The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Students Want Medvedev to See Dorms

By Natalya Krainova

October 13, 2011



A view of dilapidated Dormitory No. 9 at the Peoples' Friendship University.

On an early Thursday morning, students living in a Moscow dormitory were awoken by loudspeakers usually reserved for the fire alarm: "Leave the dormitory! Every student must leave the dormitory by 8 a.m."

President Dmitry Medvedev was coming to the Peoples' Friendship University.

In the week before Medvedev's Sept. 22 visit, roads and fences at the campus were mended and cosmetic repairs made to selected dorms. Racist graffiti in elevators was painted over and garbage picked up. Students were ordered to clear their belongings out of sight.

"Face-lifted street, empty buildings: Everything was ready to welcome the president. A nice little Potemkin village, set up to welcome the President of All Russia," two foreign students wrote to The Moscow Times, asking for anonymity for fear of reprisal.

"Medvedev's visit, and everything that has been written about it, is a lie," they wrote. "What

the president was shown is by no means even remotely comparable to the real dormitories."

They titled their letter, "Dmitry in Wonderland."

With the start of a new academic year on Sept. 1, many university students have confronted decrepit, poorly equipped and often overcrowded dormitories, with rooms also rented out to migrant workers. Or they faced not getting a room in a dormitory at all and being forced to rent expensive private housing.

Over the last two months, Medvedev has criticized the state of Russia's dormitories at a series of meetings with students and university officials, and he has unveiled plans to repair the crumbling facilities and update them with things like Internet access and swimming pools.

A lack of federal funds is half of the problem, said Alexei Krapukhin, deputy head of the Russian Student Union. But corruption and mismanagement are also an issue, he said, and the money that does arrive is allocated "in the wrong way."

Official statistics on the condition of Russia's dormitories and the financing of repairs were not available. An inquiry submitted to the Education and Science Ministry on Sept. 26 went unanswered Thursday.

Students were reluctant to comment on the record about living conditions. Those who complain to the Russian Student Union prefer to do so anonymously because they fear repercussions from university administrations, Krapukhin said.

55 Rubles Rent Per Month

At the Peoples' Friendship University, Mevedev expressed satisfaction with what he saw — and hinted that he was aware that he wasn't seeing the whole picture. He called the living conditions "rather decent" and added: "Probably, I wasn't shown the worst dormitories," according to a transcript on the Kremlin web site.

Medvedev has displayed little patience for Potemkin villages in the past. In April, while visiting the Moscow region town of Lytkarino, Medvedev also accused local authorities of hiding shabby homes behind hastily erected fences. He said it reminded him of a Potemkin village — one of many fake towns that, legend claims, Prince Grigory Potyomkin set up in the 18th century to please the Russian empress, Catherine the Great.

During Medvedev's visit to the Peoples' Friendship University, he was told that each student paid 55 rubles ($2) rent per month at the dormitory and had a free Internet connection in their rooms, NTV television and other media reported.

But the students said they did not have free Internet and did not pay 55 rubles but had to wait for weeks for a paid Internet connection to be set up and paid 6,000 to 8,000 rubles ($185 to $250) per month for their rooms.

Galina Kuzminova, a spokeswoman for the Peoples' Friendship University, denied hiding the true situation from Medvedev and said the rent for the dormitory depended on how much students paid for their studies. She could not name exact sums.

Krapukhin, of the Russian Student Union, said that by law the rent for a dormitory could not exceed 5 percent of a student's stipend. This year, the stipend is 1,200 rubles ($37) for most students who study free of charge, so their rent should not exceed 60 rubles.

Fire Safety Not Observed

Worn-out electric cables are also a big problem in dormitories, sometimes causing life-threatening fires.

Fire inspectors uncovered thousands of safety violations in dormitory checks in December 2003 after a deadly blaze a month earlier at the Peoples' Friendship University. The fire killed 44 students — most of them from Asia, Africa and Latin America — and injured more than 100 others.

More than 2,000 people faced administrative charges from that investigation. But in the end, it remains unclear how many were found guilty.

