

Blogger With Afro Challenges Conventional Politics

By [Jonathan Earle](#)

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Varlamov wants to redefine the image of the average Russian politician.

With emerald eyes and a colossal, caramel-colored Afro, Ilya Varlamov doesn't look like a typical Siberian mayor.

Nor does he have the resume.

An architect by training, Varlamov runs iCube, a creative advertising and development agency. But he's best known for his photo [blog](#), one of the country's most popular, which features frequent criticism of the government spliced between pictures of luxury hotels in Singapore, race riots in Moscow and the office of former Kremlin spinmeister Vladislav Surkov.

In a country mostly ruled by drab United Russia party loyalists, Varlamov has challenged ideas about where politicians come from and what they look like. He also briefly turned Omsk, which votes for a mayor next month, into the latest battleground for activists looking

to convert winter's mass protests into concrete reform.

"I thought, 'Why not?'" Varlamov said of his mayoral bid in a recent interview, grinning a boyish grin.

"Why should only strongmen become mayors? They're the ones responsible for the miserable state of our country," he said. "I'm different. I don't have any experience stealing or being corrupt."

Varlamov's timing couldn't have been better. Independent mayoral candidates have ridden the winter's discontent to election victories in Yaroslavl and Tolyatti, and activists are flexing the opposition's muscle with a headline-grabbing challenge to the results of a disputed mayoral election in Astrakhan.

Varlamov, a Moscow resident, pledged to turn Omsk, a city of 1.1 million in the heart of Siberia, into a model Russian city with international standards of urban planning.

He often criticizes the government on his blog, particularly with regard to architecture and urban planning, and in December he joined a handful of oppositional public figures to co-found the League of Voters, which promotes the development of civil society.

But in a riddle to detractors, Varlamov denies representing the opposition, even though he received an endorsement from Alexei Navalny, the opposition leader and anti-corruption blogger.

"I never said I would be the candidate from the opposition. This would be impossible," he wrote recently on his blog. "The opposition doesn't have just one candidate. ... I'm an independent, civil candidate."

He threw his hat into the Omsk race on April 6 after receiving an invitation via Twitter from a local opposition activist belonging to a group calling itself Citizen Mayor.

Critics immediately dismissed the campaign as a stunt, citing Varlamov's lack of experience in city administration and poor name recognition in Omsk.

Varlamov is a controversial figure in opposition circles, largely because of suspected links to Surkov and the government.

The blogger denies any connection to Surkov or his successor as Kremlin deputy chief of staff, Vyacheslav Volodin.

"The only time I ever saw Surkov was at a news conference. He might not even know who I am," Varlamov said in the interview, adding that the photographs of Surkov's office were the result of a simple request. "I just asked to shoot there!"

For many, however, the smoking gun was the online appearance of an e-mail exchange, purportedly between Varlamov and Kristina Potupchik, spokeswoman for the pro-Kremlin Nashi youth group, that appears to show Varlamov accepting 400,000 rubles (\$13,600) for writing blog posts flattering to the Kremlin.

Varlamov has variously refused to discuss the allegations or denied them, fueling speculation that his Omsk candidacy was a Kremlin ploy to discredit the opposition or split the opposition electorate ahead of the June 17 vote, assuring a victory for the ruling United Russia party.

United Russia has nominated the speaker of the city legislature, Vyacheslav Dvorakovsky, as its mayoral candidate. The Communist Party, which beat United Russia to win the Omsk vote in the Dec. 4 State Duma elections, is expected to nominate its own candidate or back an independent candidate at a party conference on Thursday, said Adam Pogarsky, a regional Communist Party legislator.

Vladislav Inozemtsev, who worked as an economic adviser on billionaire Mikhail Prokhorov's recent presidential campaign, is also running, leading to speculation that contributions from Prokhorov might skew the race.

"Varlamov says himself that he's not oppositional," Inozemtsev said by telephone. "I don't see in him an alternative to the status quo. In my opinion, he's a part of the existing system."

Muddying the water, Inozemtsev, a Moscovite like Varlamov, is a member of the Institute of Contemporary Development, a liberal think tank chaired by President Dmitry Medvedev.

For his mayoral bid, Varlamov assembled a "dream team" of advisers to help imagine a Russian city freed from the legacy of Soviet central planning, which placed little emphasis on livability and charm. They include blogger Sergei Mukhamedov, outspoken designer Artemy Lebedev — who pledged to redesign Omsk if Varlamov won — and Maxim Kats, a former poker player-turned-Moscow district council member with an amateur's passion for urban planning.

A vague manifesto written by Varlamov and Kats excoriates poor infrastructure for the disabled and bicyclists and dirty streets. "Every person has the right to walk around in white pants all year round!" it reads.

Other proposals include improving public transportation, closing the city center to traffic, building bike lanes and improving street cleaning.

Kats said by telephone Wednesday that Omsk may never see those plans come to fruition.

He said volunteers had gathered only 3,100 signatures in support of Varlamov's bid to be placed on the Omsk ballot, making it nearly impossible to gather the remaining 6,900 signatures by the May 7 deadline.

Rather than trudge on, Varlamov could call it quits in the next few days, Kats said.

Varlamov, currently traveling in Africa, did not respond to multiple phone calls for comment.

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