



# A New Role for the Literary Agent: Ensuring Freedom of Expression



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Turkish author Asli Erdoğan with her mother, Mine Aydoğdu, the day of her release from prison

*Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive, and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.*

Article 19, Universal Declaration of Human Rights

This year French literary [agents](#) Pierre Astier and Laure Pécher reprinted article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights on their New Year's card. Since August 17th, 2016, when they learned their client of seven years, Turkish author Asli Erdoğan had been imprisoned, they had been tirelessly mobilizing the press, publishers, institutions and the French government to secure her release. Erdoğan, who also wrote for a pro-Kurdish newspaper, *Özgür Gündem*, was charged, along with eight others, of being a member of the banned Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). She was released from prison on December 29th, along with her cellmate, the 70-year-old linguist, Necmiye Alpay, and the newspaper's editorial director, Zana Kaya. Erdoğan is not allowed to leave Turkey while she awaits the end of her trial and faces, as others do, a possible life sentence. Astier and Pécher's dedication to Erdoğan has been unflinching and, along with the Turkish literary [agent](#) Nermin Mollaoğlu, who also has a number of dissident authors, the role they played and continue to play, could very well be a new one for the literary agent, as such.

Agents have often represented authors in exile, such as the late Carmen Balcells, or been in exile themselves, such as Ruth and Heinz Liepman during World War II, but most did not have to deal with their authors' imprisonment in such a direct manner, and mobilization was primarily handled by organizations for which freedom of expression is at the core of their existence, such as [International PEN](#) and its local chapters, Index on Censorship, Amnesty International, Reporters without Borders, the International Cities of Refuge Network, and many others. During the Soviet era there was of course, Samizdat, the system by which banned, censored or illegal books were hand copied and manually published, bringing to the world, for example, Alexander Solzhenitsyn's work.

Today, book censorship, unfortunately, is alive and well in many countries, among which China, India, Iran, Saudi Arabia and more recently Turkey, where authorities have imprisoned journalists and authors, shuttered newspapers and publishing houses, and detained a large number of teachers, academics and civil servants.

When Pierre Astier received emails last August from Erdoğan's English-language translator, Amy Spangler, who also runs [AnatoliaLit](#), a literary agency in Istanbul, and from Richard Nash, who published Erdoğan's novel, *The City in Crimson Cloak*, in the US, alerting him to Erdoğan's arrest, he did three things: "I got active on social media. I wrote an email to Asli's publishers, and got in touch with French

journalists.” Astier’s agency represents Erdoğan internationally, with the exception of Turkey. In France, mobilization was slow at first, people were on holiday, “but in Germany it took on a huge dimension, with the [publisher’s association] Börsenverein making a declaration and launching a petition.”

During the Frankfurt Book Fair last October Astier organized a solidarity meeting for Erdoğan. Nermin Mollaoğlu was also in Frankfurt making headlines with her author Can Dunder, former editor-in-chief of the newspaper *Cumhuriyet* who is currently in exile in Germany.

In November Erdoğan was released for several hours before being imprisoned once again. Astier, with the help of her French publisher, Françoise Nyssen, and *Actes Sud*’s head of the Turkish literature division, Timour Muhidine, they “made a lot of noise”. The media got involved, and Astier, who had previously contacted the French publisher’s association, writers’ organizations, and the Ministries of Culture and Foreign Affairs, succeeded in getting the Minister of Culture, Audrey Azoulay, to make a statement. He added that Erdoğan’s former agent in France, the Turkish Barbaros Altuğ had also launched a petition that gained 52,000 signatures. “In this affair, there are people who are discreet; Barbaros was efficient and working away from the limelight, these are qualities I salute,” said Astier, who prefers to stay out of the public eye himself.



Pierre Astier



In September Erdoğan received the 2016 Tucholsky Prize, a Swedish award given to writers who fight for peace and press freedom under difficult circumstances in their countries or in exile. Because she was in prison, her mother, Mine Aydođlu, flew to Sweden and received it for her daughter. Then Astier saw videos of Aydođlu demonstrating in front of the prison where Erdoğan was being held. This was enough to convince him that Aydođlu should be invited to Paris in December, for an evening of solidarity and readings of Erdoğan's work at the [Maison de la Poésie](#). Aydođlu flew to Paris with Turkish author Yiđit Bener, also published by *Actes Sud*, who served as her interpreter. Together with Astier, they were received by the French Minister of Culture, Azoulay, before going to the evening of readings. After that, "the popular mobilization was absolute," said Astier.

"Asli is someone who is permanently in revolt. She wants to overturn all injustices in the world. She wants the Armenian genocide recognized, she supports women, gays, all minorities, and of course the Kurdish cause. She supports freedom of expression in Turkey and in the world...for me, first as a publisher and now as an agent, I believe that freedom of expression is essential. Authors should be able to write freely. When I was at *Editions Le Serpent à Plumes* I published Noam Chomsky and Edward Said because I thought that in France their voices were being censored. If I have been so committed since August 17th it's for Asli and for freedom of expression."

## Tags

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