

Özden Melis Uluğ: Thank you for accepting my invitation to give an interview, Ekren [name has been changed to preserve anonymity]. I would like to start with a few questions about Academics for Peace. We know that you are one of 1128 academics who signed the peace petition in 2016. How did you hear about it and how did you decide to sign it?

Ekren: At the time the peace petition was released, there had been ongoing curfews in the Kurdish region of the country (in Turkey). “Curfew” in English can be a misleading term, so I just want to discuss briefly what I mean by that. It was not about being inside by a certain time of day; these curfews were in place in some areas for weeks or months at a time. People weren’t allowed to leave their homes, and oftentimes, beyond even the fighting in the streets leading to civilian deaths, some people died because they couldn’t go to the hospital, others with chronic illnesses because they couldn’t get treatment on time. It felt very hopeless for people on the outside. It felt like the very least I could do was sign a petition that called on Turkey’s government to bring an end to the violence in the streets and resume peace talks.

Özden Melis Uluğ: Could you tell me about the process that took place after signing? There are incredible pressures on many academics in Turkey. How does it affect your research? How do you feel?

Ekren: Just a few days after the petition was signed, people started getting fired from their positions. Some were arrested and detained for days at a time. All the names were published in newspapers and on social media as a kind of “blacklist,” and especially academics in smaller, more conservative towns faced a lot of pressure. Some were threatened. It was a really difficult situation for a lot of people. Four academics who gave a statement to the press about all of this in March of 2016 were arrested for about a month. All of this pressure increased after the July 15th, 2016 coup attempt. It was after that that the state of emergency started, allowing for mass dismissals of people working in civil service, including academics working in public universities. Even more petition signatories were dismissed at this point; what’s worse, being purged in this way meant that your passport would also be confiscated. There are now a number of academics who cannot leave the country, and others who were able to leave just before the purge, who cannot come back lest their passports be taken from them.

Özden Melis Uluğ: We know that Academics for Peace are on trial. Could you talk a little about this process?

Ekren: The majority of trials started this past December. Along with 147 other academics, I received an indictment from the courts – it was about 16 pages that used the petition in its original Turkish, along with a back-translated version (from English) that the courts themselves had done. They claimed that the English version used different jargon to try to convince academics abroad that they should sign the petition. The indictment also indicates that we are accused of terrorist propaganda, with an added length to the sentence for using media outlets to “spread” that propaganda. This means the possibility of up to 7.5 years in prison. The first verdicts were read out on February 23rd, where three academics were given 15 month suspended jail sentences.

I had my first hearing in January, and have just had my second hearing in February, where I presented a verbal defense to the court. I’ve also sat in on a number of other hearings. Statements

read by the prosecutor and oftentimes the judge are copied and pasted from previous hearings. That means that requests or objections that the lawyer makes in one particular case may or may not be reflected by the court. Despite the fact that everyone signed the same petition, the courts are trying each case separately, presumably to isolate us and make the process even more difficult. Some judges and prosecutors are rude, and use belittling or biased language when speaking to us.

Özden Melis Uluğ: What do you think about the outcomes of this process for the social sciences in general, and psychological science in particular?

Ekren: The social sciences are being silenced. People are self-censoring, and even if not, they can be prevented from conducting research due to lack of funding or concerns on the part of their universities that their research might be too “sensitive.” If a university feels beholden to bureaucratic procedure, this can translate to a university preventing a researcher from conducting her/his research by holding them up through the ethics committee, for example. Others are more forthright in their prevention of research; if they deem it “problematic,” the researcher is prevented from conducting the research. Unfortunately, however, for science to not only flourish but even to function, it requires complete academic freedom. This is not the case in Turkey right now.

Özden Melis Uluğ: What would you like to say about the future of universities in Turkey?

Ekren: The purges and dismissals from universities mean that they have received a huge blow as places of learning and research. While some of us hope to continue working at universities and make them what we believe they used to be, others have sought to create spaces for critical thought outside of the university through Street Academies and Solidarity Academies, usually run by academics purged or dismissed from their positions. It is hard at this point to see a positive turn for universities in Turkey, but there is always hope that if these academics are able to return, they can try to turn things around.

Özden Melis Uluğ: What kind of solidarity networks exist in Turkey? How do people support each other during these difficult times?

Ekren: One of the main things is that people receive support from different organizations such as the Education Union. They have provided lawyers who work pro bono on these cases, and we should take the time to recognize them for their tireless efforts. But in addition to that is just having people show up to court. Academics have been showing up for one another, and more than that, their friends and families, and oftentimes students, show their support by being with us in the courtroom.

Özden Melis Uluğ: Can you talk a little about international solidarity? For example, we heard Steve Reich and his colleagues went to Turkey to support academics on trial. What did they do there?

Ekren: Three academics including Steve Reicher came to observe trials here in Istanbul. They also met with psychologists who have been impacted either by being purged from their positions or who are dealing with the hearing procedures, as well as with members of the Turkish

Psychological Association and Psychologists for Social Solidarity, in order to understand how psychology in general is doing and how psychologists abroad can support our colleagues here. The presence of international observers can help maintain a more professional air in the courtroom. It can even affect the behavior of the judge and the prosecutor toward the defendant, so having observers attend the hearings can be really helpful in that sense.

Özden Melis Uluğ: What should be the role of psychologists in general? What do you suggest we do in order to support Academics for Peace?

Ekren: While the trial process is ongoing, it is easy for some of us to forget that the people struggling the most are those who have been wrongfully terminated from their positions. Petition signatories and others have been purged, which means that they are blacklisted and cannot work in academia, and oftentimes or any government position. They also have difficulty finding work in the private sector. Since the state of emergency continues, our colleagues have no real legal recourse for their termination, and simply have to wait to see if they can try to get back their positions after the state of emergency ends. Oftentimes their passports are rescinded, so they can't leave the country to find work. Some, even if they wanted to, stay because they have other responsibilities to their families.

I would say the most important thing is to find ways to financially support these colleagues. ISPP has created a matching scheme, where every dollar donated will be matched by ISPP up to \$40,000.¹ I think this is a great initiative to provide emergency funding to colleagues who are purged, and longer-term funding to colleagues who want to continue conducting research. Another way to provide financial support could be to make them research partners in work being conducted abroad.

In addition, a great way to show support would be to provide some of these colleagues honorary affiliations at institutions abroad. That way they maintain an academic identity even if they have been dismissed, and can more easily get their research through ethics committees, or submit research for publication.

One thing that we have seen is the impact international observers have on the trials. In addition to just plain increasing morale, having people on the ground, seeing and experiencing these trials in person helps to disseminate through other outlets what exactly is going on here, as well as find additional ways to provide support. I would encourage other psychological (and other) organizations to consider sending observers.

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¹ Here is the link to the websites for donations:
<https://ispp.eventsair.com/QuickEventWebsitePortal/donations/donations-site/ExtraContent/ContentPage?page=3> &
<https://www.youcaring.com/academicsforpeaceinturkey-763983>