



Individual Advanced Research Opportunities Program

Final Research Report

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- **Title of research proposal**

Analysis of the Situation Surrounding the Children in Russia's Orphanages

- **Topic of research**

The situation concerning neglected children and orphans in Russia has been documented for quite some time now. It has been reported that in Russia, more than 100,000 children are abandoned each year. The estimates vary from one to four million on the total number of abandoned children in Russia. However, although some light has been shed on the problems, no solutions have been proposed on how to effectively deal with them. My project involved investigating how effectively the orphanages and organizations prepare the children for society after they reach maturity. In this I looked at the differences between how state-run and private orphanages prepared the children. I also looked at the methods employed by social organizations.

Russia's social welfare system has undergone dramatic since the shift to capitalism after the fall of the Soviet Union. Whereas the government provided significant resources to social welfare under the Soviet Union, that support has been steadily decreasing, thereby leaving the social institutions under-funded. The institutions either must fend for themselves in securing the necessary funds to run efficiently or simply make due with what government funding they receive.

With the staggering amount of orphans currently under its charge, Russia needs major financial resources to approach this issue. However, the government is not able to provide much

financing to children in need and the institutions that try to help them. To help alleviate some of the financial burden, the children are assessed, classified and placed under the jurisdiction of three Ministries.

The Ministry of Health takes all abandoned children from birth to about age four and serves as the feeder Ministry for the remaining two once the children reach the age of four. These babies in the Ministry of Health are placed in special wards called Dom Rebyonki¹

After age four the children are given a mental assessment and are resettled into one of two further Ministries. Children who have no disabilities physically and cognitively, and children with mild disabilities, but are still able to be educated are placed under the care of the Ministry of Education.

The children with no disabilities have two options. The most common is to reside in a detskiy dom² and attend regular public schools until they receive their diploma and then receive government housing. Another option is to go to a boarding school and upon completion receive specialized vocational training at a specialized school. Those with mild disabilities are placed in special boarding schools where they receive a modified education and are given special vocational training.

Children receiving the undesired classification of mildly or severely physically or mentally disabled are placed with the Ministry of Labor. These children are placed in closed institutions where they remain until eighteen. There have been several reports on the high death rate in these institutions. Those who survive spend the rest of their adult lives in special mental asylums.

There are currently three ways for the children to leave the system. The most common way is to age-out of the system. Upon reaching their eighteenth birthday, they are supposed to be provided with a place to live and a small stipend. The other two, while unfortunately do not happen as frequent, are much more effective in helping the Russian orphans reintegrate back into society.

The second way is reunification with their biological families. In order for this to happen, families must prove that they are able to once again take care of their children and prove that their children will not be abandoned again, usually by showing evidence that they are not drinking or using drugs, and that they have a stable dwelling and stable employment.

The last way is by being placed with a foster or adoptive family. This alternative is considered when the child's natural parents are either deceased or no longer able to care for the child. The new parents' eligibility is assessed according to factors such as income and whether there is enough living space for the child. Once taken in the child becomes a member of the family and is periodically monitored by the government.

¹ House of Babies

² orphanage

- **Approach and research methodology; list of venues**

The main methods I used in my research consisted of constructing case profiles of each institution I was a part of, then comparing them to see how each approached preparing the orphans for independence. To construct the profiles, I conducted semi-structured interviews with the administration, social and child care workers, support staff, and some of the children at the orphanages. At the social organizations I conducted interviews with the workers there. Besides the interviews, I kept a journal and took notes of my observations at the various sites.

In addition, I attended various field trips and training seminars sponsored by the institutions to observe how they collaborated on information and ways to better serve the orphans. The field trips and other events were usually done over the weekend so as not to interrupt the working week. I was also able to attend a few press conferences on how the situation with the orphans is being addressed in Russia.

Finally, I rounded out my research by holding interviews and discussions with professors and researchers working in this field, several directors of local orphanages, and most importantly, with a few former orphans themselves about their experiences.

For my research, I spent time at five venues: two orphanages, two social organizations, and a children's camp in the forest.

My base venue was a local orphanage in Saint Petersburg. It is called *Dom Miloserdia* (House of Charity) and is located in the central region of the city. Operating for more than ten years, Dom Miloserdia serves minors up to 18 and is divided into three units. One unit takes children up to six years old. Here the children begin the foundations of education and language. They are also taught basic social skills.

