



April 8, 2019

President Lee C. Bollinger  
Office of the President  
202 Low Library  
535 W. 116 St., MC 4309  
New York, NY 10027

*Sent via Priority Mail and Electronic Mail (officeofthepresident@columbia.edu)*

Dear President Bollinger:

The Foundation for Individual Rights in Education (FIRE) is a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization dedicated to defending liberty, freedom of speech, due process, academic freedom, legal equality, and freedom of conscience on America's college campuses.

FIRE is concerned about the potential threat to expressive rights at Columbia University in light of the cancellation of an April 4 panel discussion on the rule of law in Turkey. In keeping with its broad commitments to freedom of expression and academic freedom, and in the interest of institutional transparency, Columbia must publicly account for the event's cancellation by providing an explanation of the nature of requests, if any, made by representatives of the Turkish government regarding the content or scheduling of the panel.

## **I. Facts**

The following is our understanding of the pertinent facts. We appreciate that you may have additional information to offer and invite you to share it with us.

On April 4, 2019, Columbia University was set to host a panel discussion on the rule of law in Turkey. The event was initially sponsored by the Human Rights Foundation, Columbia University's Global Freedom of Expression program, Columbia Law School's Human Rights Institute, and the International Commission of Jurists.

As of February, Agnès Callamard, Director of the Global Freedom of Expression Project, and Sarah Cleveland, faculty co-director of the Human Rights Institute at Columbia Law School,

were planning to speak at the event, but later withdrew.<sup>1</sup> They were replaced by David Phillips, Director of Columbia’s Institute for the Study of Human Rights, and Karin Karlekar, PEN America’s Director of Freedom of Expression At-Risk Programs. Sinan Ciddi, Executive Director of The Institute of Turkish Studies at Georgetown University, was also added to the panel.<sup>2</sup> The final lineup for the panel included Ciddi, Karlekar, Phillips, Council on Foreign Relations Senior Fellow Steven Cook, and Dr. Y. Alp Aslandogan, president of the Alliance for Shared Values.<sup>3</sup>

On April 3, Cook tweeted: “Disappointed to learn that @Columbia’s Provost effectively canceled this panel two days before the event, citing ‘academic standards.’ One can only assume that the university came under pressure from [sic] the govt of #Turkey and its supporters. Terrible precedent.”<sup>4</sup>

Umut Acar, of the Consul General of Turkey in Chicago, replied to Cook’s tweet: “Congrats @Columbia for not giving a platform to Gulenist propaganda, the sole puprpose [sic] of which is to smear and vilify Turkey, weaken Turkish-American relations, and advance Gulenist agenda, under the guise of academic debate.”<sup>5</sup>

According to Cook, a Columbia University provost informed the Human Rights Foundation on April 1 that the event was postponed because, as Cook characterized it, “there wasn’t adequate consultation on the composition of the panel and it doesn’t meet Columbia’s academic standards.”<sup>6</sup> Cook went on to say that “[t]he only conclusion that anybody can really draw is that Columbia came under significant pressure from the Turkish government.”<sup>7</sup>

On April 3, PEN America released a statement expressing concern about the panel’s cancellation:

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<sup>1</sup> Shubham Saharan & Emma James, *Cancelled panel on Turkish rule of law sparks debate around foreign political pressure, academic freedom at Columbia*, COLUMBIASPECTATOR, Apr. 4, 2019,

<https://www.columbiaspectator.com/news/2019/04/04/cancelled-panel-on-turkish-rule-of-law-sparks-debate-around-foreign-political-pressure-academic-freedom-at-columbia>.

<sup>2</sup> *Id.*

<sup>3</sup> The Alliance for Shared Values is an organization associated with Fethullah Gülen, a cleric accused by Turkey’s President Erdoğan of orchestrating a failed coup attempt in 2016. Gülen denies the accusation. Cook and Aslandogan expressed that they believe Aslandogan’s invitation was likely to have spurred controversy. Elizabeth Redden, *At Columbia, Questions Over Canceled Panel*, INSIDE HIGHER ED, Apr. 4, 2019, <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2019/04/04/panelists-suspect-turkish-government-pressure-was-behind-columbias-choice-cancel>.

<sup>4</sup> Steven A. Cook (@stevenacook), TWITTER (Apr. 3, 2019, 9:12 AM), <https://twitter.com/stevenacook/status/1113428939303583744>.

<sup>5</sup> Umut Acar (@AcarUmut), TWITTER (Apr. 3, 2019, 6:49 PM), <https://twitter.com/AcarUmut/status/1113574166257598464> (emoji omitted).

<sup>6</sup> Redden, *supra* note 3.

<sup>7</sup> *Id.*

We have spoken to organizers about the decision to cancel this event. We understand that in recent weeks event participants and organizers began to have serious reservations about the composition of the panel for the event, believing that it reflected an insufficient breadth of Turkish voices. Efforts to add an adequately diverse set of Turkish perspectives to the line-up were apparently not fully successful, and we understand that there were intensifying concerns that important viewpoints would not be represented. We also understand that late last week Columbia was approached by a representative of the Turkish government who expressed objections to the planned event and the views that would be reflected in the discussion. We received word of the cancellation today. We understand that Columbia intends to reschedule the event with a panel that includes a broader representation of Turkish viewpoints.

