

## NATIONAL REVIEW

### Why Are They Doing This to the Bitkovs?

By Jay Nordlinger

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You should know about the Bitkovs — a strange and terrible case. The Bitkovs are a family of four: Igor and Irina and their children, Anastasia and Vladimir. They started out in Russia — or rather, three of them did. Vladimir was born here in Guatemala.

Igor, Irina, and their daughter were forced to flee Russia, as so many are. They came to Guatemala to start a new life. They are now in prison here. Igor is in a men's facility and his wife and daughter are in a women's facility, less than half a mile away. They are forbidden to see one another. That is, Igor may not see Irina and Anastasia, and vice versa.

Vladimir, age six, is in the care of guardians (loving, selfless ones). "If I were not a child, I would be in prison too," he says. He would rather be. He would like to be with his family, free or not.

According to the family and its supporters, the Bitkovs are the victims of a vengeful Russian state, working in curious partnership with Guatemalan authorities and a U.N. agency. Their case is all over Russia's state media, as the Kremlin cackles at their plight. In America, Mary Anastasia O'Grady of the *Wall Street Journal* has written about them. Members of Congress are interested in holding hearings.

The Bitkovs merit a book, rather than an article such as mine. They could be a movie, too — harrowing. I will tell their story in barest outline.

Igor grew up in Novodvinsk, a town in Arkhangelsk Oblast, in northwest Russia. Irina grew up in the city of Arkhangelsk. They married in 1990 when he was 21 and she 20. They are now in their late 40s.

Natural entrepreneurs, they built a splendid company, from scratch. This was NWTC, for "North West Timber Company." The Bitkovs dealt in paper products. They pioneered clean technology and performed many philanthropic works. PricewaterhouseCoopers, among others, honored them for their achievements.

As their company grew, they borrowed money from three state banks: VTB, Sberbank, and Gazprombank. Sberbank would value NWTC at \$428 million. Igor says it should have been more like \$450 million, but let's not split hairs.

With success came trouble — because the Kremlin and its oligarchs wanted in on the action. A bank official wanted to buy 51 percent of the company. Putin's party — United Russia — wanted Irina to be one of its regional chiefs. The Bitkovs said no to all this. Why? "Principle," says Igor. "I did not want to play by their rules." Irina says, "I thought we could remain independent. I didn't realize it would be fatal for us."

Putin's Russia, in brief, is a mafia state. The Bitkovs refused to pay protection.

In June 2007, something evil happened: Anastasia, age 16, was kidnapped, drugged, and repeatedly raped. This took place over the course of three days. Who did it? A criminal gang, working along with the FSB, which is the new name for the KGB. Igor paid a \$200,000 ransom (cash). Anastasia emerged from the ordeal with severe mental problems. She has been diagnosed as “bipolar” and “borderline.” Several times, she has tried to kill herself.

Yet she is much better today, and she is a very brave woman.

As the threats to them increased, the Bitkovs fled Russia. Immediately, the banks called in their loans. They gave the Bitkovs 48 hours. The Bitkovs had a perfect credit record — but they could not repay the balance of their loans in two days. So the banks forced them into bankruptcy and gobbled up the company they had built.

In Turkey, Igor had a phone call with FSB agents. It was the kind of phone call you don't forget: Wherever Igor and his family went, the agents promised, the FSB would hunt them down and kill them.

They went to Guatemala, in April 2009. Why Guatemala? On the Internet, Igor found a law firm called Cutino International, offering immigration services. The price to facilitate a Guatemalan passport and ID card was \$50,000. Igor paid for three sets: for Irina, Anastasia, and himself.

Obviously, it was hard for him to leave everything behind — even his name (he adopted a new one, the better to get lost, so to speak). But he felt he had no choice. He had one object in mind: the survival of the family.

What would you and I have done, in his shoes?

The Bitkovs settled in, as best they could. They learned Spanish. Vladimir was born in 2012. With the family feeling relatively secure, Anastasia tried a reality-TV show. Life was normal, relatively speaking.

But in 2013, one of the banks, VTB, having traced the Bitkovs, approached the Guatemalan authorities. The bank persuaded them to investigate the family for financial crimes. For over ten years now, CICIG has worked alongside the Guatemalan authorities. This is a U.N. agency, created to fight corruption in this country. CICIG has become highly controversial here. The agency is noble in birth and noble in many of its deeds, no doubt. But is the corruption-fighter pure itself?

As for VTB, it has long been under both U.S. and EU sanctions. In recent weeks, VTB's chairman and CEO, Andrey Kostin, has been placed under U.S. sanction personally.

