

Analysis

Political and Economic Changes Come Slowly to Marii El

Sergei Poduzov, Ioshkar-Ola

Abstract

The Marii El presidential administration works consistently to limit the powers of local government in the republic and deprive citizen activists of the ability to criticize the authorities. Accordingly, a protest movement could only arise on the basis of collective efforts to defend political rights.

A Referendum to Limit Local Government

On March 1, 2009, Marii El successfully conducted a referendum in 44 local jurisdictions on consolidating local government. With its passage, the referendum created one urban and 19 village jurisdictions. The authorities explained the changes as necessary to optimize local government management as part of an on-going national process of reform launched in 2003. However, the true reason for conducting the referendum was completely different: Four years ago the Marii El republic presidential administration decided to subordinate local government directly to the republican government.

To be sure there are many problems with local government in the republic and the general public has low regard for it. The republican authorities created a situation in which incompetent people dependent on the higher authorities and local business were elected as mayors. Often these mayors violated the law, creating an impression among the public that rural settlements could not independently carry out their duties and therefore it was necessary to restructure them. The Marii El procurator filed 12 criminal cases against local officials in 2008, according to its web site.

In 2007, the Man and Law organization conducted a public opinion poll in the republic's raions which showed that the population ranked mayors in second place as violators of human rights. In a poll of 812 individuals, 22 percent categorized the heads of local governments this way. Policemen were the most frequently cited human rights violators.

However, local government is the only level of government today that can serve as an arena for developing democracy under existing Russian legislation. Most importantly, these laws allow the election of unaffiliated candidates, as well as party members, to local office.

By conducting the referendum, the republican authorities secured a system of local government that will be easier for them to manage. The population, by participating in the referendum and voting ostensibly for strengthening the governments of village settlements

did not realize that they were actually depriving themselves of the ability to influence the management of their settlements.

A History of Conflict between Republican and Local Governments

It is important to note that the Marii El presidential administration decided to implement its plans for restructuring local government only after it eliminated its political opponents. There have been several episodes of conflict between the regional and local authorities.

The first conflict between Marii El President Leonid Markelov and local government leaders began at the end of 2001 when Markelov changed the republican law, forcing the local governments to give a large portion of their budgets to the republic's treasury. Four mayors criticized the president's action: the mayors of Volzhsk and Zvenigov raions and Volzhsk and Ioshkar-Ola cities. All four subsequently had to leave office.

As a result of the conflict, the authorities filed charges against the mayor of Zvenigov Raion Mikhail Zherebtsov for allegedly misusing public funds. During the preliminary investigation, Zherebtsov was removed from office and a new mayor was elected who was loyal to the Marii El president. Accordingly, the Supreme Court of the Russian Federation closed the case against Zherebtsov, but he could not return to his office. The conflict between Zherebtsov and Markelov did not end there. On June 17, 2005, Zherebtsov criticized Markelov in public at a meeting with diplomats from Estonia, Hungary, and Finland. Subsequently, the authorities charged Zherebtsov with slander and on October 26, 2005, a Ioshkar-Ola justice of the peace found him guilty and gave him a six-month suspended prison sentence.

Volzhsk Mayor Nikolai Svistunov was the second mayor to suffer for opposing Markelov. His situation at the republican level is similar to that of Mikhail Khodorkovsky at the federal level. The real reason for the conflict between the mayor of Volzhsk and the president of Marii El is a battle for the resources located in Volzhsk.

The president wanted the mayor to transfer some of this property to other people. Svistunov refused, claiming that to do so would break the law. The president chose to fight back by filing criminal charges against him. In 2003 the authorities accused Svistunov of embezzling property. In 2004, the Volzhsk city court found him guilty and he was sentenced to prison for three years and three months. While Svistunov was in jail he continued to fight for his rights, attempting to show that he was illegally convicted, drawing more and more attention to his case within Russia. In 2005, Svistunov was eligible for parole, but Markelov feared that if he were released from prison, his political rating would be higher than the Marii El president's. He also feared that Svistunov could consolidate the local political elite which then did not have a clear leader. To address this problem, the authorities filed new criminal charges against Svistunov. In order to break his will, the authorities held him in inhuman conditions as they investigated the new charges. Svistunov was placed in a cell where there was no light, hot water, or heat and his jailers would not allow his relatives to provide him with a blanket. To draw attention to his case, Svistunov announced a hunger strike. At that point, members of the Man and Law organization began to represent Svistunov's interests before the authorities, protesting the violation of his rights. They demonstrated in court that the authorities' poor treatment of the prisoner destroyed his human dignity and amounted to torture. The Ioshkar-Ola court ruled in favor of Svistunov, finding that the authorities had violated article 3 of the Council of Europe's Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms. This small victory offered hope that Svistunov would be found not guilty of the new charges against him. However, on June 30, 2006, the Marii El Supreme Court found him guilty of accepting a bribe and raised his overall sentence to eight years and six months. Svistunov considers that it will be difficult to win justice in the Russian Federation and has appealed to the European Court for Human Rights. At the same time, he has decided not to register additional complaints until the end of his term. In April 2009, Svistunov will again be eligible for parole. However, on March 2, the head of the procurator's investigative committee announced that it was investigating new charges against him - abuse of power during the time when he served as mayor.

In contrast to the other two, the mayors of Ioshkar-Ola and Volzhsk Raion voluntarily left office. The only conflict between the mayor of Ioshkar-Ola and the president did not last long and a new mayor was appointed in 2005.

President vs. Citizen Activists

The second major conflict which took place in Marii El was between citizen activists and the republican president. This conflict began in 2005 and continues to the present.

