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Former Kremlin Insider to Head State Media Giant

By The Moscow Times

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Mikhail Lesin

A former Kremlin advisor and influential media official during the turbulent 1990s who is also credited with setting up Moscow's international broadcaster RT, formerly Russia Today, was appointed Tuesday to head state-controlled media giant Gazprom-Media.

Mikhail Lesin will replace Nikolai Senkevich as head of Gazprom-Media, the country's largest media holding, following a decision by the board of directors, a statement posted on the company's website said.

The appointment of Lesin, which was widely reported in advance of the official announcement, signals a return to the heart of the official media establishment for a figure who played a key role in some of the media battles of the 1990s and early 2000s, including Gazprom's takeover of the privately owned NTV television channel, which put a network highly critical of the Kremlin firmly under state control.

As an advisor to President Vladimir Putin between 2004 and 2008, Lesin was reportedly the architect of the Kremlin-funded English-language channel Russia Today, now known as RT.

Lesin has "a reputation as being a professional, highly qualified and fairly tough," television journalist and Public Chamber member Nikolai Svanidze said, adding that Lesin's appointment could lead to changes in the media industry.

Gazprom-Media's most prominent assets are radio stations Ekho Moskvy and Citi-FM, television channels NTV and TNT, satellite operator NTV Plus, online video site Rutube and publishing house Sem Dnei. The company is owned by Gazprombank, the financial arm of state-owned gas giant Gazprom. Gazprombank is also closely linked through its management structure to Bank Rossiya, which is owned by Yury Kovalchuk, reportedly a close personal acquaintance of Putin.

At the end of the 1990s Lesin set up one of Russia's largest advertising agencies, Video International. Between 1999 and 2004 he was the country's Media Minister, before working as a presidential advisor between 2004 and 2009, when he was dismissed from the Kremlin by then-President Dmitry Medvedev.

Senkevich, the man Lesin is replacing, will retain his positions as deputy president of Gazprombank and advisor to Gazprom head Alexei Miller, according to Russian media reports. Senkevich, a former head of NTV, has run Gazprom-Media since 2004.

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