



Academy 'reform' is stifling Russian science

Insufficient funding, more bureaucracy and an inefficient government funding system are sapping the life from Russian research, says Alexey Yablokov.

It is now a year since Vladimir Putin's government announced sweeping reforms of the Russian Academy of Sciences, stripping away its independence and placing it under the control of a new civil agency.

How are things going? Not well. Unfortunately, some of the gloomy predictions of critics at home and abroad that the changes would stifle research and weaken Russian science seem to be coming true.

I can speak as a member of the academy who works at one of its institutes. Formally, all of these academy institutes now belong to FASO, the government agency set up to manage us. The agency handles organization and finances, but the presidium of the academy continues to manage the scientific research. That's a very silly combination.

As part of its new role, FASO demands information from institute scientists that would be funny if it were not so tragic. We are asked to strictly plan our research. For example, how many papers will we write in a year — in two years? What kind of discoveries will we make in two years? On the basis of our promises, they then give us money.

There has, of course, been a great increase in paperwork. FASO says that it needs all this bureaucracy to guarantee our funding. The government transfers science funds to FASO, which then divides them among the institutes for salaries, expeditions, equipment, research, and so on. And just like any other bureaucratic organization, FASO wants to know what it gets for the money it gives.

Not that there is much money. There are so-called mega-grants for scientific projects, but the academy receives only 30% of the budget that the government allocates to science. The remainder goes to the high-technology business area at Skolkovo near Moscow, the Kurchatov Institute (a national research centre) and other places.

It was clear that Russian science needed reform. But the situation now is ridiculous. What the government should have done was to strengthen the way science is funded, following Western examples, such as in the United States, the United Kingdom and Germany. There, when the state wants to support science, it mostly gives the money to an independent science agency, and the agency then divides it among the researchers, taking advice from the wider scientific community. The agency staff understand how science works — they understand which teams need support, and which teams say a lot but don't do much.

In my opinion, the government wanted to liquidate the academy as a distributor of independent opinions. And of course, it wanted to get its hands on the academy's huge property portfolio.

Traditionally, academy institutes, scientific stations and labs own a lot of buildings, many in very prestigious areas, such as the centres of Moscow and St Petersburg. The

government probably wants to use these properties to make a profit. They have already taken some of the buildings from the presidium of the academy, mainly on Leninsky Prospect in Moscow, where they took two floors.

We have been told that we, the academy, have one year to get used to the new system. But FASO will really be in charge in six months. It has already announced that it will cut 6,000 administrative jobs at the academy by 2018.

Before, when I had to go abroad for scientific events, my assistant would take my passport to a specific department that took care of my visa and tickets. There were at least 50 people in that department in Moscow, and I never had any problems. Just recently, I had to go to France — but when I called that department, I was told that there were only five people left. I made the arrangements myself, which wasted

time that I could have spent doing research.

That might not sound like hardship, and it is true that some scientists are spending too much time at their holiday dachas and not in the lab — but this is because we have no money for good equipment and not enough money for field trips and expeditions.

Of course, when the Soviet Union collapsed, many scientists simply stopped working and went to their dachas to grow potatoes and carrots, to have something to eat in the winter. The situation now is not so horrible, but I know that many scientists have another job elsewhere, just to earn some money on the side because their salaries are not enough.

This is all heading towards the collapse of Russian science. Right after the reform was first announced, a huge number of young scientists and mid-career researchers with prospects and connections immediately turned to the West or the East. There are more and more of them, and they are now spending more time abroad. About three years ago, more people opted to stay at home when the salaries increased a bit. The brain drain slowed down, but about six months ago, it speeded up again.

It is not too late to recover the situation. First, the government has to give us more money. Second, this money has to be distributed under the oversight of the scientific community.

I am a biologist, and biologists know that some animals are not able to reproduce in captivity. Scientists are like that, too. We are creative people — and we need conditions in which our creativity can thrive. ■

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