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Karelian Activist on Trial After Calling for Referendum on Secession From Russia

By Eva Hartog

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Vladimir Zavarkin

A local official in the northern republic of Karelia has been brought to trial on charges of inciting separatism after criticizing the local government and the Kremlin in an emotional speech.

Vladimir Zavarkin, a municipal deputy in the town of Suoyarvi in the republic that borders Finland, in May gave a speech in the regional capital Petrozavodsk in which he slammed the Karelian governor Alexander Khudilainen and criticized Moscow for failing to address local concerns.

“Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin, I propose to you: get rid of the wool over your eyes, look at what's being done in Karelia. Forests are being felled down to the root ... everything is being moved to [St. Petersburg,] Moscow, taxes aren't being paid. What will be left for our children? Nothing!” a video of the speech uploaded to YouTube shows Zavarkin as saying.

“So we, probably, if the Russian [government] won't hear us, will stage a referendum, I think. If Russia doesn't need Karelia — let's secede. That would be the most honest!” he added.

Zavarkin was brought to trial on Monday in a Petrozavodsk city court on charges of publicly calling for separatism, the Gazeta.ru news website reported.

Zavarkin said he considered himself a patriot and described his call for a referendum as a “cry of despair,” the report said.

Zavarkin's lawyer, Dmitry Dinze, told Gazeta.ru the case is politically motivated, saying Zavarkin's speech contained “unflattering remarks about the governor, to put it mildly.”

According to the deputy director of the Moscow-based Center for Political Technologies, Alexei Makarkin, the local authorities in Karelia are using the case to clamp down on the opposition, the report said.

“For the authorities, this is proof that those who are in opposition to Khudilainen want to join Karelia with Finland,” he was cited as saying by Gazeta.ru.

Head of the Security Council Nikolai Patrushev in March warned against a growing threat of “nationalist and revanchist socio-political organizations in Finland which use local NGOs to influence the Karelian population,” the Kommersant newspaper reported at the time.

To date, only one other person — Crimean Tatar activist Rafis Kashapov — has been tried under the law banning calls for separatism, which went into force last year, Vedomosti reported.

Kashapov last month was given a sentence of three years in prison for his online posts criticizing the Kremlin and the annexation of Crimea.

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