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The Gogol Centre targeted by the Kremlin

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On 23rd May the Investigative Committee of Russia searched the Gogol Centre (a theatre in Moscow) and the flat of its artistic director Kirill Serebrennikov, who also runs the Seventh Studio, an artistic group resident in the theatre. According to the investigators, the search was linked to the alleged embezzlement of public funds which the municipality in Moscow granted to Seventh Studio to support its artistic activity between 2011 and 2014 (approximately 200 million rubles, which at that time was the equivalent of approximately US$ 6.5 million). The investigation led to the arrest of the former general manager of Seventh Studio, Yuri Itin, and the former chief accountant, Nina Maslyaeva. The investigation was also extended to include the former director of the department for supporting arts at the Russian Ministry of Culture. Serebrennikov was interrogated as a witness.

Both the fact that Seventh Studio was being investigated on fraud charges and the form the investigation took (masked security service operatives storming into the theatre, the theatre staff being forbidden to leave the building, the confiscation of the staff's mobile phones) caused indignation among a large section of the Russian artistic milieu and were seen as an ostentatious attempt to intimidate artists who disobey the Russian government (Serebrennikov has criticised Kremlin policy many times). Famous Russian artists have shown their support in defence of the theatre and its artistic director, including figures who are loyal to the government; they brought the issue to Vladimir Putin. The issue has attracted international attention—one day before Putin's visit to France (on 28th May) leading representatives of French artistic circles signed a petition in defence of Serebrennikov in which they called the actions of the Russian government the 'intimidation of free art'.

Commentary

- It is difficult to assess whether the charges against Seventh Studio are well-founded and it is unclear if Serebrennikov will remain merely a witness in the case. Nevertheless, the investigation seems to represent the logic of repressing artists, journalists and representatives of non-governmental organisations and academia who are critical of the Russian government. The investigation warrants attention due to the prominent position of the Gogol Centre (both as a theatre and an intellectual centre) and of its artistic director on Russia's cultural map. Serebrennikov has been the target of attacks from pro-Kremlin circles, using conservative rhetoric, for a long time; nor has he been supported by the culture minister, Vladimir Medinsky.

- The measures taken by the Investigative Committee should be seen in the political context of both the presidential election scheduled for 2018 and the present approach of a section of artists to the Kremlin's policy (including the public criticism of censorship in autumn 2016 or the criticism of the government's response to anti-corruption protests held on 26th March 2017). It is currently unclear whether the actions taken by the Investigative Committee were directly instigated by the Kremlin or whether they were caused by overzealousness in the investigative bodies. The charges of financial crimes (corruption, fraud) have become a standard instrument of the political fight and rivalry between the law enforcement structures in Russia in the recent years, even though they have usually concerned officials at the federal and regional levels. The use of this instrument against a representative of the artistic milieu may be an attempt to discourage artists from taking any action or making statements against the regime in the period preceding the election. In the light of Russian legal practice, anybody who deals with public funds may fall victim to charges of this kind.
- The preventative and repressive measures the Russian government is taking against society in order to decrease the potential for resistance ahead of the presidential election may prove counterproductive. The opening up of yet another front in the confrontation with opinion-forming circles seems to have gained importance against the backdrop of the increasing number of social protests in Russia (among them anti-corruption meetings, demonstrations in Moscow against plans to bring down low-cost apartment buildings ('khrushchyovkas'), protests held by lorry drivers etc.). As with the recent ban on the Jehovah's Witnesses community in Russia or the scandal surrounding the persecution of homosexuals in Chechnya, the measures taken against a world-famous theatre director are tarnishing Russia's reputation in Europe and may thus make it more difficult for Russia to attempt to have the sanctions imposed on it relaxed or lifted.