



**NATIONAL RESEARCH  
FOUNDATION  
OF UKRAINE**

# HERALD

## **Herald #1 January-February 2022**

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**The National Research  
Foundation of Ukraine  
was established in 2018**

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**The Foundation held  
first two calls in 2020,  
another three – in 2021**

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**The results of two of  
them will be announced  
in spring 2022**



A lot has been done over these years: the online system for registering of experts, submission of applications and providing reviews has been adjusted; a database of experts has been created; the rules of call participation have been improved. And the most important is that hundreds of scientific teams have received a decent financing.

Achievements of these results became possible thanks to hard, painstaking and unpaid work of the Foundation's creators, members of the Scientific Council, and the Scientific Committee of the National Council for Development of Science and Technology. It was these "pioneers" who developed regulations, approved reports and improved terms and conditions of new calls. Today, looking back, they are surprised at the amount of work done and admit that the most difficult was to "squeeze dreams into the regulations".

Their efforts, dreams and hopes are a bright page in the history of Ukrainian science. It must not be forgotten! That is why we plan to talk about the creators, co-creators and friends of the Foundation on the pages of the Herald of the National Research Foundation of Ukraine.

We also plan to talk about the further development plans of the Foundation (in particular, regarding financing), about the implementation of scientific and technical research and development, about peculiarities of experts' and call commissions' work, about difficulties and success.

The first story of the "Herald" is dedicated to the first head of the Foundation - Leonid Yatsenko, Academician of the National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine, whose term of office ends in March 2022.



The work of the National Research Foundation of Ukraine is always in the focus of public attention. But the "human factor" remains overlooked: how much effort it takes to work in the Scientific Council and what challenges its members face.

We decided to ask these questions to the Head of the Foundation, Leonid Yatsenko, physicist, Academician of the National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine.



Head of NRFU  
Leonid YATSENKO:

**I am proud of the brilliant results of researchers who were successful in the calls!**



*– Dear Professor Yatsenko, in March 2019, the Government made a decision to appoint you as Head of the National Research Foundation of Ukraine. Please tell us about how you found yourself at that point?*

– Three years after the Law of Ukraine "On Research and Scientific-Technical Activity" was adopted at the end of 2015, the NRFU remained a 'big dream' for researchers. Since the Scientific Committee was elected in 2017, there was some development. A year later, in the summer of 2018, the Cabinet of Ministers decided to establish the Foundation, and to approve its Regulations, developed with the direct participation of the Scientific Committee.

The elections to the Scientific Council of the Foundation were to be held in autumn. Creation of the Council was to be the next step on the way of launching the NRFU. It was the time my second term as Director of the Institute of Physics of the National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine had ended, which gave me finally the opportunity to focus on doing research. But, when the elections to the Scientific Council were announced, my colleagues came to me with the words: "It's good that you are no longer the Director, now you can run the election!"

I was elected to the Scientific Council, but before the founding meeting the members of the Council said: "You have management experience and there is no one else to become the Head..."



– *The researcher must not hold managerial positions – that was one of the conditions for being elected to the Scientific Council. The Council included brilliant scientists who were eager for changes but lacked significant managerial experience. How did you and your colleagues face this challenge?*

– In order to launch NRFU operational activities, it was necessary to elaborate a Provision on the election of the Executive Director, develop and approve in the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine the Procedure for call selection and financing, the Procedure for formation and use of funds, and many other things.

And we really did it: in a short time, "from ascraton", we issued the necessary regulatory documents. At the end of 2019 these documents were approved by the Government and the work of the Foundation was launched. The first calls were announced in spring 2020.

By the way, in addition to the 'regulations', it was necessary to create an online database for registering of experts, submitting applications, and reviews in tight deadlines. And in spring, 2020, the database for registration of experts was already working. Of course, it was impossible to create an ideal database at once, so we tested and improved it "under way".

– *The Scientific Council works on the voluntary basis, and its members do not have the right to participate in the Foundation's calls. Professor, why did you agree to become a member, and later, the Head of the NRFU, which closed for you the way to participate in calls? I am sure that you have ambitious research plans that you would like to realize. Do you regret this?*

– All members of the Scientific Council regularly ask themselves the question 'Why I am doing this?', especially after non-constructive criticism in mass media or social networks. With this choice, they closed the way to participation in calls for themselves and their close relatives.

I am sure that this norm needs to be changed (at least, in relation to close relatives), because fighting corruption is a good thing, but researchers still need to be trusted, and not punished for hard unpaid work. The Scientific Council works on the voluntary basis and this work is very intensive.

This year we held 43 meetings, and in 2021 - 54. At the same time, most members of the Scientific Council are actively working in WG's, analysing reports on the stages of current projects implementation. The establishment period of the NRFU operation has generally finished, but the intense work continues.

