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Astakhov Is a Better Showman Than Ombudsman

By Victor Davidoff

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The Russian political arena has never been short on clowns. Take Liberal Democratic Party leader Vladimir Zhirinovsky, whose presidential campaign slogan in 1996 may have been the best in the history of democracy: "A bottle of vodka for every man. A man for every woman." Or consider the head of Russia's bizarre religious-Communist sect, Gennady Zyuganov, who worships the Trinity of Stalin, Lenin and Jesus Christ — in that order.

Now there's a new performer in the ring: Pavel Astakhov. Astakhov isn't really a politician. He's the Russian children's rights ombudsman. His appointment in 2009 raised eyebrows right away, since at the time he was known as a KGB officer who had graduated from the KGB Academy, a lawyer, and the host of three television talk shows. The only thing Astakhov had never done in his career was protect children's rights. So why was he given this position?

One of the possible reasons is his membership in the KGB clan. From the start of President Vladimir Putin's first presidential term, that qualification alone was enough for any highly paid and visible position — from heading a major state oil company to being a governor of a

large region. Or perhaps he was appointed children's rights ombudsman in gratitude for founding the "For Putin!" political movement, which in 2007 called for tweaking the Constitution to allow Putin to run for a third consecutive term. Astakhov, however, failed to achieve the goal. His movement never garnered broad support, and Putin's clan had to resort to Plan B: cut a deal for a temporary job switch with Dmitry Medvedev.

But in some countries, a public figure is not valued so much for his success as for his loyalty to his patron. So there is nothing surprising about Astakhov's appointment. The post, however, is a difficult one. Protecting children's rights, especially the rights of orphans, in Russia is a serious problem, and no one knows it better than Astakhov himself. As he said in an interview to the news agency Krasnoyarsky Telegraph: "Children's rights are violated every day in the county. Every year about 100,000 children become crime victims. But I'd estimate that we don't know 90 percent of the crimes committed against them."

Despite Russia's dire domestic situation, from the start, Astakhov's main focus has been foreign. Here he is like a perfect weather vane that shows which way the Kremlin's winds are blowing. Under Medvedev's presidency, Astakhov took part in negotiating and drafting the new agreement on adoption between Russia and the U.S., which was signed in the summer of 2011. In doing so, he gave a boost to the business of international adoptions, too. The agreement prohibited independent adoptions and required all of them to go through registered international agencies, which charged an average fee of $40,000-50,000.

But as soon as the Kremlin began to prepare for a new boss, Astakhov suddenly changed his tune. In a live television broadcast in December 2011, Astakhov told Putin that he was an "absolute opponent of international adoption" and asked him to ban them all. Since then, there isn't another soul in Russia who has been so steadfast and energetic in his efforts against foreign adoptive parents, especially those in the U.S.

Astakhov's active lobbying of the law banning U.S. adoptions of Russian orphans made Russian bloggers curious about Astakhov's own home life. It turns out that the great Russian patriot Astakhov appears to operate by the principle "do as I say, not as I do." He took his wife to France to give birth to their third son, and even rented a villa for them near Nice to provide the most comfortable conditions for mother and child. But everything has a price. In an interview to the magazine 7 Dnei, Astakhov complained that he had to "shuttle to the Cote d'Azure almost every weekend, because I'm afraid that my son will forget me otherwise."

Anti-corruption activist Alexei Navalny commented on Astakhov's life style on his LiveJournal blog: "The family is comfortably settled in an elite mansion in Nice. There's money in a Swiss bank account. What else does a man need to peacefully but passionately love his homeland?" Astakhov replied, albeit indirectly, in a tweet, "A propaganda war, bad-mouthing Russian reality, slandering state officials and falsification of facts are all longstanding tricks of the enemies of Russia."

Baby No. 3 isn't the only young Astakhov to spend his formative years abroad. Astakhov's elder son studied in England and the U.S., where he then worked as a stock trader. While no one knows how successful he was on the stock market, now the 25-year-old is the deputy executive director of the Moscow-based Presidential Council on Economic Modernization. The Twitter mock account "Rusiya Persident" commented bitterly: "Pavel Astakhov so hated

his son that he sent him to school in America. Fortunately, the boy survived and he was given a loving home in Russia at the modernization council."

This Vaudeville routine would be amusing if it were not for the fact that Russian orphans, especially children with developmental and congenital disabilities, have been left off stage. These children have virtually no chance of being adopted in Russia. Now that it is against the law for Americans to adopt Russian orphans, many of these children have lost all chance of finding new parents.

When these children grow up, they may learn the real name of the Scrooge who stole Christmas.

Victor Davidoff is a Moscow-based writer and journalist who follows the Russian blogosphere in his biweekly column.

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