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Leading Russian Paper's New Editor Deletes Column Criticizing Rosneft Head

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Igor Sechin, 59, has worked with President Vladimir Putin since the 1990s. **kremlin.ru**

The chief editor of Russia's leading business newspaper Vedomosti has deleted a column critical of Igor Sechin, the head of the state-controlled oil giant Rosneft, three weeks after his controversial hiring at the outlet.

The move is acting editor-in-chief Andrei Shmarov's second decision to alter or delete an article related to Rosneft since Vedomosti's new owners announced the reshuffle on March 23. After changing a headline on Russia's majority stake in Rosneft on March 30, Shmarov deleted a column Sunday that criticizes Sechin for "senseless" spending to prop up sanctions-hit Venezuela.

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"I tried to dissuade Shmarov, but he said it was his decision as editor-in-chief," Maxim Tovkaylo, the head editor of Vedomosti's website, told The Bell business outlet.

Deputy chief editor Alexander Gubsky wrote that he had restored access to the column, which has since been deleted a second time and remains inaccessible as of Monday afternoon.

"Shmarov personally removed the column," wrote its author Konstantin Sonin, a professor at the University of Chicago Harris School of Public Policy Studies and at the Higher School of Economics in Moscow.

Shmarov allegedly told staff that Sonin's column could result in legal liability and that the decision to delete it came after a phone call from Rosneft spokesman Mikhail Leontiyev, the Open Media news website cited an unnamed Vedomosti employee as saying.

Leontiyev said "it's absurd" to seek comment from him. Shmarov declined to comment on the story to multiple publications.

The Bell previously linked Shmarov's hiring to the Rosneft spokesman.

Shmarov's hiring as acting editor-in-chief has sparked backlash within Vedomosti's ranks and further upset Russia's heavily regulated media landscape. Five deputy editors appealed to Vedomosti's new owners to appoint a different chief editor on March 31.

The announcement of the independent newspaper's sale to publisher Konstantin Zyatkov and businessman Alexei Golubovich late last month similarly drew concern among the paper's staffers, with former editor-in-chief Tatiana Lysova describing the two buyers as "alien to Vedomosti's rules and ideals."

Shmarov previously founded the Kremlin-linked Expert magazine and served as CEO of the Snob news website and editor-in-chief of the Project 42 educational portal.

Sechin, 59, has worked with President Vladimir Putin since the 1990s. He was deputy head of the presidential administration from 1999 until 2008, when he was appointed deputy prime minister.

"I think this decision [to delete the Sechin column] will lead to a mass exodus of subscribers, which will affect the newspaper's financial performance," Tovkaylo was quoted as saying.

"I've warned Shmarov about this," the Vedomosti.ru editor-in-chief told The Bell.

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