

Teacher Says He Was Fired for Taking Part in Gay Protest

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Gay couples kissing at the State Duma building on Friday to demonstrate opposition to a proposed anti-gay bill. **Igor Tabakov**

A Moscow schoolteacher said he was fired for participating in a gay rights protest outside the State Duma on Friday, highlighting the sensitive nature of the gay rights debate in the country as national anti-gay restrictions loom.

The teacher's dismissal was apparently reversed Tuesday, however, after the case gained national media attention.

Biology teacher Ilya Kolmanovsky said he was fired from the Second School over the weekend after attending a gay rights demonstration outside the Duma building Friday, when, in a first reading, lawmakers easily passed a bill banning display of "homosexual propaganda" to minors.

The bill, which is supported by conservative forces, including the Russian Orthodox Church, but has been harshly criticized by human rights organizations and Western governments, stipulates fines for the promotion of homosexuality among children. The measure essentially bans gay rights demonstrations.

Kolmanovsky

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Gay rights activists organized a kiss-in to protest the legislation, but the event turned violent when self-professed Orthodox activists attacked the gay rights protesters. Police said 20 people were detained following the fight.

In an article published Tuesday on the website of Radio Svoboda, Kolmanovsky wrote that after he participated in the demonstration, his school received several complaints allegedly from pupils' parents, with a request to "keep children away from him" because he publicly said he was gay.

He said principal Vladimir Ovchinnikov told him Monday that he had to fire him "to save the school."

Kolmanovsky, a journalist who has worked at the school for seven years and teaches only on Saturdays, said he is not gay and has a wife and two children. He said he believed the complaints were made up by Orthodox activists who support the bill and with whom he had a dispute at the demonstration.

In an interview with Bolshoi Gorod on Monday, Ovchinnikov said Kolmanovsky had been fired not because of parents' complaints or because of his participation in the gay rights demonstration but because he was a freelance teacher and refused to join the staff full time. He called the firing "technical."

But on Tuesday, Ovchinnikov told reporters that Kolmanovsky had not been fired and would continue to teach at the school.

"Nobody has fired him. He worked, works and will work while I remain head of the school," he told Interfax on Tuesday.

Kolmanovsky told The Moscow Times that he hadn't received a document announcing his firing and that the school administration has asked him to leave voluntarily.

"When I told them that I would not leave of my own volition, they said they would fire me because I'm a freelancer," he said.

A woman who answered the phone at the school confirmed that Kolmanovsky had not been fired and said Ovchinnikov could not speak to a reporter because he was busy with school issues.

Kolmanovsky said the principal "was trying to back down" and said Ovchinnikov's assistant called him Tuesday evening and confirmed that he wouldn't be fired.

The Second School, in southwestern Moscow, is known for its dissident leanings during Soviet times. Sociologist Anatoly Golubovsky, who studied at the school, told Bolshoi Gorod that Ovchinnikov had been fired from the school in the 1970s for his dissident views and returned as the principal in the early 2000s.

"I feel an obligation to pay back the school's spirit and those dissidents who worked there in the 1960s and my pupils and civil society in general," Kolmanovsky told RIA-Novosti. "I don't think a teacher can be fired for his opinion, which is why I won't leave."

In comments to The Moscow Times, he said the fact that he hadn't been fired was an achievement of public support, and he didn't rule out participation in future demonstrations.

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