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Health Minister Reaches Out to Medical Workers After Massive Protest

By Allison Quinn

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Thousands turned out Sunday to protest Moscow health care reforms.

Russia's health minister has promised to consider the demands of Moscow health workers amid ongoing reforms of the capital's health care system on Monday in the direct aftermath of a thousands-strong street protest, the TASS news agency reported.

"The opinions of patients and doctors hold the utmost significance for us. As such, we will closely examine all the views expressed at the protest. Many opinions will be taken into account during the organization of the ministry's work [on the reforms,]" Veronika Skvortsova was quoted as saying Monday.

In line with health care reforms initiated by President Vladimir Putin upon his return to the presidency in 2012, city officials have aimed to optimize the effectiveness of Russia's current health care system by merging smaller medical clinics that lack a full range of service with larger hospitals, or closing them altogether. In Moscow, the government-owned premises

that are vacated will be handed over to the Mayor's Office — which critics say means that the officials carrying out the reforms are motivated more by profit than by effectiveness.

A protest on Moscow's Suvorovskaya Ploshchad on Sunday drew several thousand health care workers dissatisfied with the reforms. An independent monitoring group, the Union of Russian Monitors, pegged the turnout at about 5,000 people by 3:30 p.m, just an hour and a half after the rally's start.

Demonstrators called on the authorities to stop shutting down medical institutions and take the opinions of health care workers into account before beginning the reform process, which they say has already hastily begun with the closure of many Moscow medical centers.

Skvortsova disputed some of the claims made at the rally, however, saying they did not "correspond with reality," TASS reported.

"Some demonstrators, including some with no direct ties to medicine, voiced appeals to stop the centralized health care reforms supposedly being conducted in the country, initiated by the Health Ministry, and aimed at reducing the number of medical institutions," Skvortsova said.

"These claims are lies. The Health Ministry is not conducting any kind of centralized reform that would entail the reduction of medical organizations," Skvortsova was cited as saying.

Leonid Pechatnikov, Moscow's deputy mayor in charge of social issues, recently said to the contrary that the city planned to close 28 medical institutions over the next two years as part of the reforms.

Critics of the reforms — including the organizers of Sunday's rally: Alla Frolova, Olga Demicheva and Semyon Galperin — say they have been hijacked by officials eager to profit from medical services, which — under the Russian Constitution — are meant to be provided to each citizen for free.

Demicheva, a doctor at Moscow's Hospital No. 11, which was recently merged with another hospital, has repeatedly stressed that she is in favor of the reforms, but against "what is being done under the guise of reforms," as she wrote on Facebook after the protest.

In light of the health minister's comments on Monday, Demicheva said: "The Health Ministry has always had a lot of questions about the reforms and how they were being conduct. Now the time has come to get answers to those questions."

"I hope that the Health Ministry has not only heard us out, but that they will also support us," she said.

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