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Scientists Get Honor and Push From Above

By Lena Smirnova

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Old is new again for the Russian government, which has renewed an old Soviet tradition in an effort to give new life to the country's crippled science sector.

President Vladimir Putin signed a decree last week to create the title of "Distinguished Inventor of the Russian Federation," which had an honorable equivalent in the Soviet era. The move is meant to raise the prestige of the profession and increase the commercialization of Russian inventions.

The honorary title will be bestowed on those who create inventions that are of major national importance and are in production, for major contributions to technological progress and for long-term fruitful innovative activity, according to the decree.

Eligible candidates must have a patent for their work and be able to show that some company is considering bringing the invention to market.

The aim is to boost the low commercialization rate among Russian inventions. Currently, state organizations, which order the majority of the scientific research, don't keep an inventory or evaluate the work they get from scientists, which means that these inventions often stay on the shelf.

Scientists also lack stimuli to commercialize their inventions in the private sphere. They frequently get patents just to get another education degree or as a formality for customers, Putin said at the meeting of the Council for Economic Modernization and Innovative Development of Russia last week.

One university has 1,500 patents, but only seven licensed sales of any of those technologies, he added.

"[The lack of intellectual property rights] has a negative impact on the investment attractiveness of companies, holds back the development of innovative processes in industry and aids in the illegal flow of scientific products into other countries," Putin said.

Putin encouraged scientists to use grants more effectively instead of relying mostly on state contracts to finance inventions. He also offered to develop a new scheme for transferring intellectual property rights from the state to other interested parties, such as investors.

While the decision to reinstate a Soviet-era honorary title won't solve these issues on its own, it may give scientists a valuable morale boost during this time of transformation, said Alexander Chernov, vice president of strategic communications at the Skolkovo Innovation Center.

"Innovators deserve more attention. They don't just need money, but also the prestige that comes with their position," Chernov said.

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