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Authoritarianism and academic freedom in neoliberal Turkey

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## **Authoritarianism and Academic Freedom in Neoliberal Turkey**

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**Additional info:** In this article, Dr. Sevgi Doğan worked on the empirical part which began with part 5, conclusion, and interviewed the scholars/academics. Dr. Ervjola Selenica worked on the theoretical part including parts between 1-4 and introduction.

## **Authoritarianism and Academic Freedom in Neoliberal Turkey**

This article examines the relationship between academic freedom and authoritarianism in Turkey. Academic freedom has emerged as a concern for international institutions while also being increasingly problematic both in authoritarian regimes and neoliberal Western countries. While not a new problem in the Turkish context, academic freedom has come particularly under attack following the attempted military coup on July 15, 2016, as well as with the Turkish intervention in the Syrian conflict.

This paper is focused on scholars and academics currently working in Turkish universities. The paper explores the following questions: (1) how do these scholars define academic freedom in Turkey; (2) what is the relationship between universities and the Turkish society; (3) what are the changes that higher education is facing following the 2016 coup d'etat, in particular, in terms of pressures and barriers to academic production; (4) how do attacks affect scholars' possibilities to create, lecture, and resist government's policies? Drawing on Gramsci's theory of intellectuals and his notion of hegemony, as well as Foucault's theory of power and/as knowledge, we explore the relationship between authority and knowledge. We argue that the government's aggressive politics against Turkish scholars is a result of the failure to consolidate its power and hegemony through knowledge, and to establish an intellectual base in a *Gramscian* fashion.

Keywords: Academic freedom, authoritarianism, neoliberalism, Turkey, attacks, political violence, repression

### **Introduction**

This article aims to analyze the state of academic freedom and the conditions for academic production in Turkey in the current historical conjuncture. Since 2016, there has been a systematic attack on higher education, and many academics have been dismissed from universities. Such attacks differ from previous ones for their extensive and structural nature. Attacks against academics intensified following a peace petition called 'Academics for Peace' and signed by academics and intellectuals who called on

Turkish government to launch a negotiation with the Kurdish authorities and who protested the government military intervention against Turkish South-East areas.

In this regard, the article aims to problematize and investigate the conditions under which scholars that are still part of Turkish academia, think of academic freedom and the extent to which the concept of academic freedom has a meaning or not, in the current context. Moreover, it seeks to identify existing conditions and difficulties that hamper both academic production and freedom. Here we focus on a number of issues, factors and obstacles that Turkish academia faces under an authoritarian regime that has extensively promoted neoliberal reforms.

Contrary to previous research on this topic, our research has a theoretical and empirical anchor (Tastan and Ordek, 2020; Doganay and Deger, 2020). The research draws on semi-structured interviews with academics who are still working at Turkish universities. Two key theories underpin our work: Gramsci's theory of organic intellectuals (Gramsci 1975) and the idea of hegemony (Gramsci 1975), as well as Foucault's theory of power and/as knowledge (1978) in order to explore the relationship between authority and knowledge. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 12 scholars (4 females/8 males) from across the disciplines currently engaged in different private and public universities across central and peripheral cities using digital platforms. Interviews were conducted respecting the anonymity of interviewees as well as that of their university. Out of the 12 interviews, one was recorded, while for the others detailed notes were taken and further transcribed and translated from Turkish to English.

The article is structured as follows: section one reviews the literature and existing research on the authoritarian nature of the Turkish regime; section two reviews debates on neoliberalism and higher education; section three analyses the relationship

between bureaucracy and universities, and section four analyses the relationship between center-periphery and universities. Section five presents the empirical analysis based on the interviews conducted and is structured as follows: (i) the state of academic freedom before and after the attempted military coup in 2016; (ii) the meanings and definitions of academic freedom; (iii) barriers and restrictions to academic freedom.

### **Authoritarianism, neo-authoritarianism and neoliberalism in Turkey**

Several studies have recently focused on the authoritarian turn of the AKP rule, and generally agree that Turkish democracy has been declining, at least since 2011, following AKP rise to power (Yilmaz, Caman, and Bashirov 2019, 1-19). This observation is shared by the academics interviewed for this paper. However, these studies neglect the fact that Turkish politics has never experienced a true democracy. In other words, since its foundation, Turkish modern state has always had a semi-democratic character.

Some scholars define the current Turkish political system as an electoral authoritarianism (Konak and Donmez 2015; White and Herzog 2016), whilst others describe it as competitive authoritarianism (Ozbudun 2015; Esen and Gumuscu 2016). The term refers to a system whereby the opposition and the ruling party compete, always with the constant fear of losing (Levitsky and Way 2002, 2010). Competitive authoritarian theory ignores, however, the economic dimension of the authoritarian state. It focuses only on the *anti-characters* or features of democracy. Some scholars (Yilmaz and Bashirov 2018) define the current Turkish regime as *Erdoganism* that in turn includes four dimensions: electoral authoritarianism, populism as a political strategy, Islamism as a political ideology, and neopatrimonialism as an economic strategy. Murat Somer (2016) looks at the current regime as the combination of an old

and a new authoritarianism, i.e., the Kemalist and Erdoganist ones, whilst Taner Akcam (2018) defines AKP's regime as a Second Republic following Ataturk's First Republic established in 1923. It can be argued that with the military coup attempt on July 15, 2016 and the referendum on April 16, 2017, Erdogan began to build the Presidential System (Akcam 2018).

