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Russian Theater Director Serebrennikov Goes Free After Court Returns Case

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Kirill Zykov / Moskva News Agency

A Moscow court has returned theater director Kirill Serebrennikov's criminal fraud case to prosecutors two years after his high-profile arrest, a move that observers say is a key step toward his case being thrown out.

Serebrennikov was detained in August 2017 on charges of embezzling 68 million rubles ($1 million) in government funds as part of a theater project, damages that later doubled to 133 million rubles. Supporters of the Gogol Center's artistic director say the charges against him are politically motivated.

Related article: Russian Director Serebrennikov Released on Bail After 1.5 Years of House Arrest

"We can be sure that [Serebrennikov's embezzlement case] won't return to court," human rights lawyer Pavel Chikov wrote on social media after the news broke Wednesday.

Russian media reported that Moscow's Meshchansky District Court returned the case to prosecutors over mistakes in the guilty verdict. Prosecutors have 10 days to appeal the decision with the Moscow City Court, the Mediazona news website cited the district court judge as saying.

Serebrennikov and two other suspects were released on bail in April after a year and a half spent under house arrest on criminal fraud charges.

Bail terms restricted travel for Serebrennikov, former Seventh Studio general director Yury Itin and former Culture Ministry official Sofia Apfelbaum. A fourth defendant in the case, former Gogol Center director Alexei Malobrodsky, has been under similar travel restrictions since April 2018.

Wednesday's decision has overturned all the defendants' travel restrictions, Mediazona reported.

While in home confinement, Serebrennikov lived through the premieres of his ballet at the Bolshoi Theater and his film at the Cannes Film Festival, as well as the loss of his mother.

Russian and foreign cultural figures, including Hollywood actress Cate Blanchett, have called on the authorities to drop the embezzlement charges against Serebrennikov.

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