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The Kremlin's New Yo-Party

By Victor Davidoff

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Mikhail Prokhorov is a headline grabber.

He is in third place on the Forbes list of Russia's richest people with a fortune of $17.5 billion, and the tabloids call him "Russia's richest bachelor." He is famous for creating the Yo-mobile, the country's first hybrid car, and owning the New Jersey Nets basketball team.

Prokhorov recently made headlines again, but this time in the politics sections of newspapers: He announced that he wanted to lead the Right Cause party.

If you've never heard of the party, don't be embarrassed. A recent VTsIOM poll indicated that 48 percent of Russians only heard of the party for the first time when asked about it in the survey.

The party was founded on the ruins of the Union of Right Forces at the end of 2008 and is universally considered to be one of the Kremlin's dud projects. Prokhorov doesn't deny that the Kremlin knew about his decision. As he wrote on his LiveJournal blog, "Yesterday I

decided to call the Kremlin and inform them of my decision to get involved in politics."

The Russian blogosphere reacted to Prokhorov's interest in heading Right Cause with the joke that the political group will henceforth be called the Yo-party.

But the party's leaders are upbeat. Leonid Gozman, co-chairman of the party, commented on his LiveJournal blog: "I think Prokhorov's chances are very good. He is strong, smart and hard working. He has drive and experience. He has established a gigantic business empire, and that means he has experience working with people, delegating responsibilities and resolving conflicts."

To be sure, Prokhorov's success will not only be based on his personal qualities but on the number of zeros before the decimal point on his bank statements. Alexander Ryklin of the online journal Ej.ru wrote: "Prokhorov can spend millions of dollars promoting his new baby, and he can attract other Forbes list businessmen to this new project. He can build party offices out of crystal and gold in every part of Russia." Prokhorov seemed to confirm this prediction when he invited another billionaire, Senator Suleiman Kerimov, to join the party.

But will Prokhorov's money and personal abilities be enough to nudge the party over the 7 percent barrier into the Duma? According to a recent survey, less than 1 percent of voters would cast their ballot for the party today, and increasing that number at least sevenfold in less than a year looks like mission impossible for even the most capable leader.

But there is a more important question: Even if Right Cause headed by Prokhorov gets into the Duma, would the party ever be allowed to carry out a political program truly independent of the Kremlin? That would be tough, and it would be even tougher for a Forbes billionaire than for an ordinary politician.

As Vladimir Milov, one of the leaders of the Party of People's Freedom, noted in Gazeta.ru: "Prokhorov will be an easy target for the party of power. He is an oligarch from the 1990s, known for his eccentric and expensive habits."

Russian political insider and former Gazprom-Media chief Alfred Kokh predicted a grim future for Prokhorov on Ekho Moskvy if he dares to take independent steps in politics. "One step to the right or left, and it's curtains for the guy — a couple of felony cases, a press campaign, out on bail. He'll be on his knees asking for mercy," Kokh said.

So what is the Kremlin trying to accomplish when it creates opposition parties? Apparently it is seriously worried about the drop in the number of people voting in recent elections. Voters ignore elections because they don't believe that they are free and fair or that their vote will change anything. Prokhorov's party won't radically change the political landscape, but it might at least enliven it.

At the same time, however, it's possible that the Kremlin might have other, bigger plans for this party in the long run. As the journalist Stas Kucher wrote on his LiveJournal blog: "Politics in Russia are a big gamble — a game that changes before your eyes along with the rules. In the morning, it's chess, by noon, it's checkers. In the evening, they're playing cards, and at night the winner is the guy who broke his pool cue over the other player's head."

Victor Davidoff is a Moscow-based writer and journalist.

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