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Turkish free-speech trial halted

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ISTANBUL, Turkey - A judge halted the trial of Turkey's best-known novelist Friday, saying the Justice Ministry must first approve the explosive legal case that raises questions about the country's commitment to free speech.

Judge Metin Aydin's insistence that the ministry first approve the case against Orhan Pamuk for insulting national honor is forcing Turkey's politicians to grapple with whether they are willing to press forward with a high-profile trial despite opposition from the European Union.

The head of the European Parliament delegation monitoring the trial, which opened Friday and was closed after a half-hour, warned that the hearings are "very bad for Turkey's image in Europe."

Turkey began accession talks with the EU on Oct. 3, and Dutch conservative Camiel Eurlings cautioned that the impact of the Pamuk trial on those talks "could be huge, and it could be negative."

In a brief statement to the media, Pamuk said, "It is not good for Turkey, for our democracy, for such freedom-of-expression cases to be prolonged."

He faces up to three years in prison for telling a Swiss newspaper in February that Turkey is unwilling to deal with painful episodes in its treatment of the country's Armenian minority or its continuing problems with its 12 million Kurdish citizens.

The deep emotions that the case has stirred were obvious at the trial Friday.

As Pamuk left the courthouse, a group of several dozen nationalists shouted, "Traitor!"; "Turkey is ashamed of you!"; "Shame on you!" They pelted his car with eggs.

Inside the courthouse, Denis MacShane, Britain's former minister for Europe and a member of the British Parliament, said that "the accusation of insulting the state is something you associate with dictatorial regimes, not with a modern European state."

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