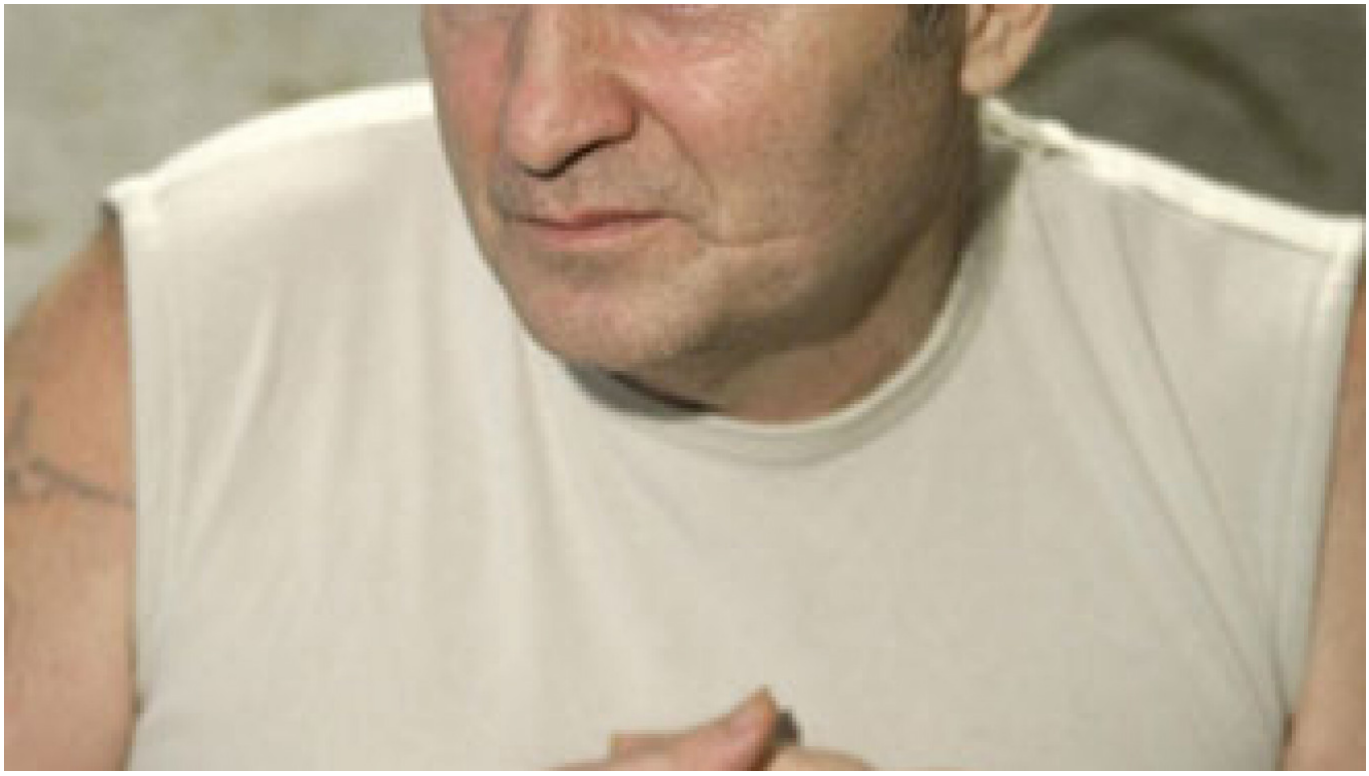
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Khimki Court Clears Beketov of Slander

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Mikhail Beketov **Mikhail Metzel**

The Khimki City Court on Friday overturned a defamation conviction against journalist Mikhail Beketov, who had accused Khimki's mayor of being involved in blowing up his car in 2008.

Several months after his car was blown up, Beketov, editor of Khimkinskaya Pravda, was badly beaten by two unidentified thugs in Khimki, a Moscow suburb. The attack left the reporter brain damaged and unable to speak.

Beketov's supporters have blamed local officials for the violence and say it was related to his investigation into plans to clear a local forest for highway construction and lucrative development projects.

After police refused to investigate the destruction of his car, Beketov gave a television interview in which he accused the mayor, Vladimir Strelchenko, of being involved.

The mayor sued for slander. On Nov. 10, Khimki magistrates court convicted Beketov of defamation and fined him 5,000 rubles ($165), although it said he did not have to pay because

of a technicality.

The conviction drew outrage not only because Beketov had suffered such debilitating injuries, including the loss of a leg and three fingers, but because just a few days earlier another Russian journalist had been severely beaten in a strikingly similar attack.

The U.S.-based Committee to Protect Journalists welcomed Friday's decision to overturn the conviction.

"We welcome today's verdict, which rightfully clears our colleague Mikhail Beketov," said Nina Ognianova, head of the watchdog's Europe and Central Asia program. "Now Russian authorities must focus their efforts on bringing to justice those who nearly killed Beketov in November 2008."

(AP, MT)

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