

Academic Freedom under Authoritarian Rule in Post-2016 Turkey: Institutional Recomposition and Individual Trajectories*

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Abstract

This article examines the transformations of academic freedom in Turkey under the authoritarian turn following the attempted coup of July 2016. Drawing on 38 biographical interviews with scholars of different statuses, we analyze how repression has reshaped both individual trajectories and the structure of the academic field. Far from being limited to dismissals or judicial sanctions, political repression operates as a mode of governance that combines the exclusion of dissenting voices with the construction of a loyal academic environment. We show how the loss of institutional autonomy has been reinforced by the centralization of recruitment, the appointment of rectors by the President, and the stigmatization of the Peace Petition signatories. At the biographical level, repression has led to processes of downward mobility, symbolic devaluation, and family ruptures, but also to strategies of resistance and conversion of cultural capital into political, civic, or international resources. By highlighting these heterogeneous trajectories, the article contributes to a broader reflection on the recomposition of knowledge and academic freedom in contexts of authoritarian constraint.

Keywords: Academic freedom; Purge(s); Declassification; Resistance strategies; Turkey.

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Described as “black robes”¹ or “pseudo-intellectuals”², academics in Turkey have always been at the center of political repression. As İzge Günel points out, “The history of universities in Turkey is nothing more than a history of purges” (Günel, 2013). The trajectory of Oya Baydar, sociologist, writer, and journalist, eloquently illustrates this persistent repression. In the context of the Cold War, her doctoral dissertation, entitled *The Emergence and Structure of the Working Class in Turkey*, was rejected twice by the faculty council of İstanbul University on the pretext that there was no social class in Turkey (Baydar & Ulagay, 2011, p. 20). This decision sparked protests and the occupation of the campus by the Marxist-Leninist youth of the time. These mobilizations denounced the ideological nature of the refusal, which they considered to be without a scientific basis, and called for the resignation of the dean. Oya Baydar, a research assistant at the time, resigned from her position due to repression. After completing her research stays in the United States, she became a research assistant at Hacettepe University in Ankara. However, in the aftermath of the military coup on March 12, 1971, she was dismissed and imprisoned due to her involvement with the Turkish Workers’ Party (*Türkiye İşçi Partisi*–TİP) and the Turkish Teachers’ Union (*Türkiye Öğretmenler Sendikası*–TÖS). Pursued by the military junta that emerged from the coup d’état of September 12, 1980, in some 30 trials, she moved to Germany. She returned to Turkey in 1991, after more than a decade in exile. Yet, repression caught up with her once again: in 2016, at the age of 75, she was violently arrested by the police at her home, and her house was searched as part of an operation targeting the Cumhuriyet newspaper for which she had been writing articles. Her individual trajectory, marked by the continuity of political repression, is thus part of the intellectual history of contemporary Turkey, which has been affected by periods of political crisis, purges, and attacks on academic freedom: in 1933, with the transformation of the Dârülfünûn³ into a university in the contemporary sense of the term, 87 out of 156 academics (Tekerek, 2023, p. 17); in 1948, brilliant academics in the social sciences and humanities at Ankara University, notably renowned sociologists Behice Boran and Niyazi Berkes and literary scholar Pertev Naili Boratav (Ak, 2015; Şanlı, 2011); in 1960, a total of 147 academics, and in 1983, a large number of academics were temporarily or permanently dismissed following the adoption of Law No. 1402 (Monceau, 2009, p. 235; Ulusoy & Bora, 2019).

How has political repression in Turkey, particularly since 2016, manifested itself in attacks on academic freedom, and what has been the impact on the individual trajectories of academics and on the structure of the professional group? Although the Justice and Development Party (AKP–Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi), in power since 2002, did not immediately make academics

1. The pejorative term used by Adnan Menderes, prime minister of the Democratic Party — a conservative party that was in power from 1950 until the military coup of May 27, 1960 — *kara cüppeliler* in Turkish, refers to critical academics who challenge the repression of political power (Tekerek, 2023, p. 17).
2. Following the circulation in January 2016 of the peace petition “We will not be a part of this crime” to protest the Turkish government’s military operations in the southeastern regions of Turkey, which are mainly inhabited by Kurdish populations. One thousand one hundred and twenty-eight academics in Turkey and abroad signed the petition demanding the removal of curfews, the cessation of military operations in Kurdish cities, and the invitation of international and independent observers to investigate the situation. Erdoğan has described the signatories as “traitors to the nation”, “pseudo-intellectuals”, and “agents of academic terror”. https://www.bbc.com/turkce/haberler/2016/01/160111_erdogan_akademisyen_aciklama. See also De Gliniasty & Hennette-Vauchez (2019). and the website of the collective “Academics for Peace”: <https://barisicinakademisyenler.net/node/1>.
3. Dârülfünûn is a higher education institution founded in 1863 with the aim of modernizing education. Inherited from the Ottoman Empire by the Turkish Republic, it underwent a reform in 1933 aimed at transforming it into a university in the contemporary sense of the term (Yanardağ, 2024).

a priority target, the situation changed from 2010 onwards with an intensification of attacks against the academic field,⁴ culminating in massive repression after the attempted coup in July 2016.⁵ This pivotal moment reveals that the repression of academics is not merely a matter of individual sanctions, but constitutes an authoritarian mode of governance aimed at redefining academic freedom, restricting freedom of expression, and, more broadly, controlling the intellectual sphere. The repression of academics has taken many forms and has been gradually intensified — administrative, judicial, and police — since the failed coup of 2016, ranging from disciplinary hearings to mass purges, from imprisonment to professional exclusion through forced resignations or early retirement. This paper examines both the loss of autonomy in the academic field under authoritarian rule and the biographical consequences of repression. It highlights the diversity of trajectories and the various forms of adaptation or resistance among academics, with particular attention to the case of the Peace Petition, whose signatories were confronted with repressive practices operating at multiple levels.

