

Science Reform Bill Passes Federation Council

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The Federation Council on Wednesday approved a controversial bill to reform the Russian Academy of Sciences, paving the way for it to be signed into law by President Vladimir Putin, as opponents of the bill protested against it outside the upper house of parliament.

The bill has prompted numerous protests across the nation in recent weeks with scientists in Moscow, St. Petersburg and Vladivostok all warning that the legislation would negatively affect research and lead to a massive brain drain, forcing young scientists to work outside the country. On Wednesday, a few hundred people rallied against the bill near the Federation Council building, with four people being detained by police for disturbing public order, Interfax reported.

Despite the fierce outcry, the legislation faced no opposition in the Federation Council with 135 senators voting in favor of the reform, two abstaining and no one voting against the bill.

The Education and Science Ministry first announced the proposed reform in June, citing inefficiency and calling for a major restructuring of the institution. The move will see three of the academy's major institutes combined and the academy's property managed by a state agency specially established for that purpose.

The provision stripping the academy of the right to manage its own property is the most contested part of the bill, leading many to question whether the financial interests of officials served as the real motive behind the legislation.

Complicating matters, a check into the academy is currently being conducted by the General Prosecutor's Office over allegations of misused funds and abuse of office. The accusations served as part of the basis for the government's concerns over inefficient management.

On Wednesday, Education and Science Minister Dmitry Livanov clarified what the next step would be in the reform that scientists have dubbed "the death of Russian science."

"All institutes that are subordinate to the Russian Academy of Sciences, the Russian Academy of Medical Sciences and the Russian Academy of Agricultural Sciences will be under the supervision of the state agency. The structure of the academy will retain only regional branches and regional scientific centers. We will work on the law's realization in close contact with the scientific community," Livanov said, *Gazeta.ru* reported.

Federation Council speaker Valentina Matviyenko seemed to try to assuage the fears of scientists, saying after the bill's passing that a working group in charge of the state-run agency that will now handle the academy's management would make sure the academy was still in charge of scientific affairs.

"The regulatory act of the government on the creation of the agency can stipulate this," Matviyenko said, *Gazeta.ru* reported

Matviyenko's comments seem unlikely to provide much consolation to the scientists mourning what they see as the loss of their independence, especially in light of recent speculation that the academy could face criminal charges as a result of the check by prosecutors.

The inquiry has already uncovered a massive misuse of federal property that caused damages to the state budget worth hundreds of millions of rubles, *Interfax* reported Wednesday, citing an unidentified person familiar with the situation.

Another source told *Interfax* that several properties had been sold below market value, leading to losses of more than 1 billion rubles.

But Vladimir Fortov, the academy's president, responded that the academy had been given the chance to remedy violations uncovered by prosecutors. Two weeks ago, the academy received notice of certain violations and was given two weeks to take measures to fix them, Fortov said.

Then, he said, "We must hold a joint meeting with representatives of the Prosecutor General's Office and the Russian Academy of Sciences and see whether the measures we took were enough or not," *Interfax* reported.

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