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Court Clears 9 Ex-Yevroset Employees

By Natalya Krainova

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A jury on Wednesday acquitted nine former Yevroset employees on kidnapping charges in a surprise ruling that a lawyer for Yevgeny Chichvarkin, the company's self-exiled founder, touted as a reason to drop related charges against his client.

The Moscow City Court released all nine defendants immediately after the verdict, Interfax reported.

Chichvarkin's lawyer Yury Gervis praised the ruling as "momentous," saying by telephone that the criminal case against his client would have to be closed after the court ruling became valid, in 10 days, if prosecutors failed to appeal.

It was not immediately clear whether an appeal would be filed.

A spokeswoman for the Investigative Committee, which has led the case against Chichvarkin, said chief spokesman Vladimir Markin was not available for comment.

The court will discuss the legal repercussions of the verdict Nov. 26, RIA-Novosti reported.

Gervis predicted that investigators would keep the case against Chichvarkin open "under false pretexts."

Chichvarkin told Ekho Moskvy radio from London, where he is fighting a Russian extradition request, that he wanted all officials involved in the legal case against Yevroset and its employees to be prosecuted.

"Those who prosecuted the company, kept innocent people in custody for more than two years, robbed the market and are directly or indirectly guilty of several deaths have to stand trial," Chichvarkin said, without elaborating.

One of the deaths that Chichvarkin might have referred to was that of his 60-year-old mother, who was found dead in her Moscow apartment in April. Chichvarkin has said he believes that she was murdered.

In August, city prosecutors overturned a refusal by district police investigators to open a criminal case into the death and returned the case to police for further inquiry.

The nine former Yevroset employees, including vice president Boris Levin and deputy head of security Andrei Yermilov, went on trial in late June on charges of kidnapping another Yevroset employee, Andrei Vlaskin, in 2003 in retaliation for supposedly selling cell phones stolen from the company.

Vlaskin himself was charged with reselling phones stolen from shipments to Yevroset, and he later paid 20 million rubles ($608,000) to settle the case.

Chichvarkin fled to Britain in December 2008.

Chichvarkin founded Yevroset in 1997 and built it into the country's largest mobile phone retailer. He sold it in September 2008 to billionaire Alexander Mamut, citing liquidity problems.

Chichvarkin claimed in May that police officers from the Interior Ministry's department for high-tech crimes had been harassing Yevroset for years in a bid to take control of it.

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