

Rebuking the Kremlin, Prokhorov Quits Right Cause

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Mikhail Prokhorov, right, with retired pop diva Alla Pugachyova next to him, applauding on Thursday at a meeting of his supporters where he stepped down from the party's leadership. **Igor Tabakov**

Billionaire-cum-politician Mikhail Prokhorov on Thursday publicly called for the ouster of Vladislav Surkov, the Kremlin's powerful point man for domestic politics.

"There is a puppet master in our country who has privatized the whole political system — Surkov. He needs to be fired. Only then we can have real politics," Prokhorov said at a meeting of his supporters in Moscow.

But Prokhorov has so far been fighting a losing battle. On Thursday, he stepped down as leader of Right Cause, a pro-Kremlin party he had headed since June but that rebelled against him this week.

Dissenters, led by political strategist Andrei Bogdanov and party boss Andrei Dunayev,

blamed the rift on Prokhorov's dictatorial leadership style and his enlistment of radical anti-drug activist and nationalist Yevgeny Roizman.

But other politicians said the Kremlin was punishing Prokhorov for being too independent. They likened the move to political suicide by the party ahead of the State Duma elections in December.

Surkov "has long misinformed the country's leadership about what is happening in the political system, suppressed the media and created discord," Prokhorov said at an improvised news conference on the stage of a conspicuously empty auditorium at the Russian Academy of Sciences.

"It is my personal task to achieve Surkov's sacking," he added, saying that to that end, he would ask for a meeting with President Dmitry Medvedev.

Prokhorov reiterated that during his meeting with Surkov on Tuesday no issues were raised.

The Surkov-bashing at the academy took a bizarre turn when Prokhorov asked pop diva Alla Pugachyova to come on stage. The compact 62-year-old looked even smaller when standing next to Prokhorov, who is 2.04 meters tall.

Pugachyova, who only came out in support of Right Cause last week, said she was ready to support Prokhorov in every way. "Maybe Vladislav Yuryevich has gone mad," she declared, using Surkov's first name and patronymic.

Prokhorov said he had resigned from Right Cause because it had become a Kremlin-controlled puppet party. He called on everyone to follow suit and begin a new political project. "Welcome to fair politics," he proclaimed.

Meanwhile, even as Prokhorov announced his leaving Right Cause, a rival convention at Moscow's World Trade Center, led by Bodganov and Dunayev, unanimously voted to oust him from party's leadership.

Former party co-leader Georgy Bovt told The Moscow Times outside the congress that he did "not want to be a member of a party that is governed not by Prokhorov but by some minions speaking on his behalf" and "when it is impossible to put a message to Prokhorov and to approach him."

Bodganov said Prokhorov had acted against the will of the majority.

"We were told [by Prokhorov] that we mean nothing and Roizman means everything and we decided it was Prokhorov who should bugger off," Bogdanov said.

"What else did we have to do when we had more than 50 delegates who have 50,000 regional members behind them on one side of the scale and Roizman on the other side?" he said.

Delegates were at the core of the dispute, with Prokhorov claiming that 21 of about 80 were Kremlin "clones" with forged credentials, representing regions they had never been to.

In any case, some 70 delegates went to Bogdanov's convention on Thursday, while some 50

delegates attended Prokhorov's event — also on Thursday — where speculation was rife that he decided to give up after realizing the number of deserters.

Roizman also quit Right Cause that day. The activist, who is often accused of overly cruel methods of treating drug addicts, joined the party in July.

Without Prokhorov, Right Cause would need a miracle to clear the 7 percent threshold at the Duma elections, delegates of all four represented parties — United Russia, A Just Russia, the Communists and the Liberal Democrats — said Thursday, Interfax reported.

Most also said Prokhorov was ousted for not complying with Kremlin-defined rules of the game, which never envisioned Right Cause taking a leftist populist slant instead of the expected pro-business one, as it did under Prokhorov.

