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7 January 2021

H.E. Recep Tayyip Erdoğan
President of the Republic of Turkey
T.C. Cumhurbaşkanlığı Genel Sekreterliği
06689 Çankaya, Ankara
Turkey

Dear President Erdoğan:

We write on behalf of the Middle East Studies Association (MESA) of North America and its Committee on Academic Freedom to express our dismay concerning recent events at Boğaziçi University. These include your government's appointment of a rector for the university, who was selected based on his political rather than academic credentials, and the detention of students for engaging in peaceful protest against that appointment.

MESA was founded in 1966 to promote scholarship and teaching on the Middle East and North Africa. The preeminent organization in the field, the Association publishes the *International Journal of Middle East Studies* and has over 2800 members worldwide. MESA is committed to ensuring academic freedom and freedom of expression, both within the region and in connection with the study of the region in North America and elsewhere.

On 1 January 2021, you appointed Melih Bulu, a former parliamentary candidate from your political party, the AKP, as the new rector of Boğaziçi University by presidential decree. Dr. Bulu is widely regarded as unqualified for the position, having previously been employed in the private sector or as a political candidate from your party, serving as mayor of an Istanbul district and running unsuccessfully in the 2018 parliamentary elections. One year ago, on 17 January 2020, you appointed Bulu as rector of another Istanbul university, Haliç University, also by presidential decree. At that time, too, he was seen as unqualified, but protests over his appointment to Boğaziçi have been more vocal because the university is widely seen as the best public university in Turkey.

We have written in the past in protest of the violation of university autonomy in Turkey as a consequence of the appointment of rectors directly or indirectly by the presidency. In our letter of [7 November 2016](#), we wrote to your government asking that you reverse an emergency decree (Kanun Hükmünde Kararname (KHK) 676) that overrode the prior legal regulation of higher education (under Law 2547, article 13), which had required that the administration at public universities convene meetings of all tenured and tenure-track academic faculty to elect candidates for the position of rector, to be presented to the President for appointment. The emergency decree eliminated the role of the university's own faculty in selecting rector candidates, replacing such elections with a selection process whereby all rectors at public universities would be appointed by the presidency working in conjunction with the Turkish Higher Education Council (YÖK). This measure, first introduced as an emergency decree, was further modified in 2018, following a package of constitutional amendments introduced by your

government that replaced Turkey's parliamentary democracy with a new presidential system of government. Under the new arrangements, not only does the presidency appoint all university rectors unilaterally, but the requirement that rector candidates be selected from among academics was also eliminated. As a result of these changes, the path was cleared for individuals like Dr. Bulu, with a private sector background who served as a politician in the governing party, to be appointed as the rector of the country's most prestigious university. In three short years, this system of appointments has shown itself to be highly politicized and has undermined confidence in university administrations across the country. At Boğaziçi University, where the first presidentially appointed rector had personal ties to the AKP but was at least a member of the faculty at the university, many Boğaziçi students and professors tried to accommodate the new appointments system in the hopes that the campus would be spared arbitrary appointments of businessmen or politicians to lead the university. However, as became apparent on 1 January, those hopes were misplaced. The already significant discontent with the suspension of university autonomy may now further aggravate the ongoing brain drain from Turkey, as qualified academics and successful students look outside of the country to pursue their studies and academic careers.

Giving voice to both long-standing frustration with government stifling of academic freedom and genuine alarm over the direction of university leadership, on 4 January 2021, hundreds of Boğaziçi students, joined by hundreds more students from other Istanbul universities, began a peaceful protest against the appointment of Bulu as rector. They marched to the university campus, chanting slogans such as "AKP, take your hands off our university." The students also issued a press release noting that positions in university administration such as the rector, deans, and department chairs should be elected by their academic peers and not appointed by the government. They demanded that university self-government be reinstated and that the government desist from political repression of academics. The students were joined in their march and protest by academics from Boğaziçi.

The students and academics marching to the university campus were met with an overwhelming security presence, with police firing tear gas, water cannons and rubber bullets to disperse the peaceful protest. Several students were detained by police as they brutally broke up the protests. More students had their homes raided during the night, along with a wave of further arrests. Students' lawyers have reported that the police broke the doors and walls of students' homes, and subjected those they detained to strip searches and physical abuse. As of the date of this letter, detention orders have been issued for at least 51 students, of whom 40 are already detained. Lawyers representing detained students suggest that more detentions are expected. The violent suppression of academic freedom, university autonomy and the rights of freedom of speech and freedom of assembly was perhaps best symbolized by the police officers' decision to place handcuffs on the gates at the entrance of the campus, literally shackling the university closed. The image of handcuffs locking students and

academics out of the university will be a lasting blemish on your government.

