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Russian Rights Activist Granted Asylum in Estonia

By The Moscow Times

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Estonia has granted political asylum to a Russian journalist and human rights activist who fled abroad more than two months ago, fearing prosecution over his criticism of the Russian Orthodox Church.

"Estonian authorities declared my criminal case politically motivated and recognized that I am being persecuted in Russia for my political views," Maxim Yefimov told the Agora human rights organization's Openinform news agency on Friday.

Yefimov, who also received a three-year residency permit, said that he was the only Russian citizen to receive political asylum in the Baltic country this year and that rights organizations from Russia, Estonia, Sweden, Ireland and the United States had backed his application.

"Estonian President Toomas Ilves shook my hand and said that he was happy his country gave me temporary political asylum, since they respect freedom of speech in Estonia," Yefimov

told Agora in writing.

Yefimov, who heads the Youth Human Rights Group of Karelia, fled the country at the end of July, shortly after local investigators charged him with with inciting religious hatred over an article he published on his group's site.

In the article, titled "Russia Is Tired of Priests," Yefimov likened the Orthodox Church to United Russia, calling the church a "ruling party" interested in money.

Investigators had also requested Interpol issue a search warrant for Yefimov, who faced up to two years' jail time in Russia over the charges.

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