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RIA Novosti Employees Await Word on Fate of News Agency

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Employees at RIA Novosti remain unsure about what exactly will happen to their jobs. **A. Makhonin**

Less than two weeks ahead of the deadline set by the Kremlin for the abolishment of major state-funded news agency RIA Novosti, its employees say they still lack details about what will happen to their jobs or when the company will cease its work.

The wire service is set to make way for a new agency to be called Rossia Segodnya by March 9, according to President Vladimir Putin's decree issued in early December. The stated goal of the new agency is to improve Russia's image abroad while spending less state money on the task than RIA Novosti did.

The dissolution of RIA Novosti and creation of Rossia Segodnya, which translates as "Russia Today," are part of what is largely viewed as a consolidation of the country's media under Kremlin control.

Other actions seen as part of this trend include the appointment earlier this month of a former deputy head of the pro-Kremlin Voice of Russia radio station as chief executive of opposition-leaning radio station Ekho Moskvy; and a wave of pressure on independent television channel Dozhd, which has said it may have to shut down after major cable operators dropped it following criticism by prominent officials of a poll it ran related to World War II.

Several people linked to news reporting at RIA Novosti told The Moscow Times on condition of anonymity that they had not been informed by their bosses about their fate.

"It is amazing that we do not learn anything from our bosses. We are living on rumors and learning news [about the reform] from news feeds," a female employee of the company said by phone. She said she did not know whether any of her colleagues had been invited to work at Rossia Segodnya.

But even if some are worried about their possible dismissal or the expected shift in the editorial policy of the new agency compared with that of RIA Novosti, the concerns are apparently not seriously affecting the work environment.

"It is quiet and calm, we are working in a normal regime," a second female employee said by phone.

A male employee said: "I have noticed no big anxiety," adding that his colleagues were "more interested in how everything will be organized" at the new agency. Some departments have been informed in written form about their liquidation, he said without elaborating.

Agency management has been quiet about how the transition will play out. Nabi Abdullaev, the head of the overseas reporting desk, which includes the English-language service, redirected a request for comment to RIA Novosti's press service. The agency's spokeswoman, Alla Nadyozhkina, refused to comment.

Earlier this week an unidentified source at RIA Novosti told Jourdom.ru, a website for news related to mass media, that the agency's contractors would be fired effective March 3, while staff employees would be laid off within two months and would get compensation and vacation payments. At least three news projects, including special sections devoted to Moscow, the Moscow region and real estate, will be shut down, the report said.

Putin appointed ultraconservative state television host Dmitry Kiselyov as Rossia Segodnya's general director. Kiselyov has said that Margarita Simonyan, editor-in-chief at RT, the pro-Kremlin English-language television station formerly called Russia Today, would become the editor-in-chief of Rossia Segodnya while retaining her current post.

When asked by a reporter whether they wanted to work for Rossia Segodnya, the three RIA Novosti employees gave diverse answers.

The first female employee said no one was planning anything yet because they were "still waiting." The second female employee said she would like to work at Rossia Segodnya "with only the goal of seeing from inside how it will be." But she said she is "very concerned" that the new agency could become a Kremlin propaganda tool and "would not like to work under the command of Kiselyov."

The male employee said: "There is no way I will stay."

"I am not comfortable with the vector of information policy that the new leadership will probably follow," he said in apparent reference to the agency becoming a Kremlin mouthpiece.

He said it appeared to him that many of those who wanted to leave after Putin announced the reform had already left or were in the process of leaving by March. He said he could not estimate the approximate number of those who quit or were going to quit.

A former male employee of RIA Novosti who quit shortly after Putin announced the agency's dissolution, but not in connection with it, and who still has friends at RIA Novosti said: "People regretted giving away what took years to establish."

"More than likely, this is another small step toward the centralization of mass media," he said.

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