The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Kommersant Editor Steps Down Amid Rumors of Pressure From Above

By Allison Quinn

November 10, 2014



Rosneft head Igor Sechin threatened to sue the Kommersant publishing house over the article.

The editor-in-chief of business daily Kommersant has resigned, triggering speculation Monday that he was forced out over a recent article in the newspaper about oil giant Rosneft.

While theories behind the move multiplied and media reports fluctuated between calling it a dismissal and a resignation, the editor himself, Mikhail Mikhailin, told RBC Daily that he had stepped down of his own accord.

But coming amid repeated recent media shake-ups, some observers suggested Mikhailin's decision was the result of pressure over the paper's editorial content.

Oppositional State Duma Deputy Dmitry Gudkov was among those who responded to the news by describing it as a "dismissal" in retaliation for an article about Rosneft.

"Let's give some PR to the article that got the editor-in-chief fired," Gudkov wrote

on Facebook on Monday, along with a link to the article "Rosneft Rose Up Against the West."

The article, published Oct. 29, described a program purportedly thought up by Rosneft and pitched to President Vladimir Putin to combat Western sanctions. According to Dozhd TV, Rosneft head Igor Sechin threatened to sue the Kommersant publishing house over the article. The publishing house is currently owned by Kremlin-friendly tycoon Alisher Usmanov.

Until Usmanov took over in 2006, Kommersant was widely considered Russia's most authoritative publication. Describing itself as Russia's first independent private newspaper, it had a string of acts of defiance under its belt — including publishing an entire issue of blank pages other than one correction in protest against the court-ordered retraction.

The paper was owned by the late tycoon and Kremlin insider turned self-exiled Putin critic Boris Berezovsky from 1997 to 2006.

On Monday, Dozhd TV published a report suggesting that the paper had come under pressure from the Kremlin elite.

Citing an unidentified source, Dozhd reported that in an attempt to avoid going to court with Sechin over the Rosneft story, the publishing house's management had first offered to fire one of the article's authors, Kirill Melnikov, before going for Mikhailin instead.

Mikhailin, who had held the position of editor since June 2010, denied that theory in comments to RBC.

"My resignation is not connected to any article about Sechin. When that article was published, I was on a business trip in China. There's no need for conspiracy theories, I have taken creative leave, and it was my decision together with the shareholders," Mikhailin was cited as saying by RBC Daily.

Pavel Filenkov, director of the Kommersant publishing house, backed up Mikhailin's comments.

"The phrase creative leave means his personal creative leave, during which he will determine what he wants to do next. Mikhailin is leaving both his posts — as editing director and editor-in-chief — and leaving the Kommersant publishing house," Filenkov was cited as saying by RBC Daily.

Mikhailin's replacement was named as Sergei Yakovlev, editor-in-chief of Kommersant-Money magazine.

Taken Off Air

The resignation came days after a journalist at Ekho Moskvy radio station was fired after making comments on Twitter about the recent death of Kremlin chief of staff Sergei Ivanov's son.

Alexander Plyushchev was fired Thursday by Gazprom Media, the media arm of state energy giant Gazprom that owns a 66 percent stake in the opposition-leaning Ekho Moskvy.

The company cited "ethical norms" for the move but did not elaborate further or explicitly connect Plyushchev's dismissal to his Twitter comments.

Plyushchev had already landed in hot water recently for hosting a talk show discussing fighting at Donetsk Airport between Ukrainian troops and separatists. The show, in which Plyushchev interviewed several journalists who had covered the crisis there, earned the station a warning from the federal media watchdog for containing "information justifying war crimes."

Ekho Moskvy editor-in-chief Alexei Venediktov said he would not recognize the firing. Gazprom Media head Mikhail Lesin responded by saying Venediktov himself could be fired if he continued in that vein.

All Change

The flurry of speculation over Mikhailin's exit from Kommersant was likely fueled by the drastic changes that Russia's media landscape has undergone recently and that many fear signal the extinction of independent journalism.

In addition to state news agency RIA Novosti having been liquidated by presidential decree late last year and replaced with a new agency headed by a Kremlin-loyal anti-Western TV journalist, the longtime editors of popular news websites Lenta.ru and Gazeta.ru have also been replaced with Kremlin-friendly editors.

Dozhd TV has likewise suffered setbacks that many have tied to its opposition-leaning coverage. Earlier this year, the channel was dropped by many of the biggest cable operators in a move its management said was Kremlin-orchestrated.

Last month, the station received notice that it was being evicted from its offices in Moscow by city authorities, leaving the staff with nowhere to work until its new lease begins.

Experts contacted by The Moscow Times on Monday declined to comment on the reasons for Mikhailin's departure, but said it wouldn't have a major impact on the media industry.

Vasily Gatov, a media researcher and investment expert, said he expected Yakovlev's appointment to bring about improvements in Kommersant.

"Mikhailin was not a 'cult' editor, neither within the paper nor for the public outside of it," he said.

Leonid Bershidsky, the founding editor of publications including Vedomosti and the local edition of Forbes magazine, said that Kommersant had long ago lost its reputation as a newspaper of record.

"It has been a gradual decline," he told The Moscow Times, describing what he said was the paper's deteriorating quality.

"Right now, there is no reason to read it," he said.

Staff writer Ivan Nechepurenko contributed to this report.

Contact the author at a.quinn@imedia.ru

Original url:
https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2014/11/10/kommersant-editor-steps-down-amid-rumors-of-pressure-from-above-a41196