While we agree that the current Turkish authoritarian system is a hybrid regime comprising both authoritarian and democratic elements, we claim that such studies ignore AKP's anti-intellectual and neoliberal character. On the one hand, Erdogan has destroyed the bureaucracy and reduced state agencies into his own party branches (Akcam 2018). On the other hand, he has used bureaucracy to maintain his power against his opponents, such as intellectuals, through investigations, disciplinary punishments, detention and humiliations. Different from Kemalist authoritarianism's reliance on the tutelary system of democracy in which the military establishes direct or indirect control over civil policy, Erdogan's authority is based on police power and its anti-constitutionalist character. With the elections of June 24, 2018, Turkey passed to a new system called 'Presidential Government System.' In this new system, the president holds all powers. The Council of Ministers has been abolished, and the parliament does not have powers to approve the Council of Ministers or to vote on distrust.

Although labels, such as hybrid regimes, illiberal democracy, delegative democracy or competitive authoritarianism try to explain the rise of authoritarian tendencies since AKP came to power in 2002, we argue that we cannot comprehend the political transformation as a whole without referring to the underlying dynamics of capital accumulation (Oguz 2012). Sebnem Oguz (2012, 2-16) refers to the capital accumulation during the AKP regime in her work. Here she uses N. Poulantzas' understanding of the authoritarian state and the accumulation of capital being

internationalized in order to comprehend the political and economic transformation of Turkey's society. According to Sebnem Oguz (2012, 2), the process of empowerment of the executive power did not start with AKP but rather was built in 1980s by the articulation of Turkish capitalism within global capitalism. Before AKP came to power in 2002, the structures that enabled the state to act in close cooperation with the capitalist class were already in place, with the legislative and the judicial bodies subordinated to the executive body to a large extent (Oguz 2012, 12). However, with the AKP regime during the 2000s, the form of neoliberal authoritarian state has been further consolidated.

### **Neoliberalism and higher education**

While we do not aim to discuss neoliberal authoritarianism, it is important to discuss the effects of neoliberal authoritarianism in the education system. The global development and promotion of neoliberalism in the 1980s had an important impact on the Turkish education system. Amendments to the Turkish Constitution in 1984 paved the way for the establishment of semi-public and non-profit higher education institutions. Bilkent University was established as the first private university in 1984 (Birler 2012, 140). The establishment of private universities was justified on the basis that Turkish higher education was uncompetitive at the global scale. In the 1990s we can observe the increase of private universities. It is, however, with the AKP regime that the number has substantially escalated. While we discuss the increase of private universities in this paper, a similar process has occurred for private schools. Between 1984 and 1999 there were 20 foundation or private universities (Birler 2012, 145; Dogan 2020). Since the rise of AKP rule in 2002, there are now 77 foundations/private universities in Turkey (Tufan and Güran 2019). This is the result of the commodification of Turkish higher education.



The commodification and privatization of the higher education system has led to two things: (i) the increase of the anti-democratic character of universities, including the replacement of quality with quantity, the bureaucratization and the creation of a hierarchical system; and (ii) the intensification of repression of academic freedom. It is worth noting that the anti-democratic character of universities is not only intrinsic to the private universities. Processes of centralization, bureaucratization and hierarchization reinforce the authoritarian structure of the university.

### **Bureaucracy, hierarchy, knowledge and power**

As we show in our empirical analysis, bureaucracy in academia is one of the most important factors hampering academic freedom. Bureaucracy is considered a necessary element to carry out “the purposes of the bureaucratically governed structure” (Weber 1958, 196). In this regard, our interviewees’ description of academic freedom reminded us of Max Weber’s sociological analysis of bureaucracy. According to Weber (1958, 196), the characteristic of modern officialdom relies on “...the principle of fixed and official jurisdictional areas, which are generally ordered by rules, that is, by laws or administrative regulations.” These regulations determine the possibility of academic research. Another important function of bureaucracy is the system of super-subordination, based on the office hierarchy and levels of grade authority. The hierarchical structure is reflected in all systems of relationships in the university, i.e., between students and supervisors, or between a dean and an academic.

