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Russian Furor Over U.S. Adoptions Follows American's Acquittal in Boy's Death

By ELLEN BARRY

MOSCOW — The grim case of a Washington-area toddler who died of heatstroke after his father left him in a parked vehicle for nine hours is national news in [Russia](#), fodder for angry political commentary and kitchen-table discussion.

The boy, born Dmitri Yakovlev, was adopted from Russia, and his death in July revived memories of a string of earlier abuse cases involving Russian children adopted by American parents. But the real outcry came in December, when his adoptive father, Miles Harrison, was acquitted of involuntary manslaughter.

On Tuesday, Russian federal prosecutors opened an investigation into the boy's death, and the authorities have called to restrict or end the adoption of Russian children by Americans.

“When we give our children to the West and they die, for some reason the West always tells us it was just an accident,” Tatyana Yakovleva, the first deputy chief of the pro-Kremlin United Russia party, told reporters. “It's hard to believe.”

The boy, renamed Chase Harrison, died on July 8, a little more than three months after he arrived in the United States. Miles Harrison strapped the boy, 21 months old, into a car seat but forgot to drop him off at day care. Nine hours after Mr. Harrison parked his sport utility vehicle outside his office, a co-worker noticed the child's body.

Mr. Harrison and his wife wept through much of the trial, and witnesses testified that they were loving and attentive parents, according to press reports. A Circuit Court judge in Fairfax County, Va., R. Terrence Ney,

ruled that although Mr. Harrison had been “plainly negligent,” he had not shown “callous disregard for human life,” the legal standard for involuntary manslaughter.

“The only atonement can take place in his heart and soul,” Judge Ney said, according to the local newspaper, The Loudoun Times-Mirror. He also said “no finding of involuntary manslaughter will bring this child back to life.”

Mr. Harrison’s lawyer, Peter D. Greenspun, said Russian prosecutors had no jurisdiction in the case. He said that he understood Russia’s interest in the case, but that calling to restrict adoption by Americans “is really politicizing the case unnecessarily.”

“This was a tragic accident which occurred without regard to the country of birth,” he said. “It could have been Guatemala, it could have been Kansas, it could have been South Africa.”

Russian officials saw it otherwise. In a statement, the Russian Foreign Ministry said, “Serious doubts arise as to the legitimacy of the practice of transferring our children for adoption to a country where their rights, primarily the right to life, turn out to be unprotected.”

“In the United States,” it continued, “punishment is absent for those guilty of such tragedies on, apparently, the sole ground that they are ‘full-fledged’ citizens, whereas their adoptees are not.”

At a public hearing in the lower house of Parliament, Speaker Boris Gryzlov declared himself “indignant.” Foreigners want Russian children, he said, because they are “genetically smarter and healthier.”

News of the judge’s ruling revived public outrage that was provoked in 2005 by the deaths of two Russian-born children after severe abuse at the hands of adoptive parents in North Carolina and Maryland. Both cases resulted in convictions. In addition, that year a Pennsylvania man was convicted of sexually abusing a girl he had adopted from Russia and of posting pornographic photographs of her on the Internet.

According to the American Embassy in Moscow, more than 50,000 Russian children have been adopted by United States citizens since 1991. Fourteen adopted children have died of abuse in the United States since 1996, said Alina Levitskaya, of the Ministry of Education and Science. "In our Russian families, unfortunately, children die much more often," Russian newspapers quoted her as saying after Chase Harrison's death.

United States adoptions of Russian children peaked in 2003 at 6,000, and have declined since, to 1,795 in 2008, as screening and legal hurdles have mounted. In a statement released after the verdict in the Harrison case, the United States ambassador to Russia, John Beyrle, said it would be wrong to severely restrict adoptions by Americans because of the case, which he called "a terrible tragedy."

"We should keep in mind the tens of thousands of extremely successful adoptions by Americans of Russian children, children who in many cases maintain a connection with their Russian roots," he said. "And we should think of the thousands of Russian children who do not have parents and who currently live in state-supported institutions."