

Prokhorov, Softening Stance, Gauges Next Step

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After his dramatic resignation from the Right Cause party last week, billionaire Mikhail Prokhorov has backtracked by saying he is not challenging the country's leadership but just one of two competing Kremlin camps.

"There was no personal conflict with anyone. ... In the end it was a conflict of ideologies," Prokhorov wrote in a blog post [published](#) late Friday. "At this stage the conservatives won. I wanted change, but the system was not ready."

On Thursday, the metals magnate-turned-politician had [accused](#) first deputy Kremlin chief of staff Vladislav Surkov of being a "puppet master" in national politics and vowed to personally fight for his removal.

The unprecedented attack on Surkov, widely seen as the architect of the system of "managed democracy" built during Vladimir Putin's eight-year tenure as president, immediately raised

concern that Prokhorov would become the target of the Kremlin's wrath.

Opposition leader Boris Nemtsov said Friday that Prokhorov might put his life in danger if he wages a political battle. "If he becomes a real opposition figure, he risks repeating Khodorkovsky's fate," Nemtsov told Interfax.

Yukos founder Mikhail Khodorkovsky was arrested in 2003 after showing political ambitions. His business empire was broken up, and he remains in prison.

Prokhorov has said he has no fear, but state media coverage since his resignation signaled strongly that he has fallen out of favor.

His comments about Surkov, made at what was supposed to be a party convention Thursday, were widely ignored even by some privately held news outlets like the Komsomolskaya Pravda daily, and the main television channels switched that day to covering the convention of his Kremlin-friendly opponents.

Over the weekend, two state-controlled channels, NTV and Rossia 1, aired damning reports about controversial anti-drug campaigner Yevgeny Roizman, whose inclusion on the Right Cause party list had sparked Wednesday's rebellion against Prokhorov.

On Friday, Prokhorov said he was ready to stand the heat. "I know already that they are trying to create problems for me and for my followers. ... They will crack down hard and uncompromisingly. I am prepared," he wrote in his blog.

But he suggested that he might not carry on with politics, saying he does not know yet "how everything will go on."

In an [interview](#) with the BBC Russian Service, published Saturday, he said he needed time to analyze the situation. "After I have weighed and thought through everything, I will make a decision," he said.

Prokhorov said he had requested meetings with President Dmitry Medvedev and Prime Minister Vladimir Putin and was now waiting for a slot in their schedules.

Asked how he planned to achieve Surkov's ouster, Prokhorov said he would fight for the victory of progressive against conservative ideology. "If [my] side wins, staff changes will be unavoidable," he said.

He also claimed that he had allies in the Kremlin. "Various people work in the presidential administration. There are those ... who have called me to express their support," he said, adding that he would not reveal their names to protect them from reprisals.

Not everybody was convinced by his argument.

"Is it so hard to understand that the political decision of [Prokhorov's] expulsion was made by Putin and Medvedev, not by Surkov or Khabirov?" Nemtsov [wrote](#) in his blog Saturday.

When the party rebellion unfolded Wednesday, Prokhorov had accused Rady Khabirov, deputy head of the Kremlin's domestic affairs department, of orchestrating it.

Nemtsov said Prokhorov's example proved that no independent party could exist as long as Putin's political system demanded total servility. "You must admit that the leader of your party is Surkov and that you are his errand boy."

Prokhorov himself conceded that he had been naive when he earlier this year agreed to lead the party, which has been seen as a Kremlin project since its inception in 2008.

In an interview with The New York Times published Saturday, he said he had agreed to do so after a meeting with Medvedev this spring. "It never came into my head that some staffers would impose some limits," he said.

Leonid Gozman, a co-founder of Right Cause and a prominent liberal, accused Prokhorov of failure. "Did he not know what country we live in? Did he not know who Surkov is?" Gozman told reporters Thursday.

Gozman, who held no party position after Prokhorov took over in June, argued that the billionaire should have found a common language with the Kremlin to ensure that a "relatively independent" party got into the Duma.

"This was a defeat for Russia rather than for Mr. Prokhorov, Mr. Surkov or Mr. Medvedev," he [wrote](#) in an essay for the Valdai Club, an international forum of Russia experts.

Analysts said it was too early to say what the consequences would be for Prokhorov, who is ranked the country's third-richest man by Forbes magazine with \$18 billion.

"In the worst case, probably his informal tax burden will go up," said Vladimir Pribylovsky, head of the Panorama think tank.

Alexei Mukhin, an analyst with the Center for Political Information, suggested that the whole affair had been orchestrated from the start and speculated that Right Cause and Prokhorov could come together again.

He said last week's events had a positive effect both on the party and its ousted leader. "Now at last everybody knows Right Cause. And Prokhorov's standing and credibility have grown immensely," he said.

Right Cause's ratings have been miserable. State-owned pollster VTsIOM [said](#) Friday that Prokhorov's three-month tenure increased the party's ratings from 1 to almost 2 percent, and the independent Levada Center's projections have not been much better.

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