

PRESS RELEASE

Sex Education Deemed Illegal in Uzbekistan

Johannesburg. 16 March 2010. Uzbek HIV activist, Maxim Popov, has been sentenced to seven years in prison apparently as punishment for his work to raise public awareness on prevention of sexually transmitted diseases and the promotion of healthy lifestyles. Although the sentence was given in September 2009, this news became public only in late February 2010.

According to local sources, Maxim Popov was charged with embezzlement of funds, involving minors in anti-social behavior, molesting individuals, involving individuals with drugs, and tax evasion. Two of his colleagues were also charged with embezzlement, tax evasion and violations of foreign currency regulations and were given one-year suspended sentences. Mr Popov is the leader of NGO Izis, which focuses on work with drug addicts, sex workers and on HIV prevention. He is also the author of the book "HIV and AIDS Today", which was published with the support of UNICEF and Population Services International. This book, explaining STD prevention, was deemed "illegal" by the criminal court of Tashkent, based on the findings of a commission of experts that it is disrespectful of the national culture and the Uzbek people.

CIVICUS: World Alliance for Citizen Participation is deeply concerned about the launching of motivated prosecutions against civil society members in Uzbekistan and expresses solidarity with Maxim Popov whose freedom of expression has been grossly violated by these retaliatory criminal charges. CIVICUS calls on the Government of Uzbekistan to release information about the details of the case and protect the right of the Uzbek to express themselves. Freedom of expression is a fundamental right enshrined under the Constitution of Uzbekistan as well as the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights to which Uzbekistan is a party.

"It is no longer just the human rights defenders who are under fire, we are witnessing systematic, frequent and widespread attacks on all segments of civil society in Uzbekistan," said Netsanet Belay, Manager of the Civil Society Watch Programme at CIVICUS. "What's more, the secrecy and opaqueness about this case is appalling. The Uzbekistan government has not offered even the most basic information on whether due process was adhered to in court, the circumstances under which Popov is being held, and whether he was afforded an appeal? CIVICUS urges the international community, including those who supporting Mr Popov's work, to find the answers."

In February CIVICUS released a statement on another case in Uzbekistan concerning violation of the freedom of expression, where a prominent photographer, Umida Akhmedova, was charged with "libel" and "insult" to Uzbek people, for her studies on the people and culture of Uzbekistan.

CIVICUS is an international movement of civil society with members and partners in over a hundred countries. The Civil Society Watch team of CIVICUS works to protect the freedoms of expression, association and assembly across the world. In 2009, the Civil Society Watch team tracked threats to civil society in over 75 countries.

For more information, please contact:
Devendra Tak, Media and Communications Manager, CIVICUS devendra.tak@civicus.org
or
Sonia Zilberman, Civil Society Watch Programme, CIVICUS sonia.zilberman@civicus.org
Tel: +27 -11- 8335959 (office)