A number of scholars in political science refer to this process of deprivation of rights by decree as “civic death” (Sertdemir Özdemir & Özyürek, 2019). While this concept highlights the extent of the rupture experienced by academics — isolation, weakened social ties, family breakdown — it nevertheless tends to freeze trajectories by suggesting a dead-end situation. Indeed, talking about “death” implies the impossibility of a return to any form of rights, even though the temporalities specific to authoritarian regimes (“intensification”, “stabilization”) strongly influence lived experiences. Furthermore, the term “civic death” tends to obscure the dynamics of the recomposition of social relations and the strategies of resistance that academics implement to circumvent or mitigate constraints. We therefore propose to analyze these effects not in terms of “civic death”, but through the notion of “social decline”,⁶ which seems more effective in understanding both the processes of statutory devaluation and the practices of capital conversion⁷ developed in response to repression. More precisely, this process of social decline occurs here through the devaluation of cultural capital and the invalidation of academic degrees. This relational approach, which jointly considers repressive modes of governance — marked by purges, the marginalization of “dissident” academics, and the erosion of institutional autonomy — alongside practices of adaptation and strategies of resistance, makes it possible to grasp the dynamic nature of the academic field, understood as a site of ongoing negotiation, redefinition, and symbolic struggle, rather than implying a fixed state of death.

Based on a qualitative survey conducted between 2022 and 2025, this contribution draws

4. Academic freedoms began to decline in 2011, and then took a turn for the worse after Gezi (2013) with increased repression against students and academics. The 2011 constitutional referendum marked a turning point, exacerbating tensions between the AKP and liberal intellectuals. This period is illustrated by the arrest of Büşra Ersanlı, a political science professor at Marmara University and member of the Kurdish BDP party, accused of belonging to a terrorist organization.
5. On the night of July 15–16, 2016, a group belonging to the Gülenist movement and established within the army attempted to subvert the Turkish government. The failure of the coup led to the declaration of a state of emergency and extensive purges in the administration, the army, universities, and the media.
6. See also Paugam’s work on “disqualification sociale” (Paugam, 2009) or Castel’s work on marginalization (Castel, 1994) to highlight how decline is a process — often reversible — of devaluation and reclassification.
7. Capital conversion designates the set of strategies through which social agents seek to transform one form of capital into another in order to preserve or improve their position within the social space. It involves the capacity to render a specific accumulation of resources effective and legitimate in a different field by adapting it to its own logic and requirements. Thus, the conversion of cultural capital into economic capital — through its valorization on the labour market — or, conversely, the transformation of economic capital into cultural capital — through investments in education — illustrates the practical operations by which agents attempt to optimize the yield of their resources across fields (Bourdieu, 1979, pp. 144–147).

on biographical interviews with 38 academics (20 women and 18 men)⁸ with diverse statuses, such as research assistants, lecturers, and university professors; academics who have been dismissed; and those who are still holding their positions. We conducted lengthy biographical interviews using a semi-structured method, allowing respondents to freely recount their career paths while addressing specific themes (primary and secondary socialization, experiences of the authoritarian turn, transformations in their work environment). Almost all of our respondents (34 out of 38) signed the petition for peace launched in 2016 by academics. To access the interviewees, we used the snowball method, starting with colleagues with whom we have a friendly relationship. Most of the interviews were conducted in pairs, with both of us present. The main challenge of our research was to establish the appropriate distance with our interviewees. Social proximity facilitated the exchange, but it also made it more difficult to maintain the necessary distance during the field research, especially when addressing the most intimate questions, such as the matrimonial consequences of the political repression. In terms of the composition of our sample regarding scientific discipline, although the humanities and social sciences (n: 32) — political science, history, sociology, psychology and economy — predominate, we also have interviewees who are in law (n: 2), urban planning (n: 2), mathematics (n: 1) and medical sciences (n: 1). As all interviews were anonymized, the first names mentioned in the paper are pseudonyms.

To analyze the effects of post-2016 repression on academics in Turkey, we propose to examine two complementary dimensions. First, we examine the loss of autonomy in the academic sphere and how the growing influence of political power has weakened the position of academics. We then analyze the individual trajectories disrupted by the purges, highlighting the forms of social downgrading and the resources mobilized to resist or adapt to it, whether through individual strategies (exile, retraining, early retirement) or collective strategies (activist networks, unions, and alternative academic spaces).

1 The Reconfiguration of the Academic Field and the Erosion of Institutional Autonomy

Recurring interventions by the political sphere in the academic field compromise its autonomy and restrict academic freedoms. These interferences, ranging from the redefinition of recruitment procedures to the direct repression of academics, intensified after 2016 and constitute a major turning point. The existing literature has focused primarily on analyzing the effects of neoliberalization, privatization, and commodification of higher education, as well as restrictions related to certain taboo subjects. The repression that followed the “petition for peace”, reinforced after the failed coup, marked a shift in scale, paving the way for new analyses of the conditions for exercising academic freedom (Aytaç, 2016, p. 181). It is these evolutions and the forms they take that we wish to focus on here.

The concept of (relative) autonomy, key to Pierre Bourdieu’s field theory, refers to the primacy of criteria specific to a specialized sphere of activity over all other criteria and the judgments of “peers” (Sapiro, 2019, p. 18). In authoritarian regimes, ideological control and forms of censorship challenge this very “technical” autonomy, which concerns internal organization,

8. This research was conducted as part of the ANR project CALOT on “The Consequences of Forced Loyalty”, led by Maya Collombon and Lilian Mathieu, which aims to identify the effects of authoritarianism in the intellectual, cultural, and trade union fields in different contexts (Russia, Turkey, Argentina, and France under Vichy). See a short summary of the project: <https://anr.fr/Projet-ANR-19-CE41-0012>.

recruitment criteria, and ethical principles. Gisèle Sapiro highlights a double constraint weighing on the literary field: market logic and state ideology (Sapiro, 2003). Academic autonomy constitutes a fragile balance shaped by the tensions between political, economic, and professional forces. In the Turkish academic field, this balance is further complicated by a hybridization of market constraints and state control. On the one hand, as in many other contexts, neoliberal imperatives — such as employability, performance measurement, and publication pressure — have become increasingly prominent within universities. On the other hand, state surveillance continues to structure both teaching and research practices, as well as the internal organization of academic institutions. This ideological control, notably institutionalized through the Higher Education Council (Yükseköğretim Kurulu–YÖK), is far from being new and unique to Turkey. Similar forms of authoritarian control over universities — and, more broadly, over the intellectual field — can also be observed in Russia (Sigman, 2021), Hungary (Majtényi & Ryder, 2025), and Latin America (Ravecca, 2019). These two logics — marketization and state control — mutually reinforce each other, thereby undermining the mechanisms of peer regulation within the academic field. The experience of one of our interviewees highlights these dual dynamics:

