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This Mysterious Occult Healer Is Behind Some of Russia's Biggest Wartime Protests

By Leyla Latypova

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Svetlana Lada-Rus. **Vladimir Lamzin / TASS**

Almost everything about Svetlana Lada-Rus, one of the most influential opposition figures in Russia, defies conventional expectations of who a worthy opponent of President Vladimir Putin should be.

Media headlines have branded her a "conspiracy theorist," a "reptilian fighter," a "healer," a "fraudster," a political party founder and a wannabe president.

In many ways, all of those labels apply. An elusive occult healer whose worldview is a dizzying melange of Russian nationalism, Soviet nostalgia, anti-Western conspiracy theories and pagan spirituality, Lada-Rus is easy for skeptics to write off as a fringe figure.

But she is also a rare exiled politician still capable of mobilizing a base of loyal supporters

inside Russia at a time of ever-escalating repression and internet censorship.

Lada-Rus' followers have taken center stage in some of the most significant resistance campaigns in wartime Russia, including historic protests in the republic of Altai, a recent standoff between Siberian farmers and the authorities and even the nationwide campaign for the return of mobilized troops from Ukraine.

At least 27 Lada-Rus supporters — all women — have faced pressure from the security services for their political activities over the past four years, according to open-source reports analyzed by The Moscow Times.

Three of these supporters were handed prison sentences ranging from 2.5 to 5.5 years and at least six are still awaiting sentencing in pre-trial detention.

Lada-Rus herself has not been seen in person since 2016, when she fled Russia while facing investigation on charges of large-scale fraud and causing grievous bodily harm through negligence, both of which she denies.

Her exact whereabouts remain unknown and she no longer speaks to the press. A one-off interview she gave to the Russian press before fleeing the country survives only in internet archives.

It was not possible to reach Lada-Rus for comment.

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The 68-year-old healer-turned-politician has nonetheless maintained a sizable online presence by building a media ecosystem with nearly 1 million subscribers across seven social media platforms, including Telegram, YouTube and the blockchain-based messenger Bastyon.

She primarily communicates with her followers in lengthy voice recordings posted to her Telegram channel as videos with a static photo of herself.

"We are sitting in a car that is speeding into the abyss. Time is working against us. Nuclear, atomic war is being planned and there must be a force that will stand up to it," Lada-Rus says in one recent recording.

Over the course of the hour-long message, Lada-Rus moves from praising Soviet dictator Josef Stalin to accusing British intelligence services of orchestrating Russia's downfall to repeating antisemitic conspiracy theories.

She also lashes out at Elon Musk's father Errol Musk over his plans to relocate white South African farmers to Russia.

People like the elder Musk are "wiping Russians off of the face of the earth," Lada-Rus says, accusing them of "helping Indians, Africans and Jews to come to Russia."

At one point, she lambasts a social media user for noting that she ignored historical facts about Stalin-era purges, during which historians estimate that as many as 39 million Soviet citizens were subjected to repressions and more than 1.1 million were executed.

“Don’t say anything bad about the Tsar, about Stalin, about Lenin or about Brezhnev — that’s a great sin,” she says.

Lada-Rus’ ideology rests on the belief that the Soviet Union’s collapse triggered the “colonization” of Russia by Western powers, though she harbors deep affection for Tsar Nicholas II.

She and her followers claim that Putin is simultaneously a puppet of both the West and the Chabad-Lubavitch Hasidic dynasty tasked with accelerating Russia's economic and societal downfall.

Lada-Rus deems Russia’s liberal opposition equally guilty of working for the West and the Russian Orthodox Church at fault for straying too far from Slavic paganism.

“Russians,” she says, are all the people living in Russia, regardless of their ethnicity — and all of them are “Indigenous” to the country.

This Russian nationalist rhetoric is accompanied by anti-LGBTQ+ hate and beliefs in a Sun deity and the healing powers of collective meditation — an homage to her origins as a popular occult healer.

Born in Soviet Azerbaijan in 1958, Lada-Rus spent most of her life in the southwestern Russian city of Samara, where her family moved when she was an infant.

A music teacher by training, Lada-Rus made a drastic career change in 1996 when she opened an occult healing center in Samara during the boom in alternative medicine that followed the Soviet collapse.

Lada-Rus’ energy healing treatments quickly became popular, bringing her tens of thousands of loyal followers across the Samara region by the end of the decade.

The healer, then known as Svetlana Peunova, first ventured into politics in 2003 when she ran for the lower-house State Duma from an electoral district in Tolyatti, the second-largest city in the Samara region.

After coming third in the Duma race, Lada-Rus unsuccessfully ran for mayor of Tolyatti in 2004 and 2008, mayor of Samara in 2010 and for a regional legislative seat in 2007.

Seemingly undeterred by previous failures, she launched a presidential bid in 2011 with backing from her own party, Volya (“The Will”), but failed to collect the 2 million signatures needed to appear on the ballot.

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In 2015, Svetlana Peunova officially changed her last name to Lada-Rus — a reference to

Lada, the Slavic goddess of love and fertility, and the Rus, the medieval peoples from whom Russia derives its name.

The following year, Russian authorities outlawed Volya as "extremist" and launched a criminal probe against Lada-Rus and her aide Marina Gerasimova.

The two women were accused of fraud, creating an organization that infringes on the identity and rights of Russian citizens and causing grievous bodily harm through negligence with the occult practices.

State prosecutors alleged that groups created by Lada-Rus operated under the guise of traditional medicine and political activism while functioning as a "destructive community" that encouraged followers to abandon their "civic responsibilities."

While Gerasimova received a sentence of community service and a fine in 2017 after spending a year in detention, Lada-Rus fled the country before trial.

Last year, a court in Samara sentenced Lada-Rus in absentia to eight years in prison.

In February, the same court sentenced her only son, Iliya Peunov, to 17 years in a maximum-security prison for running a makeshift mephedrone lab in his apartment.

The criminal cases appear to have done little to weaken Lada-Rus' growing popularity, with her social media following growing by more than 7,000 followers over the past six months.

"They are trying to shut the mouths of honest and decent people, true patriots who stand up for the interests of the country's residents and regions," Altaian activist Yevgenia Tokorokova said of Lada-Rus' jail sentence.

"Svetlana Lada-Rus is the main opponent of the current government...They want to isolate her from society, silence her and eliminate her as a political competitor," Tokorokova added.

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Lada-Rus' followers are spread across Russia's regions, from the republics of the North Caucasus to the Far East.

The majority of them are women, a clear political advantage in a country where women increasingly outnumber men.

Her eclectic and unorthodox teachings are another key to her growing popularity in the country where more than half of the population believes in at least one conspiracy theory, according to an independent survey published last month.

Perhaps most curious is Lada-Rus' popularity among members of Indigenous communities, whom she has openly referred to as "backward ethnic groups."

One of her best-known supporters is the Indigenous Altaian activist Aruna Arna, who emerged as a star participant of last year's mass rallies against controversial municipal

governance reforms in her native republic.

“Who else will expose the colonizers and defend the country and its people without giving excuses like ‘I have a family, children, work — I can't do it.’ Who? Who will stand up for Russia at the cost of their well-being and life?” Arna wrote of Lada-Rus last June during the healer’s criminal trial.

“This is a nightmare! This is simply outrageous! Where are you, all the understanding, courageous and honest people? Speak out in defense of Lada-Rus!” Arna told her followers.

Shortly after coming out in defense of Lada-Rus, Arna, a mother of three, was added to Russia’s “terrorists and extremists” list. She is currently under arrest on terrorism charges.

Frederik Boumeester contributed reporting.

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