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Killing Endangered Species and Democracy

By Vladimir Ryzhkov

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Behind President Dmitry Medvedev's superficial and meaningless words of "modernization" and "freedom is better than a lack of freedom," Russia continues its repression of opposition members, human rights activists and independent journalists. A good example of how Medvedev's "modernization and freedom" is flourishing can be found in the republic of Altai, a picturesque, mountainous region in West Siberia. Criminal charges were filed by Altai Governor Alexander Berdnikov against Sergei Mikhailov, editor-in-chief of the local Listok newspaper, for its critical articles against Berdnikov and other bureaucrats in his administration.

Berdnikov has sued Listok twice. In the first case, Berdnikov was offended when the newspaper ran a commentary describing his administration as a "snake pit." The prosecutor found legal grounds for Berdnikov's accusation and opened a criminal case against Mikhailov under Article 130 of the Criminal Code for "insulting the honor and dignity of another person when it is expressed in indecent form." If convicted, Mikhailov could face a maximum

sentence of a year in prison.

On May 13, investigators from the Altai prosecutor's office raided Mikhailov's apartment and the offices of Listok.

Berdnikov brought a second criminal case against Mikhailov because of an article that was published in Listok in July 2009 that referred to him as an alcoholic. This time, Berdnikov's sued Mikhailov for slander. To convict Mikhailov of this charge, the prosecutor must prove that he disseminated "knowingly false information" about Berdnikov's alcohol problem. If convicted on these charges, he faces a maximum sentence of three years in prison.

On March 14, Mikhailov won a seat in the city legislature from a district of Gorno-Altai, the republic's capital city. According to law, only the head of the investigative department of the prosecutor's office has the authority to open a criminal case against a deputy, which was dutifully done.

Mikhailov and Listok are vivid testaments to the courageous free speech that has come under heavy fire in Russia. Despite pressure and threats from criminal and governmental structures, Listok investigates and publicizes information about corruption and abuses of power by local bureaucrats at all levels.

Mikhailov played a key role in one of the biggest scandals in 2009, exposing Altai officials who illegally hunted endangered argali sheep from helicopters in the Altai mountains. Listok has also provided in-depth coverage on the construction of a mysterious new government residence and the 21-kilometer road leading to it that has been allocated 3 billion rubles ($100.7 million) from the federal budget.

Listok is the only newspaper in Altai that remains outside the control of the republic's authorities. It offers the kind of investigative journalism that is essential for a democracy and civil society to function as a check and balance on public officials. The newspaper also provides a platform for the opposition and citizens who are fed up with the blatant abuse of power by local officials.

But it does not look like Berdnikov and his friends have to worry too much about any checks and balances. They have a lot of powerful friends in Moscow, who love to visit Altai on long weekends, holidays and summer vacations. During the day, they enjoy "VIP hunting" excursions, taking particular delight in killing endangered species indigenous to Altai. At night, they wine and dine at exclusive VIP lodges. What a wonderful life. They certainly don't want Mikhailov and his newspaper to spoil the fun.

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