

“Expir” met with Deputy General Director of the Russian State Scientific Foundation (RSSF) Yuri Simachev

Expir: Let's take a closer look at what kind of research is funded by the RSSF. Despite the third year of your work, still not all members of the scientific community have a clear idea about this.

Yuri Simachev: in accordance with the Federal Law "On the Russian Scientific Foundation and Amendments to Certain Legislative Acts of the Russian Federation" RSF finances the conduct of fundamental and exploratory scientific research.

Exploratory scientific research is a research aimed at obtaining new knowledge, for the purpose of their subsequent practical application carried out by performing scientific research.

That is, exploratory scientific research is a broad category. For simplicity's sake, let's say this: our foundation cannot support development work. And the Foundation can support scientific research, whether fundamental or exploratory.

And the foundation can support scientific research, whether fundamental or exploratory. I would like to draw your readers' attention to the fact that 2015 was marked by certain priorities in the selection of research for funding. They relate to responding to global challenges, primarily social challenges, in particular those related to health, nutrition, personal safety and social harmony. And if we are talking about priorities, then we are definitely talking not only about fundamental research, because we want to make progress in specific areas.

Another thing is that some colleagues who are engaged in exploratory research at fairly advanced stages sometimes have objective problems related to the fact that there is not always interest in publishing in scientific journals at these stages.

And our main focus is on the presence of applicants for RSSF grant of a certain basic number of publications in journals indexed by WoS or Scopus (at least five publications from the head of the group over the past five years; at least three – on socio-humanitarian studies), as well as the fact that the results of your work performed with the help of foundation proceeds, they must necessarily become public.

Therefore, if the publication of the results is not planned, it looks strange to us. I think that the division of research into fundamental and exploratory is rather arbitrary. And in some areas, such as, for example, medicine, it is even harmful. The fact is that fundamental research can be quite typical, and can lead to the emergence of fundamentally new results (for example, transformational research, in which the horizon of our knowledge about the world is expanding).

Fundamental changes in approaches to how fundamental research should be conducted are especially important for the Russian Federation. Therefore, we are very interested in things that arise at the junction of different fields of knowledge, when the methods of one science are applied in another. For example, when mathematics, physics, biology, medicine find their new "reflection" in sociology, psychology, economics. Now one of the most interesting macro directions of research is neuroscience.

Expir: Do you have any requirements for the composition of the team applying for the grant?

Yuri Simachev: The team for the RSF is one of the most important components of the successful implementation of the project. The quality of the team is very important. First of all, it is determined by the image of the head – what publications he has (moreover, it is not so important how many of them are published or what kind journals they are published), the expert council evaluates which conferences he participated in, who gathered around him.

The supervisor is responsible for his team, including reputational, although he discusses the issues of substitutions in the team with the foundation. Secondly, the Russian Federation has introduced rather strict requirements for the participation of young researchers in the implementation of projects: at least half of the team should be young scientists (up to 39 years old).

But usually it comes out even more. There are also separate requirements regarding the amount of salary that should fall to the share of young researchers. Of course, the most important thing is the content of the project itself, its scientific viability, and the social significance of the expected results.

The Foundation supports civil –oriented research, and the main thing for us is how their results will affect the life of society. This is the main focus of the RNF.

In general, the requirements of RNF correspond to the best practices that foreign colleagues have – for example, in the same DFG or NSF. And, most importantly, they are quite transparent. They are all presented on our website <http://rnf.rfp/>. There you can also find all the reports of the foundation, interviews of members of the expert council. The system in which applications are submitted has now been improved to minimize the risk of incorrect completion of the tender documentation.

I will not hide that it was very annoying when, within the framework of the first initiative competition of the RSF, out of a sufficiently large number of projects 12774, only 11215 were allowed to participate, because some of the applicants did not pass on formal grounds due to inaccuracies made during the registration of applications. But now we see that over the past three years, strong research teams

from Russia have adapted to our requirements and they match without any problems.

Expir: How do you control the spending of funds?

Yuri Simachev: When allocating a grant, the foundation enters into a triple agreement between the Russian Federation, the head of the research team and representatives of the organization where this team will carry out the project. We don't care what it will be – research institutes, universities, commercial companies. The main thing is that its statutory documents should fix the activity of carrying out scientific research as the main one. It is important for us that the organization provides certain conditions – accounting, access to the necessary infrastructure.

The only thing that the fund strictly monitors when spending the grant is so that the head of the group does not let himself have it all on his salary, so that young specialists won't be offended". But there are no special problems with this, our scientists are quite honest and fair. We also strive to ensure that the level of overhead costs is not overstated. And then please spend the money: on salary, on equipment, on business trips, if they correspond to the goals of scientific research. The cost of RSSF grants turns out to be very flexible.

Expir: How is the examination procedure in RSF structured?

Yuri Simachev: Today, expert corps of RSF includes approximately 4,500 people. There are from two to five experts who involved in this work on a paid basis. They evaluate the application, write a conclusion. Why from two to five?

Because then there is a certain level for screening out applicants for certain parameters and the remaining materials are sent for further examination.

The foundation started in a situation when the experts were, first of all, from the Russian Foundation for Basic Research and from RSSF. But after that, a special additional set was made taking into account the proposals of colleagues from the Russian Academy of Sciences and various departments. Then the winners of the RSSF competitions were invited to become our experts. Finally, an announcement appeared on our website (this offer is still valid), which invited experts who meet our criteria to a competitive selection and those who passed it also joined the expert pool.

The foundation also attentively listens to comments made by members of the scientific community and conducts internal rotation of experts, excluding some from further interaction. The issues of the quality of expertise were seriously analyzed at the sections of the expert council of the RSSF.

If it was clear that there were serious grounds for replacement, the experts were replaced. So the foundation is in a constant process of setting up and improving the system.the quality of expertise. Now the expertise of the Russian

Federation includes assessments not only by Russian experts, but also by foreign ones.

In this regard, in addition to 3,500 Russians, a thousand foreign experts have been working since the end of last year, who are quite strong if we analyze their level of publication activity.

Foreign experts are not needed for show at all. They are involved in order to remove the problem of conflict of interest in a number of areas where there are strong scientists in Russia, but the circle is "tight". By the way, the opinion of the members of the sections of the expert council of the foundation may not coincide with the opinion of the experts, because the latter perform some preliminary evaluation function, but the section is responsible for choosing the winners. The members of the sections are known to everyone and therefore it is not easy for them.

We have a number of strict rules that do not allow conflicts of interest to arise. They take into account labor and family relations, relations related to scientific leadership, the availability of joint scientific works performed with applicants for a grant. Both the foundation and its expert council are closely monitoring that these rules are observed. Our scientific community is used to everyone getting something with some regularity. This attitude is especially characteristic of the academic environment, so a significant part of scientists at first assumed that the funds of RSF were some kind of additional payment for what they already do. RSF has a different logic, project-based: within the grant, there should be enough money for everything: for business trips, investments in equipment, consumables, salaries, etc.

Expir: Isn't your selection too strict?

Yuri Simachev: the competition for RSSF grant on average is from 1/6 to 1/10. Scientists themselves do not always adequately relate to these indicators. They say, how so? We are preparing, we are trying, there is no place to get more money for science, and you are treating us so harshly. But it is selection and the state has set certain requirements for RSSF by law: world-class research projects must be supported.