The Moscow Times
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Ombudsman's Plans for Orphans Slammed

By Jonathan Earle

January 17, 2013



Experts sharply criticized children's ombudsman Pavel Astakhov's proposals Thursday to create an orphan agency and inspect orphanages in Moscow, measures that appeared aimed at addressing concern over orphans' welfare in Russia after the country renounced U.S. adoptions.

"An agency with that name, explicitly for orphans, that's the end of the world," said Boris Altshuler, head of the children's rights watchdog Rights of the Child. He said a bureaucracy predicated on the existence of orphans would have little incentive to reduce their numbers.

Astakhov told Izvestia that he supported the creation of an orphan agency, adding at a news conference that the current system involves 19 agencies and is ineffective, Interfax reported.

But while more than 80 percent of Russia's 650,000 orphans have living parents, the country would be better off creating an agency to help children stay in their families or find adoptive

families, Altshuler said.

The children's ombudsman also said a thorough inspection of Moscow orphanages in April will see psychologists dispatched to meet children.

This is the equivalent of visiting a prisoner in solitary confinement and asking him "How do you like it here?" said Alexander Gezalov, head of the Successful Orphans project.

If the government were serious about improving the lives of orphans, it would concentrate on reducing the number living in orphanages, which stunt children's development and stigmatize them, he said.

About 371,700 children are growing up in state institutions, according to figures that the Russian government presented to the United Nations in 2011.

Addressing confusion about how the adoption ban will be carried out, Astakhov said orphans whose adoption has already been court-sanctioned — a total of 40 to 50 children — will be allowed to join their new families in the United States.

The other 100 or so pending adoptions will not go forward, he said, a move that struck Gezalov as heartless, given that some orphans have already met their prospective parents.

"Astakhov is saying that even if the children have met their adoptive parents, the kids are so stupid that they don't understand whom they've met," he said.

Orphans are leaving with their American adoptive families on a nearly daily basis, Astakhov said, but according to a report by the BBC Russian Service, not a single Russian orphan has left for the United States in 2013 due to egregious bureaucratic obstruction.

The Kremlin has faced protests and international condemnation over its decision to end U.S. adoptions as of Jan. 1. The government says it is protecting orphans from abuse at the hands of American adoptive parents — 19 have died since 1996 — while critics have described the law as a cruel nationalist ploy.

U.S. parents have adopted 45,112 Russian children since 1999, including 956 in 2011, according to the State Department.

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