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Russia Quashes Jail Sentence for Actor Ustinov Following Public Outcry

By Reuters

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Moskva News Agency

A Russian court on Monday quashed the jail sentence of an aspiring actor whose conviction for injuring a police officer on the sidelines of an opposition protest triggered a public outcry over alleged police brutality and judicial injustice.

Footage of Pavel Ustinov's arrest on Aug. 3 showed four national guardsmen in riot gear suddenly grabbing him while he was scrolling through his mobile phone in the street, apparently minding his own business.

Related article: Jailed Russian Actor Released Ahead of Appeal After Moscow Protest Verdicts Spark Outcry

Ustinov denied wrongdoing. But a Moscow court earlier this month sentenced him to three

and a half years in prison after finding him guilty of hurting one of the guardsman, who fell over in the melee.

A Moscow court on Monday quashed his jail sentence however, and gave him a one-year suspended sentence instead, a rare reversal by the Russian judicial system. A public prosecutor had earlier told the court that while he still thought Ustinov was guilty he didn't believed he deserved a custodial sentence.

Other people sentenced in connection with the protests remain behind bars, and Ustinov's case is seen by some opposition activists as a way of de-escalating tensions with Kremlin critics while avoiding making bigger concessions.

His case became the focus of public anger, with Russian celebrities, including those who work on Kremlin-backed state TV, taking to social media to demand Ustinov be freed.

Hundreds of others, including fellow actors, took turns to demonstrate outside the presidential administration and, as time wore on, others, including a senior figure in the ruling pro-Putin United Russia party, spoke out in his favour.

Monday's court ruling came a day after more than 20,000 people rallied in Moscow to demand the release of protesters jailed over the summer during what Kremlin critics say was a campaign to stifle dissent.

Ustinov was one of several people arrested at or near the protests that flared in July when a slew of opposition politicians were barred from a local election.

The rallies were the largest sustained protest movement in the Russian capital in years, peaking at around 60,000 people.

Kremlin critics accused the courts of handing down harsh sentences to protesters to deter would-be sympathizers, something the authorities deny.

Ustinov had already been freed on bail on Sept. 20, pending the result of Monday's appeal.

He and his lawyer had wanted his conviction quashed completely given what they said was no evidence of a crime being committed. Ustinov said he'd appeal Monday's ruling to try to get his conviction quashed altogether.

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