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Putin Ally Attempts to Silence Coverage, Ends Up Attracting More

Igor Sechin discovers the "Streisand effect."

By Eva Hartog

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Rosneft CEO Igor Sechin **Mikhail Metzel / TASS**

According to some Russian media, Igor Sechin has it all: beautiful wife, mansion,▣86-meter-long yacht.

What they didn't realise was just▣how much the tycoon would dislike reading about it.▣The head of Russia's largest state-controlled oil company Rosneft▣and one of Putin's closest associates, Sechin has taken to suing▣a number of independent news outlets for supposedly breaching▣his privacy.

On Monday, a Moscow district court ruled that the investigative▣magazine Novaya Gazeta should retract an article linking▣Sechin to an exclusive Dutch-made yacht. The magazine had▣used Instagram posts and geotagging to show the "St. Princess▣Olga" luxury vessel was

being used by his wife, Olga.

The ruling came less than a month after a court ordered the retraction of another article, this time in the Vedomosti business daily, which reported allegations that Sechin was building a lavish mansion near Moscow. In both cases, Sechin's legal team sued, and won, for libel, without having to prove the published information was false. "They didn't contradict any of the facts," says Sergei Sokolov, Novaya Gazeta's deputy editor. "And if they didn't contradict it, it means it's true."

Novaya Gazeta claims that, as head of a state company, Sechin's lifestyle is of public interest. His defense argues he is not a public figure and the reports breach his privacy. The court sided with Sechin. In the case of Vedomosti, the court even ordered the "destruction" of the entire issue from the paper's physical archive, saying the article had been written "for the sake of the public's idle interest."

"Of course we write to capture the public's interest," says Tatyana Lysova, Vedomosti's editor-in-chief. "We're a newspaper!"

Both Vedomosti and Novaya Gazeta will appeal the rulings, they told The Moscow Times.

Last month, the lawsuits took on an unprecedented turn, after Rosneft demanded no less than 3.1 billion rubles ($49 million) in compensation from the media outlet RBC and several of its journalists. RBC had written an article claiming Sechin asked the Kremlin to obstruct its stakeholder, and competitor, British Petroleum. Sechin's team sued for "reputational damages."

If the court rules in his favor, it would mean bankruptcy for the publication, says Yelizaveta Osetinskaya, RBC's former managing editor. Osetinskaya resigned after several of her colleagues at RBC were sacked shortly after prominent investigations into Putin's inner circle. She argues that since BP continues to be a shareholder in Rosneft, the claim does not stand up to scrutiny. The lawsuit seems to be designed to "punish RBC's independent editorial policy and send a clear signal to others," she told The Moscow Times in written comments from the United States, where she now lives.

Russia's independent journalism scene has long been subject to pressure. In the past decade, journalists have been harassed or even killed. Critical media outlets have often seen staff reshuffles or been forced to sell to more Kremlin-friendly buyers. Sechin's suing frenzy might be interpreted as falling into a new strategy of using the courts to mum investigative reports.

Immunity from scrutiny, previously reserved for Putin and his relatives, also seems to be extending to a wider circle of top Russian officials. "We are moving toward a situation of untouchable claimants," says media law expert Fyodor Kravchenko. Journalists will now think twice before writing about Sechin or Rosneft. "No one wants to take part in that kind of lottery," he says.

Ironically, Sechin's attempts to wipe the news slate clean has backfired, in a classic case of the Streisand effect whereby a hardhanded attempt to push certain information out of view has the opposite effect. As Russian outlets have covered the court cases, they have

reiterated the initial claims and in many cases provided links to the original articles online.

Readership of the offending Vedomosti article increased 42 percent after Sechin's claim, statistics seen by The Moscow Times showed. Traffic to Novaya Gazeta also increased, says editor Sokolov. "It was only an incentive for everyone who hadn't read the article, to do so," he says.

Type in the oil tycoon's surname in Google and the search engine prompts: Wife. Yacht. Salary. Sechin can sue but the public's "idle" interest in those three topics is unlikely to go away.

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