

Chirikova, Showered With Fake \$100 Bills, Fears Nothing

By [The Moscow Times](#)

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Chirikova standing on a Khimki sidewalk amid fake U.S. \$100 bills thrown at her by pro-Kremlin activists Monday. **Sergey Ponomarev**

Environmentalist and protest leader Yevgenia Chirikova had not even made it to the Khimki election headquarters to register as a candidate before opponents ran up and showered her with fake \$100 bills as she spoke to reporters.

The aim was clear: to damage her campaign to become mayor of Khimki, a town just northwest of Moscow, by portraying her as a tool of the United States, which President Vladimir Putin has accused of fomenting opposition to his 12-year rule.

Chirikova, a leading light of anti-Putin protests this year, initially looked flustered as banknotes blew around her. But she soon regained her composure and laughed as her four hecklers unfurled a U.S. flag behind her and tried to push a small Stars and Stripes into her hand for the cameras.

Chirikova — who has been detained, treated roughly by police and received threats to herself and her family because of her environmental work — is undaunted by the threat of harassment as she joins an opposition campaign to chip away at Putin’s authority by challenging United Russia in a local election.

“The more they oppress us, the more it shows we are right to really cause them trouble,” Chirikova, 35, said before registering her candidacy Monday.

“I fear nothing. I really don’t know what could stop me now,” she said.

Chirikova’s life epitomizes the civic awakening of Russia’s small but growing middle class. Angry over a planned highway that would pave over a forest, the mother of two began to speak out in 2006, gradually emerging as a leader of a movement that has increasingly questioned the institutions that dominate daily life across Russia with little open debate.

On a recent afternoon, Chirikova campaigned in a way any democratic voter would recognize, surrounded by a swarm of journalists and occasionally stopping to shake hands with residents in the streets. Visiting a construction site that has replaced a Soviet-era garden, she complained about the way residents are blocked from the planning process in Khimki, which, like many growing Russian towns, is plagued by overdevelopment and residential high-rises that seem to sprout overnight.

Resident Serafima Naumcheva, 61, tempered her high hopes that Chirikova could beat Khimki’s acting mayor, Oleg Shakhov, who has Kremlin support and whose career is closely linked to the highway.

“Everyone here likes her, but people say there’s no way she will be elected. Locals might as well vote for her, but I don’t think that the election commission will play fair,” she said.

Chirikova’s chances of success are hard to gauge because there are no independent opinion polls in an election campaign that is just starting. She won 15 percent of the vote when she ran for mayor of Khimki in 2009, 7 percentage points fewer than the winner.

After handing in her registration papers Monday, she now has until Sept. 13 to submit 800 signatures in support. Scores of opposition candidates have been barred from running in the past by election officials who found fault with signatures or other small details. But the opposition has had some electoral success this year, notably defeating United Russia’s candidate in the mayoral race in Yaroslavl.

Chirikova’s candidacy has received the backing of the liberal Yabloko party, the Parnas coalition, led by former Prime Minister Mikhail Kasyanov and two other opposition leaders, and protest leader Alexei Navalny, but it is not clear how far their influence goes in Khimki.

Political analyst Dmitry Oreshkin said he was certain that pro-Kremlin election officials would not tolerate Chirikova at the helm of this relatively small, but key, city of about 208,000 people. “I think she won’t be allowed to win because billions of dollars are at stake there,” he said, referring to the Khimki highway budget.

The highway issue has been central to Chirikova’s career.

Chirikova, who holds degrees in aviation and economics as well as an MBA, was born in Moscow and moved to Khimki shortly after giving birth to her first child. While walking one afternoon with her two daughters in the Khimki forest, the young mother saw marks on the trees and later learned that regional officials had decided the forest would be chopped down. Chirikova started printing petitions and soon formed a tight circle of supporters and followers.

The battle touched some of Russia's most intractable issues: corruption, land use and the abuse of power. The Khimki highway project offers more opportunities than usual for enrichment because the cleared land along the roadway is slated for development. Activists say that the current route benefits officials because they can buy the land in the forest for kopeks.

In November 2008, Mikhail Beketov, a local journalist who was among the first to raise the alarm about the destruction of the forest and suspicions that local officials were profiting from the project, was beaten so viciously that he was left brain damaged and unable to speak. Two years later, Chirikova's fellow activist Konstantin Fetisov was beaten with a similar degree of ferocity. He was left brain-damaged, too.

In recent years, Chirikova has received numerous threats, her husband has been beaten, and authorities have threatened to take away her children. But she had this to say: "Either you go out there and do it and don't think about fear at all, or you leave the country, because life is scary everywhere in Russia for anyone who holds any strong views."

Chirikova sees her foray into politics partly as a continuation of her campaign to improve the environment.

"We have yellow water in our sinks, horrible traffic jams, no traffic lights," she said. "I would like my child to be able to go to school safely. I would like to turn this city into a place where all mothers will be free of those fears."

(Reuters, AP)

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