The current rector is a physician, and she is very much “project-oriented”. She keeps saying that everyone should write projects and bring money to the university. [...] The president appoints the rector. [...] She has changed all the academic appointment criteria, everything. Everyone is supposed to do projects now. How are we supposed to do projects in law? Even in the United States, out of a thousand projects, maybe one is led by a law scholar. It’s just not possible!⁹

The ideological vestiges of the September 12 coup continue to permeate Turkish universities through the preservation of institutions and legal frameworks established during that period.¹⁰ The Higher Education Act No. 2547 of November 6, 1981, regulates the functioning of universities.¹¹ This law assigns universities the mission of educating students in the spirit of Atatürk’s nationalism and in accordance with his principles and reforms. It also emphasizes the protection and strengthening of national culture and national unity. These provisions reveal the ideological biases that guide the governance of universities in Turkey, establishing state nationalism and national unity as explicit finalities of higher education. The bureaucratic and centralized mode of government, under the control of the YÖK, which was founded in 1981 in the aftermath of the September 12, 1980, military coup, leaves very little space for autonomy. The YÖK’s mission is to organize and control universities, which were then perceived as bastions of the revolutionary left (Yilmaz, 2012). Endowed with considerable powers to this day, it has helped to align universities with the political establishment by exercising close supervision and promoting ideological homogeneity within institutions. The academic field in Turkey has been profoundly transformed by a set of practices designed to strengthen political control and impose the ideological alignment of rectors with the government. The massive opening of new

9. Aslı, F, 39, works at a private university (interview conducted by the authors in August 2024).

10. If the 1982 Constitution does not contain any explicit provisions relating to academic freedoms, these can be considered through articles 25 and 26, which guarantee freedom of expression, and Article 27, which relates to the freedom to engage in science and learning. However, the exercise of these freedoms remains constrained by imperatives such as national security, public order, and the principles of the Republic.

11. See the Turkish Constitution of 1982: <https://www.mevzuat.gov.tr/mevzuatmetin/1.5.2709.pdf>. See also the Higher Education Act: <https://mevzuat.gov.tr/MevzuatMetin/1.5.2547.pdf>.

universities, the targeted closure of fifteen institutions,¹² the centralization of recruitment, and the direct appointment of rectors by the President of the Republic illustrate this authoritarian logic. Designed to foster loyalty to the government, these practices undermine the institutional autonomy of higher education and research institutions.

The rapid expansion of the university network, particularly in provincial cities, should be considered in this context, as a political power tool to restructure the academic field (Tekerek, 2023). The total number of public universities in 40 cities in Turkey was 53 in 2002; by the end of 2015, this number had risen to 109 (Tekerek, 2023, p. 20). This increase, publicized under the slogan “A university for every city” (*Her İle Bir Üniversite Politikası*), has given rise to “academic inflation” characterized by the massification of universities, a decline in the quality and prestige of higher education, increased unemployment among young graduates, and a deterioration in the working conditions of academics (Yalçıntaş & Akkaya, 2019). In addition to the control exercised by YÖK and the central political authorities, provincial universities are subject to a particular form of coercion deriving from local power relations (Şengül, 2016, p. 81). Several of our interviewees stated that the repercussions of the stigmatization of the petition for peace signatories in the pro-government¹³ media were particularly severe for academics working in provincial universities. The testimonial of a young academic who had to resign from her position at a provincial university illustrates the cumulative nature of the repression: it highlights the combination of a structural context — a new university created as part of the AKP’s agenda and oriented to the production of loyalty — and a daily experience marked by social control and stigmatization.

It’s really as she said: Y. University is one of those institutions founded after 2008 by the AKP. There’s a book by Tuğba Tekerek, published by İletişim — *Taşra Üniversiteleri* (Provincial Universities) — which you may be familiar with. The university was created exactly along these lines, according to this program. And the people they recruited there, the lecturers, fit this profile perfectly. For example, the person who interviewed me was a former classmate of Erdoğan’s from imam hatip (religious high school). These are the kinds of people you find there as academics. As a result, everything in my daily life on campus was constantly being called into question: my clothes, the fact that I wasn’t married, that I was living alone as a single woman... All of this was constantly brought to the forefront. And in the end, the story of the petition (by Academics for Peace) was just one more trigger, a kind of straw that broke the camel’s back.¹⁴

The authoritarian policy pursued since 2016 combines two complementary approaches: on the one hand, a negative aspect consisting of excluding, sanctioning, and punishing critical academics; on the other hand, a positive aspect aimed at building, recruiting, and orienting a new academic field aligned with the government.

The reconfiguration of the university sector also involved the closure of certain universities in the context of the state of emergency (Olağanüstü Hâl–OHAL). The university system un-

12. See “Sayılarla Kapatılan Üniversiteler”, *Bianet*, August 2, 2016. <https://bianet.org/haber/sayilarla-kapatilan-universiteler-177442> (accessed September 24, 2025).

13. The names and photographs of the signatories were published in pro-government newspapers as “traitors to the nation”. Some of them, particularly those living in small Anatolian towns, received death threats.

14. Hatice, F, 36, resigned from her position at a public university in the provinces. At the time of the interview, she had just completed her PhD in France as part of the PAUSE Program (interview conducted by the authors in August 2024 online).

derwent a profound transformation with the closure of several institutions and the implementation of massive purges. The decree law published on July 23, 2016, allowed for the closure of fifteen universities due to their affiliation with the Gülen community.¹⁵ The government took advantage of decree laws¹⁶ allowing dismissals in the public administration to restructure the state, particularly in the higher education sector. Overall, these decree laws made it possible to dismiss 5,646 academics, or more than 7,800 if employees of closed universities are included.¹⁷ These decree laws were made public, and the names of the purged academics were published online.