*– You have mentioned critics. Leonid, how do You perceive non-constructive criticism?*

– The attention of researchers to the Foundation’s work is very big. Of course, any new institution often has problems, and these problems are actively criticized in mass media and social networks. A lot of criticism (and even accusations of bureaucratization) are caused by the limitations related to the fact that the NRFU still operates only public funds and their use is strictly regulated by current legislation. In general, the criticism is constructive, we listen and respond to it.

*– Two calls were announced in 2020, and three more in 2021. Usually, preparatory work preceding important events remains "backstage". And yet, how much effort is spent on designing a new call? What does preparatory work consist of?*

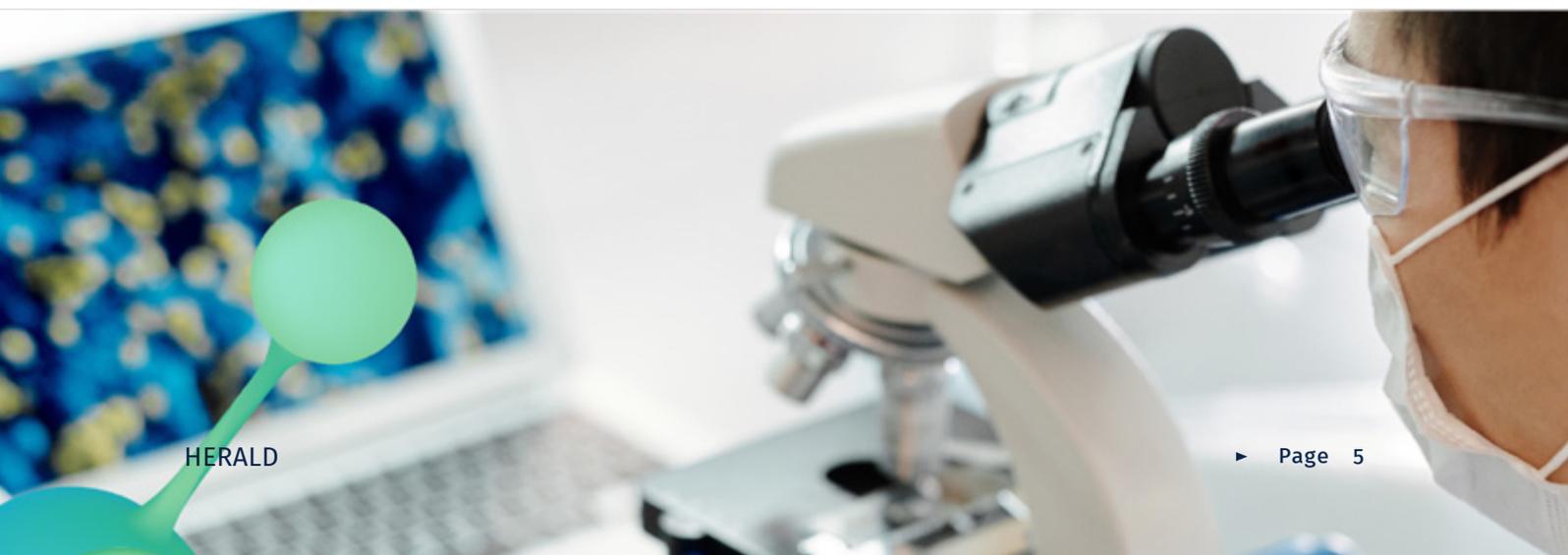
– A lot of time and efforts of the Scientific Council members and the Foundation's management are spent on preparation of each call. It is vital to consider every detail, to design clear and understandable conditions of the call.

Of course, we are trying to find an opportunity to simplify the requirements for project teams as much as possible, but only in compliance with the norms of the current regulations and legislation. Members of the Scientific Council come out with a lot of ideas and proposals for conducting calls.

For example, the report for the intermediate stage of the project should be as short as possible, or there should be only one report annually. However, these proposals collide with current norms, and as a result, the Scientific Council receives yet another portion of accusations of bureaucracy. Therefore, the work on changes in regulatory and legislative acts continues.

In particular, it is necessary to make significant changes to the Procedure for call selection and financing of NRFU projects for implementation of scientific research and developments (such changes are currently being developed), changes to the Law "On Research, Scientific-Technical Activities", etc. I hope that in the near future we will succeed in unlocking the possibility of grant support not only in one area, but in eight other areas, provided in the Law "On Research and Scientific-Technical Activities".

