

Crying Over Squirrel Institutes

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On Saturday, pages from the English version of the Russian Academy of Sciences web site contained several amusing translation errors. For example, the renowned Institute for Protein Research was incorrectly named “Squirrel Institute.” (The Russian word for protein, *belok*, is similar to the word for squirrel, *belka*.)

Bloggers — many of whom are employed by Russian Academy of Sciences institutions — did not know whether to laugh or cry. In fact, there were a number of amusing mistakes, all of which seemed to be the result of running the Russian text through online translators and then failing to edit the result.

The sad part is that these mistakes went unnoticed for quite some time. This episode was just one more blow to the reputation of the academy’s leadership, especially following Russian Academy of Sciences president Yury Osipov’s recent comment that there is no compelling need for Russian scholars to know English.

This episode highlights a problem deeper than a mere oversight by the web site’s administrators. During the summer, I attended a conference organized by the European University that brought together highly accomplished scholars and scientists to discuss the

future of Russia's sciences. At the conclusion of the conference, the participants attempted to pass a resolution reflecting the overall consensus. Not surprisingly, there were many hotly debated arguments among the participants, many of whom were distinguished Russian scholars working both in the country and abroad.

Despite heroic efforts by the conference moderator, that discussion continued through correspondence for another 90 days before finally resulting in a statement that was published in Vedomosti, Troitsky Variant and Polit.ru. These three media outlets have spent more time and space than others discussing the fate of Russian science. But the only reference the document makes to the Russian Academy of Sciences is a passing remark about the need to give the academy more funding.

Why were the participants unable to reach a consensus regarding the academy? The answer is simple: In addition to bringing world-class research centers in mathematics, chemistry and biology into a unified structure, the Russian Academy of Sciences also includes institutions whose existence and funding cannot be justified. For example, in the field of economics — my area of expertise — the academy includes a significant number of institutions where not one scholar has published research in a journal of international standing.

In the end, of course, the words “Squirrel Institute” on the Russian Academy of Sciences web site will not in any way discredit the Institute for Protein Research because the true reputation of that institution derives from the scientific accomplishments of its own scientists and researchers.

But by listing all of the academy's institutions on a single web site, it puts serious, reputable organizations and those that truly deserve to be called “squirrel institutes” on the same level.

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