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Russia's Top Diplomatic School in Turmoil Over Crimea Annexation

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MGIMO students approaching the main entrance of the university in southwest Moscow in November 2012.

Russia's top university for aspiring diplomats, the Moscow State Institute of International Relations, makes a show of being a worldly place.

In the university's main building, a sprawling gray structure in southwest Moscow, students dressed in suits stroll along hallways named after international streets like New York's iconic Broadway. Photographs of famed world leaders who have given lectures at the school, from Margaret Thatcher and Jacques Chirac to U.S. presidents Bill Clinton and George Bush, Sr., line the walls.

The university, known in Russian by the acronym MGIMO, pronounced em-ghee-MO, has a reputation as one of the country's elite academic institutions, training not only future government leaders and Kremlin functionaries but also businesspeople, journalists

and thinkers. But its image and prestige seem to be at risk amid Russia's actions in Ukraine, which have polarized MGIMO's faculty and student body.

The divisions at the university made national headlines last month when philosophy professor Andrei Zubov was fired for writing an op-ed in Vedomosti in which he said that Russia's annexation of Crimea was similar to the Nazi Anschluss of Austria in 1938.

The Foreign Ministry, which is affiliated with MGIMO and recruits dozens of its students each year to become diplomats, has responded harshly to such comparisons. It seethed last week at comments by the German finance minister likening Russia's takeover of Crimea to the Nazi annexation of the Sudetenland in Czechoslovakia in 1938.

Given the Foreign Ministry's position on the issue and its connection to MGIMO, the school's leadership argued that Zubov had acted irresponsibly by expressing such an opposing opinion. Zubov and his defenders said his firing meant that he was being deprived of his constitutional right to free speech.

"It was an extraordinary decision — I do not know of any other cases when people were fired from MGIMO for a political stance," Zubov said in a phone interview. "It is a fundamental change of attitude toward freedom of speech in our country that goes hand-in-hand with the recent clampdown on independent media."

The dissension at the university in some ways reflects a larger split within Russia's elites regarding the annexation of Crimea, even within government circles. Those with nationalist and conservative views have come out almost universally in favor of the move, while some liberals and economic officials have opposed it or at least viewed it with skepticism.

In his Vedomosti article, Zubov wrote that the annexation was an "insane and, more importantly, absolutely needless aggression" that threatened peace in Russia and post-Soviet countries. "We need to come to our senses and stop," he wrote. "Our politicians are pushing the nation into a harrowing adventure. History shows that nothing will go without payment. We need not buy into this like Germans once bought into the promises of Goebbels and Hitler."

The university, like the Foreign Ministry, says that it relies on international law in its teachings, and other MGIMO professors have argued that the Crimea referendum in which residents voted to join Russia was a legitimate expression of people's will. The West called the vote a sham since it was held just three weeks after it was first announced and took place amid an occupation by Russian troops.

"Our teaching approach is that the United Nations and international law are the base of everything in international relations, not national interest like they teach in the U.S.," said Andrei Silantyev, MGIMO's vice rector for international relations, sitting in the university's cafeteria on a recent visit. "Our educational approach is not being changed."

Silantyev, who has first-hand knowledge of the U.S. education system, having received a degree from Duke University in North Carolina, said Zubov broke an ethical norm by writing his article.

"No one had any doubts that Zubov had to resign," Silantyev said. "It was an issue of corporate ethics — he violated all the norms. Such presumptuous, irresponsible statements do not fit MGIMO culture."

Diverse Company

The culture of MGIMO is reflected in the school's high-profile alumni. The university, whose main campus consists of eight connected buildings in southwest Moscow, is widely seen as a place where the children of Russian diplomats and policymakers get their education, and most of Russia's former and current heads of foreign embassies are MGIMO graduates.

The Foreign Ministry allocates up to 100 placements for graduates annually, and some 70 percent of Foreign Ministry staff went to MGIMO. Alumni include Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, who graduated in 1972, and Russia's richest man, businessman Alisher Usmanov, from the class of 1976.

