

In Pursuit of an Alternative Academy: The Case of Kocaeli Academy for Solidarity. Non-peer-reviewed.

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Abstract: After declaring a state of emergency on 20 July, 2016 as a response to the failed coup attempt of 15 July, 2016, the Turkish government launched a nation-wide academic purge, especially targeting the Academics for Peace. This group of academics signed a peace petition in January 2016 to address civilian deaths in the South-Eastern part of the country and to urge the government to take responsibility and restart the peace process. Having the largest number of peace petitioners among Turkey's provincial universities, Kocaeli University was the first to dismiss all 19 of the peace academics from their positions on 1 September, 2016. Already active in defending the universal values of academia in other venues, these dismissed peace academics founded the Kocaeli Academy of Solidarity in pursuit of an alternative academy that aims to bring together university students, NGO members and ordinary citizens in the city in a cooperative understanding of education and research. After weekly seminars over eight months, a summer school of five days, and with applications in for funding its projects, particularly amongst others the School of Life, Kocaeli Academy for Solidarity has a strong determination to demonstrate a new democratic model of education and research.

Keywords: Academic Purge, Turkey, Academics for Peace, Alternative Academy, Academic Labour, International Academic Solidarity

1. Academia in Turkey

The academic world is globally structured in quite hierarchical ways. Research knowledge is predominantly created in developed countries and transferred to, and implemented in, developing countries. While there are a number of elite institutions that are reasonably well-connected with global research production in the developing countries, unevenness prevails with respect to the majority of provincial universities located in the developing parts of the world. Specifically, research is not always a priority in these provincial universities since these universities, despite constituting the larger chunk of the university population, are primarily expected to provide teaching for the masses.

There have been very painful consequences arising from the publishing pressure in academia that have accelerated in the neoliberal phase of capitalism, particularly in the provincial areas of developing countries. Academics in most Turkish universities are overwhelmed by the heavy teaching load resulting from the excessive numbers of students due to the large young population yet insufficient funds for educa-

tion. Nonetheless, universities and scholars are forced to publish because of the ever-increasing competition arising from the marketization of metrics-driven higher education. Academics find themselves in a conflicting position in having to choose between spending all of their time in maintaining the quality of their teaching or allocating time for publication and, as a consequence, not putting enough time into teaching, leading to decreased teaching quality. Differences in sizes and resources, as well as traditions, divide academia in Turkey into various types, thus creating disparities both at the national and university level in terms of student-faculty ratio, research opportunities, and promotion practices. In this context, this commentary will concentrate on the case of the Academics for Peace signatories at Kocaeli University and their following struggle in establishing the Kocaeli Academy for Solidarity.

2. Kocaeli University

Kocaeli University was founded in 1992 in Izmit, Kocaeli, about 100 kilometres east of Istanbul, the largest city in the country. The student population is over 81,000, with 74,000 at undergraduate and 7,000 at graduate level. At the same time, it is one of the worst with respect to the scholar-student ratio. The university's educational program has mostly focused on the training of a qualified labour force for industry since the university is located in Turkey's largest industrial area. While the School of Engineering accommodates about 11,000 students, nearly half of the undergraduate students (about 36,000) are enrolled in two-year vocational schools in order to find intermediary positions in the industrial sector. The School of Medicine has a dominant position at the university expressed by the fact that the rectors, except the first one, have been traditionally elected from among the medical faculty members. The Medical School's primary concern is to provide health services at the regional scale rather than high quality medical education and research. While the School of Theology was established in 2015, despite the arguable need for it, the long-awaited Sociology Department is yet to be founded, although academics with PhDs in sociology are already offering sociology courses in various departments of the university. Being one of the provincial universities, Kocaeli bears all the negative characteristics of the Turkish academia, while inappropriately being open to illiberal interventions by the political power.

These examples with respect to inequalities and unevenness underpin the mindset of the university administration and the broader mentality towards higher education institutions from the perspective of those in power. It can hardly be claimed that universities in Turkey have ever enjoyed academic autonomy, but this situation has worsened since 2002 under the regime of the Justice and Development Party (AKP). With the changes introduced in the administration of universities under the state of emergency, the President of the country is now able to directly appoint university rectors, who in turn appoint the deans, who in turn appoint department heads. These changes reflect the shift towards a higher education system in which universities appoint academics who are ideologically affiliated with the government rather than choosing people based on merit.

