

# In Russia, Orphanages Are a Life Sentence for Children with Disabilities

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When Russia enacted a ban barring Americans from adopting children from its orphanages in 2012, analysts pointed out that the country's disabled children in state institutions would suffer the most.

A report distributed by Human Rights Watch, titled "Abandoned by the State: Violence, Neglect, and Isolation for Children with Disabilities in Russian Orphanages," documents how the worst-case scenario for disabled children is coming to pass. About one-third of all kids with disabilities in Russia are living in so-called closed institutions, where they endure neglect and harsh conditions, according to the report.

Speaking at an event at the Open Society Foundations-New York on Jan. 7, the report's principal researcher, Andrea Mazzarino, stressed that while changes are happening

concerning disability rights, federal-level goals are being enacted slowly and unevenly throughout Russia. As a result, many disabled children in orphanages continue to waste away with limited or virtually no contact with the outside world. [Editor's note: EurasiaNet.org operates under the auspices of the OSF].

The report comes with five pages of recommendations: Mazzarino emphasized that Russia should strive to abolish all forms of institutionalization for children. "Our position is just that institutions should be closed," she stated.

Mazzarino detailed a variety of violations of institutionalized disabled children's rights, including forced sedation, denied contact with relatives, and forced physical restraint, as well as the very existence of "lying down rooms," in which those with severe disabilities are confined to cribs, where they remain "almost their entire lives." Mazzarino also highlighted a need for support services that could enable parents to care for disabled children at home, as well as measures discouraging medical staff from advising parents to give up children with disabilities at birth.

"I think there needs to be a top-down change at this point," Mazzarino said. She pointed to the "National Action Strategy in the Interest of Children," adopted by the Russian government in 2012, as a good starting point. "Russia is a huge country. There are good things happening, but they're not happening everywhere."

Administrators and doctors involved in the care system are proving a formidable obstacle to reform because some called-for changes would significantly reduce funding for orphanages, and even entail the closure of some institutions, Mazzarino noted.

Mazzarino emphasized that foreign donors could play a significant role in promoting reform, despite the existence of the so-called "foreign agents law" that complicates the ability of local non-governmental organizations to receive funding from non-Russian sources. The Russian federal government is interested in bettering conditions for disabled children, according to Mazzarino. Thus, charities and humanitarian organizations, including most groups working on disability rights, have tended not to face scrutiny under the foreign-agent legislation.

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