

Agos
By Hrant Dink

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Why have I been targeted?

A note to begin with; I have been sentenced to 6 months based on the offence of “insulting Turkishness” which I have never committed. Now as a last option I’ll apply to the ECHR. My attorneys will make the application until 17 January and they requested an article describing the course of events. I wanted to share with the public opinion this article which will be included in the file because the conscientious conviction of the society in Turkey is as significant as that of ECHR, perhaps even more important. If I did not have to apply to the ECHR I could have forever kept for my self some of the information as well as my emotional state, to be included in this series of articles which will last a few weeks. However since it has come to this juncture I believe that the best thing to do is to share everything that has happened...

The question that has been wondered and posed not only by me, not only by the Armenians but the Turkish public opinion as well, is as follows; “While the cases of almost everyone who had been prosecuted or tried based on article 301 have been dropped by means of some technical or legal solutions and they have been finalised at the very first hearing prior to any sentence, why has Hrant Dink been sentenced to 6 months?”

Light escapes...

This is actually not a misinterpretation or an unnecessary question. If you recall, prior to the hearings in Orhan Pamuk case, intensive efforts had been made in order to “find a way to drop the case”.

According to some, technically Ministry of Justice needed to give permission for trial therefore Ministry was to be referred to. Thus that was what happened.

Minister of Justice who saw that the ball was in his court both fulminated against Pamuk and repeatedly called for him to say; “I did not say that.”

As a result, the first hearing of the “Pamuk case” was held and because of the vandal assaults which took place during the hearing Turkey had been exposed to contempt before the entire world. Therefore the case was dropped in order to avoid similar incidents in the second hearing thus Pamuk’s 301 adventure had been finalised through a technical solution.

A lighter version of a similar process was experienced in Elif Şafak’s case.

The case which caused huge row was finalised at the first hearing even in the absence of Elif Şafak in the court room. Everybody was happy with these technical solutions. Even PM Tayyip Erdoğan called Şafak to wish her a quick recovery.

Similar “lighter escapes” had been experienced by several journalists and academicians who had been subjected to lawsuits based on accusations of “insulting Turkishness” due to their articles published after the Armenian Conference.

Unanswered...

Do not think that I envy the fact that these cases were lightly escaped. On the contrary even launching of these prosecutions or cases mean grave costs for their victims and I am one of those who would know and share best the weight of injustice encountered by my colleagues tried on these cases.

My concern is to question and find an answer to “why Hrant Dink’s case did not generate concerns and excitement unlike in the cases of my colleagues.”

We have seen that these light escapes provided the Government with a kind of option and these applications “with good results” were given as examples *vis-à-vis* the pressures by the EU. However the only example which could not be explained to the EU and which tied the Government’s hands with regard to 301 was the fact that Hrant Dink had been sentenced.

When it came to that case everybody was tongue-tied.

So “While the cases of almost everyone who had been prosecuted or tried based on article 301 have been sorted out by means of some technical or legal solutions and they have been finalised at the very first hearing prior to any sentence, why has Hrant Dink been sentenced to 6 months?”

The role of being an Armenian

Yes we all need this answer! Especially me.

After all I am a citizen of this country and I insist on having equal terms with everyone else.

There is no doubt that I have encountered much negative discrimination before just because I was Armenian.

For example when I went to Denizli 12th Infantry Regiment for my short-term (8 months) military service in 1986 all my colleagues were given the military rank of a recruit after the oath-taking ceremony while I was the only one separated from the rest of the group as a private.

As a mature man with two children perhaps I should not have cared about it. It even provided some kind of comfort to me actually, I did not have to be on guard duty or undertake other more challenging tasks.

But this discrimination had upset me so deeply. I can never forget how I cried for two hours behind the tin barrack while all the others were sharing their happy moments with their families.

It is still a fresh wound in my memory what my field officer told me in his room; “Don’t worry, come to me if you have any problems.”

Being tried, acquitted or sentenced on the basis of 301, is certainly not a grant of a military rank.

Therefore I can not be in a position to say, "I should not have been granted since they were not granted too." or even to say; "Since they gave it to me they should have given it to them as well."

However as someone who grew up through the experiences of discrimination I must confess that my mental reflex did not refrain from asking the following question; "Has the fact that I was an Armenian played any roles in this result?"

What I know and what I sense

As a response to this question when I gather what I know and what I sense there is certainly an answer I can give.

It is briefly as follows; "Some people decided to take action saying; "Hrant Dink has gone too far... We need to put him in his place."

I admit that this is an argument which primarily focuses on me and my Armenian identity. It can be suggested that I exaggerate.

However this is my mental perception...The given data and my personal experiences do not leave any option other than this argument.

Best thing to do is to share with you everything that I went through, together with my intuitions. The rest depends on you.

Putting me in my place...

First of all let's clarify how Hrant Dink "had gone too far".

Dink had long been capturing their attention and bothering them.

There were times when he went beyond the limits, particularly when he started raising the problems of the Armenian community, demanded their rights through AGOS which he first published in 1996 or when he displayed his own stance regarding the discussions of history which was disliked by the Turkish official thesis. However the straw that broke the camel's back was the report published in AGOS in February 04, 2004 on "Sabiha Gökçen".

The report titled "Secret of Sabiha Hatun" undersigned by Dink, discussed about the Armenian relatives of Sabiha Gökçen and claimed that Atatürk's adopted daughter Sabiha Gökçen was an Armenian orphan taken from an orphanage.

Turkey was shaken with the news when this report was published in Hürriyet, the newspaper with the largest circulation in Turkey, on February 21, 2004 with excerpts from AGOS.