The second unit is a temporary shelter that holds children from seven to fifteen. It also functions as the intake unit, as all children are initially placed here until they are assessed. After assessment they are either sent to one of the other two units, or remain in the shelter if they are within the appropriate age range of seven to fifteen. In the shelter the children continue with schooling while getting increased responsibilities with chores, such as cleaning. They also engage in numerous cultural and craft activities including visiting museums and parks, painting, and, and making small mementos as gifts.

The third unit is the vocational school/orphanage for those who were not able to reunify with their families or find adoptive ones. The children choose and master a vocational trade here such as cooking, carpentry, construction, or electrical repair. Upon turning eighteen the children are entitled to receive living arrangements from the government and go on to live their lives as normal functioning citizens.

The second venue was Orphanage #6, located in the city of Cherepovets. It is a government run orphanage that I visited while I was in the region. Next is the camp "Amber." It is an isolated unit located in the Cherepovets region, about an hour and a half drive outside of the city. The Amber camp is a complex unit consisting of year round facilities for children that provide

education and relaxation. In addition, it has a smaller unit that places orphans together in a commune. In the commune the orphans are taught a trade and help serve as part of the support team of the camp.

The two organizations I interviewed provide large-scale help to the society. The first is “Road to Home,” located in Cherepovets. It is a consortium of smaller programs designed to provide comprehensive social help to the entire population of the city. The city’s steel plant, SeverStahl, provides major financial support to Road to Home.

The smaller programs of Road to Home are grouped into one of four divisions: Board of Education, Committee for Minor’s Affairs, Committee for Social Protection of the Population, and the Board of Public Health. I looked into programs in all divisions except for the Board of Education.

The final organization was the Saint Petersburg division of the Red Cross. Like Road to home, the Red Cross houses several smaller programs aimed at helping different parts of the population in need. The Red Cross is a non-governmental organization and receives funding from a variety of sources, including through membership dues, businesses, international organizations, and an allocation from the Assembly of Saint Petersburg.

At the Red Cross I spent most of the time looking at the various programs they have in place to support children. The other time was spent at their many trainings and seminars.

- **A summary of research findings**

In general, Russia has come a long way from the days when we were shown images of squalid living conditions and frail babies that looked like they did not have much longer on earth. With steady increases in GDP and quality of living, the situation is slowly getting better for the children; but, there is still a lot of work that needs to be done in order to ensure that all, or least a majority of the orphans are prepared to enter society confidently after ageing out of the system as an adult.

I was simply astounded at the situation in Cherepovets. I was pleased to see collaboration and cooperation on all levels, from the city government, businesses and organizations, to the orphanages and people in ensuring that their most vulnerable youth are cared for. From what I concluded, this city could serve as a model for Russia as a whole in addressing the problems with orphans. From an economic standpoint without SeverStahl, one of the largest steel plants in the world located right in Cherepovets, most of this would not be possible.

As I learned from my interviews with directors of the orphanages in several cities, there is a growing trend for local businesses to sponsor a particular orphanage in order to supply it with basic necessities such as clothing for the children, useful items like a microwave or furniture, and funds to help the children have a happy holiday filled with gifts. While this is the case, the businesses often do this “off the books” for fear of being audited. Speaking with one business leader I learned that the government looks at cases where businesses have “extra” money to

throw around and will audit them. The businesses will then often have to bribe the auditors to ensure everything is ok. For this reason many businesses choose plainly not to get involved in charity, whether on or off the books.

To solve this problem, some measures should be put into place that provide incentives to local businesses that choose to sponsor an orphanage. In doing this it may increase the businesses willing to openly help and would alleviate some of the financial burden that the Russian government has in funding these institutions alone.

Another positive trend I see is the increasing use of home stays for the children. One of the downfalls of growing up in an orphanage is that the children there do not have the warmth that comes from living with a real family. In a few of the orphanages, staff members or citizens from the community volunteer to take a child home for the weekend or a holiday so the child can be exposed to a family environment.

In a step further from the home stays I witnessed a developing trend to recruit permanent foster families for the children in the orphanages. In this setup, families who want a child would go through an interview and assessment very similar to one for the adoption process. The difference here is the families would receive a small monthly stipend and other support for caring for the child. However, due to the limited amount of funding available this is not a wide spread option.

