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Russian News Outlet RBC Confirms Sale Amid Fears of Kremlin Censorship Crackdown

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A man walks towards the RBC media group office building in Moscow. **Maxim Zmeyev / Reuters**

Negations are underway to sell Russia's independent RBC media outlet, company sources have confirmed.

RBC journalists were told on Wednesday that the outlet's current owner, business tycoon Mikhail Prokhorov, will sell the holding.

Potential buyers include oligarch Grigory Berezkin, Russia's Vedomosti newspaper reported. Berezkin, who already owns the Komsomolskaya Pravda and Metro newspapers, is rumored to offer up to $50 million to add RBC to his business empire.

If Berezkin secures the deal, then Alexei Abakumov, a former employee of the Russian state broadcast group, stands as a prime candidate to manage the holding. Abakumov is also the candidate of choice for Russia's presidential administration, a source close to RBC told

Vedomosti.

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The news has ignited speculation that Prokhorov could have been forced to sell RBC due to Kremlin pressure.

Three of the outlet's top editors left the publication in May 2016 amid allegations that the outlet's investigative reporting on the Panama Papers scandal had angered government officials.

In an interview with the Financial Times newspaper, former chief editor Yelizaveta Osetinskaya compared RBC's work to "waving a red rag" at the Kremlin.

Reporting that drew Kremlin ire include articles on the wealth of President Vladimir Putin's alleged family members and a Black Sea mansion dubbed "Putin's Palace."

RBC also incurred the wrath of oligarch and Putin ally Igor Sechin, who sued the outlet for libel in 2016.

The media company was forced to pay 390 thousand rubles ($6,375) in damages to Rosneft after alleging that Sechin had asked the Russian government to protect his company from its minority shareholder, the BP oil company.

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The Kremlin has denied interfering in the RBC sale, or putting pressure on Prokhorov.

"[The government[has no right to interfere in media policy," said Presidential Spokesperson Dmitry Peskov on Wednesday. "Any sale is a private matter for the owner."

RBC's monthly audience was an estimated 24.6 million people as of late 2016, according to data from research company Mediascope.

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