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When Protesters Are Driven to Hunger Strikes

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I had planned to write this column about the fact that the National Award for Applied Economics — Russia's most prestigious prize in economics — was presented last week to historians Mark Harrison of Warwick University and Andrei Markevich of the New Economic School in Moscow. After years of painstaking work with archival material, the two men managed to finally determine the Soviet Union's gross domestic product from 1913 to 1928, a period for which reliable data had been lacking.

The main goal of the award is to attract attention to the achievements of Russia's best scholars in economics. That is why a long selection process is held, the jury is composed of leading theoretical and applied economists, the award is presented only once every two years, and winners receive a prize — large by academic standards — of 1.5 million rubles ($50,000) from Sberbank. For these reasons, I had planned to dedicate a whole article to the prize, hoping that more people would become aware of the work that Russia's best scholars are doing.

But a far more urgent story is the hunger strike being waged by Astrakhan residents

protesting what they believe was massive fraud during the March 4 mayoral election. The protesters claim that Oleg Shein — a former State Duma deputy from A Just Russia who is leading the strike — would have won if there had been no electoral fraud. The hunger strike has been going on for more than three weeks, and the chances of it ending tragically are increasing every day.

It would, of course, be tragic if Shein or one of his supporters were to die. But even if their hunger strike ended soon without any deaths, the negative repercussions of this election would continue to be felt. By all indications, the local political elite conspired to steal the election.

Hunger strikes are not the best method to achieve political goals. In theory, any losing candidate could stage a hunger strike, but that alone would not prove that he was right. Moreover, Russians have grown indifferent to injustice, and it takes something truly cataclysmic to attract their attention. If Hermitage Capital lawyer Sergei Magnitsky had not died, the criminal officials he exposed would be just as terrible and no less of a threat to society. But because he died in detention after being beaten and denied medical care, so much attention was drawn to the case.

Efforts by journalist and opposition activist Olga Romanova have attracted attention to the larger problem that goes far beyond the Magnitsky case — the attempt of law enforcement officials to embezzle and extort from successful businessmen such as Romanova's husband, Alexei Kozlov.

Unfortunately, Shein does not have a Romanova battling for him, and he is far from the Moscow ideal of an opposition activist. Perhaps that is why events in Astrakhan have not become the object of discussion or protests until very recently.

Officials must be forced to investigate allegations of electoral fraud in Astrakhan as well as the large number cases of illegal detention of businesspeople across the country. Those who are guilty of these crimes must be prosecuted. This is by no means an easy task, but civil society, including the media, can play an important role in this process. Hopefully, this can be done without hunger strikes.

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