

Duma Deputy Denounces Ban on U.S. Adoptions

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July 05, 2012

The  **Moscow Times**

Video from an episode of the American television show "Dr. Phil" about Jessica Bigley of Anchorage, Alaska, punishing her adopted son Daniil Bukharov by pouring cold water on him and forcing him to drink hot sauce. Her actions, which resulted in a child abuse case being opened against her by U.S. authorities in 2011, caused a flap over adoptions policy between Russia and the U.S.

A senior State Duma deputy has condemned as "unconstitutional" a new law in the Kemerovo region that bans Americans from adopting local children.

"The instatement of such a law is a violation of the children's constitutional right to a family," said Yelena Mizulina, head of the committee on family, women and children, Interfax reported.

Regional lawmakers who supported the bill, which was passed on Thursday, said the measure was needed to protect children against abusive U.S. foster parents.

They cited a string of highly publicized scandals involving U.S. foster parents and Russian adoptive children that have inflamed anti-American sentiment and complicated the U.S.-Russian reset.

The Kemerovo law threatens to cast a shadow over a Duma vote on Friday, when deputies expect to ratify a long-awaited bilateral treaty to improve oversight of adoptions.

Kemerovo lawmaker Nina Zinkevich said the Duma's earlier failure to ratify the treaty, which was signed in July 2011, jeopardized the thousands of Russian adoptive children living in the United States.

"The United States leads the world in child abuse," she said bluntly, Interfax reported.

An estimated 60,000 adoptive Russian children are currently living in the United States. Seventeen have died in recent years, according to government figures.

In 2011, a 17-year-old Kemerovo girl was reportedly abused by her American foster father.

Mizulina said the Kemerovo law would only be justified if there weren't any orphanages, and if demand from foster families was so great that orphans never had to spend time in one.

"I don't care how great your orphanage is, it's still better for a child to grow up in a family. The government has admitted this," she said, adding that this included foreign families.

Kemerovo, located in southern Siberia, is so far the only region to have banned U.S. adoptions. But some feared that the trend could spread to other regions and municipalities.

"I don't think Kemerovo will be the last place to ban U.S. adoptions," said Tatyana Belozerova of the adoption agency World Child International.

The government has tightened controls on foreign adoptions and raised stipends for domestic foster families in recent years. The often cited reasons are practical as well as ideological: to reduce abuses, hedge against Russia's aging population, and improve Russia's image abroad.

Anti-Americanism also appears to play a role.

"Some people live with a strange mentality. They absolutely believe that American parents adopt Russian children for spare parts. I wouldn't say that about top officials, but regular folks like garbagemen and nurses," said Alexander Romanov of the World Links adoption agency.

"There was even a deputy prosecutor general — I don't remember his name — who said, 'It's better to let our orphans die here than go to our ideological enemy,'" Romanov recalled.

Romanov accused children's ombudsman Pavel Astakhov of spreading what he called "myths" about U.S. adoptions, including the claim that Americans adopt only the healthiest children.

Astakhov, who has pushed for more domestic adoptions, repeated the claim on Thursday.

"In the 1990s, Americans actually adopted sick Russian kids. ... But today, 72 percent of children adopted by U.S. foster families are healthy. Incidentally, there are 12,500 Russians waiting to adopt these very same children," he said, RIA-Novosti reported.

A series of scandals has shaken confidence in the adoptions system.

In April 2010, a U.S. foster mother put her then-7-year-old adopted son on an airplane back to Russia with a note that said she couldn't take care of him because he was psychologically disturbed.

Video footage of another foster mother punishing her adopted son by dousing him with cold water and forcing him to drink spicy Tabasco sauce created an uproar in Russia. Officials suggested that the 180-day suspended sentence she received was too light a punishment.

The new adoption treaty aims to prevent similar abuses by introducing more stringent certification and monitoring processes. Also, under the terms of the treaty, orphans can only be adopted by an American family if no suitable family in Russian can be found.

At Russia's insistence, the treaty forbids adoptions by same-sex couples.

After ratification by the Duma, the treaty must be approved by the Federation Council and signed by President Vladimir Putin. It does not require approval by the U.S. Congress.

According to official data, 10,816 Russian children were given up for adoption last year, 7,416 were adopted by Russian citizens, and 3,400 by foreigners.

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