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Reforms Spell the End for Russian Sciences

By Yulia Latynina

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No sooner had the Moscow mayoral election ended on Sept. 8 than the State Duma passed a law reforming the Russian Academy of Science, or RAS, in a form most offensive to scientists. As a result, one of the world's oldest and most respected academic institutions will be ruined.

The current title of full-fledged RAS scientist will be devalued. All corresponding members,

a lower classification, will now be listed as full-fledged members. What's more, the Russian Academy of Sciences will be merged with the academies of medical and agricultural sciences.

The RAS's property will be taken away and managed by a government agency, resulting in an absurd situation in which officials will be responsible for approving or rejecting each new device scientists want to purchase and each new experiment they want to perform. This spells the end for Russian science as it exists and what there is of it.

This two-pronged attack suggests that this is no reform, but a personal vendetta by President Vladimir Putin because the RAS refused to grant full-fledged membership to Mikhail Kovalchuk, who, together with his brother Yury and Gennady Timchenko, is rumored to belong to Putin's inner circle.

Under Putin, Mikhail Kovalchuk was appointed director of the Kurchatov Institute National Research Center. Soon after, the institute began taking over control of one large and well-known institution after another. What's more, the enormous amount of government funding allocated to the Kurchatov Institute somehow didn't lead to an increase in scientific publications or higher salaries for the staff. The same day the government announced it was allocating 7 billion rubles (more than $200 million) for the newly acquired Institute of Nuclear and Theoretical Physics, those same scientists were told that there were not sufficient funds for research trips abroad.

I suspect that the reform puts full-fledged RAS scientists on the same level as corresponding members because the academy acted against Putin's will by refusing to give Kovalchuk full status. In addition, the RAS reforms came like an unforeseen avalanche only two weeks after the RAS delivered another affront to Kovalchuk by refusing to endorse him as the director of the RAS Institute of Crystallography.

This story is also significant because the scientists had the chance to avert the disastrous new law during the run-up to the Moscow mayoral election. They had only to pretend that they supported opposition leader Alexei Navalny and the Kremlin would have been too scared to meddle in their affairs. But the authorities promised the scientists that if they would remain quiet during the election, a compromise would be found. They remained quiet — and their institution was gutted.

Two conclusions can be drawn from this episode. First, never make a concession to this regime. Anyone who caves in will be trampled promptly. As the saying goes, "He who bends has no spine."

Second, the RAS is in an advanced state of decay. If the RAS had conducted an international audit as proposed by Nobel laureate Andrei Geim — who optimistically predicted that two-thirds of the RAS scientists would remain at their posts after such an audit — and had given full membership to such eminent Russian scientists as Milner Prize recipients Andrei Linde, Alexei Kitayev, Maxim Kontsevich and Alexander Polyakov and Nobel laureates Andrei Geim and Konstantin Novoselov, it would have been physically impossible for politicians to eviscerate the academy in this way.

It's possible that Linde and Geim have no interest in politics, but neither could they have been fooled by such statements as "Wait until after the Moscow election, and then we'll talk."

Yulia Latynina hosts a political talk show on Ekho Moskvy radio.

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