

Suspect in Magnitsky Case Gets Light Sentence

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A businessman linked by lawyer Sergei Magnitsky to a multibillion-ruble embezzlement scheme has been handed a minimum sentence and not asked to pay anything back.

Vyacheslav Khlebnikov, who the Investigative Committee said in January is a businessman with a criminal record, has been sentenced to five years in prison for embezzlement, Magnitsky's employer, Hermitage Capital, said in an e-mailed statement Wednesday.

Khlebnikov pleaded guilty, allowing Moscow's Tverskoi District Court to fast-track the closed-door trial and not examine any evidence, the statement said.

Hermitage demanded that the trial be open and evidence be considered because this could expose other people involved in the case, but the court ignored the request.

Contrary to regular practice in embezzlement cases, the state did sue Khlebnikov for damages, the statement said, adding that his suspected accomplice Viktor Markelov, a "sawmill worker," received similar leniency at another closed trial earlier.

Repeated calls to the court's press office went unanswered Wednesday.

Magnitsky claimed Khlebnikov was involved in a scheme established by Interior Ministry officers to steal 5.4 billion rubles from the federal budget. Khlebnikov was likely a low-ranking pawn in the purported scheme, Hermitage said Wednesday.

Hermitage was itself hit with tax claims that it said were fabricated by the Interior Ministry officials whom Magnitsky was accusing. Magnitsky was arrested in 2008 on tax charges and died in pretrial detention a year later of health problems. His supporters say he was intentionally denied treatment.

Khlebnikov testified against Hermitage in November, Interfax reported Wednesday, without elaborating.

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