

Putin Tough-Guy Tactics Not Working on Protests

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The Kremlin and the protest movement have effectively checkmated each other. Both are running short on strategies that could bring a clear victory or open a new avenue for the offensive. Both are hobbled by internal disagreements and personal rivalries.

The Kremlin's hopes that the anti-Putin protests would subside after the March presidential election have not been realized. The rallies in Moscow on May 6 and June 12 have shown that there is a core of protest activists numbering in the tens of thousands. They will not go away without a fight, inflicting irreparable damage on the regime — both domestically and globally.

As if out of habit, the Kremlin has resorted to tough-guy tactics: the breakup of the rally on May 6, the pathetic rounding up of protesters wearing white ribbons, pushing through at the last moment a draconian law on demonstrations and last week's searches and seizures of the protest movement's top leaders. But none of these measures have intimidated

the protesters. They are still determined to show their peaceful resistance to Putin's rule.

The Kremlin succeeded, however, in blocking serious protest activity in other major cities. The protest is now localized in Moscow and in St. Petersburg, allowing the Kremlin to cast it as marginal, frivolous and even gay.

At the same time, however, the protest movement has run out of palatable options. People at the rallies are getting tired of chanting the same old anti-Putin rants and are demanding tougher action against the regime.

The Free Russia manifesto of the June 12 rally sets out the right objectives, including new parliamentary and presidential elections and a new Constitution. But the protesters have no legal means to impose this agenda on the authorities.

The Kremlin will not hesitate to break up any protest that would go beyond the harmless rallies at a safe distance from government buildings. Nor will it allow a popular referendum to expedite legislative and mayoral elections in Moscow, denying the protesters a power base of their own.

A way out of the stalemate might be for part of the elite to set up a direct dialogue with the protesters through intermediaries like former Finance Minister Alexei Kudrin who has sympathized with the protest movement. There are few signs of this happening yet, but Putin's elite is getting wobbly amid protests that are not going away. This is one more reason to keep holding them.

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