The Moscow Times
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INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Hospital Plans Shelved Amid Uproar

By Alexander Winning

January 22, 2013



A policeman studies a local activist's poster outside St. Petersburg's Hospital No. 31.

St. Petersburg authorities said Wednesday that they had shelved a plan to transform a local hospital into a clinic for officials after a huge public outcry against the initiative.

But in a sign of how deeply the plan's opponents mistrust city officials, disgruntled residents said they did not believe assurances that the hospital would be left untouched and protested anyway.

Public anger over the plan erupted last week after a document came to light showing that authorities intended to set up a clinic exclusively for top judges on the site of City Hospital No. 31, one of the city's largest public hospitals and one that houses unique children's oncology and hematology wards.

The hospital contains 370 beds for adult patients, 35 beds for children suffering from cancer and two outpatient clinics, Kommersant reported Monday.

On Wednesday, St. Petersburg city legislature head Vyacheslav Makarov told municipal deputies that no concrete decisions had been made regarding the hospital.

"The hospital works and will work as it always has," he said in a statement posted on the legislature's website.

The document spelling out the plan to convert the hospital contained the signature of Vladimir Kozhin, head of the Office for Presidential Affairs, who oversees a commission handling the relocation of the Supreme Court and Supreme Arbitration Court from Moscow to St. Petersburg. President Vladimir Putin signed an order in November to move the courts at an estimated cost of more than 50 billion rubles ($1.5 billion).

Kozhin's official spokesman later told journalists that the Office for Presidential Affairs had excluded Hospital No. 31 from a list of potential sites for the judges' clinic after an appeal by Federation Council senators and city lawmakers.

But despite officials' assurances, local activists were out in force Wednesday, demanding formal confirmation that the plans to convert the hospital had been permanently abandoned.

Activists collected signatures in opposition to the plan outside metro stations and held one-man pickets by the city legislature and on Nevsky Prospekt, the city's main thoroughfare.

According to news reports, they shouted slogans including "Not one step back! This is our Stalingrad," referring to Soviet leader Josef Stalin's wartime Order No. 227 ahead of the battle for the city currently known as Volgograd.

Around 6 p.m., several hundred people turned out for a protest at the central Field of Mars park, a live broadcast of the picket showed. Protesters carried posters reading "Judges to the Kresty [prison]," among other things.

On Tuesday, city authorities hastily increased the maximum attendance for the demonstration from 200 to 10,000 people in the wake of the escalating public uproar.

Anna Dudnikova, an organizer of an online campaign to save the hospital, said by phone that activists had decided to act since officials had gone back on their word on numerous occasions in the past.

"We aren't taking officials' statements seriously because the same thing happened with the city's military-medical academy, which they closed despite Putin saying that everything was in order," Dudnikova said.

"They are making these statements to ward off public discontent," she said, adding that hundreds of concerned residents had gathered outside Hospital No. 31 on Sunday to highlight its critical role in the local community.

Dudnikova said city officials appeared to be trying to seize all the land on Krestovsky Island, the elite area of St. Petersburg favored by politicians and high-earners where the hospital is located.

"Kozhin is a petty official who has no right to make the decision to hand over the hospital to

the judges," she said.

Dudnikova's group, which uses social network VKontakte to mobilize support and is called We'll Save Hospital No. 31, is just one of a series of grass-roots initiatives aiming to thwart officials' designs on the hospital.

Yelena Grachyova, coordinator of St. Petersburg-based cancer charity AdVita, has organized an online petition addressed to Putin that had garnered more than 108,000 signatures by Wednesday evening.

Prominent public figures including actress and philanthropist Chulpan Khamatova, filmmaker Alexander Sokurov and Nobel Prize-winning physicist Zhores Alfyorov have added their names to the petition alongside cancer patients, hospital doctors and others as far afield as Germany.

Contact the author at a.winning@imedia.ru

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