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Former Khabarovsk Governor Plans Hunger Strike to Protest Trial

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Former Khabarovsk governor Sergei Furgal. **Vyacheslav Prokofyev / TASS**

Sergei Furgal, the jailed former governor of Russia's Khabarovsk region, has announced he plans to go on hunger strike to protest the violation of his constitutional rights by the Moscow region court hearing his case, independent Russian media outlet Sotavision reported on Wednesday.

Furgal came to prominence in Russia in 2018 when, as the candidate for the ultranationalist Liberal Democratic Party, he outperformed the Kremlin's candidate to win the Khabarovsk gubernatorial race, representing an extremely rare electoral loss for Putin's United Russia party.

However, two years into his term, Furgal was accused of two murders, attempted murder, and running a criminal gang involved in money laundering, in what were widely seen as politically motivated charges.

After his arrest, Furgal was removed from office by President Vladimir Putin "due to loss of

confidence," and replaced by a controversial but more Kremlin-friendly member of his party. Furgal then spent two years in pre-trial detention in Moscow's notorious Lefortovo prison until his trial began in May.

Furgal's decision to go on hunger strike stems from the judge at his trial refusing to allow further witness questioning by his defense team and ignoring defense petitions, both of which Furgal believes constitute a violation of his legal rights, according to the report.

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"What do you want me to do? Do you want to drive me to suicide?" Furgal was quoted by his son as saying by way of explanation on Telegram.

During his short term in office, Furgal proved to be a popular governor and his arrest and removal from office led to months-long protests attracting tens of thousands of people in Khabarovsk, as well as in other cities across Russia.

Furgal's popularity with Khabarovsk residents was largely due to him ensuring the region's budget was spent locally, local journalist Tatyana Khlestunova, who spent 13 days in police custody for covering the protests, told The Moscow Times. even in prison, Furgal still receives "dozens of letters" from his former constituents, and answers them all, she added.

Supporters of the former governor have always maintained that the criminal cases implicating him are politically motivated, and Furgal has always denied the accusations.

"The initial goal was to remove Furgal and appoint a Kremlin appointee, and they managed to do that quite successfully," Dmitry Timoshenko, a journalist from Khabarovsk who now lives outside Russia, told The Moscow Times.

"The second goal was to make sure that Furgal was forgotten. But, as we can all see, this one was more of a problem. Even war cannot erase Furgal from the memory of the people."

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