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Court Orders Detainment of Russian Governor Ahead of Murder Trial

By AFP

July 10, 2020



Sergei Furgal. **Sergei Vedyashkin / Moskva News Agency**

A Moscow court on Friday ordered the governor of a Far Eastern region held for two months ahead of his trial on murder charges that sparked outrage from his party.

The head of Khabarovsk, Sergei Furgal, 50, was arrested on Thursday on suspicion of ordering the murder of several businessmen 15 years ago.

A judge in the Basmanny District Court ruled that Furgal would be held in pre-trial detention until at least September 9, a court spokesman said.

Furgal pleaded not guilty and "categorically and entirely rejects the charges," his lawyer Boris Kozhemyakin told news agency TASS.

His arrest on Thursday caused an outcry from members of his nationalist-leaning party, the LDPR, whose outspoken leader Vladimir Zhirinovsky accused authorities of using "Stalin-era

methods".

The Kremlin's spokesperson Dmitry Peskov said Friday the comparisons were "inappropriate" and "fundamentally wrong".

The Investigative Committee, which probes major crimes, said Furgal was charged with ordering the murders and attempted murders of several businessmen in 2004 and 2005.

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Authorities are probing two murders — including the fatal shooting of Furgal's former business partner Oleg Bulatov in 2005 — and one attempted murder, news agencies reported.

The leader of the LDPR, a Kremlin-friendly opposition party, said law enforcement had vetted Furgal before he ran for public office. In 2018 Furgal embarrassed the ruling United Russia party by securing 70 percent of the vote in the governor's race.

More than 35,000 people have signed a petition calling for his release and his party has warned it could stage mass resignations to protest his arrest.

Furgal's arrest comes just days after President Vladimir Putin — who has been in power for two decades — won a landslide ballot on constitutional reforms that could allow him to extend his rule until 2036.

Two members of the LDPR in the Khabarovsk region, Sergei Kuznetsov and Dmitry Kozlov, were also arrested on fraud charges and will be held by police until September, a district court representative told news agency Interfax on Friday.

The region's first deputy parliament speaker, Sergei Zyubr, told the agency that law enforcement had searched the homes of five LDPR members since Furgal's arrest.

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