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Prokhorov Promises to Free Khodorkovsky

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Billionaire Mikhail Prokhorov said Thursday that his first move if elected president would be to pardon jailed tycoon Mikhail Khodorkovsky. ⊠Prokhorov also said he would allow free registration of opposition parties and restore popular elections of provincial governors if he wins March's vote.

Prime Minister Vladimir Putin, who is widely expected to win the election, has marginalized opposition forces, tightened election rules and abolished direct elections of governors during his 12 years in power.

Khodorkovsky, once Russia's richest man, has been in jail since 2003 on tax evasion and fraud charges seen as a punishment for defying Putin's power.

Speaking at a meeting with supporters to nominate him for the race, Prokhorov hailed last weekend's protest in Moscow against vote fraud, which attracted tens of thousands of people. ⊠"I deeply understand the demands and the strivings of the people who took to the streets," Prokhorov told reporters, adding that he might join a follow-up protest on Dec. 24.

Prokhorov said "expert opinion" had prompted him to believe that the Dec. 4 Duma elections were unfair and rigged. But he argued for a legal response to the fraud allegations. He avoided criticizing Putin directly, but said he wasn't afraid to challenge his power: "Putin is a serious rival, but I'm not afraid of competition." Prokhorov, noted for his playboy lifestyle, also humorously noted that he might need to settle down and find a potential first lady. "I'm ready even for this — if that's necessary for my country and for winning the presidential election."

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