

Protesters Should Copy U.S. Civil Rights March

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As Vladimir Putin cruises to an assured presidential victory, Russia's resilient protest movement has to demonstrate that it has the strategy to convert street energy into meaningful political change beyond March 4.

This strategy was not on display at the last rally on Bolotnaya Ploshchad. It quickly morphed into a "Russia without Putin" chant while barely mentioning the demand for a rerun of the fraudulent State Duma elections — a key reason for the protests.

Demanding free and fair Duma elections under the new rules for party participation is central to the political transition to a post-Putin Russia. A new Duma with broader political representation would crack open Putin's lock on the political process, deepen the fissures within the elites and allow for a challenge of Putin's dominance by new political leaders.

The new Duma would be the starting point to the ultimate goal — sweeping constitutional

reform to finally end the absolutist monarchy in Russia by establishing a genuine separation of powers and a government for the people, of the people and by the people.

The winning strategy must eschew the violent tactics that some protest leaders have signaled they might deploy — like occupying public squares with tent camps, a tactic proven effective during the Orange Revolution in Kiev in 2004.

This would be falling right into the trap set by the Kremlin that has sought to mobilize its supporters to defend Russia against the "orange plague."

The Kremlin's strategy is to stoke the hysteria by branding the protesters stooges of Washington, create conditions for direct street confrontation, and, if need be, provoke violent clashes between protesters and regime loyalists to justify a law-and-order crackdown after Putin's victory on March 4.

The protesters do not have the means to defeat the government in a direct showdown. Nor should it be their intention. The protests are not about a violent seizure of power. They are about regime change through comprehensive political reform with broad public support.

That's why the winning strategy is to keep holding peaceful rallies as long as it takes to press for real political reforms and legitimate democratic institutions, like a new Duma.

The right model is not an Orange Revolution. It's the U.S. Civil Rights Movement and Dr. Martin Luther King's march on Washington.

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