As an organization dedicated to the defense of freedom of expression and one that has been deeply involved in issues of free speech on university campuses, we are concerned that the outreach from the Turkish government may have played any role at all in Columbia's decision to cancel the panel. While there may have been valid grounds to reconsider the make-up of the event and even to postpone it in order to ensure a more representative group of speakers, the direct intervention of the Turkish government in an effort to influence the event creates at the very least a perception that Columbia may have been influenced by Turkey in its decision to call off the event. The government of Turkey is notorious for its relentless crackdown on dissidents, writers, journalists, and scholars, including many who are university-affiliated. Government intrusions in university decision-making of this nature violate academic freedom and freedom of speech. Universities, scholars, and free speech defenders must be vigilant in resisting such interference and avoiding even the perception that decisions may be shaped by government pressure.<sup>8</sup>

Cleveland stated that complaints from the Turkish government played no role in her decision to withdraw from the panel, instead citing a lack of "diverse perspectives required for our participation."

A Columbia spokesperson also offered comment to *Inside Higher Ed*:

"The decisions of several Columbia faculty and sponsoring institutions to withdraw from Thursday's panel discussion were a direct consequence of irregularities in the planning that occurred, including a lack of transparency concerning panel participants and insufficient consultation in the steps taken to

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<sup>8</sup> Press Release, *PEN AMERICA RESPONSE TO THE CANCELED PANEL AT COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY*, PEN AMERICA, Apr. 3, 2019, <https://pen.org/press-release/columbia-university-panel>.

rectify imbalances in the makeup of the panel,” Columbia said. “Other reasons that have been publicly suggested for the postponement are mistaken. We will soon announce a date later this month for a rescheduled event at Columbia addressing the important subject of Turkey and the rule of law.”<sup>9</sup>

*Inside Higher Ed* also reported that Columbia, which launched and maintains a global center in Istanbul, did not respond to its request for comment on whether Turkish officials had contacted the university regarding the event, and that the Turkish embassy in Washington also did not reply. An April 4 report from *The Washington Post*, however, confirmed that a “senior Turkish diplomat readily acknowledged making calls to Columbia”:

The diplomat denied making to the university any threats or reference to monetary contributions from Turkey. “I just highlighted the importance I attach to freedom of speech and expression, and gave them the background. Long story short, I didn’t threaten them.”

At first, he said, there was no reaction from Columbia. “I was told they were taking note of what we said and would examine the situation. Later on, we learned from friends in the Turkish American community that the event was postponed. Not canceled.”<sup>10</sup>

## **II. Transparency is required to reaffirm Columbia University’s commitment to freedom of expression and academic freedom**

Columbia University, though it is a private university not bound by the First Amendment, has made clear in recent years its commitment to freedom of expression. For example, in your 2016 welcoming remarks to incoming Columbia students, you said, “We don’t ban speech. We don’t censor speech.”<sup>11</sup> Later that month, the University Senate adopted a statement recognizing the essentiality of freedom of expression, noting that “Columbia, in particular, has a long tradition of valuing dissent and controversy and in welcoming the clash of opinions onto the campus.”<sup>12</sup>

Columbia University must reassure its community that it remains steadfast in its commitment to free expression and open debate. FIRE understands that some of the

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<sup>9</sup> Redden, *supra* note 3.

<sup>10</sup> Karen DeYoung, *Columbia University’s cancellation of forum on Turkey draws criticism*, WASH. POST, Apr. 4, 2019, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/columbia-universitys-cancellation-of-forum-on-turkey-draws-criticism/2019/04/04/edb33654-5705-11e9-9136-f8e6361f6df\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/columbia-universitys-cancellation-of-forum-on-turkey-draws-criticism/2019/04/04/edb33654-5705-11e9-9136-f8e6361f6df_story.html).

<sup>11</sup> Alex Morey, *Are Columbia’s Speech Codes’ Days Numbered?*, NEWSDESK, Sept. 5, 2016, <https://www.thefire.org/are-columbias-speech-codes-days-numbered>.

<sup>12</sup> *Rules of University Conduct*, COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY SENATE, Sept. 29, 2016, [https://www.essential-policies.columbia.edu/files\\_facets/imce\\_shared/TheRulesOfUniversityConduct.pdf](https://www.essential-policies.columbia.edu/files_facets/imce_shared/TheRulesOfUniversityConduct.pdf).

organizers and panelists had concerns about the event, and recognizes that those involved in the event are of course free to exercise their own associational rights by seeking to change or withdraw from events as they may so desire. However, when government officials exert pressure directed towards altering or canceling an event critical of their country, it is not unreasonable to ask what effect that pressure may have had when the event is subsequently altered or canceled at the behest of the university's administration. In thus far offering only a vague explanation that fails to acknowledge pressure from a foreign government, Columbia has left important, and easily addressed, questions about academic freedom on its campus unanswered.

Columbia should address the circumstances of the changes made to this event in a manner sufficient to answer the following questions:

1. Why did Columbia cancel the event when at least one sponsor, the Human Rights Foundation, was interested in going forward with the event as scheduled?<sup>13</sup>
2. If the event was cancelled due to irregularities in its scheduling, what were those irregularities, when were they discovered, and how were they discovered?
3. When the university reschedules the event, who will have input regarding the choice of panelists?
4. Did any representative of the Turkish government contact the university regarding the panelists, content, nature, or scheduling of the April 4 event? If so, what was the nature of those requests, and what was the response?

In light of increased focus from academics, advocates, journalists, and elected officials on foreign governments' efforts to influence debate on campuses around the world, it is incumbent upon universities to respond transparently when credible concerns about such interference are raised on their campuses. If government officials have attempted to censor speech on American campuses, it is important that those efforts be made public so they can be effectively countered.

We hope the university is able to shed light on these important matters. We request a response to this letter by April 22, 2019.

Sincerely,



Sarah McLaughlin  
Senior Program Officer, Legal and Public Advocacy

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<sup>13</sup> Garry Kasparov (@Kasparov63), TWITTER (Apr. 3, 1:22 PM), <https://twitter.com/Kasparov63/status/1113491989025185792>.