

Education Minister Faces Calls to Resign

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Dmitry Livanov

A wave of criticism toward the state of the education system may lead to the dismissal of Education and Science Minister Dmitry Livanov, with State Duma deputies intending to ask Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev about it during his address to the Duma next Wednesday.

Appointed last May, Livanov continued on an unpopular course chosen by his predecessor, Andrei Fursenko, who started a large-scale educational reform by introducing a unified test system and pushing schools to become less dependent on state funding by making the most of paid subjects.

The Communist Party, in a statement published on the party's website on Tuesday and signed by the party's leader, Gennady Zyuganov, called Livanov's education policy "anti-national" and "destroying Russian educational traditions."

"But we need to be careful in our demands because the one who may replace Livanov may be even worse," Oleg Smolin, a Communist and deputy head of the Duma's Education

Committee, said by phone.

Zyuganov told reporters on Tuesday that his party had insisted on the dismissal of Livanov's entire team in the ministry, including Fursenko, and on setting up a commission in the Duma and the Federation Council to investigate the actions of officials in charge of education.

Smolin said one of the main problems that the Communist Party's had with Livanov's work was a new law on education that will take effect in September. According to the law, the number of schools for talented children and schools for disabled children will be decreased. Opponents of the law are also apprehensive about the state of kindergartens because they may become fully paid institutions and the law authorizes municipal authorities to define the size of payments that parents must make.

Livanov was also intended to change the system of higher education by decreasing the number of universities and state-funded placements for students. Last fall, the Education and Science Ministry released a list of so-called "ineffective universities," consisting of 136 colleges around the country most of which are training teachers, cultural workers or agricultural sector specialists.

His desire to shut down some universities made headlines late last month when at a news conference during a vote on the list of universities that should be closed he whispered to his deputy when the latter voted in a different way than Livanov did: "What the [expletive] are you doing? Look at me."

Another wave of criticism came in March when Livanov said on Echo Moskvy radio that the Russian Academy of Sciences was futureless and unsustainable. A large part of Russia's scientific society was outraged.

A group of professors signed a letter that required Livanov to apologize for his "dishonorable and unacceptable behavior." He later apologized but did not recant his statement to create a new organization in place of the Academy of Sciences.

The Duma's vice speaker from the Liberal Democratic Party, Igor Lebedev, told Kommersant on Wednesday that his party also opposed Livanov's policy, adding that the question of Livanov's resignation would be put to Medvedev in a tough way. His party's outspoken leader, Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, said about Livanov in March that "he is not an education minister; he is a minister of the liquidation of education."

Some United Russia party members also supported the idea of ousting Livanov. "I think the Duma's Education Committee must demand that the ministry be cleansed of these people," the ruling party's Vladimir Burmatov said Tuesday in the Duma, referring to Livanov and his team, Interfax reported.

Opinion polls show that the public is also disappointed with Livanov's policy. According to an opinion poll released last week by the Russian Public Opinion Research Center, Livanov is the most unpopular minister in the Russian government. An online petition to fire Livanov has so far gathered more than 11,000 signatures.

Pavel Salin, director of the Center for Political Studies at Financial University, said Livanov's

dismissal would make sense for Medvedev. "Opinion polls show that education is the sphere that disappoints people the most, so a decision to dismiss Livanov would take the heat off Medvedev's government for a while," he said.

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