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22 December 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 outrage over the continuing attacks on Boğaziçi University under the leadership of the new rector, Mehmet Naci İnci. We condemn the use of various forms of physical, administrative, and legal violence against the Boğaziçi University faculty and students, including police raids, securitization and militarization of the university campus, dismissals of professors through arbitrary rectoral decisions, and criminalization of peaceful academic protest. We urge you to remove Dr. İnci and allow the faculty of Boğaziçi University to select a rector, in keeping with their long tradition of autonomous university governance.

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 nearly 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.

We have written to you numerous times concerning your government's inappropriate interventions in the administration of Boğaziçi University (see our letters dated [7 January 2021](#); [20 January 2021](#); [4 February 2021](#); and [9 February 2021](#)) following your appointment of Melih Bulu—a controversial and unqualified candidate—as rector by presidential decree. In the wake of demonstrations and accusations of plagiarism targeting Bulu, you dismissed him on 15 July 2021 and appointed Mehmet Naci İnci, a physics professor at the university and the vice-rector under Melih Bulu, as acting-rector. In our letter dated [3 August 2021](#) we underlined the facts that the sacking of Bulu and his replacement by İnci hardly signified an improvement for the university's academic autonomy and freedom. We documented how İnci, as a loyal deputy to Bulu, had taken an active role in the violations of the right to education and norms of academic freedom, undermining faculty governance by the academic senate, repressing faculty protests and inviting police and security forces onto the campus to detain protesting students. We also noted the long list of grievances against İnci, who clearly showed his disdain for academic freedom, democratic values, gender equity, and freedom of expression in the short span of time he served as vice-rector. Ignoring all such criticisms, as well as the results of a faculty-organized poll that indicated a 95% “vote of no confidence” for İnci, you appointed him as the new rector of Boğaziçi University on 21 August 2021. Developments since then have demonstrated that this decision has only further

undermined academic freedom at a university once held in high regard internationally for its excellence.

Since İnci's appointment as rector, the police have launched several heavy-handed raids against Boğaziçi students. In these raids, the rector himself played an active role in identifying students as targets. On 5 October, 14 students were taken into custody on the grounds that they had joined protests against him. Of these students, two were arrested and one was released on probation. It was later revealed that İnci had filed a complaint with the prosecutor's office specifically against those 14 students. Furthermore, the rector sought restraining orders against those 14 students under a law originally designed to protect women from domestic violence. As a result, 12 of those students were sentenced to month-long restrictions by the court. Later, you, President Erdoğan, incited against these same students by labeling them "terrorists who infiltrated universities."

The treatment of these students is part of a broader, and deeply troubling, trend of securitizing and militarizing the campus, which has accelerated since İnci's appointment as rector. Over the past year, Boğaziçi University has been fortified with security cameras, iron gates and barbed wire, and its private security force has been expanded. Heavily armed police and armed riot intervention vehicles surround the university, and both uniformed and plainclothes police operate freely on campus with İnci's consent. Indeed, following changes to the law that you and your party introduced authorizing university rectors to "take initiatives to ensure public order," İnci went even further. On 22 October, he invited the riot police to storm a vigil tent set up by students on campus in front of the rectorate building. Forty-five students were detained in violation of their constitutional right to peaceful protest. As of this writing, at least two of these students remain in detention.

The current rectorate has also elected to continue the problematic practices of its predecessor in trampling established norms and traditions of university governance and appointing unqualified candidates to key positions at the university. Most recently, Rector İnci appointed İlhami Öztürk to head Boğaziçi University's celebrated Social Sciences Institute. Öztürk did not have an academic appointment at Boğaziçi and has no prior relationship to the Institute, which has traditionally been led by individuals selected from among Boğaziçi faculty in the social sciences with regular appointments at the university. Indeed, prior to this appointment, his only academic position was in the department of law at the recently founded İzmir Bakırçay University. Öztürk has no publications in English (which is the language of instruction at Boğaziçi University), and his training is in a field that is not even represented at the Social Sciences Institute. His appointment is the most recent example of the unilateral imposition of candidates who lack the traditionally requisite credentials and are from outside the university, but appear to have ties to the AKP.

Indeed, the rector's appointed administrators have blatantly cast multiple votes to obtain favorable results in meetings, further undermining basic

procedural norms of university governance. Additionally, İnci has repeatedly intervened in the internal decisions of academic units by, for example, not approving courses. In our letter dated [3 August 2021](#), we wrote to you about the termination of the contracts of Professors Can Candan and Feyzi Erçin, which resulted from decisions overturning the approval of their courses and extending their contracts by the departments in which they served. İnci has continued his practice of taking arbitrary decisions regarding the renewal of contracts of contingent faculty, especially retaliating against lecturers who have taken an active part in the faculty resistance by barring them from offering courses. In certain cases, lecturers' academic staff ID cards were cancelled while they were still teaching courses and they had to enter the university under "guest" status. In fact, Prof. Candan was prevented from entering the campus to deliver a guest lecture at the invitation of a professor. The rectorate offered no explanation for this unlawful ban from the university.

Among all these alarming developments, Boğaziçi faculty have been voicing concerns that the integrity of the university is under renewed threat due to the privatization of its historical buildings and the invaluable tract of land on which the Boğaziçi campus is located. The choice of Hakan Nedim Malkoç to serve as the Acting Secretary-General of the university's executive board confirms these worries. Malkoç is a former deputy chair of the Ottoman Education Hearths—a far right, pro-government organization that preaches unquestioned loyalty to you, President Erdoğan— and a relative of the former chief advisor to the President. There are also serious allegations of plagiarism against Malkoç, which raise suspicions about his academic credentials. The Boğaziçi faculty took legal action against Malkoç's appointment after he was originally installed in his position by the former appointed rector Bulu in June 2021, and a court stayed his appointment pending litigation. Nonetheless, Malkoç was not only allowed to unlawfully attend the University Executive Board and Senate meetings but he was also controversially appointed to a commission with the authority to rent and sell university property. At the same time, a decision was issued that lifted the protected status of Boğaziçi central campus, opening it up to speculative private investment. Given your government's record in retaliating against dissent by confiscating property (see our letter dated [20 May 2020](#)) and privatizing public property, all these developments strengthen the impression that your government has launched an all-out attack not only on the faculty and governance of Boğaziçi University but even on its physical campus.

As a member state of the Council of Europe and a signatory to 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 call on you and your government to stop the instigation and use of coercive force against peaceful academics, to release the arrested students, to desist from the practice of appointing rectors, to reverse the arbitrary and unlawful decisions rectors Bulu and İnci have taken regarding faculty contracts and university structure, and to restore the tradition of university self-government in Turkey. We repeat our observation that the actions of your government and your appointed administrators undermine the reputation and academic integrity of one of Turkey's most prestigious universities, while adding to the more general pattern under your leadership of actions damaging the autonomy and quality of higher education in Turkey. We urge you to end this pattern and restore respect for university autonomy across the country, including at Boğaziçi University.

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

Sincerely,



Eve Troutt Powell
MESA President
Professor, University of Pennsylvania



Laurie Brand
Chair, Committee on Academic Freedom
Professor Emerita, 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)
Erol Özvar, 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

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 Boğaziçi University)

Boğaziçi Üniversitesi Mezunlar Derneği (Boğaziçi University Alumni Association)

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