

pernucleus's size, but also how its components interact with one another. "Nobody's been able to measure this with such high precision," says Millener, who hopes that understanding those interactions will shed light on so-far-obscure aspects of nuclear physics. "We don't really have a theory for these interactions." —CHARLES SEIFE

## PHILANTHROPY

### Russian Billionaires Launch Science Fund

**MOSCOW**—Two unlikely saviors have come to the rescue of Russia's impoverished scientists. Last month, a new foundation endowed with \$1 million from a pair of young tycoons announced that more than 200 researchers will receive salary supplements of up to \$10,000 this year—as much as 10 times their annual salary. While commending the so-called oligarchs for their generosity, some observers have complained about the secrecy of the selection process.

This is not the first time that a billionaire has bailed out Russian science. In the early 1990s, U.S. financier George Soros spent \$120 million of his own fortune to endow the International Science Foundation (ISF), which doled out peer-reviewed grants to more than 30,000 scientists in the former Soviet Union. Then in 1995, one of the most notorious of Russia's oligarchs, Boris Berezovsky, gave \$1.5 million to support travel grants for Russian scientists.

Now comes the Public Charity Foundation for the Support of National Science, funded entirely by Oleg Deripaska, the 32-year-old head of the megacompany Russian Aluminum, and Roman Abramovich, a 34-year-old oil industry executive and governor of the Chukotka region across the Bering Strait from Alaska. In setting up the foundation without fanfare last year, the two billionaires "did exactly the same as

Soros had done: They gave money and kept themselves in the background," says Pavel Arsenyev, former executive director of ISF's Moscow office.

The new foundation's executive director, Maxim Kagan, says candidates for grants were chosen from among past winners of three academic competitions run by the Russian Academy of Sciences (RAS) and the office of Russian President Vladimir Putin. From this list of names, Kagan says that experts selected winners based on factors such as the number of citations their papers had received. The 2001 grants went to 10 prominent academicians—including Yuri Kagan, Maxim's father—who each will receive \$10,000 this year; 200 young Ph.D.s and doctors (the highest academic degree in Russia) each get \$3000 and \$5000 respectively. The RAS will administer the awards for the charity, which reserved \$100,000 for overhead.

The selection process was conducted in secrecy—the foundation has even refused to name the experts that helped select winners—and this has prompted some grumbling. "The atmosphere of secrecy may cause suspicion," says Arsenyev, who wonders if there even were any expert advisers. He also complains that only RAS scientists appear to have been eligible for the prizes. "If Soros were to do this," he says, "he would have begun with the scientific community en masse." The former head of the ISF's scientific council, Vladimir Skulachev, argues that it would have been more transparent had the prize money been distributed by the Russian Foundation for Basic Research, the country's main natural sciences granting agency.

According to Kagan, even if the new foundation can raise money to continue beyond 2001, the selection procedure is unlikely to become more transparent. He says that RAS president Yuri Osipov views the foundation as a Russian version of the Nobel Committee, which also keeps its deliberations secret.

In unveiling the foundation, Abramovich and Deripaska said they were moved to act by the parlous state of Russian science. It's also great PR in the power struggles between the oligarchs and Putin over taxes and privatization of state assets, notes Skulachev. A few years ago, Skulachev says, Berezovsky tried a similar tactic when he persuaded six other businessmen to help him create a \$150 million science fund modeled after ISF. But the scheme fell apart before it got off the ground, says

Skulachev. "If they had created the foundation," he says, "it would have been more difficult for Putin to struggle with them."

Whatever the political benefits, Abramovich and Deripaska certainly have won the hearts of at least 210 scientists.

—VLADIMIR POKROVSKY, ANDREY ALLAKHVERDOV, AND MARINA ASTVATSURYAN

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## CHINA

### Academician to Lead Science Ministry

**BEIJING**—A remote-sensing expert who has been in charge of promoting high-tech enterprises has been chosen to head China's Ministry of Science and Technology (MOST). Xu Guanhua succeeds Zhu Lilan, who assumes a top legislative post within the National People's Congress.

Xu, who has been Zhu's deputy, will direct a rapidly growing science and technology budget that reached \$6.5 billion in 1999. He oversees state-run scientific institutes, including the Chinese Academy of Sciences (CAS), as well as funding for key basic research projects, high-technology development, scientific infrastructure, and international collaborations.

A native of Shanghai, the 60-year-old Xu was trained as a forestry scientist and spent 30 years working for the Chinese Academy of Agricultural and Forestry Sciences before moving to CAS. Named an academician in 1992, Xu is credited with helping to develop the country's remote-sensing industry using domestically made global information system instruments, as well as improving the research environment within CAS and nurturing young talent. "He was quite strict," says Niu Zheng, Xu's first doctoral student, who is now a research professor within the Institute of Remote Sensing Application. "But no matter how busy he was, he would always find time to discuss a scientific issue."

As executive vice minister of science and technology in charge of high-tech industries in the mid-1990s, Xu argued in a speech for "active measures to promote the venture capital market," including listing more high-tech enterprises on the country's stock exchange. He also lobbied for the application



**New minister.** Xu Guanhua has promoted venture capital markets.



**Pocket change.** Roman Abramovich (right) has followed the lead of Boris Berezovsky (left) in supporting Russian scientists.

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