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Right Cause Split Over Nationalists

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Prokhorov's billboard bearing the slogan, "Truth is the real power. Who is right is strong," which is a paraphrase from the 2000 film "Brother 2." **Vladimir Filonov**

Flamboyant billionaire Mikhail Prokhorov kicked off his election campaign this week with large billboards and lots of invitations to join his Right Cause party — apparently not always to the right people.

On Wednesday, Prokhorov was forced to refute allegations that he was courting nationalists to join his party, which is officially labeled as liberal and pro-business.

"Nationalists never have been and never will be included on any of our party lists. ... We won't have any people who share nationalist views in our party," he wrote on his LiveJournal blog.

Senior functionary Boris Nadezhdin had told Izvestia in an interview published on Wednesday that the party was seeing a "mass influx of officers and young skinheads" in the Moscow region after organizing roundtables with nationalists on the "Russian question."

Prominent nationalists Viktor Militaryov and Pyotr Miloserdov were invited to stand for the party in the State Duma elections in December, said Nadezhdin, chairman of the party's Moscow region branch and a senior member of the party's now-defunct liberal predecessor, Union of Right Forces.

Miloserdov is a former Communist Party official who has organized nationalist marches in the capital, while Militaryov is a political analyst with professed nationalist views.

Militaryov confirmed on Wednesday that he had been asked to join Right Cause's party list for the elections to Moscow region legislature, which will be held parallel to the State Duma elections.

"I accepted the invitation — after all, it is the first time in my political life that I have been invited to join such a movement," he told The Moscow Times, adding that his candidacy would have to be confirmed by the party.

Right Cause spokesman Alexei Urazov suggested that this would not happen.

"All regional and national lists will be decided at the party convention in September. And do believe me, there won't be any nationalists on them," Urazov said in e-mailed comments.

Prokhorov also said Nadezhdin, who is a member of Right Cause's supreme council, should leave if he sympathized with nationalists. "If he shares any of their views, there is no place in the party for him," he wrote on his blog Wednesday.

However, a day earlier, Prokhorov wrote on his blog that he had agreed to lead Right Cause because he saw a right-wing niche. "I saw that United Russia is moving left and leaving a space on the right." He did not elaborate whether he was speaking of the economic right, synonymous in Russia with liberal capitalism, or the political right, whose adherents advocate anti-immigrant and anti-Western policies.

Leonid Gozman, a prominent liberal and co-founder of Right Cause, said that if Nadezhdin meant having a dialogue with nationalists this was not necessarily wrong.

"I have a problem with simply silencing them. It is better to lead a dialogue with those who abstain from violence," he said by telephone Wednesday.

The controversy was fueled by Right Cause's massive advertising campaign, which rolled out this week and openly plays with nationalist overtones.

Prokhorov's image is featured on large billboards next to the slogan: "Truth is the real power. Who is right is strong."

The words closely resemble a famous quote from "Brother 2," a smash hit film released in 2000 by provocative director Alexei Balabanov. The crime thriller portrays the adventures of a retired Russian hit man who travels to the United States to help a friend.

Pavel Krasheninnikov, a Duma deputy with United Russia, said the reference might fuel nationalist sentiment. "There is a lot of extremism in that film. I don't think that will be popular with many ethnic groups," he was quoted as saying by Izvestia earlier this week.

Observers also noted that Right Cause's campaign is based on the colors yellow, white and black — widely used by nationalists because they resemble a 19th-century tsarist flag.

The billboards also feature the web page www.made-in-russia.ru in large letters, which was "under construction" on Wednesday and only linked to Prokhorov's blog.

Opposition leader Boris Nemtsov, who used to head the Union of Right Forces, said Wednesday that while he did not think Prokhorov had much sympathy for nationalists, the campaign was bound to fail.

"Those billboards carry no idea, they make no sense," he said.

Prokhorov's party has been labeled by critics as purely a Kremlin project since its inception in 2009.

Unlike Nemtsov's Party of People's Freedom, which was denied registration in June, Right Cause had little problems getting registered with the Justice Ministry, which is mandatory for elections.

Prokhorov, a metals magnate with a fortune of $18 billion and ranked by Forbes Russia as the country's third-richest man earlier this year, announced in May that he had picked Right Cause to enter politics. He was elected party leader in June.

He has since pushed the party's pro-business orientation, also by inviting many prominent businesspeople to join.

Urazov, the party's spokesman, confirmed on Wednesday that Artyom Bektemirov, owner of the 36.6 pharmacy chain, and agricultural machinery entrepreneur Konstantin Babkin had accepted the invitation.

Babkin had founded his own party last fall, called Partia Dela — Party of Action — but failed to get it registered.

Others, including Nafta Moskva owner Suleiman Kerimov and Sergei Petrov, founder of the Rolf car dealership, have not replied yet, while sausage magnate Vadim Dymov declined, explaining that business is more important for him, Kommersant reported Wednesday.

But analysts said the neither the advertising campaign nor prominent businessmen in the ranks would do much to improve the party's chances in the elections.

A Levada poll in June gave Right Cause just 1 percent of the vote, far below of the Duma's 7 percent threshold.

Alexei Mukhin, head of the Center for Political Information, a think tank, said Prokhorov himself was now the party's main problem.

"He is seen as an oligarch, and oligarchs are not very popular," he said.

Mukhin added that there was little chance to win the nationalist vote because it was firmly with veteran politician Vladimir Zhirinovsky and his Liberal Democrats.

Vladimir Pribylovsky, head of the Panorama think tank, suggested that Prokhorov's meddling in politics was all about money. "He knows that he will lose money, but he agreed to head the party because if he refused he would have lost even more," he said.

The country's businessmen have largely abstained from politics since the 2003 arrest of Yukos founder Mikhail Khodorkovsky, whose oil conglomerate was swallowed up by the Rosneft state holding.

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