One of the most emblematic moments of this political domination was the 2016 peace petition. Far from defending freedom of expression, the reaction of academic institutions confirmed the alignment of the academic sphere with political power. The Inter-University Council (Üniversiteler Arası Kurul-ÜAK) publicly condemned the signatories, stating that academic freedom cannot be used to “threaten the existence and security” of the country.¹⁸ This institutional position, issued by the higher education coordinating entity, sent a strong political signal: it legitimized a climate of suspicion and denunciation within universities, providing rectors and colleagues with an official framework to justify denunciations, disciplinary sanctions, and legal proceedings. Four academics were quickly imprisoned, while several rectors initiated a wave of suspensions and dismissals. The repression was not carried out uniformly, but in several stages, ranging from institutional measures to legal proceedings and police coercion.

Initially, it took the form of institutional measures, combining administrative and disciplinary sanctions. Rectors took the initiative to dismiss 76 employees, force 25 resignations, and compel 21 retirements, while 473 academics in public universities and 76 in private universities had their contracts withdrawn, were forced into early retirement, or were dismissed. At the same time, 101 academics were temporarily suspended, 549 were summoned before disciplinary committees, and 112 cases were submitted to YÖK for possible professional exclusion.¹⁹ The purges were also unevenly distributed. In other words, not all universities and disciplines were equally affected. Some universities still enjoy a relatively higher degree of autonomy. More precisely, universities situated in the country’s three main academic centers — İstanbul, Ankara, and İzmir — were disproportionately affected by the dismissals compared to those in provincial cities (Özatalay, 2020, §15). Social sciences and early-career academics were also more severely affected (Özatalay, 2020, § 29–36).

In a second phase, the repression took on a judicial dimension, with trials opened against 822 signatories, prosecuted for “terrorist propaganda” or “insulting the nation” (Kaya, 2021).

15. The decree law was published in the Official Journal on July 23, 2016, No. 29779. The complete list of primary, secondary, and higher education institutions is published in this document (in the appendix): <https://www.resmigazete.gov.tr/eskiler/2016/07/20160723-8-1.pdf>.

16. In Turkey, KHKs (decree laws) could under normal circumstances be adopted by delegation from Parliament, or directly by the government during a state of emergency (OHAL). Since the 2017 constitutional reform, they have largely been replaced by presidential decrees (Cumhurbaşkanlığı Kararnamesi).

17. See: Beyza Kural and Hikmet Adal, “Akademide İhraçlar 6 Bin 81’e Yükseldi”, *Bianet*, July 9, 2018: <https://bianet.org/haber/akademide-ihraclar-6-bin-81-e-yukseldi-198990> (accessed September 24, 2025).

18. “Davutoğlu’ndan bildiri açıklaması”, *Cumhuriyet*, April 22, 2016. (<http://www.cumhuriyet.com.tr/haber/davutoglundan-bildiri-aciklamasi-463646> (accessed September 24, 2025)).

19. All of these cases were documented by *Bianet* in the report “Darbe Girişimi Sonrası Üniversiteler: 1617 Açığa Alma, 234 Gözaltı, 8 Tutuklama” (Universities After the Coup Attempt: 1617 Suspensions, 234 Detentions, 8 Arrests) (*Bianet*, 2016). <https://bianet.org/haber/darbe-girisimi-sonrasi-universiteler-1617-aciga-alma-234-gozalti-8-tutuklama-177185>.

Under the state of emergency declared after the failed coup in July 2016, 378 academics were also directly dismissed by decree law.²⁰ Finally, the repressive practices also took the form of police action. 234 academics were taken into custody, four of whom were placed in preventive detention, while 8 were arrested, and house raids became routine,²¹ contributing to a climate of fear and intimidation. The mass purges not only served to eliminate critical academics, but also created opportunities for new recruitment based on the criteria of ideological and political loyalty.

The YÖK exercises its surveillance through academic, administrative, and ideological mechanisms: it controls the appointment of rectors and deans, centralizes recruitment and promotions, validates the recognition of foreign degrees, and imposes a standardized curriculum that keeps universities structurally dependent on political power and limits their institutional autonomy. The allocation of certain positions to academics by YÖK without consultation with the departments concerned, in order to consolidate the political authorities' hold on campus, is referred to as “parachuting” in the academic sphere.²² This method of allocating academic positions erodes the autonomy of higher education and research institutions — which was already limited — and restricts academic freedom.

The control of universities does not only concern their institutional organization: it directly affects research and teaching practices, where academic freedom remains subject to constant surveillance. Since the foundation of the Republic, this freedom has been exercised on two closely related levels: the possibility of conducting research and teaching without restriction within the university, and the capacity to publicly express one's intellectual positions. Certain research topics are considered restricted zones. Since the military coup of September 12, 1980, the Kurdish question, the Armenian genocide, and, in the past, the research on Islam have been among the taboo subjects that limit academic production (Göle, 2017, p. 877). Under the AKP, Islam has become an encouraged field of study, but the Kurdish question and the Armenian genocide remain highly sensitive, to the point of being equated by the authorities with criminal acts of terrorist propaganda. Despite certain periods of openness, academic freedom in Turkey has therefore remained under ideological surveillance. This restriction is reflected in the daily lives of academics. Our interviewees consistently report evaluating the risks associated with their teaching practices and public statements. The fear of denunciation — particularly via the digital platform CİMER (Cumhurbaşkanlığı İletişim Başkanlığı) (Uysal, 2022) — fuels a regime of self-censorship that extends into the classroom. Several respondents point out that the word “Kurdistan” is *de facto* banned in lectures and research.

A quote from an interview illustrates this practice of self-censorship very clearly:

You don't use certain words. You don't mention the word Kurdistan, for example.

20. See: Human Rights Watch: “Turkey: Government Targeting Academics” (May 14, 2018). <https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/05/14/turkey-government-targeting-academics> (accessed November 3, 2025).

21. See “Darbe Girişimi Sonrası Üniversiteler: 1617 Açığa Alma, 234 Gözaltı, 8 Tutuklama” (2016). *Bianet*. <https://bianet.org/haber/darbe-girisimi-sonrasi-universiteler-1617-aciga-alma-234-gozalti-8-tutuklama-177185>.

22. Not all positions are centrally appointed. On the contrary, the predominant norm is to set up a selection committee, composed of members from within and outside the institution concerned, responsible for evaluating applications and proposing an appointment. Although this procedure appears to be collegial, it remains closely supervised by the Council of Higher Education (YÖK), which retains a central role in validating choices. In addition, YÖK has established other centralized recruitment procedures. These have met with significant resistance at Boğaziçi University, where the direct appointment of academic leaders and the appointment of lecturer-researchers without internal consultation have been perceived as a challenge to university autonomy. (Interview conducted by the authors in August 2024).

