

Why Putin Let Prokhorov Enter Politics

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The good news about this presidential election is that it may initiate the process of building a countervailing pole to Putin's political dominance.

Putin's strategy has always resembled that of the U.S. Pentagon — never allow a competitor to appear. He has built a system where only he decides who is allowed to compete against him, rooting out potential challengers long before they could threaten his rule. This has been done through "imitation politics" in a "managed democracy."

But the protests in Moscow show that Russians will no longer put up with imitation politics. They want genuine competition in an open political system where the rules are not rigged in the government's favor. President Dmitry Medvedev's belated political reforms respond to this demand.

As Putin wakes up to this new reality, his first instinct will be to upgrade imitation politics by engineering safe and controllable alternatives that would provide the appearance of competition while keeping in place the system where only he decides everything. This

would prevent the emergence of an implacable rival from Bolotnaya Ploshchad.

This is the logic behind Putin's overtures to billionaire Mikhail Prokhorov, who has emerged from the presidential race as a plausible alternative to Putin for many upwardly mobile voters, particularly in Moscow, where he finished second. Most of that vote was anti-Putin.

Putin's interest in Prokhorov's planned new party reflects his infatuation with a two-party system that he hopes to control on both sides of the aisle while barring new dangerous entrants.

Putin may have reasons to think of Prokhorov as controllable because the oligarch is vulnerable on many fronts. But for Prokhorov to play ball and pretend to be in the opposition would be suicidal in the new political reality of zero tolerance for phonys. The only way up for him politically is to seriously challenge Putin and soon.

Putin may count on Medvedev, who has already proved to be safe and controllable as a fake countervailing pole. Appointing Medvedev as prime minister would allow Putin to keep the discontented elites from splitting and carry on with the illusion of a "liberal alternative within the regime." But Medvedev's camp wants him to come out of Putin's shadow as an independent player with an independent political future. One day, Putin may be surprised to find out that even the safe alternatives are no longer safe.

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