

U.S. Ranch Becomes Focus for Russian Adoption Anger

July 11, 2012



Children playing in the snow at the Ranch for Kids Project in northwestern Montana

HELENA, Montana — Russian government officials arrived with a Moscow television crew in tow at the gates of a ranch for adopted children in remote northwestern Montana and demanded to be let inside.

Among them was children's ombudsman Pavel Astakhov, the man who was calling Joyce Sterkel's Ranch For Kids Project a "trash can for unwanted children" on his website.

Whether it was a made-for-TV confrontation for viewers back home or a serious bid to gain entry, Sterkel kept the two-dozen children inside and away from the gate. The Russians didn't try to enter the property, but Astakhov vowed to return and shut the ranch down.

As a bilateral adoption agreement between the United States and Russia wends its way through the ratification process, Sterkel is concerned that Astakhov will try to make good on the promise he made that day, June 28.

"This is a test case. This is to test the integrity of the bilateral agreement to see if they have the muscle to come onto American soil and push their way in," Sterkel said Tuesday. "I think they want to see if they really can come in and visit children without parental consent."

The State Duma on Tuesday approved the agreement signed last year by U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton that regulates the adoption of Russian children by Americans. Negotiations began in 2010 after Torry Hansen sent her then 7-year-old adopted son, Artyom Saveliyev, back to Russia with a letter saying he was violent and disturbed and she didn't want to be his mother anymore.

That led to outrage in Russia and temporarily halted American adoptions of Russian children, of which there have been more than 60,000 to date. That anger has now landed at Sterkel's doorstep, with Astakhov making serious allegations against her Ranch For Kids.

He claims the Ranch For Kids is a place for American parents to cast off their adopted children, and that the children there receive substandard education, health care and lack security.

"These children are completely isolated from the outside world, which is grounds for violating their rights," Astakhov said in comments carried by RIA-Novosti. "It has not been made clear to us whether the children receive the necessary help and treatment, which is why the condition of the Russian kids at the ranch causes concerns."

Sterkel bristles at Astakhov's claims and says he is wrong on every count.

Her ranch for troubled adopted children, many of them Russian and many of whom suffer from the damages caused by alcohol and drugs ingested by their mothers while pregnant, has operated in the tiny community of Eureka near the Canadian border since 2003.

There are now 25 kids on the ranch. Ten of them are from Russia, with others from China, Ukraine, Kazakhstan, Haiti, Ethiopia and other countries. Their ages vary, and their troubles range from fetal alcohol spectrum disorder to the aftereffects of spending their early lives in difficult conditions in orphanages.

Some are violent or have threatened violence. Others have committed crimes because they don't understand the consequences of their actions. Many are developmentally delayed because of brain damage.

"They are living with parents who love them very much, they just need help with behavior issues," Sterkel said.

Parents pay \$3,500 a month to send their children to the ranch, and the length of their stay is determined month by month, Sterkel said.

Laurie Jarvis sent her adopted Russian child there in 2005 when he was 11. Jarvis said the Ranch For Kids gave her son a structured environment with a strict routine that involved class work and outdoor activities such as horseback riding, giving him the chance to step away from the hectic pace of American culture.

The Ranch For Kids is often the last hope for a lot of parents who have nowhere else to turn,

she said.

"It isn't that parents can't handle their children, it's the exact opposite," Jarvis said. "Parents want to handle their children, so they turn to places where they are able to manage them."

Russian officials from the consulate in Seattle have twice visited the ranch, in 2010 and 2011. Both were friendly visits, Sterkel said. But she was suspicious of Astakhov when he requested the June 28 visit, sensing that he wanted to turn her ranch into a political prop with the U.S.-Russia adoption agreement in the spotlight.

She turned down the request.

"They came anyway," she said.

Sterkel said she believes the real motive behind Astakhov's claims is to bring more lawsuits against adoptive parents. Astakhov earlier this year said Russia is suing Hansen for \$2,300 a month for her former adopted child's foster care and "psychological correction."

Sterkel said she is concerned that the U.S.-Russian adoption treaty may help Russian officials like Astakhov establish such legal claims and said any parent with an adopted child from Russia should be, too.

"If adoptive parents knew what was in this agreement, they'd be freaked out," Sterkel said. "The thought that a foreign government can come and harass me, a property owner, is outrageous. If we don't have sovereignty within our own country to protect us against a foreign government, we don't have anything."

A State Department spokesman who would only speak on background said the agency "has assisted the Russian Embassy in Washington with communicating their concerns about the Ranch For Kids with the appropriate authorities in Montana."

The agency had no immediate comment on Sterkel's concerns that the agreement would allow Russian officials access to private property with the cooperation of local officials, regardless of parental consent.

The adoption agreement must still be approved by the Federation Council and President Vladimir Putin. Both sides must then agree to procedures implementing the agreement before it goes into force.

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