

# Prokhorov Will Run Against Putin

By [Jonathan Earle](#)

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Mikhail Prokhorov announcing his presidential bid to reporters Monday. **Misha Japaridze**

Mikhail Prokhorov, the billionaire and failed State Duma hopeful, said Monday that he would attempt a political comeback by running against Vladimir Putin for president next year.

The abrupt announcement, which Prokhorov made to gasps of surprise from seasoned reporters at a news conference, could give an air of legitimacy to the election, which is widely expected to be won by Putin. It also could soothe a middle class increasingly frustrated about its lack of a political voice by giving them a candidate to vote for.

Stoking speculation that his presidential bid was orchestrated by the powers that be, Prokhorov refused to elucidate his platform and remained tepid and vague in his criticism of Putin and his United Russia party, which were lambasted by tens of thousands of middle-class protesters on Saturday at the biggest opposition rally in Moscow since 1993.

"I've made probably the most serious decision of my life: I'm running for president," Prokhorov said as he opened his snap news conference.

His next words were lost on reporters, who whipped out their cell phones and scrambled to get the news out.

Elaborating, Prokhorov declared himself a "champion of the middle class" and said he was already working to create a grassroots political party to counter "populist tricks" and promote open dialogue within civil society.

But he insisted that he would not campaign as an anti-Putin candidate, saying criticism would not take up more than 10 percent of his campaign. Instead, he said, "I'd love to concentrate on what needs to be done."

He promised to publish his campaign platform after registering as a presidential candidate with the Central Elections Commission. He has until Thursday to file his paperwork, the commission said Monday. After that, Prokhorov will need to collect 2 million signatures to appear on the ballot.

Prokhorov said he would run an "original" campaign but cautioned that it would not be a circus, saying, "The time has not come to reveal all secrets."

This will be the second foray in politics for the 46-year-old businessman, who has a fortune of \$18 billion according to Forbes. In June, Prokhorov took the helm of the pro-business Right Cause party, but he was ousted in September in a party coup that he said was orchestrated by Kremlin first deputy chief of staff and political mastermind Vladislav Surkov after he proved too independent.

Prokhorov said Monday that he has not met with Putin, Surkov or President Dmitry Medvedev since the September events involving Right Cause, which placed last with a dismal 0.6 percent in the State Duma elections on Dec. 4.

When asked how he would overcome Surkov's influence on the political system, Prokhorov said, "I've found the most elegant way to beat him — I think I just need to become his boss."

Prokhorov also said he was not afraid of following in the footsteps of billionaire Mikhail Khodorkovsky, imprisoned since 2003 for what supporters call Putin's punishment for his political and commercial ambitions.

Prokhorov, who as Right Cause leader said he wanted Putin's job as prime minister, did not elaborate on his lack of fear but conceded that "there's no fence against ill fortune."

His presidential bid appears to have been influenced by the protests that broke out across the country by middle-class Russians who felt cheated by the Duma elections, which were tarnished by reports of widespread fraud.

Saturday's rally on Moscow's Bolotnaya Ploshchad attracted between 30,000 and 100,000 people and was a rare expression of discontent among the urban middle class, whose sympathies Prokhorov hopes to win in the March presidential election.

Mirroring the rhetoric of many protesters, Prokhorov said he was "categorically against revolution." But he stopped short of including himself among the opposition, saying only that he supported increased civic participation in politics. In reply to a question from a Moscow

Times reporter, he said he was ready to work with anyone — including opposition leaders — who supports his campaign platform.

Surkov and former Finance Minister Alexei Kudrin have also called for a party for the urban middle class. Kudrin, in an interview published Monday in Vedomosti, said he was willing to help create such a party, and he said he has discussed the idea with Prokhorov. ([Story](#))

Prokhorov said Monday that he and Kudrin share economic views but had not agreed to work together.

Several other politicians have announced presidential bids, including Just Russia leader Sergei Mironov, Liberal Democratic Party leader Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, Communist leader Gennady Zyuganov, radical opposition activist Eduard Limonov, and a few public unknowns.

Putin, who made no public comment about Prokhorov's plans, is aware of his bid, Putin's spokesman Dmitry Peskov told RIA-Novosti.

But in a tacit endorsement, Channel One state television made the announcement the focus of its 6 p.m. news program — a display of attention that the Kremlin's enemies are usually denied. It also aired snippets of footage filmed during Kudrin's interview to Vedomosti.

Former Right Cause official Leonid Gozman, a staunch backer of Prokhorov during his short-lived stint with the party, was one of the few to express cautious hope about his new bid. But he conceded in a telephone interview that everything would depend on how far Prokhorov would dare to go. "Will he be able to make a real challenge to the Kremlin?" Gozman asked rhetorically.

But many observers speculated that Prokhorov had been covertly endorsed by the Kremlin in an effort to find a loyal figure to head the leaderless protest movement that materialized on Bolotnaya Ploshchad.

"This is the Kremlin's answer to Bolotnaya and an attempt to provide an alternative candidate" to Putin, independent analyst Stanislav Belkovsky said.

He added by telephone that he expects Prokhorov to appear at a follow-up rally tentatively scheduled for Dec. 24.

The Kremlin put forward Prokhorov so that the protesters "choke on sweet saliva," Belkovsky [said](#) in a separate interview to Gazeta.ru.

Belkovsky cautioned middle-class protesters against being toyed with and said their motley leaders should distance themselves from Prokhorov.

He was echoed by an opposition leader, Sergei Mitrokhin of the Yabloko party, who addressed the Bolotnaya Ploshchad rally. "He is an oligarch and he is part and parcel of today's regime," Mitrokhin said.

But political analyst Mark Feigin said Prokhorov's bid amounted to more than just a decoy. "Prokhorov is not just part of the system. He represents the oligarchy, which wants to get rid of Putin," he said.

He said big business disapproves of the current system of power that is heavily dependant on Putin.

Feigin predicted that Prokhorov would appear at the Dec. 24 rally to court street protesters and opposition leaders such as anti-corruption blogger Alexei Navalny, who enjoys immense popularity with the middle-class, Internet-using constituency.

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