

Lawyer Attacked After Defending LGBT Activist in St. Petersburg Court

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A human rights lawyer who was employed to defend an LGBT activist said he was attacked after leaving a St. Petersburg court, identifying one of the assailants as an Orthodox activist and aide to a local anti-gay lawmaker.

Vitaly Cherkasov, a member of the Agora human rights group, said a group of men accosted him when he came out of the courthouse and splashed him with an unidentified "corrosive, smelly liquid" that got on his hands, neck and clothes, news site Gazeta.ru reported Tuesday.

The incident was witnessed by court bailiffs who were accompanying him at the time, Cherkasov said, adding: "I don't know what would have happened if the bailiffs had not been nearby."

The lawyer identified one of his assailants as Anatoly Artyukh, an activist from the Narodny Sobor conservative organization and aide to St. Petersburg municipal lawmaker Vitaly

Milonov, who is known for his virulently anti-gay stance.

While Milonov denied his associate's involvement, he told the FlashNord news site that "lawyers are scum and mercenaries who work for money" and suggested that both Cherkasov and his client should be exiled from the country. Milonov also made derogatory comments about the sexual orientation of Cherkasov's client, according to the report.

During the hearing that preceded the attack on Cherkasov, the court reviewed an appeal by LGBT rights activist Kirill Kalugin, who contested his detention for a one-man demonstration during Russia's Paratroopers Day celebrations on Aug. 2.

At that time, Kalugin took to the streets in St. Petersburg holding a rainbow-colored banner that read: "My freedom protects yours," the Grani.ru news site reported. Kalugin carried out a similar protest last year that ended with him being badly beaten by men wearing paratroopers' trademark blue berets.

This year, a paratrooper also accosted Kalugin, but police intervened immediately and led the activist away, Gazeta.ru reported.

During the court hearing, anti-gay activists began shouting insults at Cherkasov and his client, prompting the judge to expel the most vociferous opponents, the MediaZona news site reported. Bailiffs were also stationed nearby to protect participants at the hearing from their critics.

The court eventually ruled that police had acted legitimately by interrupting Kalugin's demonstration, but that his continued detention at the police station after that was illegal, Cherkasov said.

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