"By showing [real political] ambitions, he decided to eat the forbidden fruit," said First Deputy Duma Speaker Ivan Melnikov, a member of the Communist Party, Interfax reported.

"Prokhorov did not want to be a marionette, he wanted to define party policy on his own," said Vladimir Ryzhkov, co-chairman of the unregistered Party of People's Freedom.

In an unexpected opposition to general opinion, a senior Duma deputy with A Just Russia, Gennady Gudkov, told Interfax on Thursday that Prokhorov may yet return to Right Cause leadership when the party reconvenes on Tuesday. He gave no explanation for the forecast, saying only that he relied on his own confidential sources.

Putting on a brave face, Prokhorov said Thursday that he may create a new political movement and would not exclude running for president in the elections in March. But he asked reporters to wait "seven to 10 days" for details.

Electrified reporters asked him whether he did not fear the Kremlin's wrath and a repetition of the fate of Yukos founder Mikhail Khodorkovsky, who for eight years has been behind bars for tax evasion and fraud, convictions widely denounced as punishment for political ambitions.

"If I had any fear, I would not be standing here," Prokhorov said calmly.

The fight at Right Cause broke out on Wednesday, the first day of the party convention in Moscow. It was supposed to be a "technical day," and Prokhorov did not even attend, but his opponents took control of the executive committee and declared war on him.

That evening, a defiant Prokhorov told a hastily arranged news conference at the headquarters of Onexim Group, his metals conglomerate, that he was staying on as party leader and that he would defy what he called a coup in his party.

On Wednesday, Prokhorov expelled Bogdanov from the party in front of television cameras but then went down without a fight on Thursday.

In an indication of where the Kremlin's sympathies lie, the Justice Ministry announced on Thursday that it considered Bogdanov's event legitimate.

State television seemingly refused to broadcast Prokhorov's speech. "Unfortunately, we cannot show you footage because [state media holding] VGTRK decided at the last minute to cancel its live broadcast," a presenter at privately owned online channel Dozhd explained. No other government-controlled channel, including English-language Russia Today, reported Prokhorov's accusations against Surkov.

The Kremlin made no official statement on the scandal, but Interfax cited an unidentified official as saying Prokhorov's "odd statements resulted from emotional stress caused by his own mistakes."

"He confused private business management with politics, and a [party] congress with a corporate party with prepaid female artists," the official added.

Rifat Shaikhutdinov, Right Cause's campaign manager whom Prokhorov appointed as his chief of staff after Wednesday's coup, said threats had already started coming in.

As evidence, he showed reporters his cell phone, which he said received a text message of "someone saying a criminal case would be opened against me." Shaikhutdinov refused to disclose the sender.

He added that many regional party leaders are being pressured by local administrations to withdraw their support for Prokhorov.

At the victors' congress, leaders of the dissenters, Bogdanov and Dunayev, conceded to reporters that without Prokhorov, the party loses financial backing and voters.

Bogdanov said the party "lost a lot" with Prokhorov's expulsion and its chances at the Duma elections were "smaller than they had been."

But he told The Moscow Times that the high-profile scandal could boost party ratings, currently hovering around 3 percent.

"It will boost [the party's] recognizability, a hundred per cent for that," Bogdanov said. "As a spin doctor, I can tell you that without recognizability there is no rating," he said.

Bogdanov, a self-professed Freemason and a longtime leader of the obscure Democratic Party, rose to dubious fame when he ran for president in 2008, garnering fewer votes at the ballots than signatures he presented to back his bid during the campaign. Later that year, his party was merged with two others to form Right Cause, reportedly at the Kremlin's request.

It remained unclear who will lead Right Cause at the December vote. The dissent's co-leader, Dunayev, was elected acting head on Thursday, but the party would only discuss its Duma list on Tuesday.

Dunayev, who said he did not mind keeping the job full-time, also pledged to return the 800 million rubles (\$26 million) Prokhorov said he pumped into the party, but only if the money was a loan, not a donation, Interfax reported.

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