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Prominent Russian Director Serebrennikov Placed Under House Arrest

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Director Kirill Serebrennikov during a hearing into his case at Moscow's Basmanny District Court
Kardashov Anton / Moskva News Agency

Prominent Russian director Kirill Serebrennikov on Wednesday was placed under house arrest as part of an embezzlement case widely seen as political.

Serebrennikov was detained by law enforcement on Tuesday and charged with embezzling 68 million rubles ($1.1 million) in government funds as part of the "Platforma" project connected to Moscow's Gogol Center. He faces up to ten years in behind bars.

Related article: Russia's Cultural Elite React to Serebrennikov's Arrest for Fraud

Serebrennikov was sentenced to remain under arrest until Oct. 19.

Speaking from a cage in the courtroom, Serebrennikov protested his innocence, describing the charges against him as "incredibly absurd and impossible," according to a Mediazona live feed from the courtroom.

He asked the judge not to place him under house arrest, saying it would mean he would no longer be able to work. He added he was not a flight risk since law enforcement had earlier confiscated his passport.

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Публикация от babettaspb (@babettaspb) Авг 23 2017 в 4:32 PDT

The crackdown against Serebrennikov began in May when his theater, the Gogol Center, was raided by law enforcement and Serebrennikov was detained by authorities for questioning. He was later named a witness in the case.

Three former employees connected to the Gogol Center are also on trial, including an accountant who during a court hearing earlier this month accused Serebrennikov of being the mastermind of the alleged fraud scheme.

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Serebrennikov's lawyer called several prominent cultural figures to testify in the director's defense, including director Andrei Smirnov and literary figure Irina Prokhorova, who offered to pay his bail.

As Serebrennikov pleaded not guilty to the charges, a crowd of around 200 people chanted “Kirill!”and “Freedom!" outside the courtroom. The crowd included some of Russia's most well-known cultural figures.

“This is a two-act performance which has been going on in Russia for a long time,” journalist and prominent commentator Sergei Parkhomenko told The Moscow Times outside the Basmanny Court.

"The first act is that everyone is guilty. In Russia anyone who receives state funding is trapped, because it is impossible to comply with all the regulations, and consequently they’re hung up by several hooks."

"The second act is such that is that any of these hooks can be pulled at any moment, either to exact bribes or to make a political statement.”

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Публикация от Darya Orel (@dashulka_eagle) Авг 23 2017 в 3:24 PDT

Ahead of presidential elections next year, many within the upper echelons of Russia's cultural circles see Serebrennikov's case as politically motivated.

Serebrennikov is widely believed to have the backing of Kremlin adviser Vladislav Surkov, feeding theories that the director's arrest is also part of an internal power struggle. But many outside the court on Wednesday said the director's arrest was meant to send a broader message.

"Those who are opposition-minded are being shown that nothing will save them, whether or not they're famous, talented, stupid, fat," said Parkhomenko. "The message is: 'If we want to snack on you, we'll eat you whole.'"

Journalist Viktor Shenderovich compared the case to the prosecution of former Yukos CEO Mikhail Khodorkovsky, who was Russia's richest man until he was arrested in 2003 and jailed for more than a decade in a case widely seen as political.

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“This sends a similar signal,” Shenderovich told the Dozhd television channel. "Kirill is a director of world class and this is a clear signal ahead of elections: no world fame or proximity to the elite will save you from a repressive government if it decides to throw you under the bus.”

Few assembled outside the courtroom on Wednesday could explain why the award-winning director had become a target.

“That’s for Kremlinologists [to explain,]” acclaimed journalist Leonid Parfyonov told The Moscow Times. "There’s no logic in it. Something you don’t understand yourself is impossible to explain."

"Why Kirill? Because he stands out the most,” film director Anna Melikyan told Dozhd. “The scariest thing is that we’ve stopped even being surprised."

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