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# Dagestan Cancels Direct Gubernatorial Elections

By Alexander Winning

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The volatile republic of Dagestan became the first Russian region to cancel gubernatorial elections on Thursday, when its United Russia-controlled legislative assembly voted overwhelmingly to scrap a popular vote scheduled for the fall.

In Dagestan's legislature on Thursday morning, 74 deputies voted in favor of allowing President Vladimir Putin to approve gubernatorial candidates proposed by the republic's assembly, local media reported. Nine lawmakers voted against the measure and three abstained.

Deputies also unanimously backed a written appeal to the president asking for permission to elect their leader earlier than September, when the popular vote was due to be held, saying they were unsatisfied with Ramazan Abdulatipov's status as acting head of the republic.

Abdulatipov was appointed in late January after his predecessor, Magomedsalam Magomedov,

was removed from his post and given a job in the presidential administration. Unlike Magomedov, Abdulatipov carries little weight with the republic's powerful ethnic clans and had mainly held political posts in Moscow prior to his appointment.

Thursday's vote comes roughly two weeks after Putin granted regional lawmakers the right to cancel direct gubernatorial elections and consult with federal authorities before voting to decide on their next leader. Direct elections, which were abolished by Putin in 2004, were reinstated in the final days of Dmitry Medvedev's presidency as a concession to anti-Kremlin protesters.

According to the new rules approved April 2, political parties represented in regional legislatures can present up to three gubernatorial candidates to the president after consulting with smaller parties. The president then selects three final candidates among whom lawmakers choose.

Dagestan, where authorities are battling an Islamist insurgency, was cited by State Duma deputies as an example of a region where, because of its ethnic diversity, elections could provoke instability and need to be handled carefully. Analysts, however, have interpreted the decision to make gubernatorial elections optional as a Kremlin tactic to bring turbulent North Caucasus republics to heel.

In discussions on the floor of the republic's legislature in Makhachkala, opposition lawmakers from the Communist and Patriots of Russia parties spoke out against canceling the vote, but United Russia's dominance in the assembly — where 62 out of 90 deputies represent the ruling party — made the result a foregone conclusion.

"I'm not surprised that the deputies voted the way they did — they do whatever they're told by party headquarters in Moscow," said Enver Kisriyev, a political scientist and Caucasus expert with the Russian Academy of Sciences.

"But authorities aren't telling the truth when they say elections would destabilize Dagestan. They simply don't want the republic to be ruled by popularly elected leaders who will stand up for local people," he said by phone.

Kisriyev, who served as an adviser to former Dagestan leader Mukhu Aliyev in his capacity as parliamentary speaker, said Abdulatipov was "almost certain" to be elected to head the republic permanently but that the OMON riot police, Federal Security Service and Interior Ministry would prop up his rule.

Alexei Malashenko, an analyst with the Carnegie Moscow Center, agreed that deputies would likely back Abdulatipov, characterizing him as an "energetic and ambitious" leader who could win popular support if his policies pay off.

"You don't change horses midstream, especially such a horse," Malashenko said about Abdulatipov, adding that the Kremlin had nudged regional authorities in volatile areas into delaying popular elections with the goal of ensuring security at the Sochi Winter Olympics, which will take place in the nearby Krasnodar region in 2014.

Abdulatipov has supported the move to cancel direct elections, declaring himself the only

candidate capable of "renewing and cleansing Dagestan." Hours after the assembly cancelled the September vote, lawmakers in neighboring Ingushetia announced that they would decide next week whether to scrap their election set for the fall.

Looking ahead, Kisriyev predicted "disastrous consequences" and "growing opposition to authorities" in light of Kremlin efforts to impose a strict power vertical in the republic. Attacks on law enforcement officers are already an almost daily occurrence.

"Magomedov [Abdulatipov's predecessor] would never have agreed to undermine the complex structure of ethnic groups that maintains a degree of order in Dagestan," he said. "Those groups ensure relative stability and have prevented the republic from descending into total war."

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