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Leftist Activist, Kremlin Critic Flees Russia After University Firing

By Mack Tubridy

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Mikhail Lobanov. **Maxim Polyakov / Kommersant**

Prominent Kremlin critic and trade union activist Mikhail Lobanov said Monday he had fled Russia, just hours after revealing that he was fired from a leading Moscow university.

"Our team made a decision: I am going on a long-term trip abroad," the activist wrote on the Telegram messaging app, adding that he was already in a place "where Russian security forces cannot break in."

"I have repeatedly said that I consider it important to stay in Russia as long as there is an opportunity to continue creative political activity," he told The Moscow Times over text message.

"Now, for me personally, this opportunity has been temporarily exhausted."

Earlier Monday, Lobanov posted a photo of an order dismissing him from his associate

professor position at Moscow State University's Faculty of Mechanics and Mathematics.

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According to the document, the official explanation for his termination was "reasons beyond the control of both parties."

Lobanov, a leading left-wing politician in Russia, ran as a candidate for the Communist Party in Russia's 2021 parliamentary elections. He was labeled a "foreign agent" by the Justice Ministry last month.

He said he believes the university did not make the decision to fire him, but was "the result of flagrant and unprecedented pressure from outside."

"Labeling me a 'foreign agent,' banning me from my profession and illegally firing me from Moscow State University are only the latest steps in a campaign the authorities have been waging against me for a year now," he wrote on Telegram when announcing his departure from Russia.

"Obviously, the next and final step would soon be some kind of fictional criminal case and putting me in jail," the activist told The Moscow Times.

"And until that moment, the life of me and my wife would have been reduced to a struggle for survival, in which there would no longer be time for political participation."

Lobanov said he planned to continue his activist work outside of Russia.

"In our situation, this means a political trip abroad. This is not a vacation," he said, adding that he hoped to "work with progressive political forces in other countries in order to form a set of proposals and guarantees" for ending the war in Ukraine.

In May, Lobanov was detained during mass raids linked to Ilya Ponomaryov — a pro-Ukraine former State Duma lawmaker who authorities accuse of spreading so-called "fake news" about the invasion of Ukraine.

He was later released after being questioned as a witness in a case against Ponomaryov.

In December 2022, Lobanov was sentenced to 15 days in jail on misdemeanor charges of disobeying police orders.

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