

Oligarchs and Politics Make Bad Bedfellows

By [The Moscow Times](#)

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If there is one thing that last week's brouhaha with Mikhail Prokhorov demonstrated, it is that oligarchs and politics make really bad bedfellows.

Project Prokhorov was doomed from the start. The Kremlin hoped that by giving Prokhorov the green light to head Right Cause, his leadership skills and flamboyant style would help the flagging party get 7 percent — but not much more — of the vote in December's State Duma elections.

This way, the Kremlin could claim that the Duma included at least some liberal opposition members, even if they are part of the country's "systemic opposition" — the term used to define Kremlin-sanctioned parties that are allowed to criticize United Russia and, to a certain extent, the ruling tandem.

The Kremlin's first mistake was that nobody in Russia likes oligarchs — particularly ones who

throw their money around buying U.S. professional basketball teams, spend their vacations in Courchevel and support extending the work week to 60 hours and raising the retirement age.

The Kremlin's second mistake was underestimating Prokhorov's large ambitions. The Kremlin wanted Right Cause to remain a small, narrowly focused "pro-business" party that would not encroach on United Russia's main electorate. But Prokhorov had completely different plans, including, as he said openly, "putting an end to United Russia's monopoly in the State Duma."

Prokhorov also underestimated the Kremlin, thinking he could manage Right Cause as he ran Norilsk Nickel and Onexim Group. Prokhorov forgot that the chairman of Russia Inc. is Prime Minister Vladimir Putin and his trusted CEO is Vladislav Surkov. On this board of directors, there are no minority shareholder rights, and in this political corporation Prokhorov was only offered a midlevel managerial position.

When he resigned from Right Cause on Thursday, Prokhorov said he did not want to be used as a Kremlin puppet. But surely Prokhorov must have understood from the beginning that a pro-Kremlin role was a fundamental part of the deal.

Another one of Prokhorov's mistakes was butting heads with Surkov. The last straw, it seems, was an insignificant argument over whether to keep Yevgeny Roizman, who has a criminal record and purported ties to nationalists, on the Right Cause party list. After Surkov reportedly demanded that Roizman be dismissed, Prokhorov basically told Surkov to get lost. This sparked the Kremlin-orchestrated coup last week led by two minor Kremlin-friendly party functionaries to unseat Prokhorov.

On Thursday, Prokhorov called Surkov a "puppet master" who should be fired. Now the question is how far Prokhorov will take his personal vendetta against Surkov. One option would be to join ranks with opposition leader Boris Nemtsov to fight against Surkov, the Kremlin's chief ideologue and architect of the country's managed democracy.

But this is highly unlikely because Nemtsov wants to see Putin out of power as well. Prokhorov, who does not want to repeat the mistakes of jailed former Yukos CEO Mikhail Khodorkovsky, has made it clear that he holds nothing against Putin or President Dmitry Medvedev. In fact, in a statement that can only evoke a chuckle, Prokhorov has demanded a meeting with the ruling tandem to explain how they are being "misled" by Surkov.

The unfortunate lesson that the Kremlin will likely take from this affair is that strong-willed, independent and successful people should not be allowed into politics. After all, Russia's managed democracy works only when its political servants can be controlled completely. This will probably mean fostering more loyal, uncreative aparatchiks like United Russia leaders Boris Gryzlov, Vyacheslav Volodin or Andrei Isayev.

This would deal another blow to the Kremlin's stated goal of developing pluralism in the country, while helping Putin and Surkov make its managed democracy even more manageable.

The views expressed in opinion pieces do not necessarily reflect the position of The Moscow Times.

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