

# **PEN NORWAY**

## **PEN Norway interviews imprisoned Gezi Park Trial defendant Mine Özerden**

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## **PEN Norway interview with the imprisoned Gezi Park Trial defendant Mine Özerden:**

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Mine Özerden is a film-maker and director. She formerly worked at the arts foundation Anadolu Kültür in Turkey. PEN Norway has followed every hearing in the Gezi trial in which Mine Özerden was one of sixteen original defendants charged with 'Attempting to bring down the state by violent means' following the protests that sprang up after groups had legitimately opposed the building of an illegal road through Istanbul's Gezi Park next to Taksim square in 2013.

On 25 April, 2022 Mine Özerden and her co-defendants in the room were sentenced to 18 years in prison and were immediately arrested. Defendant Osman Kavala, who was already in pre-trial detention was sentenced to life in prison with no parole. PEN Norway witnessed this shocking abuse of the justice system in Turkey and are interviewing each imprisoned defendant in turn.

### **Dear Mine, How are you coping right now? Can you tell us about the conditions at the prison? Also how is your health and how do you feel?**

I am staying alone in a 4m by 2.5m cell that has a bathroom and toilet. With an east-facing window that has 10x10cm bars, my cell gets the sunlight only in the mornings. But since it is on the top floor, I can see the sky and the birds. The furniture consists of a bunk bed, a steel cabinet, a table and a plastic chair. Its pink walls are filled with writings. The first days were a little difficult health-wise, as I had a cold at the time of my arrest, but I recovered in a short time. As I have been mainly busy with keeping my Mental - Spiritual - Physical health in balance during my time outside, I think I'm not doing bad in this regard.

As far as I understand, Bakırköy Women's Closed Prison is in a better position among other prisons due to its type and conditions. The majority of Prison Officers are civil servants pending appointment. Among the officers we met were some wonderful young women, most of them are educated, hardworking young women who had to do this job to make a living. They work in 12 hour shifts and on a contract basis. No new permanent staff has been hired for 8 years.

There is a significant pay gap between the permanent members of staff and the contracted employees. Prisons are administered by the Ministry of Justice, while the Family Medicine Institution in the prisons by the Ministry of Health. This duality can sometimes lead to injustices in the daily practice.

For example, I still haven't seen the result of my blood test that was done on May 12, 2022. My results were not uploaded to the e-health site, which is a national health monitoring platform. In prison, you communicate all your demands to the relevant units through petitions collected during the morning count. Although I have repeatedly submitted my petitions, I have neither been able to get a satisfactory answer regarding the results nor given a reason for this failure. I guess I'll have to take legal action now. Because this is an issue that concerns not only me but also 1450 prisoners/convicts in prison. It is necessary to struggle to correct this situation that violates our personal rights and the Constitution.

**In a message you sent to the outside, you said "I am a human rights activist. And we are being held hostage here". How do you explain this hostile attitude towards you and our other friends?**

To be honest, this is something I simply cannot explain. This situation that is imposed on us with all its consequences, for me, is irrational, absurd, dystopian and ultimately resembles a Metaverse game, respectively. A rare artefact of the post-truth era. I do not call myself an activist in Turkish. I find it more appropriate to call myself a "rights defender" who fights for rights. I think that what we have been forced to go through is utilised to intimidate, frighten and pacify those who struggle like us outside. Of course, the idea of being instrumentalised in such a way makes me extremely uncomfortable.

**You have been in the thick of the struggle for civil society your whole life. We also know that you laboured for the establishment of Taksim Platform long before Gezi incidents. In Europe, however, this platform became to be known after Gezi. What was Taksim Platform? Could you briefly tell us why people came together, what they did and wanted to do?**

Taksim Platform and Taksim Solidarity are two different structures that are often confused. Taksim Platform, which I voluntarily strived to coordinate, was established in the last months of 2011. Taksim Solidarity, on the other hand, is an umbrella organization that was established later on and has 128 different chapters across the country and it is under the coordination of the relevant professional chambers.

