

Gandhi Has Come Back to Haunt Putin

By [The Moscow Times](#)

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Up until Sunday, it looked like the clash between opposition forces and the government had calmed down, even though none of the protesters' demands has been met. But the excessive force that OMON riot police used against demonstrators starting on Sunday and continuing throughout this week now threatens to radicalize the confrontation between civil society and the state.

The use of tear gas and batons by riot police during Sunday's "March of a Million" protest was the first violent clash of its type in years. True, there probably were some radical demonstrators and anarchists bent on provoking the police, but the police also provoked the demonstrators by cordoning off the agreed-upon area and beating innocent people.

For the next three days, police stopped protesters — or people the police thought were protesters — for simply strolling down Moscow's main streets. They did not provoke the police, did not carry anti-government signs and refrained from shouting anti-Putin slogans.

On the way to his presidential inauguration on Monday, Vladimir Putin's motorcade passed through completely deserted Moscow streets, creating the impression that the authorities needed the extended May holidays only so Muscovites would vacate the city and go to their dachas.

The main goal was to ensure that nothing would spoil Putin's own personal May holiday — his return to power. An even better gift for Putin than motoring through a ghost town on the way to his inauguration would have been an end to all the protests and dissent in general.

But by using excessive force against demonstrators, the authorities only spur the opposition toward greater creativity, determination and perhaps radicalism.

Putin made a sarcastic comment in 2007 when he implied that he became the world's only democrat after Mahatma Gandhi died. It seems, though, that Gandhi has come back to haunt him. In a sign of peaceful resistance, the leaders of the opposition march sat on Bolshoi Kammeny Bridge on Sunday and in subsequent days walked the streets without resisting police demands. Gandhi successfully used this kind of nonviolent resistance to drive the British out of India.

It has already been said that the reasons for the current protest movement run deeper than dissatisfaction over widespread falsifications during the State Duma elections in December and the presidential vote in March.

Even honest elections, as demonstrators initially demanded, are not enough. The country needs institutions that work — elections, courts, institutional checks and balances, an independent media and a transparent, noncorrupt and accountable government. But the authorities do not intend to satisfy a single one of those demands. If they did, it would only limit their ability to enrich themselves and abuse their power with impunity.

As a result, authorities resort to quelling the protests with force and ignoring the protesters' demands for more transparency, democracy and rule of law.

In the last few days, the attempts by the moderate opposition to engage the authorities in a political dialogue have clearly failed, and that has only given more radical members of the opposition additional reasons to fill the void and respond accordingly.

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