3. “*Nasıl Bir Üniversite?* (NBU)” Initiative at Kocaeli University¹

Although Kocaeli University was founded mostly with somewhat left-oriented scholars, this component has depreciated in the last 15 years. NBU initiative was founded by about 50 social democratic and socialist academics working at Kocaeli University to work against the marketization of higher education and the deterioration of scholarly autonomy at universities. In their manifesto, NBU members defended academic freedom, research, democratic participation, merit-based promotion and the financing of universities through the national budget as opposed to private sector involvement. This initiative has been effective particularly in the presidential elections at the University, as well as organizing national and local actions. Its candidate for University President succeeded in getting one quarter of the votes in the last election in 2014, though losing against the current rector who had been openly supported by the country's President.² On several occasions, both the university and the city administration have been hostile to the members of the group because of their critical views and political stance against university policies as well as AKP politics. For example, one of the NBU members was sued by the AKP-affiliated mayor of Kocaeli, mainly because this member's academic research revealed the severe environmental and social costs of industrial air pollution in the region. Another member was nominated as the oppositional Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) candidate for the mayorship of the metropolitan municipality at the 2014 local elections, demonstrating the group's dissident position and their work for the common good.

4. Education and Science Workers Union at Kocaeli University

The Education and Science Workers Union (Eğitim-Sen) became the representative of all staff with the largest number of members at the university in 2015. In addition, it maintained the necessary number of members to become a separate branch at the university mostly due to the efforts of the NBU members. However, this picture changed dramatically after the peace petition became public in January 2016. Eğitim-Sen members were forced to resign from the union or gradually chose to leave it, because of the detainment of the peace petitioners and the dismissal of 19 peace academics from Kocaeli University in September 2016, most of whom were Eğitim-Sen members, while the rest belonged to the Health and Social Care Workers Union (SES). Both Eğitim-Sen and SES belong to the Confederation of Public Workers Union (KESK), known for its social-democratic/socialist politics with regard to labour as distinct from other pro-government unions.

5. The Peace Petition and Academics for Peace

In January 2016, 2,212 scholars from Turkey and around the world signed a petition titled “We will not be a party to this crime,” also known as the peace petition³. The peace petition, initially signed by 1,128 academics calling for an end to the civil

¹ It roughly means “What kind of university?” in Turkish and NBU is its abbreviation. This initiative was based on a desire for a different type of university that defends the autonomy of universities against the marketization of higher education.

² It was literally the last election as the elections for university rectors were abolished by a governmental decree no. 676 on October 29, 2016 under conditions of the state of emergency. According to the new regulation, the President of the Country will appoint the new rectors for universities.

³ For the full text of the peace petition in English and other languages, see: <https://barisicinakademisyenler.net/node/63>

deaths in the South-Eastern part of the country, drew a severe reaction from President Erdoğan, because it put the onus on the State as responsible for restarting the peace process in the country. The President vehemently criticized the peace academics after the peace petition had become public on 11 January, 2016. In a public statement following the petition, Erdoğan stated; “These [academics] are tyrants, despicable people, because those who are with tyrants are also tyrants themselves [...] I call on all judicial authorities and university administrations as their duty to punish these acts against our Constitution and laws [...]”⁴ Since then the signatories (“Academics for Peace”) have been subject to heavy pressure and persecution. Hundreds of them have faced criminal and disciplinary investigations, custody, imprisonment, or violent threats.⁵

6. The 15 July Coup Attempt and the State of Emergency

The Turkish government declared a state of emergency on 20 July, 2016 in the aftermath of the 15 July coup attempt, in the course of which the democratic opposition, though having nothing to do with the coup, was suppressed. The co-presidents and some other parliamentary members of the HDP and hundreds of journalists were arrested, many radio and TV channels were closed down, and the activities of many NGOs were suspended. Since then the cabinet has passed successive decrees and dismissed almost 150,000 public servants as of July 2017, claiming that they were affiliated with, or connected to “terrorist” organizations. The list included faculty members of public universities who signed the peace petition. The number of peace academics dismissed from public service reached about 400 between September 2016 and April 2017. Many others were forced to resign or leave the country. In addition, the passports of the dismissed academics were revoked. The state of emergency provided the government with the pretext to launch an academic purge based on a political cleansing of critical thinkers at universities. The size of the academic purge has frequently caused references analogous to the academic purge of the 1930’s in Nazi Germany.⁶

