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26 January 2023

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 your government's continuing targeted campaign against Boğaziçi University, its professors, students, and alumni. In 2021, we wrote to you about Boğaziçi on [six occasions](#), and MESA's Board of Directors issued a [statement](#) protesting the persecution of Boğaziçi faculty and students. We now write about the numerous alarming developments that took place in 2022 which threaten to undermine what remains of autonomy and excellence at this once exemplary Turkish public university.

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 2400 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 19 January 2022 the deans of Boğaziçi University's College of Education, College of Letters and Science, and College of Economics and Administrative Sciences were summarily dismissed by the government-appointed Rector Naci İnci based on a decision taken by the Council of Higher Education (known by its Turkish acronym, YÖK) the previous day. While there was neither an explanation nor a YÖK decision appended to the dismissal announcement that the deans received electronically, İnci later declared over Twitter that the YÖK decision was the consequence of the disciplinary investigations that the deans were subjected to. Needless to say, these disciplinary investigations were launched to form a basis for the dismissal decision and had not been concluded by the time the dismissal decision was announced. Boğaziçi faculty members did [not](#) really know what these investigations were about but [speculated](#) that they were for not properly running disciplinary investigations about the hundreds of students that the Rectorate demanded from the colleges to be subjected to disciplinary punishments. The dismissal of the deans paved the way for critical administrative roles and positions in the university's councils and senate to be filled by your loyalists.

We have written to you previously to denounce your decision to replace the rectors of universities across the country with government-appointed trustees or stand-ins. The current government-appointed Rector of Boğaziçi, Naci İnci, appointed over the widespread opposition of faculty, arrogated to himself the role of acting dean of the College of Letters and Science. In addition, he appointed his associates to serve as acting-deans of Boğaziçi's other colleges. For example, Gürkan Kumbaroğlu, a government-appointed vice-rector, already illegitimately designated acting-dean of the College of Communication (itself a recent creation of the government without any input from the Boğaziçi faculty), was also appointed acting-dean of the College of Economics and Administrative Sciences. Similarly, another government-appointed vice-rector, Fazıl Önder Sönmez, who had already been designated acting-dean of the College of Engineering, was named acting-dean of the College of Education as well. Thus, three administrators who were appointed in violation of Boğaziçi's tradition of self-governance and autonomy have now taken control of five colleges at the University as a result of YÖK's summary dismissal of legitimate and duly appointed deans.

Soon after these three government loyalists assumed leadership of the five colleges, the university senate, now composed of a majority of government appointees, held a meeting on 2 February to discuss the undergraduate curriculum for the College of Law, which was itself established by a midnight executive decree in 2021 without consultation with the Boğaziçi faculty. Its curriculum was then approved in an irregular and summary process by a university senate dominated by government-appointed university administrators rather than qualified academics, another reflection of the loss of integrity in higher education at Boğaziçi.

Under the university's longstanding procedures, a new undergraduate program proposal should have been discussed by three commissions before being brought to the university senate. Instead, the 124-page proposal was shared with the elected representatives of the university senate less than 48 hours in advance of the senate meeting. This program proposal, which did not go through proper review procedures, was then accepted without any discussion of its substance.

Later in the year, the acting-deans were replaced by permanent appointees from outside the university, once again in violation of Boğaziçi's longstanding traditions of governance. For example, the Institute of Social Sciences, which serves as the administrative center for graduate work for many departments, and another new, government-created program at the university, the Institute of Data Science and Artificial Intelligence, are now led by permanent deans from outside the university. Moreover, several of the new institutes and colleges, including the College of Law and the Institute of Data Science, have generated demands for physical

infrastructure that may exceed the bounds of the existing campus. In light of your government's past record of seizing university properties, (see our [letter dated 20 May 2020](#)), some worry that this may be part of an effort to relocate Boğaziçi away from its current campus, enabling the government to confiscate the prized real estate on which the university was built (see our [letter dated 22 December 2021](#)).

As the elected representatives of Boğaziçi's four original, pre-2021 colleges, professors Ümit Bilge, Gülcan Erçetin, Çiğdem Kafescioğlu and Ayşe Mumcu, [state](#),

[t]he current senate and university executive board, reshaped by eliminating most faculty members criticizing the enforced order, and the top-down imposition of new members from outside the institution, no longer represent Boğaziçi University. Once assemblies where decisions were reached through debate and deliberation, the university senate and executive board now function as tools in the automatic approval of decisions imposed by the rector and his aides.

More recently, several members of the Boğaziçi faculty have not only been replaced in their administrative duties, but also subjected to unfounded disciplinary hearings resulting in their suspension from teaching and removal from the campus. In August 2022, Ünal Zenginobuz, who had been chair of the Department of Economics until he was summarily dismissed from that role and replaced by a government loyalist, was subjected to such a disciplinary hearing initiated by appointed-Rector İnci. Professor Zenginobuz was both suspended from teaching and barred from entering the campus for three months, an exclusion that was extended in December. Cengiz Kırılı, the Director of the Atatürk Institute for Modern Turkish History, was also summarily dismissed. The University archive developed by Professor Kırılı through donations of documents and funds was closed with less than twelve hours' notice in early September 2022, and the archival materials were transferred to the university library. Similarly, the Byzantine Studies Research Center was moved to a much smaller location, again with little notice.

