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Ahead of Games, Dagestan Leader Faces Pressure to Quell Violence

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Abdulatipov, right, speaking at a meeting of regional officials on Friday.

Last week, as residents of half a dozen regions went to the polls to vote for governors, in Dagestan the legislature was making the choice of who would lead the volatile republic.

The Kremlin-backed move to skip popular elections in Dagestan was ostensibly made to avoid ethnic conflict in the diverse North Caucasus region. But another factor almost certainly loomed large as well in the minds of federal leaders: Russia's hosting next year of the Winter Olympic Games in nearby Sochi.

As expected, the republic's lawmakers voted in Ramazan Abdulatipov, 67, a former professor and strong ally of the Kremlin, who had served as Dagestan's acting head since January. With the Sochi Games approaching, Abdulatipov will be assigned the daunting task of establishing stability in the republic, a place riven by years of corruption and armed conflict, and where, for some, radical Islam has become the primary source of hope for social justice.

The selection of Abdulatipov to lead Dagestan appears to draw a new hard line in the sand for the Kremlin, whose patience has been exhausted by previous efforts to entice rebel fighters out of the mountains. About 70 percent of the republic's budget comes from the federal government, and there is little doubt that Moscow is calling most of the shots.

"Abdulatipov is driven by the Kremlin," said Tanya Lokshina, a senior Russia researcher at Human Rights Watch. "[President Vladimir] Putin has given Abdulatipov clear instructions, and this is all related to the Sochi Games. It's about mopping up."

Last week, Putin said at a meeting of his Security Council that despite some positive developments, the "state of things in the North Caucasus is improving too slowly." He ordered the security services to seek new methods for fighting terrorism and extremism and reminded officials that it was vital to achieve more success ahead of the Sochi Games in February.

Dagestan has become the main battleground in the violent Islamic separatist movement in the North Caucasus, with gun battles between security forces and suspected rebels a weekly occurrence. And the situation could worsen as the Sochi Games get closer — militant leader Doku Umarov, who heads the Caucasus Emirate insurgent group, in July called on fighters to halt the Olympics using "all means permitted by Allah."

In just the first half of 2013, at least 153 people were killed and 162 injured in armed conflicts in Dagestan, according to news agency Caucasian Knot, which tracks such statistics across the North Caucasus. That compares to at least 31 killed and 45 injured in Chechnya, the former heartland of the insurgency.

As recently as last week, on Sept. 10, a soldier was killed in the city of Buinaksk in Dagestan when unknown assailants fired upon a guard post. A week earlier, on Sept. 3, three policemen were killed in central Makhachkala, the republic's capital, when suspected insurgents shelled a police station.

The violence has not decreased significantly in comparison to last year, judging by the number of casualties: in 2012, 405 people were killed and 290 injured in armed conflicts in Dagestan, theCaucasian Knot reported. With the Sochi Games drawing ever closer, Abdulatipov has begun relying on measures aimed at quelling dissent that some international observers describe as brutal.

"The Kremlin is so focused on achieving dramatic results that they've dropped [all pretense of] soft power in the region in favor of brute force," Lokshina said.

"Abduction is rife. On paper, these are listed as detentions, if they're listed at all, but in reality, they're kidnappings," Lokshina said. "This is routine. ... Beatings and electric shocks are commonplace. We've seen the pictures of the bodies."

In part, Dagestan has faced difficulty rooting out insurgents because of turmoil within its government, driven by low-level internecine warfare, corruption and conflicting clan loyalties. Abdulatipov himself has described governance in Dagestan as "feudal," a place where criminal elites and local government often work in tandem to exert a stranglehold on the communities in which they operate.

The response from Abdulatipov has been unequivocal. As acting head of the republic, he ordered wide-ranging arrests and dismissed senior officials, including police, sending a message to the government and the public alike. Among the high-profile arrests was that in July of longtime Makhachala Mayor Said Amirov, a rival for Abdulatipov's power base and a figure whose influence stretched to all corners of Dagestani society.

"Improving the situation in Dagestan and in the North Caucasus in general is the policy of the Russian president," Abdulatipov told newspaper Komsomolskaya Pravda in June. "All those who committed certain violations or were suspected of offenses over many years feature on the general list. ... This work will continue, because this is the policy of the Russian president and the target he has set."

Amirov, who is accused of ordering the murder of a Makhachkala official, among other crimes, represented more than just a challenge to Abdulatipov's authority. He was also considered one of the only people able to affect some form of reconciliation between the various factions within Dagestan, including the Islamic insurgent groups. As a result, to some observers, his arrest signals an end to government peace efforts with the rebels.

Officials in Moscow have long argued that the insurgency in the North Caucasus is driven by poverty and a lack of economic opportunity. Unemployment in Dagestan stands at about 12 percent, more than double that of Russia as a whole, and in rural areas the situation is worse. According to a 2012 report by Britain-based nongovernmental group Saferworld, which works in conflict areas around the globe, unemployment in the predominantly agricultural Tsuntinsky and Tsumadinsky districts has reached up to 80 percent. In the Tabasaransky district, another agricultural area, unemployment stands at more than 85 percent.

Lilit Gevorgyan, a Russia analyst at consulting firm HIS Global Insight, said the economic situation was just one factor that drove people into the insurgency, along with government and police abuse.

"Ultimately, the key attractiveness of the Islamist movement remains its ability to give hope mainly to poor and young people who are disillusioned by the current political setup on the regional and federal levels, pervasive corruption and the often arbitrary use of force and law against those who have no links with government clans," Gevorgyan said.

As the militant movement has evolved, the Islamist ideological backing for it has grown stronger. Many of the rebel groups advocate establishing an independent state in the North Caucasus that would be governed by Shariah.

Because of the ties between hardline Islam and the insurgency, strictly observant Salafi Muslims, who are thought to compose the bulk of rebel fighters in the North Caucasus, are being especially targeted by Dagestan authorities.

"The Salafis are being removed from civic life," said Lokshina, of Human Rights Watch. "Kindergartens, mosques, charities are all being harassed. The Salafis are being driven underground."

The aggressive tactics used by the government as it seeks to impose order ahead of the Sochi Games could backfire in the long run, ultimately strengthening the forces the state wants

to repress, warns Lokshina: "These [methods] antagonize the local community and play into the hands of the insurgents in terms of recruitment and propagandizing their ideology."

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