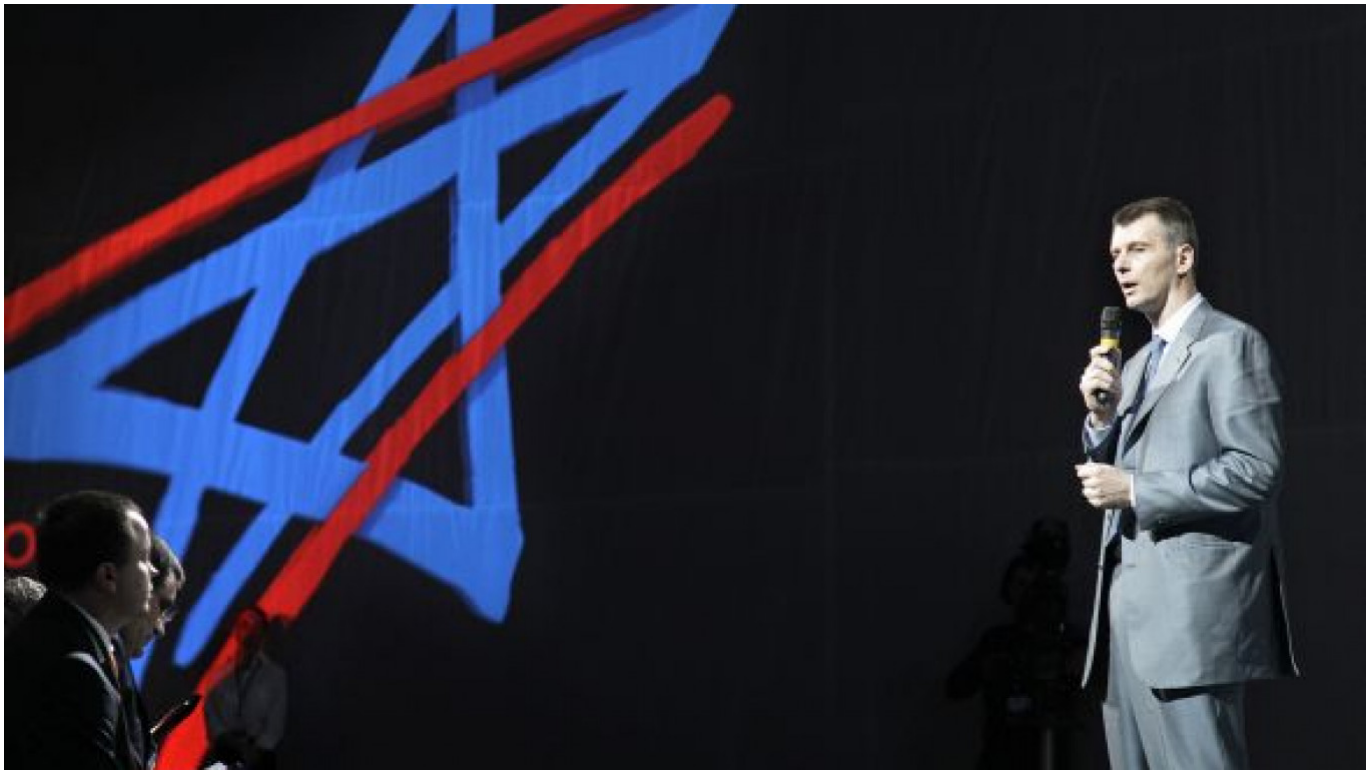
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Prokhorov Eyes Foreigners and Putin's Job

By Alexander Bratersky

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Billionaire Mikhail Prokhorov addressing delegates at a Right Cause congress who elected him as the new leader of the pro-business party on Saturday. **Igor Tabakov**

Billionaire Mikhail Prokhorov seized the reins of the pro-business Right Cause party over the weekend with ambitious plans to expand direct elections, to coax foreigners unhappy with the climate at home to invest in Russia, and to perhaps become prime minister after State Duma elections.

Prokhorov, 46, who easily won election as party leader at a Saturday congress, declared he intended to make Right Cause the Kremlin's second base of support, after United Russia, in the Duma.

"Let's forget the word 'opposition.' This is a word linked to marginal parties that have lost their connection to reality long ago," Prokhorov told 114 party delegates gathered in Moscow's World Trade Center.

"There should be two parties of power, while there is only one now," he said. "We are only trying to group our forces, but United Russia has challenged us, and we should accept this challenge."

Prokhorov, who spoke without notes, laid out a party platform balanced enough to be embraced by both the Kremlin and liberal-minded voters. His remarks resembled a speech to a business conference, devoid of the fiery rhetoric common among other party leaders who have taken on United Russia, lead by Prime Minister Vladimir Putin.

He reiterated an earlier promise to make Right Cause the country's "second party of power" in the Duma elections in December. He also suggested that he would run the party like he does his business empire, with an authoritarian hand at the wheel. Prokhorov is Russia's third-richest person with a fortune of $18 billion, according to Forbes magazine, and his assets include electricity, metals, high technology and the New Jersey Nets basketball team.

"He is the tsar, God and a military commander all together," said Boris Nadezhdin, a senior Right Cause official and former member of the Union of Right Forces, which merged with the Civil Force and Democratic Party to form Right Cause in 2009.

Nadezhdin said Right Cause, which has accomplished little over the past two years, was being turned into "a military machine."