Since 2016, rectors in Turkey are no longer assigned by an elective commission within the university but by the President of the Republic. In the last 70 years, there are two important dates that abolished the rectorship elections: 1981 and 2016. The rectors were elected for 35 years before establishment of YÖK (The Council of Higher Education). After the coup d’état on the 12 September 1980, YÖK was launched and

thus the elections were abolished. In 1992, the system including election and appointment together arrived. The elections were annulled again with the Decree of OHAL (state of emergency), which was announced after the July 15 coup attempt in 2016. According to Weber (1958, 200), there is a difference between an appointment by a superior authority and by elections. Elections modify “the strictness of hierarchical subordination” (Weber 1958: 200-201). This means that those who take up their position by election have an autonomous position in contrast to those who are appointed by their superordinate to a place lower down the hierarchy. In this regard, rectors lose their autonomy and they act according to their superordinate rather than to the inner dynamics of university. The super-sub/ordination relation penetrates the whole structure of university. Political affinity dominates Turkish academia. This is illustrated by the status of the deanship. According to the paragraph (a) of Article 16 of the Higher Education Law No. 2547, “the dean, who is the representative of the faculty and its units, is elected by the Higher Education Council for three years from among the three professors from within or outside the university, who are selected by the rector. Dean who has expired may be reassigned” (Universitelerde Akademik Teskilât Yonetmeliği). Deans of law faculties come from other fields, such as veterinary, finance, medicine, theology etc., (Gozler 2019). The largest group of law faculty deans come from theology (Gozler 2019). Hierarchical structure does not necessarily reflect an authoritarian type of government, but it can lead to its formation.

Documenting everything is the fundamental characteristic of bureaucracy. In academia, it creates an obstacle to research because it means loss of time for academics. Max Weber’s conception of bureaucracy is based on rationalization, the educated officers/civil servants, the competence and adequacy. However, the rationalization of bureaucracy in the Turkish academy has led to *political irrationality* rather than

*scientific rationality*. This means that Turkish academia has moved away from a scientific basis and has become a place of political interests. The power of bureaucracy is related to the power of knowledge and the dynamic of truth. According to Foucault (1978; 1979a; 1979b), those who cannot have power of knowledge try to obtain it through the power of the bureaucracy and hierarchy.

Talking about the function of intellectuals, Antonio Gramsci (1973, 481) in his *Letters from Prison* points out that political power needs to establish its intellectual stratum, otherwise it is doomed to collapse. According to him (1973, 481; 1991), if a political power is not able to create its own category of intellectuals, it cannot exercise hegemony but instead resorts to a dictatorship. In his political theory, intellectuals have a crucial role to play in building hegemony. The current government in Turkey has never had a constructive-progressive relation with knowledge and the intellectuals. Its attitude towards knowledge, scholars and intellectuals has always been coercive and anti-intellectual in nature.

### **Center-Periphery**

Another important element for explaining and understanding Turkish academia is the center-periphery relationship. According to Edward Shils (1961) who introduced the concept in 1961, there is an integration rather than a tension between the center and the periphery in modern nations. In *Center-periphery relations: a key to Turkish politics*, Serif Mardin (2006, 35-79) states that unlike western societies, the relationship between the center and the periphery in the Ottoman-Turkish modernization process has always been a tense one with the center being an element that excludes the periphery. Under the AKP regime, many private universities have been opened in different cities, both in the center and in the periphery. The same applies to public universities. While 77 universities were opened in the 80 years since 1923, 129 universities were opened over

the last 15 years. While the number increased, the resources are always insufficient and quality issues are overlooked.

Although universities that were opened in the periphery tried to address this tension between center and periphery, interviews confirm that the center continues to exclude the periphery. In contrast to what some scholars' claim (Bakiner 2018, 503-522), the cleavage between the cultural and social structure of center/periphery confirms Mardin's thesis regarding the center-periphery relationship in Turkey. The proliferation of universities is the result of neoliberal reforms and Erdogan's populism. Without any support for infrastructure and cultural investments, the universities in the periphery remains underdeveloped as opposed to the universities in the center. While the opening of new universities was considered an investment for those in the periphery, the quality of their education was disregarded, and never featured among the priorities.

### **Meanings and barriers to academic freedom in Turkey**

The following sections present the empirical findings from our interviews. In our interviews we have sought to unravel the state of academic freedom before and after 2016; the meanings that academics and students give to academic freedom; and the barriers, restrictions, and limitations to academic freedom with particular attention towards the academic, political and personal consequences deriving from such restrictions.

#### ***Authoritarianism and academic freedom before and after 2016***

The recent assaults to academic freedom are by no means new; rather assaults go back to the foundation of the Turkish Republic. Under the university reforms in 1933, İstanbul Dârülfünun (House of Multiple Sciences), also called Dâr-ül Fünun, was closed, and Istanbul University was opened. In this period, 92 out of 151 academics were dismissed from the university (Mazici 1995). As a result of this, Cevat Mazhar, for

example, a professor in chemistry, committed suicide (Bahadir 2019). In the following years, further arrangements were made with regard to higher education, with serious implications for academic freedom (Namal and Karakok 2011, 35). The military interventions and coup d'état in 1960, 1971 and 1980 all impacted on higher education largely as they involved a number of amendments in the Constitutional laws regulating universities. They have also resulted in the resignations and exclusions of academics from Turkish universities, in particular academics identified as left-wing in their politics.

147 academics were excluded from Turkish universities after May 27 military intervention in 1960. Many more rectors and lecturers resigned to protest against this decision (Tastan and Ordek 2020). During the 12 March 1971 Military Memorandum, the autonomy of universities was abolished. During this period, some academics were suspended from universities and arrested (Ilknur 2017). Following the coup d'état on September 12, 1980, more than a hundred left-oriented academics were either dismissed or self-resigned from academia (Ilknur 2017). The return of the academics to their job was made possible by the State Council decision in 1990 (Okcabol 2007; Senatalar 2016).

