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Russian Olympic Gymnast Kabaeva to Head Pro-Kremlin Media Holding

By The Moscow Times

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Alina Kabayeva

Olympic medalist Alina Kabaeva is to lead the biggest private pro-Kremlin media holding in Russia, its spokeswoman has said, after serving more than six years as a parliamentary deputy.

The National Media Group, which owns 25 percent of the mainstream pro-Kremlin Channel One and a majority stake in influential Izvestia daily, is controlled by businessman Yury Kovalchuk.

He was put on a U.S. sanctions list over Russia's Crimea annexation earlier this year due to his closeness to President Vladimir Putin.

"Alina Maratovna Kabaeva accepted the invitation of the holding's shareholders to occupy the post of chairman of the board of directors," spokeswoman Oksana Razumova said by phone.

She did not give details of what Kabaeva's functions will be as a manager or when the formal appointment will take place.

Kabaeva replaces Kirill Kovalchuk, a relative of Yury Kovalchuk, in the post overseeing operations including three television channels, two newspapers and a radio station.

The Kremlin has denied speculation about an alleged romantic relationship between Kabaeva, 31, and Putin, 61, who formally divorced his wife Lyudmila earlier this year.

In 2008 a small newspaper, Moskovsky Korrespondent, published a report alleging that Putin was planning to marry Kabaeva, who was born in 1983, the year he had married Lyudmila. Putin said there was no truth to the report.

The newspaper, owned by businessman Alexander Lebedev, owner of London's Evening Standard daily and a critic of the Russian authorities, was closed days after the story was published with its editor citing economic reasons for the shutdown.

Putin divorced Lyudmila in April. His private life is scarcely mentioned by most of the Russian media, with little known about his family or friends.

Kabaeva, a 2004 Olympic gold medalist in rhythmic gymnastics, was elected for a second stint as a State Duma deputy in 2011 for the pro-Kremlin United Russia party.

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