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A Student Arrest Puts Elite Moscow University to the Test

The Higher School of Economics, a bastion of free thinking since the 1990s, has become caught up in the opposition protest movement.

By Pjotr Sauer

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Yegor Zhukov. **Screenshot Youtube / Novaya Gazeta**

A chill ran down Artyom Tyurin's spine when he heard the news that his friend and fellow student Yegor Zhukov had been hauled from his bed in the middle of the night by police and charged with "organizing mass unrest," a crime punishable by up to eight years in prison.

It was the latest sign that their university, Moscow's Higher School of Economics (HSE), is under the spotlight because of its liberal values.

"I was angry and shocked. I felt that it wasn't just my friend but my community that was under attack," said Tyurin, who is a first year politics student at the school.

Zhukov, 21, took part in an unsanctioned mass opposition protest on July 27 against the authorities' decision to block opposition candidates from local elections in September. Many other students at HSE joined him. The case against Zhukov is based on footage that supposedly shows him directing protesters by "making gestures to the right." His supporters say he was directing people away from the road.

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Following Zhukov's arrest on Aug. 2, HSE students immediately started a campaign to raise funds for his legal defense. They also started gathering outside Moscow police headquarters in single pickets — the only legal form of unauthorized protest in Russia — to bring further attention to his cause.

"It felt very inspiring. The student body really came together around Yegor, no matter what anyone's political views were," said student Polina Kalashnik.

The students' fervor has brought the case to the wider public. At last Saturday's sanctioned protest in Moscow that attracted nearly 50,000 people, protesters, including famous rapper Oxxxymiron, wore T-shirts and held up signs in support of Zhukov. The performer even appeared at a Moscow court on Thursday, where a judge ruled to keep Zhukov in pre-detention custody until Sept. 27.

"I was surprised to see that Zhukov has really become one of the faces of the protest," Kalashnik said. "We, the HSE student body, managed to achieve this."

HSE was set up in 1992 by leading Russian economists to support their vision of a new market-based Russia. As the country's first modern university, it quickly established itself as a respected institution, collaborating with many Western partners.

While the university has never been far from Russia's political elite — one of its co-founders and current rector Yaroslav Kuzminov is married to the head of the country's Central Bank Elvira Nabiullina — HSE has always been one of the few safe spaces for free thought in Putin's Russia. It has hired professors who are openly critical of official policy and published reports that often contradicted those of the Kremlin.

Zhukov, his friends told The Moscow Times, is in many ways a product of HSE's freethinking philosophy.

Prior to his arrest, he ran a popular political YouTube blog with more than 110,000 subscribers where he railed against social policies that troubled him. Last winter, Zhukov also announced his candidacy for the Moscow city council elections, promising to give more authority to Muscovites over use of their taxes, although he failed to collect enough signatures to register.

"For a while now, the university has been operating in a political vacuum," said Kirill Martynov, a philosophy professor at HSE and prominent journalist. "But it seems like reality has finally caught up with us."

Martynov said he first felt that dark clouds were circling around HSE last spring, when Russia's state education watchdog Rosobrnadzor conducted a thorough inspection of the university.

Rosobrnadzor had in 2016 temporarily stripped the smaller private European University at St. Petersburg (EUSP) of its accreditation and revoked its license, a move many saw as politically motivated.

Related article: Moscow Student's 'Mass Unrest' Detention Sparks Wave of Support

As the summer began, HSE found itself at the heart of the growing discontent over the Moscow municipal council elections that has sparked successive protests in the city.

First, the university's management suspended a student talk show show after the organizers invited opposition candidate Lyubov Sobol onto the program, saying it went against the university's political neutrality policy. A week later, the university's vice-rector Valeriya Kasamara announced that she would be running in the city elections as a candidate supporting Moscow mayor and Putin ally Sergei Sobyanin.

The students now fear that the university is not on their side.

Those worries have been stoked by the news that HSE's respected politics department is to be restructured and merged with the political governance department. That means that some of the university's most outspoken teachers could be sidelined.

Politics professor Aleksander Kynev might be one of them.

"I am basically out of a job at the moment," he told The Moscow Times in a phone call, his voice shaking with anger.

Kynev, who has been voted HSE's professor of the year by the student body, said his classes have been cancelled without explanation. He believes his openly critical attitude toward Kremlin policy has a lot to do with it.

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Political analyst Tatyana Stanovaya said it's getting harder for institutions that have in the past tried to stay away from politics to keep up that stance.

"HSE is in a complicated position," she said. "The leadership has always stressed that they want to stay out of politics as much as possible. But balancing between students and the Kremlin is becoming nearly impossible."

So far, the university's leadership is trying to do just that. On Tuesday, more than 250 HSE teachers and staff called on the Moscow City Court to release Zhukov, calling his criminal prosecution illegal. At the same time, the university has warned its students and faculty that it

will not provide support for those participating in upcoming unsanctioned events.

Stanovaya believes that the attention surrounding Zhukov could put further pressure on HSE.

"The university for a while has been a thorn in the side of the Russian *siloviki* [security services], but without any real consequences. Now, that they are irritated by the protests they might ask the university which side it is really on."

And if that moment comes, Russia's leadership will have to make a decision, philosophy professor Martynov believes.

"Do they want a competitive university that will stimulate the economy or do they want a docile institution without a real identity?" he said.

Once the academic year starts, Martynov expects the student body to further mobilize around what the student newspaper has called HSE's "first political prisoner."

While the last few weeks have been tough, Martynov said the student activism he has seen has filled him with pride.

"Our university's motto is *non scholae sed vitae discimus*, which means 'We do not learn for school, but for life.' I am happy to see our students are living up to what we have taught them."

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