When we look at academic freedom in Turkey over the last 80 years, academics have suffered oppression and human rights violations because of their political orientation, and in what they say or write (Interview 12). This shows how Turkish academia, much like Turkish politics and society, has never been democratic. This also means that attacks and violations of academic freedom have a very long history. We can classify and examine the recent attacks on academic freedom in Turkey into two periods: before 2016, and after 2016. We can also separate these periods as the Kemalist and the AKP period.

With the AKP coming to power, academia was stripped of its elitist identity and opened to everyone. During the Kemalist era, those who had financial means completed their masters and doctorates abroad, and upon return were hired in Turkish universities. Since the AKP rose to power, the state has allowed non-elites to enter academia with scholarships, such as TUBITAK (Scientific and Technological Research Council of Turkey) and MEB (The Ministry of National Education). Through programs such as ÖYP (Faculty Member Training Program), students from the less well off classes could enter academia. The need for qualified faculty members emerged following the opening of many higher education institutions. This led to the expansion of graduate and post-graduate programs.

Since 2016, there has been a massive and continuous assault on academic freedoms. One scholar explains the current academic attacks by dividing AKP's power into two periods (Interview 3). The first period between 2002 and 2011, though hierarchical and authoritarian in nature, was somewhat more democratic in the AKP party. During this period, the AKP was characterized by a plurality of voices, and some issues, such as the Kurdish issue could be freely discussed. The second period post 2011 was characterized by oppression. Since 2011, the AKP increased pressure against the opposition parties such as the HDP (People's Democratic Party) - a political party that united pro-Kurdish and leftist forces of Turkey – which became stronger as a result of freedom allowed in the first period. Particularly after 2014, the government started to intervene in education, with many high schools and universities privatized.

There is a difference between the Kemalist approach to academia and the current government's approach: Kemalism's authoritarianism was different due to its 'so-called' pro-westernization attitude. It was power with red lines. These red lines are determined in the Turkish constitution. For this reason, going beyond these lines determined in the

constitution is equivalent to being subjected to pressure. One of the obstacles to academic freedom can be found in this constitution and the academy should work on the solution of these red lines in the constitution. As a result, certain academic criteria were valid. Talking about criteria and values in the current system has become impossible. Academia itself is shaped as ‘those belonging to us’ and ‘those not belonging to us.’ One of the biggest damages of this system is that it prevents society from seeing and evaluating itself critically.

In the current system, there is a paradox that can be found in academia. On the one hand, academics are asked to go abroad, whilst on the other hand, their rationale or motivation for going abroad is constantly questioned. While the government expects academics to be qualified, academics are also considered with suspicion or expelled from the university. Going abroad is being hampered both by the government and universities for fear of being criticized: “criticism of the government is perceived as criticism of Turkey. [...] Turkey and government are considered the same. [...] even the slightest constructive criticism is perceived as being made against Turkey” (Interview 1). According to some scholars, the approach of society to academia has changed since AKP rose to power (Interview 8). In the 1980s there was separation between leftist and rightist, while now the division runs between those who support AKP, and those who are against it. Another difference between these periods concerns the forms of resistance: according to some scholars, resistance today is passive, while forms of organized and active resistance are lacking (Interview 10).

### ***Defining Academic Freedom in Contemporary Turkey***

This section presents how Turkish scholars currently employed in Turkish academia define academic freedom. Some of the Turkish scholars interviewed link academic

freedom to freedom of expression.<sup>1</sup> More specifically, one scholar refers to academic freedom as the possibility to “freely criticize, express everything, self-reflect” and “academia must be distant from any form of power” (Interview 1).

The Turkish Constitution of 1982 draws a distinction between freedom of expression and freedom of research. For the first, Article 26 of the Constitution states the following: “Everyone has the right to express and disseminate their thoughts and opinions, either alone or collectively, by word, text, picture or other means. This freedom includes the freedom to exchange or receive news or ideas without the interference of public authorities” (Constitution 1982). For the latter, Article 27 of the Constitution refers to the freedom of research, science, art and press by stating that “everyone has the right to freely learn and teach, explain, disseminate science and art, and all kinds of research in these areas” (Constitution 1982). Article 130 sets both the possibilities and limitations for freedom of research by stating that “universities, faculty and assistants can freely participate in all kinds of scientific research and publications. However, this mandate does not give freedom to operate against the existence and independence of the State and the integrity and indivisibility of the nation and the country” (Constitution 1982).

The center-periphery dimension plays an important role in facilitating or hampering discussions on academic freedom and in effectively enjoying it. In this regard, one scholar from a peripheral university argues that the limits to his academic freedom are expressed at the personal level through self-censorship, and at the institutional level through administrative interferences towards his syllabus (Interview 1).

