

Putin Looks Spiteful and Petty on Adoption Law

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A true great-power response to the U.S. Magnitsky Act would have been a curt statement of regret. This is how President Vladimir Putin reacted in 2001 to the decision by President George W. Bush to withdraw from the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty, which had far graver implications for Russia's security.

A macho response would have been to swing hard at the Americans where it hurt them most, such as closing off Russian transit routes for the U.S. military.

But to retaliate with the ban on U.S. adoptions of Russian orphans, many with severe disabilities, is an absurdity with no discernible foreign policy rationale. It makes Russia look callous, vindictive and petty.

By holding innocent children hostage in a political dispute with a foreign power, Russia's global image was damaged even further. It draws unsavory parallels between Russian orphans

and Soviet Jews, whose restricted emigration from the Soviet Union led to the Jackson–Vanik Amendment.

Russia's adoption ban doesn't punish the U.S. initiators of the Magnitsky Act and even helps make a case for wavering European nations to adopt their versions of the Magnitsky Act. What's more, it raises the pressure on the administration of U.S. President Barack Obama to elevate human rights to the top of its Russia agenda. It also makes Obama's proposed visit to Moscow early this year unseemly from a moral perspective.

If the ban's main purpose was to stop Washington from meddling in Moscow's internal politics, the response only bolstered the case of those in the U.S. who view visa bans and asset freezes as the most effective way to deal with Kremlin abuses.

The adoption ban panders to Putin's conservative base, drawing on the still-untapped reserves of anti-Americanism, which is the political soup du jour. It also restricts the elites' ties to the U.S., making them less susceptible to outside pressure and less likely to defect to the opposition if the Kremlin were to hit a rough patch. The reasoning seems to be that members of the elite will not jump off the Titanic if they are under a visa ban.

But this plan may not work out so well. It is one thing to ignite policy disagreements; they don't endanger the cohesion of the ruling team. It is quite another to create a moral divide. Few people genuinely aspire to be part of the brotherhood of evil.

Some may prefer to dodge the iceberg.

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