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Vokrug Sveta Tight-Lipped on Gessen's Departure

By Jonathan Earle

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Masha Gessen **Rodrigo Fernandez**

Vokrug Sveta, Russia's oldest travel magazine, confirmed that a disagreement over authority between the publisher and editors led to the departure of former editor-in-chief Masha Gessen.

According to a company statement, excerpts of which were posted by RIA-Novosti, the company neither confirmed nor denied Gessen's claim that the conflict stemmed from her refusal to cover an expedition in which President Vladimir Putin would have released endangered cranes into the wild.

Gessen, an outspoken opposition supporter, tweeted, "I'm leaving Vokrug Sveta #thankputinforthat" on Monday, sparking speculation that she'd been pushed out for political reasons.

Owner Sergei Vasiliyev asked her to cover the event, but she refused, considering the request "editorial interference and a violation of the law on media," she told Bolshoi Gorod.

Gessen's predecessor, Sergei Parkhomenko, said there was no reason to doubt Gessen's account, but added that he had never experienced pressure from Vasiliyev in his 2 1/2 years as editor-in-chief.

Vasiliyev "was exceedingly professional. He never pressured me whatsoever," he said by telephone, adding, "Maybe the times have changed. I don't know."

In July, Vokrug Sveta (Around the World) became the official partner of the Russian Geographic Society, which is headed by Putin ally Sergei Shoigu. Putin is chairman of its board of trustees.

At the time, Putin vaguely said the government was "supporting" the magazine, which is privately owned. Gessen denied the claim.

She was unavailable for additional comment Tuesday, but she told Bolshoi Gorod that she raised objections to the event in light of Putin's history of stage-managed excursions into the wild.

Last August, state television showed footage of Putin emerging from the Black Sea in a wetsuit, amphora shards in hand. His press secretary later admitted that the amphora had been planted.

"Maybe the trees will be tied to their stumps," Gessen quipped, adding that it would be any journalist's "professional duty" to debunk any shenanigans.

Alexander Grek, editor-in-chief of National Geographic's Russian edition and a direct competitor of Vokrug Sveta, said the Putin incident was a pretext for Gessen's departure and he believed that the magazine had been selling poorly.

"I don't think Parkhomenko or Gessen were good picks to head Vokrug Sveta. They're social-political journalists working at a popular science magazine," he said.

National Geographic's Russian edition is published by Sanoma Independent Media, the parent company of The Moscow Times.

Gessen is the author of "The Man Without a Face," a damning biography of Vladimir Putin, and the co-organizer of a large protest on Putin's inauguration day.

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