I mean, you filter what is reprehensible and what is not. You don't express yourself directly. I mean, you always intellectualize, you aestheticize, you use more words. It's as if you're hiding behind sexy phrases, concepts, etc.²³

This passage reflects a recurring theme in our interviews: the need to bypass prohibited terms by using more abstract language. Far from being a simple individual strategy, it reveals a collective mechanism of adaptation, where the intellectualization of language serves to reconcile academic activity with the ongoing management of political risk. These forms of self-censorship do not only concern teaching and research, but also extend to freedom of expression in the public sphere, particularly on social media. A professor of gender studies at a prestigious private university recounts in his interview his hesitation in the face of a homophobic incident at a provincial university:

I spent two hours thinking about what I'm going to write. I've to be careful so that no one can accuse me of anything, but I've to say something. [...] I admit it's stressful. I thought the AKP would lose the 2023 elections, I was confident. And then I deleted a lot of things I had written earlier with this confidence.²⁴

Considered together, these two examples reveal that self-censorship is not limited to universities but extends to the entire social sphere in which academics are called upon to express themselves. It affects both the academic sphere (avoiding certain words, rephrasing, aestheticizing) and the civic sphere (pondering every public statement). Both illustrate the existence of a veritable "economy of speech" in an authoritarian context, where every position taken involves a constant assessment of risks.

However, the intensity and scope of these practices vary greatly from one individual to another. The following section focuses on this diversity of experiences and how they reflect the restructuring of the academic field.

2 Experiencing Declassification: Disrupted Trajectories and Mobilized Resources

The massive repression that followed the attempted coup in 2016 caused a profound rupture in the careers of academics. Job losses, social stigmatization, and the impossibility of returning to higher education had consequences that extended far beyond the professional sphere. Yet these abrupt transformations did not affect everyone in the same way. Depending on the resources at their disposal — networks, activist engagements, international connections — academics' trajectories diverged, leading toward declassification,²⁵ reclassification, or resistance. By focusing

23. Sevcin, F, lecturer and researcher at a public university (interview conducted by the authors in July 2022, Istanbul).

24. Bariş, M, 45, professor at a private university (interview conducted by the authors in July 2023, Istanbul).

25. Declassement, which we define as a "downward displacement", affects academics both individually — through the erosion of certain forms of capital — and collectively — through the devaluation of a social group. Bourdieu conceptualizes declassement as "the decline in the value of a social agent (individual, family, group, or other)" (Sinthon, 2020, p. 224). A social class, or a fraction thereof, collectively in decline, may thus experience a trajectory of social downgrading (Bourdieu, 1979, p. 273). In his article "Classement, déclassement et reclassement" (1978), Bourdieu examines strategies of reclassification aimed at counteracting or mitigating downward mobility. Such strategies may involve revalorizing a devalued category through collective forms of

on the specific constraints and resources of intellectuals, we explore both individual and collective adaptations to social declassification. In such a context of abrupt downward mobility, how do academics reconfigure their previously acquired skills and capital?

The interview accounts highlight various forms of social declassification. For many, job loss is accompanied by a radical devaluation of status and an experience of stigma. A professor accused of belonging to the Gülen community and dismissed from his position describes his experience of downward mobility through a hospitalization experience, emphasizing that if he had still been in his position, the treatment would have been different. He also expresses his deep sadness at the loss of social status:

Of course, there is a certain form of declassification. I am currently facing the problem of loss of status. When I meet someone, I hide my identity, I don't tell anyone that I am KHK'lı (dismissed by decree). [...] Sometimes I say I'm retired, sometimes I say I'm a former civil servant. [...] Now, the people you see at the bottom of the ladder, I mean the garbage collectors in the street, they sweep the ground. I envy them, they have a job.²⁶

These ruptures concern not only academic careers but also extend to the private sphere, through divorces, marital separations, and the weakening of family ties, as illustrated by the case of academics compelled to live abroad, far from their children. Numerous cases of divorce have been reported, particularly among dismissed academics. While the causal link between the dismissal of one spouse (sometimes both at the same time) and divorce is not always obvious, the loss of employment seems to have crystallized existing points of conflict that had previously been overlooked. The testimony of an academic who was able to benefit from a research grant for academics at risk had to deal with a family rupture while she was in Germany:

So, one of the kids came with me, the little one. One of them stayed with his father. But then, when the decree came out... I mean, at the beginning, I was going back and forth all the time, really, going back and forth and all that. But after that, well, I couldn't come for quite a long time, so I stayed there until 2018. Until November 2018. In the meantime, my husband (my ex-husband) was also dismissed by decree law, so he couldn't go abroad either. So, I didn't want to leave the scholarship there and come back, because, I mean, what would you even do here? [...] My spouse and one of my kids were in Turkey, so I wanted to go back. It was a hard time for me.²⁷

The repressive regime has disqualified academic capital: degrees, skills, and accumulated experience have lost their value in the Turkish academic labour market. This has led those purged to accept precarious jobs, often unrelated to their expertise. Young researchers, research assistants, and doctoral students in particular appear to be the most vulnerable. Already weakened by the precariousness of their *şöD* status, they find themselves unable to convert their cultural

claims-making or redefining it so as to ascribe renewed value. His analysis of this phenomenon leads him to conceptualize another form of dialectic between declassification and reclassification, one that is marked by the conversion of one form of capital into another.

26. Ömer, M, 59, was a professor-researcher at a public university, dismissed by decree in 2016 (interview conducted in July 2024, Istanbul).

