The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
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Russia Sentences Director, Writer to 6 Years for 'Justifying Terrorism' With Play

July 08, 2024



Russian theatre director Yevgeniya Berkovich and fellow playwright Svetlana Petriychuk **Alexander Nemenov / AFP**

A Russian military court on Monday sentenced theater director Yevgenia Berkovich and playwright Svetlana Petriychuk to six years each on charges of "justifying terrorism" in a high-profile case that has drawn criticism from rights advocates.

Prosecutors had asked for Berkovich, 39, and Petriychuk, 44, to each be sentenced to six years in a penal colony during the closed-door trial in Moscow last week.

The two women were charged over the content of their award-winning play, "Finist the Brave Falcon," which is about Russian women who fall in love with Islamist militants and plan to join them in Syria.

Lawyer Ksenia Karpinskaya, who defends Berkovich and Petriychuk, told reporters that they would appeal the verdict.

“The girls are completely innocent. There was nothing new in the closed part,” Karpinskaya said.

Both artists, who were arrested in May 2023, pled not guilty.

The play, which received funding from the Culture Ministry, was awarded Russia's top theater prize, the Golden Mask.

During a court session last year, Berkovich stressed the play had "a very simple and transparent idea that dozens of women in our time become, I emphasize, random victims of evil."

"Understanding and justifying why this happens are two different things," she said.

The actresses who acted in the play had also testified during court hearings that the play was aimed at warning women against dating potential militants.

Since Moscow launched its war against Ukraine, Berkovich has written emotional poems against the invasion. Her supporters believe her anti-war statements were the real reasons for prosecution.

Amnesty International last year urged Russian authorities to release the women, who were “being targeted simply for exercising the right to freedom of expression.”

The Kremlin declined to comment on the verdict when asked about it by reporters Tuesday, saying that it does not comment on court rulings.

Original url: https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2024/07/08/verdict-a85646