For more than 15 days, all columnists wrote positive and negative comments about this news. Statements were issued by different circles. Among them, the most important one was the written statement of the General Staff.

The General Staff had showed its reaction by saying “Regardless of its purposes, starting a debate on such a symbol is a crime against national integrity and social peace”.

In their opinion, those who were responsible for this news were ill-willed, they were trying to strip a woman, who had become a myth and a symbol for Turkish women, of her Turkish identity, and were trying to shatter its very foundation.

Who were these tactless people, who was Hrant Dink?

Somebody had to teach him his limits!

Invitation for an official conversation

The statement of the General Staff was published on February 22, Sunday.

I watched the long statement from the TV at my house.

I did not feel very comfortable that night. I sensed that something was definitely going to happen the next day. Nevertheless, my experience and my intuition did not let me down.

My phone rang early in the morning next day.

One of the Deputy Governors of Istanbul was calling. In a harsh tone, he told me that I was expected at the Governor’s office together with the documents supporting this news.

When I asked him the reason for this meeting, he replied that “it was to talk about this subject and to see the documents I had”.

I called my experienced journalist friends and asked them the meaning of this call.

They told me that ‘such conversations were not part of the tradition nor were they a legal procedure, however, the right thing to do was for me to go to that meeting with the documents I had’.

I had to be careful

I followed their recommendation and visited the Deputy Governor together with my documents.

The Deputy Governor was quite polite.

When he showed me the way to his office, I saw that two more persons were there; a gentleman and a lady. In a polite manner, he told me that ‘they were his close friends and asked if I would mind their presence during the meeting’.

By the time I said ‘I don’t mind’ and had myself seated, I had already understood the level of courtesy that would prevail during the meeting.

Then, the Deputy Governor went into the subject quite abruptly.

“Mr. Hrant” he said, “You are an experienced journalist. Shouldn’t you be reporting more attentively? Besides, what is the need for making such news? See what a mess it created. Now, we know you but what about the man on the street? They might think that you have other motives for making such news. Do you see the document I’m holding? The Armenian Patriarchate had made an application, in some websites some tactless people were attempting to engage in certain acts against some of the institutions of the Armenian community, which may amount to terrorism. We chased and arrested them in Bursa, and we brought them before justice. But you see what kind of people there are on the streets. Shouldn’t we pay more attention to such news?”

Then the male participant also joined their conversation initiated by the Deputy Governor and didn’t let anyone else speak until the end of the meeting.

He paraphrased the words of the Deputy Governor in a clearer tone.

He told me to be careful and to refrain from acts which may tense up the country and the atmosphere:

“Although we don’t agree in your style, from some of the articles you have written we understand that you don’t have any bad intentions, however not everyone can deduce that and

you might draw on you the reactions of the society.” So, over and over he warned me on this matter.

Whereas I limited my explanations to the intentions with which I had written this article.

First of all, I’m a journalist and this is the kind of news that would exhilarate a journalist.

Secondly, rather than discussing the Armenian issue over the dead always, I would like to try and debate it through the remaining ones, who are still alive.

But I saw that it was more difficult to debate it through the remaining ones!

Then I was just about to leave the room when I noticed that nobody even insisted on seeing or taking the documents I’d brought. I reminded them the documents and handed them over.

Besides, it was evident from the content of the discussions why I had been summoned there in the first place.

I should have known my limits.... I should have been careful..... Otherwise, it was not going to be good!

Now, I was at the target

Indeed, it didn’t turn out to be good.

The day after I was summoned to the Governor’s office, columnists in different newspapers pinpointed a sentence from a series of essays I had written on the Armenian identity, which read as “*The poisonous blood that will be discharged from Turks will be replaced by the clean blood of the Armenians,*” and launched a joint campaign claiming that I was inciting hatred against the Turks. Following these commentaries, a group of ultra-nationalists led by Levent Temiz, the Provincial Head of Istanbul Ülkü Ocakları (ultra-nationalist association called Idealist Hearths), took to the streets on February 26, they came to the gate of Agos newspaper, chanted slogans and thundered threats.

The police had been notified about the demonstration in advance. The necessary measures had been taken inside and at the gate of Agos.

All TV channels and newspaper reporters had also been informed; they were all standing in front of the building of Agos.

The slogans chanted by the group were quite clear: “Either like it or leave it”, “Down with ASALA”, “One night, we can visit you suddenly”.

The target had been pointed out very clearly in the speech of Levent Temiz, the leader of the group: “From now on, Hrant Dink is the target of all our wrath and hatred, he is our target.”

After the demonstration, the group dispersed. But surprisingly that night and on the following day, no TV channel (except for Kanal 7) and no newspaper (except for Özgür Gündem) made any news about the incident.

Apparently, the power that had directed the ultra-nationalist group to the gate of AGOS had also succeeded in suppressing the press and media (except for a few failures) in the aftermath of the negative images and slogans.

At the threshold of danger

Several days later, a similar demonstration was staged in front of AGOS by a group naming themselves as “The Federation for Fight Against the so-called Armenian Claims”.

Then came Lawyer Kemal Keriñsiz and –under his chairmanship- the Union of Great Jurists; a group no one had heard of until that day. Keriñsiz and his friends went to the Public Prosecutor of Şişli and indicted me. After this application, the number of cases based on Article 301 –which greatly damaged the reputation of Turkey- increased. As for me, a new and dangerous period had just begun.

Actually, I had always wondered around danger.

Either danger liked me a lot, or I liked danger...

And here again, I was standing at the edge of the cliffs. Some people were after me.

I felt them.

And I knew very well that they were not merely composed of ordinary and visible people just as Kerinçsiz's team.