

Beaten Chief Editor of Independent Siberian News Site Identifies Attacker

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Yevgeny Mezdrikov

The chief editor of an independent news portal in Siberia has identified one of the men suspected of beating him at his office earlier this month, in an attack that journalists linked to his critical coverage and a senior police official suggested was a contract assault.

Yevgeny Mezdrikov was able to identify the man who had hit him directly, and employees of news site Taiga.Info — at least one of whom witnessed the attack — were able to pick the other suspected assailant from police photographs, the journalist told the TASS news agency on Thursday.

The two suspects in the Dec. 8 attack were detained by police earlier this week, but released after signing statements pledging to stay at their home addresses, Russian media reports said.

The men — who gained entry into Taiga.Info offices by posing as delivery messengers —

claimed their attack was motivated by a private dispute with Mezdrikov, but police cast doubt on the account, TASS reported.

"We understand that this motive benefits only the suspects, and we are continuing to work on the cause-and-effect links that may have prompted this crime, and to search for those who put out a contract [for the assault]," deputy chief of the Novosibirsk region's police Vyacheslav Pevnev was quoted as saying Thursday.

Mezdrikov had not received any threats before the attack, he told the BBC's Russian Service.

Some journalists have linked the assault on Mezdrikov to his work, with the city's Novosibirskiyeye Novosti news site saying in an article that he appeared to have been targeted "for having used the freedom of speech too diligently."

"Russia has freedom of speech. But as practice shows, it's better not to use it," the article said.

Mezdrikov had been working on an investigative report about a range of Novosibirsk companies that supposedly owed 1.2 billion rubles (\$19.5 million) to the city's administration for leasing land plots, while City Hall appeared reluctant to disclose details of the situation, news site Our Home Novosibirsk reported.

On the morning of the assault against Mezdrikov, the Taiga.Info website was hit by a DDoS attack, the news portal said.

The investigative piece was published two days after the beating, Our Home Novosibirsk reported.

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