The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Putin Asked to Intervene as European University in St. Petersburg Loses Licence

December 12, 2016



The European University in St. Petersburg **TasyaPolina / Wikicommons**

Russian President Vladimir Putin has been asked to intervene after one of Russia's leading universities was stripped of its license.

On Friday, the state education watchdog Rosobrnadzor forced the European University in St. Petersburg, a private post-graduate school for the social sciences and humanities, to halt all education activities. The order came after a St. Petersburg district court ruled that the university had violated several legal regulations.

University staff said that the Kremlin "supported" the university's cause. "We expect that Rosobrnadzor themselves will find a way to step back from their initial decision," Gevorg Avetikyan, associate director for the university's master's degree program in Russian and Eurasian studies wrote on Facebook.

"Some students and professors have also asked whether they should go on to demonstrations, sign petitions etc. The rector's opinion was: the government seems to be positive and 'on our side,' so let them do their work. If they fail, then as free citizens you [have the right] to demonstrate [and] mobilize," he wrote.

Protesters have already gathered outside the Sorbonne University in Paris to show their solidarity with the students and academics. The demonstrators described Rosobrnadzor's decision as an "attack" on Russian higher education.

Founded in 1994, the European University in St. Petersburg offers courses to Russian and international students and boasts professors from leading Western universities. It also works with a number of "reformist" Russian think-tanks, including former Finance Minister Alexei Kudrin's Center for Strategic Research.

Rosobrnadzor ruled that the university's political science and sociology department did not have a sufficient number of staff whose primary occupation is practical work in the field in which they teach, and that staff on fixed-term employment contracts had not been properly certified.

The watchdog also complained that the university did not have a student gymnasium "at the location specified on its license."

In a statement on their website, the European University said that the Rosobrnadzor inspection had been sparked by a complaint from ultra-conservative St. Petersburg lawmaker Vitaly Milonov, author of Russia's infamous "gay propaganda" law and currently a State Duma deputy.

The university said that they would do "everything in their power" to fight the ruling, and that the school "paid great attention to the quality of its personnel."

European University also distanced itself from claims that government forces were "displeased" by the institute's Western-leaning outlook.

"Some Internet publications have spread false and defamatory information about [the university's] relationship with foreign organizations, [claiming that the school] works against the interests of Russia, etc.

"This has nothing to do with why our license was officially suspended. These stories are designed to convince the public that authorities [such as Rosobrnadzor] are being used for political purposes."

Students will not be told if they can still receive their degrees until the university rector meets with government officials on Wednesday.

"I first heard about the decision [to close the university] from a friend who wasn't even a student there," one student from the university's international program told The Moscow Times on the condition of anonymity. "I wish students were kept in the loop regarding government issues, but we are definitely not," the student said.

The university was previously closed for six weeks after failing a fire safety inspection in February 2008. The decision drew widespread protests after some experts linked the ruling to a European Commission grant which the school had received in 2007.

The money had been intended to fund a three-year program into improving election monitoring during Russian elections. The university had closed the project in January 2008, following public condemnation from Russian President Putin.

Artemy Magun, the dean of the university's political science and sociology faculty, said that the ruling "seemed political."

"Our university was just denied the right to teach students by the government education agency on a technicality," he wrote in English on Facebook. "The reason for an unprecedented series of control raids against the university seems to be political, even though we do not yet understand what exactly is the political actor behind the attacks and what it wants," he said.

"I guess generally speaking there are people in this state who are afraid of any, even modest, touch of enlightenment and internationalism. There is a chance that the situation is promptly resolved (and some positive signs from above), but meanwhile we can't teach," he wrote.

A further court hearing on the ruling is scheduled for Jan. 11, 2017.

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