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Yabloko Backs Chirikova for Khimki Mayor

By Alexander Bratersky

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Yevgenia Chirikova explaining to Khimki residents why she decided to run for mayor in a video posted on her newly created campaign website.

The pro-opposition Yabloko party said Thursday that it would back renowned environmental activist Yevgenia Chirikova's candidacy for Khimki mayor.

It withdrew its previous candidate, former Deputy Mayor Igor Belousov, in favor of Chirikova, who gained popularity for leading protests against the construction of a pricey highway set to bisect a local forest.

"We will not back any competitor, no other candidate from the party," Yabloko chief Sergei Mitrokhin said in a statement, adding that Belousov consented to move.

Alexander Belov, head of the ultranationalist Movement Against Illegal Immigration, also endorsed Chirikova's candidacy so that she could garner the support of a unified opposition.

Chirikova has welcomed Belov's backing, though members of the liberal opposition camp have previously met criticism for joining forces with ultranationalists.

The state has banned the Movement Against Illegal Immigration for its "extremist" doctrine.

The top government job in Khimki, a northern suburb of 200,000 people, opened up last week when former Mayor Vladimir Strelchenko, accused of corruption and suppressing political opponents, resigned voluntarily.

The Oct. 14 election has come to symbolize public resistance to chopping down the Khimki forest, which activists call the "lungs of Moscow," to build the $8 billion toll road to St. Petersburg.

The acting mayor, Oleg Shakhov, was previously a director of Dorogi Rossii, a federal road construction firm responsible for building the controversial highway.

Chirikova said Thursday that Shakhov, who has also served as deputy governor of Tula, is her main competitor in the upcoming election, Interfax reported.

Alexei Makarkin, an analyst at the Center for Political Technologies think tank, said a major obstacle to Chirikova's campaign would be the presence of other opposition candidates that would dilute voter support.

"It might be paradoxical," he said, "but the more opposition candidates there are in the race, the better it is for the ruling regime."

Liberal Democrat Vladimir Zhirinovsky said his party will back State Duma Deputy Maxim Rokhmistrov's candidacy for mayor, RIA-Novosti reported. The Communists have also announced their own candidate.

Chirikova, a local resident and trained engineer, has brought the Khimki forest issue into the global media spotlight. She has emerged as one of the most recognized figures in the anti-Kremlin opposition.

She has already run for mayor of Khimki, in 2009, and got 15 percent of the vote. She hopes to fare much better this time around.

However, the acting mayor has strong support from the Moscow region's charismatic governor, Sergei Shoigu, and is favored in the race.

Khimki is home to many state-owned corporations that get the majority of their financing through government contracts.

Makarkin of the Center for Political Technologies added that if Chirikova were to win, she may just demonstrate that the opposition can "govern effectively."

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