

Russia's In-System Opposition Gets Second Chance in Khabarovsk

In appointing a far-right deputy as the new governor of Khabarovsk, Putin is making the LDPR party responsible for extinguishing the fire of discontent raging in the region.

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July 27, 2020



Mikhail Degtyarev **Dmitry Morgulis/TASS**

The appointment of Mikhail Degtyarev, a Duma deputy for the far-right Liberal Democratic Party of Russia (LDPR), as governor of the Khabarovsk region came as a surprise to many. It seemed like a strange response by the Kremlin to the thousands-strong street protests that have swept the region since its former governor — fellow LDPR representative Sergei Furgal — was arrested on suspicion of ordering contract killings.

It was almost by chance that Furgal was [elected governor](#) of Russia's Far Eastern Khabarovsk region back in 2018. Protest-minded voters in the region back then were ready to vote for

anyone in order to defeat the candidate backed by the regime. Furgal had not even bothered to campaign.

As a representative of a tame, “in-system” opposition party that is in fact loyal to the Kremlin, Furgal initially agreed to withdraw from the second round of voting in exchange for the post of deputy governor, but later changed his mind. The Kremlin saw this as a dangerous precedent that cast doubt on the entire system of managed election campaigns. Putin had personally backed the incumbent, Vyacheslav Shport, so Furgal’s refusal to quit the race was seen as unforgivable. His arrest — on charges that date back fifteen years — and public disgrace are a warning to all other spoiler and decorative candidates, designed to quash any ideas of political autonomy.

The election of [three in-system opposition governors](#) (in Khakassia, Vladimir, and Khabarovsk) in 2018 exposed a problem that had been mounting since the end of 2016, when [Sergei Kiriyenko](#) replaced Vyacheslav Volodin as head of domestic politics within the presidential administration. The [relationship](#) between the presidential administration and the Communist Party and LDPR had become cooler and more formal, with little dialogue between them.

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If Volodin saw the Communists and LDPR as players on the same team as the regime, Kiriyenko views them as inherited vestiges of the past. Unlike Kiriyenko, Volodin knew how to maneuver, bargain, and take into account the different interests of the in-system parties. For Kiriyenko, that tactic is excessive and even harmful: it shows too much regard for a structure that has long outlived its usefulness.

Furgal’s arrest and firing was meant as a strong warning to the LDPR that the in-system parties must not set themselves up as real opposition. The question of who would replace him, therefore, took on great importance. According to some sources, Kiriyenko was opposed to making a deal with the LDPR, and the decision to appoint its member Degtyarev was made personally by Putin.

In betting on an LDPR figure and not on a candidate put forward by the presidential administration or someone with connections to the region’s influential presidential plenipotentiary Yuri Trutnev, the president demonstrated that a stable relationship with the in-system opposition is more important to him than local intrigues. Putin wants to preserve the existing party system, which seems to him to be well oiled and dependable, and in which the in-system opposition plays a crucial role.

To the Kremlin, the headline-grabbing protests in Khabarovsk against Furgal’s arrest seem like the least dangerous problem in a pyramid of political risks: little more than a regrettable side effect of mistakes made in holding the gubernatorial elections and in working with the in-system opposition. In other words, the presidential administration sees the current protests as the consequence of a two-year-old glitch, and not of Furgal’s removal.

Degtyarev’s appointment will present new challenges, however. The region clearly doesn’t want a carpetbagger as its governor, and Degtyarev is not getting a warm welcome from

either the local population or elites. Even within his own party, cracks are appearing: a regional parliamentary deputy and city deputy have already quit the LDPR in protest at Furgal's removal and Degtyarev's appointment. After all, the former's political value for the Khabarovsk region lay not in his party affiliation, but in the fact that he was lawfully elected and one of their own.

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Degtyarev will have to deal with a chilly relationship with the regional branch of the LDPR, and with enmity from the local population and presidential administration, which has distanced itself from the president's decision. It's being said in some quarters that Degtyarev is a temporary replacement, and that Moscow will select a more suitable candidate by the State Duma elections of September 2021.

It's unlikely that a temporary appointment is what Putin initially had in mind. The president held a meeting with Degtyarev and clearly gave him his endorsement. This is a genuine attempt to give the LDPR a second chance, to say: "You have [won the region](#) — now take responsibility for it." In appointing Degtyarev as governor, Putin is not promoting one of his own men, but putting responsibility for extinguishing the fire of discontent raging in Khabarovsk onto the LDPR, which will now be under considerable pressure.

It's hardly a coincidence that the LDPR suddenly dropped its opposition to a contentious bill making elections three-day affairs, which was passed in a third and final reading on July 21 — the day after Degtyarev's appointment.

Under Kiriyenko's predecessors — Volodin and Vladislav Surkov — the in-system opposition was permitted to flirt with protests to channel people's frustration and let off steam. But the current thinking in the Kremlin is that everything should be consistent. The regime is becoming less and less tolerant of any expressions of autonomy and dissent.

The Kremlin is becoming less nuanced, and either brings political parties in for close cooperation, depriving them of any autonomy (which is unacceptable for the in-system opposition), or sidelines them entirely from political dealings. This is the policy followed by the domestic policy overseers, despite Putin's misgivings.

The differing views of the president and his staff on the prospects of the in-system opposition are, however, tactical rather than strategic: both approaches agree that the opposition has no right to play its own game, and can count on an administrative role at best.

As for the protests, for the Kremlin, they are an unwelcome and delayed side effect of other people's mistakes. Accordingly, the Kremlin will tackle the protests not with political dialogue and compromise, but with the help of administrative action taken by the new governor.

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