

Medvedev Defends Heavily Criticized Education Policies

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Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev told the State Duma on Wednesday that he would not fire Education and Science Minister Dmitry Livanov in response to fierce public and parliamentary criticism of the minister over education reforms.

"I believe that a minister whom everybody likes is a person who most likely doesn't cope very well with his duties," Medvedev said while presenting his first annual report as prime minister on the government's work, Interfax reported.

Officials serving in the positions of education and science minister and health minister have always been criticized and "that's life," Medvedev said. However, Livanov should "communicate directly" with lawmakers, the prime minister said.

Medvedev was responding to a Liberal Democratic Party deputy's question about whether "the time has come" for Livanov to resign.

The prime minister praises the new education law despite fierce criticism from Duma deputies and stands up for the education minister.

Communist Deputy Oleg Smolin, who is first vice head of the Duma's Education Committee, said he was "disappointed" with Medvedev's words.

Opponents of Livanov, who was appointed last May after Medvedev was chosen to head the government, include members of all four Duma factions and public groups. They blame the minister for a law set to take effect in September that makes general education optional and likely requiring a fee.

Despite Medvedev's words of support for the minister, Duma Deputy Speakers Igor Lebedev of LDPR and Ivan Melnikov of the Communist Party predicted that the prime minister would listen to the lawmakers and dismiss Livanov in the near future, Interfax reported.

In his speech, Medvedev praised the new education law, saying it "reflects the dynamics of changes in modern education." Smolin disagreed, calling the law "a big failure."

Livanov also has expressed his intention to decrease the number of universities and state-funded placements for students by shutting down or merging so-called "ineffective universities" with better-functioning ones.

This plan was highlighted in the news last month when Livanov was caught on video whispering to a colleague at a public meeting to follow his lead on a vote regarding the list of universities to be closed. "What the [expletive] are you doing? Look at me."

Medvedev said the consolidation of educational institutions needed to take place.

"I know the situation is taken rather painfully — both regarding the evaluation procedure and decisions about the fate of certain universities," Medvedev told the Duma, adding that something "had to be done" because a number of universities have "real trouble" with research and employment rates for graduates.

The evaluation of universities has to be "transparent" and "understandable for all," Medvedev said.

Smolin retorted that "if you choose between doing wrong and doing nothing, it's better to do nothing."

With regard to dissertation councils, by next March their work will be made "more open," which is expected to boost the quality of research, the prime minister said.

The country's dissertation councils have come under fire in recent months as dozens of professors and lawmakers have been accused of plagiarism in their academic writings.

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