Like at most Russian universities, prospective students have to pass state exams in several different subjects, including Russian, history and social studies, and also must pass an English language exam. Some students receive acceptance though national contests for school graduates.

The competition for entrance can be fierce: In 2012, MGIMO admitted about 5.5 percent of applicants who needed state funding and about 7.7 percent of applicants who were able to pay their own way. There are about 7,000 students at the university and about 1,200 lecturers.

In 2009, President Vladimir Putin said that MGIMO trained specialists for the diplomatic service to protect and promote Russia's state interests in the international arena. "Elite personnel are forged here. Whole galaxies of prominent diplomats, politicians, businessmen, journalists and lawyers have graduated from the university," he said at the time.

But among those "galaxies" of graduates are also those who strongly oppose the Kremlin's policies. The editor-in-chief of independent Dozhd television, Mikhail Zygar, not only graduated from MGIMO but served as a teacher at the university. Prominent Russian writer Dmitry Bykov, who is an active participant in opposition rallies and is a columnist for opposition newspaper Novaya Gazeta, gives lectures on literature there. And television personality Kseniya Sobchak, who became an outspoken opposition supporter in 2012, also holds a degree from the university.

Ilya Klishin, editor-in-chief of the website for Dozhd television and a 2008 graduate of MGIMO, said there used to be an obvious pluralism in political thought among the university's professors.

"That helped students to form their own points of view on political processes in the country and around the world," he said by phone.

But current students interviewed by The Moscow Times seemed to have been spooked by Zubov's resignation. While saying that they felt no pressure about how to think, they admitted that they felt the need to use caution when making their opinions public.

"Our university is an interesting place — while there is freedom of speech, you can be punished for saying some things openly outside the walls of the university," said Filipp Dyagilyev, 19, a second-year student in the International Relations Department, while standing in front of the university's main entrance next to flags of the European Union, CIS and Russia.

"That is exactly what happened with Professor Zubov," said Dyagilyev, who was Zubov's student for a year. "I enjoyed his lectures. It is a pity he was fired."

Mixed Views

After Zubov left the university, some 13,000 MGIMO students, graduates and employees signed an online petition calling for him to be reinstated in his former position and calling the fact that he was apparently fired for his political beliefs "outrageous."

But Dyagilev, the second-year student, said that most of his peers did not share Zubov's opinion on the annexation of Crimea, while Silantyev argued that "most" students later apologized for signing the petition, saying they had made a mistake.

Zubov said that his piece in Vedomosti was not the first article he had written in which he criticized the Kremlin's actions. But he said that MGIMO used to be proud when its professors published work in major media outlets.

"I think MGIMO's international reputation could suffer due to my resignation, and since academic freedom was violated I am concerned about MGIMO remaining part of the Bologna process that unifies most European universities," Zubov said.

Silantyev noted that there were instructors with various views at the university — an assertion students agreed with — and that inside MGIMO the Crimea issue was considered from different angles.

"We do not ask people about their political beliefs when hiring them," Silantyev said.

MGIMO has seen at least one other prominent expression of public protest against the government's actions. In 1956, 18 Hungarian students left MGIMO to protest the advance of Soviet troops into Hungary. Nothing like this happened after the annexation of Crimea, according to Silantyev, who said there were some 1,000 foreign students from about 55 countries studying at MGIMO.

But there was one lecturer who decided to oppose the decision by MGIMO authorities regarding Zubov and leave the university. Elina Kolesnikova resigned the day after Zubov was fired and said on Facebook that when she decided to leave, some of her colleagues immediately began to act as though she did not exist. She said that some of her students supported her, however, and that after her last lecture, when she explained why she was leaving, they applauded in support.

Silantyev called her decision an emotional move, but Kolesnikova hinted that the decision was long overdue. "Academic liberty has been severely violated," she wrote in an article for The New Times. "The situation is similar to that in the army. Everyone must implement orders

and no one can disobey."

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