraine – into brothels and sex clubs.

Earlier this year in Bulgaria, legislation proposing the legalization of prostitution emerged from a working group involving the Interior Ministry and the National Tourism Board.

In Romania, a top adviser to the president began advocating legalized prostitution a year ago. A draft law was circulated through ministries and was signed by a high-profile female minister of justice who is currently an official of the European Union.

In Moldova, the media reported in February that a law to legalize prostitution was under consideration by the government. To date, it has not been formally proposed.

The Catholic Church opposes moves to legalize prostitution in each country. Typically, proponents argue that by regulating prostitution and collecting taxes they can control the industry, improve the health of prostitutes and drive out organized crime.

Besides referring to theological, biblical or moral motives for this opposition, church leaders refer to the real impact of prostitution on individuals and families.

"In our region, there have been thousands of girls hoping to get baby-sitting or waitress jobs who are tricked and wind up prostituted in Italy, Greece, Spain or who knows where," said Bishop Petru Gherghel of Iasi, Romania.
"The spiritual and physical trauma is tremendous. Many of these women never recover, even if they make it back home.

“Legalizing prostitution would serve to legitimize this abuse of integrity. It would help criminals ruin more lives,” said Bishop Gherghel.

Father Benone Farcas, vicar general of the Diocese of Chisinau, Moldova, emphasizes the brutality of prostitution.

“This is a very, very dangerous world. The criminals engage in rampant dehumanization. The women and girls are badly abused. Only misery would come from elevating prostitution to legal status,” said Father Farcas.

Catholic organizations are involved in efforts to oppose government plans to legalize prostitution and warn the public of the link between prostitution and sex trafficking.

The Sisters of the Good Shepherd led a major campaign to write the Bulgarian government to oppose legalized prostitution as a violation of human rights and human dignity. The sisters, active in more than 70 countries, made fighting the sexual exploitation of women and girls and the normalization of prostitution one of their top priorities for global engagement in 2003.

In Romania, the Catholic aid agency Caritas is leading an effort to educate the public about the strong link between normalizing or legalizing prostitution and facilitating sex trafficking.

“As prostitution is accepted, especially if it is legalized, organized crime is empowered. Demand from sex buyers increases and there is more demand than supply of women and girls,” said Gabriela Chiroiu, project manager at Caritas Bucharest. She said Caritas receives more and more police referrals of victims of sexual exploitation abroad who are sent back to Romania.

Caritas Bucharest is the local agency of Caritas Internationalis, a confederation of Catholic relief, development and social service organizations working in more than 200 countries.

In Bulgaria, the U.S. bishops’ Catholic Relief Services is implementing a $1.5 million anti-trafficking program, funded by the U.S. government. The program focuses on providing employment skills to at-risk girls so they avoid being trafficked into prostitution.

To date, Christian churches and organizations are clearly the most powerful opponents of prostitution.

“We will legalize prostitution even if we enter into conflict with the church,” said Vasile Blaga, general secretary of Romania’s presidential party, addressing a summer conference of women. “If we don’t legalize prostitution, things will go from bad to worse. I know this is not on the side with the Orthodox church or churches in general.”