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Prominent Russian Director Serebrennikov Detained in Fraud Case

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Kirill Serebrennikov **Kirill Zykov / Moskva News Agency**

Prominent theater director Kirill Serebrennikov has been detained by authorities over fraud charges, Russia's Investigative Committee said Tuesday in an online statement.

Serebrennikov is facing charges of embezzling 68 million rubles ($1.1 million) in government funds as part of the "Platforma" project connected to his central Moscow Gogol Center. The director has denied the accusation, the statement said.

Three former employees connected to the Gogol Center are also on trial, including an accountant, Nina Maslyayeva. Maslyayeva earlier this month during a court hearing accused Serebrennikov of being the mastermind of a scheme to syphon off government funds.

The Gogol Center is among the most prominent in Russia and it is widely respected for its progressive productions. The case against the theater and Serebrennikov is widely seen as part of a state crackdown on the arts, or the director personally.

The director's lawyer, Dmitry Kharitonov, told the opposition-leaning Dozhd television station that Serebrennikov was detained in St. Petersburg, where he had been working on a film on the Soviet rock musician Viktor Tsoi.

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A Moscow court is set to decide on Tuesday whether to put Serebrennikov under house arrest, the state-run TASS news agency reports.

His detention sparked an outcry in cultural and political circles on Thursday.

"The director's arrest before trial is a clearly excessive measure," former Finance Minister and Kremlin adviser Alexei Kudrin wrote on Twitter. "Especially after [Russian President Vladimir Putin]'s words about the excessive arrests of entrepreneurs."

"This is repression," opposition politician Dmitry Gudkov wrote on Facebook. "Pointless, unfounded, just intimidation. No one can hide anymore."

"I hope all artists and the general public understand there is no need to imprison [Serebrennikov]," film director Pavel Lungin told the Ekho Moskvy radio station.

"He won't run away, this is not a dangerous criminal."

In late May, Serebrennikov's theater was raided by law enforcement as part of an embezzlement investigation and Serebrennikov was detained by authorities for questioning. He was later named a witness in the case.

In July, a ballet directed by Serebrennikov based on the life of the openly gay dancer Rudolf Nureyev was abruptly postponed three days before its premier at the Bolshoi Theater in Moscow. The official reason was that it was not yet ready to show. Serebrennikov told German media earlier this month that he had been stripped of his travel passport by authorities.

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