

Russia Struggles to Reform Soviet-Era Orphanages

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Conditions at many orphanages have improved immensely since the 1990s, but experts say the quality of orphans' care leaves much to be desired.

Vikenty was 13 when he started school. Although he was being taught in the Moscow children's home that provided his earliest memories, he knew something wasn't right.

"You take out a book from the library, you read and you understand that the level of knowledge in the children's house is absolutely not the level that normal kids get in school," he said. "There were difficulties. ... [But] I decided that getting my diploma was more important than standing and crying."

Vikenty, now a 22-year-old graphic designer, started attending school at Verkh, an energetic nongovernmental organization in Moscow that offers education and life training.

Its name means upward, so it is literally a step up for children who know little of life beyond

the closed world of Russian children's homes and who otherwise risk drifting into unemployment, poverty or crime.

Twenty years after the collapse of the Soviet Union, about 371,700 children are growing up in state institutions, according to figures that the Russian government presented to the United Nations in 2011.

Russia's orphan population is as large as that of some of its provincial cities. And along with other former communist countries, it has one of the highest rates in the world.

Only 30 percent of these "orphans" have no parents. Many fall into the system when their parents, often fighting a losing battle with alcohol or drugs, are denied their parental rights or give up their child.

Almost half in this "orphan city" have disabilities or special needs, and their parents are encouraged to send them to an institution.

In 2006, then-President Vladimir Putin ordered officials to cut the number of children living in institutions, delivering a speech that evoked unease about population decline and foreigners adopting Russian children.

As Putin prepares to return to the presidency, the birth rate has started to creep up, but the number of children in institutions remains stubbornly high.

Critics argue that Putin's order ran aground because special interests are stifling reform.

"It is in the interest of the bureaucracy to preserve the system because it is an extremely expensive system," said Boris Altshuler, head of Rights of the Child. "Overall, the system of institutions receives 70 billion rubles (\$2.4 billion) per year of budget allocation, and the system doesn't want to lose this 70 billion."

Altshuler, a former Soviet dissident, likens the system to a company on the scale of Gazprom. The institution system is "'Rossirotprom,' the Russian orphan industry," he says, playing on the Russian word for orphan (*sirota*). "This 70 billion rubles per year is the income to this corporation."

An Education and Science Ministry spokesman said he couldn't provide data on government expenditures on children's institutions.

The state still dominates social services as in Soviet times, Altshuler said, adding that charities are constrained by law from providing help to foster families or birth parents.

"Because of the absence of social support, we cannot reform our system of institutions," he said, "Deinstitutionalization is impossible."

This means that only 9 percent of new orphans go back to their parents in a year, he said, compared with 70 percent in the United States and France.

"I think that [the system] is very profitable for bureaucrats," said Maria Ostrovskaya, director of the St. Petersburg-based children's charity Perspektivy, which supports children and

adults with disabilities.

Money flows into repairing and decorating buildings, but children's quality of life has hardly changed in the 15 years she has worked in the sector.

"If you go into an institution today, you will not see leaking ceilings, torn linoleum and broken beds," Ostrovskaya said. "Everything will be very nice: nice bed linens, repaired accommodations."

But children cannot play outside, and the system is not designed around their needs, she said.

Progress has been least for disabled children.

Children with Down syndrome are still being dismissed as ineducable, and their parents are advised to hand them over to an institution, said Sergei Koloskov, founder of the Down Syndrome Association, which he started in 1993 after refusing to give up his daughter.

"There are practically no alternatives for disabled children," he said.

Disabled children have scarcely been included in the deinstitutionalization effort and are far less likely to be adopted.

"If you come from a well-off family and you can pay for everything yourself, then perhaps you can get everything you need," Koloskov said. "But if you are poor, you have nothing, and they advise you that it's better to put your child in an institution, that is how it works out."

Russia's Soviet-era orphanages may have been patched up since the crisis years of the early 1990s, but they continue to stunt children's development.

"The physical conditions are so much better; there is no way to compare it with '90s," said Svyatoslav Dovbyna, a pediatric neurologist and co-founder of St. Petersburg Early Intervention Institute, which supports disabled children living at home. "Now you can see the flat-screen TVs, the carpets that the corporate donors have paid for. But the psychological environment has not really changed."

A baby in a nursery might meet 120 adults in a year but have less than 10 minutes of real interaction a day with any of them, said Dovbyna's colleague, clinical psychologist Tatyana Morozova.

