

Trio in Kemerovo Arrested for 'Unsanctioned Rally'

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Balloons have featured prominently in the For Honest Elections protest movement.

Three Kemerovo residents are awaiting a court summons after being detained for walking down a central city street with white ribbons and balloons in what local police deemed an unsanctioned protest.

Pensioner Alexander Illarionov, one of those detained, told Vedomosti that police acted after "provocateurs" came up to the group asking to see what was written on the white ribbons they were wearing.

Police then seized the ribbons, which bore the slogans "For honest elections" and "Enough of rule by crooks and thieves," and sent them to be checked for promoting extremism.

The incident took place Tuesday, the Russia Day public holiday and the same day as tens of thousands of pro-democracy activists took to Moscow streets to protest President Vladimir Putin's rule.

It also came just days after Putin signed into law new protest legislation hiking fines for participating in an unsanctioned rally to as much as 300,000 rubles (\$9,000). The fine for organizing an unsanctioned rally was raised to 1 million rubles.

Local United Russia members saw the Kemerovo group's stroll as unlawful and said it required prior clearance with city authorities.

"If three of you gathered, then that's more than one. Prior clearance was essential," said Alexander Kurasov, chairman of United Russia's executive committee in Kemerovo, the business daily reported.

But analysts consulted by Vedomosti suggested that the new protest law could be interpreted in a number of ways and that judges could interpret the notion of mass participation as they saw fit.

The three Kemerovo protesters face charges of organizing a public event without giving due notice, which is punishable by the higher fines stipulated in the new protest law.

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2