The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Kommersant Reporter Is Badly Beaten

By Nabi Abdullaev

November 07, 2010



Vedomosti reporter Oleg Salmanov taking part in the picket outside Moscow police headquarters in support of Oleg Kashin. **Igor Tabakov**

One of Russia's best-known reporters, Oleg Kashin, remained hospitalized in critical condition Sunday night as journalists and activists increased pressure on the authorities to investigate the savage weekend beating that broke his jaw, fingers and a leg.

Kashin, a 30-year-old journalist with Kommersant and one of the country's most prolific and popular bloggers, was attacked by two unidentified men early Saturday near his home at 28 Pyatnitskaya Ulitsa in downtown Moscow.

The two assailants broke his upper and lower jaw, fractured the base of his skull, broke the leg and several fingers, and severed part of a pinky. After undergoing several surgeries over the weekend, Kashin remained in a drug-induced coma in the intensive-care ward in a Moscow hospital, and doctors said his condition was grave, Itar-Tass reported.

The attack, which has stunned the Russian blogosphere, is the latest in a string of assaults on

journalists and activists but the first to galvanize journalists with both independent and state-run media.

President Dmitry Medvedev, writing on his blog, wished Kashin a quick recovery and ordered Prosecutor General Yury Chaika and Interior Minister Rashid Nurgaliyev to investigate the attack.

"The criminals should be found and punished," Medvedev wrote.

Investigators said Sunday that they were investigating footage from the two surveillance cameras that captured the attack. Moscow police spokesman Viktor Biryukov told journalists Sunday that a special task force of top investigators had been created to investigate the attack.

No one had claimed responsibility by Sunday night. Anyone arrested in the attack will face up to 20 years in prison on charges of attempted murder committed by a group.

Singer Yelena Pogrebizhskaya, who lives next door to Kashin, wrote on her blog about an hour after the attack that the cleaner for their courtyard saw two men waiting late Friday outside their apartment building, one of whom was carrying a bouquet of flowers.

About 200 journalists had signed an online petition by late Sunday urging Medvedev to protect journalists and to make sure that the investigation into the attack, as well as the murder of investigative reporter Anna Politkovskaya in 2006 and the ferocious beating of Khimkinskaya Pravda newspaper editor Mikhail Beketov in 2008, be completed and the culprits punished.

Journalists took turns staging one-person pickets outside the Moscow police headquarters at 38 Ulitsa Petrovka throughout most of Saturday and Sunday, demanding a proper investigation into Kashin's beating.

The New York-based Committee to Protect Journalists and Paris-based Reporters Without Borders joined Russian journalists demanding a thorough investigation.

RuNet overflowed with expressions of compassion toward Kashin and theories about who might have been behind such a brutal beating.

Yulia Lyubimova, an editor at the Openspace.ru media portal who used to work with Kashin, said Kashin could not be described as an opposition journalist in the sense that he blamed the powers-that-be for all the country's troubles. But, she said, he is a real investigative reporter who digs to the core, and this makes him dangerous for the subjects of his investigations.

"As a journalist and a blogger, he is a huge irritant for many. And everyone knows about his personal life," she said, explaining the unusually broad and intense public reaction to the attack.

Kashin has written about key topics in Russian politics and social life for a variety of publications, including the cutting down of the Khimki forest, anti-fascist youth groups and the pro-Kremlin youth movements. One of the pro-Kremlin groups, United Russia's Young Guard, called him a traitor on its web site in August and demanded that he be punished. On Saturday, the group issued a statement that it "feels indignant about the barbaric attack" on

Kashin.

Shortly after the beating, Kashin's editor at Kommersant, Mikhail Mikhailin, told Ekho Moskvy radio that he was sure that the attack was linked to Kashin's work as a journalist.

"They broke his fingers. It is completely obvious that the people who did this did not like what he was saying and what he was writing," Mikhailin said.

Kashin is among the most prolific Russian Twitter users. On Friday alone, he fired off 49 messages on Twitter — and this was not an extraordinary number for him.

His posts on Twitter and his LiveJournal blog often contain foul language, sometimes provocative, more often trivial. Many prominent and not-so-prominent bloggers have quarreled with him, and he was punched in the face by writer Eduard Bagirov in 2008 after an online quarrel. Kashin never pressed charges, and Bagirov faced no punishment.

In September, Kashin was a leading force in circulating a rumor on RuNet about Prime Minister Vladimir Putin's wife, Lyudmila, retreating to a monastery. Kashin said that even if the rumor was not true, people should know details about the private life of the country's leaders. Putin's private life is taboo for Russian media.

In August, Kashin used coarse language to criticize Pskov Governor Andrei Turchak, a former top official with Young Guard, in his blog. Turchak demanded that Kashin apologize. "What will happen if I don't apologize?" Kashin wrote in response on his blog. Turchak has not replied.

Last month, Kashin was not allowed to attend a meeting of Medvedev with prominent Russian rock musicians, with the Kremlin's press service saying that he has been blacklisted by the Federal Guard Service, which provides security for the president and other top officials.

Kashin sued the Federal Guard Service after he was beaten up in 2004 by men who demanded that he give them the memory card from his camera while he was researching a report for Kommersant. Kashin, who suffered a concussion and multiple bruises, accused Federal Guard Service officers of attacking him, but courts sided with the guard service in two separate rulings, saying Kashin had fallen down on his own and the officers had offered him first aid.

Kashin, a Kaliningrad native and graduate of the local naval academy, often played up his background. “Russian sailor Kashin is having yet another burger,” he tweeted from a McDonald's earlier this year.

After a long day, he typically sent as his last tweet “Spat” (sleep) before going to bed. His followers learned that Kashin did not need much rest because he was usually back on Twitter after only a few hours.

The main RuNet theories behind the beating center around the conflict with Turchak, the Young Guard's call to punish the journalist and the conflict around the Khimki forest.

Two days before the attack, unidentified assailants beat Konstantin Fetisov, a Khimki forest defender, fracturing his skull, shortly after he was questioned by Khimki police over the protests against plans to raze part of the forest for a new Moscow-St. Petersburg highway.

The brutality of the attack against Kashin matches the one against Khimkinskaya Pravda's Beketov, which is believed to be linked with his defense of the forest.

Some commentators portrayed the attack on Kashin as a general crackdown on independent journalism and activism in Russia, with Kashin being selected as a symbolic figure.

Alexander Morozov, an analyst with the Center for Media Studies, a Moscow think tank, said the Kremlin paved the way for the attack by directly and indirectly blessing the growth of violent street youth groups to fight with and scare opposition activists, mainly those with the banned National Bolshevik Party.

"The Kremlin dumped them after Medvedev was elected in 2008, but the atmosphere and the notion of violence against journalists and activists is allowed to remain," he said.

The excessive cruelty of Kashin's beating suggests the involvement of people with experience in street violence rather than professional hit men, he said.

Stanislav Kuvaldin, a journalist with Expert magazine who used to work with Kashin at the Russky Mir magazine, said public outrage was stirred by Kashin's status as one of the country's most prominent journalists but also by disgust over its cruelty.

Nikolaus von Twickel contributed to this report.

Update: Videos from the surveillance camera in the yard of Yashin's apartment building were obtained by LifeNews.ru and published online. Editor's caution: This video shows the two assailants bludgeoning Kashin. The other shows Kashin crawling into the yard and the ambulance workers assisting him.

Original url:
https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2010/11/07/kommersant-reporter-is-badly-beaten-a2764