The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Lights Dim Over the Duma

By Alexei Bayer

December 23, 2012



Many years ago on a U.S. flight to Moscow, a young, very mid-American couple asked me to help them with their Russian customs forms. I couldn't help noticing that they had brand-new passports. It was their first trip abroad. The previous summer, the U.S. charity Save the Children had brought a group of Russian orphans to their town in central Pennsylvania. The children were in their teens, and the organizers hoped that the local families hosting them for the summer would consider adopting them. Back then, Americans were adopting Russian infants, but rarely older kids, who faced very poor prospects in life once they left state-run child care.

The wife was a pediatrician and Save the Children had asked her to donate her time to help care for the kids. Two Russian sisters also stayed in their house, and the couple decided to adopt them. Now, in mid-December, they were going to Bryansk to pick them up.

At that time, I wrote a column in Vedomosti on Christmas Eve called "An American Christmas Story." It was indeed in the tradition of those heart-warming tales that are so sweet to hear in front of a fire on Christmas Eve. I kept up with this family for some time afterward.

The girls were adapting to their new environment, helped by the fact that they had made friends over the summer. The parents hired a Russian-speaking babysitter to make sure they didn't lose their mother tongue.

Today, a dozen years later, it is a high time to revisit this Christmas story. The State Duma on Friday passed by a huge margin the Dima Yakovlev bill, which bans U.S. citizens from adopting Russian children, including those with disabilities.

It is hard to fathom the depths of immorality of this piece of legislation. To start with, it is named after a Russian boy who died when left in a car on a hot day by his adoptive father. The judge acquitted the father of involuntary manslaughter, taking into account the accidental nature of the boy's death and the true remorse of both parents. In the end, the judge ruled that the father didn't meet the legal standard of "callous disregard for human life."

The law ignores and perverts the fact that thousands of abandoned children have found new families and happy lives in the U.S. They enjoy the full protection accorded to minors under U.S. law. In the few cases when the parents committed child abuse, they received just punishment.

Worse, the phony patriotism in which this law is cloaked conceals the fact that the Dima Yakovlev bill is a response to the Sergei Magnitsky Act passed by U.S. Congress earlier this month. Named after the lawyer who died in prison, it punishes Russian officials involved in a well-documented theft of $230 million in tax refunds from the Russian government. These officials are implicated in the jailing and killing of Magnitsky as part of a cover-up.

In a tit-for-tat, the Duma law, if signed by President Vladimir Putin, will punish Russian orphans. It takes away their chance for happiness to shield a bunch of thugs. It is a new low for a regime that risks becoming an international pariah state. Rightly, a petition is being circulated on the Internet to add the Duma deputies who sponsored and voted for this shameful law to the list of Russian officials banned from travel to the United States under the Magnitsky Act.

Alexei Bayer, a native Muscovite, is a New York-based economist.

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

Original url: https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2012/12/23/lights-dim-over-the-duma-a20391