

## Human Rights Defenders in the Eurasia region: Turkmenistan

### FARID TUKHBATULLIN - PROFILE

Farid Tukhbatullin is a human rights and ecological activist from Turkmenistan. In 1993 he joined the non-governmental organization Dashoguz Ecological Club in eastern Turkmenistan. As a member and later co-chair of the organization he helped to run several projects including running an independent public library in 1995-1998 and organizing a centre for supporting initiatives of civil society in Turkmenistan in 2001-2002. Dashoguz Ecological Club was closed down by a court ruling in November 2003.



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In March 2003 the Turkmen authorities sentenced him to three years' imprisonment after an unfair trial, in connection with his attendance of an international human rights conference in Moscow, organized by the International Helsinki Federation for Human Rights and the Moscow-based Memorial Human Rights Centre. Amnesty International adopted him as a prisoner of conscience.

Farid Tukhbatullin was released in April 2003 following an international outcry and was forced into exile. He now resides in a Western European country where he founded the non-governmental organization Turkmen Initiative for Human Rights. He has kept in close touch with Turkmenistan and has issued a series of reports on situation with freedom of expression and association, ethnic minorities, education and child labour in this country.<sup>1</sup>

In order to put pressure on Farid Tukhbatullin to stop his human rights work, his brother, major-general **Ruslan Tukhbatullin**, aged 41, who had been working in the Turkmen military since 1993 including in senior positions in the military administration of Dashoguz region, was forced to hand in his resignation at the end of March 2005 and was asked to vacate the military flat where he, his wife, their two children and their baby live. In addition, the dismissal may also have been connected to the 1 March 2005 visit to Farid Tukhbatullin's mother **Khalida Izbastinova** in Dashoguz by a US Embassy official. When Ruslan Tukhbatullin applied for another position in the military, he was told that he could not be employed despite his good qualifications and that "if he was able to find work at all, it would be somewhere outside this region in some village far away". On 3 May several men who were believed to be acting on instructions of the Turkmen Ministry of National Security began to seek out people in Dashoguz who have access to the internet. The search was reportedly aimed at stopping information about Ruslan Tukhbatullin from being "leaked" to the international community.

Throughout his civil society activist career, Farid Tukhbatullin has collaborated with a number of international organizations on issues ranging from protection of the environment, civil society development to promotion and protection of human rights. He has frequently attended regional and international meetings, including of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) as a representative of Turkmen civil society.

Farid Tukhbatullin is married with two children. Apart from his human rights activities, Farid Tukhbatullin writes satirical stories, draws caricatures and is interested in photography.

### Turkmenistan: background information

Human rights violations in Turkmenistan remain widespread and include violations of civil, political, social, economic and cultural rights. People deported to Turkmenistan after a failed asylum claim in other countries might be at risk of being accused of "treason", arbitrary detention, torture, ill-treatment and imprisonment.

Despite Turkmenistan's obligations under international human rights law, including its commitment to ensure freedom of expression and freedom of association under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, these freedoms are severely curtailed

<sup>1</sup> The group's publications can be found on : <http://www.eurasianet.org/turkmenistan.project/index.php?page=resource/hrights/tuhi&lang=eng>

and civil society activists, political dissidents, independent journalists, religious minorities, as well as their families continue to face harassment and imprisonment or forced into exile. Under fear of serious repercussions from the authorities, they are prevented from meeting representatives of foreign governments and international organizations, including the UN and the OSCE, on their visits to Turkmenistan.

Increased pressure forced several civil society activists and a *Radio Liberty* journalist into exile in 2003 and 2004. Like in many other former Soviet countries there appeared to be more scrutiny of possible connections between civil society activists, on the one hand, and political opposition figures or foreign pro-democracy donors, on the other, following the so-called "Rose Revolution" in Georgia in 2003 and the "Orange Revolution" in Ukraine in 2004.

Legislative amendments introduced on 10 November 2003 criminalized activities of any unregistered non-governmental group and made them punishable by "corrective labor" or prison terms. In November 2004, shortly before the Third Committee of the UN General Assembly adopted a draft resolution on the human rights situation in Turkmenistan, the country's authorities annulled the criminalization of activities of unregistered public organizations. However, it continues to be impossible for independent civil society groups to operate openly.