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Wildberries CEO Announces Successful Merger With Russ Group Following Dispute

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Tatyana Kim. **Yevgeny Reutov / Roscongress Photobank**

Wildberries, Russia's largest online retailer, has successfully merged with the outdoor advertising firm Russ Group, CEO Tatyana Kim announced Tuesday, following a bitter feud with her co-founder and ex-husband.

Wildberries and Russ Group initially revealed plans to merge in June, creating a new digital trading platform called RWB. Reports at the time said Kim and Russ Group's Robert Mirzoyan presented the project to President Vladimir Putin as potentially the "world's largest ruble-based digital banking network and payment system" that could bypass SWIFT and rival Amazon and Google's parent company Alphabet.

"I'm happy to announce that the restructuring of our joint company is complete, and we're now ready for new projects," Kim, Russia's wealthiest woman, said in a video posted on her Telegram channel.

Analysts have described the merger as unbalanced, given Wildberries' significant size advantage. Wildberries generated 538.7 billion rubles ($2.7 billion) in revenue last year, compared to Russ Group's 27.9 billion rubles ($300 million).

Independent business news outlet The Bell suggested the merger could be part of Russia's wartime redistribution of assets, benefiting business figures linked to the Kremlin.

Related article: Russia's Violent 1990s Re-Erupted With Wildberries Shootout

Russian media reported that the merger was signed off by Putin's cabinet and overseen by Deputy Chief of Staff Maxim Oreshkin, with Forbes Russia uncovering a letter in which Putin instructed Oreshkin to support the deal.

Kim's ex-husband and Wildberries co-founder Vladislav Bakalchuk opposed the merger, calling it a "hostile takeover" by Russ Group and enlisting the help of Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov. Kim announced her divorce from Bakalchuk around the same time Kadyrov vowed to "return" her to the family and block the merger.

Tensions over the business merger escalated last month when Bakalchuk led a group of men to Wildberries' Moscow headquarters and allegedly tried to force their way into the building, resulting in a shootout that left two security guards dead. Multiple felony charges, including murder, were filed against Bakalchuk and several others involved in the incident.

Bakalchuk was later released from police custody and returned home — a surprising development, as legal experts say it is nearly impossible for a murder suspect to be released on bail. The exact circumstances of his release are still unknown, though some have speculated that he received help from Kadyrov.

In her video statement Tuesday, Kim said that Russian law enforcement officials were "on our side" and that "the double murder will not go unpunished." She also mentioned that her employees had been receiving suspicious calls and messages since the merger dispute began.

"Don't be afraid of anything, I'll guarantee your safety," Kim said.

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