

Latest Orphan Death Sparks Official Furor

By [Jonathan Earle](#)

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Children's ombudsman Pavel Astakhov

With striking unanimity and furor, senior officials and lawmakers on Tuesday condemned the latest death of an adopted Russian child in the United States, saying the incident vindicates the government's controversial decision to ban U.S. adoptions.

"The death of one more Russian child in the United States has at last put the issue of U.S. adoptions to rest," tweeted Alexei Pushkov, head of the State Duma's International Affairs Committee.

The usually loud reaction, which included dozens of angry public comments, agency statements, and extensive news coverage by state-owned Channel One TV, threatened to further strain relations with the United States and marginalize Western-leaning members of the nation's elite.

State Duma deputies observed a moment of silence for 3-year-old Maxim Kuzmin, whom top officials say was murdered by his adoptive mother.

Kuzmin is the 20th Russian adopted child to have died in the United States since 1996, children's ombudsman Pavel Astakhov said in a statement late Monday.

Max Alan Shatto, as Kuzmin was known in the United States, died Jan. 21, according to an obituary published last month by the Midland Reporter-Telegram newspaper.

Konstantin Dolgov, the Foreign Ministry's Commissioner for Human Rights, said Kuzmin's body was found to have multiples injuries to his head and legs, as well as damage to internal organs that could have resulted from a strong blow, NTV reported.

He also said Kuzmin's parents gave him regular doses of Risperidone, an anti-schizophrenia drug that is also sometimes used to treat irritability in autism patients.

Texas Child Protection Services has received allegations of physical abuse and neglect against Kuzmin, but hasn't determined if they're true, The Associated Press reported on Monday. Furthermore, a spokesman for the Ector County Sheriff's Office said that police were still waiting for the autopsy report and no arrests had been made, the agency reported.

Russian officials accused the U.S. government of failing to take the Kuzmin's death seriously, and possibly even obstructing an honest and thorough investigation. "The State Department has in no way helped Russian consuls to determine the cause of death," tweeted Dolgov, the Foreign Ministry commissioner.

U.S. Ambassador Michael McFaul called Kuzmin's death a "tragedy" in a Twitter message on Tuesday morning. Later, the U.S. [Embassy](#) released a statement, saying it would be "irresponsible to draw conclusions about the death or assign guilt before autopsy results are analyzed and an investigation is carried out."

The embassy also said the State Department and local authorities had been "working closely" with Russian consular officials, including facilitating access to Maxim's younger brother, Kirill, who was also adopted by the same U.S. adoptive parents.

Supporters of the U.S. adoptions ban, which went into effect on Jan. 1 despite significant opposition from the public and, initially, several senior government ministers, lined up to say, I told you so!

"That decision was undoubtedly, absolutely correct," said Sergei Mironov, head of the Duma faction of A Just Russia, which included most of a handful of dissenting lawmakers.

Deputy Yelena Mizulina, head of the Family, Women and Children Committee, took the highly unusual step of inviting Education and Science Minister Dmitry Livanov, whose ministry oversees foreign adoptions, and Ambassador McFaul to testify before her committee.

"Let [McFaul] tell us about what they're going to do for the Russian children that remain in America," Mizulina said, Interfax reported.

Tens of thousands took part last month in a march in Moscow against the ban, which critics

dubbed the "Scoundrel's Law." The ban was also opposed by most experts on the grounds that it would condemn thousands of Russian children to dismal prospects in the country's state orphanages.

But with the death of Maxim Kuzmin, nationalist firebrand Vladimir Zhirinovskiy on Tuesday declared those who marched against the ban were the true scoundrels.

"They're the scoundrels, they're the villains, they're the scum," he said, Itar-Tass reported.

Independent political analyst Pavel Salin said the government's efforts to publicize Kuzmin's death had more to do with battling pro- and anti-Western elites than swaying public opinion, which already tends to favor the law.

"The elite understands perfectly that what's actually at stake is not adoptions, but rather the relationship with the West," Salin said by telephone on Tuesday.

Critics of the adoptions ban originally included Livanov, Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, and Open Government Minister Mikhail Abyzov.

In that sense, the media campaign appeared to be in line with recent efforts that weaken international links, including a crackdown on foreign funding for certain NGOs and a recent proposal by President Vladimir Putin to ban senior officials from holding property and bank accounts outside the country.

And the government's reaction wasn't limited to angry pronouncements.

The Investigative Committee opened a murder case into Kuzmin's death and announced that they would seek to add Kuzmin's adoptive mother, Laura Shatto, to an [international wanted list](#).

Prosecutors, meanwhile, said they would look into whether any laws were broken when Maxim and his brother were adopted, the Prosecutor General's Office said in an [online statement](#).

Russians' fury appeared to spread outside official circles, as the hashtag #AmericaMurdersChildren was the fourth most popular among Russian Twitter users at about 5:30 p.m. on Tuesday.

A group called "Russian Mothers" announced plans to march through Moscow on March 2, pending City Hall's approval, to demand Kirill's return and a ban on all foreign adoptions, Interfax reported.

Americans adopted 45,112 Russian children between 1999 and 2011, according to U.S. [government statistics](#).

Experts have sparred with officials over whether a string of fatal and non-fatal abuse cases made U.S. adoptions too dangerous an option for the approximately 125,000 orphans currently living in Russian state institutions.

But despite government assurances and the grim record set by Kuzmin's death, statistics

appear to show that Russian domestic adoption is as least as hazardous and likely more so.

Twenty-four children died at the hands of their Russian foster or adoptive parents in 2011, down from 82 in 2006 and 105 in 2009, according to the National Foundation for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, citing data from the [State Statistics Service](#).

"The [opposition] crowd will say, 'they die in Russia, too.' Yes, they die in Russia, too, but this is our family. Why would we want others to kill even more?" Zhirinovsky said, Itar-Tass reported.

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