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Russia’s Scientists Were an Asset to the Kremlin. Then They Became ‘Undesirable.’

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National Cancer Institute / unsplash

The Russian-speaking Academic Science Association, RASA, was proclaimed an "undesirable" organization by the Russian government. To understand this organization, one needs to dive into the world of 2008 that seems so different to today, it may as well be fiction.

Russia had just elected a new president, aged 42 (my goodness, I’m about the same age). His favourite band was Deep Purple, he used an iPhone, founded a Russian competitor to Silicon Valley and welcomed Arnold Schwarzenegger to the building site near Moscow. The economy had been thriving for years, escaped the worst of the 2008 global financial crisis and quickly recovered. Slowly, the government realised that the wealth is now enough to invest into science, still holding strong on what remains from the U.S.S.R., but completely neglected for over a decade.

Simultaneously, the diaspora of Russian scientists was growing, as many of the most brilliant minds seek opportunities abroad, especially in natural sciences where lab hardware and supplies are crucial for the quality of research and the ambitiousness of goals you can set for yourself. By the end of the 2000s those who left in the 90s are well-off, becoming professors of worldwide renown, having their research groups and their personal stability.

In a (purely) Western spirit of supporting those who helped them along the way, they glance back to Russian science that with all its problems gave them a free excellent undergrad degree or a PhD from a top laboratory. They keep in touch with their alma mater, through collaborations, emeritus positions, eventual lecturing but feel the power to do more, helping structural changes in the research system, modernising and westernising it. Some contribute their expertise to the media not only in research, but also in grant funding, supply system, university excellence. Some consider moving back to Russia, others prefer to have projects in multiple countries at once. RASA — the Russian-speaking Academic Science Association is born — was born out of that spirit of cooperation first in Europe, then in the U.S. and worldwide. Its primary goal is bringing the science diaspora together but it quickly becomes a hub for those Russians abroad who want to build or rebuild their connections with Russia.

The strongest research excellence initiatives of Russia in 2010 were all inspired and assisted by international cooperation: from the Russian Science Foundation and "5-100" university excellence program to a megagrant talent-seeking program and cooperation between the Skolkovo Innovation Centre and Massachusetts Institute of Technology. The scientific diaspora was strongly involved in these initiatives, its voice was authoritative and heard. The annual conference titled "Scientific diaspora and the future of Russian science" was supported by the Zimin Foundation abd featured a minister of Science and Education Livanov and Putin's long-term scientific advisor Andrey Fursenko.

RASA opened three joint centers – in St. Petersburg, Tomsk and Kazan. Many RASA members took part in the megagrant programme, some took part in meetings with President Vladimir Putin to advocate for fair grant distribution systems, especially for young researchers.

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But Russia, beyond science policy, went the way it did. Putin returned as president in 2012, shut down the last batch of independent mass media from 2013-2014 and annexed Crimea. Being an expert in your field without taking into account the whole story was more and more difficult and was considered unethical by many, and became a liability for RASA as a United States-registered non-profit as tensions arose. It's no secret that top-level bilateral connections, even in the form of membership-based associations, are a subject of interest of special services from both sides, but in times of tension the observation cannot be peaceful anymore.

From 2019 onward, RASA officially ceased operations in Russia — a strong move considering that a year before the Russian ambassador in the U.S. was a guest at the association's annual conference. When the war broke out, RASA took a strong stance in support of Ukrainian people and in particular Ukrainian scientists. Given that RASA was always a Russian-speaking

association, it included people like the renowned material scientist Yuri Gogotsi, who comes from Kyiv. After this move, many said, the legal status of RASA as an "undesirable" organization was only a question of time.

Associations are not just their names. They are made up of people. And the stories of these individuals are heartbreaking. Artem Oganov and Alexander Kabanov are probably the most prominent figures connected with RASA. Both MSU alumni, former RASA presidents (2013-2014 and 2018-2020), both were back then internationally recognized American professors at NYU Stony Brook and UNC Chapel Hill, respectively. They are both brilliant charismatic personalities, passionate about helping Russian science and taking active media roles in policy making and science popularization. Both raised the profile of RASA and pursued what seemed to be shared values.

Artem then moved to Russia, becoming a full-time professor at Skoltech and gradually became a staunch supporter of Putin's policies. Kabanov remained in the U.S. and called for more support of refugee Ukrainian researchers. The strength of RASA in better times, indeed, was bringing together people with different ideas joined by shared goals in support of better science but these times are over worldwide.

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Seeing RASA proclaimed as an "undesirable" organization — together with the University of California in Berkeley — is unsurprising in the world of 2026, but it still hurts. Berkeley cannot care less, but RASA does and does not see it as the badge of honour some do. It is a huge liability, as anyone involved with them potentially faces criminal proceedings. For some emigres it means they cut off all ties with their “country of origin” (as we are forced to call our motherland). For others, that means leaving the RASA community because they understandably can not or do not want to cut themselves off from Russia.

Whatever they choose, the law undermines RASA’s reason for being, that was always and first and foremost to build bridges. Between countries, yes, but mainly between people. In a world that is more divided and isolated every day, this is extremely sad.

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