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Ella Pamfilova, Villain of the Moscow Vote Protest Movement, Belongs to a Dying Breed

Both the Russian government and the opposition have grown tired of her, analysts say.

By Evan Gershkovich

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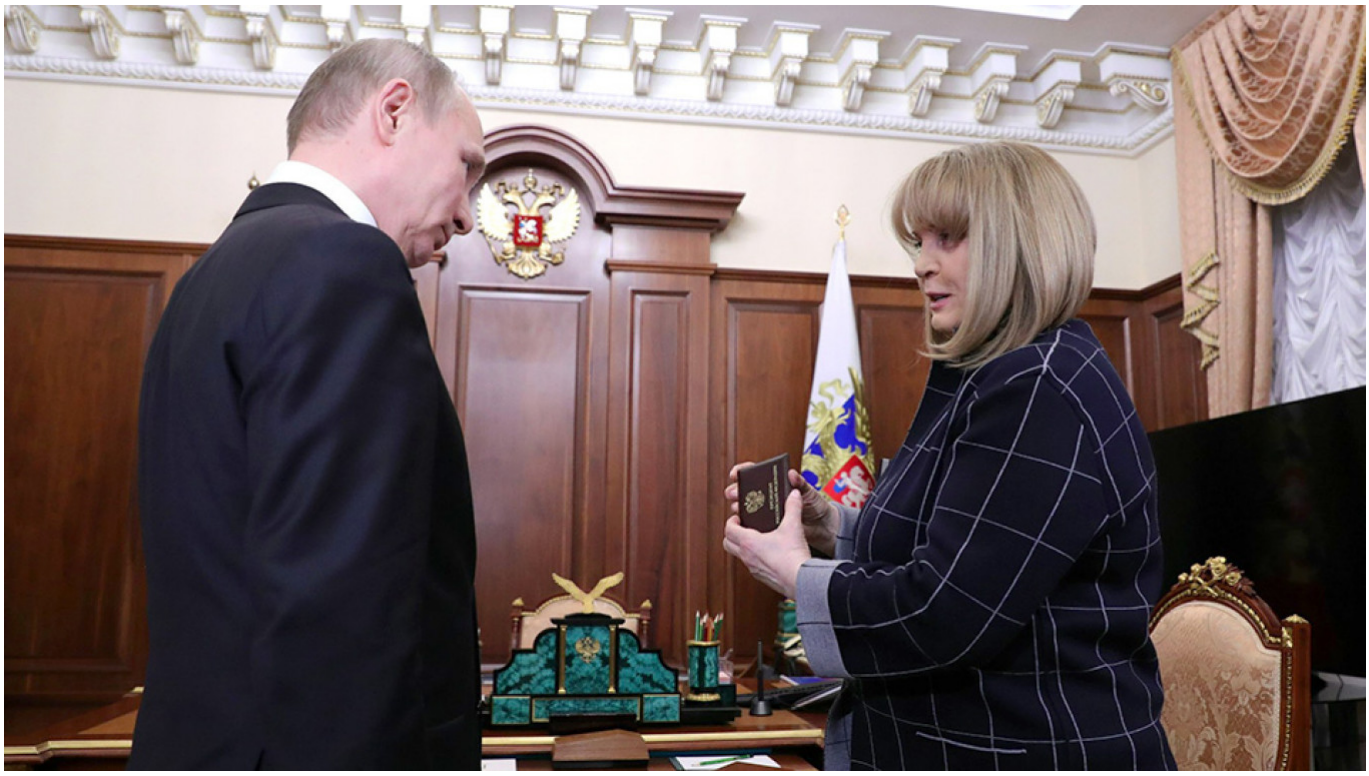

Ella Pamfilova with Vladimir Putin in April 2018, following his last re-election. **Kremlin.ru**

It was one of the defining moments of the summer: the budding leader of Moscow's protest movement for fair elections and the official responsible for protecting Russians' voting rights coming to verbal blows at a public hearing.

"You are the talking head of the presidential administration. Shame on you," Lyubov Sobol lobbed at Ella Pamfilova, prompting a retort from the head of the Central Election Commission: "You neglect and don't know the elementary foundations of electoral law. You are completely ignorant."

