

The Duma Lacks Principles

By [David Edwards](#)

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An obscure Washington state politician once said her votes on proposed legislation were based on conscience, constituency and caucus — in that order. She may be on to something.

United Russia deputies in the State Duma who voted for a bill prohibiting Americans from adopting Russian children skipped the first two steps in Mulliken's troika. Instead they caved in to their party's leaders who had imposed an ultimatum: Vote for the bill or lose your seat for insubordination. Their capitulation was both cowardly and reprehensible.

Before the bill went to a vote in the Duma, dozens of United Russia deputies were reportedly opposed. But when it came time to press the button, they voted for self-preservation rather than voting their conscience. Given the moral stakes involved, their decision showed their unfitness to hold public office. Lawmakers should do what they consider right, not politically expedient, particularly when the issue is as flammable as this one.

Arm-twisting is not unique to Russian politics, of course. When Democrats were trying to line up votes for U.S. President Barack Obama's overhaul of health care, they were stonewalled

by anti-abortion colleagues who opposed coverage of abortion. Party leaders used carrots rather than sticks, and the obstinate Democrats were ultimately persuaded to yield.

But the actions of the Duma, the Federation Council and President Vladimir Putin rank higher on the sell-out scale because the law affects children, many of whom are living in horrible conditions in Russian orphanages. Some leaders practically reveled in the sadistic step they had taken to try to teach the U.S. a lesson about Russian sovereignty.

Besides their betrayal of their own consciences, United Russia deputies disregarded the outcry from their constituency. They used legal technicalities to table consideration of a petition with more than 130,000 signatures. Even ardent supporters of the Kremlin joined the chorus of castigation. Yet it was all for nought. The overwhelming Kremlin desire to retaliate against the Magnitsky Act was rubber-stamped into law.

Nothing could be a greater testament to the sham of democracy in Russia. The rigged Duma elections in December 2011 and the PR stunts that fill the United Russia playbook ensure that legislators don't have their constituencies' interests in mind. Russia's elected representatives can defy popular opinion with impunity, knowing full well that the electorate alone cannot vote them out. When party bosses hold more sway over lawmakers and inspire more fear in them than voters do, something is terribly wrong.

The adoption ban calls to mind a quote attributed to former U.S. teachers' union leader Albert Shanker: "When schoolchildren start paying union dues, that's when I'll start representing the interests of schoolchildren." The unmistakable message in this case is that when orphaned children start counting for something, that's when Russia will start taking their interests to heart. Children's rights ombudsman Pavel Astakhov left no doubt that he is a government lackey, and it became obvious that the interests he represents are not those of children.

Putin certainly deserves blame as well. Just months before, he had shepherded a bilateral adoption pact through the Duma and hinted that he might not sign the bill. But moral calculations never entered into his thinking. Putin proceeded with Machiavellian disregard and signed the anti-Magnitsky bill into law on Dec. 28.

In his book "It Was a Long Time Ago, And It Never Happened Anyway," U.S. author David Satter wrote that the majority of Russians have inherited a historical legacy that places the actions of the state beyond reproach. He believes that even writers like Alexander Pushkin, Nikolai Gogol and Fyodor Dostoevsky, who were regarded as the conscience of the country, stopped short of questioning the moral rectitude of the Russian state.

By threatening wayward party members with expulsion from the Duma if they didn't vote for the anti-Magnitsky bill, United Russia leaders framed the issue in terms of Russia's time-honored dichotomy of *svoi* and *chuzhoi*: If you are not with us, you are against us. Politicians use this artificial dichotomy to avoid the moral responsibility of soul-searching. They thus hope to spare themselves from confronting an inconvenient conclusion: We have seen the enemy, and it is us.

Russia's leaders should take a civics lesson from an increasing number of Russians who are willing to act as society's conscience. Woe to the leaders if they keep defaulting on this

responsibility.

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