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College Head Ousted for 'Ghost Students'

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The president of a prestigious medical school in Moscow was sacked Wednesday and may face criminal charges after his school enrolled hundreds of "ghost applicants" instead of real students this year.

Nikolai Volodin, who headed the Russian State Medical University, was fired by the Health and Social Development Ministry, with which his school is affiliated, the ministry said. He refused earlier this week to step down voluntarily, even while dismissing four subordinates.

The ghost applicants were exposed earlier by a computer programmer who analyzed data on students recommended for state scholarships this year and found numerous statistically implausible similarities.

The Federal Inspection Service for Education and Science confirmed last week that 626 students recommended for scholarships to the school never applied for it. Initial reports put

the figure at about 520.

Some observers have speculated that the spots reserved for the scholarship students were to be offered to students with poor grades from wealthy families who were willing to pay bribes to enroll. Volodin, who is a member of United Russia's medical policy council, denied the allegations last week, blaming the issue on "technical mistakes" and even saying he did not rule out a possible provocation.

He was more outspoken after his removal Wednesday, calling the whole scandal "most disgusting slander" and denying any ghost applicants were accepted into the college, Rusnovosti.ru reported.

Nevertheless, the Prosecutor General's Office said Wednesday that a criminal case should be opened into the incident and asked the Investigative Committee to consider charges of abuse of office and document forgery, Interfax said.

Neither agency named Volodin or anyone else as a possible suspect. If tried and convicted, college officials face a minimum punishment of a fine of 500,000 rubles ($17,000) or a maximum prison sentence of four years.

If the allegations are confirmed, the scandal would be the biggest since the reform of high school graduation tests in 2009, when the system of standardized testing known as the Unified State Exam was introduced. The system is intended to curb corruption and give equal educational opportunities to students across the country.

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