

Motion of support for our colleagues and students at Bosphorus University in Istanbul

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ULB most strongly states its support for colleagues and students at Bosphorus University in Istanbul, who are facing acts of repression. ULB reaffirms its commitment to academic freedom and freedom of expression for academics all over the world.

On 1 January 2021, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan appointed Mr Melih Bulu as Rector of Bosphorus University (Boğaziçi Üniversitesi), a university renowned for both its high standard of education and academic freedom. The latter is a close associate of the President and is clearly involved in the authoritarian movement now embodied by the ruling AKP party. Following repressive measures against the "Academics for Peace" from January 2016 onwards, and subsequent mass dismissals of teacher-researchers after the July 2016 coup attempt, the stifling of academic freedom continues in Turkey.

This appointment of Mr Bulu is highly significant at a time when 206 public and private universities have had their rectors appointed directly by R.T. Erdoğan since October 2016. As our colleague Ahmet Insel, holder of an honorary doctorate from ULB, puts it: "By attacking Bosphorus University, renowned for its independence and universal values, Erdogan has taken his campaign to the next level. He is strengthening his control over academia." Indeed, Bosphorus University was the last remaining public university to have kept its independence until that point, as its previous management stood up to the political authorities and protected academic freedom at any price.

A few days after this new appointment, Turkish police brutally arrested dozens of students who were peacefully protesting against the executive's attempt to assert political control over Bosphorus University. On 3 February 2021, 51 students from that university were detained and described by President Erdoğan as "terrorists", while Devlet Bahçeli, leader of the ultra-nationalist party and member of the ruling coalition, described them as "criminals" and then as

"poisonous snakes whose heads need to be crushed".

The President also targeted Professor Ayse Bugra, a renowned academic, saying that she was "among the provocateurs of Bosphorus University". Ayse Bugra is none other than the wife of Osman Kavala, a Turkish civil society figure and philanthropist working for dialogue between cultures, imprisoned since 2017. Not to be outdone, Minister of the Interior Süleyman Soylu accused the former Rector of Bosphorus University, Ustün Ergüder, of provoking the protests. The pro-government media continue to criminalise students and academics by publishing their names and photos.

The protests have spread to many universities in Turkey. Over 500 people have been arrested in the last two months. While the vast majority have been released, nine members of the Bosphorus University academic community are currently in prison, and 25 are under house arrest. LGBTI+ students have also been subjected to harassment and hate speech by senior officials and an LGBTI+ association at Bosphorus University has been closed down. In addition to these insults and acts of criminalisation, President Erdoğan issued a decree on 6 February 2021 aimed at creating two new faculties in order to recruit pro-government staff and thus counter the academic freedom that other parts of the University are trying to keep alive.

Five years after the start of the wave of criminalisation of the 'Academics for Peace', who faced repression for signing a petition calling on Ankara to stop the violence in the Kurdish regions, the attacks on the foundations of the principles of academic freedom in Turkey are continuing and affecting us directly.

They affect us not only because we have colleagues in Turkey, some of whom are ULB PhD holders, with whom we work; we also provide joint supervision for doctoral students and have developed scientific relationships as part of Erasmus programmes with certain Turkish universities. At the same time, we have taken action for solidarity with our "Academics for Peace" colleagues - in particular, ULB regularly attended the trial hearings in Istanbul between 2016 and 2019. Through grants for researchers in danger, we also welcome colleagues from Turkey who are no longer able to exercise their profession in their own country. Finally, these attacks affect us because everything that affects academic freedom, wherever it may be, speaks to us about ourselves, about the action for solidarity that we need to take or amplify, and about this academic freedom that we must also preserve and consolidate here, at a time when it is sometimes being weakened, even in democratic spaces.

ULB appeals most strongly for the release of members of the Turkish academic community who are still imprisoned or under house arrest.

ULB reaffirms its commitment to academic freedom throughout the world, without which no University worthy of the name can fulfil its mission.

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