Putin Endorses Plan to Create Super University

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President Vladimir Putin has agreed to create a new university capable of securing a spot in top international rankings by merging two existing universities with the Siberian department of the Russian Academy of Sciences.

The plan came as the government warned that dozens of universities might be closed for inefficiency, signaling that work was under way on two fronts to fulfill a decree signed by Putin upon his inauguration on May 7 that aims to boost the quality of education in Russia.

Putin on Friday accepted a suggestion by Russia's top academician, Yury Osipov, to unite the Siberian department of the Academy of Sciences with the Moscow Institute of Physics and Technology, which was founded by the academy, and the St. Petersburg Academic University, which is also associated with the academy.

Osipov, who heads the academy, said the new university should place in top international

education rankings.

"And believe me, such a university would be among the leading ones because these founding universities are simply first-class," Osipov said, according to a transcript of the meeting published on the Kremlin website.

"Let's try," Putin replied. "We could really combine scientific with educational activities." Putin said in his May decree that at least five Russian universities must rank in the top echelons of academia by 2020.

The decree also called for an assessment of existing universities, and the Education and Science Ministry on Thursday published its findings: a nationwide list of 135 "ineffective" universities and 449 university branches, some of which may be "reorganized" by being merged with other universities or closed.

The ministry's survey assesses the high-school exam grades of newly enrolled students, the amount of research conducted by the universities and the share of foreigners in the student body.

The list includes 20 Moscow-based institutions, including the Russian State University for Humanities, the State Management University, the Moscow Pedagogical State University and the Russian State Sociological University.

Russian universities failed to make the Times Higher Education magazine's list of the world's top 200 universities in October and top 100 universities in March. The rankings take into account the quality of teaching and research and the university's ability to attract foreign students and faculty, among other factors.

The Times Higher Education ranking has been compiled annually since 2004, and several Russian universities made it into the top 200 until a switch to a stricter methodology in 2010.

In October, Moscow State University improved its rating from last year, moving from the 276-300 group to the 201-225 group. Moscow State Engineering Physics Institute made its ranking debut in the 226-250 bracket. But Putin's alma mater, St. Petersburg State University, dropped off the top 400 list altogether.