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INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Prokhorov Signature Target Hit

By Alexander Bratersky

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Billionaire presidential candidate Mikhail Prokhorov says he has successfully collected the 2 million signatures required to allow him to run for president.

The Central Elections Commission still has to verify the authenticity of the signatures, but experts said they expected Prokhorov would have no trouble in securing a place on the ballot alongside Prime Minister Vladimir Putin in the March 4 election.

Prokhorov announced on his Facebook page on Friday that his assistants were busy preparing the signatures to submit to the elections commission by the Jan. 18 deadline. He has also already collected 400 million rubles ($12 million) in his campaign coffers — four times as much as Putin, according to official elections commission data.

Prokhorov said he would look at the findings of independent election observers such as Golos — which recorded widespread allegations of fraud in the Dec. 4 State Duma elections — to help structure his campaign.

"Together we can for the first time in 20 years create conditions for elections that are fully transparent and not falsified," Prokhorov wrote.

Prokhorov is the only independent candidate to announce he has collected enough signatures. Grigory Yavlinsky, a seasoned politician trying to run for president for the third time, says he has 1.7 million signatures.

Putin, who was nominated by the ruling United Russia party as their candidate, as well as Communist leader Gennady Zyuganov and Liberal Democratic Party boss Vladimir Zhirinovsky, do not need to collect signatures because they represent parties that have Duma seats.

Another presidential hopeful, Irkutsk Governor Dmitry Mezentsev, has not said how many signatures he has collected.

Mezentsev was nominated by the railway trade unions. Russian Railways employees in Moscow say they have been asked to collect signatures for Mezentsev, but the company has sought to distance itself from calls by a regional branch asking employees to help.

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