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Putin Orders to Proceed With Academy of Science Reforms

By Alexander Bratersky

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A fake gravestone for the academy standing next to the Duma building. **Igor Tabakov**

President Vladimir Putin on Wednesday ruled out postponing reforms to the Russian Academy of Sciences that are fiercely opposed by many researchers but proposed a compromise of sorts that would grant additional powers to the academy's newly elected head.

Putin also told the academy's acting president that with increased state investment in science, the nearly 300-year-old institution needed to show the public "big, good, socially useful results."

"In recent years, the government has put more and more money into research activity. Of course, in some cases it's not comparable to countries where they invest more, but in some areas it is comparable now," Putin told acting Academy of Sciences head Vladimir Fortov in a meeting at the Kremlin.

Putin's comments seemed to coincide with the government position voiced this week that researchers are spending too much time making money and too little on science.

Researchers have lashed out at a government-proposed reform bill being considered that would, among other things, strip the academy of its ability to manage its property, a move that some researchers say is motivated by certain officials' financial interests.

Putin seemed to seek a truce on the issue on Wednesday, however, proposing to make Fortov the head of an agency that would control the academy's property.

Academics have called for further discussion of the bill before it is put to a vote by the State Duma, but the lower house of parliament approved it in a first reading anyway on Wednesday in a very tight vote, with 234 deputies in favor, only eight above the minimum to pass a bill. The Duma has scheduled the bill for a crucial second reading on Friday.

At Putin's meeting with Fortov, the president said the reforms could not be put off until fall as the academy wanted.

"It would have been possible [to delay the vote] if the government had not sent the draft law to the Duma. [But] now we need to make a decision. Sometimes it is better to make a decision than to run around in circles," Putin said.

Fortov said after the meeting that a third and final reading of the bill would not come until fall.

Lawmakers sparred angrily over the bill in the Duma on Wednesday, with the Communist faction even threatening to leave parliament if the draft law is considered in a final reading before the end of the current session.

Deputy Prime Minister Olga Golodets, who presented the government position on the bill, said the academy manages 260,000 hectares worth of property and called the construction of elite homes on its premises "shameful."

She also said that of the academy's 95,000 employees, only 45,000 were engaged in research activity.

According to Alexei Mukhin, the head of the Center for Political Information think tank, Putin's proposal to put Fortov in charge of the academy's property agency is "an attempt to find compromise."

"The conflicts between the academy and the government block attempts of any decisions. Further politicization only makes things worse," said Mukhin, who added that the president is acting as an "arbiter" in the case.

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