



Russia's crackdowns are jeopardizing its science

The escalating encroachment on democratic freedoms undermines the nation's claim of support for science, says Fyodor Kondrashov.

For more than a decade, the private Dynasty Foundation has supported science and education in Russia, funding scholarships and organizing summer schools. Yet roughly two months ago, the Russian government applied a controversial law and labelled the foundation a foreign agent. Earlier this month, Dynasty's founder Dmitry Zimin, a physicist turned entrepreneur, was forced to announce its closure. The government's treatment of Dynasty Foundation marks an unwelcome return to the inseparability of science and ideology in Russia.

There is more to these events than a science funder caught up in unfortunate circumstances. There has been a profound political change in Russia, and the causes and consequences of this — for science and for society — need to be examined in historical, political and social contexts.

Reacting to political protests against voter fraud in the 2011 parliamentary elections, the government introduced a series of laws and measures that were designed to restrict foreign influence, but in fact seriously curtailed political and civil liberties. These laws reflect the anti-Western rhetoric of government officials and a renewed popular nationalist sentiment, which intensified last year with the annexation of Crimea and the war in Ukraine.

The law that claimed the foundation was designed to curtail the influence of foreign-funded non-governmental organizations in Russian politics. The fact that Zimin chooses to bank abroad and that Dynasty funded some activities that the government said had the potential to influence public opinion were enough for the Ministry of Justice to target the foundation. Hours after the designation as a foreign agent, Zimin's Facebook account was hacked. Any doubts that the move was political were removed by a scandalously biased report on one of the main government-owned television channels that claimed Dynasty was funding efforts to destroy Russia.

Zimin comes from the generation of my grandparents, with first-hand experience of the brutal application of anti-Western ideology to science. For 30 years, the then-Soviet government deemed genetics ideologically criminal, and students and professors were labelled saboteur agents of foreign governments. In his influential book *Heroes and Villains of Russian Science* (Edwin Mellen, 2000), my grandfather describes the repression — and sometimes murder — of geneticists that forced him, a young biologist at the time, to study the subject in secret for fear of arrest. The ban on the subject led to a collapse of Soviet agriculture. It also caused the heroes and villains of that generation to be defined by their ability to withstand political ideology or to resist compromise with the

regime, perhaps as much as by their actual contribution to science. The generation of my parents was affected to a lesser degree, but they, too, have told stories of withstanding ideology when conducting research. It seems that the Russian government has not learned the lesson of its predecessors, and is determined to interfere with science and use it for ideological purposes.

There are lessons here for other nations and institutions. It is not just governments that use science for ideological purposes. Indeed, scientists and institutions seem oblivious to the moral hazards of mixing the two, and want to consider the ethics of such decisions only in hindsight.

Under the relatively liberal Russian president Dmitry Medvedev, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) in Cambridge scored a lucrative contract to help create the Skolkovo Institute of Science and

Technology (Skoltech) in Moscow in 2011. As the behaviour of the present Russian government becomes more totalitarian and hostile to academic freedom, officials at MIT are surely presented with a dilemma on whether to discontinue the collaboration. Institutions and individuals seeking to establish research and academic centres in the Middle East or China have to make similar decisions.

Skoltech is one of several ways in which the Russian government is seeking to promote a pro-science and innovation agenda. A successful research programme must cultivate local talent and attract foreign scientists. To place political ideology that is based on vehement xenophobic rhetoric centre stage in

dealing with a science organization such as Dynasty jeopardizes both. The guarantee of political and civil liberties is an essential condition for the maintenance of a successful research culture, and the ongoing encroachment on democratic freedoms in Russia reduces its appeal as a place for research even further.

If history is any indication, other practices will make a comeback, such as government control over publication or the requirement of political loyalty to obtain funding.

My own generation of scientists will now consider science in Russia not from the perspective of opportunity but from its understanding of right and wrong. History is writing a new edition about the heroes and villains of science around the world. Scientists and academic institutions must remember that the choices they make about becoming involved in projects that are influenced by morally corrupt political ideology will help to determine how history remembers them. ■

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