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Roizman Stirs Up Yekaterinburg Elections

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Yevgeny Roizman, Yekaterinburg mayoral candidate and founder of the City Without Drugs foundation.

A week before nationwide elections, Yekaterinburg's mayoral candidate has found himself embroiled in a legal battle with a television host after calling him a "con man and a touring prostitute."

But for Yevgeny Roizman, 50, the lawsuit is only the latest in a long series of scandals.

And it may stem, in part, from the social activist's unapologetically blunt style, which polls suggest is working quite well for him in the mayoral race but which Roizman himself has said may be intimidating for authorities.

When Roizman meets with voters in the city's numerous courtyards of dilapidated Soviet apartment blocks, he is always barraged with the same requests: "When will our building be refurbished?"; "Build a playground for our children!" his potential voters say.

And his response is invariably reliant on the principle of tough love: "What, you don't have your own hands?"

As Roizman sees it, the nature of people's demands in a city at the crossroads of Asia and Europe attests to the overall apathy and indifference of the Russian population — an attitude that Russian men are especially prone to. So his answer to them is: "If you want your building to be refurbished then do it yourself!"

According to recent polls, Roizman's insistence on the "do it yourself attitude" is working in a country whose population is often criticized for a lack of initiative. He is currently leading in the Yekaterinburg race as the candidate from Mikhail Prokhorov's Civil Platform party and is confident about the outcome.

"I am going to win this election," he said over the phone ahead of a recent campaign speech.

Roizman is one of 12 candidates in the race to head Russia's fourth-largest city. His main rivals are considered to be United Russia's Yakov Silin, who is a deputy of regional Governor Yevgeny Kuivashev, and State Duma Deputy Alexander Burkov of A Just Russia.

There are, however, several obstacles to a mayoral victory.

Prosecutors in the Sverdlovsk region last Wednesday announced plans to investigate the anti-drugs activist for possible links to criminal gangs. The check was prompted by a documentary-style film called "Moment of Truth", which was broadcast on Channel 5 last week.

It said telephone records suggested that Roizman was associated with Temuri Mirzoyev, a nephew of the late crime boss Aslan Usoyan, better known as Grandpa Hassan.

Roizman called the allegations "nonsense" and attributed the claims to the fact that he was leading in the mayoral race. "They're afraid of me," he told the BBC's Russian service, adding that the investigation only discredited the prosecutors.

The "Moment of Truth" program's producer, journalist Andrei Karaulov, later filed a libel suit against Roizman, alleging that he had called him a prostitute and a con man in response to the film's allegations.

Silin has also claimed that Roizman's criminal past is the main hurdle to his mayoral ambitions, and it is frequently cited as a reason not to vote for him.

"We have come back to the same intersection that we found ourselves at a decade ago when the leader of the Uralmash gang could have become mayor," Vadim Dubichev, deputy head of the Sverdlovsk gubernatorial administration, said by phone, though he did not refer to Roizman by name.

"People in the Urals know what I am talking about," he said, apparently referring to reports that the Uralmash gang — the most powerful crime syndicate in Yekaterinburg — helped Roizman in his earlier anti-drug activities by beating and brutalizing drug dealers.

Roizman, who is also the author of two collections of poems, was sentenced to a two-year

prison term in 1981 on charges of theft and fraud.

But he doesn't see that as a problem.

"I believe it would be good for anybody in Russia to spend some time in jail," Roizman said with a grin. "Without such an experience, you can't truly understand life in Russia."

Roizman now opposes his main rival, Kuivashev, through Kuivashev's deputy, Silin. His campaign manager and domestic partner, Aksana Panova, has come under fire in what many say is a personal feud between Roizman and Kuivashev.

After choosing Roizman over Kuivashev, Panova was recently charged with money extortion. Last Friday, the judge in her trial unexpectedly adjourned the hearing until Sept. 9, prompting Roizman to tell reporters from the courtroom that Panova's case was being used to blackmail him into withdrawing from the mayoral race.

But it is not only his political ambitions that have brought him under intense scrutiny.

With his posture of a self-made man who walks the walk rather than just talking the talk, he gained prominence in the Urals by declaring war on drug dealers and opening up the "City Without Drugs" foundation. In Yekaterinburg alone, the number of drug addicts skyrocketed from a few dozen to more than 50,000 following the breakup of the Soviet Union.

But in the process of fighting the drug trade, he found himself pitted against local policemen as well.

In the Yekaterinburg gypsy quarter, he said he saw how gypsies, together with policemen, would sit carelessly in the middle of the street while drug addicts, hooked on heroin, lay in ditches around them.

"Can you imagine? This is my city, and if this is possible in my city, then who am I?" Roizman wrote in his book while describing how he started his foundation.

His methods for treating drug addicts were subject to major criticism, which has now reverberated during his campaign. Some of the foundation's employees were accused of kidnapping and torturing their patients. The recovering addicts had to spend one month in a so-called quarantine, when they were forced to withdraw from heroin "cold turkey" while handcuffed to their beds and placed on a strict bread, onion and water diet. The practice was abandoned in 2008 after a public outcry.

Despite Roizman's tumultuous history, there may be another reason for his certainty that he will win.

Yekaterinburg, Russia's fourth-largest city and one of its main industrial centers, is known for its long-standing independent and contrarian mind. In the 2011 State Duma elections, the ruling United Russia party received only 33.6 percent of the vote in contrast to the nationwide average of 49.3 percent.

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corrupt criminals in power, and Roizman is something new, clean and honest.'
Kiselyov

"This is a very big city with its own traditions and identity that make it autonomous from the regional and federal government," said Nikolai Petrov, a professor at the Higher School of Economics.

Konstantin Kiselev, a political scientist and member of Roizman's team, echoed Dubischev's warning about criminals in power — but in his scenario, Roizman was the good guy.

"There is a fight between the corrupt criminals in power, and Roizman is the personification of something new, clean and honest," he said.

On Saturday, hundreds of Yekaterinburg residents showed up for a morning jog in the city center wearing Roizman-style signature red shirts. Following the event, Roizman said on Facebook that he would not be deterred from the big race, despite numerous threats from the local government.

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