

1,000 Rally for New Anti-Kremlin Bloc

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People rallying Saturday on Bolotnaya Ploshchad in support of For a Russia Without Arbitrariness and Corruption. **Andrey Rudakov**

About 1,000 people gathered in Moscow's Bolotnaya Ploshchad on Saturday to support a new anti-Kremlin coalition that has said it will field a presidential candidate in 2012.

Four liberal opposition politicians called on the crowd to help mount a challenge to Prime Minister Vladimir Putin and his United Russia party in 2011 State Duma elections and the 2012 vote.

"We stand for free elections, for a Russia without lawlessness and corruption," Mikhail Kasyanov, who was prime minister during Putin's first term as president, told the crowd.

Kasyanov joined Boris Nemtsov, Vladimir Ryzhkov and Vladimir Milov in a bid to unite Russia's fractured opposition as elections near. Putin has hinted that he will either run for president in 2012 or support President Dmitry Medvedev.

"We formed the coalition to put forward a single candidate for the elections in 2012. We will stand against the party of thieves and traitors, United Russia," Nemtsov said, addressing the

crowd on a square across the river from the Kremlin. The coalition is called For a Russia Without Arbitrariness and Corruption.

"Our aim is to throw this clique from power," Nemtsov said.

More than 100 police officers monitored the rally, which was held with the permission of Moscow authorities.

The size of the crowd underscored the uphill battle faced by liberal Kremlin opponents who were pushed to the margins of politics during Putin's presidency.

In an opinion poll last month by the independent Levada Center, 2 percent of respondents said they would vote for the alliance if it were running in Duma elections.

That score put them behind United Russia, the Communists and the other two parties that are now represented in the Duma.

Nemtsov said the alliance would aim to seek registration as a party — which is required if it is to run in parliamentary elections — in the spring.

That effort will test the mood of the Kremlin, which critics say has used technicalities and dirty tricks to keep opponents off ballots in recent years.

"In today's circumstances, this is a step forward," Gennady Vasin, a 49-year-old bank employee, said of the coalition's formation. "We want Russia to be democratic and free. We want an end to corruption."

Yury Volnov, a 36-year-old manager at an IT company, expressed cautious optimism about the alliance's prospects.

"We can't be sure this will work, but we have to try something," said Volnov, who carried his 8-month-old son.

(Reuters, MT)

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