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Science Academy Public Statement on the Situation of Universities at the Beginning of 2019

A Science Academy's task is to work on issues such as promoting the development of long-term policies on science, supporting scientists, and carrying out discussions on the ethics of science. Sadly, however, in the universities in Turkey there are so many factors that hamper scientists from fulfilling their duties in its most basic form that, as the Science Academy of Turkey, we feel obliged to regularly point to these problems.

We now need to discuss the tragic case of the murder of Ceren Damar, a research assistant who was brutally killed in her office Çankaya University Faculty of Law, by a student she had caught cheating in the exam. This incident is directly related to the facts that day by day the crucial role universities, science and scientists play for a society is undermined, the tendency of the Turkish society towards violence increased, and the commitment to ethical values faded away.

The many examples in media of people entering university campuses with weapons, and the threats of violence are deeply concerning. It is a signal for the erosion of the intellectual identity of universities and that no effective measures are taken against such incidents and no sufficient investigations are carried out. We have come to a point where any approach to solve issues through discussion, exchange of ideas or convincing each other is despised in our society and resorting to violence in the slightest of disagreements has come to be seen as fair. It is all the more ironic that this recent crime was committed by a law student who should have learned to respect other opinions at the very beginning of his education, who should have adopted a culture of reconciliation as the student of a faculty expected to raise the main defenders of ethics and law in the society. The offender has not only cheated, thus seeing it as his 'right' to get a grade others have been toiling to get to, but also had no hesitation to end someone's life because she simply did not permit his cheating.

Even in the aftermath of this dreary murder, we do not observe an environment of social condemnation or self-criticism. Both in university education and in academic promotion there are many known cases of violation to the principles of merit and honesty which have remained unrequited; cheating and plagiarism do not receive public reaction, instead these are overlooked and even taken as normal; as such a culture installs itself in the society, those who point to these unlawful and unethical conducts are almost reproached. While those struggling

for an education environment based on merit are left alone and undefended, 'succeeding' through 'short cuts' and proceeding over others' labour instead of one's own hard work have gained prominence.

On the other hand, some people who peacefully express their opinions face obstacles in a time when freedom of opinion and speech of all, and especially of academics, is constantly challenged. It is unaccountable that the signatories of the 'Academicians for Peace' Declaration face prison sentences, in addition to the various forms of repression they have been enduring (such as dismissal from office, loss of rights, and bans on leaving the country) and even the durations of prison sentences differ on disputable justifications. It is a must for social sciences and humanities to have a questioning approach to social issues, and critical academic research and declaration of opinions inevitably have a wide effect on the public. Resorting to penal law measures against declarations that remain within the sphere of freedom of speech, however, intimidates and seriously limits academic thinking. As the Constitutional Court expresses in its resolution published on the Official Gazette on January 3, 2019, 'freedom of speech is of vital importance for the working of democracy':

Freedom of speech means that individuals can, without restriction, reach news and information and the opinion of others; cannot be reproached for their ideas and opinions; can freely express, explain, defend, and transmit and spread these on their own or together with other people. As often expressed in the decisions of the Constitutional Court and the European Court of Human Rights, this freedom not only covers socially accepted, harmless or irrelevant information and opinions, but also those that are considered offensive, shocking and disconcerting information and opinions.

Individuals can only realize themselves in an environment in which they can freely express and discuss their opinions. As such, freedom of speech is a value necessary for a person to know, understand and perceive themselves and others, and determine their relationship with others in this framework.

On the other hand, pluralistic democracy necessitates tolerance towards the expression of opinions –including those that oppose the views of the majority- through all kinds of means, acquiring supporters to the opinions expressed, realizing the opinions and efforts to persuade others to these opinions. Providing social and political pluralism depends on the expression of all kinds of opinions peacefully and freely. In this sense, freedom of speech is of vital importance for the working of democracy.”

Violence sprouts in environments where ideas cannot be shared freely. The main method of communication among people is to speak and to exchange views. Trying to learn from those holding different opinions from oneself, and respecting those opinions when it is not possible to accept them is a virtue, not a weakness. Universities and other places where science is practiced are the environments where this is experienced every day. All scientists know that they should find the most convincing arguments in order for their ideas to gain acceptance. Scientists live with the fact that everything that is held true today might be falsified through new findings tomorrow. People have nothing to lose from constant self-questioning, they

would only benefit from this. Universities contribute to the intellectual development of the society by the realization of this process of questioning and understanding.

Both the public and the universities in Turkey have been losing a lot in this period of continuous inhibition of freedom of thought and expression, installing a culture of violence and punishments instead. We are thus not a society at peace with itself, neither can we become one as long as the environment of free thinking that is the prerequisite of scientific development in science remains in danger.

Respectfully announced to the public,

Executive Board of the Science Academy of Turkey

January 16, 2019