

A Way to Put Officials In Our Place

By [The Moscow Times](#)

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Two United Russia deputies introduced a bill last week that, if passed and enforced, promises to bring much-needed investment into the country's education and health-care systems.

The irony is that the lawmakers probably never intended to help schools or hospitals with the legislation.

The initiative, drafted by Vyacheslav Lysakov and Valery Trapeznikov, would take a bill proposed by Just Russia Deputy Ilya Ponomarev to regulate officials' foreign assets several significant steps further.

Ponomarev's bill focuses on the public disclosure of foreign assets under the basic principle that people have a right to know where the money, property and hearts of their public and appointed officials are located. Ponomarev believes that public officials have a right to own foreign assets as long as they can prove that their wealth was legally obtained.

But Lysakov and Trapeznikov's bill is much more severe. Public officials would be prohibited

from owning foreign property or opening foreign bank accounts.

Moreover, according to one version of the bill, officials would even be banned from receiving medical care in foreign countries or sending their children abroad to receive a high school or college education.

At first glance, this provision seems radical and even unconstitutional. It would never be acceptable in a Western democracy.

But health care and education have deteriorated so much in Russia that perhaps only radical measures like this one can save them. Indeed, many deputies have no idea how decrepit the country's health-care and educational systems really are for the simple reason that they are not consumers of these services. As long as they receive high-quality health care in foreign countries and send their children abroad to study, they are removed from the problems that ordinary people face. And as long as public officials are unaccountable to the people, these deficiencies will remain the people's problems, not theirs.

Foreign education for relatives of public officials first became a public issue in 1996, when Russians learned that Boris Yeltsin Jr., the 15-year-old grandson of the first president, had entered the elite Millfield School in Somerset, England, which at the time cost \$22,500 a year to attend.

Most Russians were offended by what they interpreted as an unpatriotic and hypocritical decision. (To be fair, Yeltsin, in the same year, had his coronary bypass operation done in Russia, although an American doctor, Michael DeBakey, was the lead surgeon.)

If public officials are forced to receive medical care and send their children to schools and universities in Russia, perhaps they will take a closer look at the pitiful state of these sectors. Ideally, this would force them to think harder about how to improve them — not only for themselves but for all Russians.

Critics say the United Russia bill is only a publicity stunt — an attempt to appear patriotic and anti-Western to cater to the party's conservative electorate. Even if the bill is passed, – Kremlin-loyal public officials will most likely still be allowed to use standard loopholes to keep their foreign assets and obtain medical care and education abroad.

If this proves to be true, this will be another cruel joke on Russians and another disgrace for the Duma.

The views expressed in opinion pieces do not necessarily reflect the position of The Moscow Times.

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