

Report on the mission to Istanbul of 18 to 19 January 2007 to represent the European Parliament at the Funeral Mass for the Armenian journalist Hrant Dink

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Hrant Dink, publisher and editor-in-chief of the Turkish-Armenian weekly newspaper *Agos*, published in Istanbul, was shot in front of his newspaper's offices on Friday, 19 January 2007. He died at the scene from three gunshot wounds to the head. The news spread across the world within minutes and there was a great sense of outrage within Turkey and in Europe as a whole. The murderer was a 17-year-old youth from ultra-nationalist circles in the city of Trabzon. Although those who gave the assassination order have since been arrested, many questions surrounding this crime remain unanswered. As well as covering the Mass and visits to the family and to the editorial staff of the *Agos* newspaper, this report examines the background to the crime as well as the significance of Hrant Dink's work in the context of efforts to improve relations between Armenia and Turkey. Let us begin, however, with a brief biography of Hrant Dink:

Hrant Dink

Hrant Dink was born into an Armenian family from the town of Malayta in eastern Turkey. The Armenian Patriarch of Constantinople, Mesrob II, described his development and personality in the following words:

'His life of struggle and hardship made Hrant Dink a courageous, sensitive and resolute person. These qualities enabled him to become an advocate and a symbol of justice, freedom of belief and human rights. He stood up for his opinions and his ideas without fear of possible consequences. He was equally resolute in taking action when he was convinced that action was needed.

Hrant had the same affinity with his native country as he had with his ethnic roots. He loved his birthplace, his country and its people without rejecting the values of his origins. His courage reflected his Anatolian attitude to people – full of love, making no distinction on the basis of religion, race or origin. In this, Hrant followed God's commandment.'

With these words, Patriarch Mesrob II expressed the joy he felt when, calling on Mrs Dink to express his condolences, he learned that Hrant believed in Jesus and honoured him as the Saviour. The fact that the Patriarch did not discover until after Hrant Dink's death that this prominent member of his small community had been a Christian believer says a great deal about Hrant's work in Turkey. With his liberal left-wing convictions, he was not only on the side of the opposition in national politics but he also belonged to the opposition within the small Armenian community, which is dominated by the Armenian Apostolic Church. He had been especially critical of the leaders of the community for not being vociferous enough in condemning the numerous instances of discrimination against minorities in general and against the Armenian community in particular. Nevertheless, or perhaps precisely because of that criticism and that courage, he was extremely popular within his community.

Hrant Dink, whose journalism was honoured with numerous awards, had also established a firm place within Turkish society. *Agos*, the newspaper he published – which, unlike other Armenian newspapers, also appears in Turkish – was held in high regard by its Turkish readers too. His foremost concerns were Turkish-Armenian dialogue and rapprochement, and the promotion of relations between Turkey and Armenia.

Hrant firmly believed that the past can only be addressed and understood where there are prospects of future relations. Armenia's painful history exercised his mind no less than the Armenian Diaspora. But he took a different, and perhaps more effective, approach to the debate on the Armenian genocide of 1915 than is customary in Turkey. In his speeches and writings, he tried to avoid the term 'genocide'. He informed his readers and listeners, describing the events of 1915, but left the definition to them and invited them to find the appropriate term.

Hrant was also loved by his Turkish friends because, like many other critical journalists in that country, he was persecuted on account of his work. He was the subject of several criminal trials. He was sentenced to six months in prison under Article 301 of the Criminal Code for 'denigration of Turkishness'. His last newspaper article contained a very tactful analysis of the reasons why charges against 'Turkish' writers such as Orhan Pamuk and Elif Şafak had been dropped whereas he had been convicted. He could rebel like nobody else against exclusion and injustice without bowing to anyone or indeed taking pleasure in his resistance. His conviction hurt him not only because he considered it unjust but also because he felt it as an affront to his deeply held anti-racist convictions. This made him a unique journalist in Turkey, a much-loved and respected figure. His death is undoubtedly a great loss to Turkey and to the Armenian community around the world.

