

TV Boss Interview Sparks Uproar

By [The Moscow Times](#)

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A controversial interview with Konstantin Ernst, general director of state-owned Channel One, has caused a scandal in social networks and the media, raising questions of press freedom and journalist ethics.

The interview was taken in 2008 by Yevgeny Levkovich, who was a freelance correspondent for the Russian edition of Rolling Stone magazine. He had tried to publish it for five years before posting it on his blog on Snob.ru on Thursday. No other major media outlet accepted it for publication.

In the interview, Ernst, who is running Russia's most popular television station and is seen as the country's media demiurge, touched upon sensitive issues such as the pro-government bias on television, regular meetings between Kremlin officials and top editors, as well as the murder of Vladislav Listyev, a famous TV anchor who was often compared with American television star Larry King and was shot in the head at the entrance to his apartment building in March 1995.

The murder of the beloved television celebrity deeply shocked the nation, with President Boris Yeltsin making an emotional statement and several thousand people attending his funeral.

The interview was interrupted at times with Ernst's requests to stop recording in order for him to make a comment off the record.

Despite Ernst's requests, Levkovich did include one of the excerpts that was not meant to be published. According to Levkovich, Ernst named Sergei Lisovsky, one of the powerful advertising magnates of the 1990s and currently a Federation Council Senator, as the one who ordered the murder of Vladislav Listyev.

Listyev was one of the most popular TV anchors and managers in the 1990s and is widely associated with the rise of independent media in Russia. Following his assassination, Russia's main TV channels shut down for a whole day, only displaying a picture of Listyev and the words, "Vlad Listyev has been killed."

Ernst's accusation caused a scandal to erupt as media actors began to question its credibility and whether Levkovich's decision to publish bits that were "off the record" was ethical. The head of Channel One is seen as a powerful figure close to President Vladimir Putin.

Speaking to Ekho Moskvyy radio, Lisovsky denied the accusation, saying: "It's futile to comment on nonsense."

According to the radio's stations editor-in-chief, Alexei Venediktov, Ernst denied making any accusations both while the interview was recorded and during the off-the-record periods.

Levkovich claimed that what he said was true, saying there were at least two witnesses to the conversation, a photographer Igor Rodin and his colleague Pavel Grinshpun.

Touching on other topics, Ernst said it was his personal decision not to let such opposition leaders as Garry Kasparov and Eduard Limonov appear on his television station because he "doesn't take them to be politicians."

Despite admitting that regular meetings between Kremlin officials and top media figures do take place, Ernst underlined that he did not think they undermine media freedom.

In light of the growing scandal and citing legal concerns, Snob.ru has restricted access to the interview, but copies of it have already spread across the Internet.

Ernst denied that there was any kind of censorship on Channel One apart from his own and emphasized that he was a true patriot, praising Putin for "not letting Russia fall apart just like Yugoslavia did."

According to Levkovich, his decision to publish the interview was determined by his conviction that Russian society was currently experiencing "a period of stagnation" and because he wanted to show that "nothing has changed for quite some time."

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