Interviews reveal a number of dimensions that have an impact on how academic freedom is defined and expressed:



- 1) Freedom of expression, censorship and self-censorship
- 2) Center-periphery
- 3) Institutional factors
- 4) Political and governmental pressures
- 5) Students' repression
- 6) Politically sensitive subjects and languages

Each of these dimensions can be broadly classified as public or private pressure areas, i.e., the former referring to governmental, institutional and societal pressures while the latter to individual pressures from scholars themselves. For a scholar, academic freedom is respected when “one can discuss a critical subject in a critical time in his/her native language” (Interview 2). There are a number of controversial topics in Turkish society which, when reflected upon in academia, has detrimental effects for academic freedom and expression. One of them is the headscarf issue (Interview 2). The headscarf topic has been hotly debated in public since the 1960s in a period of proliferation of higher education institutions. Following the 1980 military coup, a dress code – in force for 31 years (Al Jazeera 2013) - was issued and prevented kerchiefed women from taking part in the public arena. Since 1997, the headscarf was banned in Turkish universities with the circular letter issued by the Rector of Istanbul University on the February 23, 1998. In 2007, five years after the AKP came to power, it was possible to enter the universities with a headscarf. On October 1, 2013, a democratization package made possible headscarves in the public sector (Al Jazeera 2013; Aksoy 2005, 279-280). The headscarf issue highlights how academic freedom means also the right to be freely educated.

Other interviews reveal what academic freedom should mean going beyond the possibility of freely expressing their own thoughts without being subjected to any form

of pressure to write on critical issues in their own language. To circumvent censorship, many scholars choose English to write their research.

The Kurdish and Armenian questions have always been controversial subjects throughout Turkish history and politics. According to one scholar, “doing research on these subjects is very difficult under Turkey’s political conditions. Not only talking about them but the critical thinking itself is difficult” (Interview 2). The ‘desire,’ ‘pleasure’ and ‘enthusiasm’ are feelings associated with scientific research by some interviews. However, under the current repressive conditions, such feelings are replaced by ‘fear’ and ‘anxiety.’

For one scholar, academic freedom meant free research, free self-development, and the possibility to freely share his research with the broader society (Interview 3). However, as another scholar points out, while academic freedom is the essence of academia, it is currently in “a desperate situation” in Turkey (Interview 4). In the current situation, sensitive or critical issues have stopped being the object of scientific research as they have become a political matter (Interview 4). Apart from being free to write, research and publish, academic freedom also means the possibility to freely lecture without restrictions or forms of oppression from the administrative structure of the university (Interview 6). For a doctoral student, academic freedom means the possibility to freely choose the research subject or topic by him/herself without being under administrative, societal and political pressures (Interview 8). These remarks suggest the need to look at academic freedom in terms of the relationship between society, academia and politics. Since 2016, following academic restrictions in Turkish universities, a huge divide and alienation between Turkish academia and society exists. Another scholar who cites J.S. Mill’s *On Liberty*, links academic freedom to happiness and well-being, and defines academic freedom as “freedom of thought [...] academic

freedom is a necessary condition for the development of reason and progress, prosperity and happiness of humankind” (Interview 7).

### ***Barriers to academic freedom and their consequences***

Following the 2016 coup, the Turkish academy has been highly politicized. One scholar reported that the rectorate has been sending messages supporting the military operations in Rojava. This has affected her own motivation as an anti-militarist, drained her mental energy and disrupted her own interior peace (Interview 4). As a result of this general oppressive climate, students, teachers, and academics have slowly self-isolated and developed different addictions, including the use of antidepressant. The antidepressant use is not only peculiar to the academics who signed the peace petition, and were dismissed by their universities. It is also widely used by academics who still work in the university (Demirel et al. 2019). According to one scholar interviewed, the trend towards alcohol and addictive drugs has increased among academics (Interview 4). For him, the main reason for such depression is in regard to the fact that while academia is a field where what is invisible for the society is made visible, it has been impossible for scholars in the current historical conjuncture to provide solutions and overcome the collapse that has permeated Turkish society and academia. For this scholar, there can be no academic freedom while there is a widespread sense of desperation (Interview 4). In their view, some of the outcomes of academic restrictions and dismissal are the following:

- 1) Withdrawal
- 2) Increased use of antidepressants and other addictive substances
- 3) Self-censorship
- 4) Loss of energy and will for research and academic studies
- 5) Academic mobbing

## 6) Exemption from the material and financial resources for research

We can look at the structure of academia as a factor that leads to the conflicts, restrictions, and barriers for both academic production and freedom. We can also analyze this structure in terms of the public and private, the individual and institutional, the hierarchical and the bureaucratic. Fear and anxiety are the result of the public and private, the individual and institutional, the hierarchical and bureaucratic aspects, which in turn leads to censorship and self-censorship. By public and institutional aspects, we mean the governmental and non-governmental organizations and institutions that put restrictions against academic freedom. By private and individual aspects, we refer to those pressures coming from the individual scholar and which results in self-censorship or psychological problems such as addiction.

### *Fear and anxiety: Censorship and Self-Censorship in Turkish Academia*

The restrictions regarding freedom of expression and censorship which scholars are exposed to in Turkey is reminiscent of the restriction and censorship applied by the tsar and the German government in 1905. Of this period Rosa Luxemburg writes: “And, all the while, the press in our country and in the tsarist empire, muzzled by the censors, was forced to remain silent about these most important and dramatic historical events that will be recorded for centuries in the history of Russia and in fact in the history of the world” (Luxemburg 2019, 59). In a similar vein, the current government in Turkey censors scholars dealing with critical topics such as the Kurdish and Armenian questions, academic freedom, the Syrian war, immigration etc.

