

Dear Mr President:

I am writing this letter as a Foreign Member of the Russian Academy of Sciences and also as a scientist who has for fifty years been active in international scientific cooperation, prominently including a series of Russian-Finnish scientific meetings that goes back to the 1970's. As such, I cannot but find it my duty to warn you of the dangers of the proposed state directed reorganization of the Russian Academy of Sciences, especially of those parts of it that would restrict the self-governance and self-determination of the Academy.

Because of the important status of Russian Science internationally, the proposed changes would make international and scientific cooperation more difficult in general. Very real damage would nevertheless be suffered by the Russian nation itself. In the present-day scientifically and technologically oriented society, statesmen unavoidably need objective advice in matters of science and scholarship as well as in their application. History shows us clearly enough the vitality of this need. The work Russian physicists have done over a long time is familiar to most people, but not as many have realized this work was made possible by the scientists' being able to make their scientific and technological decisions on scientific basis.

Even leaders who are commonly labeled autocratic have sometimes realized this need and sought private the advice of individual scientists. I have been privileged to witness personally to what extent the former President of Finland, Urho Kekkonen trusted the advice of the Finnish mathematician Rolf Nevanlinna, and I was greatly impressed when I learned many decades later about how Stalin himself had welcomed tens of personal letters of advice from Pjotr Kapitsa.

The problem administrators and legislators face is to how to implement institutionally this advisory function of science and scientists. Academies of science are here a natural and traditional solution. They can be private as in Finland, or a part of the state system, as in Russia, as long as they have the independence that alone can guarantee their objectivity as advisory organs.

Like everybody else, scientists make mistakes. But a great virtue of the scientific method is that it is self-corrective: mistakes are eliminated through critical discussion among scientists. Such a discussion can serve its purpose only if it is conducted in purely scientific terms. Academies of science can do so, but only if they have enough independence and self-governance. For such reasons, the proposed changes in the nature and the status of the Russian Academy of Sciences are detrimental not only to science in Russia but to the entire Russian Society.

I respectfully suggest that reform proposal is discussed openly in the critical spirit of the scientific method and modified in the light of the discussion, keeping especially in mind the value to the society of objective, independent advice.

Yours respectfully,

Jaakko Hintikka

President Honoraire,  
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