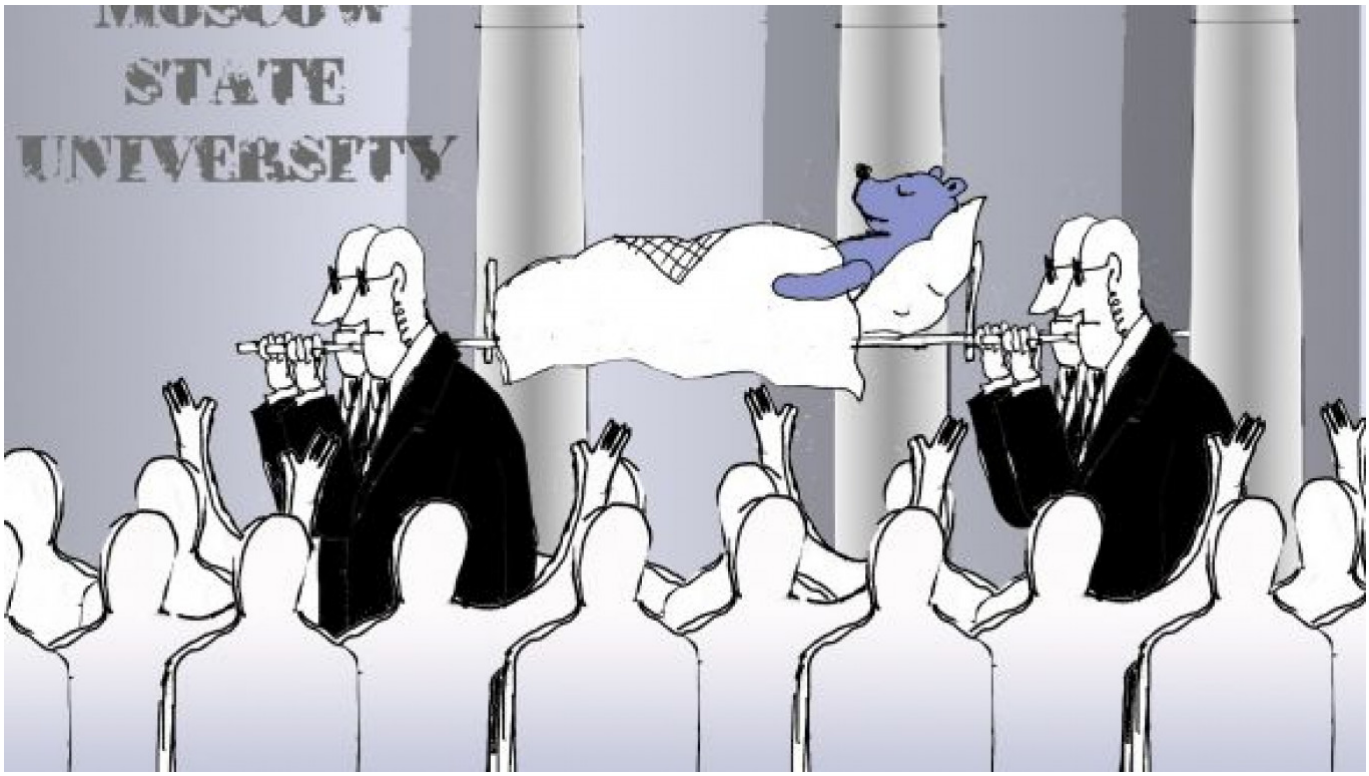
The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

MGU Is No Place for Discussion

By Victor Davidoff

October 23, 2011



The dramatic events that took place on Thursday in Libya will ensure that this date will be remembered in history. An important event took place in Russia on that day, too, and while although it was far less dramatic than the death of Moammar Gadhafi, it was rich with symbolism.

On Thursday, President Dmitry Medvedev met with students and representatives of youth organization at the journalism department of Moscow State University.

The choice of venue and conditions of the meeting were a vivid indicator of the current status of freedom of speech in the country at present and what it is likely to be under a continuation of the ruling tandem.

First, the event wasn't announced anywhere and was planned in absolute secrecy. The students at the journalism department didn't know about it, and even the dean, Yelena Vartanova, was informed about the president's visit only the day before. She was just asked to make sure that two auditoriums were free — one for the meeting and the other for a buffet.

On the morning of the meeting, hungry students drooled over a huge amount of food and drink that was brought in for the buffet — hungry in the literal sense because the Federal Guard Service, which provides security for the president, closed the departmental cafeteria as a security precaution.

The security detail closed off the entire building and carried out its own special face control, not letting in students whose names were on their blacklist. Some faculty members were barred from the building, too.

But that was a minor inconvenience, as one student, D-lindele, wrote on his LiveJournal blog, : "That was nothing compared with what happened next. The journalism students were shocked to learn that the 'students' at the meeting with the president would really be dozens of activists from Nashi and other similar organizations."

But the author was mistaken. In fact, there were about 30 students from the journalism department — about one-tenth of the audience. Only the most trustworthy students were invited, including the attractive girls whose half-nude photographs graced a calendar made for Prime Minister Vladimir Putin's birthday last year. Other less-trusted journalism students were only allowed to greet the president when he entered the hall and went up the stairs.

In a video on YouTube showing the meet-and-greet episode, you can see an unidentified student about a meter from Medvedev holding up a hand-made sign the size of an A4 sheet of paper. Then security guards close in on him, and he disappears behind their backs.

That wasn't the only protest that the president chose to ignore. Student Igor_malinin wrote on his LiveJournal blog: "Just then a group of enterprising guys held up oppositional signs, like 'Press isn't from the word oppress' and 'Why do you tweet while Khodorkovsky rots in jail?' Right now they've been detained by the Federal Guard Service and are being held in the auditorium.'

Three female students were detained for protesting by the entrance to the building and spent several hours in a police precinct. Altogether, seven journalism students were detained. Typically, the detention of protesters was not mentioned in any of the television news reports.

Budur, a blogger from the journalism department, wrote: "Citizen Medvedev humiliated and insulted the dignity of seven members of our community. The seven did not organize a rally or do anything against the law or against university bylaws. They were just doing their civic duty. This is the first time since the 1930s that people were arrested right on the campus of the university."

After the meeting, one of the journalists managed to ask Medvedev what happened to the students who had been detained. "Is someone being detained some place?" Medvedev asked. Apparently he was the only one who didn't know.

And that evening, Medvedev sent out a cheery tweet on Twitter: "The meeting at the journalism department was good. I see that everyone had a good time. Thanks for the comments. Sweet dreams."

Perhaps Medvedev actually thinks that a staged event with a paramilitary security operation

during which protesters were arrested in his presence was a "good meeting." And perhaps he thinks that it was held with full respect for the law and everyone's civil rights. Or perhaps he thinks that the most important aspect of the event was that everyone had a good time.

If so, it shows how little he understands the country that he is ruling, where an increasing number of people have a completely different notion of civil rights than Medvedev and his security advisers. And eventually they will find a way to make the authorities play by their rules in politics.

In the meantime, sweet dreams, Mr. President.

Victor Davidoff is a Moscow-based writer and journalist whose blog is Chaadaev56.livejournal.com

The views expressed in opinion pieces do not necessarily reflect the position of The Moscow Times.

Original url: https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2011/10/23/mgu-is-no-place-for-discussion-a10340