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Press release
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From Kyiv to Graz:
A researcher tells the story of how he escaped

Graz, 24 November 2022: On 24 February 2022, an entire country was plunged into war practically overnight. Russia advanced into Ukraine and attacked the country on a large scale. The result was a massive wave of refugees, including scientists, who wanted to flee the war zone. One of these scientists is Oleksandr Bondarenko, who was able to leave the country not least due to quick assistance from Med Uni Graz. He can now continue his investigation of an interesting and very challenging research topic here.

Bad omens

A feeling of nervousness had descended over Ukraine in February. Russian troops were assembling on the borders to Ukraine, yet naturally it was denied that an attack was being planned. Nevertheless, the U.S. and other countries moved their embassies from Kyiv to Lviv in the west. For many Ukrainians, it was then clear that war was inevitable, as Oleksandr Bondarenko says. On February 24 the time had come: Bombs fell on Ukraine and Russian troops invaded.

A black day

Things started to happen very quickly: Oleksandr Bondarenko was awakened by bombs at 5 AM. At the same time, he got a call from friends about a bomb strike in Melitopol, a southern city close to the Sea of Azow.

A few days before the war started, Oleksandr Bondarenko and his family had been invited by a former colleague to Vorzel, a village near Bucha about 8 kilometers away from Kyiv. At that time it was not clear whether a war would occur or what was safer, the city or the village. Ultimately Oleksandr Bondarenko and his family decided to remain in Kyiv—to their good fortune: The village of Vorzel was taken in the first few days of the war of aggression. Massive fighting forced the inhabitants into their basements for weeks with very limited food and water, not to mention telephone or Internet connections.

There was hardly any way out of Kyiv. Train tickets to the west were sold out within minutes. Oleksandr Bondarenko and his family hid in the basement of their apartment building for four days, not knowing when, how and if they would ever be able to flee the city. In these first hours

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of the war, Oleksandr Bondarenko received many offers of help from throughout Europe, including from Med Uni Graz. Corina Madreiter-Sokolowski and Wolfgang Graier of the Division of Molecular Biology and Biochemistry of the Gottfried Schatz Research Center at Med Uni Graz played a substantial role in getting Oleksandr Bondarenko out of Ukraine.

Quick response

On that same day, Corina Madreiter-Sokolowski and Wolfgang Graier invited Oleksandr Bondarenko to come to Med Uni Graz for further education. This quick response was the main reason that Oleksandr Bondarenko was allowed to leave the country. In the meantime, there was a state of emergency in Ukraine and adult men were prevented from leaving the country with just a few exceptions. One of them was for PhD researchers engaged in research and education abroad. The invitation was an important document, but what followed was a maze of documents and permits. It was going to be a long time before Oleksandr Bondarenko would be able to leave Ukraine.

Support and funding

To leave Ukraine and receive a certificate of exemption, he first had to go to many government offices. The university in Kyiv and the military had to issue him the documents required for him to leave the country. While his family waited in the western part of the country, Oleksandr Bondarenko had to travel around Kyiv and Lviv to get the necessary documents, all while there was fighting in the area around Kyiv and shots were heard in the streets.

It worked to his advantage that Oleksandr Bondarenko already had close ties to Med Uni Graz. From 2008 to 2018, he was an academic staff member in Wolfgang Graier's lab. Since 2014 he has pursued his own FWF-funded project dealing with electrical signals in endothelial cells induced by cannabinoids.

Another important "tool" that helped him escape was a Joint Excellence in Science and Humanities (JESH) Fellowship from the Austrian Academy of Sciences (ÖAW). With the JESH papers, Med Uni Graz was able to provide the researcher a position and grant him a research opportunity, which was the prerequisite for permission to leave the country. Thanks to the JESH Fellowship, Oleksandr Bondarenko could be involved in research immediately upon his arrival in Austria.

Funding from the Austrian Science Fund (FWF) was used to finance his stay in Austria. Klaus Groschner, Chair of the Division of Medical Physics and Biophysics of the Gottfried Schatz Research Center at Med Uni Graz, had been preparing a funded project that made it possible to employ Oleksandr Bondarenko using "top-up funding." Thanks to the quick response of everyone involved, it was possible to take advantage of special FWF funding for researchers from Ukraine. Another FWF project led by Corina Madreiter-Sokolowski ensures that Oleksandr Bondarenko can conduct research at the Medical University of Graz until 2026.

Research at Med Uni Graz

Oleksandr Bondarenko is now conducting research at Med Uni Graz in his area of specialization: investigation of ion channels in mitochondria and endothelial cells. His current research focuses on the signaling mechanisms underlying endothelial cell dysfunction in inflammatory processes. Endothelial cells line the inside of our blood vessels and their inflammation plays an important role in many diseases that affect the cardiovascular system as well as COVID-19. The discovery

of how errors in regulation of ion channels in the plasma membranes of the endothelial cells affect the development and progression of inflammation could provide important information for the treatment of different diseases. Oleksandr Bondarenko's employment at Med Uni Graz ensures that he can remain in Austria until at least 2026.

Further information and contact

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