The beginning of Taksim Platform dates to December 2011; but its history goes even further than that. It is a long process weaved with the well-balanced attitude, personal experience and knowledge of our friends who have been struggling in different fields on similar issues... The short answer to question "How was the Taksim Platform established?" is: By necessity. In fact, I should underline that in this interview, I am describing my personal perceptions and experiences as someone who had witnessed Taksim Platform's struggle closely.

People who had ideas and suggestions about Taksim, among them individuals from very different convictions and fields, including experts in their fields, came together under the same sentence. The first meeting was on 26 December 2011 with the participation of 35 people from different disciplines and then the head of the Directorate General of Protection of Cultural and Natural Assets No. 2, and the first press conference was held on 17 January 2012. People began to call this civil and independent group, which formed spontaneously, as Taksim Platform. Taking shape was an independent formation that was nonhierarchical, free from all corporate identities, and careful to ensure the democratic participation. Everyone is working completely voluntarily, and there are no salaried employees.

The President kept referring to us as 'Çapulcular' which means looters. All I can say is that, among us are all kinds of looters, privileged looters, academic looters, student looters, marketing looters, social scientists, journalists, filmmakers, activists, architects, engineers, locals, shopkeepers, workers, pensioners, disabled, and so on, everyone took on some responsibility. We were already so legitimate that one could take our whisper for a scream. This legitimacy gives you a courage that inspires self-confidence. Instead of using a quarrelsome language, you can be perceptive, calm and creative<sup>1</sup>.

**In another message you sent to the outside, you said, "This case is not our personal case. Gezi has become a public movement. Gezi means honour". What does Gezi mean honour? What can we learn from Gezi?**

I would like to answer this question with a metaphor. Mercury is my favourite element. It is both solid and liquid, conductive and dense. Its most important feature is its strong tendency to unite if shattered by an external impact. Just imagine the way its dispersed pieces quickly coalesce, and the growing portion exerts a gravitational force on the quick small pieces. The symbol for mercury is Hg. Shall we call it Halkın Gücü (the Power of the People) Once together, people feel safer, right?

**We are not yet to see a real place of evidence during the hearings. We have observed the violations of many fundamental rights and freedoms, especially your right to a fair trial. How could you hold your head high in the face of so much injustice?**

I guess it is thanks to my personal principles, my reasoning and self-confidence. I see the life through two simple principles: The first one is about making an endeavour to understand myself and the other, and the second one is about trying to avoid doing to the others what I do not want done to me, which we all learned when we were children. These two simple principles have been quite sufficient in my 57 years life.

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<sup>1</sup> At the request of Mine Özerden, this paragraph is quoted from her interview in the Summer 2013 issue of 3 Ecologies Magazine.

I am not an optimist or a pessimist, but a rational and a strong realist. I also think that being an individual who knows what she does not want and plus my efforts to create a unified methodology of "Anthropology of the Individual" invigorated me to some extent. Besides, the history of humanity is full of all kinds of injustices... It seems that we will neither be the first nor the last, right? We are running just to stand still, and in our situation we are taking a step backwards to go two steps forward... Which may have its own advantages and is something to contemplate.

**You have recently pointed out that among the victims of this indictment are the people who are actually representatives of the opposition parties today. Do you believe that an effective opposition can be mounted today if they avoid expressing solidarity with you?**

For me, "realpolitik" means an ideal situation, whereas "the real politics" is the current situation. What I ask from the politicians is that they should interpret our instrumentalization by them through the lens of "realpolitik" and act with dignity and honesty. As a person who is facing the consequences of her actions, I believe I am justified to demand this. Therefore, my expectation from the members of the 61st Government who parted ways with Erdogan is that they file a petition and withdraw their claims of being harmed rather than babbling around. I wish that not only the opposition, but also the people from all walks of life whose rights were violated would express their solidarity with Gezi and us. I think people from different walks of life should gradually intensify their practice of standing together on a minimalist common ground and bring this issue to the agenda and do that through democratic methods.

**As a rights defender, how do you interpret the repressions against the freedom of expression and civil society organisations in Turkey?**

Authoritarianism is a global problem. I believe we are experiencing a harsher version of it because we have been poorly governed for the last ten years.

