The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

‘I Have Nothing to Fear’: The Anti-War Leningrad Siege Survivor Running for St. Petersburg Governor

June 27, 2024



Lyudmila Vasilyeva **Vasilyeva's team**

Lyudmila Vasilyeva, at 83 years old, has a long history of activism.

A Leningrad siege survivor and pensioner, Vasilyeva is now a hopeful for governor of Russia's second-largest city, St. Petersburg. She aims to challenge the incumbent, Alexander Beglov, who is running from the ruling, pro-Kremlin United Russia party.

Calling for the end of the Kremlin’s war on Ukraine, she campaigns with the slogan “St. Petersburg — the city of peace.”

As a self-nominated candidate, Vasilyeva must prove she has the support of 2% of St. Petersburg residents — nearly 80,000 signatures — by Friday. Additionally, by law, she needs the support of 155 municipal deputies from at least 80 municipal entities in St. Petersburg.

Although she is still far from meeting the criteria to run for governor, Vasilyeva told The

Moscow Times that her main goal is to have a platform to speak out and advocate for peace.

A veteran protester, Vasilyeva took to the streets of her native St. Petersburg on the day of Kremlin critic Alexei Navalny's death in February and was briefly detained three times for protesting during the early days of the 2022 invasion of Ukraine.

The Moscow Times spoke to Vasilyeva about her political ambitions and hopes for the country.

The interview has been edited for length and clarity.

MT: Why are you running for governor?

LV: I am a native of St. Petersburg. I was born in this city two months before the start of the Great Patriotic War and have lived here my entire life. This is my city. It was important for me to be heard here. My main slogan is 'Stop the war.' I have said it many times but now I decided to run for office to declare this slogan loudly so people understand why I am against the war. That is my goal.

Additionally, I want young people to come to power — they are our future. My team mainly consists of young people. I want energetic youth who are looking towards the future to come to power. The people on my team are true citizens of St. Petersburg and patriots of their country. They are brave people.

MT: What is it like to start a political career in Russia in 2024?

LV: I'm not afraid for myself. But I am worried for the children, for our future. Like a mother, I want to embrace them all and protect them from this horror that's happening in our country. My family, especially my son Denis, is very worried about me, of course. But at my age, I have nothing to fear.

People on the streets don't recognize me yet. But when they come [to sign documents endorsing my candidacy], they all thank me and express their gratitude for giving them the opportunity to show that not everyone in Russia supports the war. These are very brave people who overcame their fears to come and openly say it.

We've already held meetings with voters. For example, blockade survivors — wonderful women, free-spirited and well-groomed, defying their age — have come to our headquarters. We are resilient, hardened by the siege.

I believe that it is important to talk to everyone, to listen to each person's opinion, and to explain mine. When I attend protests, I always speak with the police. By the way, they often listen to my position. Even now, I believe that dialogue with everyone is essential. We still have to live together. We can't get away from each other — we live in the same country and we will continue to communicate. I believe we must try to extinguish the hatred that exists in society today.

MT: What challenges have you faced as a self-nominated candidate?

LV: It was difficult to find a place for our campaign headquarters. Many refused to rent out space when they found out it was for an election campaign, saying, "You understand the situation, don't you?" It was also uncomfortable during the registration process at the electoral commission. They tried to find reasons to reject us, such as twice refusing the appointment of our financial manager on formal grounds.

State-run media does not cover our campaign. However, we are the only ones who are actively campaigning. I see no one else but [current Governor Alexander] Beglov, who is on TV from morning to night. We have tried to get coverage on our local TV stations and newspapers several times, but they were silent.

Collecting signatures and securing support from municipal deputies is a tough task. I feel like I'm living in a madhouse. No rest, no sleep. This morning, there were calls, then interviews, and later we will go to the campaign headquarters. Apart from St. Petersburg, we are collecting signatures abroad, in Europe. But I feel like a steadfast tin soldier.

MT: What are your future plans?

LV: The plan is not to stop. Even if we cannot participate in the election campaign [for the head of St. Petersburg] we will come up with something. Of course, this format [gubernatorial elections] will be closed to us if we don't collect enough signatures. But we can still continue some sort of action in support of peace because the slogan we started with is the right one. Our slogan is "St. Petersburg — the city of Peace." This slogan is not necessarily tied to the election campaign. Additionally, we have upcoming municipal elections in the city, so we can make an impact there.

In any case, we do not plan to stop. I want our country to be a place where people can live comfortably, where human rights are protected, where the air is clean, where the land is not defiled, where forests don't burn. I want Russia to be a country where people live well.

The people who have already endorsed me are people of all ages, from 18 to the oldest at 88. What unites them is that they want to stop the war and they are brave to show that.

And I thank them all.

Original url:
https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2024/06/27/i-have-nothing-to-fear-the-anti-war-leningrad-siege-survivor-running-for-st-petersburg-governor-a85531