

Duma Passes Science Reform Bill in Final Reading

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September 18, 2013

The  **Moscow Times**

Federal lawmakers on Wednesday passed a controversial bill reforming the Russian Academy of Sciences in second and third readings while hundreds of people, including academy members, protested in front of the State Duma building.

Many members of the academy, which is composed of hundreds of state-owned research institutes, criticized the proposed reform for its provision that deprives the academy of the right to manage its property, cutting off a vital source of income amid what they say is poor state financing.

The ruling United Russia party and the Kremlin-loyal Liberal Democratic Party supported the reform unanimously in Wednesday's vote, while the Communist Party voted against it and Just Russia members were divided. In the final tally, 331 deputies voted for the bill, 107 voted against it and one abstained, Interfax reported.

Duma deputy speaker and senior United Russia member Sergei Neverov said Wednesday that the final text of the reform "reflected the positions" of both scientists and lawmakers.

"The bill passed today will provide additional opportunities for the advancement of Russian science and fundamental research and for [science's] use in developing the economy and raising people's standards of living," Neverov said in comments published on United Russia's website.

But Yury Osipov, the academy's president for 22 years, from 1991 to 2013, called the reform a "big mistake," telling Interfax that lawmakers disregarded the main demand of researchers — the right to manage their academic institutions. That right was passed to a new federal agency.

"That is the main demand. Institutions cannot be separated from the academy, from science. Research should be controlled by scientists. Research, the direction of activities and the organizational scheme should be determined by the scientists themselves, and not someone [else]," Osipov said.

According to one education official, the reform bill passed Wednesday corrected a policy put in place in the 1990s to help researchers cope with a lack of state funding.

The situation had changed since then and the government has a right to supervise the academy's money-making activities, said Vladimir Filippov, the head of an agency within the Education and Science Ministry that oversees dissertation commissions.

"The Academy of Sciences of the U.S.S.R. did not have the right to dispose of property — sell land, lease or build residential property on that land — without the approval of the government. And research in the Soviet Union did not suffer because of it," Filippov said in an interview with state-run Russia 24 television on Wednesday.

Two participants of the unsanctioned protest outside the Duma were briefly detained by police on Wednesday for putting a foam gravestone beside the wall of the Duma building to symbolize the death of Russian science, and laying flowers next to it.

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Original url:

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