

Kremlin dismantles Russian Academy of Sciences

Clara Weiss

29 October 2013

At the end of September, Russian President Vladimir Putin signed into law a bill that reforms the Russian Academy of Sciences (RAN). The legislation, which was previously passed by the Duma, Russia's parliament, virtually puts an end to the academy as an independent scientific institution and will lead to far-reaching cuts in science funding. The new law is the culmination of a decades-long assault on science and culture that began with the restoration of capitalism in the Soviet Union.

Despite undergoing a dramatic decline since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the academy has—until the current reform—consisted of 500 scientific institutions and some 55,000 employees. The Academy of Sciences is the main organization responsible for research in Russia, with universities focusing more on teaching.

Supposedly designed to increase the “efficiency” of the academy, the new law stipulates that the Russian Academy of Sciences is to be merged with the Academy of Medicine and the Academy of Agricultural Sciences. All the assets of the new academy, including its buildings and technology, will be managed by a commission appointed by the government. The head of the commission will be directly accountable to the Russian prime minister.

This means that from now on any scientific project can be blocked by government officials who choose to withhold the necessary facilities and resources. Research projects that do not directly serve the economic and political interests of the government and the oligarchs have virtually no chance of being realized. Media reports also indicate that a large part of the academy's property is to be sold. The reform of the RAN will also include the merging of several institutes.

Press commentators expect more comprehensive cuts

are in the pipeline. Given the widespread opposition to the RAN reforms, however, the Kremlin has so far denied that it intends to slash funding further.

From the very outset of the RAN reform process, the government has sought to cover up its plans and given little public information about the consequences of the law. Shortly before the summer recess, a bill was put forward in the Duma calling for the break-up of the academy. According to the assertions of numerous high-ranking members of the RAN, it had not been discussed with the newly elected president of the academy, physicist Vladimir Fortov.

The proposed law caused shock and a wave of outrage among Russian and international scientists and the public, making it impossible for the Kremlin to push it through as planned in late summer. Its adoption was delayed by a few weeks. Minimal changes incorporated based on the recommendation of scientists, however, did not alter the core of the law.

The steps taken by the Russian government reveal the hostility and contempt with which the ruling elite treats science and culture. Although the years following the collapse of the Soviet Union have been marked by unrelenting attacks on these spheres of social life, they had until now not dared to touch the Academy of Sciences because it represents Russia's cultural and scientific progress more than any other institution in the country.

Founded by Tsar Peter the Great in 1724, the RAN, known as the Soviet Academy of Sciences during the time of the USSR, has produced some of the past centuries' greatest scientists and discoveries.

Among others, these included polymath Mikhail Lomonosov (1711-1765), mathematician Pafnuty Chebyshev (1821-1894) and Dmitri Mendeleev (1834-1907), who developed the periodic table in

chemistry. In 1820, Fabian Gottlieb von Bellingshausen and Mikhail Lazarev discovered the Antarctic. Physician and physiologist Ivan Pavlov (1849-1936), famed for co-founding behavioural science, was awarded the Nobel Prize for Physiology and Medicine in 1904.

The academy underwent a huge boom during the Soviet era. Despite Stalinist repression and bureaucratic censorship, which destroyed the lives of thousands of scientists, considerable public investment in science, education and culture in the post-war era resulted in a flowering of the academy in certain areas deemed necessary by the Soviet bureaucracy.

Among members of the academy receiving the Nobel Prize were, in particular, many physicists who participated in the development of atomic science: Pavel Cherenkov, Ilya Frank, Igor Tamm (all three in 1958), Lev Landau (1962), Nikolai Basov and Alexander Prokhorov (1964) and Pyotr Kapitsa (1978).

But the end of the Cold War and collapse of the Soviet Union were accompanied by a radical assault on science and culture. Between 1992 and 1995, the number of employees in the sciences decreased by 22 percent—from 2.3 million to 1.7 million. It is estimated that between 100,000 and 250,000 scientists left the country in the 1990s. According to Yuri Osipov, former president of the RAN, government expenditure on science was reduced by a factor of 12 to 15.

The average age of equipment in the academy doubled from 7.5 to 15 years from 1990 to 2006. The contribution of Russian scientists to international research has correspondingly decreased. Russian scientists now produce fewer papers per year—averaging only 25,000—than scientists in much smaller South Korea. The Russian government invests slightly under 1 percent of gross domestic product in research, which is less than investment in the US (2.7 percent) or Japan (3.7 percent).

In 2006, a reform programme temporarily resulted in a slight increase in funding for science and a rise in salaries for many low-level academy employees. However, the situation has again deteriorated since the beginning of the global economic crisis.

The administrative hierarchy of the academy is so firmly entrenched that young scientists find it almost impossible to gain promotion. The hierarchical structure reflects the social division in Russian society.

While official figures suggest the average academy staff member earns between €500 (US\$690) and €1,000 (US\$1,380) a month, in fact, many only receive €150 (US\$207) to €300 (US\$414).

However, the RAN's top earners are part of the country's political and economic elite. A narrow layer of high-level academics have exploited capitalist restoration to enrich themselves. Since then, they have supported not only social attacks on the working class, but also continual cuts in culture and science.

Physicist Mikhail Kovalchuk, one of the upper-level members of the academy, is said to have been involved in drafting the new law. Kovalchuk and his brother Yuri, who is also a former physicist and now one of the richest men in the country, are members of President Putin's inner circle. Having been denied full membership in the academy several times, despite strong support from Putin, Mikhail Kovalchuk said in an interview, "The academy will necessarily have to perish, as did the Roman Empire."

Nobel Laureate in Physics Zhores Alferov, the long-serving president of the academy and its current vice-president, is a millionaire and leading member of the Communist Party (KPRF). As a KPRF Duma deputy and president of the academy, he has for years cooperated in the implementation of cuts in science and its growing subordination to the profit interests of the oligarchy.

Following his denunciation of the reform process, the pro-Kremlin media recently accused Alferov of corruption and nepotism. Other leading academicians have also been involved in numerous corruption scandals in the past. Their actions, however, are being used as an excuse by the no less criminal elites in the government to push through their assault on science and culture.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact