



The Canadian Philosophical Association
L'Association canadienne de philosophie

February 9, 2016

Prof. Dr. M.A. Yekta Saraç, President
Council of Higher Education
06539 Bilkent/Ankara
Republic of Turkey

Re: Academic freedom in Turkey

Dear Dr. Yekta-Saraç,

I write on behalf of the Board of the Canadian Philosophical Association, to express the Board's grave concerns and reservations about the current treatment of academic personnel in Turkey. Many news sources and personal reports indicate that professors, staff and students in Turkish universities have been singled out for harassment based on their expressed views. They are persecuted either by private individuals or groups who are unimpeded by police forces, or by agents of the Turkish government employing tactics that include heavy-handed investigations, threats, or imprisonment. This pattern of action and inaction is alarming in many respects. Our particular concern is for the safety of our colleagues in the Turkish higher education system, and for the effects of this conduct on academic freedom.

We recognize that the concept of academic freedom is neither simple nor univocal; it may manifest differently in distinct national or cultural contexts. However, two key observations will be consistent with any meaningful understanding of the concept. First, academic freedom is not something independent of a rich and productive university system. It is not a special right that academics demand in return for performing the research and teaching so critical to sustaining and transforming a modern polity. Rather, academic freedom is a precondition for achieving those results. To attack or dismantle that freedom is to dismantle the system of instruction, of inquiry, and of open, conscientious discourse that characterizes both universities and intellectual rigor more generally.

The second point to note is that academic freedom is made vacuous by efforts to criminalize academic expressions of informed judgement by people within the university community. The precise boundaries of academic freedom are less important here than the fact that genuine inquiry requires a basic level of trust between researchers and educators on one hand, and university administrations and the State on the other hand. This trust transcends differences of partisanship; it consists in the reasonable confidence of professors, staff, and students that they need not guard their thoughts constantly in order to avoid loss of employment or loss of freedom. The breakdown of this trust is lethal to the atmosphere and practices that enable an academy to function.

In light of these considerations, we urge the representatives and officials at all levels of government in Turkey, and the administrations of Turkish universities, to ensure not only that the civil liberties and personal safety of Turkish academics are respected, but that the openness, tolerance, and employment security characteristic of academic freedom are fully honoured. We regard the dismissal of professors from their positions for reasons not plausibly linked to their job performance, and the persecution, arrest, and imprisonment of Turkish academics for views expressed in their roles as academics, as constituting serious departures from principles of academic freedom by which we may recognize the enlightened governance of university systems in any nation.

Cordially,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Tim Kenyon', written in a cursive style.

Dr. Tim Kenyon, President
Canadian Philosophical Association