

P E N N O R W A Y

Interview with Yıldız Tar,
imprisoned Editor-in-Chief of KaosGL.org:

**“Every voice that breaks through
these four walls turns into a
resounding echo of freedom”**

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Yıldız Tar, Editor-in-Chief of KaosGL.org, journalist, and human rights defender, was detained on 18 February 2025 during an Istanbul-centred operation targeting Peoples’ Democratic Congress (HDK). Tar’s home in Ankara was raided, leading to her arrest. On 21 February, Yıldız was formally arrested by Istanbul 6th Criminal Court of Peace.

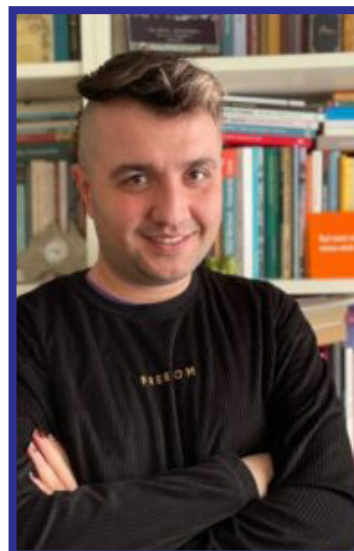
The reasons for Tar’s detention include participation in peaceful protests over ten years ago and Tar’s journalistic activities. Tar’s arrest occurred amid increasing pressures on press freedom and the struggle for LGBTI+ rights in Turkey.

Responding to our questions from Silivri Prison, Yıldız Tar detailed the oppressive atmosphere in Turkey and, despite challenging prison conditions, called on everyone to remain hopeful.

As PEN Norway, we will continue to stand in solidarity with Yıldız Tar and all other detained journalists, documenting and publicising the injustices they face.

Considering the present condition of LGBTI+ in Turkey, the oppression they have endured over the past ten years, and the challenges they face in everyday life, how would you describe the overall picture?

In 2015, we witnessed the beginning of a dramatic shift in the government’s LGBTI+ policies with the police attack on the Istanbul LGBTI+ Pride March. Before then, the march had been a peaceful event, drawing nearly 100,000 attendees, but the police intervention that year was not an exception. Prior to 2015, while the state refrained from enforcing protective measures and fostered an environment of hate speech and impunity, it largely avoided severe infringements on freedom of expression and association—except for sporadic legal attempts to shut down organizations. Although we cannot speak of an entirely ideal environment, it is fair to say that repression was relatively less severe. However, post-2015 has been a period in which all state institutions have been mobilized against LGBTI+. During the State of Emergency, the indefinite ban



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on LGBTI+ events in Ankara not only prevented pride marches but also led to the obstruction of all events. Even though LGBTI+ associations won the lawsuits filed against this prohibitive mindset, these court decisions were unfortunately not treated as precedents and did not stop local authorities, such as governorates and district administrations, from implementing further prohibitions. On the other hand, institutions such as the Radio and Television Supreme Council (RTÜK), the Ministry of Commerce, the Ministry of Family, the Ministry of National Education, the Human Rights and Equality Institution of Turkey (TİHEK) have become the headquarters where anti-LGBTI+ political violence was disseminated through bans and hate speech. In sum, if one were to summarise the 10-year period after 2015 with a single term, it would be political violence.

The proclamation of 2025 as the Year of the Family, along with the proposed bill aiming to penalise all forms of expression related to LGBTI+ with imprisonment, is the most recent chapter in this ten-year-long process. Should the law be enacted in its current form, local authorities will no longer need to impose bans, since all activities concerning LGBTI+ will become a matter of criminal proceedings by default. This proposal, which is a copy of US President Donald Trump's "two sexes" executive order, could lead to mass detentions and arrests.

Meanwhile, hate crimes continue unabated. The cases of Hande Buse Şeker and Mira Güneş, which I have closely monitored as a journalist, stand as the most visible examples of how hate crimes unfold in Turkey. It is possible to mention tens, even hundreds of murders and attacks like these two cases. However, most of these hate attacks fail to gain any public attention at all. So to speak, even "bringing up the fact that you have been killed after being murdered" is prevented by bans.

The draft bill on the agents of influence, the disinformation law, and other regulations affecting freedom of expression... How have all these restrictive laws impacted your work at KaosGL.org?

Even if regulations restricting freedom of expression are yet to be enacted, they create a climate of fear and lead to self-censorship. Alongside the laws on the agents of influence and disinformation, which serve to intimidate, threaten, and silence, another significant regulation—a so-called 'LGBTI+ propaganda ban'—appears to be on the way. The draft bills may change, but I believe that the government has already achieved a large part of its goal with these bills.

"We are faced with intense internet censorship"

As KaosGL.org, we are faced with intense internet censorship in addition to these regulations. Last year our website was blocked as part of the government's "safe internet" campaign. This severely hindered our ability to reach our readers.

It should also be noted that our reporters and writers face judicial investigations and lawsuits for their news reports and articles. Almost every week, we encounter requests by a reporter or writer to use a pseudonym because of problems they face in their professional or social life. Every news and article we publish must be subjected to a risk analysis. And this has nothing to do with the

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Can you briefly talk about KaosGL.org and your Editor-in-Chief activities there?

