

Arrest of Makhachkala Mayor Seen as Sign of Changing Tide

By [Ivan Nechepurenko](#)

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Said Amirov

Correction appended

As the fallout from the arrest of the leader of Dagestan's capital continued on Monday, experts agreed that the event would likely send tremors throughout all of Russia.

Makhachkala Mayor Said Amirov, 59, was detained Saturday with the help of special forces sent by Moscow, who blocked all of central Makhachkala and escorted the wheelchair-bound Amirov to a military helicopter parked on the city's main square to take him back to Moscow.

Since Amirov has been widely reported to exert complete control over the law enforcement agencies in Dagestan, with many of his relatives occupying high-ranking positions, the operation was prepared in total secret. Local authorities were reportedly oblivious to Moscow's plans.

"This was a brilliant operation executed by the Kremlin to show that Moscow can put the situation in order if it wants to," said Alexei Malashenko, a Caucasus expert at the Moscow Carnegie Center.

Experts say the detention of Makhachkala's mayor points to a changing tide.

Malashenko dubbed Amirov "the North Caucasian Luzhkov," referring to the long-serving mayor of Moscow, who was ousted in 2010 personally by then-President Dmitry Medvedev on the grounds of a "lack of confidence."

Residents of Makhachkala were more likely to identify Amirov as "bloody Roosevelt," however, due to his excessive and strict control in what is currently Russia's most violent region and his dependence on a wheelchair, earned after one of 15 assassination attempts against him that left a bullet in his spine.

On Sunday, Moscow's Basmanny District Court ruled to keep Amirov in detention until Aug. 1. Investigators say Amirov organized the killing of an investigator in December 2011; ten others suspected of involvement have also been detained.

Izvestia cited sources in the presidential administration as saying the arrest was sanctioned from the very top due to almost daily deadly explosions in the republic.

According to Gregory Shvedov, editor-in-chief of the Caucasian Knot news agency and a leading expert on the Caucasus, statistics [show](#) that Dagestan is the main contributor to terrorist activities in the North Caucasus, with more than half of all casualties in the first quarter of 2013.

"In view of the upcoming Sochi games, this must have drawn the attention of the Kremlin," he said.

In another sign of tightening security in the region, President Vladimir Putin fired Zhaudat Akhmetkhanov from the post of interior minister of the republic of Karachayevo-Cherkessia, the Kremlin's official website said Monday.

At the same time, some Makhachkala residents were ready to take to the streets in a show of support for their mayor. Local lawmakers and civil servants gathered in the city hall building to discuss the situation and sign a petition to Putin to put the investigation under his "direct control."

Amirov's sister and secretary of the local United Russia executive committee, Perziyat Bagandova, linked the detention to the upcoming gubernatorial election in Dagestan. According to a recent opinion poll, Amirov would have beaten the acting head of Dagestan, Ramazan Abdulatipov, in a direct election.

Although local lawmakers canceled direct elections in April 2013 in favor of a system in which the president nominates three candidates that the local parliament then votes for, Amirov would have likely stood out as an obvious choice.

He was decorated with numerous state awards, including one recognizing his enduring cooperation with the Federal Security Service. Over his 15-year tenure as Makhachkala's mayor, he was twice called Russia's best mayor.

The Investigative Committee's statement on Sunday begged to differ, however, saying the detained mayor and other suspects are being questioned in connection with "a variety of serious and heinous crimes committed on the territory of the republic of Dagestan."

Analysts have noted that Amirov's detention fits into the ongoing transformation of the Kremlin's internal policy.

"In my view, this is another sign that the Kremlin is tightening the screws across all of Russia. Physical force instead of 'soft power' is being used against the insurgents in the North Caucasus, or anybody connected with them. This is the so-called scorched earth policy, which does not need people who can build bridges between the warring sides," Shvedov said.

"Amirov was one of these people — maybe the most influential in Dagestan, and certainly much more powerful than its current head, who is expected to be officially appointed a few months from now," he said.

"But is it likely that physical force would lead to stability and stop terror? Well, it didn't in Israel," Shvedov said.

Contact the author at i.nechepurenko@imedia.ru

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Due to an editing error, an earlier version of this article indicated 2011 as the year of former Moscow Mayor Yuri Luzhkov's dismissal. It should have said 2010.

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