

Prokhorov Signatures Near Ready

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Billionaire Mikhail Prokhorov is confident of collecting the 2 million signatures he needs to stand as an independent candidate in the March 4 presidential election, his spokeswoman Olga Stukalova said.

Prokhorov's campaign staff has gathered about 1.2 million signatures in support of the businessman's candidacy and has until Jan. 18 to get the remaining 800,000, Stukalova said.

Prime Minister Vladimir Putin has faced the biggest protests of his 12-year rule over allegations of fraud in Dec. 4 parliamentary elections that gave his United Russia party a majority.

Putin, who is running for president in March, has refused opposition demands to hold a rerun parliamentary vote. President Dmitry Medvedev submitted laws to the lower house of parliament in December making it easier to register parties and run for the Kremlin.

Prokhorov's candidacy may be a ploy to benefit Putin by legitimizing the March vote through the appearance of genuine competition, according to Sergei Markov, a former lawmaker in Putin's party who heads the Institute of Political Studies in Moscow.

Prokhorov has promised to call new parliamentary elections next December should he defeat Putin in March. The New Jersey Nets basketball team owner would also serve only five years of his six-year mandate and make it easier for smaller parties to get into parliament, according to his campaign program.

Prokhorov would get 2 percent of votes, according to a Dec. 16 to 20 survey by Moscow-based pollster Levada Center, compared with 36 percent for Putin. The poll surveyed 1,600 people and had a margin of error of 3.4 percentage points.

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