

# The Second Russian–American Child Welfare Forum: Opening Remarks of the Russian Child Rights Commissioner

Karen Smith Rotabi, PhD, MSW, MPH

As a result of bilateral child protection negotiations between the United States and the Russian Federation, the Second Russian–American Child Welfare Forum was held in late June 2012 in Chicago, Illinois, as a part of the 20th Annual Colloquium of the American Professional Society on the Abuse of Children. This meeting, a follow-up to a previous gathering held in Russia, was organized to exchange experiences and opinions on pressing issues we face in building effective child welfare systems in our countries (Egorova, 2012). This article summarizes highlights of the meeting events as recognition of the good and necessary work needed to promote child protection—both generally and as one small contribution to the complex process of preserving Russian–American intercountry adoptions.

## Opening Remarks of Commissioner Pavel Astakhov

Although the forum was clearly a collegial event marked by the spirit of collaborative dialogue, the deeply distressing subject of Russian adoptees being maltreated by their U.S. citizen–adoptive parents (see Rotabi & Hein, 2010) was the substantive focus of opening remarks of the Russian Child Rights Commissioner, Mr. Pavel Astakhov.

Astakhov (2012) began with the recognition that there are different views on child welfare and that the discourse is not about political games. He stated that “child rights are a big issue in Russia” and that the resultant response related to this core value is an indication of the growth of civil society in Russia. Underscoring this point, he said, “...[P]rotection of our citizens, especially those outside of Russia...is very important.” Referring to the bilateral intercountry adoption agreement signed between both governments in the summer of 2011, he acknowledged that Russia still must ratify the agreement and that he was optimistic about ratification. He also noted that such an agreement is necessary to set standards for the practice of intercountry adoption between Russia and any nation that receives Russian adoptees. In the months since the conference, Russia has in fact ratified the agreement. Other agreements are already in place with France and Italy. Israel is in process of developing such an agreement, according to Astakhov.

Commissioner Astakhov (2012) went on to emphasize the values underlying the bilateral Russia–U.S. agreement, including the “well-being of children” and their “right to happiness” during the most formative of years of human growth and development. He stated that “we have to solve issues” to make happiness a reality. Focused on the best interests of the child, Astakhov turned to the facts of the tragedies of Russian adoptees in the United States:

- There are 19 officially recognized deaths of Russian adoptees in the United States.
- Russian nongovernmental organizations have documented more than 19 deaths.
- Protection of children against violence, at home and abroad, is a priority of Russia.

Focusing on the positive aspects of Russian–U.S. intercountry adoptions, Astakhov (2012) then pointed out that some Russian children have been sent to the United States for medical treatment. One such child received treatment for a serious heart condition. The U.S. family fostering the child has since applied for intercountry adoption, and official channels and formal processes are now underway to support this.

In closing, Commissioner Astakhov (2012) stated that the protection of children against violence is a priority in Russian state policy. To move forward in a collaborative relationship with the United States, in terms of Russian–American child adoptions, Astakhov and others traveling in the official Russian delegation attended a formal meeting of the Child Protection Subgroup of the U.S.–Russia Bilateral Presidential Commission (Obama–Medvedev). Also, as a part of the official visit to the United States, he and the delegation met with various social service organizations, including “The Ranch,” a well-known group home in Montana that addresses the needs of adopted children suffering from various psychological and emotional problems. Many of the clients are intercountry adoptees from Russia (see [www.ranchforkids.org](http://www.ranchforkids.org)). This private residential treatment facility has offered a controversial approach to treating Russian children as a result of adoption disruption. Some have charged that The Ranch is nothing more than a sophisticated way to abandon Russian

adoptees. Others defend it and note the excellent and humane treatment available in the facility and the many families who remain deeply committed to their adopted children while they receive services for various mental health problems. Regardless of mixed sentiments, the Ranch has come under criticism for a variety of reasons, including Astakhov's outrage with the facility's management and treatment of Russian children. Criticism from Astakhov only intensified after he was denied entry into the facility during this delegation visit.

## The United States Department of State Responds to Astakhov's Comments

Mr. Luke Dembosky (2012), a U.S. Department of Justice representative serving at the U.S. Embassy in Moscow, was accompanying the forum delegation. He recognized the approximately 50 Russian colleagues attending the forum and then responded to Commissioner Astakhov's comments. In an effort to promote civil society, Dembosky too recognized the collaborative spirit of the Bilateral Presidential Commission and the forum. His main points, specifically in regard to Russian–U.S. intercountry adoptions and Commissioner Astakhov's comments, were as follows:

- The United States condemns the abuse or abandonment of any child.
- Over 60,000 Russian children have been adopted by U.S. citizens since 1990, and the vast majority of children have been placed successfully—that is, they now live in a loving home.
- While not belittling any one case of maltreatment, one needs to realize that it is important not to let politics get in the way of the important child welfare intervention of intercountry adoption.
- Currently, rigorous safeguards accompany the adoption process.
- Further, in the spirit of mutual cooperation and development of child protection systems, the U.S. Department of State is assisting Russia in developing a National Center for Missing and Exploited Children. (Dembosky, 2012)

