

Russian Media Group Ousts Chief Executive

*Removal Follows Criticism
By Putin About Coverage
Of October Hostage Crisis*

By GUY CHAZAN

MOSCOW—American financier Boris Jordan has been sacked as head of a state-controlled Russian media conglomerate, in a move that could signal a Kremlin crackdown on the press in the run-up to elections later this year.

Gazprom-Media, a subsidiary of OAO Gazprom that manages the gas monopoly's media assets, fired Mr. Jordan as its chief executive at a board meeting last week. He will stay on as director-general of NTV, Gazprom-Media's flagship television channel, though he said he expects to be fired from that post, too.

Mr. Jordan's position had been in doubt since President Vladimir Putin publicly criticized NTV for its coverage of October's hostage crisis, when Chechen gunmen seized 800 people in a Moscow theater. Nearly 130 of the hostages died, most from the effects of knockout gas pumped into the theater before it was stormed by Russian special forces.

At a Kremlin meeting with media executives during November, to which Mr. Jordan wasn't invited, Mr. Putin implicitly accused NTV of endangering the hostages' lives by broadcasting live footage of the assault, a charge the channel denied. Mr. Putin accused unnamed foreigners of using "the blood of Russian citizens" to boost their ratings—a remark widely perceived as a swipe at Mr. Jordan and one of NTV's top presenters, Savik Shuster, who is a Canadian citizen.

A spokesman for the U.S. State Department, Richard Boucher, said the U.S. would be "very much concerned" if the change of management at NTV presaged a change in its editorial independence. He said reports that the government had influenced Mr. Jordan's dismissal would, if true, "constitute a serious blow to Russia's independent media."

Once the only national TV network

not owned or controlled by the state, NTV has long been considered a bellwether for press freedom in Russia.

Its previous owner, media tycoon Vladimir Gusinsky, was detained briefly on fraud charges in 2000, shortly after Mr. Putin became president. He later went into exile, and in April 2001 state-run Gazprom seized control of NTV and Mr. Gusinsky's other media holdings in a boardroom coup.

A former investment banker of Russian-émigré stock, the American-born Mr. Jordan was vilified by liberals when he took the job of NTV's new director-general after the Gazprom takeover. Dozens of correspondents left the channel rather than work with him.

But he has won praise for turning around the channel's finances and making good on a promise to preserve its editorial independence. NTV has retained its hard-hitting reputation, with recent reports focusing on corruption and brutality in the Russian army and a nationwide energy crisis that has left many freezing in their homes.



Boris Jordan

Gazprom-Media's new chief, Alexander Dybal, said

Mr. Jordan was dismissed due to differences over "corporate management and business-development strategy."

But Mr. Jordan suggested his removal was part of a Kremlin plan to impose tighter control on the media as Russia gears up for parliamentary and presidential elections.

"One can only speculate that there is an election coming up at the end of the year and NTV takes a very independent position on these things," he said.

Liberal lawmakers agreed that Mr. Jordan's sacking smacked of censorship. "People in the government think the best way to solve a problem is to stop anyone reporting it," said parliamentary deputy Irina Khakamada.