

A Russian Milestone: First Black Elected to Office

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Russian councilman Jean Gregoire Sagbo speaking in the administration office in Novozavidovo, a village 100 kilometers north of Moscow. **Sergey Ponomarev**

NOVOZAVIDOVO, Tver Region — People in this town used to stare at Jean Gregoire Sagbo because they had never seen a black man. Now they say they see in him something equally rare — an honest politician.

Sagbo last month became the first black to be elected to office in Russia.

In a country where racism is entrenched and often violent, Sagbo's election as one of Novozavidovo's 10 municipal councilors is a milestone. But among the town's 10,000 people, the 48-year-old from the West African country of Benin is viewed simply as a Russian who cares about his hometown.

He promises to revive the impoverished, garbage-strewn town where he has lived for 21 years and raised a family. His plans include reducing rampant drug addiction, cleaning up a polluted lake and delivering heating to homes.

"Novozavidovo is dying," Sagbo said in an interview in the ramshackle municipal building. "This is my home, my town. We can't live like this."

"His skin is black, but he is Russian inside," said Vyacheslav Arakelov, the mayor. "The way he cares about this place, only a Russian can care."

Sagbo isn't the first black in Russian politics. Another West African, Joaquin Crima of Guinea-Bissau, ran for head of a district in the Volgograd region a year ago but was heavily defeated.

Crima was dubbed by the media "Russia's Obama." Now they've shifted the title to Sagbo, much to his annoyance.

"My name is not Obama. It's sensationalism," he said. "He is black and I am black, but it's a totally different situation."

Inspired by communist ideology, Sagbo came to the Soviet Union in 1982 to study economics in Moscow. There he met his wife, a Novozavidovo native. He moved to the town about 100 kilometers north of Moscow in 1989 to be close to his in-laws.

Today he is a father of two and negotiates real estate sales for a Moscow conglomerate. His council job is unpaid.

Sagbo said neither he nor his wife wanted him to get into politics, viewing it as a dirty, dangerous business, but the town council and residents persuaded him to run for office.

They already knew him as a man of strong civic impulse. He had cleaned the entrance to his apartment building, planted flowers and spent his own money on street improvements. Ten years ago, he organized volunteers and started what became an annual day of collecting garbage.

He said he feels no racism in the town. "I am one of them. I am home here," Sagbo said.

But he did feel racism during his first year in the town, when his then 4-year-old son Maxim came home in tears, saying a teenage boy spat at him. Sagbo ran outside in a rage, demanding that the spitter explain himself. Women sitting nearby also berated the teenager. Then the whole street joined in.

Russia's black population hasn't been officially counted, but some studies estimate about 40,000 "Afro-Russians." Many are attracted by universities that are less costly than in the West. Scores of them suffer racially motivated attacks every year — 49 in Moscow alone in 2009, according to the Moscow Protestant Chaplaincy Task Force on Racial Violence and Harassment, an advocacy group.

After the Soviet collapse, Novozavidovo's industries were rapidly privatized, leaving it in financial ruin.

High unemployment, corruption, alcoholism and pollution blight what was once an idyllic town, just a short distance from the Zavidovo National Park, where Prime Minister Vladimir Putin and President Dmitry Medvedev take nature retreats.

Denis Voronin, a 33-year-old engineer in Novozavidovo, said Sagbo was the town's first politician to get elected fairly, without resorting to buying votes.

"Previous politicians were all criminals," he said.

A former administration head — the equivalent of mayor in rural Russia — was shot to death by unknown assailants two years ago.

The post is now held by Arakelov, a veteran of the Soviet war in Afghanistan who says he also wants to clean up corruption. He said money used to constantly disappear from the town budget, which is being investigated by tax officials.

Residents said they pay providers for heat and hot water, but because of ineffective monitoring by the municipality they don't get much of either. The toilet in the municipal building is a room with a hole in the floor.

As a councilor, Sagbo has already scored some successes. He mobilized residents to collect money and turn dilapidated lots between buildings into colorful playgrounds with new swings and painted fences.

As he strolled around his neighborhood, everyone greeted him and he responded in his fluent, French-African-accented Russian. Boys waved to Sagbo, who had promised them a football field.

Sitting in the newly painted playground with her son, Irina Danilenko said it was the only improvement she has seen in the five years she has lived here.

"We don't care about his race," said Danilenko, 31. "We consider him one of us."

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