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Jailed Russian Governor Asks Supporters to Stop Protests – Lawyer

By AFP

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Demonstrations have erupted nearly every day in the Khabarovsk region since the region's governor was detained last week. **Yevgeniya Pustovit / TASS**

A popular governor arrested in an old murder case says he wants supporters to end mass protests that have rocked Russia's Far East, his lawyer said Thursday.

Sergei Furgal, who was detained last week and flown to Moscow before being accused of involvement in several 15-year-old murders, unsuccessfully appealed his arrest in court Thursday.

Related article: Russia's Khabarovsk Region Tasted Democracy. Now Voters Feel It Was Ripped Away.

Demonstrations have erupted nearly every day in the Khabarovsk region — which Furgal still

formally heads — as residents demand Moscow return him to face any charges locally.

His lawyer Boris Kozhemyakin told journalists outside the courthouse that while the 50-year-old governor appreciates the support, he does not endorse unauthorized gatherings.

"Sergei Furgal has nothing to do with the demonstrations of residents of Khabarovsk, his voters," Kozhemyakin said.

"He thanks them, but today in court he said he does not approve of these mass actions, as he is the region's governor, and he believes his voters should act in accordance with existing legislation," the lawyer added.

Crowds estimated in the tens of thousands marched through Khabarovsk at the weekend and hundreds have continued to rally this week, while smaller protests were held in other towns in the region.

A huge rally has been called for Saturday.

Elected with a large majority in 2018, Furgal, who is a member of the nationalist Liberal-Democratic Party, delivered a major upset to a candidate of the majority United Russia party.

Many of the protesters believe the charges are politically motivated and question why investigators waited so long to accuse a public official who should have undergone background checks.

Investigators say Furgal organized the murders of several businessmen in the Far East in 2004 and 2005.

In a fresh statement on Thursday, Russia's Investigative Committee, which probes major crimes, said it had "irrefutable evidence" of Furgal's involvement.

It named for the first time the businessmen who were killed as Yevgeny Zorya and Oleg Bulatov, while another man Alexander Smolsky had an attempt made on his life.

"It is clear to the investigation that the decisions regarding the murders were taken as Furgal and his co-conspirators sought to further their commercial interests," the committee said.

Moscow prison monitor Yeva Merkachova said on Thursday that she visited Furgal and another detainee in the case named Nikolai Mistryukov, who has given testimony against the governor.

In a post on Facebook, Merkachova said that Mistryukov is in very poor health after losing vision in one eye and being refused crucial cancer medication.

"He is psychologically beaten and has a most serious diagnosis," she said, calling his treatment a "crime."

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