Among the provincial universities, Kocaeli University had the largest number of peace petitioners, and was the first to dismiss all 19 of the peace academics at once as a result of the first emergency decree on 1 September, 2016, decree no. 672. In fact, the signatories at Kocaeli University were the first to be detained by the counter-terror police on 15 January, 2016 just a few days after the peace petition had become public and president Erdoğan had targeted the peace petitioners in his speech. The reaction from the Kocaeli University administration was so rapid, mainly because such an opposition could not be tolerated in the provincial areas and it was easier to intervene in provincial universities. Almost all the signatories were members of the NBU and therefore were already “notorious” for their critical views, thereby accelerating the investigation process and the final dismissal from their positions. However, for the very same reason, their supporters at the university, and in the city of Kocaeli in

⁴ <http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/erdogandan-akademisyenler-bildirisine-sert-sozler-40040876>

⁵ For an updated list of the rights violations against Academics for Peace, see: <https://barisicinakademisyenler.net/node/314>

⁶ For two different examples of such a reference respectively from a foreign minister and from a scholar, see:

- a. <https://apnews.com/7e47b81fa2db4eeca77bf6de91cfd148/luxembourg-fm-turkish-crackdown-reminiscent-nazi-methods>
- b. <http://www.birgun.net/haber-detay/nazilerden-kacan-akademisyenleri-arastiran-vialon-turkiye-deki-ihraclari-degerlendirdi-147458.html>

general, played a significant role in organizing against their detainment on 15 January, 2016 and in obtaining their release in the late hours of the same day.

7. Kocaeli Academy for Solidarity

The academics who were dismissed from their positions at Kocaeli University left the university with the slogan: “We will return! We are not leaving our students and the city”. This declaration had paved the way for the foundation of the “Kocaeli Academy for Solidarity” (KODA)⁷ which was launched on 28 September, 2016 with a big crowd including academics from other universities from around the country as well as from abroad.

Kocaeli Academy for Solidarity was established on three bases; legal struggle against the related investigations and dismissals from academic positions; political struggle against the Council for Higher Education of Turkey (YÖK) and the political power; and finally, academic struggle to establish an alternative venue for education and academic research.

In terms of our legal battle, we have made applications to every possible court within the domestic law, while also applying to the European Court of Human Rights. We have been pursuing our political struggle in different forms. Members of the Academy in Kocaeli are also active members of the Kocaeli Democracy Initiative. In addition, one of the members is co-chair of the Peoples’ Democratic Congress (HDK), whilst another is the general coordinator for the Confederation of Progressive Trade Unions of Turkey (DİSK). One of the members of KODA, who is a medical doctor, is also a board member of the Human Rights Foundation of Turkey (TİHV), while another takes part in the activities of Doctors Without Borders Turkey Branch.

Yet, our academic labour has become more important as it appears that we shall not be able to return quickly to academia. We have been trying to put into practice our ideals as academics within the Kocaeli Academy for Solidarity, something that we could not have done in the established academy. We have offered weekly seminars that are free and open to the public since October 2016. These continued until the end of the semester at the Eğitim-Sen conference hall in the city centre with an audience of around 100. In these seminars, scholars and students from various disciplines and members of the public initiated interdisciplinary discussions that removed the boundaries between artificially separated disciplines as well as between academics and the public.

The KODA activities seem to have encouraged students at Kocaeli University to establish their own venue for education which they have named the Young Academy. The students have been in contact with the KODA members from the beginning of this process asking their advice. Once established, the Young Academy attracted more students from all walks of life in addition to those who had been following KODA seminars. Since the weekly seminars were presented by only one academic every week, the students demanded classes from dismissed academics on a more regular basis in the form of reading groups which, in turn, gave way to the organization of several reading groups such as Gender, LGBTI and Queer Readings; Symbolic Politics; Philosophy of Liberty; Right to the City; and Labor History; all this within a few months of the Young Academy’s start. The reading groups used several coffee shops for their class gatherings near to the Eğitim-Sen Kocaeli Branch where KODA carried out its weekly seminars and other meetings.

⁷ For more information, see: www.kocaelidayanisma.org

Following the end of the seminar program and the semester for the Kocaeli University students, we organized a summer school between 10 and 15 June, 2017, thanks to the financial resources provided by a few supporters. The school had more than 40 participants consisting mainly of Kocaeli University students both at undergraduate and graduate level, as well as some others from the Kocaeli public. One of the most important outcomes of the summer school was the ability to have students from different backgrounds and political stands working together in an academic and democratic setting. The students expressed their appreciation of this atmosphere since they could discuss any topics without pressure.