In September 2005, a fire broke out before dawn in a dormitory at the Moscow State Open University, killing two students and injuring 11. A short circuit was suspected as the cause.

A student at the Moscow Pedagogical State University who graduated this year said wiring at Dormitory No. 7 on Prospekt Vernadskogo, where she had lived, was old and could not support many electric devices. Short circuits often occurred, she said, and "a whole floor remained without lighting."

Students living in Dormitory No. 13 of the Peoples' Friendship University said they are currently allowed to switch on only a few electric devices at once.

Lack of Space

The number of Russian students has grown since the introduction of the Unified State Exam in 2001, which enabled students from faraway locations to enter universities in big cities.

"We have not, to our regret, managed to provide these guys the due number of places in the dormitories, while renting housing in Moscow and many big cities is economically unfeasible for most students," Alexei Kazak, chairman of the Russian Student Trade Union, told Medvedev on Sept. 13, according to the Kremlin web site.

Education and Science Minister Andrei Fursenko told Medvedev at a government meeting at the Peoples' Friendship University on Sept. 22 that 10 percent of residents of Russian student dormitories do not work or study at the affiliated universities.

Late last month, more than 100 illegal migrant workers were detained in a dormitory at the Moscow Energy Institute, Itar-Tass reported.

That dormitory was officially closed for repairs but, in reality, was being leased out.

Cosmetic Repairs

Accompanied by students at the Peoples' Friendship University, a Moscow Times reporter

walked around the campus and saw Dormitory No. 13, with fresh cosmetic repairs but tiles falling off a bathroom wall, plaster peeling from a bedroom wall, cracks in a balcony wall and graffiti peeking through the paint in an elevators.

The reporter also saw a torn electric cable hanging outside a first-floor window at another apartment block.

Cosmetic repairs are conducted at the dormitories every year, and individual items are fixed when broken, said Kuzminova, the university's spokeswoman.

She could not say when the last time that the dormitories, some of which are 30 to 40 years old, underwent capital repairs. But she said repairs were done "as required by law." She was reluctant to find out exactly when, saying it would "take a very long time."

Plans for Gyms and Internet

Medvedev has promised that things will get better.

"It is not a secret that many [dormitories] were built decades ago, and some hundreds of years ago, and have become outdated," Medvedev told rectors, students and governors at a Sept. 13 meeting, according a transcript on the Kremlin web site.

Student dormitories have to be "comfortable," Medvedev said, and have gyms, medical centers, study rooms, Internet access — "which goes without saying" — and kitchens suitable for cooking "normal meals."

"We must strive for what exists at the leading universities in developed countries — campuses," he said.

One such campus is under construction at the Far Eastern Federal University in Vladivostok, he said. Apart from "comfortable rooms," it will have a swimming pool, a stadium and a medical center.

It will also host next year's Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation summit, and its construction is part of the 660 billion rubles ($24 billion) being spent to prepare the region for the event.

Similar campuses are planned for construction at some other regional universities, including at the National University of Science and Technology, Medvedev said.

"But ... the situation with dormitories and campuses in general remains complicated," he said.

Reached by phone, a Kremlin spokesman referred questions about the students' complaints about Medvedev's visit to the Peoples' Friendship University to the school administration.

Toilet Keeps Flushing

The foreign students who wrote to The Moscow Times said friends in Dormitory No. 9 lived for a long time last winter without glass in a window in their room, with the temperature inside dropping below 20 degrees Celsius.

A Russian student interviewed outside Dormitory No. 9, where she was living, said yearly repairs were just "so-so." She gave only her first name, Maria, for fear of reprisal and said she had been living in that dormitory for four years.

Maria, who did not know the two foreign students who wrote to The Moscow Times, said she and her friends each paid an average monthly rent of 2,500 rubles, and the Internet in the rooms cost 400 rubles per month.

Maria said they had been waiting for two months for the university administration to repair damage caused by leaking water pipes and fix peeling paint on the walls and a toilet that never stops flushing.

Original url:
https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2011/10/13/students-want-medvedev-to-see-dorms-a10163