

Putin Awards Opposition Journalist

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In a rare display of political generosity, Prime Minister Vladimir Putin has announced state awards to opposition journalists including Mikhail Beketov, who was left disabled after a severe beating following a confrontation with the Khimki city administration about a Putin-backed road construction.

The move comes two weeks after a U.S. State Department official traveled to Khimki to speak with local activists, promising to "redouble" U.S. efforts to press Russia on human rights.

The awards to Beketov and the others imply an attempt to placate Western concerns and might mark Putin's latest attempt to show a softer side after he declared in September that he would seek to retake the Kremlin next year. But the investigation into the attack on Beketov remains stalled three years on.

The recipients of the annual government award for the print media were [announced](#) on the Cabinet's web site late Monday. The list, signed by Putin, also includes Yelena Petrovskaya of the liberal Novaya Gazeta newspaper; Fyodor Lukyanov, editor-in-chief of the Russia

in Global Affairs journal and a contributor to The Moscow Times; and the outgoing editor-in-chief of the Vokrug Sveta travel magazine, Sergei Parkhomenko.

The award comes with a cash prize, which stood at 1 million rubles (\$32,000) last year. It will be handed out on Jan. 13, Russian Press Day, which marks the date that the first Russian newspaper was published on Peter the Great's orders in 1713.

Beketov is the most unexpected entry on the list. The 53-year-old journalist worked as editor-in-chief for Khimkinskaya Pravda, a local newspaper for Khimki, the Moscow region's second-biggest city with a population of 207,000.

The paper, which enjoyed significant local impact despite a modest circulation, campaigned, among other things, against a Moscow-St. Petersburg highway that would pass through the centuries-old Khimki oak forest, requiring its partial destruction.

The \$8 billion highway was approved by Putin and received the staunch backing of local authorities, but environmentalists insisted on an alternative route. Beketov, on his part, ran several articles denouncing the highway project as corruption-ridden.

In 2008, Beketov lost a leg and was left brain-damaged after unidentified thugs beat him up in the street. He never fully regained his speech and can only move around in a wheelchair.

After the beating, Khimki Mayor Vladimir Strelchenko sued him for his pre-attack allegations, but the suit was thrown out on appeal in 2010.

Several other critics of the project have also been beaten, including activist Konstantin Fetisov, who spent weeks in coma last year. Public protests mounted afterward, prompting the Kremlin to halt the project. But President Dmitry Medvedev green-lighted the construction in December, saying it was too late to revise it.

No progress has been reported in the inquiry into the attack on Beketov, though six people, including a Khimki official, have been detained over Fetisov's beating. None have gone to trial.

On Oct. 15, U.S. Assistant Secretary of State Michael Posner met with the forest's defenders at Fetisov's dacha outside Khimki and said human rights had been sidelined in the U.S.-Russian "reset" in relations. "When somebody organizes a protest, they shouldn't be beaten over the head with a baseball bat," Posner said.

Putin has never explicitly spoken about the Khimki forest. But last year, Vedomosti reported that Arkady Rotenberg, who has been linked to Putin, was connected to companies involved in the road construction.

Media analysts agreed Tuesday that the award selection was a government attempt to show some improvement on human rights.

By honoring Beketov, the authorities are trying to send a "positive signal" to high-ranking critics in the West, Boris Timoshenko, a senior researcher at the Glasnost Defense Foundation, said by phone.

Ivan Zasursky, a media analyst who sits on the Kremlin's human rights commission, said "the

authorities are trying to apologize" to Beketov for not protecting him before.

"They are trying to show that they are not on the same side as those who committed the crime," Zasursky said.

But the government needs to punish the attackers to prove it is serious, said Beketov's supporters, including Yabloko party leader Sergei Mitrokhin and Yevgenia Chirikova, who heads the campaign in defense of the forest.

"If they can give Misha back his leg and the third of his brain that got smashed away, I'm all in favor," an indignant Chirikova said Tuesday, [according](#) to Gazeta.ru.

"But if this is just a way of saying, 'Oh, what a nice Misha!' by the people who have created the system that crippled him, then this is cynicism, pure and simple," she said.

Mitrokhin said by phone that he was sad the authorities didn't think about Beketov until it was too late.

"The government didn't care about him when he was lying there dying in a Khimki hospital," said Mitrokhin, who helped to transfer Beketov to a better medical facility after the attack.

Mitrokhin reiterated that he believed that subordinates of Moscow Governor Boris Gromov, a political patron of Khimki Mayor Strelchenko, were responsible for the attack on Beketov. Gromov won a defamation lawsuit against Mitrokhin over the same allegations last year.

Fellow awardee Parkhomenko, a former political journalist, told Business FM radio that the government should have given Beketov a state pension to pay for his costly medication instead of the award.

Putin never had much sympathy for opposition journalists before. When famous Novaya Gazeta reporter Anna Politkovskaya was shot dead in 2006, he notoriously waved aside the incident, insisting that "she had minimal influence on political life in Russia."

Independent political analyst Stanislav Belkovsky said that giving an award to Beketov was an "image thing" for Putin.

"It's a sign that we will see a new Putin, not the bad anti-West guy, but a person who is capable of building a constructive relationship even with people he doesn't like. But this doesn't mean that the basics would change," Belkovsky said by phone.

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