

Court Clears Siberian Official

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Defying judicial statistics, which show that only 1 percent of trials in Russia end in acquittals, a Novosibirsk court cleared a regional deputy prime minister of abuse of authority, fraud and embezzlement Monday.

The former suspect, Viktor Gergert, said after the hearing that the case against him was "political" and targeted his superiors, but did not elaborate, Interfax reported.

Investigators accused Gergert of misusing 36 million rubles (\$1.1 million) of regional money in 2007. They said Gergert, who oversaw the region's agricultural department at the time, subsidized leasing of agricultural equipment to private producers despite no authorization to do so.

About half of all subsidies were not documented properly and possibly embezzled, investigators said.

Gergert, who was not detained or removed, denied all allegations, insisting that the money was put to good use and gave a boost to the agricultural industry in the region.

The court sided with the defense on Monday, ruling that prosecution failed to prove any serious wrongdoing on Gergert's part. It admitted minor legal violations in his actions, but said they were not for personal gain.

Gergert said he would demand a public apology from investigators and sue for damages. Prosecutors said they would decide on an appeal after receiving a copy of the ruling.

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