

POLITICS

Ukrainian scientists in forefront of protest

Researchers rally as government shuns international ties.

BY ALISON ABBOTT

Ukrainian graduate student Oleksandr Skotokhod has gone from worrying about his thesis defence to fearing for the safety of himself and his colleagues. His PhD plans were put on hold after he was swept up in antigovernment protests in Kiev that have claimed at least four lives. Among the dead is geophysicist Yuriy Verbitsky, whose body was discovered on 22 January after he was kidnapped from the hospital where he was being treated for wounds received in the protest.

Scientists such as Skotokhod, who is based at the Institute of Molecular Biology and Genetics in Kiev, were among the first to set up camp on 2 December in Independence Square, also known as the Maidan, or ‘Square’. The camp was established after police attacked demonstrators protesting against Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovych’s 11th-hour refusal to sign an association agreement, agreed in principle in 2012 after years of negotiations, that would have brought Ukraine closer to the European Union.

At least 100 scientists from 20 research institutes quickly joined in. As well as peacefully supporting the antigovernment protests, they are pushing for better support and a more competitive, westernized system for science, including closer ties to European Union research programmes.

Their protests intensified when the government decreed on 21 January that any organization receiving money from abroad — including, for example, a scientific society — would be considered a ‘foreign agency’ and subject to intense security surveillance.

The Ukrainian Physical Society is among those calling for the repeal of the decree. In a letter to the government and parliament it says that “the state is not providing adequate support for sciences ... Meanwhile, this law renders impossible the non-governmental support of sciences from international sources.”

There has been a steady decline in spending on science. In 1991, when Ukraine gained independence from the Soviet Union, science spending accounted for 2.44% of the gross domestic product. By 2011 it had dropped to 0.73%, and on 16 January this year, parliament approved a massive 30% cut for 2014. Scientists from the Maidan camp immediately organized a protest in front of the

Ukrainian House cultural centre.

Scientists with international experience also complain that the conservative National Academy of Sciences (NAS), a learned society that runs Ukraine’s 173 research institutes, has done nothing to protect science or to reform its Soviet-style management. In 2007, researchers created a parallel organization called the Ukrainian Science Club (USC), which has lobbied actively for science. One big victory was the 2011 creation of a government-funded programme to provide around US\$1 million a year for centres of excellence called State Key Laboratories, selected in tough competition by an international advisory panel. However, the first such centre, for molecular and cell biology, ran for only 15 months before the government slashed its funding, says USC executive director Nataliya Shulga, a molecular biologist at the National Pedagogical Dragomanov University in Kiev. “Our science lives in an outdated environment and it is hard to really change things,” she says. This year, the government stopped the key laboratories programme altogether.

The USC has also been critical of the national academy’s silence over the anti-government protests. The NAS put out a public message of condolence for Verbitsky, who worked at the NAS Institute of Geophysics in Lviv, that mentioned only his “tragic death” without referring to its circumstances.

Life on the Maidan is tough, but the science camp enjoys support from colleagues who donate clothes and food. Research institutes in Kiev organize their scientists’ schedules so that the tents can be occupied around the clock. The increasing violence means that now only men sleep there at night — in thick sleeping bags on raised wooden pallets to protect them against bitter temperatures, which have plummeted as low as -16°C . Shulga and others have created the Open University of Maidan, organizing hundreds of lectures to entertain protestors since 7 December, with themes ranging from economics to how the brain works. It also commissions and distributes popular-science leaflets.

Skotokhod hopes that the situation will have stabilized enough for him to reschedule his thesis defence in the spring. But he has invested in a snowboarding helmet and protective glasses. “The fight might be longer, and the police and agents provocateurs are violent,” he says. ■