



## Solidarity with Gülsüm Çetinkaya

**06.09.19 The European Students' Union (ESU) condemns the treatment of Gülsüm Çetinkaya, a Turkish-Belgian law student at the Vrije Universiteit Brussel (VUB) arrested in Turkey for defending the interests of Kurdish people who have long suffered violence, injustice and abuses of human rights under the Turkish government. Çetinkaya was detained for 40 days and up until writing, has not been allowed to leave the country.**

ESU is appalled by an attack on the freedom of expression in Turkey, whose authorities have targeted a Turkish-Belgian law student whose alleged offense was to share articles on Facebook some 4-5 years ago highlighting the injustices suffered by the Kurdish people in Turkey. Inciting a climate of fear to speak up for risk of revenge from Turkish authorities is daunting to the freedom and safety of Gülsüm Çetinkaya. ESU finds it deplorable that such suppressive surveillance and abuse of the legal powers are wielded against those who take a critical stance to defend human rights and freedom within Turkey. Such degree of infringement against the right to freedom of expression reflects a severe systematic diminution of democracy.

ESU expresses full solidarity with Gülsüm Çetinkaya and calls on Belgian authorities to step in and safeguard her rights, her safe return and ability to continue her studies. ESU would like to remind the Turkish authorities that they, as members of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) since 2001, must stand by their commitment to the key values of the Bologna Process, including **freedom of expression**, autonomy for institutions, independent student unions, academic freedom and free movement of students and staff. However, the systematic oppression of activists within the academic sector in Turkey has proven anything but upholding these values.

In January 2016, more than 1100 scholars in Turkey were placed under investigation after they signed a petition calling on the government to end violent conflict with the Kurdish people in Eastern Turkey, and to re-establish and stabilise public life instead<sup>1</sup>. Another wave of undemocratic and large-scale actions hit the society in the aftermath of the failed coup attempt on 15 July 2016 where the Turkish government extended its repression on the education sector, suspending more than 15,000 employees of the education ministry, from teachers and administrators to university professors. In addition, more than 1,500 university deans were also ordered to resign by the state-run higher education council<sup>2</sup>. Families of tens of thousands of workers were left with no subsistence, nor social security. People were left in a stalemate situation, without access to fair, transparent and democratic legal procedures. Additionally, with having their passports confiscated, they couldn't seek work or refuge abroad<sup>3</sup>.

The European Students' Union (ESU) is the umbrella organisation of 45 National Unions of Students (NUS) from 39 countries. The aim of ESU is to represent and promote the interests of students at the European level towards all relevant bodies and in particular the European Union, Bologna Follow Up Group, Council of Europe and UNESCO.



ESU calls upon Turkish authorities to thoroughly reflect on the serious repercussions of suppressing the freedom of expression of students, academics and other members of civil society. Fear to speak out against injustices and express critical assessment is debilitating to the entire practice of democracy; it violates the fundamental human rights and freedoms of civil society; it harms the public image and quality of academia and it puts into question the rule of law in the country. At a time when freedom of expression is being undermined in numerous democratic countries around the world<sup>4</sup>, ESU takes a strong stand against oppressive actions aimed at silencing critical opinions of students, academics and civil society. We believe that fostering open dialogue and critical thinking within academia are key to developing more humane, tolerant, innovative and creative citizens capable of contributing to a well-functioning democracy and society that values and upholds the right to freedom of expression.

**On behalf of the Executive Committee of the European Students' Union.**

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.esu-online.org/?news=letter-to-president-erdogan-threat-to-academic-freedom-in-turkey>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.esu-online.org/?news=esu-strongly-condemns-turkeys-purge-of-the-academic-community>

<sup>3</sup> <https://csee-etuice.org/en/solidarity-section/turkey/2076-general-information>

<sup>4</sup> <https://freedomhouse.org/issues/freedom-expression>

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