Sobol, an ally of Russia's most prominent opposition leader Alexei Navalny, was one of more than a dozen opposition candidates for the Moscow city council who were barred from running in last weekend's elections. Her exchange with Pamfilova, videos of which soon racked up hundreds of thousands of views, came during an early July hearing on the candidate's appeal, which the election chief denied.

Days earlier, Moscow's election commission officials had ruled that the opposition candidates had not collected enough valid signatures from eligible voters to make it onto the ballot. The candidates argued that they were actually removed for political reasons. Many Muscovites agreed, prompting a wave of the biggest anti-government protests Russia's capital had seen in years.

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That anger, however, was precisely what President Vladimir Putin was hoping to avoid when he named Pamfilova his elections chief in 2016. A longtime human rights defender respected by the opposition, her appointment was a bid to improve the public's perception of voting standards, analysts say.

And while the rallies have receded for the time being, for some protesters it was the viral exchange between Sobol and Pamfilova that hammered home that the Russian government has no interest in making concessions to its opposition.

Now, with the more consequential 2021 State Duma elections on the horizon, the beleaguered elections chief has her work cut out for her.

"Her value as the head of the Central Election Commision was primarily based on a large chunk of the opposition trusting her," said Alexei Chesnakov, a former Kremlin official. "With this confidence having fallen to zero and almost impossible to restore, Pamfilova will struggle to stay in this role in advance of the Duma elections."

Building bridges

Three years ago, some liberals took Pamfilova's appointment as a sign the authorities were backing election reform.

After falsifications during the 2011 State Duma elections triggered the last wave of mass anti-government protests in the Russian capital, Putin promised to clean up election commissions across the country that had long turned a blind eye to, or supported, rigged elections for Kremlin-backed candidates.

"If there were not a political desire for normal, fair and open elections, then they would never choose a person like me, someone hard to work with who won't play the subordinate," Pamfilova said at the time.

To her backers, Pamfilova, 65, had for years proven to be someone with good intentions who could get things done.

First elected in 1989 to a seat on the Soviet Supreme Council, Pamfilova made her name

starting in 1991 as Labor and Social Affairs Minister under liberal prime minister Yegor Gaidar in Boris Yeltsin's first post-Soviet government.

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"It was a time of wild inflation and low salaries, and mine as a state university professor was lower than my mother's pension," said Svetlana Gannushkina, a veteran human rights activist and Nobel Peace Prize nominee. "This was because Pamfilova was fighting for the elderly."

Gannushkina would later get to work closely with Pamfilova, when new president Putin in 2002 named her chairwoman of the Presidential Human Rights Council. Gannushkina traveled with Pamfilova to Chechnya during the Second Chechen War, where she said Pamfilova worked tirelessly, even in life-threatening circumstances, to help negotiate the release of Russian troops.

"Once, an innocent person was arrested and Pamfilova went into the police station. She didn't leave until she came out with him," Gannushkina recalled.

"I'm not trying to make a hero out of her. These are just the facts I saw."

During those years Pamfilova was also regularly able to organize meetings between human rights activists and Putin, Gannushkina said.

"It was important for both sides to have a dialogue, to break a wall and find understanding," Pamfilova said in a 2010 interview, describing her role as "building a bridge" between the president and "the main critics of Russia's state power."

Open door policy

But others who have worked closely with her said that, as the years went on, while she managed to maintain a dialogue, the results began to diminish.

"Her door was always open and she was always ready to talk and to commiserate," said Tanya Lokshina, the associate Europe and Central Asia director at Human Rights Watch, who served on Pamfilova's advisory council while she was Russia's human rights ombudsperson from 2014 to 2016. "But it's hard to say whether by that stage she wasn't trying enough or whether the political regime had become too rigid and unyielding."

"She would say, 'What a nightmare, but I'm not sure I can do anything.' It became a refrain of sorts."

In 2010, Pamfilova resigned from her role in protest against attacks on human rights activists. When Putin offered her a role as his elections chief, some saw her as an ideal fit for making Russian elections more fair — someone who could work with the Kremlin but was also principled and respected by the opposition.

