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Med School Denies 'Ghosts' Are Frauds

By Alexandra Odynova

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A top medical school in Moscow is deeply mired in a scandal over this year's new students — three-quarters of whom either don't exist or never applied for enrollment.

The Prosecutor General's Office on Friday began a check into the Russian State Medical University, which struggled to fend off allegations that its enrollment scheme was a large-scale scam.

At least 536 out of 709 students recommended for state-funded enrollment at the college never took the required exams, the Federal Inspection Service for Education and Science reported Thursday.

The "ghost applicants" occupied the places that would otherwise have gone to real applicants — who then had to enter other colleges. However, places reserved for fake students could later be quietly offered to those with lower grades — but bigger wallets.

Alexei Krapukhin, deputy chairman of the Russian Students Union, said parents of some

applicants complained that "they had been asked to pay between 350,000 and 400,000 rubles [$12,300 to $14,100] for enrollment" in state-funded spots at the Russian State Medical University.

"It would be cheaper than six years' worth of tuition fees, which amount to 170,000 rubles per year on average," Krapukhin told The Moscow Times by telephone Friday. He did not name any names.

In Russian colleges, the state usually funds the education of a fixed number of students who are selected based on their exam grades. The rest are charged tuition.

The "ghost applicants" were exposed by computer programmer Viktor Semak, who said he "wanted to help his friend" enter a medical college.

In a post on the college's online forum on July 30, Semak noted several implausible similarities shared by successful applicants. Most of them scored upward of 270 out of 300 on their Unified State Exams — a very hard-to-achieve performance; all had some entitlement, such as a disability, prioritizing them for enrollment over regular applicants; all applied close to the deadline; and none applied to any other medical college.

Education authorities looking into Semak's report soon discovered that the statistically unlikely applications were fakes. Their places were handed over to real students, the Federal Inspection Service for Education and Science said.

The university's rector, Nikolai Volodin, said Thursday that he was surprised by what he referred to as "a technical failure," Itar-Tass reported.

On Friday, Volodin said several members of the exam commission who were responsible for the incident were removed from the commission. He didn't specify their names or their alleged fault. He also said he had no plans to resign.

The education watchdog's head, Lyubov Glebova, also said "dead souls" were enrolled as a result of commission's neglect. She did not say whether it was viewed as deliberate fraud or an honest mistake.

The Health and Social Development Ministry, with which the Russian State Medical University is affiliated, has not commented on the incident. Education and Science Minister Andrei Fursenko threatened "tough measures," but did not elaborate.

The Prosecutor General's Office reported on its web site that it had invited Volodin in "for explanations," but did not say whether he or the school faced any penalties.

Numerous reports from applicants and students, available on blogs and web forums, indicated that the scheme could have been operating last year as well but went unnoticed by officials.

If fraud allegations are confirmed, that would make the scheme the biggest examination scam since the 2009 nationwide introduction of the State Unified Exam, a standardized type of high school graduation testing aimed at curbing corruption.

"There have been a lot of violations linked to the Unified State Exam, but it's the first time

such a big scheme has been disclosed," said Krapukhin of the Russian Students Union.

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