27. Aysun, F, 53, was a lecturer-researcher at a public university before being dismissed by a decree-law in 2017 (interview conducted in July 2023, Istanbul).

capital into professional resources due to a lack of networks and recognition. Article 50/d of the Turkish Higher Education Act (1981) provides for a specific contract for master's and doctoral research assistants. This status (50/D) is strictly temporary: it automatically ends upon the defense of the doctoral dissertation or the interruption of the doctoral program. Unlike permanent positions (status 33/A), it offers no prospect of tenure. Doctoral students under 50/D thus find themselves in a situation of structural precariousness, entirely dependent on their department or university administration. This contractual insecurity sparked numerous union mobilizations in the 2010s and partly explains the particular vulnerability of young researchers during the post-2016 purges. Due to institutional pressure from the rector, Ceren, an architect who had previously served as a research assistant, resigned from her position. As a PhD candidate, she was involved in union activities within Eğitim-Sen²⁸ against these precarious contracts known as 50D. She describes the process that ultimately drove her to resign from her position and seek a scholarship abroad as follows:

But the real wake-up call came when I realized that when I was with the students, I wasn't interested in anything else. I was completely immersed in the class, especially in the studios. We draw there, I was talking to the students, etc. It's a workshop with a lot of individual contact. And when I realized that I couldn't pay attention anymore, I was on the phone all the time, wondering if there had been an explosion somewhere, what had happened in a trial somewhere, you know, and now I'm all alone. I can't stay here without raising my voice, but if I raise my voice, I feel very alone, and the struggle will turn into self-harm after a while. That's why I applied to PAUSE²⁹ when I realized there was no point in staying here anymore.³⁰

Faced with this shock, academics mobilized a range of resources. Social and union capital emerged as an essential buffer. A unionized scholar, dismissed immediately after the first decree laws were issued, explains:

Of course, Eğitim-Sen. Eğitim-Sen provided us with institutional support and legal assistance. They paid us a salary, and my colleagues also established a solidarity network among themselves. Through this network, they offered both material

28. The Education and Science Laborers Union (Eğitim-Sen), founded in 1990, is a dissident trade union organized in universities as well as in primary and secondary education institutions. It is affiliated with the Confederation of Public Employees' Trade Unions (KESK). Alongside two other unions active in the same sector — Eğitim-Bir-Sen, which is close to the current government, and Türk-Eğitim-Sen, of nationalist orientation — it is one of the main unions in the field of education. Members of this union face workplace discrimination, regularly documented in the Rights Violations Reports available on its official website (Hak İhlalleri Raporları Archives, n.d., Eğitim Sen, retrieved November 3, 2025, from <https://egitimsen.org.tr/konu/hukuk/hak-ihlalleri-raporlari/>). Over the past decade, Eğitim-Sen has lost a significant portion of its membership and representative power due to repressive practices. While it represented 11.40% of education workers in July 2015, by July 2025 its share had fallen to 6.29% (<https://sendikadata.com/iskolu/kamu/02-nolu-hizmet-kolu/>, accessed November 3, 2025).

29. "The PAUSE program supports scientists and artists in exile by facilitating their integration into higher education and research institutions, as well as cultural organizations. It also engages in advocacy activities aimed at defending academic and artistic freedoms" (see: <https://www.programmepause.fr>).

30. Ceren, F., 39, was a research assistant at a public university. She resigned from her position due to administrative pressures and is currently a PhD candidate in Paris, granted a scholarship from the PAUSE program (interview conducted in December 2022, Istanbul).

and moral support. In this way, they kept us from giving up — especially at the beginning.³¹

While trade unions and professional organizations tend to be associated with counter-power in liberal democracies, a similar logic can be observed in contemporary Turkey, where authoritarian tendencies are evident. This coexistence — which is mostly conflictual — of democratic institutions and illiberal practices is one of the key features of the political regime in Turkey, which some authors describe as “hybrid” (Diamond, 2002). Berk Esen and Şebnem Gümüşçü also distinguish Turkey from Russia and Venezuela in terms of both the intensity of authoritarian policies and the strength of opposition forces. By describing this regime as “competitive authoritarianism”, they highlight the existence of elections, which always give the opposition some room for manoeuvre and create a competitive space (Esen & Gumuscu, 2016).

International capital is also important; researchers with networks abroad, language skills, and previous mobility experience have been able to benefit from programs such as Scholars at Risk³² and PAUSE. By international capital, we mean the capacity for international mobility, made possible by the accumulation of several types of capital, in particular international social capital and internationally recognized cultural capital. The latter includes the necessary linguistic capital, as well as degrees, qualifications, and skills whose value is internationally validated and recognized. These resources thus function as an instrument of domination, structuring academic hierarchies within a globalized labour market (Wagner, 2020, pp. 85–100). Access to these sources, particularly linguistic ones³³ is, by definition, unequal in all contexts, and becomes vital in authoritarian contexts. The interview with Mert illustrates how academics are attempting to manage political uncertainty by anticipating repression that remains undetermined. He explains that he and his wife applied for a grant from Scholars at Risk even before they were directly targeted by a decree law:

No, I mean that we didn't take any precautions: we decided that we had to apply to Scholars at Risk immediately. I mean that the legal processes and decrees are still uncertain, we don't know whether we will be affected or not. Maybe we'll be able to go abroad next year, etc. And that's when my wife found a scholarship opportunity in Brussels, at the ULB, the Free University of Brussels. For academics in vulnerable situations like us. She applied for it. She contacted a professor, and it turned out that the scholarship would be granted very easily. We decided to go. Those who had been dismissed couldn't leave. Let's go, let's see while we're there, and if something happens during that time, then let's think about a life there. So that's the step we took. Let's also wait for the trials to be finalized. We went just as the court sessions were starting.³⁴

31. Ahmet, M, 51, was a research assistant at a public university, dismissed by a decree law in 2016 (interview conducted in July 2022, Istanbul).

32. Scholars at Risk is an international network of higher education institutions and individuals dedicated to protecting threatened scholars and advancing academic freedom worldwide. See: Scholars at Risk (s.d). *Protecting Scholars and the Freedom to Think, Question, and Share Ideas*. <https://www.scholarsatrisk.org/> (accessed November 3, 2025).