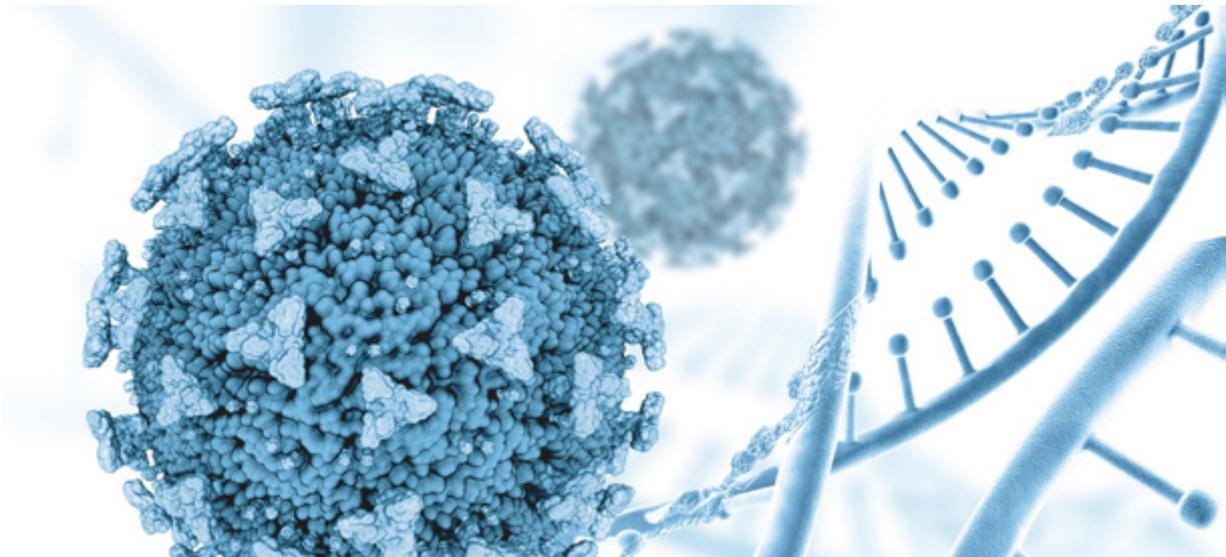
The task of the Foundation and the Scientific Council is to develop the procedures for conducting next calls, so that at the moment of unblocking to be ready for launching new calls.





- *The terms and conditions of new calls are significantly different from the previous ones. What has been improved this year?*
- In 2021, the Scientific Council of the Foundation updated the Procedure for reviewing and expertise of projects for the implementation of scientific research and development significantly. In the updated Procedure, the problems and shortcomings of the call procedure are taken into account as much as possible, in particular, safeguards against biased expertise are established. This Procedure can be found on the Foundation's website.

Among the changes, the most important are the following: the Call Commission now consists of panels formed according to thematic areas. Each of panels includes at least five persons. Each application is accompanied by two (not by one, as it was in 2020) supervisors, who are determined by the Call Commission on proposal of the panel. On the suggestion of supervisors, the Call Commission approves the rating list of possible experts for each application. The Foundation asks the first three experts on the list for their consent to do the reviewing. If one of them refuses, the proposal is sent to the next expert on the rating list.



Unfortunately, search for experts is the most problematic moment in the work of Call Commissions, which requires maximum attention and time. Another innovation of the updated Procedure is that supervisors are to interact with experts and check the expert's conclusion for completeness, truthfulness and reason. If deficiencies are found, the conclusion will be returned for revision. This procedure is described in the updated Procedure in a very detailed way, in order to maintain a balance between the rights of an expert and the rights of the Call Commission. This means that an expert's conclusion is no longer an ultimate truth - scores like 100 points or 10 points must be reliably substantiated! One of the critical problems is the problem of disagreement between experts. Of course, the reviews of all three experts cannot coincide completely (because the NRFU relies on expert reviews, rather than numerical evaluations according to formal parameters).

If the application is scored, for example, 80, 85 and 90 points, then the difference between them does not exceed the critical value (the procedure describes in detail how the difference and the critical value are calculated) and the final score will be the arithmetic average of the three scores, in this example – 85. But in case the application is scored, for example, 80, 85 and 30 points, then a special application

review procedure was applied for such cases, according to which the final score is determined taking into account the opinions of all Call Commission's members who are in the panel.



I would like to emphasize that members of the Scientific Council and the Foundation's Directorate are always 'in touch' with the scientific community. We are always happy to help, explain and correct shortcomings.

*– In the first two calls, 216 projects won, approximately half of which currently receive state grant support. Among them are pioneering projects in medicine, ecology, economics, etc. Most teams already have excellent results. However, there is still not enough information about these projects in the public information area. In your opinion, how can this be changed?*

– The NRFU is engaged in active informational work to promote the results of implementation of current projects, but the researchers should also promote their achievements more actively. In many European calls, one of the requirements for projects is promotion of the research results. Therefore, in applications, researchers indicate how they plan to promote their work, disseminate knowledge about the project (have a project website, Facebook page, YouTube channel, etc.). This promotion plan is also evaluated by experts.

And this affects the general score of the project. I am sure that this requirement should be introduced in our calls as well.

*– Looking back at the time that has passed since you were appointed Head of the NRFU, tell us what these years have been like for you? What are you proud of?*

– They turned out to be much more complicated than I thought at the beginning. I am proud of the brilliant results of many projects, breakthrough research which is carried out with the help of grant funding.

If you compare the Foundation with a living organism, it is a little child that is only taking its first steps. Of course, it needs to be supported and protected to grow strong and independent.

*By Svitlana GALATA*

