The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Anti-Kremlin Satirist Flees Russia Over 'Putin's Chef' Libel Suit

January 11, 2022



Russian writer Viktor Shenderovich. **Sergei Savostyanov / TASS**

Prominent satirist and Kremlin critic Viktor Shenderovich said Tuesday he has left Russia after a catering magnate with close ties to President Vladimir Putin sued him for libel.

Yevgeny Prigozhin, who is known as "Putin's Chef" for catering dinners for the Kremlin, was last month awarded damages in a civil lawsuit against Shenderovich and the liberal-leaning Ekho Moskvy radio station over their mention of his Soviet-era criminal record.

Shenderovich said he now faces pre-trial custody and up to five years in prison after Prigozhin filed a new libel lawsuit against him.

"I'll refrain from personally participating in the criminal case," he wrote in an early Tuesday Facebook post announcing his departure from Russia.

Shenderovich, who is best known for working as a writer for popular political puppet show *Kukly* (Puppets) in the late 1990s and early 2000s, is the latest Kremlin critic to leave the

country amid what activists call an expanding crackdown on dissent over the past year.

He said the criminal case was the final chapter in a series of harassment against him, including "home invasion, surveillance, telephone hooliganism, slander, invasion of privacy and direct threats to life," over the past two decades.

Related article: Russia Labels Pussy Riot Activists, Satirist 'Foreign Agents'

"The Kremlin has hinted for the past 20 years that I should leave through endless and demonstrative criminality against me," the columnist said.

In December, Russia's Justice Ministry labeled Shenderovich and a handful of other prominent Putin critics "foreign agents."

"While Prigozhin is an elite here, I'll continue to perform the function of a foreign agent away from my homeland, but without a muzzle," Shenderovich wrote.

Among other legal requirements, the "foreign agent" tag requires individuals and media organizations to add a disclaimer notifying readers of their status to every piece of content, including social media posts.

The Kremlin said Tuesday that it saw no link between Shenderovich's emigration and his foreign agent status.

A St. Petersburg court last month awarded Prigozhin 1.1 million rubles ($15,000) in compensation as part of a civil lawsuit, finding Shenderovich guilty of calling him a criminal and murderer in on-air comments to Ekho Moskvy.

Prigozhin rose to notoriety for his reported role in Russia's alleged interference in the 2016 U.S. presidential election and alleged efforts to advance the Kremlin's military and energy interests overseas, particularly in Africa.

Shenderovich, who obtained Israeli citizenship last year, did not disclose which country he has relocated to.

Original url:
https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2022/01/11/anti-kremlin-satirist-flees-russia-over-putins-chef-libel-suit-a76008