

Anger at Kremlin Grows in Latest Massive Russian Far East Protest

Putin's decision to replace a popular arrested governor with a politician who is not from the region has poured fuel on the fire.

By [Evan Gershkovich](#)

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Tens of thousands of people marched through Khabarovsk Saturday in protest. **Igor Volkov / AP / TASS**

KHABAROVSK — Tens of thousands of people took to the streets in Russia's Far East for the third Saturday running for the latest rally in an unprecedented protest movement that is gaining momentum and taking on an anti-Kremlin bent.

Now entering their third week, the protests in the Khabarovsk region on the border with China kicked off after the arrest of governor Sergei Furgal earlier this month on several 15-year-old murder charges his supporters believe are politically motivated. This week the protest movement was spurred on by the Kremlin's decision Tuesday to replace Furgal with a new governor who has never lived in the region.

“They keep spitting in our faces, so we keep coming out,” said Alexei Potashenko, a 49-year-old small business owner, at the scene of the main rally in the region’s capital city of Khabarovsk. “It’s quickly becoming a new tradition.”

Surprising for Russia’s regions both in their scale and longevity, at the heart of the demonstrations is the demand that Khabarovsk’s former governor, who is being held in Moscow, stand trial — with witnesses — in Khabarovsk.

Elected in a surprise victory in 2018 on the back of a protest vote as locals became fed up with the ruling United Russia party in the region, Furgal quickly became the so-called “people’s governor.” His widespread popularity grew after he made several populist moves once in office and helped his far-right Liberal Democratic Party of Russia (LDPR) take control of Khabarovsk’s city and regional parliaments the next year.

Related article: [Russia’s Khabarovsk Region Tasted Democracy. Now Voters Feel It Was Ripped Away.](#)

After he was arrested and whisked to Moscow on July 9, about 40,000 people took to the streets in the region’s main city of Khabarovsk, some 6,100 kilometers east of the Russian capital. Rallies have taken place each day since, with the main demonstrations taking place on Saturdays. Last Saturday, estimates put the total numbers at about 50,000 in a city with a population of 600,000.

This Saturday, journalists reporting on the protests from the outset said the day’s rally was the largest by far, though estimates varied greatly. While pro-opposition social media channels placed the total at around 90,000, Khabarovsk authorities said that 6,500 people attended.

Although the protest movement has no clear leaders, protesters told The Moscow Times that up until this week planning in social media chat groups had mostly agreed that they should keep the focus of the rallies on Furgal. They said that was done partly to avoid confrontation with police, who have so far allowed protesters to gather peacefully.

But after President Vladimir Putin named Mikhail Degtyaryov acting governor to replace Furgal on Monday, the tone of the rallies shifted this week.

“They thought it would calm us down because he is from LDPR, but that’s not what we were demanding,” Valery Nechayev, a 23-year-old chef who has been active in protest planning since the beginning of the movement, said on the eve of the Saturday rally. “The discussions in the chat groups became much more anti-government this week.”

Two local LDPR deputies [quit](#) the party over the decision, while Degtyaryov’s early moves have stoked anger among locals.

First the new governor declined an invitation to meet with protesters, who had demanded he hear their concerns as he’s not a local.

Then he [blamed](#) the rallies on foreigners, citing evidence he said was provided to him by local law enforcement that they had flown in from Moscow.

And ahead of Saturday's rally, he said he would go on a tour of the rest of the region, [explaining](#) the decision by saying, "There are a lot of people who live in Khabarovsk."

On Saturday, protesters met in their usual gathering place on Lenin Square in front of the regional administration building in the city center before setting off on a two-hour march in a festive mood. Music blared from parked cars, protesters handed out snacks and water, and passing cars and public buses honked in support.

As the protesters walked, their chants included "Furgal was our choice" to "shame on LDPR." The rally also featured anti-Kremlin slogans like "Twenty years, no trust," a reference to the time Putin has spent in power, and posters saying "We can't be bought." Earlier this week, Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin [promised](#) to allocate 1.3 trillion rubles (\$18.2 million) in federal funding for the region, according to Degtyaryov.

When the march looped back to the square, a smaller group of several hundred protesters gathered in front of the regional administration building. The chant they repeated most often was "Putin resign."

"The protests have become much more radical," said political analyst Alexander Kynev, who attended Saturday's rally. "You can sense that the attention is being turned to the president."

Related article: [Putin-Appointed Governor Defies Calls to Leave Protest-Hit Russian Region](#)

That may spell trouble for the movement down the road. Already this week, after Degtyaryov was named to the post, there were signs that the authorities may begin to crack down.

Police on Thursday [charged](#) two protesters with organizing unsanctioned rallies. According to Russian law, demonstrations have to be agreed in advance with the authorities, who have not approved any of the Khabarovsk rallies.

And opposition activists in the region linked with Kremlin critic Alexei Navalny and exiled oligarch Mikhail Khodorkovsky's Open Russia pro-democracy movement were attacked by unidentified men. The activists blamed the attacks on the authorities.

Even Furgal, before being replaced as governor, appeared to be trying to help tamp down protests [through a message](#) via his legal representation.

"Sergei Furgal has nothing to do with the demonstrations of residents of Khabarovsk," his lawyer said last week. "He thanks them, but today in court he said he does not approve of these mass actions."

But for some protesters, the movement's demands have already evolved.

"It's no longer just about Furgal," said Irina Androsova, a 57-year-old shop clerk, noting that the election of the former governor himself had been for many people a way to express their disagreement with the status quo. "This is discontent about everything that is finally boiling over."

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