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Former Siberian Official Given Probation for Journalist's Killing

By Anna Dolgov

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The city of Tulun in the Irkutsk region.

A court in the Irkutsk region has sentenced a former local official to a 22-month probation for killing a journalist who had published critical reports about corruption in local government.

The court ruled that Gennady Zhigaryov, a former deputy mayor of the town of Tulun, near Irkutsk, acted in the "state of affectation," or extreme emotional disturbance, when he stabbed journalist Alexander Khodzinsky to death in July, 2012, the Investigative Committee said in a statement Wednesday.

Khodzinsky, 74, appeared to have retired from full-time journalism but continued working as an investigative reporter, publishing a series of exposes about supposed cronyism and corruption among municipal officials in Tulun — a timber and coal producing town with a population of 45,000. He also specifically criticized current district prosecutor Valentina

Suponkina.

Khodzinsky said that a shopping center that belonged to the wife of Zhigaryov, who was then a deputy mayor of Tulun and a member of the pro-Kremlin United Russia party, was constructed illegally, NewsBabr.com reported.

In the wake of Khodzinsky's publications, Tulun's then-Mayor Viktor Piven fired Zhigaryov as his deputy, Irkutsk-based Baikal 24 news agency reported in 2012.

In July, 2012, Zhigaryov drove up to Khodzinsky's summer home, and the two got into an argument outside the house. Zhigaryov sprayed the journalist in the face with an aerosol can, and then stabbed him seven times, news agencies reported.

Investigators initially charged Zhigaryov with premeditated murder, but the accusation unraveled as the defense sought to present the killing as a result of a private quarrel gone sour.

Zhigaryov's supporters argued that during the confrontation, the journalist had insulted and threatened the former official, prompting Zhigaryov, who was 57 at that time, to lose his temper and attack the veteran reporter.

Khodinsky's neighbor, the only apparent witness to the killing, mentioned no insults and threats in her statements to investigators. But the court threw out most of her testimony, pointing out some minor contradictions in the retired sales clerk's narrative, NewsBabr reported.

In its Dec. 31 verdict, the court ruled that the confrontation arose from a "personal animosity between the two men," the Investigative Committee said in the Wednesday statement.

The court also based its verdict on forensic psychiatrists' ruling, which concluded that Zhigaryov was in a "state of affectation" when he committed the killing, the statement said.

Attempts by human rights officials to get the results of the psychiatric evaluation overturned were unsuccessful, Lenta.ru reported.

The Irkutsk region's human rights ombudsman Valery Lukin also sent a letter to the Investigative Committee, saying that the killing was linked to Khodzinsky's journalistic work and his "open struggle against the multiple abuses and violations, committed by officials and other persons," the Glasnost Defense Foundation human rights group said.

France-based media watchdog group Reporters Without Borders also issued a statement shortly after the attack, condemning the murder.

The verdict was not the only scandal coming out of Tulun this week. Yury Karikh, who succeeded Piven as mayor, was forced to leave office after a court found him guilty of fraud, IrkutskMedia reported.

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