

3 on Hunger Strike Over School Merger

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Education and Science Minister Dmitry Livanov. The students in a public appeal on Wednesday supposed that Deputy Prime Minister Dmitry Rogozin – Livanov's uncle – could have been behind the removal of rector Baburin.

Students and professors barricaded themselves inside a Moscow university on Wednesday, with three teachers declaring a hunger strike, after the government fired their rector as part of the school's merger with another one.

The Russian State University of Trade and Economics is set to be merged within a year with the Plekhanov Russian Economic University in line with President Vladimir Putin's order in May to shut down "ineffective" universities or merge them with other ones. Putin's order was viewed by some observers as a way to reduce spending on education.

The criteria for assessing a university's efficiency have been worked out by the Higher School of Economics, headed by Yaroslav Kuzminov, who is married to Elvira Nabiullina, Putin's aide and a former economic development minister, media reports said.

Students and professors on Wednesday barricaded themselves inside the University of Trade and Economics, refusing to let the new rector inside, Itar-Tass reported.

"We demand that our university be left in peace," post-graduate student Vyacheslav Pimenov, a representative of the university's youth policy department, told The Moscow Times on Wednesday.

Students fear that tuition fees will rise and that they will have to retake exams as the result of their university's merger with the Plekhanov university, while professors fear that they could be fired, Pimenov said.

Shklyayev told the students Tuesday that fees would not rise but salaries for professors would, although he could not promise that all professors would keep their jobs, media reports said. The merger is expected to be completed within a year.

On Tuesday, three professors went on a hunger strike to protest rector Baburin's dismissal, Pimenov said. On Thursday, students and professors at the university intend to present a letter to Putin at a state council meeting.

The Education and Science Ministry on Monday replaced the university's rector Sergei Baburin, a former State Duma deputy and leader of the Russian Nationwide Union, a low-profile nationalist party registered in June, with Andrei Shklyayev, deputy rector of the Plekhanov university.

The students in a public appeal on Wednesday supposed that Deputy Prime Minister Dmitry Rogozin — uncle of Education and Science Minister Dmitry Livanov — could have been behind the removal of rector Baburin.

In a 2006 report, Alexei Titkov, then a pundit with the Panorama think tank, identified Rogozin's sister as Tatyana Filippova. A biography of Livanov's father, aircraft designer and businessman Viktor Livanov, identified Tatyana Filippova as his wife. Baburin and Rogozin, both former nationalist leaders, formed joint election blocks in the early 2000s but fell out in 2005.

But Sergei Markov, a pro-Kremlin pundit and vice rector of the Plekhanov university, said it was unlikely that someone was "trying to get rid of Baburin because of his ideology," although Baburin probably thought so and staged the protest of students and professors.

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