

## Ekho Shake-Up Stirs Censorship Fears

By [Nikolaus von Twickel](#)

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Alexei Venediktov says he is resigning in protest over a board shake-up. **Igor Tabakov**

The announcement on Tuesday of a boardroom shake-up in the country's most prominent opposition radio station and a decision to nix a critical television talk show has raised fresh concerns over media freedom.

Alexei Venediktov, editor of Ekho Moskvy radio, said he and his deputy Vladimir Varfolomeyev will resign in protest from the board of directors after the station's majority owner Gazprom Media demanded the ouster of two other independent board members.

The two directors, liberal economist Yevgeny Yasin and lawyer Alexander Makovsky, will also resign, meaning that four of the board's nine members will be replaced when shareholders elect a new body on March 29.

In a [statement](#) posted on Ekho Moskvy's website, Venediktov said the ouster of Yasin and Makovsky was unfair.

But he added that he had already reached an agreement with Gazprom Media to replace them with Svyazinvest CEO Vadim Semyonov and Yevgeny Trubin, a former head of the Lenizdat publishing house.

Venediktov also suggested that the station's executive director Yury Fedutinov would take his and Varfolomeyev's seats.

"Let him slave away," he [wrote](#) on Twitter.

It remained unclear Tuesday how exactly the new board would look, but Venediktov said that while the body has no say over editorial content, the reshuffle will increase Gazprom Media's sway over the radio station.

"It will be easier to fire the editor-in-chief," he said on air, explaining that the majority shareholder — a subsidiary of state-owned energy giant Gazprom — will get extra rights to remove the editor.

Gazprom Media owns 66 percent of Ekho Moskvyy, with the remaining 34 percent held by the radio station's staff.

Meanwhile, Russian MTV pulled a new talk show in which members of the country's radical opposition had been given a voice.

Called "Gosdep," or "State Department," the show was aired for the first time last week, presented by leading socialite Ksenia Sobchak, the daughter of former St. Petersburg Mayor Anatoly Sobchak.

"Today my show was taken off the air without any explanation given. We planned to record Navalny on Friday," Sobchak [wrote](#) on her Twitter, referring to opposition blogger and activist Alexei Navalny.

MTV did not comment Tuesday, but a staff member confirmed to The Moscow Times on condition of anonymity that the show had been canceled. She refused to elaborate.

Sobchak later said that the station had told her that young people were not interested in politics.

"How can this be when the first edition reached [an audience] double the channel's average?" she said.

The news triggered fears that the government was trying to silence critical media outlets weeks before the March 4 presidential election. Prime Minister Vladimir Putin, who is seeking to return to the Kremlin for a third time, lashed out at Venediktov last month, accusing Ekho Moskvyy of "pouring diarrhea at him day in and day out."

"This could be a first step to oust Venediktov," political analyst Vladimir Pribylovsky told The Moscow Times, referring to the boardroom dispute.

Venediktov said that while he saw boardroom demands as an "element of political pressure," there would be no changes to Ekho Moskvyy's coverage, which has traditionally been highly

critical of the government since its inception in 1990.

He [said](#) on Twitter that he was resigning voluntarily from the board and that the issue of his resignation as editor "was never raised."

He also pointed out that Gazprom Media had first issued its demands on Dec. 30, more than two weeks before the prime minister's Jan. 18 attack. However, Venediktov also suggested that Putin's outburst had been a signal in his ongoing negotiations with the holding.

"The thing is that when Putin started to publicly criticize the station, many zealous officials took this as an order to attack," he said, adding that the interpretation was wrong.

"Putin did not issue such an order," he said.

Putin's spokesman Dmitry Peskov denied Tuesday that the prime minister had anything to do with the conflict.

"I categorically say no," he was quoted as saying by Interfax.

Gazprom Media said Tuesday that it was merely streamlining corporate policy.

"Our standards stipulate that all affiliate companies must have business managers on their boards," the holding said in a statement carried by national news agencies.

The media holding has been in control of the station since 2001. Observers have credited the station's continued independence to Venediktov's negotiating skills and Gazprom Media's unwillingness to repeat its experience with television channel NTV.

When Gazprom Media took over the country's biggest private television station in 2001, staff and supporters held protests on the street.

Pribylovsky said any attempt to bring Ekho Moskvyy into line now would trigger even greater protests.

The country has seen unprecedented mass rallies against the government since the December State Duma elections were followed by accusations of widespread vote-rigging.

Ekho Moskvyy's management also denied reports that the boardroom conflict was triggered by financial difficulties. Fedutinov, the executive director, told RIA-Novosti that the station's profit in 2011 was 34 million rubles (\$1.1 million).

The news of Ekho Moskvyy's troubles also convinced some prominent businessmen to offer help for the station. Writing on his [blog](#), billionaire presidential candidate Mikhail Prokhorov offered the stations' journalists credit to buy back Gazprom Media's majority share.

A similar offer was made by Natalya Sindeyeva, the owner of the Dozhd online TV channel.

But Venediktov said Gazprom Media would hardly agree to sell.

"We have been trying a buyout for 10 years — to no avail," he [told](#) Sindeyeva on Twitter.

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