Georgii Pirogov was the first citizen to criticize Markelov publically, doing so at a 2005 demonstration organized by the group Marii Ushem, which seeks to protect the rights of the indigenous people in the region. The authorities charged Pirogov with slander and after two-and-a-half years of investigation, a justice of the peace in Ioshkar-Ola found him guilty and gave him a suspended sentence of six months in 2007.

Nina Maksimova and Vladimir Kozlov of the Marii Ushem group also came into conflict with Markelov. The authorities used a variety of means to pressure this group, including the filing of criminal charges. The Moscow Helsinki Group has a long description of this incident on its web site (<http://www.mhg.ru/publications/A1AD2FD>). This conflict does not have an impact on the current political situation in the region. However, either side could revive it at any moment.

The third incident of conflict between the regional authorities and its citizens involved the Marii priest Vitalii Tanakov. He prepared a brochure entitled "A priest speaks" which contained three sections: the origins of the Marii religion, a comparison of the Marii religion and nationality with other religions and nationalities, and the future of Marii El. In the third section, Tanakov criticized the political elite led by the republican presidential administration. The authorities filed charges against Tanakov for instigating inter-ethnic conflict. A Ioshkar-Ola court found him guilty and sentenced him to 120 hours of community work. Then the Ioshkar-Ola procurator asked the court to declare the brochure "extremist." April 2009 will mark the second anniversary of the beginning of that case. Specialists from six institutions have concluded that the brochure included information that sparked ethnic conflict. As the case drags on, Tanakov has appealed to the European Court for Human Rights claiming that his freedom of religion and speech were violated.

The fourth case is a conflict between supporters of former prime minister and presidential candidate Mikhail Kasyanov and the Marii El president. The leader of Kasyanov's election campaign in the republic is Rustam Abdullin. The authorities paid special attention to Kasyanov's supporters during the campaign. Before the campaign, Abdullin had criticized Markelov in his capacity as deputy chairman of the regional branch of Union of Right Forces political party and as the coor-

dinator of United Civil Front protest movement in the region. Kasyanov’s supporters collected signatures for him in the republic and then passed them to Abdullin so that he could take them to Moscow. The authorities detained Abdullin on the Ioshkar-Ola-Moscow train. They filed charges against him and his colleagues for allegedly forging signatures. The case is currently before the court and Abdullin’s supporters fear that his rights will not be protected.

All of these cases demonstrate how all conflicts among the elites of Marii El end in victory for the republican president. Currently, the battle is escalating,

bringing ever more people into the struggle for power. To date, the authorities have managed to contain the conflict in the legal field, using the punitive powers of the law enforcement agencies. It is clear that the authorities are limiting political freedoms and violating human rights in an ever more serious ways. It is important to point out that if the political elite never lose, and we see how only one side in this conflict is ever convicted of wrongdoing, then the protest movement will only become stronger as people seek to defend their political freedoms.

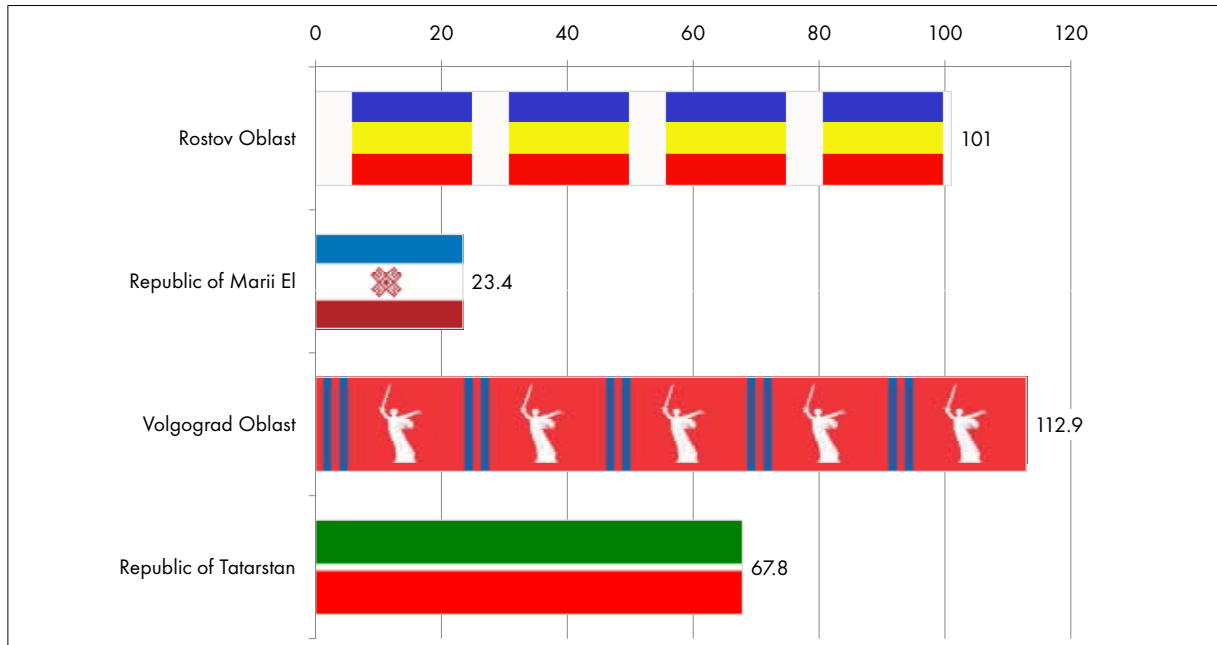
About the author

Sergei Poduzov is the co-chairman of the Man and Law organization in Marii El.

Graphs

Rostov and Marii El Regions – Key Data Compared

Territory (in thsd. km²)



Source: see table on pp. 14–17.