

Altai Journalist Charged With Libel

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The outspoken editor of an Altai opposition weekly has been charged with defamation and inciting ethnic hatred for calling the republic's administration a "nest of vipers" and Governor Alexander Berdnikov an "alcoholic."

Supporters of the journalist, Sergei Mikhailov, say the case is politically motivated and surprising in light of the fact that he was just elected to Altai's legislature in a popular vote in March.

Mikhailov, 36, editor of the Listok newspaper, was charged with libel over two articles that contained the phrases deemed offensive and, if convicted, faces up to four years in prison and a fine of up to \$14,000, the local branch of the Investigative Committee said.

He is also accused of insulting Berdnikov's protege, local deputy prime minister Sergei Tevonyan, an ethnic Armenian. Mikhailov carried a poster reading, "No place for any -yans," at a rally in February 2009, the committee said in a statement [published by Listok](#) on Monday. Armenian surnames typically end with "-yan."

Mikhailov, who was elected as an independent lawmaker to the legislature, controlled by United Russia, will likely be dismissed if found guilty in court.

He denied the accusations, including carrying the poster, and said he would "continue to fight."

"There is no libel or insults in our articles, and the story about the poster sounds like a brazen provocation. I assume that this is a blatant attempt to punish me over political issues," Mikhailov said in a statement published on Listok's web site.

Mikhail Paklin, a local lawmaker with the Communist Party and a supporter of Mikhailov, also called the case politically motivated.

"Even though the articles were published a year ago, Berdnikov only noticed them when Mikhailov was elected as a deputy," Paklin said by telephone. "An ordinary journalist is one thing, but as a deputy, he has more opportunities to open doors."

Listok, which has a print run of about 15,000, gained prominence covering the crash of a helicopter carrying senior officials on an illegal hunt in January 2009. Several survivors of the crash currently await trial on poaching charges.

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