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Elections in Russia: Prokhorov punished for overzealousness

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On 14 September, the *Pravoye Delo* (Right Cause) political party's leader, billionaire Mikhail Prokhorov, was removed from his position in an atmosphere of scandal. He became head of the party in May, at the recommendation of the government, who had been promoting *Pravoye Delo* as a party aimed at attracting liberal-minded voters during the upcoming elections. Since May, the new leader had been running a dynamic campaign, which also involved his own considerable resources. His sudden removal was effected during a party congress by 'secessionists' acting at the instruction of Vladislav Surkov, the deputy head of the Presidential Administration, who is loyal to Prime Minister Putin. The pretext for Prokhorov's exclusion was his refusal to remove a candidate from his party's electoral lists.

Commentary

- As has been observed in recent months, winning support for *Pravoye Delo* was part of the Russian government's election strategy. This strategy boils down to creating and supporting loyal groups (each of which has an image as 'liberals', 'nationalists' *et al.*) which would demonstrate the existence of pluralism on the Russian party scene; during the elections, these parties are intended to attract that part of the electorate which does not support United Russia, the party associated with the ruling elite. *Pravoye Delo* was aimed at those middle-class voters who are disenchanted by Putin and Medvedev, and who should have been attracted by the young and dynamic Prokhorov (the third richest man in Russia) and his liberal rhetoric.

- Prokhorov's sudden removal from the party was caused by fears in the government (especially among Vladimir Putin's circle) of his independence and his rising political ambitions. Although Prokhorov is a pragmatic businessman and loyal to the government, some of his pre-election activity (promoting a liberal programme, his announcement that he will run in the presidential election, his opposition to excessive government interference in the electoral roll) has raised concern among the ruling elite. This shows once again how restrictive the political rules of the game are in Russia: even in the course of an activity sanctioned by the government, politicians cannot afford to express even partial independence. The events around *Pravoye Delo* may also be a warning signal to other parties close to the government, especially the nationalist *Rodina*/Congress of Russian Communities, led by Dmitry Rogozin (who was removed from Russia's internal political scene a few years ago for displaying excessive political ambitions, but is now

back, with government support).

- Despite a split in *Pravoye Delo* and the discouragement of those voters who had supported it, it will start in the elections with new, little-known leaders, and it remains possible that it will be represented in parliament, possibly thanks to electoral manipulations. But this scandal further reduces the legitimacy of the Russian parliament which will be elected in the forthcoming elections this 4 December. It will also increase the number of voters in Russia who have no political representation, are dissatisfied with the current political options, and are tired of the long-standing dominance of the same groups.