



Science Insider: Turkish Scientists See New Evidence of Government's Anti-Evolution Bias

by John Bohannon on 5 July 2013, 1:50 PM | [19 Comments](#)

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Too controversial? The Evolution and Ecology Network of Turkey—which includes the organizers of the summer school—at a meeting in Istanbul in 2009.

Credit: EvoEko-Türkiye

Relations between Turkish scientists and their government just got even tenser. The Scientific and Technological Research Council of Turkey (TÜBİTAK)—the country's main research-funding agency—has rejected a funding application for a [summer workshop on quantitative evolutionary biology](#) because "evolution is a controversial subject." The organizers are calling this the first open admission of a bias against evolutionary biology by Turkey's conservative government. But a TÜBİTAK official counters that the rejection was the result of objective peer review.

The idea for the summer school, to be held 9-15 September at the [Nesin Mathematics Village in Şirince](#), "grew out of a network of young Turkish ecologists and evolutionary biologists we started several years ago," says Erol Akçay, a Turkish evolutionary biologist at Princeton University, who is one of the organizers. "Biology students in Turkey don't usually get much of a math background from their programs," he says, and yet "mathematical biology is a field on the rise." The summer school was set up to give Turkish biology students their first exposure to such topics as population genetics, game theory, and evolutionary modeling. (The network consists of Turks working as postdocs and professors at universities in Turkey and abroad; the goal, says Akçay, is to create "a fully fledged professional society of Turkish ecologists and evolutionary biologists ... like the American Society of Naturalists.")

Akçay and his colleagues had asked TÜBİTAK for 35,000 Turkish lira (about \$18,000) to cover accommodation for students and domestic travel for speakers. The official rejection letter, which arrived two weeks ago, stated that "evolution is both nationally and universally a controversial subject. ... It is difficult to regard it as an activity on which a consensus can be reached. ... Since evolution is still a debated issue, the degree to which the organizers represent the community/country is very questionable."

However, the letter went on to say that evolutionary biology is "the glue of all biological sciences" and that the credentials of the summer school organizers are impeccable. "It is a remarkable document," Akçay says, adding that the positive comments may have been a dissenting view from one reviewer. When the organizers requested a reevaluation of the decision on 28 June, TÜBİTAK responded that the only recourse was to take on the agency "in court".

Turkey's scientists may be angry, but few are surprised. "It is just what is expected from [the government], looking at their past record," says one Turkish evolutionary biologist not involved with the summer school who requested anonymity. A controversial government Internet censorship program started [blocking educational evolution websites](#) in 2011. (The biologist says that the censorship continues.) And earlier this year TÜBİTAK [stopped publishing books on evolution](#)—a decision it claimed was based on copyright issues.

"It sets a very dangerous precedent," Akçay says. "Today it might be a summer school that is fairly cheap ... but tomorrow it could be a young researcher coming up for tenure. ... And this on top of the very worrying and worsening trend in academia and the broader society towards curtailing freedom of speech and inquiry."

In response to questions, Murat Özoğlu, the deputy chair of Science Fellowships and Grant Programmes at TÜBİTAK, sent *ScienceInsider* an email saying that "all the project proposals submitted to TÜBİTAK are subject to the peer-review process. Those proposals that are rated "A" or "B" by the external reviewers are typically funded. I would like to state, unequivocally, that the mentioned project was declined solely based on its score as determined by the peer-review process. TÜBİTAK has no reservations in supporting projects on the subject matter as it was erroneously claimed." To show that TÜBİTAK does fund projects in evolutionary biology, Özoğlu sent *ScienceInsider* a summary of a TÜBİTAK-funded "Workshop on Human Evolution" organized by Ergi Deniz Özsoy of Hacettepe University in Ankara, which took place in April.

"Yes, it was funded (quite surprisingly to me) by TÜBİTAK," Özsoy told *ScienceInsider* by email. "But last year I submitted another [proposal] on the basics of evolution which was rejected," based in part on doubts about the "universality" of evolution. "The rejection of the summer school on quantitative evolution ... using the arguments of creationism, is a clear sign that TÜBİTAK has anti-evolutionist motives," Özsoy writes. "This is very dangerous and shows that creationism is becoming a government policy."

The new flap comes amid a massive protest movement against the Turkish government [that includes many academics](#).

Evolutionary biologist Murat Tugrul of the Institute of Science and Technology in Austria, a co-organizer of the summer school, says the meeting will go ahead despite TÜBİTAK's decision and will be followed by a small symposium on the same topic. Private donors are closing the funding gap, Akçay says. "We have raised a little above 3,000 Turkish Lira, and donations are still coming in."

<http://news.sciencemag.org/scienceinsider/2013/07/turkish-scientists-see-new-evide.html#more>