

Prokhorov Finding Support Among Businesspeople

By [Roland Oliphant](#)

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Eight years after Mikhail Khodorkovsky was arrested for what his supporters said was showing too brazen political ambitions, Russian businessmen and foreign investors have cautiously welcomed the return of oligarchs to Russian politics — even if they're not quite sure what Mikhail Prokhorov is up to.

Prokhorov, 46, announced that he was throwing his hat into the presidential race at a surprise news conference Wednesday, following a week of demonstrations and counter-demonstrations that has seen markets slide. Moscow's bourses reached their lowest levels since October on Monday.

"I applaud his action," said Rostislav Ordovsky-Tanayevsky Blanco, a Russian-Venezuelan businessman behind a string of well-known restaurant franchises. "It is not about winning, as Putin most probably still is the most popular politician and could win the next election. It is about competition and openness and fairness. And on those two Russia still has a long way

to go."

"It's positive news. It gives an option to choose and may lead to actual change, innovation and greater productivity," said the Russian head of a Fortune 500 company that does several billion dollars in turnover locally.

It was the simple existence of a choice, rather than an endorsement of Prokhorov as a candidate that won approval, with many taking a "wait and see" attitude.

"Unless the real deals come on the table, the rest is just talk," said Igor Bogorodov, head of the CIS division of Raven Russia, a warehousing company, pointing out that it would be impossible to tell how serious the metals magnate is until he unveils an electoral program.

Despite promising to base his campaign on "what needs to be done" rather than criticism of the current regime, the nearest Prokhorov has come to a manifesto is saying he would aim to represent the Internet-using middle classes who overwhelmingly made up the protests that have hit Russia since Dec. 4.

Just days earlier he had blogged that there is "no alternative to Putin" — prompting speculation that he was chosen by a panicked Kremlin as a safe pair of hands to lead the disparate opposition movement that appeared on Bolotnaya Ploshchad on Saturday.

Nonetheless, he is the only first-time candidate in a field that so far includes Prime Minister Vladimir Putin, LDPR leader Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, A Just Russia's Sergei Mironov and Communist Gennady Zyuganov. Former National Bolshevik leader Eduard Limonov has also promised to register.

The head of a Western tech company operating in Russia shrugged off the question of Kremlin orchestration and called on the opposition to throw its weight behind Prokhorov.

"The Kremlin has shown that it knows how to organize the number of votes it needs," he told The Moscow Times.

"There is no alternative in the opposition camp that people could potentially rally around. They should all support Prokhorov," said the executive, who asked for anonymity to speak openly.

But there are sound economic reasons to hope he becomes at least a serious challenger, if not a future president, said one real estate executive who has worked in Moscow for about 15 years.

If the March election is rigged, and "if Putin wins with 80 percent and no runoff, people will say this is [expletive]," the executive said.

That distrust, in turn, would spur even more Russians to emigrate and worsen the country's brain drain, he predicted.

Not My Candidate

But there is no sign that the Russian blogosphere, where the recent protest originated, shares

the businessmen's enthusiasm. Many may be put off by suspicions about Kremlin involvement in his candidacy, while left-leaning oppositionists oppose his pro-business proposals like an extension of the work week.

In the Russian blogosphere there is still immense support for anti-corruption blogger Alexei Navalny, who is still serving a 15-day jail sentence after being arrested at the first post-election demonstration on Dec. 5.

Navalny has not ruled himself out of the race but has refused to enter while he is still behind bars. He is not due to be released until at least Dec. 20. The deadline for registering to run for president is midnight on Dec. 16.

Second Time Lucky?

Prokhorov first ventured into politics when he headed the Right Cause party earlier this year. The party's ratings briefly spiked under his leadership, but he was ousted in an internal coup in September. Prokhorov at the time blamed the coup on Kremlin adviser Vladislav Surkov.

Rivals have already taken a dig at the two-meter tall oligarch's previous abortive attempt to enter the political arena.

A Just Russia leader Sergei Mironov, who announced his own candidacy for president on Nov. 10 as thousands demonstrated against election fraud in Moscow, dismissed Prokhorov's second political venture Tuesday as a "practice run."

"I know a good Russian saying — God loves threes. Trust me, this will be his second training flight," he told journalists, Interfax reported.

Confused Loyalties

Boris Titov, a Right Cause member and head of Delovaya Rossia, a business association that represents non-raw materials industries, refers to Prokhorov by his first name and calls him a "nice guy."

He backs initiatives like extending the work week, though he'd rather not change the Labor Code so as not to provoke a backlash from the United Russia party, which he says is drifting to the left in economic matters.

But he said he'd been left disappointed by the oligarch's previous foray into politics, and says he doubts he can win this time.

"I've been a member of the party for some time, and I became active again when Mikhail joined. We hoped he would make it into a real party for the liberal-right. But then we saw he wanted to make it into a 'broad appeal' party for everyone," he told The Moscow Times.

Titov said he did not take part in the subsequent coup against Prokhorov, but ceased to be active in the party — though he remains a dormant member in the hope that it may one day become the pro-business vehicle he described.

Further complicating Prokhorov's potential support base is the opaque relationship between

business associations and the current regime.

Delovaya Rossia is affiliated with the All-Russia People's Front, a political vehicle created by Putin earlier this year to shore up political support in light of falling ratings for United Russia.

Titov insisted that his organization would not back either candidate. "We're a business association, and we represent business interests. We work with Putin and United Russia to lobby our interests, that is normal; but there are members of all parties in the group."

He ducked questions about whether he would personally vote for Prokhorov over Putin, but said he doubted the oligarch could win the contest because the only viable platform would be a liberal-right one, and "anyone on such a platform will be a minority candidate because popular memory associates the free market with the nightmare years of the 1990s."

Alexander Shokhin, head of the Russian Union of Industrialists and Entrepreneurs, is also a member of the All-Russia People's Front, a woman who answered the phone at the union's office said. Prokhorov is a member of the union.

She said only Shokhin could answer a question about whether the organization would support either candidate or take a neutral position. He was unavailable Tuesday.

Staff writer Rachel Nielsen and business editor Justin Lifflander contributed to this report.

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