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Dagestan Judge Gunned Down in Apparent Revenge Killing

By Alexander Winning

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Magomedov oversaw a series of high-profile trials since his appointment to the republic's Supreme Court. He was reportedly subject to repeated threats over his work.

A top judge in the restive Dagestan republic was gunned down outside his home in what observers called revenge for rulings against local insurgents.

An assailant fired at least five shots at Magomed Magodemov, 55, as he approached his car at roughly 9 p.m. Tuesday in Makhachkala, the republic's capital, the Investigative Committee said in a statement Wednesday.

Magomedov, who had served in Dagestan's judiciary for the past 30 years and presided over the trials of terrorist groups, died at the scene of the shooting, while his attacker fled.

Attacks on officials have become an almost-daily occurrence in Russia's troubled North Caucasus, where police and security service officers are battling a resurgent Islamist

insurgency after two separatist wars in neighboring Chechnya.

A law enforcement operation code-named Volcano 4, aimed at detaining the culprit, has so far yielded no results, but investigators opened a criminal case on charges of attempted murder of a member of the judiciary and illegal weapons possession. The charges are punishable by a jail sentence of up to 20 years.

Commenting on Magomedov's death, Dagestan republic leader Magomedsalam Magomedov said on his official website that the attack was "an attempt to destabilize the republic, to frighten those who are at the forefront of the struggle with extremism and terrorism."

Dagestani State Duma Deputy Rizvan Kurbanov wrote on his blog that "the response to these slaves of Satan [those behind the killing] should be severe."

Investigators said Wednesday that they are treating Magomedov's professional activity as the likely motive for the assassination.

Magomedov had overseen a series of high-profile trials since his appointment to the presidium of the republic's Supreme Court in 1995. He had been subjected to repeated threats because of his work, local media outlets reported.

On Dec. 18, Magomedov sentenced three Dagestan natives to between eight and 10 years in jail for participating in underground terrorist cells. Lawyers and rights defenders have since cast doubt on the verdict.

Yelena Denisenko, a human rights activist and legal specialist in Memorial's Dagestan office, said by phone Wednesday that the defendants had likely been pressured into giving incriminating testimony.

Denisenko also said the accused, who initially admitted guilt but later retracted their confessions in the courtroom, probably weren't allowed access to their lawyers in pretrial detention. The verdict was subsequently appealed.

In other cases, Magomedov sentenced 19-year-old Gadzhimurad Khulatayev to 15 years for the murder of his father, a senior police investigator in Makhachkala, and sent three people to prison over a 2002 terrorist attack in Kaspiisk in which more than 40 people were killed.

Magomedov's killing comes just weeks after the All-Russia Congress of Judges shared its concerns with President Vladimir Putin over a surge in attacks on judges. The group told Putin that 14 judges had been killed in Russia over the past three years and that 250 crimes against legal officials remain unsolved.

Cabinet ministers responded in early January by issuing an order saying that judges would be provided with mobile warning alarms to alert police if they are threatened.

But Denisenko questioned the effectiveness of such alarms in Dagestan, where law enforcement and judicial officials are routinely threatened.

"This will be a positive measure if it is effective in 90 percent of cases, but whatever sort

of security you have with you, you can be killed here," she said.

On Tuesday, the same day as the attack on Magomedov, a police car was sprayed with bullets in the village of Kirovaul.

A representative of Dagestan's Supreme Court refused a request for comment, saying only that all hearings scheduled for that day had been canceled so that Magomedov's colleagues could attend his funeral.

The funeral, which was held in Magomedov's home village of Kubachi, roughly 100 kilometers from Makhachkala, was attended by some 500 people and was heavily guarded by police, RIA-Novosti reported.

Magomedov's funeral fell on his 56th birthday.

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