

3,000 Rally in Kaliningrad for Putin's Ouster, Popular Vote

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About 3,000 people rallied in Kaliningrad on Saturday to demand Prime Minister Vladimir Putin's resignation and a return of direct gubernatorial elections.

The gathering was considerably smaller than a protest of 10,000 people — one of the largest since Putin rose to power a decade ago — that was staged in the economically struggling exclave on the Baltic coast in January.

Boris Nemtsov, leader of opposition group Solidarity, called the authorities "thieves," to chants from the crowd of "Fire Putin! Fire Putin!"

Both organizers and police said the demonstration ended peacefully.

Although Saturday's rally was relatively small, "this protest was more radical," Nemtsov said later by telephone.

After the January demonstration, Putin scolded his ruling party, United Russia, for not paying

more attention to ordinary voters.

Nemtsov dismissed police estimates that only 700 to 800 people took part in the rally. Organizers, witnesses and a Reuters reporter estimated that about 3,000 turned out.

"[The police] are fulfilling Putin's orders," said Nemtsov, who three weeks earlier was detained during a Moscow rally against restrictions on freedom of assembly. He was also detained Sunday while attempting to lead a march of about 100 opposition activists with a giant flag in central Moscow to mark the Flag Day holiday.

In Kaliningrad, protesters from groups like Patriots of Russia, the Communist Party, Solidarity and The Other Russia adopted a resolution demanding the reinstatement of gubernatorial elections and the resignation of Putin's government. Putin scrapped the elections in favor of presidential appointments in 2004.

The January rally in Kaliningrad was mainly a call for the dismissal of the region's unpopular governor, Georgy Boos, a Putin appointee. Saturday's protest was to have conveyed the same message, but last week United Russia decided not to include Boos on its list of nominees for a new term. Boos' current term ends next month.

(Reuters, AP, MT)

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