

## Russian elections: the XX factor

February 14, 2012 8:15 pm by Courtney Weaver

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On the eve of Russia's March elections, Russia's state-owned news channel has been airing regular presidential debates – albeit not always with the candidates. Such was the case on Monday night, when Vladimir Putin and billionaire Mikhail Prokhorov faced off through two proxies: Nikita Mikhalkov, a renowned film director who has cosied up to the Kremlin in recent years, and Irina Prokhorova, the tycoon's little-known, 55-year-old sister.

Prokhorova entered the debate on Monday known only for work managing her brother's charitable fund, and as the editor and publisher of a small journal. She exited the night a star.

"When time from time people ask: 'And where do we find new, competent, professional people?' they don't understand how much the appearance of such new people, who are many in our society, rattles the the musty atmosphere an authoritarian political regime," [wrote Andrei Illarionov, the Cato Institute economist and former Putin advisor on his blog](#). "A completely small stirring in the political swamp has been enough for the country to recognise the name of one such competent person – Irina Prokhorova."

"Irina Prokhorova was magnificent with Mikhalkov. So much more interesting than her brother" [tweeted Yevgenia Albats](#), editor-in-chief of liberal newsweekly New Times.

Andrei Piontkovskii, the political analyst, [told Kommersant FM](#): "I think the Prokhorov family has made a huge mistake. It shouldn't have been Mikhail who ran for president, but Irina."

The hour-long debate, which can be [viewed on YouTube](#), ended with the director Mikhalkov promising Prokhorova his vote if she ever ran for president. So will Prokhorova's rousing success rub off on her brother? Prokhorov has seen a small jump in the polls over the past month, from an estimated 4 per cent of the

vote to 5 per cent, according to polling group VTsIOM. However he is unlikely to get into the double-digit range over the next month – even with the help of his sister.

While some joked on Twitter on Tuesday that the candidate had gained point for simply sharing his sister's DNA, others questioned why he hadn't made good use of her earlier.

“It's very strange that Prokhorov's pre-election team, which promised a 'bright' campaign, concealed from us such a treasure,” [wrote blogger Rustam Adagamov on his LiveJournal page](#). “If Prokhorov really wants to somehow make a sound in this election, he shouldn't go on [comedy show] 'Projector Paris Hilton' and make dull jokes about gondolas but beg his sister to take an active role in his campaign. In the current case, I couldn't help but wonder: is Mikhail Dmitrievich a Kremlin project?”