Even though there are different forms of oppressions and censorship, no state in history has been able to survive through constant coercion. As Luxemburg says, “the revolution cannot be killed by silence [...] Because the censorship is not allowing any

further news reports, thus blocking information to the general public, we are reprinting the most important dispatches from the foreign press” (Luxemburg 2019, 59).

Since the coup attempt in 2016, the government has censored the press by closing many journals, newspapers, and televisions that are critical of its policies. Academic freedom has not only been censored by the state or university administration but also as a result of self-censorship or forms of censorships exercised in other fields. According to one interviewee, academics’ exposure to legal pressure leads to self-censorship (Interview 5).

The existence of an institution called CIMER (Cumhurbaskanı İletisim Merkezi/Presidential Communication Center) has been one of the main factors for censorship and self-censorship.<sup>2</sup> This institution emerged as an organ targeting the transmission of wishes and complaints to the president in 2018. Everything taught in class risks being transmitted to this institution. Academics are surveilled and controlled through systems and institutions of surveillance. Not surprisingly, this has caused self-censorship among academics. A scholar refers to self-censorship in class when he finds himself using analogies for explaining Rousseau and his concept of the unity of power. The ‘unity of power’ concept is exemplified through other historical or geographical examples such as Argentina or Mexico (Interview 6).

Barriers to academic freedom and self-censorship run also across the center-periphery axis. According to one scholar, speaking about controversial topics such as Kurdistan was easier when he was working in a university at the center. This is not possible anymore in the provincial university where he is currently working (Interview 6).

Other forms of self-censorship are to be found in what is concealed or revealed in job applications and curriculum vitae, for example by hiding articles published on Foucault,

and the concept of daily resistance or self-defense in Hobbes and Machiavelli (Interview 6). Self-defense is a concept used by the Kurdish leader, Abdullah Ocalan in his theory of democratic federalism. Not being able to use concepts in his field of study hinders his ability to think and write as thus his academic freedom.

Censorship and self-censorship are related to fear (Interview 10). Fear as a psychological factor that leads to self-censorship has become more evident since 2016, in the context of the attacks on academia. Pro-government scholars were not affected by these attacks, while those scholars that supported the peace petition called ‘Academic for Peace’ started becoming fearful of being identified as government opponents. One scholar identifies different forms of fear, such as fear from losing ones job, and fear from being excluded from society (Interview 10). The fear of losing the job is widespread among academics. Oppression has increased a general sense of precarity among academics in Turkey.

Another important thing related to censorship and self-censorship is the expectation from scholars to link their work, research and teaching to “native and national values” (*yerli-mille*). Yilmaz, Caman and Bashirov refers in their article to the “AKP’s legitimizing strategy, its ‘New Turkey’ mission” which “has a strong emphasis on a fully independent, very strong Turkey that is a leading regional and even global power. One of the most noteworthy features of the mission is that it is presented as a ‘native’ and ‘national’ strategy” (2019, 8). While a subtler form of control and thus censorship, such expectation serves to assess their dedication to the nation and their loyalty to government policies. According to Altıparmak, “for scientist there is something more important than loyalty to the nation. Loyalty to the truth” (Altıparmak 2016, 193). In the academic *milieu*, this has led to a sense of uncertainty and thus often

scholars have stopped inviting speakers or lecturers for fear of not being approved by the dean.

Censorship and self-censorship can also be caused by pressure mechanisms exercised by students against academics. An investigation can be opened with the complaint of a student. This is accompanied by a general sense of distrust against scholars and academics, which hampers their legitimacy and reliability (Interview 1). Another psychological disorder experienced by scholars employed in Turkish universities is the dismissal of their colleagues. This is expressed, from example, in the case of the signatories to the peace declarations. Such declarations are a threshold that divides the academic field between those that signed and those that do not sign, with the former often dismissed from their academic positions while the later apply self-censorship. According to one scholar, “too many friends were investigated, both the academics for Peace, and other friends, and this affected me very negatively. I got into a situation close to depression, many friends got psychological treatment, psychiatric treatment” (Interview 3).

The restrictions surrounding what are feasible research subjects are of a political, social and cultural nature. Of the social and cultural restrictions, it is worth mentioning traditional subjects, such as the topic of ‘virginity’ or ‘incest.’ Scholars are thus expected to reconcile governmental expectations and pressures on linking their research to native and national values, while at the same time avoiding sensitive issues related to traditional values. Such short-circuits mean in practice that scholars can do research on the family but without touching its gender dimension, or do research on tradition and culture without touching aspects related to virginity or incest. Censorship and restrictions are also found on how and who writes the official history. In contrast to

other contexts, there is a limited number of scholars that seek to counter the official version of history by proposing alternative and counter-narratives (Interview 10).

