

Media Landscape Shifts With Putin's Return

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NTV journalist Svetlana Kuritsyna, better known as Sveta from Ivanovo, interviewing Liberal Democratic Party leader Vladimir Zhirinovskiy.

If prime-time television is any indicator, the country's media landscape is undergoing a major shakeup.

Last weekend, Svetlana Kuritsina, a provincial activist for a pro-Kremlin youth organization, [debuted](#) on NTV national television with her own show, “Luch Sveta,” or “Ray of Light.” During the half-hour road show, the somewhat inarticulate 19-year-old was shown discussing how she could use her overdeveloped bust for her career.

Kuritsina, better known as “Sveta from Ivanovo,” became an Internet sensation last winter after a video surfaced of her rambling about how Russians “have become more better dressed” under Vladimir Putin. Her Saturday night debut was watched by 357,900 viewers, more than any other television show that evening, [Izvestia reported](#).

Kuritsina's rise has been mirrored by Ksenia Sobchak's fall.

Sobchak, an outspoken television host and opposition activist, said Monday that Muz-TV had rejected her for an upcoming modeling show that she has hosted in the past. “The CEO murmured something about not being in the format,” she [wrote](#) on Twitter.

Muz-TV, the Russian equivalent of MTV, subsequently confirmed that the show, “Top Model, Russian-Style,” would be cast in an entirely new format.

The show was the last national venue for Sobchak, who has been sidelined by the major channels since she publicly supported the protest movement this winter. The daughter of the late St. Petersburg Mayor Anatoly Sobchak, President Putin’s former mentor, is now largely confined to the Dozhd online television channel.

Why is “Sveta from Ivanovo’s” star rising while Ksenia Sobchak can’t get a job on national television? The answer, pundits say, can be seen by stepping back to see a flurry of departures, closures and cutbacks that have taken place in the media industry in the two months since President Vladimir Putin returned to the Kremlin.

Whether some or all of the changes are connected to Putin and a possible media crackdown is anybody’s guess. But some say there are troubling signs that the state is exerting new pressure on media outlets.

“In the current political environment, it is very tough to withstand pressure to close risky, money-losing outlets,” said Pavel Sheremet, a freelance television and newspaper reporter who recently left Kommersant after three years.

Kommersant is a case in point. The Kommersant holding company [closed](#) Kommersant TV, an ambitious online television project, in June, ending a turbulent month that began with the exit of CEO Demyan Kudryavtsev and also saw the closure of the Russian-language version of the French fashion quarterly Citizen K., which had published stories about this winter's protest movement.

The decisions were described by the company as business-motivated, and new Kommersant holding CEO Dmitry Sergeyev has said the amount of Kommersant TV’s daily losses was enough “to buy yourself a good German car.”

The ousted CEO himself has said that his exit was driven by new business priorities and that there was “no need to seek a direct political connection.”

But many believe that the company’s billionaire owner, Alisher Usmanov, pushed for the decisions under pressure from the Kremlin.

Sheremet, the former Kommersant reporter, said Usmanov has been on alert since December, when Kommersant-Vlast magazine editor Maxim Kovalsky was fired after publishing a photo that insulted Putin.

Sheremet explained that Usmanov was more vulnerable than some other media magnates because of his broad exposure to the country's economy. The Uzbek-born owner of mining and metals conglomerate Metalloinvest is the country's richest man, with an \$18 billion

fortune, according to Forbes magazine.

Konstantin von Eggert, a political commentator for Kommersant FM radio, said the media industry was undergoing a rollback to the days before Dmitry Medvedev's presidency. "There is a directive to move back to 2007," he said by telephone.

Meanwhile, NTV has seen a string of resignations, the latest being host Sergei Minayev and producer Alexander Urzhanov.

Urzhanov said earlier this month that he resigned after receiving a significant pay cut for criticizing an anti-opposition feature twice aired by the channel in March. In a [statement](#) on Facebook, he complained that NTV had "almost completely been cleansed" of people close to Nikolai Kartoziya, a senior producer whose resignation in January prompted speculation that NTV's liberal staff was being squeezed out.

While Minayev refused to say why he was ending his "Honest Monday" show, observers agreed that his exit was another blow to the liberals within the channel.

Although NTV was infamously taken over by state-controlled Gazprom-Media in 2001, its news programs have remained relatively independent compared to the big state-run channels Channel One and Russia 1.

Experts said they expected more upheavals to hit state television, which is the prime source of political information for much of the country's population.

Last week, government spokeswoman Natalya Timakova confirmed that the overall budget for state-owned media would be slashed by 5 percent.

The reduction would shave 3.75 billion rubles (\$115 million) off the current 75 billion rubles (\$2.3 billion) in state subsidies, according to Gazeta.ru.

The decision could be the reason for cuts at RIA-Novosti, the country's biggest state news agency, which currently gets an annual subsidy of 2.6 billion rubles from the state, the report [said](#).

RIA-Novosti is planning to close Russia Profile, an online magazine initially launched as a monthly print edition together with The Moscow Times, and shift its staff and archives to RIA's English site, a RIA spokesman said in an e-mailed reply to questions.

The agency will turn the English-language Moscow News, currently published twice a week, into a weekly, and reduce its number of pages by 25 percent, according to its editor, Tim Wall.

Earlier this month, RIA denied reports that it was [planning to close](#) the print edition of the Russian-language daily Moskovskiye Novosti.

Analysts linked the state media budget cuts to the planned opening of a public television station. Alexei Mukhin, an analyst with the Center for Political Information, a think tank, said that the Finance Ministry would never authorize extra money for the planned television station. "This will mean that money has to go from one pocket to another," he said.

Putin last week appointed television veteran Anatoly Lysenko, 75, to head a 25-member board for the new channel.

Much remains unclear about the channel, which is supposed to be neither state-run nor commercial and is seen as Prime Minister Medvedev's brainchild. Medvedev first suggested it during his presidency and has subsequently advocated selling off state media. Plans, however, to set it up on the basis of either City Hall's TV Center or the Defense Ministry's Zvezda channel have been met with stiff resistance from both organizations, which do not want to lose their channels, Sheremet said.

But not all state media organizations need to be thrifty. RT, the English-language TV channel formerly known as Russia Today, is planning to open a huge new studio in the city's eastern outskirts by the end of the year, the channel's editor, Margarita Simonyan, [said](#) on her blog.

RT spokeswoman Alina Mikhaleva confirmed by e-mail that all the channel's staff would eventually move to the new studio, adding that she could not specify the cost before the building was finished.

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