

Soros foundation offers its help free to other agencies

Moscow & London. The International Science Foundation (ISF), the body set up by the financier George Soros to support scientists in Russia, is claiming that "logistical bottlenecks" will cause significant delays in the payment of up to US\$30 million of similar aid that other Western agencies have offered to provide next year.

To prevent this happening, ISF is offering such agencies the free use of its own system for transferring research funds and scientific equipment to Russian scientists. Soros has personally agreed to underwrite the costs involved.

But the offer has been coolly received by INTAS, the main agency concerned. Officials at INTAS, which was set up by members the European Union and six other European states, are prepared to sanction transfer of aid to Russia "by any legal means". But they are concerned that the tax exemptions secured by ISF for its grants may not prove legally valid for INTAS grants. (Under Russian law, salaries alone are subject to tax deductions of up to 53 per cent).

Soros set up ISF in 1992 with \$100 million, and the agency has since developed a large network of Russian and Western scientists. Its Moscow office employs about 70 staff, and an office in New York monitors all grants and arranges for these to be transferred to Russian scientists in hard currency.

But Soros's own money is due to dry up at the end of next year, and ISF is keen to maintain the infrastructure it has built up. Several months ago it set up a Grant Assistance Programme to offer other organizations the use of this infrastructure, including the tax-free importation of scientific equipment and materials, at a flat 10 per cent handling fee (see *Nature* 370, 242; 1994).

INTAS, which has so far rejected ISF's offer, remains equally sceptical of the new invitation. "We cannot guarantee that money transferred through ISF will not later become subject to tax," says Pierre Venet, director general of INTAS. INTAS admits it is still refining its own procedures for transferring funds, and that these have yet to be officially approved by the Russian authorities. Venet stresses that INTAS's activities must have protection under Russian law, as it is an intergovernmental organization.

Venet adds that once INTAS procedures are running smoothly and have obtained full legal protection, it may require these to be used by all its grant recipients, rather than alternatives such as ISF's system. One reason, he says, is that a centralized procedure will allow INTAS to keep full records of how its grants are being used.

But ISF officials claim that INTAS's concerns about the legality of the founda-

tion's procedures are misplaced, and that the reluctance of the European body to take up its offer is political — reluctance to see European aid funds handled by a US body.

Meanwhile, Russian authorities remain divided about the activities of the ISF, even though the government has offered \$12.5 million to the foundation, to be matched by a similar amount from Soros. One explanation is that some Russian officials say they would prefer to rely on mutually beneficial cooperation agreements in science rather than on Western charity.

Irritation about ISF's activities — which ISF officials attribute to factors ranging from the foundation's low overhead costs to its tax-free status — emerged at a meeting in



Brussels in October on the obstacles to cooperation in science and technology with the Russian Federation.

Gennady Mesyats, chairman of the Urals Scientific Centre of the Russian Academy of Sciences, for example, told the meeting that the West should thank Russia for giving it access to technology. He claimed ISF had been created by *émigrés* who disliked the Russian Academy of Sciences, and wanted to prevent it from having a role in distributing funds. The new grant assistance programme should be ignored, he said, and funds transferred directly to the institutes employing grant recipients.

Nevertheless, ISF officials claim that many Russian scientists who were initially sceptical about the foundation now support its activities. Alex Goldfarb, the executive director of the ISF, claims that such support was evident from a number of leading officials of the Russian Academy of Science at a meeting of the academy in Moscow earlier this month. "They now accept that they were wrong in their initial assessment of what we are doing," he says.

Vladimir Pokrovsky & David Dickson

US and Russia agree joint projects, but not funding agency

Washington. US and Russian negotiators have signed 15 new agreements on cooperative projects in areas including science, space, and environmental monitoring. But at a meeting in Moscow last week, the US team, led by Vice President Al Gore, said it was unable to support a joint research and development foundation — despite earlier White House hopes that a domestic dispute over US funding could be solved in time for the meeting (see *Nature* 372, 584; 1994).

The newly signed agreements include a plan to collaborate on the prevention of pollution in the Arctic, to fly two US stratospheric monitoring instruments on Russian satellites, and to cooperate on the Acoustic Thermometry of Ocean Climate (ATOC) experiment run by the US Advanced Research Projects Agency.

A new US-Russia Health Committee announced joint programmes to support partnerships between US and Russian pharmaceutical firms and to foster women's reproductive health. The committee also agreed on priorities for cooperation, including diabetes, health education, control of infectious diseases, and primary care practice.

According to Jeff Schweitzer of the White House Office of Science and Technology Policy, the joint R&D foundation is "not completely dead". But it appears unlikely to gain approval. Lawyers for the Department of Defense (DOD), which was to have paid \$10 million into the fund this year, continue to insist that the law creating the proposed foundation requires another federal agency to come up with matching funds.

The DOD also is holding back on continued US funding of the International Science and Technology Center (ISTC) in Moscow, a competitive grant programme funded jointly with Europe and Japan in order to provide former Russian weapons researchers with more peaceful work.

The centre has committed \$49 million this year — about half of it from the United States — to support more than 5,000 individuals working on 94 different projects. But that money is nearly all used up, and no US funds have been allocated for next year.

Anne Harrington of the State Department, which is responsible for American involvement in the ISTC, says merely that the matter is "under discussion" at several agencies — including DOD, which paid most of this year's contribution through "reprogrammed" defence funds.

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