

Karelian Activist Fined For 'Inciting Separatism' in Russian Republic

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Vladimir Zavarkin

A local official in Russia's northern republic of Karelia has been fined 30,000 rubles (\$450) for “inciting separatism,” following an impassioned speech in the regional capital Petrozavodsk in May, in which he called for the dismissal of the Karelian governor and urged Moscow to pay more heed to local concerns, the TASS news agency reported Friday.

Vladimir Zavarkin, a municipal deputy in the town of Suoyarvi, northwest of Petrozavodsk, was brought to trial on Oct. 26 after his remarks hinting at the possibility of staging a referendum on the status of Karelia, a historical Finnish province now divided between Finland and Russia.

“If the Russian [government] won't hear us, we will stage a referendum, I think. If Russia doesn't need Karelia — let's secede. That would be the most honest!”, Zavarkin said in May 20 speech after listing a number of local environmental and fiscal issues he claimed Moscow failed to address, Russian media reported.

On Nov. 6, the same court in Petrozavodsk deemed the YouTube video of Zavarkin's speech "extremist" in content, prohibiting its broadcasting on Russian territory.

The prosecution had called for Zavarkin to be sentenced to two years in prison and be barred from holding public office for two years, the Vedomosti newspaper reported.

His lawyers said that he had only been expressing his opinion on the situation in the region, and that the Russian constitution allowed for the holding of an in-out referendum in Karelia, Vedomosti reported.

"Calls for separatism" were made a punishable offense last year. The law made headlines again in September 2015, when the Crimean Tatar activist Rafis Kashapov was sentenced to three years in prison for his online posts criticizing Russia's annexation of the peninsula.

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