

# U.S. Adoptions Give Russian Children New Lives

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As someone who loves my native country, I understand that when orphans are adopted by foreign parents, Russia loses those children forever. They go to live with their new families and remain beyond our borders for the rest of their lives. As frustrating and painful as it is, the children are ultimately happier for having gained loving parents and new lives full of hope.

In the process, Russia loses not only some of its citizens but also potential parents of future generations. But even if these orphans stayed in Russia and had children, the odds are high they, too, would give up their children to orphanages. It is not their fault but their misfortune — a misfortune that haunts their entire lives.

I am very familiar with the lives children lead in Russian orphanages and what often happens to them after they leave and try to lead a normal life. Unfortunately, the state has shown no interest in helping them become productive citizens. I wrote a thesis on the subject and can

confidently report that Russia's attitude toward these children has not changed since Felix Dzerzhinsky ordered that a network of shelters be built to round up homeless children — like a bunch of stray cats and dogs — to get them off the street. Rather than providing counseling and other forms of assistance to deeply dysfunctional families, the government simply removes the children and places them in orphanages. Out of sight, out of mind.

Russia lacks a system that encourages young mothers not to give their unwanted newborns to orphanages. What's more, nongovernmental organizations that try to assist orphans or parents who want to give up their children to an orphanage are sometimes harassed by the authorities for "overstepping the jurisdiction of the state." The result is that children end up in orphanages, and the parents whose children have been removed are marginalized, branded with shame and subjected to harassment from the police. This is all standard government policy.

Political will is needed along with new legislation to help these broken families and abandoned children. The situation also calls for government officials or institutions that will be charged with preserving families and not simply with overseeing their dissolution. The actions of children's rights ombudsman Pavel Astakhov fall far short of this standard, and his support for the current measure to ban U.S. citizens from adopting Russian children only proves that he will shift his stance on the issue according to whichever way the political winds are blowing.

I am personally in favor of Russian orphans being adopted by Russian families, but to achieve this, the government and civil society must do more than simply give orphans toys at New Year's without any thought of adopting them. But how can we make Russians and the government more charitable and humane with regard to orphans? In most cases, adoptive parents prefer healthy and attractive children. What to do about children who have serious health problems and disabilities? What level of awareness should society have so that people would willingly adopt these children, knowing that the Russian medical system is unable to cure or even help them significantly? Waiting until Russian medicine improves to make them viable candidates for adoption would simply be criminal.

U.S. parents adopt Russian children not only to give them a new identity but also to help them overcome their illnesses and disabilities. Credit here should also be given to the U.S. government for extending benefits to so many children adopted from overseas.

Russian orphans cannot wait until their own society and medical system develop enough to care for them. They need families right now because childhood is the time in which the foundations of character are laid. If the childhood they experience in Russia is a reflection of the conditions in orphanages today, their future will be bleak indeed.

I once saw a girl and a boy in a Russian orphanage who suffered from serious medical problems, and later I visited them overseas in the home of their foreign adoptive mother. She gave those children a loving family and the most important gift of all: their own happy and productive childhood.

That is how it should be. The right to a happy childhood has no borders or nationality.

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