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Kashin Is Cleared in Defamation Lawsuit

By Alex Chachkevitch

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From right, Kashin, Parfyonov and Chirikova at the Anti-Seliger camp. **Darla Denisova**

A Moscow court on Tuesday cleared Kommersant reporter Oleg Kashin in a much-watched defamation lawsuit, ruling that he was free to speculate about who might have ordered his beating last fall.

Kashin wrote on his blog in March that the assault was masterminded by the Kremlin's youth policy chief, Vasily Yakemenko.

Yakemenko sued Kashin, as well as the liberal newspaper Noviye Izvestia and political analyst Alexander Morozov, who also voiced the theory, demanding that each be fined 500,000 rubles ($17,800).

But a swift two-day trial at Moscow's Khamovnichesky District Court ended in defeat for Yakemenko, Interfax reported.

Judge Igor Kananovich said Yakemenko failed to prove that the accusations were a "factual

statement," not an opinion, which does not qualify for libel, Gazeta.ru reported.

A jubilant Kashin cited U.S. astronaut Neil Armstrong, the first man on the moon, saying: "This is one small step for a man, one giant leap for mankind," Kasparov.ru reported.

"It's evident that nothing too important happened and that the investigation of my attempted murder is still not finished," Kashin said on his LiveJournal blog Tuesday. "But today is a celebration for me, and for Vasily Yakemenko it's a day of big disappointment."

It was unclear whether Yakemenko would appeal.

Yakemenko's lawyer Sergei Zhorin said by telephone that "it's hard to say yet" whether an appeal would be filed. He said the final decision will come after the judge releases a statement with his official ruling next week.

But a statement posted on the web site of Yakemenko's Federal Agency for Youth Affairs said he would appeal. The statement was also published on the blog of Kristina Potupchik, who is a spokeswoman for both Yakemenko and Nashi, the pro-Kremlin youth movement he founded in 2005.

Zhorin called the court's reasoning "complete nonsense."

Kashin spent five days in a medically induced coma after being attacked with metal rods that two unidentified attackers concealed in bouquets of flowers. President Dmitry Medvedev met the reporter face to face and promised to punish the criminals, including the masterminds, regardless of their rank.

But Kashin said in March, citing Morozov, that the investigation had stalled after investigators found that the case led to Yakemenko. No news about the investigation has been released in recent months.

Kashin had criticized Yakemenko and Nashi in his articles before the attack.

Tellingly, Kashin attended the Anti-Seliger camp in the Khimki forest last weekend. The event, organized by environmental activist Yevgenia Chirikova and also attended by the likes of anti-corruption blogger Alexei Navalny and television star Leonid Parfyonov, was billed as an alternative to the annual state-funded youth camp at Lake Seliger organized by Yakemenko's agency.

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