More Than 100 Kommersant Journalists Protest Firings

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More than 100 journalists at the Kommersant publishing house signed an open letter Wednesday protesting the dismissal of two senior executives over the publication of an obscene photo lampooning Prime Minister Vladimir Putin.

Kommersant Vlast editor-in-chief Maxim Kovalsky and Kommersant holding general manager Andrei Galiyev were fired Monday by the company's billionaire owner Alisher Usmanov.

The letter, signed by some 90 Kommersant journalists and 15 of their colleagues at the news web site Gazeta.ru, also owned by Usmanov, blasted the move as cowardly.

"We consider his [Kovalsky's] dismissal as an act of intimidation aimed at preventing any critical comments toward Vladimir Putin," said the letter, posted on OpenSpace.ru. "We are forced toward cowardice. ... It's the same falsification that insulted people at the elections," it said.

Usmanov's harsh reaction came after the weekly magazine printed a photo of an uncounted ballot cast for the Yabloko party with the words, "Putin, [expletive] off," written on it. Usmanov said the "publications border on petty hooliganism."

Insiders at the company told The Moscow Times that Usmanov's decision came under pressure from the Kremlin over critical reporting about the contested Dec. 4 parliamentary elections that resulted in mass protests.

Russia's third-richest man, Mikhail Prokhorov, who announced on Monday that he would run against Putin for president in March, made a formal offer Wednesday to buy the Kommersant publishing house from Usmanov, RIA-Novosti reported.

Usmanov dismissed the idea as a joke on Tuesday when the offer first surfaced. He said Wednesday that he had no intention of changing his mind over the firings.

Prokhorov already owns several media outlets, including RBC Daily, which is much less influential than the Kommersant daily.