

To the kind attention of:

Federica Mogherini
*High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy / Vice-President
of the Commission*

Tibor Navracsics
European Commissioner for Education, Culture, Youth and Sport

Brussels, 15 February 2017

Dear HR/VP Mogherini,
Dear Commissioner Navracsics,

Last week, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan terminated the positions of thousands of public workers, including professors: a situation that imperils the international standing of Turkish educational institutions, bringing another stain on Turkish political history. On Tuesday, February 8th, following the renewal of the state of emergency, another wave of purges targeted 4,464 public workers, following the publication of the list in the Official Gazette on February 7th. A total of 330 academics were removed from their positions as a result of this most recent decree, destroying their livelihood, their employment rights, and their freedom of political expression. These moves drew immediate and harsh criticism from the opposition party as well as from a wide range of Turkish and international scholars who unequivocally condemn this form of overt censorship and deplore the effects these unjustifiable and draconian moves will have on educational institutions throughout Turkey.

Of the 330 academics summarily removed from their positions, 184 of them had signed the petition “We will not be party to this crime!”, calling for an end to military operations in the Kurdish region of Turkey. Amongst these scholars is Ibrahim Kaboğlu from Marmara University, a prominent professor of constitutional law and former head of the Turkish Human Rights Advisory Council. Kaboğlu repeatedly criticized the charter amendment package, arguing that the Constitution cannot be changed during the state of emergency. He is, in the words of veteran journalist Yavuz Baydar, “*one of the flag bearers of those who against all odds defend the value of the rule of law [...] Kaboğlu engaged selflessly for years for a democratic order*”.

Amid the 330 academics affected, two emeritus professors were also relieved of their positions: Oget Oktem Tanor, an 82 year old professor who founded the first neuropsychology laboratory in Turkey, and Ahmet Hasim Kose, a renowned professor of economics. These are among the most widely respected academics in Turkey, known and admired throughout the world.

The decree targeted some of the best universities in the country, such as the Ankara University Faculty of Political Science (SFB), a school compared to France's Sciences-Po. On February 10th, students, academics and opposition MPs held protests in the capital city of Ankara and in Istanbul. In some cases, academics laid their gowns on the ground in protest against the police blockades, preventing them from entering universities. Photographs showed police trampling on their gowns, sparking a strong condemnation throughout social media. The students and professors who protested in the campus of SFB were brutally attacked by the police, who used plastic bullets and police dogs to force demonstrators from the site. The purge of last Tuesday was so heavy-handed that even pro-government circles expressed concerns about the appalled reactions it prompted in the media.

On February 9th, 2017, representatives of the Council of the European Union and of the European Parliament reached a provisional agreement to establish a European Year of Cultural Heritage for 2018. On June 8th, 2016, the Commission affirmed that cultural exchange and cultural institutions will be called upon to play a crucial role in strengthening international partnerships. In the words of the EU High Representative and Vice-President Federica Mogherini: *"Culture is a powerful tool to build bridges between people, notably the young, and reinforce mutual understanding. [...] As we face common challenges, culture can help all of us, in Europe, Africa, Middle East, Asia, to stand together to fight radicalisation and build an alliance of civilisations against those trying to divide us"*. Similarly, the European Commissioner for Education, Culture, Youth and Sport, Tibor Navracsics, asserted: *"Culture is the hidden treasure of our foreign policy. It helps to promote dialogue and mutual understanding"*.

Given the gravity and urgency of the situation in Turkey and the huge number of scholars and cultural workers now suddenly and unjustifiably deprived of their positions, we ask the EU to create an ongoing fund, based in Brussels, in accord with the framework of its own stated strategy on the central role of culture. Such a fund would have as its priority the aim of preserving Turkish intellectual and cultural life, underscoring the rights to freedom of expression and information and the right to have rights. The fund could be administrated by a small committee with the aim of helping academics and journalists who have lost their jobs following Erdoğan's repressive policies and to promote initiatives centered on the research programs of the academics located in Turkey.

We expect the European Union and its institutions to stand in defence of cultural freedom, thought and creativity, and to oppose the destruction of the basic rights that keep our educational and cultural institutions alive. The fund can symbolically save the honour of Europe, showing that the Union does not stand by as the cultural life of its partners is destroyed, and could provide the urgent and valuable opportunity for Turkish academics to have access to resources that will make it possible for them to continue their work under protected conditions. As Aristotle wrote, virtue (and dignity) requires an ad minima well-being.

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