

Russia In Need of Prokhorov

By [Alexander Etkind](#)

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Mikhail Prokhorov, owner of gold mines in Siberia and a professional basketball team in the United States, is one of Russia's richest men, with a net worth of \$18 billion. In June, he agreed to lead the Right Cause party to contest December's State Duma elections. Prokhorov, 46, seemed to believe that his business success would boost his political prospects.

Prokhorov was wrong, and he resigned in September from the party he had led. Meanwhile, Prime Minister Vladimir Putin will seek a third presidential term in 2012. In the absence of new faces or ideas, the only prospect for the coming election year will be to pump more petrodollars into a struggling and grossly inefficient economy. That spending binge will feed corruption, inflation and natural-resource dependency — the three evils that former Finance Minister Alexei Kudrin has fought throughout his tenure.

While Prokhorov is one of several respected oligarchs, Kudrin was the most respected member of the government. Their departure from political life is widely viewed as a symptom of deepening divisions among the Putin-era governing elite, even a harbinger of political crisis.

To be sure, there are many subtle signs of panic at the top over the state of the country's economy. But there is no hint that United Russia has a new program to meet these challenges in Putin's next administration, apart from more censorship of the Internet. But all signs of conflict within the ruling tandem have disappeared.

Until September, President Dmitry Medvedev made great efforts to encourage hopes for change. But Putin never lost control over the state apparatus, and the prospect of his regaining the presidency never dimmed. So those hopes were always false. Indeed, most of Russia's rulers have been in office for the better part of a decade. Some, like Kudrin, had become visibly impatient for change, but most remained very content with the status quo.

As during the Cold War, a bureaucratic crisis suddenly exposed the mechanisms by which this elite has wielded power. When resigning from his party, Prokhorov accused Medvedev's first deputy chief of staff, Vladislav Surkov, of foul play, calling him "the puppet master" who had "privatized politics in Russia."

In talking about Surkov, Prokhorov demonstrated his refusal to be a puppet. In fact, Prokhorov has much to offer his country. His articulate speech and self-made success are unusual among Russian politicians. And with housing, health care and education less accessible now than at the end of the 1980s, his political program focuses on what should be done to improve Russia's human capital — the key problem holding back the economy.

According to Prokhorov, productivity in Russia is only 6 percent or 10 percent of that in the United States, which is why the economy struggles even when the price of oil is peaking. More than 1 million educated professionals have emigrated from Russia over the past decade.

During the last 20 years, social inequality has grown threefold. Russia, Prokhorov concludes, is a feudal society, and Putin's political monopoly and economic mismanagement only exacerbates the "natural-resource curse" that afflicts many countries that are equally dependent on oil and gas exports.

Such a bleak diagnosis of Russia's ills could never be the basis for a Kremlin-sponsored political party. Nevertheless, for a while Prokhorov tried to play politics according to the Byzantine rules that govern Russian elections.

But playing politics by Putin's rules requires scores of hired professionals and "political technologists." Despite his acumen, Prokhorov surrounded himself with such people, pretentious wizards who have turned Russian politics into the revolting spectacle that it is. He hoped to break up Putin's monopoly by using its own tools.

Today, Prokhorov's program remains the only tangible result of the \$26 million that he and his friends invested in his campaign. He is probably sorrier for the loss of three months of his time. Although he claims that he will not leave politics completely, he now looks like just another oligarch who must choose between capitulation, emigration and imprisonment. Kudrin's future is no less obscure.

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