

MOSCOW – Kerrie and Scott Farkas are looking forward to spending their lives with Dmitri, a blond, brown-eyed 2-year-old they've just spent two days with at an orphanage in Tambov, in central Russia. They're optimistic despite a significant slowdown in international adoptions from Russia this year, due to an ugly and very public bureaucratic war that pits government liberals and child-care agencies against nationalist politicians who allege that children are being "trafficked" abroad. If the politicians' demands for change are met, they could severely curtail the ability of prospective foreign parents to adopt here.

Mr. Farkas says that for him and his wife, things are going well so far. "We have a good agency, and they have brought us through any potential problems," he says.

Foreign adoption has long been a sensitive issue in Russia, where the population has been shrinking for decades while the number of children without families has ballooned to an estimated 700,000. Last spring, the Russian media heavily covered the case of Irma Pavlis, a Chicago woman sentenced to 12 years in the abuse-related death of her adopted Russian son, Alex, in 2003. The daily Komsomolskaya Pravda reported that at least 13 Russian children have been "murdered" by US parents since foreign adoptions became possible in 1990.

In separate incidents this month, Moscow police seized adoptive children from two couples, one Italian and one American, after accusations of child abuse were phoned in. Both the US and Italian embassies issued strong statements casting doubt on the charges and warning of political manipulation.

"We heard about these incidents, and we find it inexplicable," says Scott Farkas, who will return to Lancaster, Pa., for a six- to eight-week wait to finalize his own adoption of Dmitri. "We can't understand how someone would go through this process and have that as the result."

Some 60,000 Russian children have been adopted by foreigners over the past decade. Well over half of them have found homes with Americans, who adopted about 23,000 children around the world last year. The Russian figures have spiked in recent years, with nearly 10,000 international adoptions last year, 5,865 of them to the US. The number adopted so far this year has dropped by a third.

Experts say the kind of problems cropping up for prospective parents in Russia have been encountered elsewhere. Adoptions from Vietnam (about 700 annually) halted in 2002 amid charges of corruption and "infant trafficking." A bilateral agreement on adoption concluded between the US and visiting Vietnamese Prime Minister Phan Van Khal on Tuesday may put the process back on track.

A child-protection law enacted by Romania in 2002 imposed such onerous restrictions that the practice stopped, leaving thousands of eligible children trapped in institutions. Last week, Ukraine placed a temporary freeze on all international adoptions, pending a government restructuring.

"It's very common in international adoptions that there are starts and stops," says Stephanie Mitchell, executive director of MAPS, an international adoption agency based in Maine. "There's a lot of curiosity in some cultures about why foreigners want to adopt their children, and this can lead to rumors and misconceptions taking hold."

To some Russians, the spate of child-abuse allegations against foreigners appears a timely validation of claims by a group of State Duma deputies that Russia's adoption process, overseen by the Ministry of Education, is riddled with corruption and incompetence, leading to the virtual sale of Russian children.

Yekaterina Lakhova, chair of the Duma's powerful commission on women, family, and youth, told a radio program this week that Russia's adoption system was geared to "selling" children to foreigners rather than finding suitable parents at home for them. Without citing examples, Communist lawmaker Svetlana Goryachova told parliament last week that Russian children were being "trafficked" to Western pornographers and prostitution rings.

A tough review initiated by Russia's top prosecutor has led to denial of accreditation to at least a dozen of the approximately 80 international adoption agencies working in Russia, and more could face the ax.

"We see many cases of cruel treatment of children by foreign adopters," says Nina Ostanina, deputy chairwoman of Ms. Lakhova's commission. "The Ministry of Education is a corrupted structure. We need them to stop the practice of demanding and receiving money for selling our children abroad. We want to tighten up procedures and conclude bilateral agreements to enable the state to take under control [Russian] adopted children living abroad."

Child-care professionals say that, while domestic violence and corruption may be painful realities in cases, Russia's orphans are being used as a political football by nationalist politicians.

"About 2,000 Russian children perish each year in domestic violence, yet this attracts no media outrage," says Boris Altshuler, head of Child's Rights, a Russian NGO that works with children. "This is a top-level political game, to which children are hostages. Some powerful forces in Russia want to undermine [President Vladimir] Putin's policies of closer cooperation with the West."

Mr. Altshuler says the harsh review of agencies was uncalled for because most of the high-profile instances of abuse - including the Pavlis case - occurred to

children adopted through a loophole in Russian law that permits "independent" adoptions.

Adopted from where?

The number of international adoptions continues to rise in the United States. 22,884 visas were issued to orphans in 2004 - up from 17,718 five years earlier.

Top 10 countries for US

1. China 7,044
2. Russia 5,865
3. Guatemala 3,264
4. Korea 1,716
5. Kazakhstan 826
6. Ukraine 723
7. India 406
8. Haiti 356
9. Ethiopia 289
10. Colombia 287

Source: US Department of State

"In some regions the process is dominated by middlemen who advertise on the Internet and charge high fees," he says. "They don't face the same legal and documentary requirements as international agencies do, and this has been the source of most of the problems. Our nationalist politicians talk about the need to control Russian children living abroad, but say little about the need to control this mafia at home."

Foreigners who adopt through accredited agencies typically pay about \$20,000 in agency fees, travel expenses, and legal and translation costs. According to one expert, agencies usually make a donation to the originating orphanage, but never in cash. The financial outlays made by foreigners are one of the key controversies, since adoption is supposed to be free under Russian law.

Following the Pavlis case, nationalist Duma deputies succeeded in cracking down on foreign-based adoption agencies and revising the family code to make international adoptions harder.

Ms. Ostanina says the main reform demanded now by the Duma group, which includes dozens of leading lawmakers, is the conclusion of "bilateral treaties" that will empower Russian officials to follow and intervene in the lives of children who've been adopted by foreigners.

"If these deputies get their way, I'm afraid international adoptions will just come to an end," says Natalya Shaginyan-Needham, executive director of New York-based Happy Families International, which was reaccredited after the recent review. "A child adopted by an American family will become a US citizen. There are privacy issues. This seems to be just a way to chill the process."

Child-care experts here say domestic adoptions have halved over the past decade, with just 6,000 Russian orphans taken in by Russians last year. "There is a lack of public information, which feeds widely believed stereotypes about orphans being genetically flawed, or destined to become hooligans," says Eric Batsie, Russia director of Kidsave International, an advocacy group that runs a partly US-funded project to promote domestic adoptions.

Russians say the process is no easier for them than it is for foreigners. Svetlana Sorokina, a TV news anchor who adopted a girl two years ago, says she searched for more than a year and endured a maze of obstacles. "Even with all my contacts as a journalist I found it very difficult," she says. "Our state does nothing to help."

The Education Ministry, the main target of criticism, is fighting back. This week it launched a Russian-language website (www.usinovite.ru) that will provide access to a database of 260,000 Russian orphans, along with information about adoption and a list of accredited agencies. Officials say an English-language version may be added. In an accompanying statement the minister, Andrei Fursenko, warned that "all too often, unfortunate orphans are being used as a pretext for unscrupulous political campaigns. Suffering children shouldn't be the subjects of such speculation."

But many professionals say the atmosphere is unlikely to improve soon. "International adoption has become such a hot potato here that anything that comes up, like the Pavlis case, will lead to more trouble," says Ms. Shaginyan-Needham, whose agency sponsors projects to promote domestic as well as foreign adoptions. "Many of us in this field are Russians ourselves, and we wish Russian children could stay at home as much as anyone else does. But there is no alternative to foreign adoptions for now, and if they end, it'll be the children who suffer."

