

Russia Considers Ban on ‘Immoral’ Commercial Surrogacy Industry

Russia’s rapidly developing surrogate industry may now grind to a halt, as members of the parliament debate banning the practice. The issue is dividing feminists, the surrogacy industry and surrogate mothers – who are often some of Russia’s poorest women.

Written by [Anastasia Maunilova](#)

Published on Nov. 23, 2017



The majority of surrogate mothers in Russia are poor women hoping to earn enough to care for their families. *BSIP/UIG via Getty Images*

MOSCOW – Anna came to Moscow five years ago, looking for a job. Now, aged 22, she is pregnant with her first surrogate baby. She sees surrogacy as a way to help other people, she says.

“I wanted to take part in the surrogacy program even before I had my own child. But this is forbidden by Russian law, so I had to wait for some years,” she says. According to Russia’s

surrogacy regulations, a woman must already have her own biological child before acting as a surrogate for someone else.

Anna sees her three-year-old biological daughter every day on Skype: While Anna lives in a special hotel until the birth of the surrogate baby, her own daughter is staying in Ukraine with her grandmother. “When she grows up, I will tell her about my current job,” Anna says.

If the pregnancy and the birth of the child all go well, Anna says she plans to take part in the program again as soon as her body is ready. But Russia’s lawmakers might prevent that from happening.

Senator Anton Belyakov, from the small A Just Russia party, has proposed a bill that would ban commercial surrogacy in Russia. He says commercial surrogacy is no different from sex work, and it is already banned in most countries. Sex work is currently banned in Russia. “It is immoral and brings harm to both mother and the child,” he told News Deeply.

Belyakov’s ban would not only shut down the commercial surrogacy industry, it would also prevent surrogate mothers from carrying babies for friends or relatives out of altruism.

Commercial surrogacy is currently legal in most U.S. states, South Africa and post-Soviet countries such as Ukraine, Georgia and Kazakhstan.



Russia’s upper house is considering a bill to end surrogacy entirely. (Stanislav Krasilnikov/TASS via Getty Images)

A Lucrative Source of Income

Commercial surrogacy has existed in Russia since 2011. There is no official data on the extent of the practice, but Vladislav Melnikov, director of one of the largest Russian surrogacy clinics, the European Centre for Surrogacy, says there were 2,000 children born in Russia to

surrogate mothers in 2016. He says there are around 100 centers for surrogacy in Russia, with 40 of them in Moscow alone.

While countries such as India and Nepal have been hubs for international couples seeking to have a child, Melnikov says most couples seeking surrogacy services in Russia are Russians themselves.

On average, the procedure costs biological parents 2 million rubles (around \$34,000). Surrogate mothers are paid around 800,000 rubles (some \$14,000), while the rest goes to the clinic. Most of the women who volunteer for this program do so for money, Melnikov says. “Usually the only women who suit the health criteria for the procedure come from small Russian cities like Tula, Ryazan, Saratov, Voronezh, for whom the surrogacy fee is a big sum,” he explains.

Rosstat, the Russian state data bureau, cites the [monthly salary of a teacher](#), one of the most common jobs for women, as 40–50,000 rubles (\$700–850) per month.

“According to Russian law, a surrogate mother can only be a woman who already has children, so often women come to us because they need money to feed their kids, especially if her husband has left the family,” says Julia, the manager of an agency, Eva, which recruits surrogate mothers in Saint Petersburg, and who did not want to share her last name. “Most of them also have to pay credits or mortgage loans to the bank.”

Konstantin Svitnev, head of the Center for Reproductive Law and Ethics, says surrogate mothers sometimes try to get additional fees by blackmailing the biological parents.

According to Russian law, the child, which the surrogate mother is carrying, should not receive the any genetic material from the surrogate mother. “She can provide the childless couples with her body for the period of pregnancy, but not with the actual egg. Nevertheless, the law states that when she gives birth to the child, the surrogate mother has a priority right to register the child as her own, and no separate contract can take that right away from her,” Svitnev explains.

This means that, immediately after the birth, but before signing the papers in which she renounces her right to the baby (after which the biological parents apply for adoption), the surrogate mother can ask the biological parents for more money. This especially occurs, Svitnev says, when the biological parents do not go through an agency but have negotiated with the surrogate mother on their own.

Division Among Feminists

While surrogate mothers and other industry players ask for better regulation, Russian feminists are divided over the future of surrogacy. Tatiana Nikonova, an intersectional feminist who writes [Sam Jones' Diary](#), of one of the most famous Russian blogs about sex, relationships and gender questions, argues that banning surrogacy altogether will only bring harm to women.

“They will go on taking part in surrogacy programs, but ... it will be harder for women to get payment and they will be more often exploited by clinics,” Nikonova said.

If the government wants to stop women from taking part in surrogacy, she says, it has to provide them with more financial support for their children and make it easier to get alimony from former husbands.

But Bella Rapoport, a Russian publicist, blogger and radical feminist, disagrees. “Exactly because of the fact that only poor women take part in surrogacy, is why it should be banned,” she said. Rapoport and her fellow radical feminists argue that surrogacy is an economical form of gender oppression. “It is the same as to buy a kidney from a poor man.”

“People often call surrogacy ‘access to reproduction technology’ – they want to mask the fact that they’re using a human being for money,” she said.

Belyakov’s bill is currently in limbo, and it’s unclear whether the ban will come into effect. For many Russian women, ending commercial surrogacy would cut off a lucrative income stream.

But Anna insists she’s not in it for the money, but out of a sense of duty.

“I heard the news that surrogacy could become forbidden in Russia, but I hope very much that it is not going to happen,” she said. “It will leave so many people without a chance to ever become parents.”

About the Author

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