The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

St. Petersburg Ballet Elite in Outcry Over Tsiskaridze Vaganova Role

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November 05, 2013

Rehearsals at the ballet academy, which is receiving a backlash over its leadership overhaul. **Mark Olich**

Nearly 100 representatives of the St. Petersburg ballet community have spoken out against the unexpected appointment last week of former Bolshoi Theater star Nikolai Tsiskaridze as acting rector of the city's venerable Vaganova Ballet Academy.

In a letter calling on the Culture Ministry to immediately review the decision, Vaganova professors and artists from St. Petersburg's Mariinsky Theater said that the sudden dismissal of former rector Vera Dorofeyeva and artistic director Altynai Asylmuratova was an irreparable loss to the institution, RIA Novosti reported.

Their departure "disrupts the continuity of the school's traditions and represents an inadmissible, not to say criminal, decision," which has essentially paralyzed the institution and injured both the academy's reputation and Russian culture as a whole, the cultural figures said.

The objections of St. Petersburg's cultural elite were preceded by a broader public protest. An online petition that had gathered 600 signatures by mid-day Tuesday called for the government to direct Vaganova's academic council to select its own candidates for rector and art director, to be submitted to the Culture Ministry for approval.

The petition criticized the Culture Ministry for overlooking the administrative and pedagogical experience required for the position — experience that the signatories agree Tsiskaridze currently lacks — and for undermining the autonomy of St. Petersburg's cultural traditions.

"It is not at all by chance that the management of the academy is passed on to its graduates. Nikolai Tsiskaridze, a brilliant pupil of a just as respected but entirely different school, is not a bearer and preserver of the St. Petersburg tradition," the petition said.

As for Mariinsky Theater star Ulyana Lopatkina, who was earlier reported to have been appointed art director of Vaganova in place of Asylmuratova, the petition said that her ongoing career as a dancer would not leave the ballerina sufficient energy to devote to the academy.

However, Tsiskaridze said in a statement Tuesday that Lopatkina will not in fact be taking on the post of artistic director, as he has signed an agreement extending Asylmuratova's contract in an effort to preserve "the continuity of the academic process."

A Culture Ministry spokesman said that although the ministry recommended Lopatkina for the post, the final decision remains with the academy's elected rector.

The date of the definitive election of Vaganova's new rector, which will either confirm Tsiskaridze or remove him from the post, is to be set at an impending meeting of the institution's academic council.

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