

U.S. Parents Cautiously Welcome Child Adoption Treaty

July 15, 2012



Dan, Nancy and Max Genatiempo of Indianapolis.

INDIANAPOLIS — When they adopted their son from a Russian orphanage in 2007, veterinarian Dan Genatiempo and his wife, Nancy, endured a year filled with red tape, tens of thousands of dollars in travel costs and months of anxious waiting.

The suburban Indianapolis couple recently began the process of adopting a Russian sister for their now 6-year-old son, Max. But they aren't overly optimistic that their second adoption will be any easier, despite the Russian parliament's approval of a long-awaited agreement to simplify adoptions by Americans.

"I think it's going to be a beneficial thing, but as far as changing the process real drastically, I honestly don't expect it to," Dan Genatiempo said.

The adoption climate between the two nations soured in April 2010, when a Tennessee woman put her 7-year-old son alone on a plane with a one-way ticket back to Russia. She said the boy had emotional problems and claimed she had been misled by a Russian orphanage about his

condition.

Russian officials responded by threatening to halt all adoptions by Americans.

Adoption agencies and prospective parents hope the agreement ratified last week will ease tensions between the two countries over the abuse and deaths of Russian children adopted by U.S. parents. Russian officials say at least 17 adopted children have died at the hands of their American parents.

Opportunities for international adoptions have declined dramatically in recent years as countries such as China have tightened restrictions and begun promoting domestic adoption and foster care to keep more children in their native countries.

Russia was the third-most popular country for international adoptions in 2011. Only China and Ethiopia had more. Many American families turn to international adoption after being frustrated by a shortage of healthy U.S. infants or long wait times for private adoptions. Others are drawn by interest in foreign cultures or a desire for a child of a specific gender.

Although a total shutdown of American adoptions of Russian children never happened, the Russian adoption process has slowed dramatically over the past several years. The State Department says 970 Russian children were adopted by U.S. families in 2011, down from 5,862 in 2004.

Part of that decline can be attributed to Russia's recent embrace of a foster system allowing Russian families to care for children in exchange for compensation, said Inna Pecar, president and CEO of KidsFirst International Adoption Inc., an Indianapolis-based adoption agency. The high cost of traveling — Russia now requires adoptive parents to make three trips to Russia — also has been a factor, Pecar said.

In the wake of the incident involving the Tennessee woman, about a quarter of the nearly 25 American agencies that handle Russian adoptions stopped taking applications from parents seeking Russian children, said Tom DiFilipo, president and CEO of the Joint Council on International Children's Services.

The 2010 episode rattled adoption agencies, the Russian government and adoptive parents, he said.

"It was an isolated incident, but it was definitely something that shook the adoption community," DiFilipo said.

He hopes those agencies will resume taking applications now that an agreement between the two nations is nearly in place.

The agreement, which advocates said still needs the signature of President Vladimir Putin, stipulates that Russia will only work with U.S.-accredited adoption agencies — those recommended by the State Department. In addition, it establishes a central adoption authority in Russia, according to Chuck Johnson, president and CEO of the National Council for Adoption, a nonprofit adoption advocacy group based in Alexandria, Virginia.

Both he and DiFilipo acknowledged that it would take time for Russia to implement the new

regulations, but they said the rules create a solid framework for international adoptions.

"It's a huge step in the right direction," Johnson said.

Many agencies and parents say they'll wait and see how the changes proceed.

Jennifer Doane, clinical manager of the Russian adoption program at Wide Horizons for Children in Waltham, Massachusetts, said people are pleased the agreement has been ratified and hope "it will make adoptions go more smoothly and quickly."

But Lowell Highby of Nevada, Iowa, doubts that will happen.

Highby adopted a 10-year-old boy from Russia in January 2010 but said his attempt to adopt a girl in July 2011 ended in heartbreak. When he traveled to Russia on one of the three required trips, he said it quickly became apparent that there was political pressure to avoid sending children home with Americans.

"They were going after the orphanage director and social services agency about not doing enough to find a home for her in Russia," Highby said.

The Russian government is focusing on the small percentage of adoptions that don't turn out well instead of the thousands that do, Highby said. Lost in the mix are children in orphanages longing for a home, he said. "What's happening to Russian kids in Russia? Let's focus on that."

Highby said he would still like to adopt another child but doubts there will be much of an increase in Russian adoptions as a result of the agreement.

"With the process becoming more difficult and convoluted and more expensive, I don't see that happening," Highby said.

Keith Wallace, CEO of the Evansville, Indiana-based Families Thru International Adoption, said he isn't rushing to resume accepting applications for his agency's Russian adoption program.

He said his organization, which has helped Americans adopt about 1,000 Russian children in the last two decades, first wants to see how the adoption system is implemented before accepting new applications from hopeful adoptive parents.

"In my opinion, it's not a good decision to sit there and think everything's fixed just because the law has been passed," he said. "The implementation of laws is different than the passage of laws."

"I want to know exactly what path they're going down before I start walking down the path with them."

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