

Death of Dynasty Foundation Would Deal Major Blow to Russian Science

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Zimin, 82, announced Tuesday that he would no longer fund Dynasty in light of its new legal status.

The potential closure of a leading scientific foundation that was placed this week on the Justice Ministry's list of "foreign agents" would deal a colossal blow to the country's scientific community, prominent Russian scientists said Tuesday.

The Dynasty Foundation, established in 2002 by telecommunications mogul Dmitry Zimin, was added Monday to the Justice Ministry's list of "foreign agents," a label applied to nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) that receive funding from abroad and engage in loosely defined "political activities."

The Justice Ministry's decision has sparked outrage among scientists and high-profile critics.

Even President Vladimir Putin is said to have questioned the ministry's initiative at a private meeting during the Business Russia forum in Moscow on Tuesday, the RBC news agency

reported, citing three unnamed participants in the meeting.

The foundation, which had a planned budget of 435 million rubles (\$8.6 million) for this year, aims to popularize science among the general public, and offers grants to up-and-coming academics. It also supports projects that increase awareness of social and political issues.

The foundation also funds Liberal Mission, an NGO that provides a platform for debate among liberal-minded economists, political scientists and sociologists. Liberal Mission was added to the "foreign agents" register alongside Dynasty on Monday.

Zimin, 82, announced Tuesday that he would no longer fund Dynasty in light of its new legal status, the Interfax news agency reported. He added that it was unlikely that the foundation could survive without his financial support.

The foreign funding that the Justice Ministry claims Dynasty is receiving in fact comes from Zimin's personal bank accounts, which are kept abroad.

"I have never hidden the fact that I keep my money abroad," Interfax quoted Zimin as saying Tuesday. "But Russia also keeps its money abroad."

President Vladimir Putin said last year that funding for scientific research would not suffer due to the economic crisis, vowing that the state would continue to pour at least 834 billion rubles (\$16 billion at the current exchange rate) into the field by 2020.

But Russian scientists interviewed by The Moscow Times said that state funding alone is currently insufficient to support science in the country. The loss of Dynasty, which funds 20 programs and projects, would seriously hinder the revival of Russia's scientific community and jeopardize the paths of young researchers hoping to contribute new knowledge in their fields, according to leading academics.

"Funding for science in the country is insufficient and not transparent," said Boris Shtern, the editor-in-chief of online science newspaper Troitsky Variant, which receives half its funding from Dynasty. "The science-themed festivals Dynasty organizes, its support for schools, museums, institutes, all that would be gone. That would represent a great loss for science in Russia."

Russia adopted its "foreign agents" legislation in 2012. One year later, the Justice Ministry was given the power to unilaterally register organizations reluctant to adopt the politically charged label voluntarily. Sixty-seven NGOs currently feature on the Justice Ministry's list of "foreign agents."

Some observers have questioned the actual size and scope of Dynasty's contribution to the scientific community, pointing out that the foundation is not necessarily a household name. A State Duma deputy serving on the legislative committee for science and technology told The Moscow Times on Tuesday he was not aware of the foundation's existence.

But Russia's scientists beg to differ, claiming that in addition to jeopardizing the research of young scientists, the Justice Ministry's decision also exposes the desire of the government to increase its control over science in the country.

"Our government is bothered by anything that rattles it," said Mikhail Gelfand, vice director for science at the Moscow-based Institute for Information Transmission Problems. "Dynasty is independent, it cannot be told what can and cannot be done. It is a model organization that fosters professional consolidation. Why can Dynasty hold an honest grant competition, while the government cannot?"

Shtern concurred with Gelfand's claim, saying the Russian government was wary of "anything that does not depend on it."

Russia's scientific community has also viewed with distrust the state's alleged attempts to assert greater control over academic work. In 2013, Putin signed a law ordering the reform of the Academy of Sciences, a widely respected organization that incorporates more than 500 research institutes. In accordance with the reform, the academy's property and some of its affairs fell under government control, prompting fear that the institution could lose its independence.

The Justice Ministry's decision about Dynasty has proved divisive at the highest levels.

Despite Putin's alleged questioning of the Justice Ministry's decision, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov defended the move earlier Tuesday, saying that Dynasty's inclusion on the "foreign agents" list did not reflect a problem with the legislation, Interfax reported.

"Whether he [Zimin] will shut down his foundation or not is up to him," Interfax quoted Peskov as saying Tuesday.

Alexei Kudrin, a former Russian finance minister who currently heads the Committee of Civil Initiatives foundation, wrote Monday night on Twitter that the fact Dynasty landed on the "foreign agents" list represented a serious flaw in the legislation.

The wide-ranging reaction to the Justice Ministry's decision also sparked debate about the nature of the "foreign agents" law. The Vedomosti newspaper reported Tuesday that the Justice Ministry and Russia's presidential Human Rights Council have expressed a willingness to drop the law on foreign agents, given last week's adoption of controversial legislation on "undesirable organizations." The "undesirable organizations" law, which bans the work of foreign NGOs viewed as threats to national security, quickly sparked speculation that it would render the "foreign agents" legislation obsolete.

Peskov denied any overlap between the two laws.

"These [the two laws] are completely different things," Interfax quoted Peskov as saying Tuesday. "'Undesirable' [organizations] are those that represent a threat to national security and national interests, as stated in the legislation. A 'foreign agent' does not necessarily represent a threat to national interests."

Dynasty's management is expected to make a decision on June 8 about the newly declared "foreign agent's" fate.

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