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MINNPOST

Putin's cruel politics behind the ban on Russian adoptions

By Nick Hayes | 02/12/13



REUTERS/Sergei Karpukhin

Thousands of demonstrators gathered for a march in Moscow in January to protest against a ban on Americans adopting Russian children.

Despite Vladimir Putin's victory in the presidential election last year, long-promised and delayed reforms of education, social welfare, health care, infrastructure investment and taxation have gone nowhere. Meanwhile, the Russian parliament is working on legislation that would ban blasphemy, the use of foreign words and phrases in the Russian language, and "homosexual propaganda" from the press.

It is the season of non-issues in Russian politics.

Russia's leadership blusters and rants on issues that have about as much relevance to the country's problems as bills introduced by Michele Bachmann have to do with the real challenges facing the United States.

The epitome of the pitiful state of Russian politics is the “**Dima Yakovlev law**” that bans the adoption of Russian orphans by Americans. The orphans are just a pawn in Putin’s political games.

Last December, Congress passed and President Obama signed into law the so-called Magnitsky bill. Sergei Magnitsky was a Russian auditor and accountant imprisoned in 2008 because of his accusations of pervasive fraud in the Russian government. He died in prison in 2009 under highly suspicious circumstances. The Magnitsky law blacklists Russian state officials suspected of complicity in his death and human rights abuses and prohibits them for entering the United States or having access to its banks.



Angry with the Magnitsky law, Putin and the Kremlin elite retaliated. On Jan. 3, Putin signed the “Dima Yakovlev law.” It covers up a callous and mean-spirited reactionary nationalism behind the purported defense of Russian orphans from the clutches of predatory adoptive parents in the United States.

The law is named in honor of Dima Yakovlev. On July 8, 2008, Dima was 21 months old and had been in the United States for three months when his adoptive father forgot to drop him off for day care in the morning, drove to work and left the child strapped in his safety seat in a SUV for nine hours. A co-worker noticed the dead child.

A judge in Virginia acquitted the father.

Sensationalized stories

The Dima Yakovlev case followed a series of sensationalized stories in the Russian media about the abuse of Russian children by their adoptive U.S. parents. In 2005, reports appeared of the deaths of two Russian children in North Carolina and Maryland. The children were victims of abuse by their adoptive parents. A Pennsylvania man was convicted of sexually abusing his adopted Russian girl and posting pornographic images of her on the web.

Russian tabloids see the adoption of Russian children by Americans as a 21st-century version of the orphan trains, one that now delivers Russian children into the arms of America’s sexual predators and criminals.

There’s politics in Putin’s cruelty. His decision to embrace the ban on U.S. adoptions underscores his political vulnerability. Ever since his announcement in fall 2011 that he would run for a third presidential term and basically dump the erstwhile President Dmitry Medvedev and his liberal entourage, Putin has turned to the hard-line Russian right for his base of support.

A more politically secure and confident Putin would have taken a different tack on the adoption

question. Last December, when the Russian parliament passed the law and sent it to Putin, he might have delayed action, pulled off a high-profile meeting with Secretary of State Hillary Clinton in which Russia's concerns would have been addressed, signed a watered-down version into law that tightened up a few regulations on adoptions, and announced a Russia-U.S. NGO devoted to the well-being of Russian children in the United States. Rest assured that he wouldn't be above also posing for the press with a Russian orphan infant in his arms.

In the process, Putin would have gained a loyal, pro-Russia lobby in the United States of the parents of adopted Russian children and those children in their later adult years.

The controversy over adoption plays out in the nationalist angst in Russia over its demographic decline. Life expectancy rates remain at Third World levels. Russia reached below-zero birth rates decades ago. The Russian nationalist right plays out the hard side of its population politics in its anti-adoption rhetoric and the "Dima Yakovlev law."

Its soft side appears in campaigns by pro-Kremlin youth organizations, nationalist parties and the Russian Orthodox Church that call on Russian couples to do their patriotic duty in bed and procreate. Putin has championed this fertile brand of politics. In 2008, Putin declared a new holiday, **Family Contact Day**, Sept. 12. Russian couples were encouraged to use the holiday for acts of coitus that ideally would produce children nine months later on another holiday, Russia Day, June 12. The data does not show that nine months later there was any increase in newborns. Putin, the father of two daughters, also proclaimed that the norm for Russia should be three children to a family.

A **story ran in the Daily Mail** last week reporting that Putin had personally invited the R&B group Boyz II Men to perform in Moscow to set the mood for Valentine's Day and let their make-out lyrics encourage young couples to join the cause of procreation.

Cultural wars

Russia's orphans are also pawns in the games of Russia's cultural wars. Since the fall of the Soviet Union, the Russian Orthodox Church has campaigned against the spread of American evangelism in Russia, decrying its attempts to lure Russians away from the Orthodox faith. Although the Russian Orthodox Church tends to view its historical rival, Catholicism, as at least a worthy enemy, in the eyes of the Russian Orthodox Church American evangelicals are at best one step away from Moonies enticing Russian children into cults of heretics. This was implied in the pronouncement last week by the patriarchy that Russian orphans adopted by U.S. parents would not get "a truly Christian upbringing."

As we say, denial is not just a river in Egypt. Putin and his supporters in the parliament's United Russia Party simply deny the hard facts of Russia's demographic crisis. At the bottom of Russian society are a minimum of 128,000 orphans eligible for adoption. There are roughly 18,000 prospective families who are willing to adopt. Adoptive parents in the United States, moreover, have

been virtually the only ones willing to adopt Russian orphans with special needs. The high risks of abuse, neglect, criminality and human trafficking fall on the side of the Russian orphanages themselves, not the prospective adoptive parents in the United States.

Meanwhile, at the top of Russian society, the nation's elite are emigrating. Consider this example: In Miami today, there are **birthing clinics** that offer package deals for Russian mothers to give birth to U.S. citizens. Priced from \$10, 000 to \$20,000, these clinics provide visa support for expectant Russian mothers and their families, accommodation in Miami, and complete obstetrical and passport services so that the newly born Russian infant has U.S. citizenship.

Putin could care less about the fate of Dima Yakovlev or Russia's orphans. They are merely an opportune vehicle to carry the message of Putin's embrace of the Russian right and its anti-Americanism.

Dictators are often known not only for their great historic crimes but also for their petty acts of cruelty. The Roman Emperor Caligula relieved his boredom at the circus games by ordering spectators to be thrown to the lions. Mussolini executed his own son-in-law. Hitler poisoned his dog, Blondi, before taking his own life.

Putin has subjected the oligarch Mikhail Khodorkovsky to a nine-year jail term in Siberia (on trumped up charges) along with a pattern of harassment and humiliation. In prison, Khodorkovsky has been the victim of beatings by stooges planted by prison officials who also feed the media rumors of Khodorkovsky's sexual proclivities.

Putin's police raided the apartment of media celebrity and opposition figure Kseniya Sobchak, who is rumored to be Putin's god daughter, and distributed video of the raid so that every creep in Russia could ogle at takes of her dressed in scanty lingerie worthy of a Victoria Secrets' ad.

Now Putin's picking on orphans. The gesture is particularly cruel even by Putin's standards. A very cold heart beats behind this brand of politics.

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