

Mass protests continue in Russian Far East

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Between 50,000 to 100,000 people took part this past weekend in protests in Khabarovsk, Russia. The city of 600,000 on the Russian-Chinese border is the capital of the Khabarovsk region, which has 1.34 million inhabitants.

The demonstrations, the largest in the area's history, began on July 11 after the region's governor, Sergei Furgal, was arrested by the Russian secret service FSB and flown to Moscow. He has been charged with involvement in the murder of several local businessmen in 2004 and 2005.

Furgal is a businessman himself and politician of the far-right Liberal Democratic Party (LDPR). For two decades, the LDPR, which promotes Russian chauvinism and anti-immigrant sentiment in an effort to contain social discontent, has formed part of the nominal opposition to the Putin regime. De facto, however, it supports all of the Kremlin's main policies. Furgal was elected over his rival from the ruling United Russia party in 2018.

The governor was arrested just days after a national referendum on a series of amendments that enshrined far-right values in the Russian constitution and significantly strengthened the power of the Russian president over local authorities. Khabarovsk was one of two regions where the amendments were overwhelmingly rejected.

Anti-Kremlin protesters demanded that Furgal be tried in Khabarovsk and not in Moscow. Many carried signs saying, "I am Furgal," "Freedom for Furgal" and "Putin, you have lost my confidence." They chanted slogans, such as "Putin resign," "This is our region," "We hate Moscow," "Shame on the Kremlin!", "Russia, wake up!" and "We are the ones in power!" Many were carrying Russian flags and the blue-green-white flags of the Khabarovsk region. According to reports, protesters were drawn from different social layers, including businessmen, the middle class, and

workers.

Speaking to journalists, demonstrators expressed anger over inequality and the federal government's infringement upon regional authorities and laws. Irina Lukasheva, a 56-year-old vendor, told the *New York Times*: "There will be a revolution. What did our grandfathers fight for? Not for poverty or for the oligarchs sitting over there in the Kremlin."

Another resident told the *Deutsche Welle*, "We hate Moscow. This hate began with the prohibition on cars that had the steering wheel on the right, which we used to be allowed to import cheaply from Japan. Now we have to pay high tariffs. Ever since this ban on cheap Japanese cars, the levels of popular support for the central government have gone down."

Businessmen from small- and medium-sized enterprises indicated that they were struggling to develop their companies because of federal laws that favor national companies in fishing and timber, in particular.

So far, police have not cracked down on protesters in Khabarovsk. One demonstrator told the German public broadcaster *ARD* that most law enforcement officers voted for Furgal and likely sympathized with the protests.

Political analyst Ilya Grashenkov told *Deutsche Welle*, "These are protests against Moscow and against the heavy pressure that the Kremlin traditionally exerts on local politicians. Local elites fear for their livelihoods, and in this case, they're showing solidarity with common people, who feel betrayed." He stated that the outcome could be a "putsch in the Kremlin" organized by "disloyal elites."

The Kremlin has been scrambling to respond to the protests. Last Monday, Putin appointed Mikhail Degtyarev, also from the LDPR, as acting governor. In one of his first statements, Degtyarev declared that "people don't have enough money to live" and that his

administration would try to regulate prices for utilities, which many inhabitants of Khabarovsk cannot afford.

Social discontent and anger over the Kremlin's antidemocratic constitutional amendments are factors driving the protests, which are occurring under conditions in which the Russian oligarchy, like its counterparts elsewhere, has forced through a premature reopening of the economy even as the coronavirus continues to rip through the population.

With over 811,000 infections, Russia has the fourth highest number of cases in the world. Millions have either lost their jobs or are forced to work shortened hours and thus lose a substantial portion of their meager income. Hospitals have been devastated by the pandemic.

Warring factions of Russia's ruling oligarchy seek to channel these sentiments into the dead-end of regionalism and nationalism. This is precisely the goal of pro-US opposition leader Alexei Navalny, who has been supporting the Khabarovsk protests and long advocated greater regional autonomy for Russia's 80 regions. The LDPR, Furgal's party, too has a history of building alliances with regional elites that seek greater independence from Moscow. Such forces have been deliberately fostered by US imperialism with the aim of further destabilizing the Putin regime from the right.

In the 1990s, conflicts within the rising oligarchy over the control of state assets and raw materials often took regionalist forms, especially in energy-rich regions like the Urals, Siberia and the Far East. The possibility of a secession of these regions has long been a topic of open discussion.

From its inception, a central aim of the Putin regime was to subordinate regional elites to federal control to prevent a breakup of the Russian Federation. However, as the economic and social crisis has deepened and the pressure of imperialism has increased in recent years, conflicts between Moscow and regional authorities have acquired a renewed intensity.

Russia is marred by huge regional disparities. While Moscow and a handful of regions with vast oil and gas resources, such as the Yamal-Nenets Autonomous Region, now have gross domestic products (GDP) that are equivalent to the Netherlands and Singapore respectively, other regions, especially in the North Caucasus, have GDPs that are closer to that of Congo or Honduras.

By contrast, the Russian Far East is home to some of the worst-off regions in the country, with poverty levels that can be as high as double the national average. While Khabarovsk is not among the poorest areas, it has recently been hammered by mass layoffs. And the region has the highest rate of depopulation among the areas that make up Russia's Far East. A World Bank report from 2018 stated that "[t]he sheer scale, scope, and starkness of spatial disparities in Russia are startling by any standard."

Any progressive challenge to the Putin regime must oppose the regionalism and nationalism that are fostered by the ruling elites and encouraged by US imperialism. To defend its social and democratic rights, the Russian working class must come to the fore as a unified and independent social and political force, and align itself with the millions of workers around the world that are now entering into struggle against capitalism.



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