**In your defence, you humorously pointed out the fact that half of the Gezi Trial suspects are women and said, "The happiest thing about the trial is that it has achieved gender equality". The women's struggle in Turkey is going on with a strength that will inspire all women in Europe. What do you think is the role of women in the struggle for freedom of expression and freedom of assembly, and of course in the Gezi resistance?**

Yes, we are currently imprisoned as 3 women and 3 men, with a demand for 18 years in prison, and for Osman Kavala to be sentenced to life. We had no idea that we were the "Secret Seven".<sup>2</sup> Actually, I am not a fan of sexist interpretations... But if, as a woman, you are given a late start to life, you become a "feminist by necessity".

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<sup>2</sup> Secret Seven – Children's adventure series by Enid Blyton. Mine Özerden expressed her wish to make it known that she was referring to this series that she used to watch a kid.

I am more hopeful of the new generations. I am willing to take credit for ourselves and say that we raised them after all. Now we are educated by them. Class struggle is the fundamental concept, of course, but the female precariat is taking it much harder all over the world.

**You kept saying “Taksim belongs to us all” during the Gezi protests. And it became a slogan. What do you think is the political and sociological meaning of this phrase? In your defence, you also said, “I endeavoured to make Taksim remain as a place of expression for people from all walks of life”. Could you elaborate a little bit on the relationship between public spaces and freedom of expression?**

You can find my answer to this question in detail in my interview published in 3 Ecologies Magazine.

The phrase “Taksim Belongs to Us All” that managed to gather people around itself was not a mere slogan or a sentence, it was actually an objective analysis of the situation. Before the elections on June 12, 2011, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, then the Prime Minister announced a project called the Taksim Project. There was no doubt that a new arrangement was needed in Taksim. Taksim is the most important public square in Turkey, also well-known globally. It is the common asset of people from all walks of life and all age

Taksim is not under the domination of a certain social group like it is with the areas in Istanbul of Kadıköy, Nişantaşı or Fatih. It is the only space where people from different cultural codes can come into contact and feel each other...It is a space of expression.

Taksim is the first place that comes to our minds when we are sad, happy, when we think we have been treated unfairly, when we want to celebrate. Therefore we said, “Let’s do something different this time. Let’s not have the arrangement of Taksim and its surroundings shaped by a top-down decision in the form of a puzzle, as it was in the past. Why not ensure an implementation that would be a successful example and enrich the city in terms of ideas, and show the kind of management we aspire?”

We call on the city administration to perform its duty.” The authorities still refuse to admit that “Taksim belongs to us all” despite the fact that it is certainly true. Holding an arrogant view of cultural diversity not as an indispensable wealth but as an opportunity to demonstrate their “tolerance”, they want to keep Taksim for themselves only.

Out of sheer obstinacy, their aim is to prevent the cultural richness and social memory of Taksim, which it has sustained from the past to the present, from being bequeathed to the future. It seems that it is not only a matter of leaving their mark on the public square, but to change its appearance altogether, to sever its ties it has with the past.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> At the request of Mine Özerden, this paragraph is quoted from her interview in the Summer 2013 issue of 3 Ecologies Magazine.

## **As peoples and civil society organisations of Europe, what can we do for you?**

In my opinion, the essential thing anyone can do for all of us is to “refine” ourselves... Instead of working in jobs that reproduce the system again and again, we can explore and try a lifestyle that makes living in harmony with the “ecosystem” its main focus. My motto is to aim to be “authentic, sincere, refined”. It is easiest to be sincere, authenticity is more difficult, and the most difficult is to refine yourself. Not running after something beyond necessary, making inroads for equally sharing the world’s blessings. Not consuming the ecosystem by grinding it off. In my opinion, as developed and developing countries, we are currently a burden on Africa’s back, one of the oldest continents. I don’t know if another world is possible before we realize that the oppressed is also the oppressor.

I am writing you with the hope that we are not too far from the days when we will be equal subjects of a planet without discrimination.

**PEN Norway stands in solidarity with all defendants in the Gezi trial and with the legal defence teams in their efforts to have these unjust and unlawful decisions overturned. PEN Norway will continue to campaign for the freedom of Mine Özerden and her co-defendants.**