

‘Time for Radical Measures’: Lyubov Sobol Is Seizing the Protest Moment

With key opposition figures sidelined, the Navalny ally has led the Moscow council vote demonstrations.

By [Evan Gershkovich](#)

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Lyubov Sobol is detained for a second time in one day during protests on July 27. **Dmitry Serebryakov / AP / TASS**

In a YouTube video posted on the evening of July 13 that has been viewed more than half a million times, Lyubov Sobol made two announcements. The first was that Moscow’s election commission would be preventing her from running in upcoming city council elections. The second was that she would be going on a hunger strike in response.

“It’s time for radical measures,” the 31-year-old opposition leader said in an interview with The Moscow Times on Monday evening.

To get on the ballot for the Sept. 8 vote, potential candidates had to each collect

approximately 5,000 signatures, depending on the district, from city residents. But over the first days of July, opposition politicians saw some of the names they collected invalidated by election officials. They argue that the authorities have barred them from running to stop them from challenging Kremlin-backed incumbents.

“If they steal our elections for the Moscow City Duma,” Sobol says in the July 13 [video](#), her voice rising in anger, “then how can we even discuss elections for the State Duma, Moscow’s mayor or any other elections?”

Related article: [Don’t Call Lyubov Sobol Navalny’s Press Secretary](#)

Thousands of people agree with Sobol’s logic. Over the 17 days since she began her hunger strike, they have mobilized for regular street protests demanding opposition candidates be allowed to run. The demonstrations seem to be gaining momentum, at one point [ballooning](#) to up to 22,500 people, though on Saturday the response to the latest one was a [crackdown](#) that left nearly 1,400 people detained.

This week the authorities offered the protesters an outlet to vent their anger by approving a demonstration on Prospekt Sakharova, a location away from the city center where officials had earlier allowed protests. But the opposition, feeling its strength, held out for a more central location, a request City Hall [denied](#) Tuesday afternoon.

Shortly after, Sobol [called](#) for a protest on Moscow’s central Boulevard Ring. A Facebook page for the [event](#) lists 13,500 as going or interested in attending.

“We will come out every Saturday in the center of Moscow until they put us on the ballot,” Sobol said Monday evening. “People are demanding more protests. Last Saturday showed that they are ready to come out on the street even if the protest hasn’t been approved by the authorities. I would be a traitor to my supporters if I agreed to go back to Prospekt Sakharova now.”

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Sobol pointed to the case of Denis Kosyakov, a popular comedian who [wrote](#) on Twitter Sunday morning that he was inspired to come to the street by the way the authorities were handling the demonstrators.

“In recent years, I wasn’t particularly interested in the protest movement,” he wrote. “But after the authorities got out of control yesterday, I will definitely go out on the street, and I don’t care if it’s allowed or not.”

Just a few years ago, Sobol pointed out, Kosyakov turned down invitations to join her on a talk show. “He was apolitical and too scared then,” she said. “We have leverage now. There is no situation in which they win and we lose.”

In the basement office that she and other opposition candidates used as a headquarters while they collected signatures in June, Sobol shuffled slowly across the vast room and spoke many decibels lower than her usual booming voice. She has lost more than 7.5 kilograms (16.5

pounds) since she began her hunger strike and has moved into the office to ensure she remains in the public eye.

Hunger strikes aren't uncommon in Russia. Last year, Oleg Sentsov, the Ukrainian filmmaker and writer imprisoned in the country on charges of extremism, fasted for 145 days before being force-fed by prison officials. The year before, deputies in Serpukhov, a town in the Moscow region, led a 56-day hunger strike against a landfill that was located too close to a school.

"It's a gesture of despair," Sobol said. "It's not self-immolation, which I'm not ready for yet. But it's still a pretty serious step."

Embed: <https://twitter.com/MBKhMedia/status/1155161087442075648>

Sobol admits that her hunger strike alone might not influence the authorities. "Putin doesn't like reacting to political blackmail, and he considers this blackmail," she said. But she also noted that the hunger strike was bringing attention to her cause, and that she was trying to put pressure on the authorities in other ways as well.

"One of my main instruments in this battle is being public and open," she said.

A longtime ally of Russia's most prominent opposition leader Alexei Navalny, Sobol became the person [most searched](#) for on the country's largest search engine Yandex from mid-June to mid-July. That is due, in part, to her knack for going viral on social media.

Detained on the evening of the first protest, the day after she announced her hunger strike, she made a [run](#) for it when the police weren't paying attention. Although she didn't get far, the video made the rounds on the internet, to the delight of her supporters.

She has since been detained another three times — once after she was [carried](#) out from the Moscow election commission building on the couch where she had been staging a sit-in. She was also detained not once but twice during Saturday's demonstration.

Unlike the other main leaders of the protests, though — Navalny allies Ilya Yashin and Ivan Zhdanov, as well as Dmitry Gudkov, a prominent critic of Vladimir Putin — she has so far avoided prison time.

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Signaling a crackdown on the protest movement last week, the Investigative Committee opened a criminal investigation into opposition politicians who were calling on protesters to take part in unauthorized demonstrations. Navalny and Gudkov have since been handed 30-day prison sentences, while Zhdanov has been sentenced to 15 days and Yashin to 12.

This has left Sobol as virtually the only prominent leader not behind bars. "I feel my responsibility," she said. "But I have never hidden in the bushes from it."

Nor, she claims, has she felt scared by what could happen. She had an indication of the worst

when Navalny was [hospitalized](#) on Sunday with a health scare. Hospital doctors said it was due to an allergic reaction, while Navalny's personal doctors believe he was exposed to unidentified chemicals in prison.

Sobol believes the timing and the fact that Navalny had never experienced an allergic reaction before points to Yevgeny Prigozhin, who has been linked to alleged U.S. presidential election meddling and proxy wars in Ukraine and Syria — and with an [attempt](#) on her husband's life in 2016.

Did the Navalny scare rattle her?

"There's nothing to be scared about," she said. "A lot of people, logic and the law support us."

"And besides," she added, "we've been living with these risks for a long time."

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