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Perestroika revisited

The corpse of Vladimir Lenin lingers in its mausoleum on Red Square even though the communist experiment he inspired is also dead. The body will stay there indefinitely, says Russian President Vladimir Putin, because removing it would be tantamount to saying that generations of men and women, now old, have lived their lives in vain.

He might as well have been talking about the Russian Academy of Sciences (RAS). The academy, like the original Bolshevik, is a prominent symbol of a triumphant past. Neither body has changed much since its Soviet heyday. The RAS is run pretty much the same way it was in the 1970s. Its membership, too, is pretty much the same, dominated by the golden generation of Soviet science — whose mean age now is 69, well beyond the life expectancy of the average Russian male. Its popular slogan is "to preserve abstract science," which in real terms means preserving itself — something it has done since the early 1990s despite miserable financing, the exodus overseas of its brightest and youngest, and a humiliating freefall in social prestige and scientific output.

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IN WHOSE INTERESTS? RUSSIA SAYS IT IS STILL WILLING TO FUND THE SCIENCES, BUT ONLY IF THEY ARE LEAN, COMPETITIVE AND BENEFICIAL TO THE DOMESTIC ECONOMY. SCIENTISTS ADMIT SOME CHANGE IS NEEDED, BUT FEAR THE LOSS OF OWNERSHIP OF VALUABLE PATENTS AND REAL ESTATE LIKE THIS, THE ACADEMY'S SIGNATURE BUILDING IN MOSCOW.

For decades, the academy has been presenting a stiff upper lip at suggestions that it should do anything differently. Zhores Alferov, the Nobel laureate in physics, says that the RAS is like the Russian Orthodox Church: neither should be, nor can be, reformed. But something in this picture is about to change — and Lenin isn't going anywhere. Frankly, it's about time.

The academy and the Ministry of Education and Science have reached something that approaches a consensus on a plan to close or privatize dozens of the academy's some 450 institutes, and set loose about a fifth of its 113,000 employees (some 56,000 of whom are researchers), in exchange for a two-fold increase in government funding by 2008.

The agreement is a compromise on an earlier proposal that would have all but liquidated the academy as part of the ministry's plans ostensibly to reform, or modernize, the state-sector sciences, of which the RAS accounts for about six percent of the workforce. The academy has always been small in relation to the baffling morass of about 2,500 scientific organizations — the so-called scientific research institutions, and state scientific centres, that serve or complement universities, industry and government ministries. Yet it always figures most prominently. The academy is to fundamental research what the rest is to applied research.

If all works out as planned, the government will boost funding from 46 billion to 110 billion rubles by 2008. That would mean that the average researcher would receive a monthly salary of 30,000 rubles, or about $1,000, up from 6,800 rubles today. It also would mean an increase from 90,000 rubles to 750,000 rubles in the annual outlay per researcher, money that would be spent on equipment and laboratories.

From here onwards the general trend in financing would be to cease targeting specific institutions, but instead target programs in three specific sectors: applied science, abstract science, and, over time, university research. The programs have yet to be identified.

There's more, but this largely is the prescription for what officials say will help science to become competitive internationally, to better serve Russia's economy (it accounts for only six percent of exports), and to reel in young researchers currently working abroad or for foreign companies.

Still, there are legitimate questions over whether the so-called reforms, in the end, really have much of anything to do with science. Prominent scientists including Vitaly Ginzburg, another Nobel laureate, believe that the proposed measures really are a cloak to cover up what is tantamount to a grab for power over the academy and, accordingly, its property — which includes patents, and some of the most valuable real estate not only in Russia, but in Europe. Certainly the Kremlin is wrong to demand approval over the academy's candidates for president and general membership, posts that currently are elected.

The next several years will bring more hardship for an institution that, lately, has known little else. But the academy is right to have taken upon itself to change, to move on rather than to die, slowly, as one, in the name of science.

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