

Russia Won't Fix Dagestan By Jailing Said Amirov

By [Mark Galeotti](#)

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For 15 years, Said Amirov shrugged off periodic assassination attempts — even the one in 1993 that left him in a wheelchair, with a bullet lodged in his spine — to remain the master of Makhachkala, perhaps the most unruly city in Dagestan, now the most unruly republic in the Russian Federation.

Last week, following his arrest in 2013 for plotting to shoot down a rival's plane, Amirov was sentenced to 10 years in jail. That he was toppled from his position, and through a court rather than a Kalashnikov, says something about modern Russia.

Deputy premier of Dagestan since 1991, Amirov acquired a name as a ruthless political operator whose campaign against local gangs was characterized by many as just an attempt to supplant them with his own allies. In 1998, he was elected mayor of Makhachkala and held that position until his arrest and suspension from office in 2013.

Amirov appeared bulletproof in every sense of the word. He survived at least a dozen

assassination attempts, some say 15, including rocket attacks on his offices in 1998. Just as importantly, he appeared politically unassailable. Despite continued allegations of brutality, corruption and crime links, he outlasted four Dagestani leaders and three Russian presidents.

No wonder that, as well as the nickname "Roosevelt" — because of his wheelchair — he was also known as "Said the Deathless," after Koschei, the immortal villain from Russian folklore.

When Moscow decided to move against him, it had to consider the strength of his local power base. This included not only his own private army of bodyguards but also considerable influence in the Dagestani police and, allegedly, a

drug-trafficking gang known as the Kolkhozniki. As a result, his arrest was closer to a raid in hostile territory, spearheaded by Federal Security Service commandos brought in from outside the republic, backed with armored vehicles and helicopter gunships. Such was the concern about his sway over the local authorities that Amirov was immediately airlifted to Moscow, along with his nephew and nine other suspects.

If Moscow had been happy enough to let him build his fiefdom for 15 years, why did it turn against him? Part of the reason appears to have been that he fell afoul of the powerful Investigative Committee by his involvement in the 2011 murder of one of its regional heads, Arsen Gadzhibekov.

Although Amirov was to be convicted on the basis of a different case, his plot to use a surface-to-air missile to shoot down a plane carrying Sagid Murtazaliev, head of the Dagestan Pension Fund, started the process rolling.

But even the Investigative Committee cannot reach in and pluck someone like Amirov from his fortress-like home and deposit him in Moscow's Lefortovo prison without a political decision having been made by the Kremlin.

The very reasons that once seemed to make Amirov such an admirable local proxy — his skill at managing the complex ethnic and factional politics of Dagestan, his ruthlessness, his networks within both the underworld and the elite, his industrial-scale corruption, his acquisitive ambition for himself and his family — all became liabilities.

Although the insurgency in the North Caucasus speaks the language of jihad, in the main it is a product of endemic failures of governance. Corruption has not only hindered any attempts to bring meaningful economic progress to this impoverished region, it has also deepened the divide between the handful of haves and the have-not majority.

Given that Amirov had openly been preparing a bid to become the next governor of Dagestan, his arrest was a powerful symbol of a new bid to try to master the corruption and clientelism making the North Caucasus virtually ungovernable.

It was also significant how this case was carried through. Instead of a quiet but forcible retirement, as had been offered to past figures whom the Kremlin wanted gone, Amirov was arrested, tried and convicted. The overall picture is of a case taken through the legal system properly.

Amirov was sentenced to 10 years in a maximum security prison colony and was deprived

of his state awards. These included some that, ironically enough, had been given to him by the Federal Security Service. This is unprecedented for one of the Kremlin's former local strongmen. It may even be a cautionary tale for other local kleptocrats.

Meanwhile, there are some very limited grounds for hope in Dagestan. In June, it was announced that it was third only to the Nizhny Novgorod and Sverdlovsk regions for implementing the 218 "May Orders" from the

socio-economic program President Vladimir Putin outlined in his 2012 inaugural address. This may be so much eyewash, but there has certainly been some real progress on the ground. This year has seen industrial production up 24.1 percent, and as a result unemployment is slowly declining, although not quickly enough.

Some of the regional aid funds, typically devoured in orgies of embezzlement, are going to the projects they were meant to fund. Projects such as the reconstruction of the Makhachkala-Tbilisi road, which would help trade with neighboring Georgia, are at last under way. The delayed 100-megawatt Gotsatlinskaya hydroelectric power station, begun in 2007, is about to be commissioned. Dagestani billionaire Suleiman Kerimov has bought a majority stake in Makhachkala Airport and is expected to invest more than \$86 million in it.

Mission accomplished, then? Hardly. Just as one can see signs of progress in the way Amirov was toppled, one can also see the limitations of the system in what has happened since then.

Dagestani leader Ramazan Abdulatipov initially tried to adopt a more conciliatory and reformist style. But as disappointment grew at the slow pace of change, he responded with a more authoritarian and divisive approach. Protests have been dispersed, triggering ethnic riots. Meanwhile, the insurgency remains active and violent. Even the news about Kerimov's investment has been greeted with caution, as it is likely less to reflect his confidence in regional air traffic and more an investment in buying favor in the Kremlin and influence in Dagestan.

The problem is that "fixing" the North Caucasus is not just about removing a few individuals but re-engineering structures of governance to create genuine legitimacy. Without political stability, guaranteed property rights and a serious and sustained campaign against predatory corruption and embezzlement, economic progress will continue to be driven either by subsidies from Moscow or investments like Kerimov's, intended more to buy influence than kickstart a moribund economy.

Abdulatipov quickly squandered the optimism generated by Amirov's arrest. Amirov's conviction creates another brief opportunity, but if the Kremlin lets this one also pass, it is hard to see any real hope for the North Caucasus.

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