The funeral – a political event

The funeral of Hrant Dink turned into one of the largest ever mass demonstrations in the city of Istanbul. Although it was expected that thousands would come to pay their last respects to Hrant Dink, not even the greatest of optimists could have foreseen the vast sea of more than a hundred thousand people. At 10 a.m. on Tuesday, 23 January, when we¹ arrived in the boulevard in front of the *Agos* offices, thousands of people had already gathered for the demonstration, which was due to begin in one hour's time. As we waited for the start of the demonstration, which began with a speech from Hrant Dink's widow in the form of a letter, entitled *Sevgilim* ('My Beloved'),² floods of people poured into the street in front of the *Agos* offices from all parts of the city. Mrs Dink's speech, a declaration of love, not only moved the listening crowds to profound grief but also contained an appeal to refrain from the chanting of slogans and to accompany Hrant in silence on his final journey. This wish was respected. It was not easy to take in this mass of participants, young and old, who seemed to come from all strata of society. It was as if we were in the midst of a sea and could only make out waves of people. It was impossible to see where the crowds began or ended.

After a few kilometres the family and guests left the demonstration to attend the Funeral Mass in the Church of the Virgin Mary. This was not easy either. The guests' path was blocked not only by the traffic, which had been brought to a standstill by the demonstration, but also by the sheer mass of people around the church. All the streets around the Church of the Virgin Mary, the seat of the Patriarch, were jammed with masses of people. The ambassadors of many countries,

¹ Hélène Flautre, chair of the Subcommittee on Human Rights, also travelled to Istanbul for the funeral.

² See annex.

including the United States, the Netherlands and Germany, had travelled up from Ankara, and the Turkish Government was also represented by two ministers. The press, representatives of employers' organisations, trade unions and political parties, the Mayor of the City of Istanbul and representatives of the Armenian community throughout the world were gathered in the church.

In his remarks during the Mass, the Patriarch was very restrained. He neither attempted to assess the political motives for the murder nor apportioned blame to the security forces for failing to protect Hrant Dink, nor did he even comment on speculation and accusations concerning these matters. Two important demands did, however, emerge clearly: the Patriarch asked the Turkish Government to grant full freedom of expression and to ensure that people would no longer be charged or convicted, let alone murdered, for expressing their opinion. The second demand related to discrimination against the Armenian community in Turkey. The Patriarch called for recognition that 'the Armenians are Turkish nationals who have lived for thousands of years in this country, and they must no longer be perceived as a foreign body or a threat'. The removal of this prejudice, he said, should begin with the revision of school textbooks.

The liturgy was accompanied and concluded by Gregorian chant and hymns. The congregation rejoined the demonstrators at the cemetery.

The family and the editorial staff of *Agos*

On 22 January, shortly after our arrival, we had visited the family to express our condolences and convey the condolences of the President of the European Parliament. The small modest flat in the Bakırköy district of Istanbul was crammed with family and friends of Hrant Dink. Representatives of political parties were in the room. The youngest daughter was with her mother. Mrs Dink was outwardly composed, but her grief was evident. The constant flow of callers was surely stressful, but at the same time it helped to ease the family's pain. As we were leaving the flat, the Minister for the Interior arrived. Two days later, it was reported in the press that the Prime Minister had paid a call. Mr Erdogan spent more than an hour with the family. Some press reports seem to indicate that his visit was more than just a courtesy call.

Thanks to the bookshop that Hrant Dink established in the Bakırköy district, the family's economic circumstances seem to be stable. Before his murder, he was building a new house to reduce the burden of a high rent for the bookshop. Nevertheless, it will not be easy for the family to continue Hrant Dink's work and maintain his personal network. His children are still too young to contribute, not having yet completed their education.

The family will also have to bear his political legacy, a task made even more onerous by his murder. There is a need not only to maintain the *Agos* newspaper, which was partly funded from Hrant Dink's own pocket, but also to channel many initiatives designed to keep Hrant Dink's ideas alive through the creation of foundations and other cultural and political activities, and these things are not easy to organise.

The twenty or so people who work for *Agos*, his political and cultural platform, showed through the organisation of the demonstration that they will continue to run the newspaper successfully. Dink's closest friend, the journalist Etyen Mahçupyan, will take over as editor-in-chief in the meantime and will assist the family, who will be publishing *Agos*. The financial situation, though not particularly stable, seems to be sound enough for the newspaper to cover its costs. It

would be a great loss for Turkey if *Agos* were to die with Hrant Dink. We visited the newspaper offices twice and assured the editorial team of our support.

