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MARCH 20, 2010, 1:44 P.M. ET

# Thousands Protest Russian Economic Policy

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Associated Press

ST. PETERSBURG, Russia—Thousands rallied across Russia on Saturday to denounce government economic policy and demand more freedom.

Many participants in the rallies, dubbed the "Day of Wrath" by the opposition, demanded the resignation of Prime Minister Vladimir Putin.

About 1,000 people rallied in St. Petersburg holding placards "Putin's team must resign!"

Police didn't intervene with the St. Petersburg protest but they barred protesters chanting anti-Putin slogans from holding a rally on a downtown Moscow. City police spokesman Viktor Biryukov said 70 people had been detained for taking part in the protest which hasn't been authorized by authorities.

Opposition activists have insisted they need no special permission from authorities to hold rallies because the Russian constitutions guarantees the right of assembly.

The authorities allowed an earlier protest of about 1,000 in another section of the Russian capital to demand a reform of the Russian traffic police, which has been widely criticized for corruption and inefficiency.

An opposition rally in the far eastern port of Vladivostok drew about 1,500 people, and similar protests were to be held in many other cities throughout Russia on Saturday.

Several thousand demonstrators gathered in the Baltic city of Kaliningrad despite an earlier decision by the opposition leaders to cancel the protest. They chanted "Government should resign!" and called for the ouster of the provincial governor, the Interfax news agency reported. Police didn't intervene.

The organizers said that about 5,000 people attended the protest, while police said about 3,000 took part, Interfax said.

A January rally in Kalinigrad attracted about 10,000 in the largest antigovernment protest in years, and the government was clearly worried. Mr. Putin has criticized the main pro-Kremlin party, saying its empty promises had fed public discontent.

Mr. Putin moved into the prime minister's seat in 2008 after eight years as president but retains much of his power. The opposition has accused him of rolling back many of the democratic achievements of the 1990s.

Nothing will change as long Putin stays at the helm, Olga Kurnosova of the United Civil Front,

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an umbrella group uniting several opposition parties and movements, said at St. Petersburg's rally. "We don't want him to continue ruling."

Some protesters criticized Mr. Putin's cabinet for failing to compensate a rise in utility tariffs that has affected living standards.

"I'm worried about growing gas and electricity prices," Vyacheslav Ivanov, a 71-year old retiree. "The prices are growing, and we are getting poorer."

Many others blamed the government for red tape and rampant corruption that has stifled business.

"I came to this rally because it's impossible to develop small business in this country," said the 58-year old Yelena Balikina. She said she had to close her business venture because of official restrictions. "They stamp small business out with taxes and inspections," Ms. Balikina said. "And you have to pay bribes on every step."

In Vladivostok, where many residents draw their incomes from trading in cars imported from nearby Japan, demonstrators protested the latest restrictive measures against foreign vehicles introduced by the authorities in a bid to protect local car makers.

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