

For 5 Years, U.S. Families Pursue Kyrgyz Adoptions

By [The Moscow Times](#)

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Kyrgyz orphans playing in an orphanage in Bishkek. Kyrgyz authorities halted international adoptions in 2008 due to allegations of fraud in the system. **Abylay Saralayev**

NEW YORK — The boy, named Vladimir, is 5 1/2 years old, struggles with learning to count and draw and lives in an orphanage in Kyrgyzstan. His would-be parents in New York have had just five brief visits since they signed on to adopt him in 2008, yet they refuse to abandon the quest.

"We have already bonded with this child," said Frances Pardus-Abbadessa. "Probably a day doesn't go by that we don't think of him. In our mind, he's our child. If we don't wait for him, what's his fate going to be?"

Frances and her husband, Drew, were among a group initially known as the "Kyrgyz 65," Americans who were in the process of adopting 65 orphans from the Central Asian republic when it suspended international adoptions in 2008 due to allegations of fraud.

The group's ranks have dwindled over the ensuing years, while Kyrgyzstan's adoption system has been disrupted by political turmoil and persistent corruption.

Some of the Americans gave up, some of the children were placed in domestic adoptions, and last summer nine of the remaining children finally were allowed to go to America. The Pardus-Abbadessas are now among 16 U.S. families still waiting, five years later.

Drew describes their predicament as "an emotional roller-coaster." But he and others in the waiting group are cautiously encouraged by the efforts of Kyrgyzstan's new social development minister, Edil Baisalov.

A 35-year-old English-speaker and avid Twitter user, Baisalov has brought an uncharacteristic level of openness to government business in his country during six months on the job. He is working on new anti-corruption regulations and hopes for swift government approval that might help clear the way for the remaining U.S. adoption cases to be completed.

It's not a sure thing. Various anti-corruption and children's rights activists in the Kyrgyz capital, Bishkek, have criticized the proposed rules as inadequate and vowed to oppose them.

But one of the waiting Americans, Shannon Fenske, of Reeseville, Wisconsin, said Baisalov nonetheless had raised hopes after so many disappointments.

"We are so incredibly impressed and grateful for what he has done since taking over," Fenske said. "He's been the most vocal in favor of moving our cases forward."

Fenske, a medical technician, and her husband, Kevin, an aircraft maintenance manager, were matched in July 2008 with an infant Kyrgyz girl afflicted by a severe cleft lip and palate. They arranged for two operations for Kamila that improved her condition, but pain and speech problems linger.

The Fenskess have four other adopted children with special needs, including a 6-year-old boy adopted from Kyrgyzstan in 2007. But even with a bustling household, there's no thought about dropping the quest to adopt Kamila, whom they've visited only once — in June.

"She's our daughter. It's that simple," Shannon Fenske said. "We promised her a family. We will not stop fighting for her until she's here, where we feel she belongs."

Kyrgyzstan is an economically struggling country with often ill-equipped orphanages. Resources are scarce, specialist training to care for severely disabled children is limited, and the daily food budget at some facilities is \$1.50 per child.

Unscrupulous bureaucrats dealing in what was effectively a trade in children led to two halts in foreign adoptions — in 2006 and 2008 — by Kyrgyz authorities.

In July, adoptions were again frozen after the arrest of Baisalov's predecessor, Ravshan Sabirov, who allegedly extorted funds from foreign adoption agencies seeking accreditation. Sabirov was acquitted but nonetheless lost his post.

Under the new rules being pushed by Baisalov, any adoption agency working in Kyrgyzstan

will have to secure separate agreements with four government ministries and with the security service. Foreign agencies will be required to provide detailed financial statements to reduce the odds of corruption.

Despite that, the Bishkek-based Protection of Children's Rights League remains unconvinced and insists that many problems still need to be resolved. The league's leader, Nazgul Turdubekova, says corrupt local officials and unscrupulous intermediaries are commonly seen at international adoption agencies' offices.

Baisalov described criticism of the proposed adoption rules as "absolutely irrational."

"They are just using children for their own public relations aims," he said. "They are criticizing provisions they developed themselves and are thus delaying the reunification of Kyrgyz children with their parents."

Drew and Frances Pardus-Abbadessa fervently hope for such a reunion with Vladimir, whom they already consider their son. They're hoping to rename him Franco Michael, after the first names of their parents.

The couple is wary of sharing photos that show his face, for fear of breaching adoption protocol. But they readily recall their five visits with him, dating back to June 2008, when he was 7 months old and they found him at his orphanage in a large pen filled with crying children.

Their last meeting was in July 2012. Since then, said Drew Pardus-Abbadessa, they've been sending letters and packages but have been told not to visit.

"You're introduced to a child, and they become part of your heart, part of your family," Drew said. "Then there are the delays, all the ups and downs. You have your hopes raised, and they're dashed again."

Drew, an environmental engineering consultant, and Frances, who works for New York City's Office of Child Support Enforcement, completed a domestic adoption while waiting for a resolution in Kyrgyzstan. They're determined that their son Pavol, who turns 2 on Feb. 22, will have an older brother.

"It's not what we signed up for, adopting a child that old," Frances said of Vladimir. "It will be harder for us. He will have bonding issues. But at least he'll have love and support, a chance he'll never have if he stays in that orphanage."

The Pardus-Abbadessas, the Fenskes and the other waiting families have an ardent well-wisher in Ann Bates, a 41-year-old pediatric transport nurse from Bernville, Pennsylvania, who was one of the nine members of the Kyrgyz 65 who completed their adoptions last summer.

Bates, a single mother now engaged to a longtime friend, said her 6-year-old daughter, Krystina, is developmentally delayed compared with other children her age but is physically healthy and a joy to have around.

Bates also adopted a boy from Russia in 2010 and considers herself lucky because

in December, Russia banned further adoptions by Americans in retaliation for a U.S. law targeting alleged Russian human rights violators.

Bates remains in touch with the families still waiting for Kyrgyz adoptions and yearns for their success.

"My heart still bleeds for all of those kids," she said. "I've seen them, I've held them, I've helped advocate for the last five years. I see the huge improvements that Krystina has made in six months that she would never have made in an institution. To know the others are not getting that attention is heartbreaking."

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