

Astrakhan Electrifies the Opposition

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Left Front leader Sergei Udaltsov rallying with about 100 people at the Astrakhan region's representation office to support Oleg Shein on Monday. **Igor Tabakov**

Astrakhan became a new rallying cry for the country's fledgling protest movement Monday when key opposition figures called for support of a 25-day hunger strike of mayoral candidate Oleg Shein in the southern city.

Left Front leader Sergei Udaltsov and Solidarity leader Boris Nemtsov joined more than 100 protesters in the capital, while anti-corruption blogger Alexei Navalny and two State Duma deputies, Dmitry Gudkov and Ilya Ponomarev of A Just Russia, announced that they would travel to Astrakhan on Tuesday. (Read a [city profile](#) of Astrakhan.)

Pro-Kremlin lawmakers denounced the protest as a political provocation and blackmail.

Shein, a former Duma deputy for A Just Russia, refuses to recognize the official outcome of the mayoral vote, which was held parallel to the March 4 presidential election and gave him 30 percent. United Russia candidate Mikhail Stolyarov was declared the winner with 60

percent.

Shein went on hunger strike on March 16 together with some 20 people, who have since refused to eat solid food. Despite losing 9 kilograms of weight, he says he is feeling fine. "We are controlling our blood sugar levels and taking showers," he told Interfax on Sunday.

In a video [posted](#) on YouTube, a markedly thinner Shein explains that he decided to go on hunger strike to prevent the city from "falling into the hands of the mafia."

But supporters call his physical condition worrying. His former wife, who joined the Moscow protesters on Monday, expressed her own fears and noted that Shein was prepared to fight to the end.

"He will be the last to end the hunger strike," his former wife, Carine Clement, said in an interview on the sidelines of the protest outside the Astrakhan region's representation office.

Clement, a French sociologist who was married to Shein for seven years until they split up in 2009, said her former husband took his fight seriously. "For him, this is a matter of honor," she said.

Opposition leader Udaltsov announced that he and five activists would start a solidarity hunger strike in the capital.

He also said he would return to Astrakhan's office near the Sukharevskaya metro station daily after the region's representative, Nikolai Korolyov, failed to speak to him as promised on Monday. "I will be here Tuesday at 2 p.m.," he said, standing outside the office with a large white poster reading, "People are dying in Astrakhan! Putin and Zhilkin: You are responsible!" Alexander Zhilkin is the governor of the Astrakhan region.

Udaltsov himself has staged a series of hunger strikes to protest being arrested, the last in December when he had to be hospitalized in serious condition.

Navalny, the anti-corruption blogger, announced his backing of Shein on Twitter and called on other supporters to travel with him to Astrakhan, sending the city's name up into the Russian-language top trends on the popular microblogging site Monday.

Shein [said](#) on his LiveJournal blog that he would meet with Navalny in Astrakhan on Tuesday morning.

This is the second time that a hunger strike is electrifying the country's opposition. A similar rush erupted in February, when activists in the Stavropol region town of Lermontov stormed the local administration building and went on hunger strike to protest their exclusion from municipal elections. The conflict was defused after weeks of negotiations.

But the stakes in Astrakhan, which has a population of more than 500,000 and is dubbed the country's capital of the Caspian Sea, are bigger.

A Just Russia leader Sergei Mironov reiterated on Monday that his party wants President Dmitry Medvedev and his elected successor, Vladimir Putin, to defuse the situation. "We will definitely ask Putin about the situation in Astrakhan," Mironov told reporters, Interfax

reported.

Duma Deputies Gudkov and Ponomaryov sent a letter to Medvedev in which they called on the president "to cancel the result of the dirty Astrakhan elections, restore justice and save the lives" of their hunger-striking comrades.

Neither Medvedev nor Putin reacted publicly Monday. But members of United Russia's Duma faction made it clear that they had little respect for Shein and his supporters.

Vyacheslav Lysakov, first deputy chairman of the Duma's Constitution and State Affairs Committee and a member of a Duma fact-finding mission that visited the Astrakhan protesters in late March, said their refusal to end their hunger strike was utterly irresponsible. "What they are doing now is already political provocation and blackmail," he told The Moscow Times.

Lysakov said Shein could not expect that his demands for a recount or a repeat of the mayoral election would be met anytime soon because a thorough investigation of the vote, as recommended by the four-member mission, would take weeks to complete.

"When his aim was to draw attention on the federal level, the reason for the hunger strike absolutely vanished," he said.

Lysakov's comments echoed those of actress Maria Maksakova, who represents Astrakhan in the Duma for United Russia. In a [statement](#) last month, Maksakova called Shein a "scandalous" politician whose past record of hunger strikes only showed that he suffered a lack of weight "both physically and politically."

Sergei Markov, a former United Russia deputy who now serves as vice president of the Plekhanov Institute of Economics, said the staging of hunger strikes was a sign of the political system's deficiencies. "If this is the only way to solve a political impasse, then this shows how little developed the political competition is," he said.

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