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Fursenko Is Education's No. 1 Enemy

By Boris Kagarlitsky

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The Russian educational system has many problems but only one real enemy. It would take hours to list all of the problems but only a moment to name the No. 1 enemy: Education and Science Minister Andrei Fursenko.

Perhaps Fursenko's biggest claim to fame was his idea of forcing university-bound students to take unified state exams against the strong objections of educators, students and parents.

Recent polls show that Fursenko is by far the most unpopular government official in Russia. But it seems that even these signals aren't stopping him. Last week, he introduced a new initiative, which will clearly outdo his unified state exam idea.

"There is no evidence that smaller classes provide a better education," Fursenko said. It follows that the limit to class size should be eliminated. "If a teacher can properly organize instruction for 27 students," the minister added, "it would be wrong to stop him."

Fursenko is not talking about simply raising the maximum class size by one or two people but

about abolishing the limit completely. At the same time, his ministry has threatened to sharply reduce the number of teachers and their salaries, and to cut both the number of schools and the funding they receive.

Russia has striven for several decades to reduce the number of students, first from 45 to 30 per class and then down to the current level of roughly 25. The goal in doing so was not only to improve health and living conditions by reducing crowding — and the spread of infections — in the classrooms but also to enable teachers to give more individualized attention to each student.

The standards that Fursenko intends to abolish are based on years of both domestic and international experience. If he is unaware of that fact, it shows that he is far too incompetent to run the country's educational system. But the real tragedy is not the ill-considered remarks made by an incompetent official, but that those remarks reflect a systematic campaign aimed at downsizing public education as if it were a noncore, unprofitable business sector within a large company.

Fursenko's policy is in complete accord with the proposals made by Russia's business elite. For example, billionaire Mikhail Prokhorov, a leader of the Russian Union of Industrialists and Entrepreneurs, or RSPP, complained during a meeting with senior government officials that there are too many educated people in Russia. The problem is that they can't find professional jobs suited to match their specialization. Recall that Prokhorov also proposed that Russia switch from a 40-hour to a 60-hour workweek.

Senior government officials should have denounced Prokhorov's and Fursenko's initiatives — if for no other reason than they will derail President Dmitry Medvedev's modernization plans. Instead, they nodded their heads and promised to support the initiatives, which will mean a mass closure of schools and a sharp increase in the number of students per teacher.

A country that makes its living by exporting raw materials evidently feels that it doesn't need an educated work force to drive and diversify its economy.

In addition, it appears that the country's incompetent and insecure political elite are threatened by a population that is too educated. After replacing standard incandescent light bulbs with more energy-efficient fluorescent ones, we should try a similar move with the ruling elite — replacing the old, antiquated and highly inefficient ones with a modernized generation of new leaders.

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