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Court Rules RBC Must Pay Over $6,000 in Damages to Rosneft in Landmark Media Case

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Alexander Shcherbak / TASS

The Moscow Arbitration Court ruled on Monday that the RBC media company must pay 390 thousand rubles ($6,375) in damages to Rosneft. It must also publish a retraction of an article it wrote on the state-controlled oil company's director, Igor Sechin.

Rosneft took RBC to court for libel after its newspaper reported in April that Sechin, a close associate of President Vladimir Putin, had asked the Russian government to protect his company from its minority shareholder, the BP oil company.

At the time of the article's publication, Russia was trying to privatize a 19.5 percent share of Rosneft. According to RBC, Sechin asked the authorities to require the potential buyers of the stake not to cooperate with BP, to prevent the British oil giant from acquiring more control over the company. RBC's reporting was based upon anonymous sources.

Rosneft alleged that the report harmed the company's reputation and demanded roughly $49 million in damages. The claim threatened to bankrupt both RBC and the individual journalists who had written the controversial article.

The loss of RBC, known for hard-hitting investigations into Russia's political and business elite, would also be a major blow to press freedom in Russia.

Rosneft was widely expected to win the case, as Sechin had reportedly never lost a lawsuit before. Nevertheless, the outcome can be considered a compromise, with the damages awarded to Rosneft significantly lower than demanded.

This means RBC will be able to continue its reporting, although some argue the widely publicized case has set a precedent for companies to take journalists to court over damages allegedly incurred from their reporting.

RBC has ten days to fulfill the court's ruling and pay the 390 thousand rubles. One of the journalists involved in the case, Timofei Dzyadko, has stated that he will appeal the court's decision. RBC has not yet formally commented on the ruling.

In the last several months, Rosneft CEO Sechin has successfully sued independent newspapers Novaya Gazeta and Vedomosti over articles he claimed had breached his privacy.

Read more: RBC says BP is complicit in the destruction of Russia's free press.

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