

## **Memorial recognizes opposition politician and journalist from Naberezhnye Chelny Sergei Eretnov as a political prisoner**

On 12 July 2016 Sergei Eretnov, a deputy of the 2<sup>nd</sup> convocation of the city council of Naberezhnye Chelny in the Republic of Tatarstan and founder-publisher of the newspaper *Komitet Revizor*, was sentenced to three years in a general regime prison colony and fined 200,000 roubles under Article 33, Section 5 and Article 171.2, Section 2, point 'b', of the Russian Criminal Code (aiding and abetting the illegal organization and conduct of gambling by an organized group). Earlier, while awaiting trial from 8 July until 4 September 2014, Eretnov was held in pre-trial detention, after which he was transferred to house arrest until the day of his conviction when he was again taken into custody.

Sergei Eretnov is the founder and publisher of the newspaper *Komitet Revizor* and a well-known opposition politician in Naberezhnye Chelny. He has regularly accused representatives of the authorities of corruption and links with organized crime and has clashed with city officials, including former and current mayors. His name featured in the so-called 'gambling case', a prosecution concerning the operation in Naberezhnye Chelny of a large number of illegal rooms with gaming machines, immediately before the 2014 elections to the State Council of the Republic of Tatarstan. In other words, the prosecution of Eretnov began a significant time after the opening of the criminal case and the arrest of other defendants in the case, when persons believed to be members of a criminal gang testified against him.

Eretnov himself, his supporters and a number of journalists, allege that he was prosecuted because he had planned to take part in the elections as a candidate and had serious chances of winning. In order to prevent this, he was prosecuted. Local opposition politicians say Eretnov was potentially the strongest candidate from the opposition in the Avtozavodsk polling district, against whom the authorities actively used the administrative resources available to them, as well as 'black' political technologies, seen for example in the way that two 'doubles' immediately came forward as candidates against him. After Eretnov's arrest, the electoral commission refused to register him as a candidate in the election.

It should be noted that the Naberezhnye Chelny city court acquitted Eretnov, and others so charged, of the more serious offences under Article 210 of the Russian Criminal Code (taking part in a criminal group) on the grounds that the prosecution could not prove that he had organized a criminal group. Moreover, he was also found not guilty under Article 159 of the Russian Criminal Code (large scale fraud).

In effect, the court found Eretnov guilty only of having allegedly provided real estate services on one occasion, assisting the organizers of a gambling business to obtain a long-term rental on a property. In our view, the imposition of a sentence involving deprivation of liberty on charges of having brought two parties together to make a deal renting a property is absurd when the prosecution could not even prove that Eretnov in fact knew that this property would be used for unlawful purposes. At the same time, the only evidence for the dubious 'fact' in question was the testimony of another person involved in the case – a person whom even the court that issued the judgment viewed with scepticism, concluding that in other episodes he had borne false witness against Eretnov. It is obvious that in this instance there are ineradicable doubts about the guilt of Sergei Eretnov, doubts that, according to the Constitution of the Russian Federation, must be interpreted in favour of the accused.

*Recognition of an individual as a political prisoner, or of a prosecution as politically motivated, does not mean that Memorial Human Rights Centre shares or approves of the individual's views, statements or actions.*

For more information about this case, see [here](#).

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