

Skolkovo and Gulag for scientists

To Profs. Roger D. Kornberg kornberg@stanford.edu
Wolfgang Ketterle ketterle@mit.edu
Alan J. Heeger ajhe@physics.ucsb.edu
Mikhail D. Lukin lukin@physics.harvard.edu
Eugene A. Demler demler@physics.harvard.edu
John M. Doyle doyle@physics.harvard.edu
Tommaso Calarco tommaso.calarco@uni-ulm.de
Arden L. Bement bement@purdue.edu
Dieter Bimberg bimberg@physik.TU-Berlin.DE
Richard A. Lerner rlerner@scripps.edu
Alex Lvovsky lvov@ucalgary.ca
Lev Pitaevsky lev@science.unitn.it
Vladimir M. Shalaev shalaev@purdue.edu
Fedor Jelezko fedor.jelezko@uni-ulm.de
Detlev Ganten zuschauerservice@br-online.de
Siegfried Dais info.se@de.bosch.com
Philip Frost ir@ymbiosciences.com

July 10, 2011

Dear colleagues,

Each one of you is either engaged or considering engagement in the Skolkovo Project in Russia. A new conference of the Skolkovo project will be held in the middle of July in Moscow. In our previous letter (see attached) half year ago we tried to bring your attention to the problem of Russian scientists currently imprisoned, or under active investigation by Russian security agencies, all of them being accused of "spying" activity and/or illegal transfer of allegedly secret technological information to other countries. In our letter we listed seven of them: Drs. Valentin Danilov, Igor Reshetin, Mikhail Ivanov, Sergei Visir, Ivan Pet'kov, Evgenij Afanas'ev, and Svyatoslav Bobyshev; most of them imprisoned for very long terms, some exceeding 10 years. Leading Russian scientists (including late Nobel Prize winner V. L. Ginzburg) in their many calls to research communities stated that accusations against those scientists are not true and are dictated by the motives other than real justice or real state security (see three documents in Russian attached).

We argued that that issue is closely related to the Skolkovo project, since any international collaboration with Russian scientists is potentially open to the same kind of accusations and actions by Russian security apparatus. We implored you to take a close look at those cases and do something to make them open to the international community and ideally result in their release from unjust imprisonment.

No response from you ensued (with two exceptions: one scientist of Russian origin talked to one of us, and even tried to explore the situation with other Russians at the last meeting on the project, and one European scientists, who requested more information).

Before the forthcoming Skolkovo meeting in Moscow, we want to renew our call for action. We don't believe that with those scientists behind the bars, any collaboration between Western scientists and Russian government-funded system will be moral, beneficial for science, productive (in terms of scientific output), and even safe for the participants.

With all the signs of fake democracy in Russia, with largely government-controlled economy, whereby the government systematically seizes huge chunks of successful private companies and imprison their former owners (be reminded of Khodorkovsky's imprisonment and Magnitsky's death in prison), with human rights violated on a grand scale, with opposition suppressed by the government, and independent mass media (especially TV) virtually shut down by it, with the government and criminal cartels blended together, with unwanted journalists being murdered in the street, with corruption having grown to the point that Russia got to nearly the top of of the list of most corrupted countries in the world,

-- we believe those Skolkovo funds are "devil's money", no matter what is anybody's justification for taking it. Of course, everyone of you is free to take it. And not even think about what is the moral price of it, or what you can do to alleviate those worries or even to protect your own interests in near future. You are free scientists in a free world and may have your own idea about the situation. Besides, any extra-funding, especially for research wouldn't hurt, would it? After all, anyone of us, researchers, are able to do our research thanks mostly to tax-payers' money.

