

Paper Seizure Linked to Letter, Not Photo

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An open letter to Medvedev, not this picture, could have led to the seizure. **Vladimir Rodionov**

Authorities in the Kaliningrad region have come under fire after police seized 40,000 copies of a local newspaper that carried an open letter to President Dmitry Medvedev demanding that he fire local leaders.

Speculation swirled that the seizure had to do with Izvestia Kaliningrada's front-page photo, which showed Medvedev biting into a watermelon under the headline "We'll Tell Him Everything."

But Oleg Altovsky, the weekly's editor, denied the rumors Thursday.

Medvedev visited the region last Sunday, two days after the seizure, when he celebrated Navy Day together with sailors in the port of Baltiisk. He did not comment on the colorful photo, which was released by his own press service.

Altovsky said he was stopped by traffic police and spent hours in police custody last Friday after having picked up the paper's print run from the printing house.

The seizure was obviously linked to the open letter, Altovsky said by telephone. "Clearly they did not like it."

The letter, first [published](#) online last week by the 39.ru regional news web site, asks Medvedev to fire Governor Nikolai Tsukanov and his government. The 2,160-word statement accuses Tsukanov of nepotism and hiring officials with criminal pasts or vested business interests.

Altovsky said police told him that the paper contained "extremist material" and that they were still investigating it. "I have no hope of getting the copies back," he said.

It was unclear who was behind the letter, which had 2,316 signatures by late Thursday.

Altovsky refused to name the organizers, and Boris Obratsov, the owner of 39.ru, did not respond to repeated calls Thursday.

Obratsov told Kommersant in an interview earlier this week that "certain people" had warned him that if he publishes the letter in print he would go to prison.

Tsukanov has denied any links to the seizure. "I know a text has been published online asking the president to fire me and the government. But I cannot comment on something else happening now because I know nothing about it," he was [quoted](#) as saying by Newkaliningrad.ru last Friday.

Mikhail Chesalin, an opposition lawmaker at the local legislature, condemned the seizure as "a criminal act".

Chesalin, a member of the Patriots of Russia party, said that Tsukanov, who is currently leading in local primaries held by the United Russia ruling party, had little reason to fear the letter's publication.

"But the fact that the newspaper was seized suggests that he did have qualms," he said.

Reporters Without Borders [said](#) the seizure was the latest example of regional governors abusing their power to silence media.

"We are disturbed to see this form of censorship used more than once in a short space of time," the press freedom group said on its web site. It added that authorities in St. Petersburg on July 4 had seized 90 percent of an issue of the Kommersant Vlast weekly, which criticized Governor Valentina Matviyenko. The story, reported last month, was never confirmed by law enforcement agencies.

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