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Vlast Editor Fired Over Putin Insult

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Kommersant Vlast's Issue No. 49, which includes a photo of a ballot signed by a voter: "Putin, [expletive] off."

Censorship fears surfaced Tuesday after billionaire Alisher Usmanov, who owns the outspoken Kommersant Vlast weekly, fired its editor-in-chief over an obscene photo involving Prime Minister Vladimir Putin.

Insiders at the Kommersant publishing house told The Moscow Times that Usmanov was pressured into the dismissal by a Kremlin disgruntled by the independent media outlet's unflattering portrayal of its activities.

But the sacking, which appears to have followed weeks of growing tensions within the Kommersant publishing house, may fuel protest sentiments, which are riding high after disputed State Duma elections last week.

Usmanov fired the weekly's editor, Maxim Kovalsky, along with Andrei Galiyev, general manager of the Kommersant holding, late Monday.

The billionaire confirmed Tuesday that he had acted over Kommersant Vlast's Issue No. 49, which came out Monday and focused on allegations of fraud and vote-rigging by Putin's United Russia party at the Dec. 4 elections.

The particular cause of Usmanov's anger was a photograph of a ballot cast for the liberal Yabloko party in London and signed by the voter: "Putin, [expletive] off."

"These publications border on petty hooliganism," Usmanov told the Gazeta.ru online newspaper, which he also owns.

Usmanov, who told The Moscow Times by phone when he bought Kommersant in 2006 that he would not interfere with its editorial independence, insisted Tuesday that he prized the publishing house's independence. "But there still are moral and ethical norms that were violated here," he said.

The 58-year-old metals magnate, whose fortune is estimated by Forbes at $17 billion, added that he was considering a lawsuit against Kovalsky.

Kovalsky, who spent 12 years as editor, told Interfax that he regretted nothing. "I'm convinced that I did everything correctly and don't regret that the issue was [handled] exactly as it was," he said.

The chief of the Kommersant publishing house, Demyan Kudryavtsev, filed a resignation letter on Tuesday, saying he had not known about the photo but was taking responsibility for his team's actions. The board of shareholders has two weeks to review his request.

Usmanov did not act of his own free will, two journalists working in separate media outlets owned by Usmanov told The Moscow Times on condition of anonymity.

The dismissals were made "by Usmanov under enormous pressure from the Kremlin," said one of them, a prominent staffer at one of the outlets in the holding.

"It has never happened before. We're all shocked," he said.

Usmanov bought the Kommersant publishing house for $200 million from Georgian tycoon Badri Patarkatsishvili, who in turn had acquired it from exiled businessman Boris Berezovsky a few months earlier. The holding includes, among others, the Ogonyok and Kommersant Dengi magazines, a radio and television channel, and the influential Kommersant daily.

All of the publications have maintained an outspoken stance and regularly criticized the ruling establishment, which, along with their professionalism, helped them maintain popularity with a middle-class readership.

Kommersant's media outlets have regularly used obscenities before, though not during an election cycle and targeting Putin, widely seen as the country's ruler.

A striking example is last year's coverage of a daring stunt by the radical art group Voina that involved drawing a gigantic penis on a St. Petersburg drawbridge facing the local offices of the Federal Security Service. Kommersant publications, like many other media outlets, published photos of the drawing and mentioned its title, which incidentally involves the same obscene

word for "penis" that appeared on the ballot published in Vlast.

No open clashes between Usmanov and journalists in his employ were reported until last month, when Gazeta.ru's political editor Roman Badarin stepped down, saying elections-related coverage had "ceased to satisfy the bosses and owners." Badarin cited, in particular, Gazeta.ru's link to a web site documenting campaign violations that it coordinated with independent elections watchdog Golos. Golos has been under pressure from the state-run media, which has depicted it as a subversive agent of Western powers.

A week of protests followed the Duma vote, culminating in a rally of 30,000 to 50,000 last Saturday. Protesters demanded a recount of the ballots, punishment of officials behind vote-rigging, and the release of those who were arrested at previous rallies. The photo published in Vlast was of one of the ballots deemed uncountable by election officials.

The protesters gave authorities two weeks to react, with another rally, billed for 50,000, scheduled for Dec. 24. President Dmitry Medvedev said he disagrees with the demands, but he has ordered a check into the reports of violations.

In an unexpected twist, billionaire Mikhail Prokhorov said Tuesday that he wanted to purchase the Kommersant publishing house. Usmanov dismissed the offer as a joke, Kommersant FM reported.

But there may be more to it than irony, given that Prokhorov announced his own presidential bid on Monday. He plans to cater to the middle-class constituency that rallied against the election results, and acting as the protector of publications favored by the middle class might score him points with voters.

Alexei Simonov, head of the Glasnost foundation, said he believed that Vlast staff had tried to express their own attitude toward the authorities through the photo — though it was a violation of journalistic ethics. Even so, he said by phone, such an infraction did not necessarily mandate dismissal.

"As usual, we wanted the best but ended up with the more of the same," he said about the dismissals, adopting an adage coined by former Prime Minister Viktor Chernomyrdin.

Vladimir Varfolomeyev, deputy chief editor of the Ekho Moskvy radio station, also wrote in his blog that rumors had been flourishing about pressure on the reporters working with the Kommersant holding in connection with the elections.

"The [Kommersant] newspaper has lowered the degree of its attacks on 'crooks and thieves,' but Vlast kept up on its own," he said Tuesday, adding that the dismissals are "a very sad thing for both the mass media and society in general."

Putin's United Russia is widely disparaged as the "party of crooks and thieves."

While the dismissals might raise questions about the Kommersant holding's independence, that also seem to be helping sales. The article linked to the obscene photo was widely read online, and printed copies of Kommersant Vlast's Issue No. 49 were all but impossible to obtain at newsstands by late Tuesday.

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