

Death of Editor Shocks Armenia

Author: [IWPR](#)

The murder of Armenian editor Hrant Dink in Istanbul has caused a wave of outrage in Armenia, with competing calls either for Turkey to be punished, or for a new dialogue between these historical enemies.

Turkey itself has been shocked by the assassination. Tens of thousands of people attended the funeral on January 23 of Dink, an ethnic Armenian and a Turkish citizen, who had done much to encourage dialogue between Armenians and Turks on difficult historical issues.

Dink was murdered on January 19. The next day, the Turkish police arrested a teenager identified as Ogun Samast from the eastern city of Trabzon. Samast is reported to have confessed to the crime and said that he was motivated by reports that Dink had said that "Turkish blood is dirty."

The Armenian government was quick to condemn the murder in the strongest terms. Tigran Torosian, speaker of parliament said that after the killing, "Turkey should not even dream of EU membership."

President Robert Kocharian presented his condolences to Hrant Dink's family and friends, saying, "The murder of a famous journalist in Turkey gives rise to numerous questions and is deeply reprehensible."

All the churches of the Armenian Apostolic Church held requiems for Dink, and political, cultural and journalistic circles all expressed shock.

Dink had worked as editor-in-chief of the bilingual Armenian-Turkish newspaper *Agos* in Istanbul since 1996. He had been charged several times under the controversial article 301 of Turkey's penal code, "insulting Turkishness."

Dink trod a careful line, expressing loyalty to Turkey while asserting his right to a distinct Armenian identity. In his publications he never used the expression "Armenian genocide" other than in inverted commas. He attached much more importance to informing ordinary Turks about the events of 1915 than in international parliamentary resolutions that recognising what happened as "genocide."

Coverage of the murder of Dink has dominated Armenian television over the last week. Public television has repeatedly broadcast a moving clip in which his portrait is shown close-up, and his voice – in an excerpt from a speech he made on the 90th anniversary of the Genocide in Yerevan – is heard saying "This was a genocide, because the people were cut off from their roots, from their homeland."

In a staged montage, the muzzle of a gun is levelled at his face, a shot rings out and the speech is cut short.

Armenia and Turkey have no diplomatic relations and their common border has been closed ever since Turkey shut it in April 1993, when Armenian forces occupied the Azerbaijani district of Kelbajar during the war over Nagorny Karabakh.

However, a lot of business still goes on between the two countries, mainly via Georgia. Some estimates suggest that 30,000 Armenian citizens have temporary jobs in Turkey.

The murder has made those who travel back and forth between the two countries nervous. At the Yerevan office of a Turkish transport firm called Emniyet, three Turkish drivers silently watched a live television feed of Dink's funeral.

Emniyet's buses run between Yerevan and Istanbul and back twice a week. Most of the passengers are Armenian traders who bring back goods, mainly clothes, from Istanbul's markets.

"Of course, the murder of Dink is a painful event, but I have to say that it has had no impact on our company's activities," said Rimma Galajian, who works for another bus company called Oz Nuhoglu. "People are carrying on travelling as usual. Actually, I don't remember any cases of Armenian passengers being treated badly in Turkey over the eight years I've worked here. And we too treat the Turks coming to Armenia well."

Most experts agree that the murder marks a critical point in Armenian-Turkish relations and that the way the issue is handled will be important.

But the nature of the calls for action has been very diverse. Much of the Armenian media coverage has been angry, with accusations that Turks are genocidal by nature.

The nationalist party Dashnaktsutiun organised a march and candle-lit vigil outside the offices of the European Union in Yerevan. One protestor carried a poster saying, "The hands of Turkey are covered in blood".

"Armenian youth can never put up with terrorist acts against any Armenian in any country," said one of the organisers, youth activist Abraham Gasparian.

However, an article in the Yerevan newspaper 168 Hours said these kind of sentiments ran contrary to the Dink's own ideas.

"Propaganda along the absurd lines that 'a Turk is always a Turk' is gathering momentum in our country," said the paper.

168 Hours offered its own, very different interpretation of the Dink murder, "A man has been killed who wanted to help change Turkish and Armenian perceptions and bring closer the day, when the two peoples will finally understand that neighbours have no future if they are brimming with hatred towards one another."

Some analysts hope that the murder may lead to improved Armenian-Turkish relations.

American-Armenian analyst Richard Giragosian told IWPR, “It is not the murder of Hrant Dink that is now a challenge to the Turkish state; it is the way the Turkish authorities handle the impact of his death that is most important. Turkey is now faced with the realization that it must move forward while also honestly recognising its past.”

But Alexander Iskandarian, director of the Caucasian Media Institute, predicted the murder would not bring about any changes. “Those who thought they shouldn’t establish relations with Armenia will stick to that opinion, while those who called for a normalisation of Armenian-Turkish relations will say that nothing out of the ordinary has happened, since murders occur in many countries of the world,” he said.

Rafael Safrastrian, an expert on Turkey, also predicted that little would happen. “No political force in Turkey has spoken positively about the reopening of the Armenian-Turkish border and the establishment of diplomatic ties,” he said.

Another Armenian expert on Turkey, Arsen Avagian, said he did detect a shift in Turkish public opinion following the murder and said the best tribute to Dink would be a thaw in relations between Armenia and Turkey.

“He fought against hatred, and he wanted Armenian-Turkish relations to improve,” said Avagian. “Hrant always said that an Armenian serves as an antidote for a Turk, and a Turk is one for an Armenian.

“It’s very important that Turkish public opinion has condemned the treacherous murder and that Turkish newspapers have carried headlines like ‘Hideous murder’. It would be wrong to turn a blind eye to this.”

Tatul Hakopian is a commentator with the Radiolur news programme on Armenian Public Television.

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