

Repression: Academics flee Turkey for Germany as Erdogan targets teachers

Friday 8 December 2017, by [VERGIN Julia](#) (Date first published: 31 October 2017).

Turkish professors who signed a call for peace are being charged with disseminating terrorist propaganda. Many are seeking refuge in Germany – but here too they face an uncertain future.

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Dilek Dizdar still hasn't received an indictment. A professor of intercultural German studies and translation at the University of Mainz, she was one of the 1,128 signatories of an appeal for peace — an initiative of Academics for Peace — in the form of an open letter written in January 2016 and addressed to the Turkish government. In it, the academics called on the state to halt military operations in Kurdish territories and seek a peaceful solution to the conflict. About 120 Turkish academics living in Germany signed the appeal.

The Turkish public prosecutor's office has accused the signatories of "propagandizing for a terrorist organization." [1] It claimed that their aim was to present the Turkish state as criminal and an "illegitimate, destructive power," and to legitimize violence from the outlawed Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). Now it appears all the signatories will be charged.

University by university, indictments are coming

The first court cases will begin on December 5. A separate trial is to be held for each signatory. Current information suggests that the indictment is systematically combing through universities. So far, academics from the Istanbul University, Galatasaray University, Istanbul Technical University and Marmara University have been affected.

The Academics for Peace initiative was started in 2012. It describes itself as working for a peaceful and democratic solution to the Turkish-Kurdish conflict. In the appeal, the academics described the actions of Turkish security forces in Kurdish areas of settlement at the end of 2015 as "a policy of extermination and expulsion" — and in doing so they trod heavily on the government's toes.

"I know a whole lot of colleagues who are affected," Dizdar said.

German scholarships help some academics

Some academics from Turkey are now in Germany thanks to a scholarship from the Philipp Schwartz Initiative of the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation, which provides help to persecuted and endangered academics. However, these scholarships are limited to a maximum of 24 months. Signatories of the petition for peace who return to Turkey can expect to be brought to trial — and they are afraid of the possible consequences: Under Turkish law, disseminating terrorist propaganda is punishable by up to seven and a half years in jail.

Dizdar said she had no misgivings about signing the petition for peace. Nor did Kader Konuk, the director of the Institute of Turkish Studies at the University of Duisburg-Essen.

Now, though, she said she also expects to receive an indictment from Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's government.

"Immediately after the petition was published, Erdogan derided all the signatories as pseudo-intellectuals," Konuk said. "Ever since, we are only ever described as 'so-called academics.'"

State of emergency in Turkish universities

After the attempted coup in July 2016, a national state of emergency was declared, and many more academics found themselves in difficulty [\[2\]](#). The first of the 1,128 signatories had already been arrested in the spring of 2016.

"Back then, though, we still didn't foresee that all the signatories would face criminal proceedings," Konuk said. "It's now clear that this is the case."

In the interim, she added, almost half of those affected have not only been dismissed from their posts, they have also been banned from traveling or practicing their profession.

Solidarity is not enough

Konuk is one of the initiators of the Academy in Exile, in response to the still-escalating situation against Turkish academics. In the German cities of Essen and Berlin, academics from Turkey will be given the chance to pursue their research undisturbed and without fear. The newly founded academy has advertised 10 research scholarships; only academics from Turkey are eligible at this initial stage.

"According to an international comparison, Turkish academics are most at risk," said Konuk, referring to statistics compiled by the network Scholars at Risk [\[3\]](#).

Locking up freethinkers

Turkish academics who want to stay in Germany long-term must either apply for asylum and hope to be granted protection — or hope they will secure a position when the scholarship comes to an end. That would not only help the at-risk academics; Dizdar said she believes German society could also profit enormously.

“These people bring a huge quantity of resources with them,” she said. “They’re sociologists, psychologists, literary scholars, artists and actors.”

Dizdar also said she believes it is this potential that Erdogan is attempting systematically to silence in Turkey.

“All freethinkers should be locked up,” she said of Erdogan’s approach. “He’s fighting all intellectuals.”

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P.S.

* <http://www.dw.com/en/academics-flee-turkey-for-germany-as-erdogan-targets-teachers/a-41181311>

Footnotes

[1] <http://www.dw.com/en/turkey-plans-charges-against-turkish-peace-academics-in-germany/a-41164096>

[2] <http://www.dw.com/en/post-coup-turkey-journalists-public-employees-under-fire/a-39673957>

[3] <https://www.scholarsatrisk.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/Free-to-Think-2017.pdf>