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Son of State Media Boss Tipped to Replace Durov at Vkontakte

By The Moscow Times

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VKontakte's offices, above the famous St. Petersburg bookstore, Dom Knigi

In another sign of the forced integration of the Internet into Russia's state-controlled media network, Boris Dobrodeyev, son of the head of Russia's largest state-run media corporation, could soon take over as CEO of leading social network Vkontakte, replacing the site's whizz-kid founder Pavel Durov, who is now in exile in the U.S. claiming persecution by the Russian security services.

Billionaire Alisher Usmanov's Mail.Ru Group, Russia's second-largest Internet company and owner of a 52 percent share in Vkontakte, or VK, has nominated Dobrodeyev for the position, Itar-Tass reported Friday, citing a source in the government. Dobrodeyev, who is currently serving as VK's acting CEO, was on the board of directors of Mail.Ru Group before moving to VK in January. He also happens to be the son of Oleg Dobrodeyev, head of the All-Russia State Television and Radio Broadcasting Company, or VGTRK, a state media behemoth that operates five national television channels, a host of Internet projects and more than 80

regional television and radio networks.

The appointment has not yet been approved by VK's other shareholder, Moscow-based investment fund United Capital Partners, or UCP, according to Itar-Tass. Mail.Ru Group declined to comment, while UCP did not respond to inquiries.

If his appointment is confirmed, Dobrodeyev will be filling a chair left empty when VK founder Pavel Durov fled Russia in April, fuming that he had been forced from his position as chief of the company and predicting that VK would fall to Kremlin control. Durov had sold his 12 percent stake in VK to an associate of Usmanov, the Kremlin-linked billionaire who controls Mail.Ru Group, in December, and Mail.Ru Group then snapped it up in March to become the website's majority shareholder. Durov later said that he was forced to sell the shares due to a conflict with the Federal Security Service, or FSB, which had demanded that VK hand over information on opposition-linked users and groups.

Mail.Ru Group and UCP are now locked in a struggle for possession of VK, while Durov and UCP are simultaneously suing each other over ownership of Telegram, an instant messaging service created by Durov in the U.S.

Beside the newfound family connection, VK and VGTRK are also expanding their links in other ways: VGTRK's deputy head Dmitry Mednikov told newspaper Izvestia this week that the media corporation has agreed to give VK — which, unlike Facebook, offers video and music streaming — the rights to legally show its video content. For years, VK, with its 88 million registered users in Russia and 143 million users worldwide, teemed with every song and film imaginable, all uploaded by users and freely available. But new anti-piracy laws are now beginning to bite, and the network is transitioning to legality.

"Practically all of our content is already on Vkontakte, but it has been put there illegally," Mednikov said. Altogether, the rights to tens of thousands of hours of video content will be handed over for legal viewing, Mednikov said, adding that the companies intend to monetize the content through advertising.

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