

Russia's Ekho Moskvyy Celebrates Victory as Radio Host Dodges Ax

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Ekho Moskvyy radio host Alexander Plyushchev.

Radio station Ekho Moskvyy has scored a victory in its struggle to preserve editorial independence after its state-run corporate owner has revoked an order to fire one of the station's journalists and promised to beef up the chief editor's rights.

Editor-in-chief Alexei Venediktov and head of the state-run Gazprom Media holding Mikhail Lesin reached the agreement during a four-hour meeting on Wednesday, Venediktov told his radio station later that evening.

Removing a major bone of contention between the parties, Lesin revoked an earlier order to fire Ekho Moskvyy radio host Alexander Plyushchev — a dismissal that critics said contradicted the station's charter, which places the authority to dismiss editorial staff with the editor-in-chief.

Plyushchev will still face some sanctions over the Twitter post at the heart of the dispute in which he commented on the recent drowning death of the 37-year-old son of Kremlin chief of staff Sergei Ivanov.

In the post — which was later deleted and replaced with an apology — Plyushchev wondered whether the "death of Ivanov's son, who ran over an old lady and sued her son-in-law, is proof of the existence of God/higher justice," referring to an incident in 2005 when Alexander Ivanov hit and killed a 68-year-old pensioner with his car.

Regulate Behavior

Plyushchev has been banned from reappearing on air until Jan. 15 under an order signed by Venediktov in exchange for concessions to Gazprom Media, the radio station reported.

Venediktov also said in his program that the radio station's charter will be amended to regulate the "behavior of journalists on social networks."

Another part of the deal with Gazprom Media included increasing the "personal accountability" of its chief editor for the remarks made by his journalists on air, Venediktov said.

While Venediktov called the deal a "compromise," he said it fully preserved the editorial independence of the radio station and even offered prospects for increasing the rights of its editor.

"The foundations of the editorial policy of Ekho Moskvy have not been affected. They have been preserved," Venediktov said, adding they might "even be strengthened," without elaborating further.

But the "most important thing is that the chief editor of Ekho Moskvy is still in charge of the editorial policies," Venediktov said.

Beleaguered

The dispute over Gazprom Media's order earlier this month to dismiss Plyushchev, and Venediktov's staunch refusal to comply, had stoked fears about the fate of the beleaguered radio station — one of the last bastions of media independence in the country amid a state crackdown on media.

Earlier this month, media watchdog Roskomnadzor slapped Ekho Moskvy with a warning over a recent program — hosted by Plyushchev — about battles at eastern Ukraine's Donetsk Airport, and ordered the transcript of the talk show removed from the radio station's website. A second warning within a year would give the government the power to shut down the radio station.

Ahead of the Wednesday meeting, Lesin conceded in an interview with Novaya Gazeta published Monday that "firing Plyushchev was illegal." But he criticized the journalist for his Twitter post.

"No matter who Ivanov is, there are such notions as family, children, wife, health, death. It is

indecent to touch such things," he was quoted as saying.

A meeting of the board of directors of Ekho Moskvyy scheduled for Friday to discuss the dispute was canceled as a result of the resolution, which was widely hailed as a success for the radio station.

Plyushchev welcomed the deal in a Twitter message, calling Venediktov a "hero," and on Facebook opposition politician Boris Nemtsov called on readers to congratulate Ekho Moskvyy and its chief editor its "victory."

"The last free radio station will continue its work, and this is incredibly cool," he wrote.

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