

Prostitutes, Politics and Priorities: St. Petersburg Activists Take a Stand

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A group of St. Petersburg activists has declared war on illegal advertising for the services of prostitutes around the city, known as Russia's cultural capital.

Activists from the civic initiative Beautiful Petersburg, which aims to preserve and improve the appearance of the city, said they clashed with a gang distributing illegal posters offering "intimate services" Friday. One activist was punched and another threatened with stabbing, Beautiful Petersburg representative Krasimir Vranski told The Moscow Times on Monday.

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To combat the problem, Beautiful Petersburg proposes using a computer program that would

automatically generate calls to the phone number listed in the illegal advertisement, hound the guilty party with automated messages detailing their crime, its location and the charges they could face and on top of that render the number busy and unusable for a prolonged period of time. The program, which would cost about 100,000 rubles (\$1,800), has been effective in the cities of Odintsovo in the Moscow region and Magnitogorsk in the Urals, Vranski said.

Grigory Solominsky, a lawyer who has worked on legal action taken against low-profile street advertisers, offered the activists some advice in the Nezavisimaya Gazeta newspaper.

"You shouldn't be tearing down the ads, but stamping them with some kind of political slogan or epithet against [city] Governor [Georgy] Poltavchenko," he was cited as saying. "Street sweepers will remove 'politics' from the walls and lampposts within half an hour of the posting, and it's obviously not enthusiasm that's driving their behavior but orders."

Vranski told The Moscow Times that he agreed that the mechanisms were in place but were being reserved solely for vandalism concerning politics.

"An old monument or statue can remain defaced [with graffiti] for months before the authorities do anything about it. But deface a monument with a political slogan and it'll be scrubbed off in a matter of hours."

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