Russia: Are efforts to help thousands of 'abandoned' children being resisted?

By Tim Whewell
BBC News

Ambitious plans to reduce the number of orphans in Russia are running into strong institutional resistance, child welfare campaigners have warned.

The Kremlin has launched a programme to move tens of thousands of children out of institutions and into family homes.

Most have been abandoned by their parents and receive little or no education.

But the campaigners say there is opposition to reform from institutions that benefit from the state funding orphans attract.

"It's huge resistance of a system which wants to keep money, working places and jobs," said Maria Ostrovskaya, head of a St Petersburg charity, Perspectives, that is trying to open orphanages to the outside world.

Using official statistics experts calculate that about 300,000 children in Russia are in state residential homes at any one time, but estimates differ widely.
The government says there are 118,000 "orphans" in children's homes. Most have living parents, but have been rejected by them.

Fourteen-year-old Sonya, who lives in St Petersburg Children's Home Number Four, tells a typical story: "When I was born I had some problems, and in the hospital they said I was dead, or I wouldn't live long, so my parents refused to take me."

Ivan Sharipov was abandoned by his mother when he developed cerebral palsy at the age of eight.

He says: "She locked herself in the bathroom so she couldn't see me. I knocked on the glass door, I wept, but it didn't help. I realised it was pointless. Because if someone's abandoned you, it means they didn't need you."

Parents have been encouraged by doctors to abandon ill or disabled children on the grounds that the state can care for them better.

But orphanages often provide only a minimal standard of care, with little attempt to stimulate or educate children with special needs.

"It was never written, it was never spoken out, but this place was for children to be kept until they die," says Andrei Dombrovsky, deputy director of the St Petersburg home.

He is an outsider brought in from a children's charity to reform the orphanage. Some orphans now attend ordinary schools outside the orphanage - something that was once unthinkable - and volunteers from outside work with children inside the home.

'Profitable system'
But opening orphanages to the outside world is only a start.

"Our dream is to transform these institutions into institutions that support families," says Ms Ostrovskaya.

The Russia Without Orphans programme now being developed by the Kremlin's Children's Commissioner, Pavel Astakhov, calls for as many orphans as possible to be fostered or adopted.
State benefits for foster carers have been increased - in St Petersburg they are equivalent to about half the average salary for the first fostered child. But Russia still lacks the support services for children with special needs to be brought up by families.

Veteran children's rights campaigner Boris Altshuler says so much money goes into children's homes - about 1.5m roubles (about £35,000) per child per year - that officials will fight to retain them.

"This system is extremely profitable for the corrupted bureaucracy. That's why even the best practice in Russia, experience of moving children to family care, is paralysed and stopped by the system through the members of parliament," he says.

The BBC repeatedly asked Mr Astakhov for an interview, without success.

But a scheme by childcare professionals a few years ago to encourage orphanages to send children to foster parents was officially blocked.

In the southern city of Astrakhan, children's rights activist Vera Drobinskaya says the orphanage system is "becoming more closed and more cruel."

A former doctor, she lives in a ramshackle wooden house and has become famous for battling the authorities for the right to foster children.

She now has a family of seven - three girls and four boys - with physical disabilities or special needs.

She has rescued them from children's institutions and transformed their lives.

Before they had hardly any education. Now most go to ordinary schools.

But in some cases, it was years before officials agreed to release the children. And relations between her and local authorities declined further after she complained publically about conditions at one orphanage where she discovered at least 41 children had died over 10 years, apparently of neglect.
"If these orphanages were open, and there was more contact between orphans and ordinary people, there wouldn't be any more orphans, they'd all have been fostered. But that's strongly blocked by our state system," she says.

As reforms begin in some places, such as St Petersburg's Children's Home Number Four, a few children may be able to escape a system that moves orphans with learning difficulties into mental asylums when they reach 18, and keeps them institutionalised for their whole lives.

Sonya, the girl abandoned at birth by her parents, is now learning to walk after years in a wheelchair.

"I think I can live on my own. That's why I'm going to school. I think I'll succeed," she says.

But it will be a long time before the rest of Russia's orphans follow her out of the system.

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