These maneuvers represent only a small fraction of the ever-growing list of illegitimate actions undertaken by government-appointed administrators at Boğaziçi. Arguably, the most egregious changes undermining university governance and academic standards have been the changes to recruitment procedures. The new procedure adopted by the university senate now dominated by your administrative appointees has practically eliminated departmental involvement in the evaluation of academic qualifications as part of the recruitment process. The process of filling a new position in a department may now start without any consultation with, or knowledge of,

the members of the department concerned. Since the initiation of this unprecedented recruitment procedure, several positions have been filled following job postings that were clearly designed for a targeted hire. This practice of nepotistic hiring has become increasingly common at reorganized or newly created public universities, and it is destroying the autonomy and academic standards of one of the most important universities in the country.

One search governed by the new procedures is currently underway with the likely aim of turning an administrative appointee into a faculty member. Murat Önder, the administrative appointee in question, deserves special scrutiny. The Turkish press has reported that Önder, the government-appointed dean of the College of Economics and Administrative Sciences who was imposed in March without consultation with the faculty of Boğaziçi, has since appointed himself to numerous senior roles at the university so that he currently also serves as deputy-chair of the Department of Economics and deputy-chair of the Department of Business Management. Thus, in a college that consists of three departments, Önder has appointed himself to two-thirds of existing senior leadership roles. Not satisfied with aggregating control over the college, he is now pursuing an academic appointment, as well.

In fact, Önder is in the process of being hired as a faculty member in the college after he was initially imposed as a trustee administrator from outside the university without any corresponding academic position. The university's central administration, led by government-appointed Rector İnci, launched a highly unusual search for a faculty position in the Department of Political Science and International Relations at the end of October. The curriculum of this department does not include any courses in Public Administration; nevertheless, İnci launched a search for a (full) professorship in "Administrative Sciences," seeking someone with a BS, an MA, and a PhD in a discipline related to Public Administration. Beyond the fact that these qualifications pertain to a field that does not fall within the scope of the department, the job posting is also irregular for providing this degree of specificity of the precise academic background being sought. The conspicuous overlap between the [job description](#) and the particular academic qualifications listed on Önder's [CV](#) is unmistakable. Given the broader context, it is clear that this position was tailored to provide an academic sinecure to Önder, who under ordinary circumstances is not qualified for a regular appointment in the department.

Önder's current FTE is at another public university in Ankara, but media scrutiny following efforts to appoint him to the Boğaziçi faculty has brought to light allegations of plagiarism that cast doubt on his qualifications to serve in a faculty role at any university. Reports detailing these allegations were censored by [court](#) order on 11 November 2022. Nor

are the allegations against Önder the first occasion on which your government's appointees to university positions have been accused of plagiarism. In at least one previous such case, reports of plagiarism were also censored by court order, though in that case the court also terminated the appointment of the suspect on other grounds. We find the many procedural irregularities attendant to Dean Önder's administrative and possible faculty appointment alarming and worry that your government's record of abrogating universities' administrative autonomy and basic norms of academic freedom is accelerating.

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 and university autonomy. 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 cease manipulating administrative and faculty appointments at the country's universities as part of an apparent strategy to replace qualified academics with partisan loyalists of your government. We are particularly troubled by events at Boğaziçi University because they are consistent with the purges and expropriations that have eviscerated the Turkish higher education sector as a whole and because the relentless assault on the country's leading public university seems designed to produce a demonstration effect, signaling that any university seeking to preserve its autonomy will be targeted. Your government's disregard for the norms of university governance and faculty appointments at Boğaziçi signals that regardless of international reputation and national prestige, no institution of higher learning will be spared.

We call upon you in the strongest possible terms to desist from these practices and to restore university autonomy and other traditional norms necessary for a thriving and competitive higher education sector at Boğaziçi University as well as at all other universities across the country. We also demand the reversal of the arbitrary and unlawful decisions taken by appointed-Rector İnci regarding faculty contracts and disciplinary actions against respected leaders of departments and colleges at Boğaziçi. We repeat our observation that the actions of your government and your appointed administrators undermine the reputation and academic integrity of Turkey's universities.

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)

Bekir Bozdağ, Türkiye Cumhuriyeti Adalet Bakanı (Justice Minister of the Republic of Türkiye)

Erol Özvar, Türkiye Yükseköğretim Kurulu (YÖK) Başkanı (President of the Turkish Higher Education Council)

Mahmut Özer, Türkiye Cumhuriyeti Milli Eğitim Bakanı (Minister of Education of the Republic of Türkiye)

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



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Hannah Neumann, Vice-Chair of the European Parliament Subcommittee on Human Rights

Raphael Glucksmann, Vice-Chair of the European Parliament Subcommittee on Human Rights

Bernard Guetta, Vice-Chair of the European Parliament Subcommittee on Human Rights

Christian Sagartz, Vice-Chair of the European Parliament Subcommittee on Human Rights

Dunja Mijatović, Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights

David McAllister, Committee on Foreign Affairs, European Parliament
Address: Europe Office Brussels European Parliament

Nacho Sanchez Amor, Member of European Parliament and European Parliament Standing Turkey Rapporteur

Kati Piri, Member of the Dutch Parliament (The House of Representatives)

Volker Türk, 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

Farida Shaheed, 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)

Gabriel Escobar, Deputy Assistant Secretary, United States Department of State