"Lack of stimulation, lack of good relations is producing some brain damage," she said. "The mother without any education can observe the child and see that the child got enough [food]. ... The stranger doesn't recognize whether the child got enough, whether it is too much or whether he or she likes this kind of food."

Every five months, children in a Russian orphanage fall one month behind in average weight and growth, researchers at St. Petersburg State University found. Their findings were cited by Dovbyna and Morozova.

"The majority of the orphanages are much better, but at the same time you will see the same small kids," Dovbyna said.

Oleg Palmov, a psychologist at St. Petersburg State University, agrees that the orphanages have improved.

“These are not the institutions they used to be 10 years ago,” said Palmov, who has visited scores of nurseries.

He said the majority have good facilities, medical care and toys. But there are still important deficiencies. Palmov cited “emotional needs and the development of personality” as areas where orphanages are generally lacking.

Inside the Institution

The director of an institution in the Tula region, who requested anonymity because she is not authorized to speak with the media, said her institution offers a childhood to children who would otherwise not have one.

Youngsters come to her institution at the age of 6 or 7, usually from families with drinking problems.

Lacework and wooden masks made by her charges hang on brightly painted, peeling walls. Plants are wilting in stuffy classrooms, and the corridors smell of disinfectant. Excitable small children cling to the director’s skirts shouting “mamochka [mommy].”

“Our children are difficult. ... Nobody wants to adopt them,” the director said, adding that a volatile early life leaves a legacy of behavioral problems. “For the children, this is home. Here there are activities; here they can go to school.”

The Kremlin insists that such institutions will become part of Russia’s past.

“The dismantling of children’s homes should be the task of the next five years,” Russian ombudsman for children’s rights Pavel Astakhov said. “I think that our slogan, our day-to-day perspective must be a Russia without orphans, where adoptive parents are lining up to adopt children.”

Resolving children’s problems has been an issue for the past 100 years, he said, an oblique reference to a century scarred by war and repression.

Millions of orphans roamed the streets before being swept into state orphanages under Stalin, who laid the foundations of the institution system, which boomed in the 1960s.

“Of course, there are bureaucrats who are interested that the government continues to [give] them money,” Astakhov said. “I would not say the system contradicts the interests [of reform]. ... The main factor is the lack of knowledge among Russian citizens and lack of understanding of how fulfilling and legitimate it is to become an adoptive parent.”

End of the Institution?

As prime minister, Putin called for an end to all foreign adoptions in the near future. He made that statement while discussing children’s welfare during a marathon question-and-answer session in December 2011.

Encouraging adoptions by Russian parents is the right strategy for improving child welfare, he said.

But improving child welfare requires political change, Altshuler said. Russia, he continued, “doesn’t have checks and balances, a democratic system that works by itself. Many things can only be resolved at a personal level.”

So it would be naive to expect a presidential order, like the one Putin issued in 2006, to fix the system, he said, adding that there are plenty of “unseen forces” that can bypass presidential laws.

Ostrovskaya, of Perspektivy, said reform plans can be ineffective. She has seen how a home of 550 children was broken up into four smaller homes, housing a maximum of 150 children.

“I think there is no difference; it is minimal. It is just reducing the size of the institutions, not fixing the problem,” she said. “If there were no more than seven people, then it would be a reduction in my view. But 150 is just the same.”

The experience of one atypical children’s home in the capital reveals both the appetite for and limits of change.

Since Putin’s 2006 order, 34 children from Moscow’s Special Correctional School-Institution No. 8 have been adopted.

“I think it is a lot,” director Vadim Menshov said at the institution, a light, airy building where studio-style portraits of some of his 91 charges greet visitors.

Menshov said his institution was the first in the country to offer support to adoptive parents and that this explains his success. He said his biggest dream is to overhaul an “out-of-date and broken” system.

“We have a good community,” Menshov said. “[But] imagine that you live here endlessly for weeks, months, years. Of course it is hard.”

In a proposal submitted to the Moscow mayor, he sketched out an alternative in which three or four children live in an ordinary home, are cared for by full-time guardians, and attend ordinary nurseries and schools. This plan would cut costs in half, he said.

“Social organizations really like it,” Menshov said. “Civil servants also say ‘yes, it’s all good.’ But so far, nobody has done anything.”

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