

# Kremlin Running Out of Options as Protests Grow

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The Kremlin is running out of palatable options to neutralize the continuing street protests in Moscow.

Despite gloating predictions of the imminent death of the protest movement, the thousands-strong "March Against Scoundrels" in Moscow on Jan. 13 showed that the protest movement is resilient, and that its base in the capital is strong and growing. It may now be morphing into a broader democratic movement. The political strategies deployed to crush it have proven ineffective.

These counter-strategies focused on discrediting protest leaders with criminal charges based on flimsy evidence and sought to discourage people from joining the rallies by jailing some of the participants on trumped-up charges of "staging mass riots."

They involved smear campaigns in state-controlled media, portraying the protesters as

agents of foreign influence out to destroy Russia's greatness.

They stoked a class war pitting middle-class Moscow against blue-collar workers in the regions. They unleashed a "cultural war," portraying Moscow's educated class as alien to the "traditional Russian values" of the provincial "moral majority."

The Kremlin intentionally avoided speaking directly with the protesters regarding their demands, such as prosecuting those responsible for vote-rigging in recent elections, new election rules to prevent this fraud and a new Central Elections Commission.

Political analyst Gleb Pavlovsky in a recent Dozhd TV appearance said it is as if President Vladimir Putin were moving in circles, thinking of what else to throw at the protesters just to avoid talking to them directly.

Instead of looking for ways to accommodate some of the protesters' demands, the Kremlin preferred an in-your-face approach. The Duma's already damaged legitimacy was completely erased by bizarre bills, while proposals for early elections were dismissed out of hand. The Kremlin's discredited electoral machine remains in place, while new legislation is pushed to make vote-rigging, particularly through absentee ballots, easier.

The end result has been more anger, alienation, discontent and instability. The strategy is to create a huge moral and political divide within society and the elites. Now, an increasing number of Russians are confronting the stark choice between working for the system and saving their reputation. Others are now questioning the legitimacy of the system itself.

The strategy runs counter to Putin's campaign promises of stability, unity and moral cohesion. It should be abandoned before it's too late.

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