

Thousands Rally for Putin's Bid

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YEKATERINBURG — Thousands of supporters of Prime Minister Vladimir Putin rallied Saturday to back his bid to return to the Kremlin, a week before what are likely to be far larger opposition protests to demand greater political choice.

Police said about 10,000 people gathered in Yekaterinburg, the country's fourth-largest city, with many brought on buses and trains from outlying towns in the Urals industrial belt to back Putin before the March 4 presidential vote.

Demonstrators held placards with slogans such as "We are for a stable tomorrow," swayed to pop music and enjoyed free food and drinks.

"Buses were laid on for us at the factory. We saw lists in advance of those who would go to the rally," said Andrei Mandure, a worker at a chemical plant in the town of Lesnoi, a closed facility during the Soviet era. Putin did not attend the rally.

Public-sector workers were also out in the city's railway station square. One, a 59-year-old kindergarten worker who gave her name as Yevgenia, said her boss had instructed her to attend.

Putin is aiming to secure a third presidential term in March. He holds a clear lead in opinion polls, with Communist Gennady Zyuganov running a distant second.

The exclusion of liberal Grigory Yavlinsky from the slate on a technicality has further angered the opposition, which says the Kremlin allowed billionaire Mikhail Prokhorov to run to capture protest votes without posing a threat to Putin.

"There are no good candidates. Yavlinsky was banned ... [so] who else if not Putin?" said Sergei, a 46-year-old from Kirovgrad, when asked who he would vote for in March.

Tens of thousands of people from different parties and others, unaffiliated to any political organization, are expected to take part in a protest march in Moscow on Feb. 4 to press for fair elections, which was approved by the city's authorities.

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