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Death Sentence for Russian Science

By Boris Kagarlitsky

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The government's stated purpose behind the bill to reform the Russian Academy of Sciences was to free researchers from the burden of administering property so that they could devote all of their efforts to pure scientific work. That argument might have made sense back in ancient Greece, but today no major advancements in applied science are possible without significant resources and equipment. Reformers point to shortcomings in the system of self-governance practiced by the scientific community and say the new law is intended to fully

rectify those defects. But rather than correcting any flaws, the bill actually marginalizes Russian science and pushes it to extremes that defy logic.

Under the proposed law, a government ministry would appoint the directors of all research centers, and the associated buildings and properties would be managed by a specially created state agency. What happens next is easy to predict by considering the fate suffered by other institutions under government control: They are simply liquidated by combining institutions with similar names, dismissing hundreds of scientists in the process. Then the new entity is moved to a different building far from the city center so that the original, far more valuable real estate can be sold.

The death sentence for the Russian Academy of Sciences has already been handed down, and now all that can be hoped for is a stay of execution. Making matters worse, the recently elected president of the Russian Academy of Sciences, Vladimir Fortov, and his close associates seem unwilling or unable to defend the academy against this onslaught. Fortov initially presented a very reasonable compromise plan to President Vladimir Putin, who immediately rejected it out of hand. Rather than slam the door on his way out as anyone carrying the public's trust should have done, Fortov accepted the humiliation and told his colleagues the next day that the government had conceded enough for the Russian Academy of Sciences to call off the fight.

But the struggle will not cease — not only because scientists have not resigned themselves to events, but also because Education and Science Minister Dmitry Livanov and the government will not stop until they have completely destroyed the method of organizing research work that Russia inherited from the Soviet Union. Livanov himself said as much in an official letter that, fortunately, has been made available to the public. He writes that "the law will be adopted in any case and so any discussion of its pros and cons or the correctness of the procedure by which it was approved strikes me as pointless."

A process of consolidation is taking place within the ranks of the scientific community. People are becoming aware of their professional and social interests and are quickly discovering a willingness to fight for those interests, even if that means hunkering down and occupying their institutions and refusing admittance to government officials who are intent on seizing their property. "Then so be it," they say. "Anyway, without the support of society, scientists cannot exist."

The fight for the rights of scientists is a key stage and perhaps a turning point in the struggle for the democratic transformation of society. And it shows that if citizens are unaware of their social and professional interests and are unprepared to decisively and uncompromisingly defend them, democracy cannot be established.

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