

Hrant Dink: an openDemocracy tribute

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In his [first article](#) [1] for **openDemocracy** Hrant Dink observed that "the relationship between Turkey and the EU is governed less by reciprocal desire than by fear". His conclusion: "Do not fear".

Now the sentiments that he addressed without fear have led to his [assassination](#) [2]. Turkey is a European country. Its Ottoman past is deeply formed by its Byzantine Christian heritage, while modern Europe has been shaped by its long arguments with the Turk. Today, as trade, tourism and migration bring the two parts of Europe together, people on both sides fear and resist the implication of their shared legacy.



Hrant Dink (1954 - 2007)

A brave and kindly man in his early fifties Hrant was shot down outside the office of his journal [Agos](#) [3]. This is a bilingual, Armenian-Turkish publication. The bitter tragedy of his death is that *Agos* was an expression of his dedication to a debate not with Turkish nationalists but with his fellow Armenians. He felt that they were too much in the grip of the Armenian diaspora's obsession with the genocide between 1915-17. He wanted to talk, write and publish about it freely and honestly, of course. But with the hope of this allowing Armenians to become normal, healthy citizens of a modern democratic Turkey.

This approach threatens the purist nationalists of Turkey. They, it now seems, have got their man.

The last time I saw Hrant was last summer in Istanbul. Like many who had spoken and written about his country's history with the Armenians he had been accused of "insulting Turkishness". Unlike most of them whose charges had been dismissed, he had been found guilty and given a

suspended sentence. We discussed his determination to take his appeal to the European Court of Human Rights, and the costs. Now it has lost its chance to overturn the verdict.

- Anthony Barnett

When, in October 2005, Hrant Dink was given a six month suspended sentence for an allegedly anti-Turkish statement, he was outraged. As an Armenian, he pointed out [4], he had been fighting racism all his life and had never belittled either Turkish or Armenian identity.

Hrant Dink [5] was one of Turkey's most prominent Armenian citizens. He was convicted for an article he wrote for the bilingual Armenian-Turkish weekly, *Agos*, which he edited, in which he discussed the continuing impact of the killings of hundreds of thousands of Armenians by the Ottoman army in 1915-17. The issue remains highly contentious: the Turkish state refuses [6] to acknowledge that this was genocide and Hrant Dink was among a group of Armenian writers and intellectuals who sought, through discussion, to defuse tensions between the Armenian diaspora and Turkey.

Hrant Dink was subsequently prosecuted for "insult to the Turkish state", a charge that carried a possible six months imprisonment. The charges derived from remarks at a conference on "Global Security, Terror and Human Rights, Multi-culturalism, Minorities and Human Rights", held in 2002 in Sanliurfa. Dink, an Armenian, had been asked about how he felt when, at primary school, he had, like all fellow pupils, to recite the words: "I am a Turk, I am honest, I am hardworking". He had responded that although he was honest and hardworking, he was not a Turk. It was enough to land him in court, prosecuted in a wave of trials [7] brought by far right interests against writer, journalists and public intellectuals in Turkey in the last two years [8].

His shocking murder in Istanbul today will be seen in the light of these attacks on free speech and freedom of thought in Turkey.

- Isabel Hilton

"I am an Armenian of Turkey, and a good Turkish citizen. I believe in the republic, in fact I would like it to become stronger and more democratic. I don't want my country to be divided, but I want all the citizens to be able to live fully and contribute their diversity to this society – as a source of richness."

– (Hrant Dink, 2006)

Hrant Dink (1954 – 2007) was born in Malatya, a city in the eastern Anatolian region of Turkey. At the age of seven he moved to Istanbul, where he spent the rest of his life. He received his early education in Armenian community and boarding schools, later going on to study in the zoology and philosophy departments at the university of Istanbul. After graduating he pursued a career as a journalist and activist for Armenian civil rights in Turkey.

From a young age he was aware of the taboo subject of the "Armenian issue": "We all have an intuition about something broken in the past. It's in our genetic code. Each Armenian family has losses that go back to the time when survivors were scattered all over the world."

He describes his experience growing up with both Turkish and Armenian identity as: "I didn't know what it meant to be Turkish or Armenian. At school in Istanbul, I recited the Turkish credo every morning, but I was also told I should preserve my Armenian identity. I never came across my own name in school books – only Turkish names."

Years later as a teenager, he would hear "the word 'Armenian' used as a swearword." As an adult he would face direct discrimination: "I saw high-court decisions that referred to Armenians as 'foreigners living in Turkey'. The Armenian orphanage that I worked so hard to establish was confiscated by the state."

Despite this, he refused to leave Turkey, and instead campaigned hard to promote better relations between the Turkish and Armenian communities:

"My identity was always *other*, and often belittled. I saw again and again that I was *different*. Many people who were like me were leaving this country, but I didn't want to leave – I wanted to stay and fight for what I thought was right."

In 1996 he founded, became editor-in-chief and columnist of *Agos* [9] (*translation: "ploughed furrow"*), an Istanbul-based weekly newspaper published in both Armenian and Turkish. It was briefly suspended in 2001.

In April 2004 he gave a speech [10] at the UN Commission on Human Rights on freedom of expression in Turkey. He identified many continuing problems but his words had a positive note:

"the tendency of many Turkish intellectuals to learn Armenian history, problems and culture, to discuss them and to see Armenian community as a richness for the country, gives hope for the future by creating a sound demand right from the bottom to the top."

In recent years Hrant was charged a number of times under the strict Turkish penal code for "denigrating Turkey" and "insulting Turkish identity". His cases included a trial on 28 April, 2005 about a speech he gave at a human rights and minorities conference in 2002, a conviction on 7 October, 2005 to a six-month suspended sentence for an article on the Armenian diaspora published in *Agos*, an interview given to the Reuters news agency on 14 July, 2006 where he spoke candidly about his opinions on the events of 1915.

Of his October 2005 conviction he said:

"I was found guilty of racism. How can this be? All my life I have struggled against ethnic discrimination and racism. I would never belittle Turkishness or Armenianness. I wouldn't allow anyone else to do it, either."

It is reported that on 10 January he wrote an article for *Agos* expressing his worry at the large number of threatening letters and emails he was receiving and his dismay at the lack of concern shown by the Istanbul police.

He was killed on 19 January by an unidentified gunman outside the central-Istanbul offices of *Agos*.

Hrant Dink wrote two articles for openDemocracy:

"The water finds its crack: an Armenian in Turkey [11]" (13 December, 2005)

"Orhan Pamuk's epic journey [12]" (16 October, 2006)

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