

PEN NORWAY

PEN Norway Turkey Project

**PEN Norway interviews woman journalist Seyhan
Avşar following death threats for her reporting**

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About the Authors

PEN Norway is an independent and non-profit membership organisation, dedicated to defending freedom of expression and supporting writers at risk and writers in prison. PEN Norway's goal is that everyone should have the right to express themselves freely. PEN Norway is the Norwegian branch of PEN International – the world's largest writer and freedom of expression organisation, established in 1921.

Seyhan Avşar is a journalist working for Turkey's Cumhuriyet newspaper. To date, her articles have won awards from the Journalists' Association of Turkey, Istanbul Journalists' Association, and the Association of Progressive Journalists. She has also won the Metin Göktepe prize for journalism.

Seyhan Avşar is a young woman journalist and court reporter in Turkey. In May 2022 she went into hiding after receiving serious death threats from men online, following her court reporting in the case of a heroin smuggler. Seyhan, like many journalists in Turkey, is the subject of several court cases herself simply for doing her job. PEN Norway studied an indictment against her in 2021 and she has written articles as part of PEN Norway's Turkey work.

Following this recent, violent online attack against her we contacted her to ask her about the case and find out how she was.

Seyhan, we've been worried about you following the Tweets we saw about you taking your family into hiding after receiving death threats by phone message and online. So, first of all, how are you? How are you coping with this situation? How do you carry on your daily life and journalism activities in the face of such threats?

I am aware that I was neither the first nor the last journalist to receive threats. With hundreds of our colleagues are still in prison today, this is not just a problem of present times. The journalists whose pen was a servant to truth were even murdered: Hrant Dink's fate left me with a lump in my throat which still lingers; nobody was called into account for torture killing of Metin Göktepe while he was reporting news; the murderer of Uğur Mumcu could not be "identified" to this day. As all this had happened and continues to happen, I knew from the day I entered the journalism profession that I would face such threats.

Can you tell us a little about the background of the threats? How did these threats begin, after you reported which story?

I wrote that story about B.D, who is supposedly linked to a large organised crime association in Turkey. He was apprehended with 16 kilograms of heroin and declared that he had been working for the intelligence agency for many years, and then months passed. I did not come across any reactions to the story at that time. I think that the later threats and attempts to bring me into line were related to my persistence in doing journalism, making news that would disturb them and expose their crimes.

So why do you think this news you reported upon triggered such an episode?

As I said, I am aware that what I have been going through is not an individual or a specific case. The way I see it, these attacks are part of what the journalism profession has always been facing in Turkey... And these attacks will continue if the people's right to information and freedom of the press are not de facto guaranteed.

If you don't mind telling us, can we ask what kind of threats you're facing? Are they social media threats or phone messages? Are they coming from a single source or are you under multiple attacks?

First, I received a call from a private number, and when I answered it, I could not get any sound. Afterwards, a message was sent to me from an account on Instagram. The first message was, "Hey, are you that as***le who backbites about Alaattin Çakıcı on Halk TV?" Since I could not make any sense of it, I messaged back and said "Who are you? What a nerve you've got." Then the messages continued. He sent another message, "Who exactly is this Şule Aydın?" In the following messages, he wrote, "G... G... stop babbling around. Speak only if you have documents. Make note of it, or you'll end up running away to Germany like the others. Save me contact." When I replied, "I will file a criminal complaint against you," he said, "Many tried. FETO, PKK, DHKP/C, Green Party in Germany. But justice is everywhere. Try to be a Turk. What do you want me to do to you?" Actually, at the beginning, I did not think of making this exchange public. When my spouse warned me and said that we need to take precautions, I posted a tweet at night. Hundreds of support messages have been sent. Thank you to everyone who supported and shared their feelings of solidarity. (The threats still continue)

We know that you have encountered many different problems. Actually, within the scope of the Turkey Indictment Project, we reviewed an indictment drafted against you. Are the risks you face today and those in the past parallel or different?

Once the judiciary, law enforcement, or rather any institution of the state mark you as a target, you will remain there forever. There are not one, but many lawsuits filed against me. I must be causing trouble for someone, and they want to gag me, that is why I am being sued. And since they saw that the lawsuits fell short of silencing my voice, they probably began threatening me using more informal and direct methods. Don't get me wrong, I don't think the government is directly threatening me, but by issuing

indictments and filing lawsuits against me, and by marking me as a target on social media, the government let the criminal gangs mark me as their target.

As far as we understand from the press and your statements, you are not the only target. We read those two more female journalists received threats along with you. Can you tell us about the process they have been going through, provided that you have their consent of course?

We are living in a country where men dominate and women are subordinated, and this is the case from the parliament to the judiciary and the streets. Therefore, your daring, your courage and your persistence becomes even more menacing for the patriarchal groups, especially if you are a woman. This is true not only in our profession, but in all areas of life. In our case, they probably think “How could a few women expose a mammoth criminal organization without any fear?”

We know that before, not only you, but also many female journalists such as Pelin Ünker, Çiğdem Toker and Canan Coşkun were targeted. We see that the compensatory damages cases and criminal cases never stop. Can we say that there is a greater intolerance towards women journalists in particular? If so, why do you think this is?

As I just mentioned, men do not want to see brave, successful women in front of them. The reasons why those colleagues you mentioned are also targeted are very similar to our case. That is true not only with respect to how they target us, but also with respect to how they treat us in our journalistic practice. I mean, in a protest where there is any police intervention, for example, the policemen first push the women journalists away before our male colleagues.

And did you take any legal action in the face of this? Has any investigation been initiated against the person or persons who threatened you? Have the authorities taken any steps to ensure you are safe?

I filed a complaint to the prosecutor office about those who threatened me, but I was not given any private bodyguards, or anything like that.

When it comes to such attacks, what mechanisms are in place to protect journalists in Turkey? Is there a trade union or professional organization of which you are a member?

In fact, there are many unions, acting as press organizations. It is, however, not enough for the unions alone to take measures in this regard. The state should take the measures at the discursive, judicial and law enforcement level. However, the unions in Turkey stated that they stood in solidarity with me against these threats. The Chairman of the CHP also made a statement on this issue in particular.

Dear Seyhan, we want you to know that we are with you, sincerely. Is there anything we can do? Is there any message you want to send to international non-governmental organizations working in the field of freedom of expression and freedom of the press?

I have received many messages of solidarity, thank you very much for being with me. But, I think it is necessary to acknowledge that the freedom of the press does not stand alone but also covers the people's right to be informed. Therefore, the press will be free when people begin to defend the right to be informed of not only the press organizations, but of the general public. Thank you again to all the beautiful people at PEN Norway for standing with me and not making me feel left alone. In solidarity...

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PEN Norway stands with Seyhan Avcı and all journalists, especially those of Jin News and the editors and journalists recently arrested in Turkey's Kurdish regions, in their fight to bring pluralistic and critical journalism to the peoples of Turkey.

If you would like to support independent journalism under threat in Turkey, please consider taking out a solidarity subscription to an independent newspaper in Turkey, such as Evrensel.

For more information on Seyhan's indictment, see: <https://norskpen.no/eng/nyheter/indictment-against-journalist-and-author-seyhan-avsar-oguz/>

To read an inspiring interview with Jin News editor Ayşe Güney, see:

<https://norskpen.no/eng/nyheter/triple-discrimination-life-as-a-woman-kurd-and-journalist-in-turkey/>
<https://norskpen.no/eng/nyheter/triple-discrimination-life-as-a-woman-kurd-and-journalist-in-turkey/>