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Mikhail Lesin Resigns as Head of Gazprom-Media

By The Moscow Times

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Mikhail Lesin

Mikhail Lesin has stepped down as head of major state-controlled media holding Gazprom-Media, the company said late last week.

Gazprom-Media, whose holdings include independent radio station Ekho Moskvy, said Lesin's resignation was due to family reasons, Russian media reports said Friday.

The holding's board of directors will finalize his resignation at an upcoming meeting, Gazprom-Media was cited by Ekho Moskvy as saying. No replacement has been named.

Earlier, a flurry of reports of Lesin's imminent resignation appeared on Russian news wires, all based on undisclosed sources and giving divergent accounts of the motive.

Forbes Russia cited sources in the media and government as confirming the resignation, with one of the individuals claiming that the decision was made personally by President Vladimir

Putin.

However, Gazeta.ru cited a media executive as saying that Lesin was leaving due to "family circumstances," adding that the decision came unexpectedly to his colleagues.

Meanwhile, business news agency RBC quoted an undisclosed government official as saying the dismissal might have been initiated by billionaire Yury Kovalchuk, a close Putin ally.

The accounts came after RFE/RL reported last week that U.S. federal authorities planned to investigate Lesin for possible violations of anti-money-laundering laws during his purchase of expensive California real estate.

U.S. Senator Roger Wicker's request for an investigation has been forwarded to the U.S. Justice Department's criminal division and the FBI, the report said, citing a copy of a Dec. 3 letter from U.S. Assistant Attorney General Peter Kadzik.

Lesin has denied the allegations, saying they have been trumped up, Forbes Russia reported.

Lesin was recently involved in a dispute with Ekho Moskvy journalists over a Gazprom-Media order to fire one of the radio station's hosts, Alexander Plyushchev, for an insensitive Twitter post.

The dispute, which stoked concerns about the future of one of the last remaining independent media outlets in Russia, was resolved between Lesin and Ekho Moskvy editor-in-chief Alexei Venediktov last month. Plyushchev kept his job, and the radio station promised to develop guidelines for its journalists' behavior on social networks.

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