But before you make your decision without taking any action that would possibly mitigate your own possible predicament, you may want to consider a few things:

You may expect that the Russian authorities may want (and in a few cases known to us, did it already) to have most detailed information from you about your personal life (e.g. you personal tax statements for a few last years -- a thing unprecedented in the Western countries we know about; your family information, etc). That the Russ-government may want to control very tightly whatever you are going to do within your projects, and very likely -- to insist on having a decisive vote (and perhaps -- a veto right) on how and for what direction of your research the fund are going to be used, and who is allowed -- or not allowed -- to be part of it. You may expect to discover that a sizable part of your Russia-based collaborators have (officially undisclosed) security apparatus affiliation, including professional researchers; that even security-non-affiliated Russia-based collaborators will be compelled to write detailed reports of their activities to their security "handlers". To discover that any new information in sensitive areas (such as e. g. the theory and experimental data on coding/decoding, in particular in quantum information), will be shipped out to classified Russian labs before you get permission for publications. You may expect a huge gap between great ideas of international research efforts and grim reality of infamous Russian bureaucratic and thoroughly corrupted government, that will greatly reduce the real amount money coming to your lab due to all kind of either straight or hidden bribes, which may eat up to 50% of your funding. To run into a no less infamous Russian corporate law, largely inadequate, full of controversies, and in final account -- irrelevant when it comes to Russian political realities.

And on the top of that, you may discover -- and pretty soon, that the the «research part» of the project has a "double-use" nature. That all the research activity with all the great names involved, in addition of its (dubious) significance for science, could be just a "front" for a huge construction/development/corporate project on building the entire city with large infrastructure with highways, railroads, airport, communications, etc., with a multi-multi-billion budget, exceeding that for your research by orders of magnitude, with a great part of that budget being siphoned out from the country -- and the project never completed -- in one of the biggest scams in the history of corruption in Russia. You may discover that the entire project is a fake, and all of you are just a "window dressing" in that scam. And that upon the completion of that scam, you may hear that "thank you, but your services are not needed anymore". And if some of you will vent your displeasure with that, you may discover themselves arrested and accused in spying and/or anti-government activity and face a mocked-up trial behind closed doors, with all the

"witnesses" and "experts" being affiliated with security services. A good part of you are still Russian citizens, which makes it easier to accomplish. If that happens, who knows, you may wish that the professional community make a strong effort to pull you out...

And you also may bear in mind that in the next year, 2012, there will be a presidential election held in Russia, and that with almost certainty, a current Prime-Minister, Mr. Putin, will be elected, same as in the past, as the President, for two terms again, but this time it will go for 12 years. Welcome to the realities of even more corrupted Russia with a Stalin-inspired dictator.

Now, if you are not much concerned about moral issue of taking money from Skolkovo project while other scientists are thrown into Gulag, and you are not concerned about trying to pull them out, consider at least an effort to protect your own interests by using the issue of imprisoned scientists as a "truth test" and government's willingness to collaborate with you. Tell the Russian government: "prove to us that we can trust you by making a small but definitive gesture: let those Gulag-imprisoned scientists go. Or at least, held an open trial, with members of the international research community included as experts."

Is this doable? Is it safe for you? Of course, it is! None of those prisoners present a real threat to Russian security, government, or even personally to Putin or Medvedev. You are a powerful group, with three of you -- Nobel prize winners and the rest of you -- top movers and shakers in your respective fields. If, as a group, you speak with one voice, what can you be afraid of? At the moment, the Russian government needs you, as a group, much more than you need them! Why be so meek about at least this self-protecting, let alone moral, issue? After all, there is no need for you to pound your fist on a table; you can explain to Russian government that to do what you want to be done, may actually be a great propaganda bonanza for them. Just beat it!

Most sincerely yours,

Prof. Alexander E. Kaplan
Dept. of Electr. & Comp. Eng.
Johns Hopkins University
3400 N. Charles St.
Baltimore, MD 21218, USA
ph. (410) 366-3056
E-mail: alexander.kaplan@jhu.edu
web: <http://psi.ece.jhu.edu/~kaplan>
(at the moment at the University of Ulm, Germany, till July 23'11).

Prof. Vladimir B. Sandomirsky
Dept. of Physics
Bar-Ilan University
Ramat-Gan, 52900 Israel
ph. (972)3936-6524
E-mail: samgomv@biu.013.net.il
web: <http://www.biu.ac.il/PH/sandomirsky/>