

AMERICAS

When the Kremlin Says ‘Adoptions,’ It Means ‘Sanctions’

The Interpreter

By AMANDA TAUB JULY 10, 2017

President Trump’s son Donald Trump Jr. initially defended his meeting with a Russian lawyer connected to the Kremlin during the 2016 presidential campaign by saying that it was primarily about adoption — a seemingly innocent humanitarian issue.

Reinstating American adoptions of Russian orphans certainly seems like a far less serious matter than a meeting about, say, the removal of United States sanctions on certain Russian officials.

But from the Russian perspective, whether the younger Mr. Trump and his associates knew it at the time or not, the issues of adoptions and sanctions are so inextricably linked as to be practically synonymous. (Mr. Trump said in a later statement that the lawyer, Natalia Veselnitskaya, had also promised to give him compromising information about Hillary Clinton.)

Understanding the connections between adoptions and sanctions offers a lens into the worldview and foreign policy goals of President Vladimir V. Putin of Russia,

What connects the two issues? Leverage.

It might not seem obvious what sanctions have to do with American parents' adoptions of Russian children, which is the topic that the younger Mr. Trump initially said Ms. Veselnitskaya wanted to discuss. Their connection comes down to one word: leverage.

The context is the Magnitsky Act, a 2012 American law that freezes the assets held in the United States by Russian officials responsible for human rights abuses. The law also bars these officials from receiving American visas. It was named after Sergei Magnitsky, a young Russian lawyer who died in pretrial detention after exposing a \$230 million tax-theft scam perpetrated by Russian officials.

To the law's backers, the Magnitsky Act was a way to strike a blow for justice. But to Mr. Putin, it seemed like an intolerable attack by the United States government against the stability of his own presidency.

Mr. Putin, though powerful, depends on the support of a small circle of powerful elites, in and out of government, who both keep him in power and help him enforce his will. In exchange, Mr. Putin sees that they are taken care of. The Magnitsky Act, by sanctioning some of those elites, sent a message that Mr. Putin might not be able to uphold his end of the bargain.

It also called into question whether lower-ranked officials could trust that they would be protected from punishment for tolerating or participating in illegal acts at the behest of Mr. Putin or his allies.

And the law embarrassed Mr. Putin by showing that his influence was not strong enough to prevent the law's passage, despite his vigorous lobbying against it.

Revoking the law became an important foreign policy priority for Mr. Putin's government. And he identified adoptions as an area that seemed to offer a way to force the issue.

In 2011, the year before the Magnitsky Act was passed, about 1,000 Russian children were adopted by American families, more than from any other foreign country. Many more adoptions were still pending, some for American parents who

had already met the children they expected to take home. An adoption freeze would be a grievous loss for those families.

The Russian government, sensing that those parents would be a vocal pressure group, proposed a law known as the “anti-Magnitsky law,” which would halt all adoptions of Russian children by Americans — including those that were already in process. The Kremlin cited the case of Dima Yakovlev, a Russian toddler who died after being adopted by American parents, as a pretext for the rule.

But the government also made clear that the new law would be retaliation for the Magnitsky Act.

That pressure failed to sway the American government, and the Magnitsky Act stayed in place despite pleas from anguished adoptive parents.

But, for Moscow, the issues of adoption and sanctions became seen as linked and have remained that way — something that a Kremlin-connected lawyer like Ms. Veselnitskaya would surely have had in mind.

Lifting of sanctions is a priority for Putin.

Since that time, Russia’s efforts to reverse the Magnitsky Act and lift other sanctions, like those that the United States imposed after Russia’s invasion of Crimea, have been a constant through-line of its foreign policy. They remain a critical priority for Mr. Putin, who sees the sanctions as one part of a broader effort by Western governments to undermine his presidency.

Ms. Veselnitskaya has engaged in a vigorous campaign to reverse the Magnitsky Act, including promoting a documentary film that portrayed William F. Browder, Mr. Magnitsky’s former employer and the main lobbying force behind the act, as the true culprit behind the tax fraud that Mr. Magnitsky revealed.

Michael McFaul, who was the United States ambassador to Russia when the Magnitsky Act was passed and is now a professor at Stanford, referred to Ms. Veselnitskaya as an “anti-Magnitsky lobbyist” in a tweet, saying that she could only have been raising the adoptions issue in the context of the Magnitsky sanctions.

Mr. Browder also believes that Ms. Veselnitskaya was acting as a Kremlin emissary when she approached the Trump campaign. “There is absolutely no question that they were looking for an opening to repeal the Magnitsky Act,” he said. “They were going to the possible next president of the United States to do that.”

Donald J. Trump’s often-expressed admiration for Mr. Putin may have led the Russian president to believe that the Republican candidate would be receptive to those efforts as part of a broader shift away from the hostility of the later years of Barack Obama’s presidency.

The Magnitsky Act marked a turning point between the relative openness and cooperation between Russia and the United States during Mr. Obama’s early years as president and the rapidly escalating hostilities of his second term.

From the Russian perspective, “adoptions,” as an issue, means more than parents adopting children. It means an end to sanctions and a return to a sunnier era in United States-Russia relations, an issue that is core to Mr. Putin’s agenda and that the younger Mr. Trump’s father had, at the time of the meeting, promised to bring about.

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