

NTV Backlash Extended to Advertiser

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The  Moscow Times

Procter & Gamble, the world's largest consumer-products company, is facing a boycott of its products by opponents of Prime Minister Vladimir Putin for supporting state-run NTV television through advertising.

NTV broadcast a documentary film called "Anatomy of Protest" on March 15 that accused opposition groups of paying people to attend their rallies.

The film sparked demonstrations outside the station's broadcasting center in Moscow and calls from prominent bloggers to boycott the channel and its advertisers' products.

P&G, the largest advertiser in Russia, said in an e-mailed statement Tuesday that while respecting the rights of citizens to express their opinions, it rejects any attempt to make the company an "instrument" in a political war.

P&G accounted for 5.2 percent of all ad spending in Russia last year, according to Moscow-based research group TNS Media Intelligence.

The boycott campaign marks a new tactic for Russian opposition forces struggling to regain

momentum.

They brought tens of thousands of people to the streets to protest parliamentary voting in December and the presidential ballot March 4 that will put the former president back in the Kremlin.

"P&G doesn't make any exclusive products, so we can easily substitute them with brands of their competitors," said Alexander Plushchev, an opposition activist and journalist, in a blog post.

The Cincinnati-based company, whose brands range from Gillette razors to Tide detergent and Pringles chips, had sales last year of \$82.6 billion, about 14 percent of which came from Central and Eastern Europe, the Middle East and Africa, according to the company's website.

"Advertising is a means of bringing information about our goods to a wide range of consumers through all communication channels," P&G said in the statement. "The assessment of contents of TV programs broadcast by licensed TV channels is beyond an advertiser's competence."

Andrei Lyan, a P&G spokesman in Moscow, declined to disclose how much the company spends each year on advertising on NTV, saying the information is confidential.

Fyodor Bogatyryov, a member of Solidarity, which has organized a series of anti-Putin rallies, said Monday that he is suing NTV to demand a retraction to the claim that organizers paid protesters to attend rallies.

The channel's owner, Gazprom-Media, hit back at the campaign against it, which it said included hacker attacks that paralyzed the NTV website.

"These attacks are aimed against democratic mechanisms, social discussion and a free exchange of views among members of society," Gazprom-Media CEO Nikolai Senkevich said in a statement on the company's website.

Discontent is growing among Russia's urban middle class, which is increasingly fed up with corruption and barriers to unhampered participation in the political process, according to pollsters.

Putin, 59, has been in power for 12 years and could stay at the helm another 12 if he runs again in 2018. That would make him the longest-serving ruler since dictator Josef Stalin.

The proportion of Russians with at least \$500 of monthly income rose to about 50 percent last year from less than 10 percent in 2004, according to Citigroup Inc.

That helped drive up retail sales by an annual average of 11 percent in the decade through last year, attracting retailers such as Ikea and Inditex.

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