

SCHOLARS AT RISK

NETWORK  ITALY SECTION

To: His Excellency Recep Tayyip Erdoğan
President of the Republic of Turkey
T.C. Cumhurbaşkanlığı Genel Sekreterliği
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Subject: Petition in support of Boğazici University Community

1st March 2021

Your Excellency,

On behalf of *Scholars at Risk* Italy – the Italian section of SAR international network whose mission is to protect scholars and promote academic freedom across the world - we would like to express our concern for the serious events that have affected the Boğazici University community, and the Turkish higher education system, since January 2021.

As President of the Republic of Turkey, on the 1st of January 2021, You appointed new Rectors to five universities in Turkey. Among them, Prof. Melih Bulu, a member of the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP), was appointed as the new Rector of Boğaziçi University. In our understanding, this decision mirrors the decreasing loss of autonomy that has characterised Turkish higher education system since 2016. In the aftermath of the failed coup attempt in July of that year, Your government issued the Emergency Decree No. 676, which placed the Rectors' appointment process in the hands of the Presidency and the Turkish Higher Education Council (YÖK). After the state of emergency was lifted in 2018, Your government decided to place the appointment of Rectors permanently into the hands of the President and YÖK.

This decision contrasts with the past Turkish law which granted universities the right to have their Rector elected by tenured and tenure-track academic faculty, and then to present the decision to the country's President for appointment. Further, as asserted in 2018 by the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights and by the Council of Europe's Venice Commission, there is no evidence supporting that Decree No.676 was directly linked to the management of the state of emergency.

Boğaziçi's faculty members and students have expressed their solicitude through a series of peaceful protests, to which police have responded with violent force, arrests and the use of tear gas and rubber bullets. Most recently, in different cities, the Turkish police has attacked and detained dozens of students who peacefully protested against the AKP's attempt to assert political control over Boğaziçi University.

Within the context of persistent attacks against the scholars and students of one of the oldest and most prestigious HE institution in Turkey, we become concerned also about specific attacks involving its past representatives, such as Prof. Ayşe Buğra. Prof. Buğra, emeritus at Boğaziçi University, distinguished and internationally renowned scholar, who was accused of being one of the main instigators of the protests. Furthermore, Interior Minister Suleyman Soylu publicly targeted former Boğaziçi University Rector, Prof. Dr. Üstün Ergüder, for the protests against the President's decision. These attacks were condemned by thirty-eight former Rectors of Turkish universities who have expressed their concerns about the situation.

With this letter, the members of *Scholars at Risk* Italy stand in solidarity with all the students and scholars of Boğaziçi University. We call upon Professor Bulu to decline the position and we further urge Your government to release all students still in custody, withdraw all charges and restore the tradition of university self-government through rescinding the legal framework that enables You to make appointment of university Rectors by Presidential decree.

Thank you for your attention to this matter. We look forward to your positive response.

Sincerely,

Prof. Ester Gallo, University of Trento. Co-chair, Scholars at Risk Italy and SAR International Advisory Committee



Prof. Claudia Padovani, University of Padova. Co-chair, Scholars at Risk Italy and SAR European Advocacy Committee for Academic Freedom



Prof. Francesca Helm, University of Padova. Co-chair, Scholars at Risk Italy



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