

Russian State Media Merger Rumor Prompts Industry Mudslinging

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September 06, 2015



RIA Novosti published a story about a possible merger of Ekho Moskvy and Snob.

Russian state-run news agency RIA Novosti and Ekho Moskvy, the opposition-leaning radio station, got into a public mudslinging match last week as they exchanged unsubstantiated rumors about each other merging with other media outlets.

The saga began on Thursday, when Alexei Venediktov, the prominent editor-in-chief of Ekho Moskvy, announced on Twitter that Margarita Simonyan, editor-in-chief of the state-run Rossiya Segodnya holding that owns RIA Novosti, was set to leave Rossiya Segodnya and head the NTV sensationalist TV channel.

Her resignation, he wrote, "opens an opportunity for Rossiya Segodnya ... to merge with TASS [another state-run news agency] under [TASS head] Sergei Mikhailov."

Simonyan immediately denied the claim, also on Twitter. "You tweeted nonsense about me,"

she wrote, addressing Venediktov. "I'm not going to NTV," she added.

The next day Snob, an opposition-leaning magazine, cited an unidentified source at Rossiya Segodnya as saying the agencies were indeed merging.

It will take one or two months to complete the merger, the source told Snob, and employees at the media holding are already aware of it. The Snob report also cited both Simonyan and an unidentified employee of TASS as denying there would be a merger or that there was even any discussion of one.

Later that day, RIA Novosti published a story about a possible merger of Ekho Moskvyy and Snob. The story was also based on information attributed to an "unidentified source" and claimed the outlets were planning to combine their websites and social media accounts.

In response, both Ekho Moskvyy and Snob representatives denied they were merging. In a twist that prompted further speculation that RIA had simply been retaliating to the Snob report, a disclaimer was later added to the RIA report that read: "While writing this story, the Ria.ru editorial board adhered to journalistic standards set by @aavst [Venediktov's Twitter handle] and Snob.ru. We promise never to use them again in our work."

It would not be the first time employees at RIA have found out about dramatic changes at their place of work from other media. In December 2013, the RIA Novosti news agency was liquidated by presidential decree and turned into Rossiya Segodnya, which came as a shock to many employees when the news was announced by other media outlets. RIA Novosti remains the name of the holding's Russian-language news service.

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Original url:

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