

Doubts Nag Prokhorov's Candidacy

By [Jonathan Earle](#)

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Billionaire presidential candidate Mikhail Prokhorov working in his palatial Tverskoi Bulvar office as seen in a reflection on the mirror above his desk. **Igor Tabakov**

"Let's look at the history of human development," he begins. "Somebody always has to be first. That person says, 'We need to develop in this way,' and nobody believes him; they're suspicious of him. Nobody believed Steve Jobs or Bill Gates at first."

Whether Mikhail Prokhorov, the billionaire presidential candidate, is the visionary leader he claims to be or a Kremlin ploy has been one of the most-discussed questions of the political season.

If Prokhorov is independent, it could mean that the Kremlin is opening the political playing field — perhaps in response to a wave of opposition protests — after a decade of tight controls.

If he's not, then protesters' pleas have fallen on deaf ears. The regime's promises have been a lie, or so the logic goes.

Prokhorov, 46, says he's his own man, that he and Putin have no reason to trust each other, that his disastrous stint as head of a pro-business party and attractiveness to "anti-Putin" voters is proof that he couldn't be a Kremlin puppet.

But with less than three weeks left before the election, even opposition-minded voters — the group Prokhorov has courted so sweetly — don't entirely trust him, and observers continue to examine his every move for Kremlin fingerprints.

Sitting on a leather chair in his downtown office, Prokhorov gives no indication of the albatross that hangs around his neck. In an interview with The Moscow Times on Wednesday, he exuded the cold intelligence of a chess master and enough confidence to match his 6-foot-8-inch frame.

In English, he comes across as a glib wisecracker, delivering recycled lines with a smirk and a head bob. In Russian, he is stern, issuing perfectly formed utterances in favor of free markets, free people, democracy and rule of law. He never stumbles or raises his voice.

If Prokhorov doesn't talk like a politician, it's partly because until last summer, he wasn't. When he became the leader of the pro-business Right Cause party in June, Prokhorov was known as a metals magnate, and in the United States as the owner of the New Jersey Nets basketball team.

His entry into politics raised eyebrows. Many compared him to former Yukos CEO Mikhail Khodorkovsky, who has been jailed since 2003, ostensibly for stealing oil and evading taxes. But his supporters say the charges were retribution for his funding of opposition political parties.

In September, Prokhorov was ousted from Right Cause in a mysterious party coup he says was orchestrated by the Kremlin's then-head spin doctor, Vladislav Surkov.

Later that month, Prime Minister Vladimir Putin and his protege, President Dmitry Medvedev, made the swap heard round the world, announcing that they would switch places after the March 4 presidential election and return Putin to the post he held from 2000 to 2008.

The move sparked outrage, and after the Dec. 4 State Duma elections were tarnished by allegations of widespread fraud, tens of thousands took to the streets of Moscow demanding democratic reforms and Putin's ouster in what was the largest challenge to Putin's rule in more than a decade.

Re-enter Prokhorov, now a surprise presidential candidate.

His platform was a protester's dream: free and fair elections, political pluralism, economic competition, less red tape, less bureaucracy. He would break up state-run monopolies, boost investment in infrastructure and education and do away with censorship of television.

"His is the most liberal, European and deeply reformist platform. But the central question remains: Is this propaganda, or is this real?" opposition leader Boris Nemtsov said, Kommersant reported Thursday.

Prokhorov said Russia needs to move slowly and carefully toward a society in which

the freedom of the individual — including his property, faith and sexual preferences — would be respected.

"I'm not planning to participate in [gay parades]," he said, when asked if he would support the events, which former Moscow Mayor Yury Luzhkov famously denounced as "satanic."

For many, Prokhorov sounded too good to believe. They speculated that the government was trotting out a pseudo-opposition candidate to soak up opposition votes and lend legitimacy to a presidential election.

Twenty percent of the opposition protesters on Feb. 4 would vote for Prokhorov, putting him in second place behind Communist Gennady Zyuganov, who won 23 percent, [according](#) to a Levada Center poll.

Prokhorov is the only candidate in the race who hasn't run for president before. All other candidates have run at least twice.

And he's the only candidate to have attended any of the opposition rallies. Prokhorov says he wants to turn opposition rhetoric into action.

"It's important to turn the wave into practical actions, to produce concrete changes. The Organizing Committee doesn't have a program," he said, adding that he will eschew business and devote himself to reforming Russia through a new political party whether he wins or loses.

Adviser Yuliana Slashcheva said the party would be founded on the pro-Prokhorov Pravo Molodykh movement, Kommersant reported Thursday.

But a spokesman for the group said by telephone that he'd heard nothing of the plans, and a second representative, who preferred to remain anonymous, said he wouldn't comment until after Prokhorov's scheduled visit to Yekaterinburg on Saturday.

Prokhorov's poll numbers continue to put him at the back of the pack. Only 5 percent of respondents in a Feb. 5 poll by state-run VTsIOM said they planned to vote for him, compared with 53 percent for Putin and 10 percent for Zyuganov.

Prokhorov said his own polls have him at 7.5 percent to 9 percent nationally. If the elections are honest, he will receive between 10 percent and 15 percent, he said.

Part of that may have to do with Prokhorov's relatively poor name recognition. And with a net worth of about \$12 billion, he's also had to overcome widespread mistrust of the super-rich.

But he says attitudes have shifted and that people hate thieves more than billionaires.

"People come up to me and say, 'We'll vote for you because you're rich and successful. You have everything and you won't steal.'"

By his own admission, Prokhorov hasn't driven a car since 1995. He doesn't use computers or mobile phones, and he doesn't read literature. He owns 20 customized jet skis, a 200-foot yacht and a 21,500-square-foot house. He doesn't drink vodka.

"Don't make me out to be an alien from outer space," Prokhorov said. "I live a normal, ordinary life. I walk around the streets a lot, I talk to people, I understand what's going on very well."

Prokhorov also pointed to his management experience as well as his life story, from loading train cars to small business to big business to running a "small country." This helps him to relate to people, he says.

Celebrity supporters, including aging pop diva Alla Pugachyova, who famously called him a "mama's boy," and musician Andrei Makarevich of the legendary group Mashina Vremeni, have joined Prokhorov's roll in recent weeks.

On Wednesday, Makarevich and Pugachyova released a campaign song, "The Tallest." The refrain goes: "If you were born the tallest, you simply see further than everybody else."

Prokhorov said his wealth means that he doesn't need political cover. At the same time, however, he says the liberal elite that he claims supports him and whose ranks, he claims, are growing, is too afraid to back him publicly.

"It's a personal decision," he said. "One helps me behind the scenes, while the next decides it's better not to, that's it's better to support Putin for the time being."

As for the question, "Why did he run, and not the others?" he says, "I've always loved risk. I've always loved challenges. Managing risk is what I've done for a living. Yes, the risks are higher in politics."

A source close to the campaign said staffers' enthusiasm and commitment convinced him that the campaign was for real. The source speculated that Prokhorov's anti-Putin rhetoric had been mild because he didn't want to appear to be overcompensating.

Ultimately, if opposition-minded voters choose Prokhorov, it will not necessarily be because they trust him or believe that he is independent.

"I'd vote for Prokhorov over Putin, but I'm voting against Putin," said Olga Romanova, a journalist and opposition leader who's known Prokhorov for 20 years.

Konstantin Sonin, an economic adviser to Prokhorov, said he believes that Prokhorov is an imperfect candidate but is the only one bringing something new to the table.

As for whether Prokhorov is a Kremlin puppet:

"He told me he wasn't. But I suppose that's what he tells everyone," he said.

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