

Turkish government harasses international scholars in Berlin

PRESS RELEASE

Berlin, September 17, 2017

We write on behalf of the Workshop for Armenian-Turkish Scholarship and the Lepsiushaus Potsdam to express our deep concern about recent efforts by Turkish authorities to prevent scholars based in that country from participating in a conference in Berlin entitled “Past in the Present: European Approaches to the Armenian Genocide.” We consider such actions to be an attack on free speech and academic freedom, indeed, to extend such intellectual repression beyond the borders of Turkey. We share the concern of the Middle East Studies Association (MESA) of North America that such actions seriously and scandalously damage scholarship and the free exchange of knowledge.

The Workshop on Armenian-Turkish Scholarship (WATS) is a series of international academic workshops, founded at the University of Chicago and the University of Michigan in 2000 as the “first forum where Turkish, Armenian, and other scholars could create a community of Turkish, Kurdish, Armenian, and other scholars to conduct an informed debate” relating issues surrounding the fate of Ottoman Armenians, an event generally accepted as the Armenian Genocide. Despite the efforts of Turkish nationalists who deny the established facts of history, the latest workshop, the tenth in the series, took place on 15-18 September at the European Academy Berlin, co-organized by the University of Michigan, USC Dornsife Institute of Armenian Studies, and Lepsiushaus Potsdam, under the auspices of Dr. Martina Münch, Minister for Science, Research, and Culture of the State of Brandenburg.

The conference has come under sustained attack by Turkish ultra-nationalist political circles in Turkey and Germany. Long-time deniers of the Armenian Genocide in the international arena declared that the conference will “serve imperialism and the interests of Kurdistan” and framed the Kurdish issue as forming “the second Israel,” clearly an anti-Semitic slur.

We consider that a democratic society requires a free exchange of ideas, and such pressure on academics in Turkey has already had a chilling effect on university scholars, who have in the last decades help to build up a high level of academic professionalism and achievement. Turkey has been hurt by the current atmosphere of intimidation and threats as evidenced in the treatment of the scholars who wished to attend the WATS conference in Berlin.

We will be vigilant from this moment on in our efforts to protect the rights and freedoms of all academics and call on the Turkish government to restore the academic freedoms that have been and are being violated in Turkey. We demand as well that the Turkish state desist from interfering in intellectual exchange and expression outside of Turkey. There is no substitution for independent research and the presentation of research findings in academic settings and in scholarly meetings. These exchanges are fundamental to academic freedom. Such interference infringes on the democratic order in Turkey and in hosting countries. The events surrounding the WATS conference in Berlin demonstrate one more instance of the Turkish state’s refusal to respect basic human rights’ protections both under Turkish law and Turkey’s clear international obligations.

WATS Organizing Committee
Lepsiushaus Potsdam