While situation for preparing the orphans for integration into society is progressing positively, there are still problems that need to be addressed.

- The orphans need to be taught appropriate life skills to be productive and successful in society. Too often orphanages simply serve as a boarding residence until the children reach maturity. Once mature and on their own the children lack the most essential knowledge in order to survive such as budgeting skills, how to obtain important documents such as a birth certificate, how to hold a job, and how to setup an account at a bank. Measures need to be put into place to ensure the orphans are taught these skills.
- Relevant vocational skills need to be taught to the orphans so they can find jobs in the community. While it is useful that they are taught skills as sewing and such, they will need to be taught concrete skills that are in demand by the local businesses. This can be done by setting up internships with local businesses in order to give the orphans the training they need, as well as give them subtle work experience so they will be competitive in the job market.
- The situation surrounding the orphans' entitlement to living space needs to be examined closely. After reaching the age of eighteen, orphans are guaranteed some type of living space by the government. However, there have been many problems reported with this such as children not receiving their accommodations and ending up homeless. In cities like Saint Petersburg and Moscow there is a booming real estate market where agencies are buying apartments and rooms in communal apartments to rent them out at extraordinary prices. I have heard cases by orphanage directors and orphans themselves where the agencies will offer to buy the room of the orphan at well below market price.

Since this nevertheless is a large sum to the child, he will accept the money and when it is spent will have no price to live. Protection measures need to be put into place to protect the orphans from such practices.

- Follow-up care should be done to regularly monitor the progress of how the orphans are adjusting to life after emancipation from the social system.
- Society needs to be correctly informed about the situation of the orphans. There is a stigma attached to being an orphan, where you are perceived to be a criminal, scoundrel, or otherwise unwanted person. These unfair and untrue generalizations prevent many in society from taking part in helping the orphans in integrating into society. I experienced this as I grew up in institutions in the United States and I witnessed this in Russia while conducting my research. A start to addressing this problem would be the implementation of community awareness and community involvement campaigns. There can be public sessions where the public visits the orphanages to gain a first-hand insight on how they are run and the situation of the children there. Also, events can be organized where the orphans get out into the community so they are visible. I organized a street cleaning event so the people could get some exposure and see the orphans in a positive light in the community.
- The orphans need mentors to provide them with positive guidance about life. It would be even better to get those former orphans who have managed to successfully integrate fully into society to return to show the orphans currently in the system that it can be done.
- Finally, prevention care and counseling should be setup for families whether or not they are in crises situations. By tackling the problem before the children is removed from the home and placed into an orphanage, we will have one less child institutionalized, and less resources drained from the government.

- **Relevance and contribution to field.**

As stated in the beginning, this project was not designed to document the problem, but rather analyze how the organizations are attempting to solve it. Research in this area on how prepared the orphans are to integrate society can have major implications on policy on all levels. Looking from an economic standpoint, the more of the orphans that are able to work after reaching maturity, the better it is for the economy. Thus, one of the main focuses on policy should be investing the resources needed to prepare the children for this. The opposite end of this would be children imprisoned or in state institutions as adults, which would continue to drain the government of resources that could be allocated elsewhere.

It is my hope that this report contributes some insight to some of the current methods used to help prepare the orphans for society. In addition, it can be used as a basis from which to continue further investigation and track the progress of the Russian organizations on this front.

- **Suggestions for future research.**

A suggestion for future research would be to continue to track the progress of the development of home stay and foster care programs. With Russia's oil revenue trickling down to the general population, it would be interesting to see how it affects families wishing to foster a child from an orphanage. Another area that could be researched is the situation of orphans who receive follow-up care as opposed to those who do not. With the potential problems orphans face after emancipation, a study could be done to compare the results.

- **Recommendations for the US policy community.**

In concluding my project, I have the following recommendations for the US policy community.

- To collaborate with Russian authorities on how to best implement incentives to businesses who donate to charity so that more will choose to follow suite.
- Provide trainings to Russian colleagues on methods for setting up an efficient foster care system. While the foster care rules vary from state to state in the US, they are nonetheless a useful guide from which Russian counterparts may benefit. The key here though lies in the amount of funding Russian authorities ar willing to put into the system.
- Assist with prevention trainings for families at risk of having a child put into n orphanage.