The murderers and freedom of expression in Turkey

The murderer, a 17-year-old youth, was arrested fairly quickly, two days after the crime. The murder of an Italian priest a year before, which was also committed by a youth, aged 16, not only put the city in the spotlight but also alerted the press to the fact that fanaticised minors were being used for political assassinations. So far seven men from ultra-nationalist circles who are believed to have been behind the crime have been arrested, and they are currently being questioned. They too are young people in their mid-twenties. Two theories are being discussed in the Turkish press.

It is being suggested that those who give the orders are using the same methods as the organisers of suicide bombings and deliberately choosing minors to carry out their crimes. Fanaticised by nationalists and fundamentalists, these young people are sent to assassinate critical journalists, writers and politicians. After his arrest, one of the young people also made death threats against the writer Orhan Pamuk, last year's winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature, who was likewise charged with a breach of Article 301 of the Criminal Code. The theory has been advanced that the men behind these crimes are active members of political parties and also maintain links with elements of the security forces.

The second theory is that the killers are gangs of youths who have been fanaticised through the Internet. Initial indications suggest that these youths are linked in a Web network and communicate with other ultra-nationalist circles. This scenario would make the situation even more dangerous since it may be supposed that there are hundreds of these youth gangs throughout Turkey.

Whichever is the true scenario, it spells danger for all critical journalists, writers and politicians who have been charged or convicted under Article 301. Almost all of the journalists and writers who have been charged under Article 301 are given police protection – and rightly so, for the last article by Hrant Dink,¹ which was published in two parts in *Agos* on 12 and 19 January, reveals how that provision has been putting journalists' lives at risk.

In his article, Hrant bemoans the fact that, in spite of the expert reports obtained by the court and contrary to the statement made by the public prosecutor, his accusers secured his conviction, and he was sentenced to six months in prison. This judgment, he said, hurt him, because it meant that he had been wrongly convicted of 'denigrating Turkishness'. He went on to describe how the trial had made him a target for ultra-nationalist factions. This frequent pattern in cases involving Article 301 is an important factor in the present debate, and for this reason we shall briefly focus on it.

On 6 February 2004, Hrant had stated in a newspaper article that Sabiha Gökçen, the adopted daughter of Kemal Atatürk, had been of Armenian descent and that Atatürk had adopted her from an orphanage. As evidence, he accompanied the article with excerpts from his own conversations with members of Sabiha Gökçen's family. A report on this article made front-

¹ See annex, 'The "pigeon skittishness" of my soul' – *Agos*, 12 and 19 January 2007.

page headlines in one of the major national newspapers on 21 February 2004, triggering both a chorus of praise and a hail of condemnation. The fiercest criticism came from the general staff of the armed forces, who called Hrant's article a criminal act. As a result, he was called to the office of the provincial governor and given a formal warning. Hrant Dink tried to point out that for him, as a journalist, discovering that Kemal Atatürk's adopted daughter was an Armenian girl was a big news story. For that reason, 'instead of only discussing the Armenian question through the dead', he had sought to discuss it 'through living people and survivors too'. Hrant Dink concluded that it was even more difficult to involve survivors in the discussion.

In the days that followed, *Agos* became the target of ultra-nationalist demonstrations. Hrant Dink's speeches and writings were scrutinised. The "Great Jurists Association", another ultra-nationalist body, initiated proceedings against him on the basis of a sentence taken out of context from an article that had appeared in *Agos* on 13 February 2004. The public prosecutor instituted proceedings under Article 301 of the Criminal Code. Contrary to all judicial logic, Hrant Dink was found guilty at every stage of the proceedings.

The succession of trials and appeals and the fact that he had to resort to the European Court of Human Rights weighed heavily on Hrant Dink. He felt persecuted and even threatened. He told his friends that he was afraid. His final article conveys a vivid impression of how he must have felt during the last months of his life.

Hrant Dink's death has brought two important issues into the public spotlight in Turkey, namely the threat to freedom of expression and the Armenian question. The outpouring of sympathy and the throngs of people who paid their last respects to Hrant Dink mean that we must ensure that these two issues are high on our agenda in the coming months and years.