## Core Themes of Subsequent Presentations Made During the Forum

The forum offered 18 workshops focused on child welfare and maltreatment. Many of the visiting Russian colleagues presented on child protection processes and practices in their respective regions. For example, one session was entitled *Juvenile Commissions and Protecting Minor's Rights in Krasnodar Region* (Reznik, 2012), while another was more generally entitled *Main Challenges in Revising Child Protection Legislation in Russia* (Spivak, 2012). A presentation by Agafonova (2012) focused on foster care programs and the support of foster families, while

another presentation focused on the support of foster parents (Mikhaylova, 2012). These particular presentations gave opportunity for U.S. participants to hear about this important social intervention for the deinstitutionalization of children. Included in Agafonova's presentation was the use of specialist outreach teams, such as emergency psychosocial support services for families in crisis. In sum, the presentations focused on the state of child protection knowledge and practice in Russia. Main points included the importance of collaboration, child rights, and programmatic and social work practice strategies in preventing and responding to child maltreatment.

The invited U.S. presentations included an overview of the U.S. Department of Justice's sex offender Sentencing, Monitoring, Apprehending, Registering, and Tracking (SMART) system, in which all 50 states electronically collate identification information about sex offenders. This information is widely available and includes photographs and free access on the Internet. Other aspects of this vital work provide requirements that sex offenders report international travel prior to departure so that international law enforcement (Interpol) may be notified. Depending on level of risk, Interpol then notifies the destination country when deemed necessary. Such a strong approach to tracking sex offenders who may visit another nation to offend again is necessary for a country such as Russia where citizens are vulnerable to sex trafficking (Turkel, 2012).

Meetings also involved the discussion of policy issues, such as comments by the U.S. Department of State's representative from the Office of Children's Issues, Janelle Guest (2012). The focus of this particular presentation was international child abduction and the U.S. implementation of the Hague Convention on Parental Abduction. Guest made a descriptive policy presentation focused on *how* the Office of Children's Services is involved in cases of parental abduction and the framework of its services, such as key administrative policies.

An invited guest speaker, this author presented on *Global Issues in Child Protection* (Rotabi, 2012) and discussed the deinstitutionalization of children. Focusing on the global cost and consequences of large-scale child care institutions, often referred to as "orphanages," the main points were both the social–psychological outcomes of children who grow up in institutions and the ineffectiveness, inefficiency, and high-financial costs of such institutions. In terms of financial implications, of notice is the fact that foster care as well as primary preventive family support services are not only more cost effective but also in the best interests of the child. This approach ultimately *prevents* the institutionalization of children in some cases. One such social intervention, Family Group Conferencing and its pilot testing in Guatemala, was given as an applied example of intervention diffusion and collaborative approaches to training social workers for such a child protection strategy.

## Discussion

Russian adoptions have slowed dramatically in the United States along with slow-downs in other nations such as China and a moratorium in Guatemala. Since 2004, international child adoptions to U.S. citizens have declined at least 60%. This radical change in the important practice of child adoption has become a source of considerable debate—focusing on policy, practice, and outcomes of intercountry adoption.

Intercultural collaborative partnerships are critical to learning in any discipline. When it comes to child welfare, many such collaborative approaches to learning exist, and global social work is an active field of engagement that is focused on human rights and identifying best practices (Healy & Link, 2011). The Russian–American Child Welfare Forum is one such example of particular importance given its connection to the future of intercountry adoption between the two nations. Engaging in collaboration and acts of goodwill is not diplomatically necessary, but cooperation is an essential goal. Ultimately, engaging in discourse that enables exchange of knowledge and supports mutual learning about human service practices is a goal that builds transnational relationships. From there, greater understanding may be focused on protecting children—a cause that we all agree is critical for a just global society.

I personally look forward to the next steps. On the U.S. side of the equation, the American Professional Society on the Abuse of Children anticipates the development of a white paper on the necessary steps to improve intercountry adoption practices that is written in collaboration with Russian colleagues (Personal communication, R. Hughes, June 30, 2012). This is an important step because a bilateral agreement must be executed and carried out at the intercountry-adoption-agency-level, including strengthening practices standards of social workers and human services in general in both nations.

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## About the Author

Karen Rotabi, PhD, MSW, MPH, is Associate Professor of Social Work at United Arab Emirates University. She started her career in the United States at a county-level social services' permanency planning unit where her caseload was primarily foster care youth in preparation for adoption. In 1991, Dr. Rotabi joined the Peace Corps and helped establish the National Organization for the Prevention of Child Abuse in Belize, Central America. In 1996, she worked for the U.S. Air Force Family Advocacy Program on child abuse and neglect, and on domestic violence prevention in England. She received her PhD in social work in 2004 from the University of North Carolina (UNC) at Chapel Hill, and she was Assistant and then Associate Professor at Virginia Commonwealth University School of Social Work (2006–2012). Dr. Rotabi volunteers for the U.S. State Department and Council on Accreditation (COA), working as a Hague Evaluator and Commissioner for COA for the accreditation of intercountry adoption agencies. Her recent book (2012), co-edited with Judith L. Gibbons, is titled *Intercountry Adoptions: Policies, Practices, and Outcomes* (Ashgate Press). Contact: [ksrotabi@yahoo.com](mailto:ksrotabi@yahoo.com)