

In Defense of Science

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By Konstantin Sonin

State Duma Speaker Boris Gryzlov opened a new front in the government's war against science in an interview he gave to Gazeta.ru on Friday. He attacked the Russian Academy of Sciences commission on pseudo-science for its criticism of the government's Clean Water program in which Gryzlov has a clear financial interest. Gryzlov is one of the two patent holders on a water filter that is being mass-purchased and installed in thousands of government institutions under the aegis of the Clean Water program. The situation is dangerous for two reasons besides Gryzlov's blatant conflict of interest and possible abuse of power.

First, although the average educated person perceives Gryzlov's attack against the commission on pseudo-science as absurd and motivated by ignorance and self-interest, most ordinary people and even top officials could easily consider it to be fully justified. When the national media report on stories of poltergeists or perpetual motion machines, people who know better pass it off as nonsense, but millions of others perceive it as hard science.

State agencies have initiated or are funding a significant number of the projects that the commission deems to be based on questionable scientific principles. Incidentally, the commission's report identifies only those projects that flagrantly contradict the basic laws of science everyone learned in high school, making it an easy read for the average person. But the attitude toward science now is so dismal that Gryzlov actually stands a chance of gaining the upper hand by discrediting the commission's findings.

The second reason that causes concern is Russia's sad experience during the 20th century. Attacks similar to Gryzlov's destroyed the sciences in the Soviet Union in the 1920s and 1930s. And now 90 years later, the status of Russian science is incomparably lower than it was when the Communists launched a war against scientists.

The only exception, of course, was physics, and this was only because of the country's urgent need to develop an atomic bomb to keep on par with the United States. Nonetheless, 20th-

century Soviet and Russian history painfully shows that the government can pose a serious threat to scientific advancement.

But why would politicians have such a strong interest in waging a war against science? Citizens entrust their tax money to politicians so that they can carry out projects for the public good. Politicians then ask the scientific community to evaluate the relative merit of each project and to give recommendations for implementing it.

In countries with effective governments, politicians are answerable to the people for the success of the projects they propose and implement. If a project fails, the politician risks losing re-election. That motivates politicians to turn to prominent outside specialists to help boost the chances of success in any given project.

In Russia, where people have always had a deep mistrust of government officials, ordinary citizens rely on the scientific community to tell them if the politicians are trying to pull the wool over their eyes with regard to a particular project. This is one of the reasons why there are so many attempts to discredit and undermine the country's scientific community. At the same time, it destroys one of the last mechanisms allowing Russia's leaders to get objective feedback from the people.

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