

~~free~~ **osmankavala**

Osman Kavala Trial examined at an International Book Talk via Zoom

April 20, 2020, New York

Research Institute on Turkey (RIT), Turkey Human Rights Litigation Support Project (TLSP) and Osman Kavala Solidarity Team organized an international panel focusing on a compilation, a book previously produced by 300 friends, organizations and initiatives for Osman Kavala's 62nd birthday. The panel covered the solidarity campaign #FreeOsmanKavala and the story behind the production of the book, the state of his trial, how it affects civil society in Turkey as well as concerns amid COVID-19 as he is within this higher risk age group and certain basic rights such as the right to nutrition and the right to health are not precisely looked after.

The panel was hosted via Zoom with the participation of more than 150 attendees from 76 global human rights organizations, institutes, NGOs, cultural organizations and universities, including Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, Article 19, PEN International, European Cultural Foundation, Goethe-Institut, Mercator Stiftung, Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, Chrest Foundation, Arter, SAHA, National Academies of Sciences Human Rights Committee, International Commission of Jurists, Columbia University Institute for the Study of Human Rights, Columbia University Global Freedom of Expression, Freedom House, Bar Human Rights Committee, the Law Society of England and Wales; several academics, independents artists, curators, journalists and writers as well as representatives from the German Parliament, German Foreign Ministry, Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe, Council of Europe, and Consulate General of Sweden to name a few.

The panel started with the opening remarks of Ayşe Bingöl Demir (TLSP) and Eylem Delikanlı (RIT). Drawing attention to the alarming reports on serious attacks on and "judicial harassment" of human rights defenders, journalists, politicians, lawyers and all expressing their critics toward the government in Turkey, Bingöl Demir underlined the importance of the international community to find ways to come together and carry out much needed discussion on what needs to be done to address these issues, resist against the oppressive trends and secure Osman Kavala's and all political prisoners' immediate release amid COVID-19 pandemic.

Elaborating the purposes of the panel, Delikanlı mentioned “Not only did we gather here today to elaborate Kavala’s case and the perplexing judicial process but also to highlight the solidarity events around his case, how we can envision creative ways to strengthen collaborations and build stronger relationships to act together within this shrinking civil space—not only in Turkey but also globally.”

Osman Kavala sent a message from prison through his lawyer, which was read at the event. After saluting the speakers and participants in his message, he stated “Unfortunately, there is a collective effort to continue my detention. Meanwhile, the mentality and the practices that instrumentalize my detention also continue. Together with me, there are local administrators (mayors) and journalists who lost their freedom through these unjust imprisonments. Despite all, I believe the ones who defend human rights, law, and freedom will change this dark tableau.”

Asena Günal, executive director of Anadolu Kültür, shared in detail the judicial process Osman Kavala has been facing since October 2017, when he was first arrested, and provided a first-hand account on the arbitrary nature of prosecutions he has been made subject to up until now. On the reason why Osman Kavala has been targeted, Günal stated that “He symbolized the belief that there could still be law in this country. And exactly for this reason, his detention and arrest signify the criminalization of all these civilian and democratic activities and the persons and institutions that partake in them. By arresting him, the government wants to browbeat everyone who claims their rights and particularly those who work in the field of civil society and culture and arts.”

Human Rights Watch Turkey director with Europe and Central Asia division, Emma Sinclair-Webb continued with her remarks about the trials. Elaborating how the court handled each proceeding, she said “I think it’s very important to bring back this human aspect to this proceeding and how extremely tough they have been on those closest to Osman Kavala.” She shared her assessment of Kavala’s case and the trial as well as the ongoing prosecution under which he has been detained. She underlined Turkey’s failure to implement the European Court of Human Rights’ December 2019 judgment in which it found Turkey in violation of the European Convention on Human Rights and requested Kavala’s immediate release. She also discussed the broader context of politicized trials, misuse of anti-terror legislation and “crimes against the state” charges. She concluded “Osman Kavala’s trial is a part of a whole wave of unfair trials in Turkey.”

Murat Çelikkan, the co-director of Hafıza Merkezi, continued the discussion by elaborating the effects of Osman Kavala trial by stating that “All the civil society activities are being criminalized with an indictment in Osman’s case and with the Gezi trials. His arrest and accusations against him are not only agony for himself, for his family and friends but also a threat to civil society in general. This has a paralyzing effect on civil society organizations.”

Nancy Kricorian, a New York-based writer and organizer talked specifically about the project that she organized with Osman Kavala on Istiklal Avenue on April 24, 2015 around the memorial commemoration of the Centennial of the Armenian Genocide. She recited a poem she wrote for Osman Kavala; the last part of it reads as “Evening comes. We let the curtain fall and step back from the window. Dinner is on the table. There is an old song on

the radio, one that reminds us of our youth. Were people kinder then?" The poem had an emotional impact on the participants.

Following the presentations 4 discussants shared their brief comments about the panel, the trial and their personal relationships with Osman Kavala.

Nacho Sánchez Amor, Member of the European Parliament (Spain) and current Standing Rapporteur for Turkey stated that "Osman Kavala's case has become a litmus test, a real proof for the sincerity of the reforms in Turkey. I don't have a lot of hope given what happened in the last months... They are the most public proof that the Turkish government and the Turkish judiciary, without any kind of shame, are conducting the cases in a political way."

Claudia Roth, Vice President of the German Parliament said "I do think that this is an encouraging, inspiring and hopeful example for global solidarity. I remember Osman Kavala long before Gezi, a bridge builder, a person of arts and culture dedicated to democracy, a real European... He is not alone and we will not give up to ask 'Free Osman Kavala.'"

Elazar Barkan, Professor of International and Public Affairs at Columbia University and Director of SIPA's Human Rights and Humanitarian Policy Concentration & ISHR, continued "Now with COVID-19, we learned to reevaluate the concept of a hero; people who put their lives in the line in order to improve the situation of others, in order to support and to take care of people whom they don't know... By committing ourselves to social activism and human rights activism I am sure we are contributing to Osman's well-being even if he is in prison."

Sabina Sabolović of the curatorial collective What, How & for Whom—directors of Kunsthalle Wien—shared her personal experience on working with Osman Kavala. She stated that without Osman Kavala, the 11th Istanbul Biennial exhibition that was curated by WHW would not have happened; Osman Kavala did not only support the people in culture and arts by providing resources but also by connecting them with the right people and institutions.

Following a Q&A in which the attendees asked various questions on different aspects of Kavala's ongoing detention and potential campaign ideas, the panel was concluded by the participants reiterating their willingness to continue their commitment and collaboration to end Osman Kavala's detention.

To view the entire event please visit: <https://bit.ly/354PSx7>