### *Institutional Control and the Hierarchy-Bureaucracy Factor*

Institutional control is directly related to censorship. Here we analyze it as a separate dimension in order to illustrate the problematic structure of university and its effects on academic freedom. Although the political situation and the general societal environment are reflected in the Turkish academy, the university's own problematic structure is an important obstacle to academic research and production. Such a structure is hierarchical and highly bureaucratized. Furthermore, universities are closer in structure to vocational schools rather than to research centers. Some scholars argue that the possibility to do research is not only related to academic factors, but also to administrative ones (Interview 11). Here we can classify the restrictions related to the institutional and administrative structure as follows:

- 1) The political environment that prevails within the administrative and institutional structure of the university;
- 2) The traditional structure of the administration;
- 3) The restrictions created by the rules and criteria in the mandatory regulations of the administration; and
- 4) The traditional approach of administrative units that see academics as civil servants.

Another important factor which impedes academic freedom is the hierarchical structure and power relationships in the university. As a result of this hierarchy, the administration can easily intervene in classes. The dean or the head of the department can warn and ask scholars to not discuss sensitive and critical topics in class. A case in point is the discussion on gender in class. A scholar reports that in one occasion, the



administration intervened pointing out how discussions on gender in class could destroy the family and Turkish social and community structure (Interview 6).

Another institutional obstacle to academic freedom is the Higher Education Council (HEC). The HEC is responsible for overseeing, planning, organizing, governing, and controlling universities in Turkey, as established in Articles 130 and 131 of the 1982 constitution.<sup>3</sup> HEC – established during the coup period – consolidated the centralization of authority and ended the autonomy of Turkish universities. One of the interviewees talks about the technical dimension of academic freedom (Interview 9). This dimension refers to the institutional constraints on academic freedom. In this context, institutions such as HEC who decide how much academic work and publication should be done, “prevents the academic from taking his own path” (Interview 9). Academia becomes a place where the academic work repeats itself and where scholars write similar and parrot fashion articles for the purpose of accumulating points (Interview 6).

Another problem at the institutional level, highlighted by interviews, is that academics are seen as civil servants by the university administration.<sup>4</sup> Since the right to render service in higher education is directly related to the right to the freedom in science regulated in the Constitution (articles 27,130-131), the function of academics cannot be understood as any other sort of the public service (Akdeniz and Altıparmak, 2016). Contrary to civil servants, academics can independently and freely decide their approach and methods of working, researching and teaching.

In the institutional and administrative context, academics are marginalized from their ‘research’ function. Academics are not considered as researchers, but rather as lecturers or simply as civil servants carrying out administrative tasks. Another administrative obstacle concerns the permission for obtaining research materials or

doing fieldwork. According to a scholar, field research is not well known in Turkey (Interview 9). In order to do field or archival research, the head of the department should give an official permission. This again may lead to situations of self-censorship whereby researchers prevent themselves from asking permission.

Administrative limitations of this kind have academic and personal consequences, the latter being mainly related to satisfaction and motivation. A scholar argues that while the political dimension of academic freedom is a significant factor, the daily dimension in the department is important as well (Interview 9). Restrictions concern both fieldwork carried out in Turkey or abroad. Administrative restrictions regard also conference participation and getting permission to participate in conferences abroad has become more difficult following the coup d'état in 2016.

Academic freedom is also affected by the hierarchy between the student and the academic. Willingness to explore new dimensions in the student's research is perceived as a disobedience to the supervisor (Interview 8). Due to the lack of freedom of expression, the researcher only sees academia as a job center; this is a far cry from the enthusiasm of intellectual and scientific discovery.

## **Conclusion**

Academic research in Turkey is characterized by a number of politically controversial topics - the Kurdish question, headscarf ban, gender, Armenian genocide – whose discussions are either censored or self-censored. In our research, we have found four different types of censorship that characterize Turkish academia: the political, social, institutional, and personal (self-) censorship. The pressures and conditions under which academics conduct research have resulted in various forms of psychological disorder. Attacks and pressures are structurally transversal, and they affect scholars

defined as leftist opponents to the system as well as scholars self-defined as conservatives.

Worried about academic repression, academics deal with this fear and create a safety place by “navigating the political geography carefully, by disassociating themselves from activities or persons they think might be ‘dangerous’, and by trying hard not to say the *wrong* thing” (Starr 2010, 6). The fear of being dismissed from academia affects everyone, including those that did not sign the 2016 *Academic for Peace* petition.

Almost all academics interviewed agree that the university is the center of knowledge, the arena where citizens acquire the critical skills for self-development, and the place where society and people can find truth. In addition, academia should be the place where academics find the solutions for the fundamental problems of a society. In this regard, these scholars believe that if there is no knowledge and truth unveiled in and through academia, violence will take place and re-occur.

There is general agreement among the academics interviewed that there is a disconnection and huge polarization between different groups in the Turkish society and within academia itself. Compared with the more recent past (up until 2011), the relationship between student, knowledge and academics has been radically altering. The government’s aggressive attitude towards academics has undermined their legitimacy *vis-à-vis* their students. As a result of the anti-intellectual attitude and policies of the Turkish government and the AKP party, students’ and societal respect for knowledge is reduced and the value of knowledge undermined. The distance that runs between Turkish society and academia reverberates with a similar distance between the Turkish state and academia. This is another result of neoliberal authoritarianism. The cleavage between knowledge and politics – a result of neoliberal authoritarianism – exists

because politics is not interested in the production of knowledge unless it is profit-generating.

