

Open Letter to President von der Leyen

July 25th, 2023

To the attention of
Ursula von der Leyen
President of the European Commission
Rue de la Loi / Wetstraat 200
1049 Brussels
Belgium

Dear President of the European Commission,
Dear Ursula von der Leyen,

In this open letter, I am writing to you in my role as the president of the European Council of Doctoral Candidates and Junior Researchers, an association representing more than a million early-career researchers across Europe. Together with my colleague, Eurodoc's vice president Pil Maria Saugmann, I have just returned from a visit to Kyiv, where we had the pleasure to meet with representatives of young scientists from 17 out of the 24 Ukrainian regions, who had traveled at their own expense to Kyiv for this occasion, and we discussed the needs and the situation of the Ukrainian young scientists. At the Ministry of Education and Science, we met with Deputy Minister **Denys Kurbatov**, Director of the National Research Foundation **Olga Polotska**, and their colleagues. Furthermore, we met with the Plenipotentiary Advisor of the President's Funds for Education, Science and Sport **Olga Budnyk**, and members of the Ukrainian Parliament **Yuliia Ovchynnykova** and **Roman Hryshchuk**, as well as Chief consultant of the Parliamentary Committee on Education, Science and Innovation **Oleh Levchuk**.

Given the desperate situation in Ukraine, it was impressive to observe the ongoing reforms in Ukrainian higher education and its current work towards measures to improve the conditions of academics, as well as towards mitigating the repercussions of the war. It was deeply encouraging and inspiring to hear the stories of those young scientists who have been facing difficulties due to the war but yet are dedicated to conducting outstanding research and academic activities. Even the need to conduct parts of the meetings at the Ministry's shelter due to a missile attack was but a small glimpse into the reality our colleagues are living through for 517 days now. The mental strength of our Ukrainian colleagues and their energy in spite of all hardship was remarkable to witness. Moreover, they are dedicated to continuing pursuing innovative research that will have societal impact for all of us.

Despite the cruel war, the research and education activities of our Ukrainian colleagues do not principally fall behind academia in the European Union. However, they are impeded by systematic hurdles unimaginable by most of our Western European colleagues. Lack of infrastructure and equipment, financial shortcomings and salaries not even closely sufficient to make ends meet – those are just a few of the issues that were brought about or worsened to an unbearable level by the Russian war. For instance, according to the data of the Young Scientists' Council of Ukraine, there were around 16000 young scientists in 2021. Now in 2023, there are only around 11000, with 5000 of them who have been directly affected by the war.

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The decrease in the numbers of young scientists raises particular concerns. Without intervention, an academic generation will be lost, which will have consequences lasting long into the future: the current generation of Ukrainian young scientists is not just shaping the higher education and research sector currently, but crucially will do so for the decades to come as senior academic staff. If they leave academia now, they will not be in academia in a decade or two. The Ministry, the Funders and the Young Scientists in Ukraine are working hard to make academic career paths more attractive for early career researchers in Ukraine in order to gain and retain them for research and teaching. Nevertheless, with the impact of the war, it is crucial that European partners help them to strengthen and support the higher education sector and the researchers within Ukraine itself.

The various measures taken by the European Union and the member states since the beginning of the full-scale invasion have been crucial. In the name of the European early-career researchers, we particularly welcome that the recent recommendations for a Ukraine Facility finally explicitly include research and education in the recovery and support measures. This is particularly important not just with regard to the Ukrainian economy, but equally for its society and democracy, as the Council of Europe likewise argues.

A strong research and higher education sector is necessary in today's knowledge economy and will be important for a sustainable recovery after the war: Ukrainian academia must receive the necessary support to in particular retain the current generation of Ukrainian early-career researchers as they will be essential to shaping the higher education and research sector for the decades to come. We find it thus imperative that further measures match the scale and pertinence of the matter in a timely manner, as recovery, including of the Ukrainian research and higher education sector, needs to start now.

In the upcoming days, Eurodoc's Ukraine task force together with the Young Scientists' Council of Ukraine will elaborate in detail on the outcomes of the discussions we had during these three days and summarize specific recommendations based on the needs of our colleagues in Ukraine.

In the meantime, more information on our visit can be found on our website.¹ Furthermore, the problems and activities in the different regions are provided in the presentations of our colleagues, the Ukrainian young scientists published on their platform.²

As European early-career researchers and as EU citizens, we urge you to implement the much-needed measures soon. Beyond frontiers, across the European continent, we are a community, and this concerns us all.

The vice president and myself, we remain at your disposal.

Sincerely,

Sebastian Dahle,
Eurodoc president
sebastian.dahle@eurodoc.net

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Resources:

¹ <https://eurodoc.net/news/2023/a-strong-research-and-higher-education-sector-is-crucial-for-a-sustainable-recovery-of>

² <https://drive.google.com/drive/u/0/folders/1DI93Xt4ed6Oj40VHiEXQIH1Bd40ZU7f>