VTB's charges — that is to say, the Russian state's charges — of financial crimes went nowhere here. They were patently absurd. But the authorities had a different angle: passport violations, documentary irregularities. For a time, VTB was a plaintiff in a passport case, which was odd.

At 6 in the morning on January 15, 2015, Igor, Irina, and Anastasia were arrested. A full 70 agents came to the house. Another 30 went to the family's office. Still another 30 went to the house of Anastasia's boyfriend. That's 130 agents in total — an impressive number for a passport case.

Initially, the Bitkovs were kept in *carceletas*, or cages, in humiliating and dangerous conditions. Igor had to deal with gang members (MS-13 and Barrio 18). Anastasia had a terrifying breakdown. The details of these first days are staggering.

What about the little boy, Vladimir, three years old at the time? The Kremlin was quick to weigh in. It did so in the person of Pavel Astakhov, who was then Putin's commissioner for "children's rights," notorious. Astakhov declared that Vladimir was a Russian child who should be in the hands of Russian authorities. (Tough luck, Pavel: The Guatemalan-born Vladimir is a Guatemalan citizen.) Irina and Igor wanted their son to be in the hands of their chosen guardians: his longtime nanny and one of the family's lawyers. A judge sent him to an orphanage.

He was there for 42 days. When he was finally released to his guardians, he was in very bad shape, physically and mentally. There was a scar over his eye. He had multiple infections. He had a chipped front tooth. He was undernourished. Moreover, he was in a zombie-like state, unable to speak. Today, he is in good shape, all things considered, cared for by those remarkable guardians.

In our separate interviews, the Bitkovs tell me, over and over, how grateful they are for their clutch of helpers and advocates, whom they refer to unblushingly as "angels."

It is important to Anastasia and her family that she stay out of a place called Federico Mora Hospital. A warden, among others, has threatened to send her there. Federico Mora is a mental institution that consigns girls and women to sexual slavery. The BBC did a documentary on it, bluntly titled "The World's Most Dangerous Hospital." Anastasia says that her present prison must be very heaven by comparison.

Last December, one court ruled that the Bitkovs were not guilty of any criminal offenses. If anything, they were guilty of administrative offenses in the matter of their passports and ID cards, which could make them liable to a fine. CICIG et al. challenged this ruling — and the Bitkovs were convicted. Their sentences: 19 years in prison for Igor, 14 each for Irina and Anastasia. For passport violations and documentary irregularities.

The sentence for rape is between eight and twelve years. Murderers rarely get what the Bitkovs got. There are others who have been prosecuted for passport-and-ID fraud — but they are government officials (corrupt), human traffickers, and the like. A nasty, sometimes murderous ring. Do the Bitkovs belong in the same category?

There are people in this country, and elsewhere, who are anti-Bitkov: who buy the Russian propaganda or simply scorn the family. But virtually no one thinks their sentences are anything but insane and shocking.

In prison, Igor looks after his health. He exercises regularly. He feels that good health is necessary, for his family's sake. He thinks of Vladimir: How old will this boy be when his father gets out? How old will the father himself be? Ever the entrepreneur, Igor is making and selling crêpes to his fellow inmates. It may not be a \$450 million paper company — but it's something.

Asked what he would like people to know, Igor says, "The Kremlin has tremendous power. More than people realize. More than I realized, before we were persecuted here in Guatemala." He believes that the Russian influence on his fate is strong, and that Guatemala is awash in Russian money and schemes. He is far from alone in this view.

In the women's prison, just down from the men's, Anastasia is gracious and composed. She has embraced Christianity, and in fact was baptized just yesterday. "For the last several years, I have been in survival mode," she says. "Now, God is healing me. He is doing His work. You need to lose everything in

life to come to the understanding that you never really had anything. Real life is not physical, it comes from within.”

Irina has a particular goal, or “dream,” as she calls it: to be part of a team that helps others who are trapped in nightmarish circumstances, such as those she and her family have faced.

Russian authorities continue to taunt and haunt the Bitkovs, intent on prosecuting them in Russia, for example. They have raided the homes of Irina’s mother in Arkhangelsk and Igor’s brother in St. Petersburg — threatening them with imprisonment, for good measure.

Bill Browder has taken up the Bitkovs’ cause. He is the financier who became a human-rights champion after his lawyer, Sergei Magnitsky, was tortured to death in Russia. In his view, the Russians don’t really care about the Bitkovs. Rather, they are making an example of them, saying, in effect, If you dare to defy us, you will never be rid of us. We will pursue you to the ends of the earth.

Call it deterrence.

The United States is not without a role here. Washington is the biggest aid donor to Guatemala — by far — and it also pays for about half of CICIG’s budget. At a minimum, Congress ought to know about this bewildering and sickening case.