

The Böcek family's death by poisoning in Istanbul: A preventable tragedy

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The tragic deaths of four members of the Böcek family, including two children, in Istanbul while on holiday from Germany and staying at a hotel in the Fatih district has revealed the deadly consequences of Turkey's unregulated and profit-driven tourism business and the state's systematic neglect of its duty to protect public health.

On the morning of November 12, the Böcek family went to the hospital by taxi suffering from nausea. After undergoing examination and treatment, the family returned to their hotel. However, when they fell ill again repeatedly during the night, an ambulance was called to the hotel to take them back to hospital. Shortly after, the children, Kadir Muhammet (6) and Masal (3), died. Their mother, Çiğdem Böcek, died in intensive care on 14 November, their father, Servet Böcek, died on 17 November after several days of treatment.

Initially, it was assumed that the deaths were caused by food poisoning. However, as the investigation progressed it emerged that the deaths were caused by a disinfestation carried out in the hotel to eradicate bedbugs. According to the state-owned Anadolu Agency, the Forensic Medicine Report stated that "phosphine gas" had been detected in towels, face masks and swab samples taken from various locations in the family's hotel room. It is believed that the phosphine gas seeped in through the bathroom ventilation system. Two other tourists staying at the same hotel were hospitalised with similar symptoms.

A hotel employee, the owner of the pest control company and his son, and an employee of the pest control company, were arrested. The hotel owner was placed under house arrest, while the receptionist was prohibited from leaving the country. The hotel was temporarily evacuated. However, these measures treat the problem as solely the result of individual mistakes

and open the door to new disasters.

The death of the Böcek family is a result of years of lack of oversight, uncontrolled chemical use, and the underlying "profit before lives" policies in Turkey.

One of the tragic consequences of this policy was the fire that broke out at the Grand Kartal Hotel in the Kartalkaya Ski Center in Bolu this year. On January 21, 2025, a chain of negligence led to a fire that killed 78 people and injured 137. In the trial that concluded last month, the company owners and managers received life sentences, while no government officials were held accountable.

The deaths of the German citizens, the Böcek family, received widespread coverage in Turkey and the international press. Media outlets from Germany to the UK and the US covered the incident.

The *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (FAZ) reported that "an insecticide with high toxicity, which is strictly prohibited in hotels, was used in a suspicious manner," adding that Turkish authorities were under pressure due to similar deaths. *Deutsche Welle* (DW) noted that tourism safety standards in Turkey were being questioned following the deaths and reported that officials had confirmed the family members had most likely lost their lives due to "poisonous gas that appeared in the hotel room." *Der Spiegel* wrote that the question "Could these deaths have been prevented?" was being raised in Germany and Turkey.

CNN International stated that the incident pointed to the "illegal use of banned and extremely dangerous pesticides." The *New York Times* wrote that the deaths "raised troubling questions about the enforcement of safety standards in Turkey" and reported that German authorities had demanded a thorough investigation.

BBC Turkish reported that the forensic report confirmed the family members had been poisoned by a

chemical substance; Reuters that the incident had spurred calls for “stricter regulation and independent oversight” in Turkey’s rapidly growing accommodation sector. According to a report by the United Nations World Tourism Organization, Turkey surpassed Italy in 2024 with 56.7 million visitors, becoming the fourth most visited country in the world. Istanbul ranks first among the most visited cities.

The poisoning cases seen across Turkey just in recent weeks reveal how widespread and deep-rooted the problem is. Eighty people at a school event in Kayseri, 28 students eating doner kebabs during aid distribution also in Kayseri, 94 people eating at a religious ceremony in Rize, 11 workers eating chicken and rice in Bursa, and five students eating hamburgers at a school in Samsun were hospitalized with suspected poisoning. One crew member died and two were poisoned during chemical cleaning on a tanker in the Sea of Marmara. Another 56 people were poisoned at a Removal Center in Gaziantep.

Expert assessments show that the deaths of the Böcek family were not solely due to individual mistakes but stemmed from the structural collapse of the capitalist system which has disregarded public health for years. Dr. Nasır Nesan, Head of the Public Health Branch of the Turkish Medical Association, states that the common factor in the poisoning cases occurring one after another in different cities is an unregulated capitalist market system. According to Nesan, food, water, and chemical poisoning are not independent of each other. They are all products of a structure that has been “marketized, with its public capacity systematically weakened.”

The reduction of public health and safety measures, the abandonment of basic oversight and the widespread use of cheap and unregulated chemicals are leading to preventable deaths. Institutions with oversight authority have been rendered ineffective for years due to budget cuts. Unlicensed pest control companies, meanwhile, are gaining a larger share of the “free market” through social media advertising.

Dr. Afşin Pekci, an Emergency Medicine Specialist from Istanbul University, stated that low-cost chemicals and their easy availability have led to widespread uninformed use, adding that the fundamental problem stems not from a lack of knowledge but from the system encouraging uncontrolled use. According to

Pekci, the fact that individuals who are not competent in the risks, effects, and conditions of use of these chemicals have access to them is itself a security issue.

“Being cheap and effective does not mean it is harmless,” says Pekci, emphasizing that the opportunity for early intervention was lost because the necessary information was not shared. These assessments confirm that the disaster that befell the Böcek family was the result of a profit system that disregards human life and health.



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