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Oligarch Looks to Revamp Party

By Alexandra Odynova

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Prokhorov's appointment would spell the return of big money to national politics after a decade of separation. **Vladimir Filonov**

Billionaire Mikhail Prokhorov said Monday that he would lead Right Cause, the only party that has supported a second term for President Dmitry Medvedev, but observers expressed doubt that he would be able to salvage it from political limbo.

The 46-year-old owner of the New Jersey Nets, named Russia's third-richest businessman with a fortune of $18 billion by Forbes in April, was tipped to join the pro-business Right Cause party last month but dismissed it as an April Fool's joke at the time.

His appointment would spell the return of big money to national politics after almost a decade of separation under an unwritten contract between big business and the Kremlin. But whether the party will be able to win seats in State Duma elections in December remains to be seen, analysts said.

"I confirm, the information is correct," Prokhorov replied curtly at a news conference

in Kaluga when asked about news reports that he planned to head the party.

"I've addressed my proposal to the Right Cause party bosses," he said, Interfax reported.

He refused to elaborate until his candidacy is approved, but said he would propose a new party platform and a new name to better cater to the still-politically neglected middle class.

Prokhorov's confirmation appears to be a matter of time. Right Cause co-founder and co-chairman Leonid Gozman confirmed to The Moscow Times that the party backed Prokhorov as able to challenge the supremacy of the ruling United Russia party.

"The party wishes to destroy United Russia's monopoly on power," Gozman said in a telephone interview.

A public figure can currently "either join United Russia or stay neutral," Gozman said. "But we would like to see part of the elite joining a different party."

Neither Medvedev nor Putin commented on Prokhorov's remarks Monday.

Prokhorov explained his motives in an e-mail to employees of his Onexim holding that was leaked to the press, appearing in Komsomolskaya Pravda on Monday.

"I got flooded with calls from my colleagues, friends and close ones — the many of you who didn't understand my refusal," Prokhorov wrote.

Even his sister, who "can't stand politics," told him: "Misha, you should go, you can change something," the newspaper said.

Prokhorov, a co-owner of Norilsk Nickel who has invested tens of millions of dollars into projects in line with Medvedev's modernization campaign, has cut a controversial figure in years past. He once threw posh parties at the French ski resort of Courchevel and in 2007 was accused by local police in connection with a prostitution case. He was never convicted of wrongdoing, and the murky case fizzled out the next year.

Prokhorov also co-runs with his sister Irina a prominent charity that sponsors the Nos literary prize.

Prokhorov is a welcome face in government circles, with Prime Minister Vladimir Putin personally taking his Yo-Mobile, the country's first hybrid car, for a test drive in front of cameras last month. But he angered many Russians that same month by proposing that the workweek be expanded to 60 hours, from the current 40, and other employer-friendly amendments to the Labor Code.

Right Cause, the youngest of the country's seven registered parties, has achieved little since it was created in 2009 from the merger of the Union of Right Forces, Civil Force and Russia's Democratic Party.

Right Cause's inception was sanctioned by the Kremlin, which was looking for a loyal party to unite liberal voters. On Monday, Gozman described the party as a "political compromise" with the authorities.

But the party has won only 14 seats in regional legislatures nationwide since 2009 and failed to make a survey of party popularity conducted last month by Levada Center, the independent pollster. A recent poll by state-run VTsIOM put its public support at 2.9 percent, far below the 7 percent threshold for the State Duma elections.

Analysts blamed the party's poor performance mainly on the lack of a charismatic leader. It is co-headed by Gozman, journalist Georgy Bovt and Delovaya Rossia head Boris Titov.

To the party's credit, it has spent quite some time looking for a frontman. Candidates named by the media in recent months have included First Deputy Prime Minister Igor Shuvalov, Kremlin economic aide Arkady Dvorkovich and Finance Minister Alexei Kudrin. None of them has spoken publicly on the issue.

"Right Cause is a party that needs a charismatic politician with administrative and financial resources," said Alexei Mukhin, an analyst with the Center for Political Information.

At the moment, the party "doesn't really exist," he said.

In November, Gozman announced that the party would back Medvedev should he decide to run for re-election in 2012. Medvedev, who has no party affiliation, remains in need of a political vehicle, with United Russia being headed by Putin. He has not spoken about aligning with Right Cause.

"Medvedev might use Right Cause as a political tool but will continue to stay above the parties," said Yury Korgunyuk, a political analyst with the Indem think tank. "But before that, the party has to overcome the 7 percent barrier in the parliamentary elections."

Gozman declined to comment on Medvedev's possible affiliation with the party. "Putin and Medvedev are such a complicated thing," he said.

Mukhin voiced skepticism about the party's future, predicting it might win only about 2 percent of the vote in the Duma elections. He added, however, that vote rigging could improve its turnout and much depended on "how many votes will be written in."

Regardless of the party's future, the addition of Prokhorov would in itself mark a landmark change in Russian politics. It would be the first time a billionaire has openly dabbled in politics since the arrest of former Yukos CEO Mikhail Khodorkovsky in 2003.

Khodorkovsky was jailed for fraud and tax evasion, but his imprisonment was widely seen as punishment from Putin for his political ambitions, which included financing liberal opposition parties ahead of the 2003 Duma elections. His jail term, extended in December until 2017, was considered a warning for businesspeople to stay away from politics.

Prokhorov said Monday that he did not "consult with anyone from the presidential administration" about joining Right Cause. But Mukhin dismissed the claim, saying the decision must have been approved from above.

Prokhorov's decision was praised Monday by Yevgeny Chichvarkin, the former Yevroset owner who was tipped in 2009 as the new head of the party's Moscow branch but instead ended up fleeing to London to escape what he called trumped-up criminal charges.

The charges were recently dropped.

Chichvarkin said he would like to work under Prokhorov were it not for his fears that he might be arrested if he returned home, Interfax reported.

The head of United Russia's Duma faction, Boris Gryzlov, said Right Cause would not succeed with Prokhorov because he had alienated voters with the 60-hour workweek and a proposal to increase the retirement age.

The leadership of the Duma's other three parties — A Just Russia, the Liberal Democratic Party and the Communists — also questioned Right Cause's chances at the ballot box.

Right Cause's future may become clearer by late June, when it will hold a party convention at which Prokhorov is expected to present his platform. He said Monday that he would also decide after the convention whether to quit business for politics or combine the two careers.

An earlier version of this article included the incorrect name of the NBA basketball team that Prokhorov owns. The team is called the New Jersey Nets.

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