

How to Democratize Russia Without Revolution

By [Gordon Hahn](#)

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Opposition leader Boris Nemtsov recently said that the white-ribbon opposition's leadership needs to emphasize to the public that they are engaged in a marathon rather than a sprint in the struggle for democracy in Russia. The remark came after low turnout for the Dec. 15 "Freedom March" in central Moscow.

To be sure, full democratization will not come overnight, but the timeline might not be as long as some think. The more authoritarian Soviet Union came a long way during Perestroika 1.0 in the late 1980s and early 1990s. With that in mind, the struggle during Perestroika 2.0 may be difficult but need not be especially long. Indeed, the opposition may be making things harder than they really are.

Fundamental regime transformation is unlikely to come about by way of either a peaceful or violent revolution from below — that is, a seizure of power by the societal opposition. More likely, it will be a negotiated transition in which street protests and other peaceful political action push the regime to make the necessary democratizing reforms. The best way to do that

is not on the streets alone but through the ballot box. Thus, during Perestroika 1.0, a multifarious opposition composed of democrats, nationalists and moderate socialists both inside and outside the Communist Party nudged Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev toward more reforms by using a broad menu of tactics, from mass demonstrations to victories at the ballot box.

Today's battle requires a similar multipronged approach in which electoral victories must play a key, if not leading, role. Defeat at the ballot box could be the best way to scare and pressure the regime to undertake reforms and play politics according to democratic rules. To achieve this, the opposition should register as parties or join already registered parties like the Party of People's Freedom or others depending on ideological orientation. Sergei Udaltsov's Left Front, for example, might join the Communist Party or register its own party to run in elections.

The opposition has several years to organize and rally its forces for the State Duma and presidential elections in 2016 and 2018, respectively. In the meantime, opposition parties have the opportunity to practice, experiment and expand their networks through the intermittent gubernatorial and perhaps revived senatorial elections.

Close calls and defeats for the Kremlin's United Russia can push President Vladimir Putin to make compromises and liberalize the system, as occurred this past year. One of the lessons for the opposition should be the effect of the original white ribbon movement's first victory. The December 2011 demonstrations prompted then-President Dmitry Medvedev to introduce a series of electoral reforms during the following months — for example, the registration of the opposition leader Vladimir Ryzhkov's Republican Party, which then united with the Party of People's Freedom.

The dilemma for the opposition is that its more radical elements demonize Putin and the regime to the extreme, and this requires denigrating Medvedev's reforms as insignificant. In this way, the opposition is denying itself its first victory and missing a crucial lesson of its first engagement with the regime.

Moreover, United Russia's relatively poor showing in the Duma election and in previous regional elections played a role in the decision to introduce political reforms as a way of co-opting moderate opposition elements into the system — and off the streets. This is a dynamic that the opposition can use to become increasingly influential within the system, push for more reforms and make elections more free. Ultimately, the regime may agree to lose more elections, including federal ones. This could take more than one election cycle, meaning more than a decade of struggle similar to that which led to the fall from power of Mexico's Institutional Revolutionary Party in the 1990s. On the other hand, more than one more federal cycle may not be needed if regional gubernatorial and legislative elections are taken advantage of to the greatest extent possible.

Mundane, painstaking work needs to be done for the opposition to be successful. This means more fundraising, organizational work, leadership selection, voter registration drives and effective campaigning. The kind of heroic revolutionism that the more radical leftist and nationalist elements within the opposition hope to use to bring a rapid collapse of the regime will be in less demand. Therefore, the new electoral agenda will have the added benefit of

forcing some radicals to moderate their tactics and even their goals, thereby strengthening the moderate and democratic element within the opposition.

The electoral agenda should include:

- Diversifying the street opposition by incorporating its elements into existing political parties or creating new ones;
- Pushing for the legalization of election blocs in both federal and regional parliamentary elections, which Putin said in his presidential address he was willing to discuss;
- Developing opposition parties' level of organization in part by institutionalizing a leadership and platform selection process;
- Expanding opposition parties' presence in the regions using gubernatorial and regional legislative elections;
- Beginning a search for State Duma candidates in the regions, given the planned return to a mixed- party and single-mandate system, in which half the Duma seats will be apportioned according to the results of single-district races;
- Pursuing dialogue with the regime, especially on the issue of legalizing electoral blocs, while maintaining criticism of authoritarian aspects of its policies and the political system.

While bad, Putin's regime could be worse in terms of both comparative and Russian historical standards. The regime has shown a willingness to make some compromises and limit its use of force. For example, the organizers of the recent illegal demonstration, a violation of the law that under Putin's legal amendments brings with it tens of thousands of dollars in fines, were only briefly detained and were not charged.

The political system is sufficiently open. It can now be used to bring about change without incurring the risks of chaos and crackdown inherent in revolutions and attempts at revolution. The opposition simply needs to be tactically diverse and flexible enough to win the day.

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