

Academy's letter to Russian raises issue of political views

Washington. The US National Academy of Sciences has taken the unprecedented step of asking one of its members to resign because of his personal views, triggering an international debate about the role of politics in recognizing scientific achievement.

In a letter dated 16 July and made public last week, the academy's president, Frank Press, and its foreign secretary, James Wyngaarden, express the academy's "strong aversion" to the antisemitic sentiments in a 1982 book by the eminent Russian mathematician Igor Shafarevich. The letter also asks Shafarevich to respond to charges that he has blocked the appointment of qualified Jewish mathematicians at the Steklov Institute in Moscow, which he once directed and where he is now head of the algebra section.

"Using your position to speak against Jews because of your perception of their influence upon Russian society is not only deplorable, but violates the principles of our Academy," the letter says. "If *Russophobia* represents an accurate expression of your views, and if our information of the composition of the algebra section is a reflection of your influence on hiring and appointment practices, you may wish to consider whether it is appropriate for you to maintain your membership of the National Academy of Sciences."

This is the first time in the 129-year history of the academy that a member has been asked to resign. Press says that there is no mechanism for dismissing a member.

However, not all who object to Shafarevich's words and deeds think that the academy is doing the right thing in asking him to leave. Two French members have suggested that Press resign for overstepping his authority, and others believe that the academy's letter was ill-advised.

"It was my understanding that election to the Academy was on the basis of scientific contribution, and I object to the injection of political criteria in asking someone to resign," says Serge Lang, a mathematician at Yale University. "While someone may deserve the opprobrium of the scientific community — which Shafarevich does for *Russophobia* — that does not affect his scientific contribution."

William Jaco, executive director of the American Mathematical Society, says that while he deplores Shafarevich's politics, he has "tremendous respect for his mathematics".

Shafarevich, a foreign associate member of the academy since 1974, was unavailable for comment and has not formally responded

to the academy's letter. Ironically, he was promoted for membership after writing *Socialism as a Phenomenon in World History*, an anti-government book that was seen as a brave act in the political climate of the mid-1970s.

The book attacks socialism on religious rather than economic or political grounds, advocating a return to a Christian and culturally orthodox Russian tradition that predates the Soviet revolution. The publication of *Russophobia* in 1982 continued this theme, but also introduces Shafarevich's concerns about the influence of Jews on Russian society.

One of the prime movers in the academy's decision to act is Lawrence Shepp, of AT&T Bell Laboratory, who has translated the book into English. Shepp says that *Russophobia* has fed existing antisemitic tendencies among the anti-democratic movement in Russia, as well as demoralizing Russian Jews.

Joseph Birman, a theoretical physicist at City University of New York and a frequent visitor to Russia, says that Shafarevich "is very visible in the public domain as a supporter of extreme nationalistic, racist and right-wing groups," and that Shafarevich's status as a renowned mathematician gives credibility to his views and to those with whom he associates. His election this spring to full membership of the Russian Academy of Sciences (see *Nature* 357, 617; 1992) is seen by some as an official endorsement of his opinions.

Henri Cartan and Jean Pierre Serre, two distinguished French mathematicians who are foreign associate members of the US academy, have contacted Press to deplore his letter to Shafarevich. Serre's letter refers to the issue as a "politically correct witch hunt" and suggests that Shafarevich be sent an apology and that Press himself should consider resigning.

In a reply to Cartan and Serre, Press says that the academy applies no test of political correctness to membership. "Since freedom of expression is a basic tenet of both science and democracy", he says, "it is appropriate to ask Shafarevich if his views and practices are consistent with non-discrimination against a particular ethnic group."

For Shepp, the real fight against Shafarevich will be waged in Russia. He wants the academy's letter, and other open letters that have been written to Shafarevich and published in the United States, to be published in Moscow as part of an effort to inform all segments of the former Soviet Union.

Ian Mundell

New German budget aims to restore eastern science

Munich. In the face of concern about the high cost of reunification, cash-strapped Germany is sticking to its decision to equalize research levels in its eastern and western states as soon as possible. The 1993 science and technology budget announced last week provides a generous sum for strengthening the research base in the former East Germany. But although research has done better than most in the national budget, the overall increase still lags behind inflation, and cutbacks in many areas seem inevitable.

Heinz Riesenhuber, the research minister, has persuaded the German federal government not to abandon research as part of its austerity programme by arguing that increased spending on research will stimulate growth in all areas. Research and technology programmes, mostly outside universities, have received an increase over 1992 of 3.8 per cent, nearly twice the average. Around 40 per cent of the country's overall research budget of DM9.6 billion (US\$6.3 billion), a slightly higher ratio than last year, is devoted to high-level basic research.

The eastern states of Germany will be the major beneficiaries of shifts in next year's budget: DM1.75 billion is earmarked for improving their research base, a 9.4 per cent increase over last year. Most of this money will go to large research establishments, but some will be used to improve the infrastructure of research in universities and to subsidize small companies.

The budget also provides the first signs of a shift in Germany's pattern of research support. By providing 8 per cent more money for ecology and climate research and by sharply reducing spending on nuclear and fossil-fuel energy research, the budget conforms to the results of a two-year investigation and to promises made at the Earth Summit in Brazil. In addition, large research institutes will be orientated more towards biological, rather than physical, disciplines.

Space research has also been given an above-average increase. Although national space programmes are to be squeezed, the budget increases the size of Germany's contribution to the European Space Agency (ESA) by 9 per cent, to DM1.2 billion. But the government hopes to save on this sum in negotiations with ESA's other member countries. The budget also gives priority to new, intelligence-based technologies and collaborative projects with former Eastern Bloc countries, hoping in particular to gain from Russia's expertise in space.

These priority projects will take money from a pot already diminished by inflation. As a result, the losers face the possibility of layoffs or the closing of facilities.

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