We have already applied for research grants in order to fund our research projects in the fields of democracy, human rights, urban studies and environmental protection, equal citizenship, and gender equality. Moreover, we have planned a two-year educational project under the title “The School of Life” for which we have applied for funding that has passed the first stage. This “alternative school” plans to be free and open to the public. Although it only consists of elective courses in conjunction with different disciplines, it is still based on meeting certain requirements for completion. One of the main aims of the program is to break down the hierarchical structure of the established academy and the problematic character of faculty-student relations. The general aim is to sustain education and research not only by KODA academics, but also with students, researchers, and other academics in the city and across the country.

Because of the administrative obstacles existing under the state of emergency, KODA has not been legally established yet, but it has continued its *de facto* institutionalization. KODA aims to continue its activities and survive independently of the near and far future, even if the members will win their legal battle and return to their positions at the university. In addition, KODA members aim to continue their struggle against the established academy under an umbrella organization both in and outside of the country, together with other alternative academy initiatives and solidarities. Mainly because they are aware of the fact that their imagined academy could only be achieved through coordination and solidarity with a nationwide/global network.

Can KODA succeed? It seems that the overall success of KODA depends on its ability to become a local part of a more general organization for an alternative academy. A number of objective conditions for the realization of this end exist: in particular, local and national connections, public support, the state of affairs within the established academia, as well as the awareness of the fact that nothing will ever be the same at these universities even if all dismissed academics were to return to their positions one way or another. Such an alternative academy can become a locus of power to transform society but can only succeed if it is capable of creating a realistic alternative against the marketized educational system.

Maintaining the quality of educational and research activities is important and can only be achieved through equality in obtaining resources and eliminating academic inequalities at the national and international level. It is essential that research activities provide ways to find solutions to the vital problems of the majority and poor segments of society. Certification of educational activities is also a necessity within existing market conditions in order to provide legitimacy when students require such certification. Still, the question of finance remains as the elephant in the room. In this respect, an alternative academic organization can only exist with the support of civil and democratic mass organizations at the national and international level. KODA members are determined to overcome these challenges and are committed to set an

example with the support of those around the world who share the same ideals related to education, research and academic labor.

About the Authors

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received his PhD from Boğaziçi University, Turkey, in 2001 with a dissertation entitled “The Turkish Liberalism and the Social Question, 1908-1945”. He is the co-editor of *Trabzon’u Anlamak (Understanding Trabzon)* (2009). He worked in the department of Political Science and Public Administration at Kocaeli University, Turkey, between 2003 and 2016. He was dismissed by a governmental decree for his signature on the so-called “peace petition”. He is now a member of the Kocaeli Academy for Solidarity. His current project is an inquiry into the moral and political conditions of living together with differences, with a special interest in Turkish modernist Islamism.

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received her PhD in Development Studies from Marmara University in Istanbul, Turkey, and an MA from the Ohio State University in Columbus, USA. She worked as an assistant professor of Labor Sociology in the Department of Labor Economics and Industrial Relations at Kocaeli University, Turkey, from January 2012 to September 2016. She was dismissed from her position through a governmental decree issued under the state of emergency for signing a petition titled “We will not be a party to this crime,” also known as the peace petition which was a call directed to the State to end the civil deaths in the South-Eastern part of the country and to restart the peace process. Her work has been published in journals related to education, labour and the Middle East. Her research interests include migration, women’s labour, gender and social policy, religion and women, in addition to education. She continues her work within the Kocaeli Academy for Solidarity as the founding member of the academy with the other peace academics also dismissed from Kocaeli University for the same reason.

Adem Yeşilyurt

is a PhD Candidate in the Department of Political Science and Public Administration, Middle East Technical University (METU), Ankara, Turkey. He received his MS degree in 2014 from the same department with his thesis “The Role of Reporters in Corporate Media: An Inquiry into the Labor Process of Reporters in Turkey”. His research interests include digital labour, political economy of the media, cinema, and social theory. His PhD research concerns the question of “free-time” in modern capitalism with respect to technology, organizations and working relations. He worked as a research assistant at METU between 2011 and 2014 and then at Kocaeli University until he was dismissed by a governmental decree of September 2016, because of the “peace petition” that he signed. Since then he has been working as the coordinator of the Kocaeli Academy for Solidarity.