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Prokhorov's Future Hazy as Elections Approach

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Mikhail Prokhorov after testing the E-Mobil car in St. Petersburg, June 2013. **Maxim Stulov**

Civil Platform leader Mikhail Prokhorov's future seemed uncertain Monday as he denied a report that he would leave politics, while analysts said the billionaire may have indeed scaled down his political ambitions even as his party establishes itself ahead of regional elections.

Some commentators argued that the tycoon's refusal to run in the Sept. 8 Moscow mayoral vote and his failure to prevent his party from being removed from an election in the Yaroslavl region could indicate that he has lost interest in politics.

Prokhovov has previously been accused of failing to decisively assert his political ambitions and of being used as a tool of the Kremlin when he headed the Right Cause party in 2011 and ran for president in 2012.

Izvestia, citing sources close to Prokhorov and to Civil Platform, reported Monday that he might abandon his role as leader of the fledgling political party.

But Prokhorov and his press office denied the report, with the tycoon calling it a hoax, Interfax reported.

"I'm not going anywhere," he said. "I remain in politics, and we're continuing our work."

Prokhorov also said he was transferring his foreign assets to Russia in order to take part in the 2014 Moscow City Duma elections. Under Russian law, individuals who own foreign assets are forbidden from running for political office.

One of the sources cited by Izvestia said Prokhorov was in talks with the Kremlin on a possible replacement for him and would step down as leader of Civil Platform once a suitable person was found.

Prokhorov does not want to participate in political life anymore and does not intend to sell his foreign assets, the sources said.

"Prokhorov has already left politics," Anton Krasovsky, who was the businessman's campaign manager when the tycoon ran for president in March 2012, told the Kremlin-connected newspaper. "Choosing between his [Brooklyn Nets] basketball club in the U.S. and politics in Russia, he has opted for the former."

Alexei Mukhin, head of the Center for Political Information, said business had become a higher priority for Prokhorov than politics. He said this was exemplified by Prokhorov's refusal to run in the Sept. 8 Moscow mayoral election.

Mukhin predicted that if Prokhorov stepped down as Civil Platform leader, the party would face the same fate as Right Cause, which gradually faded into obscurity after he left it.

But Alexei Makarkin, a deputy head of the Center for Political Technologies, said he believed Prokhorov was being honest when he said he did not run for mayor because the election was announced unexpectedly and he did not have enough time to transfer his assets to Russia.

Prokhorov's supporters were disappointed with the decision and, as a result, their sympathies shifted to anti-corruption activist and current mayoral candidate Alexei Navalny, Mukhin argued.

The tycoon recently criticized Navalny, saying he would not be able to handle Moscow's problems. According to Makarkin, that criticism can be attributed to Prokhorov's desire to maintain good relations with the Kremlin. "He is trying to keep a balance between being in the opposition and a more moderate stance," Makarkin said.

Prokhorov also seemed to display a lukewarm attitude toward politics when he did little to prevent his party from being removed from legislative elections in the Yaroslavl region scheduled for Sept. 8, one of the sources cited by Izvestia said. Civil Platform activists from Yaroslavl subsequently tried to meet with the tycoon to clarify the situation, but their request was rejected, the source said.

In the city of Yaroslavl, Civil Platform has become the most popular political party, surpassing United Russia. A representative of Prokhorov's party, Yevgeny Urlashov, served as the city's mayor from 2012 until last month, when he was arrested on corruption charges.

Makarkin said the Kremlin has unofficially barred Civil Platform from participating in elections in areas where the local elite is split over their attitudes toward the Kremlin, such as the Yaroslavl and Zabaikalsky regions. But in places where the establishment is more or less uniformly loyal to the Kremlin, federal authorities have not acted to remove Prokhorov's party from the ballot.

"Federal authorities don't intend to agree to a split in the elite," Makarkin said.

Meanwhile, in Yekaterinburg, Civil Platform may see its highest-profile election result. Yevgeny Roizman, a prominent party member and a popular anti-drug activist, is currently leading the polls in the run-up to the Sept. 8 mayoral election in the Urals city.

But Mukhin said Roizman's popularity had little to do with the party and could be attributed to his personal qualities, adding that the activist had refused to receive funding from Prokhorov.

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