33. Anne-Catherine Wagner particularly emphasizes that inequalities in language skills are linked to earlier socialization among intellectuals. This requires knowledge of the subtleties of the language, which is very rarely possible in a school-based learning environment, and regular contact with native speakers (Wagner, 2020, pp. 94–96)

34. Mert, M., 49, professor and researcher at a public university (interview conducted in July 2023, Istanbul).

This statement highlights three key aspects. First, the experience of a period of suspension, marked by radical uncertainty regarding legal action and decree laws. Second, the need for strategic anticipation, which involves taking the initiative before being hit with an irreversible sanction, by activating available international resources. Finally, the interview reveals unequal access to these resources: only academics with prior international capital (networks, language skills, academic recognition) can seek such support. Mert's trajectory thus illustrates how, in an authoritarian context, international capital becomes a vital lever for survival and mobility, but one that is distributed very unevenly among researchers.³⁵

Some, however, refuse to accept this possibility. A university professor renowned for his work in constitutional law and his engagement in the defense of human rights, explains that he was explicitly encouraged by his rector to take early retirement, but he firmly refused:

“Even if I had only one day left before retirement, I would never agree to leave under fear”, I said.³⁶

Shortly after his dismissal, he was elected to Parliament. This political reclassification enabled him to regain a form of protection and legitimacy: his diplomatic passport restored his freedom of movement, which had been taken away from him. He was also able to continue his activist activities, refusing, however, to travel abroad except for major political or academic commitments:

Firstly, not all my colleagues are members of parliament. Why should I be the only one to travel? They are obliged to do so, but I am not. Secondly, I have never attended official visits because I categorically refused to appear in the same photo as members of the MHP (Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi/Nationalist Action Party) or the AKP (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi/Justice and Development Party). I therefore did not take part in any official delegations abroad.

This case illustrates the possibility of converting academic capital into political capital, which remains exceptional but significant in a context where repression destabilizes all established positions. Beyond these singular trajectories, several academics have chosen to reconvert into valued intellectual or civic activities: publishing, journalism, translation, NGOs, or human rights associations. These career paths show that, even in the absence of early retirement or exile, it is possible to transform the cultural and symbolic capital accumulated in the academic field to build new legitimacy in other social spaces (Bourdieu, 1971).

This dynamic of reconversion is not only expressed on an individual level. It has also taken on a collective form, through the creation of alternative academic spaces. Faced with institutional restrictions, independent initiatives emerged after 2016 to continue to train, educate, and conduct research on academic freedom outside the university. These places, such as the School of Human Rights or the BİRARADA Association (Association, Science, Art, Education, Research, and Solidarity),³⁷ the Solidarity Academies, the Istanbul Solidarity

35. See in particular Nimer et al., 2023.

36. Mehmet, M, 75, worked at a public university before being dismissed (interview conducted in July 2023, Istanbul).

37. See in particular the interview realized by Sümül Kaya (Sevim & Kaya, 2020). See also the internet page of the Association BİRARADA: <https://biraradadernek.org/>.

Academy (İstanbul Dayanışma Akademisi),³⁸ the Ankara Solidarity Academy (Ankara Dayanışma Akademisi),³⁹ the Eskişehir School (Eskişehir Okulu),⁴⁰ the Without Campus,⁴¹ the Turkish Human Rights Foundation,⁴² and the TIHV Academy. These places serve as spaces for intellectual production and access to information, but also as sources of income for some dismissed academics. Indeed, they also enable academics who have been purged to sometimes find work that allows them to regain a more favorable economic situation. Ezgi recounts the creation of the School of Human Rights as a way of transforming defeat into a collective project:

If I have to say anything about authoritarian regimes, it is that we have been defeated. We have to accept that and move on. That is how we founded the Human Rights School. We were defeated even before we were dismissed, because we lost the Human Rights Research Center (affiliated with Ankara University) and because they interfered with the content of our courses. Before we were dismissed, the rectorate had already begun to assign the dean.⁴³

Investing in the associative sector by acquiring new skills also appears to be a path to professional reconversion. This type of trajectory shows how cultural capital accumulated in the academic field can be converted into civic and social capital, enabling individuals to gain new legitimacy outside the university. Nil, for example, chose to leave the university permanently to invest in urban planning and the associative sector:

In fact, in New York, I studied urban planning and started working for an organization focused on social housing. [...] I thought it was great to do other things and see other people, and I really liked urban planning, the United States, etc. [...] Because, in fact, I was doing the last few years before doing my job, after my PhD. In fact, I had started to take an interest in it [...] When I lost my job, I thought it was also an opportunity to do something else. That's it. I liked it. That's why. After that, I started working in NGOs.⁴⁴

Finally, for those who have not been directly dismissed but who are under constant pressure from the rectorate or the Higher Education Council, alternative spaces function as “islands of freedom”. In this authoritarian context, keeping one's job does not guarantee continued professional recognition. Critical academics are gradually being marginalized: absent from the

38. See: “İstanbul Dayanışma Akademisi başlıyor”. *Medyascope* (2017, June 14). <https://medyascope.tv/2017/06/14/istanbul-dayanisma-akademisi-basliyor>.

39. ADA–Ankara Solidarity Academy. (2018). Accessed September 4, 2025, at <https://adakoop.org/>.

40. See the Eskişehir School website Eskişehir School “We Will Not Be Complicit in This Crime”: <https://eskisehirokulu.org/> (accessed September 4, 2025).

41. See the interview with two founders of Kampüssüzler published in Kural, B. (2017), “Kampüssüzler: Şerden Çıkan Hayır Çıkar”, *Bianet*, February 6. <https://bianet.org/haber/kampussuzler-serden-cikan-hayir-183354>.

42. Human Rights School website: “İnsan Hakları Okulu,” on İnsan Hakları Okulu, 2025, <https://www.insanhaklariokulu.org/A> (accessed March 6, 2025).

43. Ezgi, F, 46, was a scholar at a public university, dismissed by a decree law in 2016 (interview conducted online in August 2024).