Our research shows that the inability of the government to consolidate its power and hegemony through knowledge and an intellectual base in a Gramscian fashion might in part explain its aggressive politics against Turkish scholars. Current transformations in Turkish higher education have to be seen in the context of the broader Erdoğan's project of conquering and restructuring the state which has triggered various power struggles between and within elite groups and that has been heightened by the geopolitical fluidity and insecurity in neighboring states over the last few years. Following an intensification of hegemonic and power struggles for the control of the state, the AKP has relied increasingly on the parliamentary majority to pass laws and restructure institutions (Akkoyunlu and Öktem 2016, 513). The judicial restructuring has been followed by the bureaucratic restructuring and is now being followed by an intensification of the higher education restructuring not only through neoliberal reforms but also through coercion and repression.

While presidential reforms have cemented Erdoğan's domination of Turkey's institutions they have not guaranteed consensus and hegemonic legitimacy in politics and society. Indeed, the AKP's regime is engaging in an "ideological work" requiring "consistent policing of actors" (Lewis 2013, 333). Similar to what previous research on Turkish civil society has shown, AKP is caught between conflicting interests and pressures of appropriating and containing higher education, in the attempt to make academia (de-) politicized, segregated and passive (Heydemann 2007; Yabancı 2019). Selective repression has sought to contain critical voices in academia by inducing passivity and a climate of anxiety and has pushed critical voices in academia towards atomization by enforcing self-censorship and invisibility as the interviews in this paper

have shown. While academia is not fully co-opted in the service of the government it is neither able to engage in revolutionary resistance against the regime and thus struggle for change.

This sheds light on the regime's resilience and societal embeddedness and its increasingly pervasive authoritarian nature expressed in the growing use of state's coercive capacity to suppress various forms of non-violent as well as violent dissent. The repression of thousands of scholars and the reform of higher education reflects the attempt to create a new organic ideology that is effectuated dialectically through ideological struggles. The use of force and coercion reflects an organic crisis threatening the hegemonic position and the ruling position of the leading class. While the leading class exerts authority through police power it also relies on the building of a passive and submissive higher education deprived of its most critical agency and further weakened by the neoliberal precarization of academia.

As a recent book from Asli Vatansever has shown (2020), changes in Turkish academia are part of broader structural changes and conditions of global capitalism and neoliberalism that have increased precarization of the academic labour force through privatization and deregulatory market mechanisms. Turkish scholars are subject to a double precarity – a political and economic one – and to pressures both exerted by the state and the market that have tangible material consequences. Such consequences reflect the ideational struggle between these competing forces and their organic intellectuals. The extent to which the regime will successfully consolidate an organic ideology and its organic intellectuals and thus ensure hegemony is marked by uncertainties and questions and open to further investigation and research.

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<sup>1</sup> For a discussion on the difference between academic freedom and freedom of expression see (Altıparmak 2016, 189-196).

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- <sup>2</sup> It was first called BIMER (Prime Minister Contact Center) and in 2018 it was changed and took the name CIMER. It was established with the Presidential Decree number 14 published in the Official Gazette No. 30488 dated 24 July 2018. BIMER was a web service that was published in the Official Gazette on November 20, 2006 and was established in order to convey the demands, notices and complaints of citizens directly to the presidency. (Türkiye Cumhuriyeti Cumhurbaşkanlığı İletişim Başkanlığı).
- <sup>3</sup> The disciplinary and criminal affairs of academics are arranged differently from other civil servants and are regulated by the HEC. According to a Constitutional Court's decision in 2019 "the rule that gives the head of the YÖK the right to open an investigation against the academic staff, undermines the scientific autonomy and exceeds the supervisory authority of the Higher Education Council, which is incompatible with the articles of 130 and 131 of the Constitution" (Norm Denetimi, 2019).
- <sup>4</sup> According to the decision of Constitutional Court on July 17, 2019: "In the Constitution, universities have been evaluated differently from other public institutions by having scientific and administrative autonomy. Accordingly, it is clear that the differences should be taken into consideration in the arrangements to be made about the faculty members" (Norm Denetimi, 2019).

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### Table of interviews

Interview	Age	Sex	University: center/periphery	University: public/private	Interview Date	Interview Tool
1	40	male	periphery	public	28 December 2019	WhatsApp
2	28	female	center	private	29 December 2019	Face to face
3	34	male	center	private	30 December 2019	WhatsApp
4	32	male	center	public	31 December 2019	Face to face
5	55	male	center	public	5 January 2020	Jitsi
6	33	male	periphery	public	9 January 2020	Jitsi
7	47	female	center	public	10 January 2020	Email
8	32	female	center	public	19 January 2020	Face to face
9	36	male	center	public	24 January 2020	Jitsi
10	35	female	periphery	public	2 February 2020	Jitsi
11	34	male	periphery	public	27 February 2020	Jitsi
12	56	male	center	private	3 March 2020	Jitsi