On April 10-12, 2014, the International and Area Study Centers of the University of Illinois, in partnership with the Center for International Business Education and Research, co-sponsored the tenth annual Joint Area Centers Symposium (JACS). The theme of this year’s event was “Children and Globalization” and explored “concerns among parents, educators and public policy officials worldwide about the impact of the global economy, migration, global media, war and social change on the socialization and rights of children.” The breadth and diversity of the covered topics was truly impressive and global in scope, engaging with questions related to legal and social constructions of childhood, child marriages, psychological issues of child soldiers, problems faced by migrant children and child laborers, and children’s rights in relation to corporal punishment, to name but a few.

The symposium’s panel on “Homeless/Street Children and International Adoption” was of particular interest and relevance to members of REEEC, given Russia’s previous status as one of the top countries of choice for inter-country adoptions by American and Western European citizens, and the recent controversy with the “Dima Yakovlev Law” (also known as the “Anti-Magnitsky Law”), which came into effect in January 2013. Although the Russian case was not directly represented on the panel, the presenters engaged with concerns that are relevant and applicable to it.

Both Alyssa Handelsman (Anthropology, University of Michigan at Ann Arbor) and Dr. Marcella Raffaelli (Human and Community Development, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign) focused directly on children’s experiences in unsafe environments and on the street, respectively. Alyssa Handelsman’s presentation focused on her ethnographic fieldwork with children and their families in Guayaquil, Ecuador. She shared the many stories she gathered from children in Guayaquil’s shanty-towns and used them as a basis for analysis of the way children think about families, love, community, and belonging within environments subjected to extreme violence. Dr. Raffaelli, in turn, investigated developmental risks and resilience factors of street children in Brazil. Her research asked: what factors allow some children to have more positive outcomes from their experiences on the streets than others? Which children survive and which do not? And why?

With Harla Sara Octarra’s (Social Policy, University of Edinburgh) and Dr. Monica Ruiz-Casare’s (Division of Social and Transcultural Psychiatry, McGill University) presentations, the panel’s focus shifted to policy and intervention. Ms. Octarra explored Indonesia’s efforts to implement the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCR) and the country’s recent enactment (in 2010) of a new social welfare policy focused specifically on the well-being of street children. This new policy, Ms. Octarra argues, misguidedly situates the welfare of the street children within their families, charging the latter with the responsibility to keep kids off the streets. Ultimately, Ms. Octarra asserts, the families of origin are often the reason for the children’s street status and, because of this, the policy promises to be largely ineffective in the future. Dr. Ruiz-Casares presented on her team’s innovative usage of the Knowledge, Attitudes, and Practices (KAP) mixed-method study in order to gather data for evidence-based intervention in child protection in Liberia. Dr. Ruiz-Casares argues that the cost effectiveness and focused scope of the KAP surveys make them an excellent choice for future research in the field of child protection in low income countries.
Finally, Dr. Luciana-Marioara Jinga (Institute for the Investigation of Communist Crimes and the Memory of the Romanian Exile, Bucharest) and Dr. Waganesh Zeleke (Counseling, Psychology and Special Education, Duquesne University) engaged explicitly with the topic of inter-country adoption. Dr. Jinga explored the Ceaucescu regime’s usage of inter-country adoption as a powerful tool for its international relations with the U.S. and Western Europe. Dr. Zeleke investigated the adjustment issues of Ethiopian adoptees in the U.S.

Dr. Jinga’s and Dr. Zeleke’s presentations highlighted the complexity of the politics surrounding inter-country adoptions, which also challenges the often simplified rhetoric that dominates discussions of this issue in the media. The Russian example of the recently banned international adoptions, in my opinion, is no exception. The typical coverage of the issue is familiar to most, if not all: the well-known American angle focuses overwhelmingly on the demonization of the Putin regime and its “heartless usage of innocent orphans” for political retaliation. The typical Russian angle focuses overwhelmingly on “them” (Americans) taking “our children” and, either through carelessness or cruelty, killing or abusing them in disproportionate numbers abroad.

Although touching on important partial truths, both sides allow more important and complex issues that are directly relevant to the children themselves slip through the cracks. Russia’s enormous (social) orphan problem does indeed need to have more effective domestic solutions that go beyond institutionalization or international adoption. Its experimentation with domestic adoption, foster care system, and social support for families has not demonstrated adequate results, leaving hundreds of thousands of children without parental care. For those kids, international adoption is a lifeline that should not be taken away, further reinforced by the fact that the vast majority of Russian-born adoptees are happy and safe in their new homes. The simplified demonization of the ban on international adoptions, however, dismisses the often imperialist history of inter-country adoptions, its frequently corrupt and profitable nature (both in Russia and the U.S.), and post-placement oversight problems. International adoptees in the U.S. have much less protection than their domestically adopted counterparts. In the last couple of years, the Russian authorities, not the U.S. State Department, have first reported the majority of cases of death and abuse of Russian adoptees in the U.S. Furthermore, the U.S. State Department has been largely reactive when local or state authorities finally report to it, and no comprehensive initiative for post-placement monitoring on a national level has been undertaken. This unwillingness to make the safety of international adoptees a federal issue (which, no doubt, would ruffle the feathers of those that believe that government should stay out of parenting and the home) makes the effectiveness and reliability of any treaty between the two countries on the safety of inter-country adoptees questionable at best.

Anya-Hamrick Nevinglovskaya is a Ph.D. Candidate in Comparative and World Literature at the University of Illinois. She is currently working on her dissertation, provisionally entitled “Memoried Flesh: Discourses of Shock and Trauma in Russian Fiction, 1860-1936.” Anya’s research interests include trauma studies, the history of mental sciences, Soviet punitive psychiatry, psychoanalysis, and gender studies. In addition to her research and teaching, Anya also actively pursues opportunities connected to education equity through her work with students traditionally underrepresented in the academic sphere. She is also passionate about the issues surrounding Russian and global orphanhood. She researched Russia’s problem of social orphanhood as an undergraduate Fulbright-Hays scholar and worked at an orphanage in Grenada, West Indies (2006-2008) as a Peace Corps Volunteer.