

RUSSIAN SCIENCE

New R&D Chief Asserts His Authority

MOSCOW—The new head of Russian science, physicist Vladimir Fortov, has moved quickly to assert control over the country's far-flung research enterprise despite a recent government reshuffling that dismantled the ministry of science and technology and created a lower level state committee. In interviews with *Science* and a local radio station last week, Fortov made it clear that R&D policy will be set by the new committee. His words are an attempt to clarify the hierarchy of Russian science in the wake of a long-running battle between the Russian Academy of Sciences (RAS) and Boris Saltykov, the former science minister whose position was abolished in the cabinet reshuffle (*Science*, 23 August, p. 1039).

"The RAS is the most respected scientific establishment in the country," Fortov said in his first public interview since he was named head of the new state committee. But he said there are many other portions of the country's R&D efforts that fall outside the scope of the academy and, thus, must be coordinated by another body: "The range of existing institutions includes those that, in the past, were controlled by the branch ministries, for example, the nuclear physics institutes, as well as those focused on applied research," he said. "None of them could be controlled by RAS. It's the state committee that would have such authority."

Fortov's plan to use the state committee to coordinate the work of all research institutions wins plaudits from Yuri Lebedev, head of the department of the former ministry responsible for institutional reform. "One cannot manage science," says Lebedev. "One can only regulate certain relations between institutions. A state committee is the most suitable form for this activity." But others believe a more powerful body may be needed. Nikolay Vorontsov, a biologist and former head of the Duma's subcommittee on science, thinks that "the old Soviet state science committee was suitable for the old Soviet system. I strongly doubt that it will be as efficient today."

The new state committee is not yet able to conduct state policy because it ranks below ministerial level. But Fortov says he's taking steps to remedy the problem. "That is why we discussed this issue with the prime minister [Viktor Chernomyrdin]." Fortov says new regulations that spell out the committee's duties and rights will be drafted "within days ... and I'm sure that if we need some specific powers, the government will grant them to us."

But even if he gets the administrative powers he needs, the new vice premier acknowledges that he faces many problems in trying to put Russian science back on its feet. Fortov says a lack of funding remains the single biggest obstacle to progress, especially for the new state

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research centers carved out of existing institutions. "They were chosen on a competitive basis, and their status should have been reconsidered in 2 years," he says. "It is time to do it, but there's no money." This year, he noted, the centers received only 17% of their promised budget: "There's no gas in this automo-

bile. If the tanks were full, then we could judge if this policy saved [these labs] from collapse."

The problem is not about to disappear for the overall Russian science program, he added, based on preliminary talks on next year's budget. Although he is not allowed to discuss the details, Fortov noted that "the figures are unsatisfactory." Funding will be even lower than current levels once inflation is factored in, and the problem is compounded, he says, by the government's poor track record in providing money already appropriated. Research institutions around the

country have received only about 60% of the funding they were promised. At the same time, he said, the situation could improve next year if all conditions were met.

As head of the Russian Foundation for Basic Research (RFBR), Fortov knows firsthand how hard it is to run a grants program when the money doesn't arrive. "This year the foundation got only 40% to 50% of its funding. That is a fantastic shortage," he says. Although Fortov says he will eventually step down as head of the foundation, he wants to protect its high-quality, competitive, peer-reviewed research. "In my conversation with the prime minister I stipulated a certain transitional period—half a year or 1 year," he explains. "I don't want a new boss to come and fire people and change the style of work."

Fortov calls himself a evolutionist, not a revolutionary. But he says there will be some changes in how the former science ministry was run: "It's natural that, since the status of this body has changed, its structure should be different." Among those almost certain to go is Andrey Fonotov, Saltykov's former deputy and his closest ally.

Apart from fiscal worries, Fortov says his most difficult problem will be finding the right balance between his roles as researcher and administrator. His ideal top official, he says, "is a researcher with a taste for administrative work," and while head of the RFBR he typically spent 3 to 4 days a week working either at the RAS Research Center of High-Temperature Physics of Pulse Effects, in Chernogolovka near Moscow, or the High-Temperature Institute in the capital. Now that his administrative workload has been elevated, Fortov says, "I will probably work less as a researcher. And that's the most painful problem for me."

—Andrey Allakhverdov and Vladimir Pokrovsky

Allakhverdov and Pokrovsky are writers in Moscow.

BIOMEDICAL RESEARCH

New 'Basic Research' Chief at NIH

National Institutes of Health (NIH) director Harold Varmus last week appointed Marvin Cassman, acting director of the National Institute of General Medical Sciences (NIGMS), to permanently head the institute. Cassman, who has been deputy director of NIGMS since 1989, has been heading the agency since 1993 when former director Ruth Kirschstein became deputy director of NIH. NIGMS supports basic medical and biological research not aimed at a specific disease. Its 1996 budget of \$947 million funds 3300 research grants in cell biology, biophysics, genetics, developmental biology, pharmacology, physiology, and biological chemistry.

Cassman, a biochemist, joined NIGMS in 1975 as an administrator in the Cellular and Molecular Basis of Disease Program. He also has advised Congress and the White House on science and technology policy. Varmus singled out for praise Cassman's leadership in creating and leading a research and training program established in 1987 to use structural biology in the fight against AIDS. "Dr. Cassman is an outstanding scientist and scientific program manager whose skills are ideally suited for this position at the helm of NIH's 'basic research institute,'" Varmus said.

—Gretchen Vogel