I have been the editor-in-chief of KaosGL.org internet newspaper since 2014. Previously, I worked as a reporter, editor and a programme host in various websites, agencies and radios. Between 2009-2014, I was a volunteer for Lambda Istanbul and Istanbul LGBT+ associations. Again, from 2014 until today, I have worked as a journalist in various positions in media organisations other than KaosGL.org. KaosGL is an LGBTI+ organisation that started out as a magazine in 1994. KaosGL.org is an independent internet newspaper that publishes daily LGBTI+ news under the umbrella of Kaos GL Association. At KaosGL.org, we embrace rights-based journalism, striving to be 'the voice of the voiceless' while also working to create a platform where LGBTI+ can express themselves in addition to documenting human rights violations. As the editor-in-chief, I have been part of this journey for 11 years, working alongside our news team as well as our volunteer and contracted reporters and writers from all over the country. Against the censorship and invisibility of LGBTI+ in both mainstream and alternative media, we are working to carve out a path and tell our stories in our own language.

way existing legislation works. Because when it comes to LGBTI+ individuals and their rights, the law itself turns into a tool of political violence.

Could you provide us with details regarding the criminal case filed against you? What do you think was the reason for your arrest?

I have been under arrest for 20 days as of 13 March 2025, the date I answered your questions. Before that, I was under detention for 4 days. And the indictment is not ready yet. However, as far as I understand from the police and prosecutor interrogations, I am accused of “membership of a terrorist organisation”. I was not asked any questions other than regarding the phone taps from 2012, when I was a student at Boğaziçi University, and 2013, when I started working as a journalist. Do I even need to state that these phone surveillances are against the law? But the phone tap recordings themselves are as ridiculous as a joke. I was asked about phone calls related to the 8 March celebration we had planned on campus during my student years, discussions concerning the activities of the LGBTI+ student organization I was part of, and other conversations that, after 13 years, I naturally do not recall. I was asked about the time when, in 2013, I informed my editor as a reporter for a news report from the DISK building in Şişli on May 1st. The Peoples’ Democratic Congress (HDK), which consists of more than a hundred entirely legal political parties, unions, associations, and foundations and has been carrying out all its activities publicly for years, is being labelled as a “terrorist organization”. It is alleged that I “intensively took part” in their activities. The fact that while a detention order was being issued against us, HDK was holding a press statement in front of Çağlayan Courthouse was the ultimate irony of the situation.

“My activities as a human rights defender and a journalist are penalised”

In this process, my activities as a human rights defender and a journalist are penalised. I leave it to you to interpret how unlawfully obtained wiretaps from years ago are now being used as justification for the arrest of the editor-in-chief of an online newspaper focused on LGBTI+ rights—right at the moment when 2025 has been declared the Year of the Family.

Can we ask about your prison conditions? Do you face any arbitrary restrictions?

Being arrested on baseless charges is itself an arbitrary restriction, but prison conditions further amplify these limitations, where access to social and physical exercise rights is obstructed in an entirely arbitrary manner. The biggest problem in the prison where we have been held for almost a month is overcrowding. As far as I remember from the prison regulations and news reports, we are 42 people held in a Type-L prison cell, which was built for 7 people. With just two toilets and two bathrooms available, ensuring adequate hygiene is naturally quite challenging. Again, access to open and indoor sports areas, which should be provided on a weekly basis, is restricted to only one or two times per month. And we are only allowed to use the closed gym. The open sports field is just a football pitch. Again, we are not allowed to participate in any of the social activities. Apart from watching movies once a month, we are prevented

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from attending art, language and music courses. As far as I was informed, the justification for this is “security”. Our entire ward is also prevented from using the outdoor football field for the same reason; instead, we are only allowed out in small groups of ten for short periods. Among the most important problems is the infirmary. Our medications either never arrive or are delivered with delays. Nothing is done in the infirmary except cursory examinations. Getting a referral to a hospital is itself a tedious and exhausting process. Our parcels are delayed for a very long time. From what we’ve been able to find out, this is because the dog that is supposed to inspect them has been on a long ‘vacation’. Though we joke about it in the ward, having to wait for the duty dog’s return from its vacation just to get essentials like shoes and clothing is even more frustrating than waiting for Godot.

We observe that Pride marches face severe attacks every year, yet efforts are continually made to organize the demonstrations. How does this happen?

For a march to be considered as truly held, it must not face any bans or police intervention. However, this is not the case in Turkey. As a devoted community, LGBTI+ activists continue to come together every year despite all the violence and repression—sometimes by changing routes and locations, sometimes by dispersing across the city, and sometimes, as seen in Mersin, even by gathering at sea. However, these gatherings cannot be expanded into broad and mass marches. Because the police prevent it using violence.

“We, as a society, owe our gratitude to all Pride marchers”

I understand this situation more clearly when we meet with young LGBTI+ activists. Younger generations have yet to witness a time when Pride Marches could be held freely, resembling a great wave of celebration. Unfortunately, the phrase ‘Pride March’ now evokes images of detentions and brutality.

The year I was honoured with a special award at the Musa Anter Journalism Awards, I dedicated it to the then-imprisoned politician Sebahat Tuncel and to the Pride Marches, which continue to seek new paths despite all repression. I am still of the same opinion. In the midst of this bleak picture, we, as a society, owe our gratitude to all Pride marchers—whether they take to the streets alone or in large crowds—who boldly proclaim their existence.

Despite all periods of repression in Turkey, this ongoing resistance and the resilience of human rights defenders give us hope. But how about you, are you hopeful? What kind of Turkey do you imagine?

I am hopeful because I have witnessed firsthand how LGBTI+ rights advocates are transforming society. I have seen Kaos GL’s Anti-Homophobia Local Meetings reach over 40 cities, and in the events where I have spoken, I have observed that the perception of social equality is growing—not just in metropolitan areas but even in smaller towns. The goal of the current political violence is to build a wall between LGBTI+ individuals and the rest of society, aiming to halt the transformation toward a more equal and freer life. If we can build a solidarity strong enough to overcome that wall, we will see better days.

PEN Norway would like you to know that we stand in solidarity with you. Do you have a message for us and international rights organisations?

Thank you for your solidarity. Every voice that breaks through these four walls turns into a resounding echo of freedom.