44. Nil, F, 42, was a public university lecturer and researcher with a temporary contract, dismissed in 2016 (interview conducted in July 2023, Istanbul).

media, ignored by university administrations, they are no longer sought after for their research topics. This symbolic declassification constitutes a form of silent exclusion, less visible than dismissal but just as effective. They allow for a certain degree of scientific autonomy while remaining within the institution. A psychologist working at a renowned university explains how she has been under constant pressure from the Higher Education Council and how she is involved in the Resistance Academy:

We founded the Resistance Academy in February, open to the public, with weekly public scientific lectures. It is located in the Sevgi Soysal Library, a public space across from Gezi Park in Taksim. The municipality gave us permission to use it. During the last municipal elections, we said, “I hope we don’t lose”, and when the CHP (Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi / Republican People’s Party, the main Kemalist and social-democratic opposition party) won the municipal elections, it was a great success. For 18 weeks, professors from different fields, who had been dismissed here, participated in this resistance. We told the audience that these professors had been separated from their students and that they had given a science class. Everything was recorded. You can visit the Resisting Academy website. [...]. It’s about bringing science outside. “If they don’t let the academy live here, we’ll move it outside”. Because humans are curious creatures. Young people are curious, and I think a lot of interesting things can happen. Let’s see, I don’t know what will come of it.⁴⁵

The above interview quote illustrates the reasons behind the creation of alternative research spaces. The idea of sharing knowledge in the public sphere beyond institutional boundaries appears to be the logic underlying the creation of solidarity academies. Nevertheless, the limited access to economic and symbolic resources, along with the low degree of institutionalization and international recognition of the scientific production emerging from these alternative spaces, seem to constitute their main limitations⁴⁶ (Mestci, 2023).

Behind these individual trajectories, a common thread emerges: the centrality of networks. Whether it is a question of obtaining an international scholarship, joining an NGO, benefiting from union support, or converting academic capital into political capital, these experiences rely on the mobilization of pre-existing relationships. However, in a context of authoritarian repression, strictly academic social capital⁴⁷ — consisting of peers, colleagues, or university hierarchies — tends to disintegrate: stigmatization, self-censorship, and isolation weaken professional solidarity. This gap is partly filled by investment in activist, union, or political networks. In other words, social capital not only plays a multiplier role for other forms of capital, as Bourdieu suggested, but also acquires strategic autonomy in an authoritarian context. It becomes a prerequisite for access to resources for survival, reclassification, and resistance. The interview with Kemal demonstrates how his dual academic and union membership has shaped his career path:

45. Gizem, F, 57, professor at a public university. (Interview conducted in August 2024, Istanbul).

46. History also reminds us of their fragility: most of the solidarity academies created after the 1980 coup disappeared when academics returned to their institutions, with the exception of the Free University (Özgür Üniversite).

47. Social capital refers to all the resources that an individual can mobilize because of their involvement in more or less institutionalized networks (Bourdieu, 1980).

When I was about to become an academic, I also had a second role that of activist [...] My academic identity is almost inseparable from my identity as an activist and unionist.⁴⁸

In these cases, militant capital (Matonti & Poupeau, 2004) is not limited to a political resource: it overlaps with social capital by offering relational and identity continuity when academic capital is disqualified. These militant and union networks are not only individual resources for survival: they also fuel collective dynamics of academic reconstruction. It is at this level that alternative spaces of knowledge emerge in the post-2016 context.

3 Conclusion

Although emblematic, the post-2016 political repression is not an isolated episode; it is part of the history of Turkish academia, which has been marked by institutionalized political intervention and surveillance since 1980. Universities, faced with the dual constraints of managerial logic and political surveillance, are experiencing a weakening of institutional autonomy. This weakening is reflected in greater centralization by YÖK, particularly in the recruitment process, and strong ideological alignment with the government. Overall, the Turkish case echoes a broader global trend of political repression in the academic field, as observed in countries such as Russia, Poland, Hungary, Argentina, and Brazil.

The institutional transformations brought about by political repression have significant biographical consequences. Adopting a relational approach, the paper articulates two levels of analysis — the institutional and the individual — in order to examine how authoritarianism operates and produces effects “from below”. It thus explores the interplay between structural transformations in the academic field and the biographical reconfigurations of scholars who experience and respond to these changes.

An analysis of academic trajectories in Turkey since 2016 demonstrates that political repression is not just a set of individual sanctions, but rather a mode of governance designed to profoundly transform the academic field. The social declassification experienced by many researchers reflects the weakening of cultural and professional capital, but it also reveals the emergence of resistance strategies based on social and international networks as well as union networks. Far from being frozen in a state of “civic death”, academics are developing forms of adaptation, retraining, and the creation of alternative spaces that testify to their enduring intellectual vitality. This resilience highlights the fact that, even in an authoritarian context marked by intimidation, censorship, and self-censorship, the university remains a place of symbolic and political struggles. Through their initiatives, Turkish academics are helping to redefine the very meaning of academic freedom and opening up avenues for thinking about the recomposition of knowledge in highly restrictive environments.

By adopting a relational perspective, this article contributes to the sociology of academic fields under authoritarian rule. It shows that repression does not simply destroy academic freedom; it redefines it. The notion of social decline, which we propose as an alternative to *civic death*, captures the dual process through which academics experience both statutory devaluation and attempts at reconversion of their cultural capital. This analytical shift makes it possible to understand authoritarianism not only as a mechanism of exclusion but also as a system of reclassification and selective inclusion, rewarding loyalty while disqualifying dissent.

48. Kemal, M., 50, worked at a public university before being dismissed. (Interview conducted in September 2022, Istanbul).

Beyond its national specificities, the Turkish case also reveals a broader transformation in the global hierarchy of knowledge: the devaluation of cultural capital and of the social role of academics. Authoritarian regimes accelerate this process through coercion and ideological control, but similar dynamics are at work in neoliberal contexts, where managerial logics redefine the value of knowledge in terms of productivity, employability, and utility. In this sense, the Turkish experience is not only an example of repression but a magnifying lens on a wider crisis of symbolic authority (Bourdieu, 1971), in which intellectual work loses part of its social legitimacy and critical function.

Yet the trajectories of Turkish scholars also demonstrate that this devaluation is not total. By mobilizing social, militant, and international networks, many academics have managed to reinvest their intellectual resources in new spaces of knowledge and civic engagement. The emergence of solidarity academies, NGOs, and informal teaching initiatives illustrates an ongoing effort to revalorize knowledge as a collective good, outside state-controlled institutions. These experiences testify to the resilience and redefinition of cultural capital in times of authoritarian neoliberalism.

Ultimately, the Turkish case invites us to rethink academic freedom not as a legal or institutional guarantee, but as a dynamic and relational process continually renegotiated between state power, market logics, and professional norms. The coexistence of marketization and political control — far from being contradictory — constitutes a new regime of governance that reshapes the very conditions of knowledge production. Understanding how academics navigate, resist, or adapt within this hybrid configuration sheds light on the global reconfiguration of cultural capital and intellectual authority in the twenty-first century.

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