

The Mysterious Death of the Man Behind Putin's Media Machine

By [Peter Hobson](#)

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Mikhail Lesin

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For a man who once shaped Russia's media sector, remarkably little is known about the last months of Mikhail Lesin's life.

A macho, "hell-for-leather guy," who as press minister from 1999-2004 broke the hold of oligarchs on Russia's media and asserted state power over the airwaves, Lesin was found dead on Nov. 5 in a Washington hotel, aged 57. According to relatives quoted by Russian media, he died of a heart attack.

A year earlier, Lesin's meteoric career had suddenly ended when he abruptly quit as head of Gazprom Media, one of the country's largest state-owned media conglomerates.

People who knew Lesin described him as a fiercely ambitious man, with the nickname "bulldozer." As head of Gazprom Media from 2013 to early 2015, he gave the impression of someone who felt "all-powerful," Vladimir Pozner, a television journalist who had known Lesin since the end of the Soviet Union, told The Moscow Times.

His beginnings were less grand. In the final years of Communist rule, Pozner encountered Lesin when he was being employed to carry briefcase-sized mobile telephones for businessmen.

But he was driven. In the late 1980s he co-founded an advertising company and swiftly became a multimillionaire. Only a few years later, he helped mastermind the slogans of Boris Yeltsin's successful 1996 run for the presidency, launching his government and state media career.

Lesin was present at the creation of Russia's state-dominated media sector. As press minister he forced media magnate Vladimir Gusinsky to cede control of television station NTV while Gusinsky sat in a jail cell. In 2005, he helped create Russia Today, now RT, a television network that broadcasts Russia's point of view in multiple languages and aims to undermine Western news narratives. Afterward, he served as an adviser to the Kremlin.

Those moves shaped Russian media. Now, state controlled TV broadcasts the government's view, and Putin, after more than 15 years in power, has an approval rating of almost 90 percent.

Downfall

Most people contacted by The Moscow Times were wary of commenting on Lesin. But those who agreed to talk said he may have pushed too hard for power while at Gazprom Media, alienating powerful colleagues and falling out with Yury Kovalchuk, a close associate of President Vladimir Putin and a major shareholder in the company, from whom Lesin may have borrowed money.

In late 2014, Lesin picked a fight with Alexei Venediktov, the long-serving and well-connected editor of liberal radio station Echo Moskvyy, in which Gazprom Media has a majority stake. In a dispute over the firing of one of the station's journalists, Lesin was forced to back down.

The confrontation may have been the proximate cause of Lesin's resignation, which came shortly afterward. With the brawl around Ekho, "it all fell together," said one source familiar with the situation, who did not want to be named.

"One of the main reasons was that he owed a huge amount of money to Kovalchuk, which he supposedly didn't intend to pay back," the source said.

He also underestimated his rivals, said two other sources familiar with the matter. The heads of three of Russia's major TV channels complained to President Putin that Lesin had begun behaving as if he was their boss, as he had been while press minister.

Lesin said his exit from Gazprom Media was for family reasons.

Illness and Investigation

The outcome left Lesin out of the loop, possibly with some powerful enemies, and perhaps without the support of Putin.

It was a rare error for a man who "made very few mistakes" during his career, said Pozner.

By the time he left Gazprom Media, Lesin, a heavy smoker and drinker for much of his life, was ill. Lesin lost 30 kilograms after breaking his spine in an accident in 2012, Margarita Simonyan, the editor-in-chief of RT, wrote after his death. His back later became infected, forcing him to undergo a series of 13 operations that continued late into this year, she said.

In the U.S., meanwhile, Lesin's wealth was under scrutiny. In July 2014, a few months after U.S.-Russia relations were marred by Moscow's annexation of Crimea from Ukraine, Senator Roger Wicker requested a Justice Department investigation into whether Lesin had violated international anti-corruption and money-laundering rules.

Wicker said Lesin owned property worth \$28 million in Los Angeles, where his son, Anton Lessine, works in Hollywood and has produced films including the Brad Pitt feature "Fury" and "Fading Gigolo," starring Woody Allen. Lesin's daughter also lives in the U.S., where she works for RT.

It is unclear whether the Justice Department or the FBI began to probe Lesin's affairs. Both departments either declined to comment or did not respond. But Wicker's request has fed speculation about whether Lesin was in Washington to cut a deal with U.S. authorities — some say he was killed by enemies to silence him; others say his death was faked as part of a witness protection scheme to keep him safe.

People have also questioned why Lesin, who was known to live the high life of a multimillionaire, was staying at the comparatively un-luxurious, \$240-a-night Dupont Circle Hotel.

An investigation into the death by the Washington metropolitan police department is ongoing.

Lesin last year replied to Senator Wicker's accusations over his wealth, telling Forbes Russia that the properties in Los Angeles found by Wicker did not belong to him, but to his children.

He was worried for them, he said, adding, "I got used long ago to not being loved."

Contact the author at p.hobson@imedia.ru

Correction: A previous version of this story appeared to suggest that Simonyan wrote that Lesin was a heavy smoker and drinker. In fact, this was not included in her statement.

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