

Prokhorov Blames Kremlin for Party 'Coup'

By [Alexandra Odynova](#)

September 14, 2011



Mikhail Prokhorov holding up an expulsion order for Right Cause members who challenged him Wednesday. **Igor Tabakov**

Billionaire Mikhail Prokhorov called dozens of reporters to a hastily organized news conference in his ninth-floor office on Wednesday to declare that he would not be ousted from Right Cause amid an attempted mutiny.

Prokhorov, elected leader of the pro-business party with the Kremlin's implicit blessing less than three months ago, accused Kremlin officials of encouraging the party's old guard to stage a coup on the first day of Right Cause's election convention, which kicked off on Wednesday without him.

But an unidentified Kremlin official told Interfax that the squabble was a publicity stunt co-scripted by the billionaire and the Kremlin.

"You must be waiting for me to say I'm leaving. No way," Prokhorov told reporters and cameramen in his oval office on the top floor of his Onexim Group building in central Moscow.

Wearing a confident expression behind his huge desk, he said bluntly that his party was being "raided" in a manner that reminded him of the illegal corporate takeovers of the 1990s.

At least 21 regional delegates at the convention Wednesday were replaced by "clones" with forged credentials, he said.

The first day of the convention was "technical," he said, but the "clones" could vote for his ouster later on.

One "real" delegate, Irkutsk region's Yevgeny Seledtsov, who attended the news conference, said "my body was kicked out" and cell phone seized when he tried to film Wednesday's session.

"Our regional representatives have been under serious pressure from governors and deputy governors," Prokhorov said.

"There is no split in the party but pressure from the president's administration," he added.

Prokhorov said the "raid" was orchestrated by Rady Khabirov, the Kremlin's deputy chief of staff on domestic affairs. He did not say why. Khabirov did not comment Wednesday.

Prokhorov said it did not appear to him as a coordinated Kremlin crackdown because he had recently met with Vladislav Surkov, the Kremlin's first deputy chief of staff and chief political strategist, and no conflict issues were raised.

In retaliation for the mutiny, Prokhorov held up a piece of paper with orders to suspend the party's executive committee, including party member Andrei Dunayev, and expel old party hand Andrei Bogdanov. Both men have been described in media reports as Kremlin envoys.

Rifat Shaikhutdinov, a former spin doctor for Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich and former Liberal Democrat, was appointed acting head of the executive committee.

Prokhorov promised more details on Thursday.

Indeed, the battle appeared to be far from over. Bogdanov — the former leader of the Democratic Party of Russia, which was merged with two others to create Right Cause in 2008 — said later Wednesday that Prokhorov had no right to expel him.

Interfax, citing unidentified party officials, reported that the convention might yet vote on Prokhorov's ouster on Thursday.

Bogdanov, a senior Freemason who ran for president in 2008, said earlier that Prokhorov should not step down but "if he does, there's a worthy replacement for him," Interfax reported.

Bogdanov named no names. Kommersant, citing party sources, said he might be seeking the job for himself. But Gazeta.ru [reported](#) that liberal-minded Kirov Governor Nikita Belykh had been offered the post by the Kremlin.

Belykh, who used to head the Union of Right Forces, which was also merged into the Right Cause, even discussed the appointment with President Dmitry Medvedev last week, Gazeta.ru said. But the governor and Kremlin spokeswoman Natalya Timakova denied the report Wednesday.

In an interview with Kommersant, Bogdanov [accused](#) Prokhorov of campaigning incompetently. He also told Interfax that many party delegates oppose the inclusion of controversial anti-drug activist and nationalist Yevgeny Roizman on the party list. The Kremlin is reportedly displeased with Prokhorov's decision to tap Roizman, whom critics accuse of using overly harsh methods to treat drug users.

But the Kremlin is even more displeased with Prokhorov taking a left-wing nationalist stance instead of the expected pro-business one and encroaching on the turf of the ruling United Russia party, Gazeta.ru [said](#), citing yet another party source.

Political analysts were divided on how serious the crisis at the party is and who could be behind it.

Independent analyst Stanislav Belkovsky accused Surkov, the president's first deputy chief of staff, of seeking Prokhorov's ouster.

Kremlin officials have been talking to Right Cause members from the regions since Tuesday "so they vote against Prokhorov," Belkovsky said by telephone.

Surkov is "most likely fulfilling Medvedev's order," he said.

The president is displeased with Prokhorov's disregard toward orders from the Kremlin, especially his decision to court various electoral groups, even United Russia's constituency, instead of "the creative class" as he was supposed to, Belkovsky said.

Prokhorov's backers — former close associates of the late President Boris Yeltsin, including former Kremlin chief of staff Alexander Voloshin and Yeltsin's daughter Tatyana Dyachenko — are likely trying to mediate the conflict now, Belkovsky said.

"If Prokhorov manages to come to terms with members of the presidential administration over Surkov's head, he will stay," Belkovsky said.

But Yury Korgonyuk, an analyst with the Indem think tank, said Prokhorov's complaint about pressure from the Kremlin could be a ploy to paint him as an independent candidate.

"They're putting on an act that the Kremlin tried to exert pressure but failed," Korgonyuk said.

Real pressure is unlikely because the presidential administration could have taken the party from Prokhorov easily if they had wanted to, he said.

Right Cause, created as a government-backed attempt to rally liberal votes, has been flagging ever since its inception in 2008, bogged down by a lack of strong leadership.

Prokhorov, 46, whose net worth is estimated at \$18 billion by Forbes magazine, skyrocketed to party leadership at a party congress in June. He met no opposition at the time and was hailed as the only man to help Right Cause cross the 7 percent threshold at the State Duma elections in December.

He is the first billionaire to dabble in politics since Mikhail Khodorkovsky, jailed since 2003 on economic charges that his supporters call revenge by then-President Vladimir Putin.

Since his election as party leader, Prokhorov has staged a promotional campaign for himself using a slogan from the patriotic action movie "Brat 2" (2000) and has tapped aging pop diva Alla Pugachyova to join the party ranks.

Right Cause has drafted an election platform that calls for a return of gubernatorial elections and a party-based government. The current but still not final version of the document went up on Prokhorov's [blog](#) Tuesday.

Prokhorov has pledged to give the party upward of 15 percent of the Duma vote and said he wants the prime minister's job — now held by Putin — if Right Cause performs well. This goal is still far off, however, because a [poll](#) by Levada Center in late August put its support at 3 percent.

Staff writer Natalya Krainova contributed to this report.

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