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Major News Outlet's License Revoked Over 'Profanity'

By Oleg Sukhov

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A Moscow court Thursday revoked the license of the Rosbalt news outlet over alleged profanity in two videos it posted, including one by punk group Pussy Riot.

The case against Rosbalt, initiated by the Federal Mass Media Inspection Service, has been interpreted by some as an attack on free speech, while others view it as part of a struggle for control of the business.

Rosbalt, set up in 2001, is one of Russia's major news outlets, with main offices in Moscow and St. Petersburg and a website that is one of the country's top 10 most cited. Its coverage focuses on news and analysis in the realms of business and politics, and it often has exclusive stories not widely covered in the media.

The state media watchdog's bid to shut down Rosbalt has attracted widespread attention, with State Duma deputies, the Kremlin human rights council and the Russian Union

of Journalists criticizing the case.

The ruling by Moscow City Court will take effect in a month. It could lead to Rosbalt being forced to give up its activities as a registered news agency, although its site would be able to keep functioning as news websites do not require a license, Rosbalt lawyer Dmitry Firsov said by phone.

Firsov said the decision was "unprecedented," alleging that there were numerous procedural violations and that the court had ignored the fact that the mass media service's injunctions against Rosbalt had been appealed. He said Rosbalt would appeal the latest ruling as well.

Firsov also said that Rosbalt had bleeped out the swear words from the allegedly offending videos and that the videos were immediately removed from its website after the state media watchdog issued its injunctions.

President Vladimir Putin's spokesman Dmitry Peskov said Thursday that he had no right to comment on the decision because it had been made by a court, part of a separate branch of government, NTV television reported. But he said pressure on mass media was justified in some cases.

"I would assume the government must exert certain pressure on media that violate the law and use swear words or promote something that contradicts legislation," Peskov said.

The Pussy Riot video, called "Like in a Red Prison," which criticizes Putin's regime and its dependence on oil and gas, features members of the group climbing onto the roof of a gas station and oil being poured on a portrait of Rosneft CEO Igor Sechin. Apparently addressing Putin, it says "[Expletive] sexist, get away from the hole! Homophobic [expletive], get out of history!"

The second video shows a person with his hands tied and several other people who are swearing. According to notes to the video, the person with his hands tied had been driving a car and was criticized by other drivers for creating obstacles to traffic, for which he attacked them with an axe and was handed over to the police.

The state regulator's attempts to revoke Rosbalt's license over the videos triggered speculation regarding the reasons behind the case.

Rosbalt CEO Larisa Afonina and lawyer Firsov attributed the court ruling to the news outlet’s independent stance being at odds with Kremlin policy.

"The decision is connected with the agency's open and free journalism," Firsov said.

Afonina said Rosbalt was financially independent from the government and its journalists were free to voice their opinions.

"We will work for another month as a media organization," she said, as cited by NTV. "If the decision was intended to shut us up, we won't be."

Journalist Tatyana Chesnokova wrote on Rosbalt's website earlier this month that the case against the news outlet could also have been caused by a business conflict.

"Someone decided to take over the agency and organized a crackdown on it," Chesnokova wrote. "Probably it was negotiated with someone from the Kremlin's command hierarchy. And now the agency's task is to find someone higher up in that hierarchy to defend itself."

The news outlet's management purportedly has ties to powerful government officials. Natalya Cherkesova, the chairwoman of Rosbalt's board of directors, is married to Viktor Cherkesov, a State Duma deputy with the Communist Party who has reportedly had a long-running conflict with Kremlin heavyweight Igor Sechin and Security Council head Nikolai Patrushev.

Cherkesov, a KGB veteran who was one of Putin's deputies when Putin headed the Federal Security Service from 1998 to 1999, stepped down from his last major post as head of Rosoboronpostavka, the federal government's arms supplies agency, in 2010 in what was interpreted by some analysts as a defeat in his spat with Sechin.

Earlier this month, Cherkesova's car was attacked by unknown hooligans in St. Petersburg, and her driver was beaten up, prompting speculation that the attack could be related to the supposed crackdown on the media outlet.

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