Indeed, Prokhorov didn't mince words in describing his role as party leader ahead of Duma elections. "We are climbing out from under the ground, and we have a task ahead — although later we will make the party's program more democratic," he said.

He told a separate news conference that he did not exclude the possibility of becoming prime minister if his party is elected to parliament.

Speaking about the politically tinged case of jailed former Yukos CEO Mikhail Khodorkovsky and his associate, Platon Lebedev, Prokhorov said both should be freed through parole. The two former businessmen are both eligible for parole and have applied for release.

Prokhorov is also expected to become the main financial backer of Right Cause, taking over a role previously linked to Anatoly Chubais, who co-founded the Union of Right Forces while heading the now-dismantled electricity monopoly Unified Energy System.

Chubais will leave Right Cause soon, his adviser Leonid Gozman told Kommersant on Saturday. Gozman, who served as one of three Right Cause co-leaders before Prokhorov's election, will remain in the party as an ordinary member.

Another former co-leader, Boris Titov, head of the Delovaya Rossiya business association, will also remain as an ordinary member, while the third, Georgy Bovt, a former senior Izvestia editor, took a seat on the party's new 11-member leadership council.

Turning to the party platform, Prokhorov said more power should be given to the regions and federal districts. He called for direct elections of mayors, chief judges, prosecutors and the heads of police precincts. He said single mandate seats should be returned to the Duma.

"Our country is called the Russian Federation, but judging by the leadership it is an empire where only the executive branch is working," Prokhorov said.

He said a top goal would be to invite foreign companies hit hard by crises in their home countries to look for opportunities in Russia.

His remarks echoed comments made by President Dmitry Medvedev at a meeting of visiting U.S. fund managers on May 25, 2010. "We invite all those who suffer at home to come to Russia," Medvedev said.

Before the party congress began, about a dozen members of Young Guard, United Russia's youth group, rallied against Prokhorov outside the World Trade Center with signs like "Prokhorov: Criminalized Politics." One young man, dressed in a smart suit, stood on an old-fashioned wooden cart pulled by attractive young women screaming, "Prokhorov! Skiing! Courchevel!"

French police detained Prokhorov, who has the reputation of being a playboy bachelor, at the Courchevel ski resort in 2007 on suspicion of being part of a prostitution ring. The businessman was released without charges.

At the news conference, Prokhorov said women have played an important role in his life. "I'm the last person who can be accused of ignoring women — that would just be an insult," he said. "I believe in love. I'm waiting to meet my second half and to have the life that normal people lead."

During his party speech, Prokhorov addressed fears that Right Cause might become a party of tycoons, saying its electoral base could comprise heads of households and young people.

"Today, everything connected to human capital, education and culture is in a state of degradation," he said. "I believe that spending for health and education should remain ahead of spending for defense and law enforcement agencies."

Prokhorov's election was carried by state television over the weekend. Analysts said a key factor that will determine whether Right Cause clears the 7 percent threshold to win Duma seats will be whether it gets access to airtime on television.

Prokhorov's party platform won praise from Medvedev's top economic adviser, Arkady Dvorkovich. "The majority of the issues voiced by Prokhorov are attractive to me. Some needed to be discussed further," Dvorkovich wrote on his Twitter account.

But it is to early to say whether Right Cause might become Medvedev's political base, said Alexei Mukhin, an analyst with the Center for Political Information. "The electoral base for the party like that is around 3 percent," he said.

Mukhin also cautioned that even if the party won airtime, the coverage might not translate into votes on Election Day. "If you blow up a balloon too much, it can pop," he said.

Medvedev said he spoke to Prokhorov before he laid out his aspiration to lead Right Cause earlier this year. "It is to early to say how it will turn out for him. As a leader, he has both strengths and weaknesses," Medvedev said in an interview published Friday in state-owned

Moskovskiye Novosti.

In an interview with the Financial Times published last week, Medvedev said he regretted that liberal-minded Finance Minister Alexei Kudrin had declined to join the party.

One Right Cause official said liberal-minded officials in the Kremlin needed a support base to counter United Russia. "You can't play chess with yourself," he said, speaking on condition of anonymity because he was not authorized to speak to the media.

Alexander Kubayev, chairman of Right Cause's Yaroslavl branch, expressed hope that a leader like Prokhorov would give regional officials the confidence to voice support for Right Cause more openly.

Several United Russia officials criticized Prokhorov as a businessman who knew nothing about politics but still harbored "enormous" political ambitions.

"For now, this party gives the impression of being nothing more than a gathering of businessmen," Yury Shuvalov, deputy head of United Russia's top organizing body, said in a statement.

United Russia official Andrei Isayev said Right Cause, the Communist Party and the liberal opposition Party of People's Freedom all sought "to destroy Russia from within."

Vladimir Ryzhkov, co-leader of the Party of People's Freedom, said Saturday that Right Cause was "another Kremlin project." He spoke at a Pushkin Square rally of 2,000 people protesting the Justice Ministry's refusal to register the party last week.

But Prokhorov found support among some leading culture figures, including liberal-leaning directors Pavel Lungin and Valery Todorovsky.

"He made up my mind," Lungin said in an interview at the congress. "He made his message clear: He wants power with a capital 'P'."

"He is like a rocket," Todorovsky said. "He has an opportunity to take the right path or fail."

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