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Art at Risk as Russian Museums Lose Guards to Budget Cuts

By Anna Dolgov

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The Union of Russian Museums appealed to member organizations earlier this week to "urgently conduct exercises on protecting the work of the exhibitions through our own forces."

The State Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg may be left without police guards starting this fall as the Interior Ministry is laying off officers amid funding cuts, the director of Russia's biggest art museum said.

The Interior Ministry plans to pull police guards from Russia's museums starting in November, Hermitage director Mikhail Piotrovsky said in an interview with Ekho Moskvy radio station Tuesday, appealing to the authorities to reverse the decision.

If the police guards are gone, art thieves may still be deterred by museums' own security systems and services, he said. But unlike police officers, museum guards do not carry weapons, according to Piotrovsky.

"The police are the only organization that can take a hooligan by the scruff of the neck and throw them out into the street, and who bear arms," Piotrovsky told Ekho Moskvy. "Other security organizations have substantially fewer rights."

The full scope of the expected cuts in police presence remained unclear, as the authorities have supposedly compiled a "very short list of cultural institutions" where police officers will continue to be stationed, but there was no indication that the Hermitage might be one of them, Piotrovsky said, Ekho Moskvy reported.

"We received a letter saying that starting on Nov. 1, all the police guards we have will be leaving the Hermitage," he was quoted as saying.

"I have written several letters to all the ministers, asking them to tell me for certain whether this means that the Hermitage will be left without police guards," Piotrovsky added. "So far they have not responded. So far there is an announcement that they [the police guards] will be leaving."

The Interior Ministry's payroll is to be slashed by 10 percent, or about 110,000 jobs, under an order signed by Russia's President Vladimir Putin last week.

The cuts come amid the economic downturn and Western sanctions against Moscow over its meddling in Ukraine, but the ministry's ranks were shrinking even before the current economic crisis.

In 2009, then-President Dmitry Medvedev determined that the police payroll was bloated and ordered a 20-percent personnel cut. Since then, staff numbers have shrunk from 1.28 million to 1.13 million.

Meanwhile, the Union of Russian Museums, of which Piotrovsky is president, appealed to member organizations earlier this week to "urgently conduct exercises on protecting the work of the exhibitions through our own forces."

The call for museum self-defense was prompted by police plans to remove its guards, and also by the vandalism of items on show at a Manezh exhibition in Moscow by Orthodox activists last Friday, according to the document signed by Piotrovsky.

"Our society is ill," the statement read.

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