

# The Siloviki's Front Man in Dagestan

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One year before the 2014 Winter Olympics in Sochi and 12 months before the term of former Dagestani leader Magomedislam Magomedov was to expire, the Kremlin appointed a new leader in the volatile republic. To make his dismissal look more like a promotion, Magomedov was given the newly created post of deputy head of the presidential administration in charge of national questions, an important-sounding job with vague responsibilities.

He was replaced by Ramazan Abdulatipov, a career politician who started out during the leadership of former Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev. Abdulatipov left Dagestan in the 1980s to successfully pursue a number of roles: chairman of the Council of Nationalities of the Supreme Soviet of the Soviet Union, first deputy minister of nationalities, senator, ambassador to Tajikistan and rector of the University of Art and Culture. Abdulatipov is equally distant from the various conflicting ethnic groups in Dagestan, although rumor has it that he does have ties to tycoons Ziyavudin Magomedov and Magomed Magomedov in the same way that his predecessor had support from billionaire Suleiman Kerimov.

Due to the extremely complex ethnic composition of Dagestan, direct presidential elections

have never been held there, and a system of ethnic checks and balances is used. It is very unlikely that direct elections will be held this time, either. For such cases, amendments were proposed to the law on the direct election of governors that would allow the legislature to grant authority to the leader, a procedure practiced from 2005 to 2012. The amendments have only been through the first reading in the State Duma. It is worth noting that Magomedov was opposed to those amendments and advocated direct elections.

It would be wrong to say that Magomedov committed any serious errors while running Dagestan. It is the most unstable region of Russia, and it would be a mistake to conclude that – Abdulatipov will do a better job. Why did the Kremlin make this change at what would seem to be an inopportune moment? Apparently, the goal is to change not only the individual in power but the whole model of government as well.

Neither Abdulatipov nor his predecessor is a strong figure in the region. But whereas Magomadev could rely on the reputation of his father, Magomedali Magomedov, who led the republic for more than 15 years and effectively built Dagestan's current political system, Abdulatipov lacks a strong leadership team.

By appointing Abdulatipov, who is definitely no strongman, in a region plagued by what is essentially a smoldering civil war between insurgents, siloviki and Islamic extremists, the Kremlin is admitting that its approach of relying on ethnic clans did not work and will now turn to the siloviki to rule by force. In the conflict between Magomedov and the siloviki, the Kremlin stands on the side of the siloviki and is essentially appointing a figurehead to lead the republic.

Abdulatipov will apparently act as a front for the siloviki, playing much the same role as Alexander Khloponin, who was appointed presidential envoy to the North Caucasus Federal District in 2010. Hopefully, the siloviki, who are generally given carte blanche in such arrangements, will be deployed from the federal center and not turn out to be the more ruthless version employed by Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov.

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