Following the violent crackdown and arrest of protesters, your party spokesperson, Ömer Çelik, stated that your government considers Boğaziçi University to be a precious asset and values the important work of its professors. The best way for your government to honor these words would be to reverse course immediately by respecting the autonomy of the higher education sector in Turkey generally, and desisting from making appointments of rectors to Turkish universities, beginning with Boğaziçi University.

Our letters over the past four years have documented a deeply disturbing pattern of blatant violations of academic freedom and the right to education under your government. We noted that Boğaziçi University has often been singled out for denunciations by your government. In November 2016, you first used your executive powers to overrule Boğaziçi University's internal elections and appoint a new rector, Professor Mehmed Özkan, amidst the protests of Boğaziçi academics and students, marking the first such move after the passing of the emergency decree that gave you authority to directly appoint rectors. On 7 January 2018, you stated in a public address that Boğaziçi University was a failing institution and could not become a global brand because it did not uphold what you described as "national values." In our letter of [4 April 2018](#), we decried these comments as well as the detention of Boğaziçi students for having engaged in an anti-war protest, students to whom you referred as "terrorists" and whom you promised to have expelled. We noted that your comments then were emblematic of your government's conflation of political dissent with terrorism. We see now that your government's targeting of Boğaziçi's students, academics and the autonomy of the university's governance has only accelerated with each passing year, culminating in the literal handcuffing of the university's campus.

As a member state of the Council of Europe and a signatory of the European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, Turkey is required to protect freedom of thought, expression and assembly. Turkey is also a signatory to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, and the Final Act of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), all of which protect the rights to freedom of expression and association, which are at the heart of academic freedom. The rights being trampled by your government's actions are also enshrined in articles 25-27 and 42 of the Turkish Constitution.

We urge your government to immediately secure the release of all Boğaziçi University students detained in connection with the protest of 4 January 2021. We further ask that your government restore the tradition of university self-government in Turkey, withdrawing not only Bulu's appointment as rector to Boğaziçi University, but also, as we called for in our

letter of [7 November 2016](#), rescinding the legal framework that enables you to make appointments of university rectors by presidential decree.

Thank you for your attention to this matter. We look forward to your positive response.

Sincerely,



Dina Rizk Khoury
MESA President
Professor, George Washington University



Laurie Brand
Chair, Committee on Academic Freedom
Professor, University of Southern California

cc:

Ibrahim Kalın, Chief Advisor to the President and Presidential Spokesman
Mustafa Şentop, Türkiye Büyük Millet Meclisi Başkanı (President of the
Turkish National Assembly)
Abdülhamit Gül, Türkiye Cumhuriyeti Adalet Bakanı (Justice Minister of the
Republic of Turkey)
Yekta Saraç, Türkiye Yüksek Öğretim Kurulu (YÖK) Başkanı (President of
the Turkish Higher Education Council)
Ziya Selçuk, Türkiye Cumhuriyeti Milli Eğitim Bakanı (Minister of Education
of the Republic of Turkey)
Maria Arena, Chair of the European Parliament Subcommittee on Human
Rights
Viktor Almqvist, Press Officer for the Committee on Foreign Affairs of the
European Parliament
Josep Borrell Fontelles, High Representative of the European Union for
Foreign Affairs and Security Policy
Fiona Knab-Lunny, Member of Cabinet of Josep Borrell, High Representative
of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy
Hannah Neumann, Vice-Chair of the European Parliament Subcommittee on
Human Rights
Raphael Glucksmann, Vice-Chair of the European Parliament Subcommittee
on Human Rights
Christian Danielsson, Director-General for Enlargement at the European
Commission
Dunja Mijatović, Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights
Kati Piri, Member, Committee on Foreign Affairs, European Parliament
Nacho Sanchez Amor, Member of European Parliament and European
Parliament Standing Turkey Rapporteur



Re: New Rector of Boğaziçi University

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Verónica Michelle Bachelet Jeria, United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights

Irene Khan, United Nations Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression

Koumbou Boly Barry, United Nations Special Rapporteur on the right to education

Boğaziçi Üniversitesi Rektörlüğü (Office of the Rector of Bogazici University)

Boğaziçi Üniversitesi Mezunlar Derneği (Bogazici University Alumni Association)