But critics saw her appointment simply as a shift in strategy — from the systematic ballot-stuffing of her predecessor Vladimir Churov's reign, whose removal was one of the main

demands of the 2011-2012 Bolotnaya protests, to a new tactic of eliminating candidates before they could even make it onto the ballot.

"Filtering out undesirable candidates at the registration stage means [the authorities] are left with the 'right' list of candidates, and therefore there is no need to 'correct' the results," the political commentator Andrei Pertsev wrote at the time. "The Kremlin has clamped down on everything and changed the rules to make 'fair elections' possible while effectively guaranteeing their results."

"In this light, Pamfilova is necessary to maintain the sham," he added.

Related article: St. Petersburg Police Filmed Dragging Local Election Monitor as Critics Decry 'Dirty' Vote

Navalny was skeptical Pamfilova had been handed the reins to make substantive changes too, proclaiming from the moment she was appointed that he would test her. The opportunity arrived soon enough with municipal elections just weeks later in the Moscow suburb of Barvikha. Four of Navalny's allies ran in the election and claimed that non-residents had been bused in to vote against them. Pamfilova cancelled the vote.

One of those candidates was Ivan Zhdanov, now the director of Navalny's Anti-Corruption Foundation. Today he sees Pamfilova having stepped in then as a way for her to save face early on. Over the years since, the two have had other opportunities to butt heads. This summer Zhdanov was one of the candidates barred from running in the Moscow City Duma elections.

Like Lokshina, Zhdanov noted that what has set Pamfilova apart from her predecessor is that she has maintained a dialogue with the opposition. "I've had four meetings with her since she's been appointed, which is pretty unprecedented," he said.

Still, in his view, that's as far as she has gone.

"People thought that because one of theirs was in this role as elections chief that something would improve," Zhdanov said. "But what we have seen is that this didn't work out."

No room for dialogue

In recent years, Pamfilova in her public statements has begun to sound and act less like someone sympathetic to liberal ideas at all.

In a pre-election interview, she denied that this summer's protests were even about fair elections, but because people needed an excuse to express unhappiness. In another interview, she told the Associated Press (AP) that, as far as barring candidates is concerned, "we have to stick to the letter [of the law]."

After it ran, Pamfilova called for a public hearing, saying the news agency only published select quotes rather than the full transcript. The hearing will take place later this month.

Pamfilova did not respond to multiple requests for comment for this article, but she told AP that her election commission will look at lowering the number of signatures candidates need

to make it onto ballots.

Not all of her own advisors are convinced she will follow through.

Speaking at an election commission roundtable last year, Alexander Kynev, a political scientist and member of the Central Election Commission's advisory council, predicted that keeping opposition candidates off the ballot in the Moscow city council elections would spark mass protests.

"Not a single thing was done to prevent this from happening," he told The Moscow Times this week, adding: "Pamfilova's public statements have made me doubt that she even wants to effect any change."

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Others who work with her dispute that evaluation. For Grigory Melkonyants of the Golos election-monitoring NGO, Pamfilova's tenure as a whole shows that improvements have been made — particularly in allowing observers to monitor voting stations. The problem, he believes, is that people have set expectations too high for a single person.

"Especially the person who holds this role in our time," Melkonyants said. "There are so many election commission officials on so many different levels across such a massive territory. There's only so much that can be done."

Those expectations have also changed Pamfilova, according to political analyst Tatiana Stanovaya.

"She truly believed that she had set herself apart from the authorities and she saw herself as a hero for it," she said. "And what did she get in return? A huge wave of criticism from liberal society. In the end, she turned her back on them and started more actively defending the authorities."

Yet the authorities, too, have hung Pamfilova out to dry, said Stanovaya. That's because they have excluded the politics of building bridges with critics.

"She is from a different epoch in which dialogue with the opposition was still considered important," Stanovaya said. "The authorities have now decided that they don't need to work with the opposition at all."

For Gleb Pavlovsky, a former Kremlin advisor who originally lobbied for Pamfilova to have a role in Putin's government, her story "symbolizes that working within the system is no longer possible."

"There are very few people like her left," he said, "and I think the best thing she can do now is resign."

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