The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Russia's VK Appoints Son of Kremlin Insider as New CEO

Appointment raises fears of more government influence over the social media platform.

December 13, 2021

Vladimir Kiriyenko has been appointed the new CEO of VK, which controls Russia's largest social network. **Mikhail Dzhaparidze / TASS**

Russia's top social media platform, VKontakte, has appointed the son of an influential Kremlin insider as its new chief executive, the company announced Monday.

Vladimir Kiriyenko —whose father Sergei Kiriyenko is first deputy chief of staff in the Presidential Administration — will become the CEO of VK Group, which controls VKontakte and a number of other internet businesses, "effective immediately."

The move follows a controversial takeover of VK by companies affiliated with state-owned gas giant Gazprom, in what commentators said was a sign of the Kremlin tightening its grip over the important social media network.

VKontakte, often dubbed "Russia's Facebook," is Russia's most popular social media platform, with almost 100 million monthly users.

Related article: Gazprom Gains Control of Russia's Top Social Network

Vladimir Kiriyenko was formerly vice president at Rostelecom, a state-run telecommunications firm. His father, Sergei Kiriyenko, is one of the most influential figures in Russian politics — a former prime minister who now has sweeping authority and control over the country's domestic policy. He has been under EU and U.K. sanctions since 2020 over the poisoning of Kremlin critic Alexei Navalny last year, and oversaw last year's constitutional reform referendum which provided the legal basis for President Vladimir Putin to potentially stay in power until 2036.

"I am excited to be joining VK as its CEO," Vladimir Kiriyenko said in a statement Monday.

"The company will continue to unlock new markets and test new products as we focus on expanding our reach and user engagement. The company has a powerful platform for further growth, and realizing its full potential as a business, as an employer and a public company is a challenge I am very much looking forward to."

His appointment was approved unanimously by VK's board and he will take office immediately, VK said Monday.

Shares in VK have tumbled since the new ownership structure took hold and lurched lower again Monday with the announcement of Kiriyenko's appointment. The stock price slipped 5% in trading in Moscow to take combined losses over the last two weeks to 30% — or $1.4 billion in lost market capitalization.

Even before last week's takeover, the social network had been seen as close to the Russian government and critics accused the company of readily sharing user data with Russia's security services. It was founded by Russian entrepreneur Pavel Durov, who sold it in 2014, citing pressure from the FSB.

The deal follows years of the Kremlin gradually seeking to increase control over the Russian internet, which had remained a relatively free space even as traditional media outlets fell under the control of the state or oligarchs seen as close to Putin.

Original url:
https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2021/12/13/russias-vk-appoints-son-of-kremlin-insider-as-new-ceo-a75802