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At Akado, CNN Fades and Returns

By Jennifer Rankin

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Akado said TV channels must apply to state authorities for permission for each provider that hosts them. **Maxim Stulov**

It was a farce worthy of the comedy channel.

On Thursday morning, one of Russia's biggest Internet and cable TV providers said that it had dropped the BBC and CNN indefinitely, setting off a flurry of speculation about censorship.

But by early evening, the foreign channels were back on the company's network, leaving lingering suspicions that the incident had been more than a fizzle in transmission.

News emerged that Akado, Russia's sixth-largest cable company according to Gazeta.ru, would no longer carry three foreign channels, the BBC, CNN and Bloomberg News, for its half-a-million subscribers, after an Interfax employee and Akado subscriber called to complain.

An Akado employee in the call center, Sergei Fyodorov, told Interfax that from July 10 the

three channels would no longer be available for Akado customers for “reasons unrelated to the company.” The news was later reported in other Russian media.

Coming on the heels of proposals to label some NGOs “foreign agents,” to create a blacklist of banned Internet sites, and for tougher punishment for defamation, the report instantly sparked fears of censorship.

A sardonic tag on Twitter, “Thanks for that, Putin,” came back into use. Another Twitter user described the news with the exclamation “Curtain!” in an apparent reference to the iron one.

“I hope it's not because of my interview,” tweeted Ksenia Sobchak, the opposition activist and media personality, referring to her appearance on CNN last month. In February, MTV pulled Sobchak's political talk show “GosDep,” apparently after she invited opposition leader Alexei Navalny to appear.

On Thursday evening, “CNN and BBC” was a trending topic on Twitter in Russia.

An Akado spokesperson told The Moscow Times by email Thursday afternoon that Bloomberg, CNN and BBC had been dropped because the channels lacked the licensing documents for transmission on cable networks required under Russian law.

TV channels must apply to state authorities for permission for every provider that hosts them, the spokesman said, adding that it was not possible to say when the channels would be back.

The company had warned the TV channels twice that failure to obtain the licenses would mean that they could no longer be aired by Akado, he said.

The explanation puzzled media experts.

“You need a license to use some waves, and this is not the case for companies that are re-distributed by Russian cable providers,” said Anton Nossik, a prominent blogger who is also an Akado customer, in an interview by phone.

By mid-afternoon, Akado's top brass seemed to order an about-turn, amid questioning on the blogosphere.

“The company has received the necessary confirmation from CNN, the BBC and Bloomberg that allows us to restore transmission on Akado's networks,” Sergei Nazarov, a vice president of the company, said in a statement. He added that these companies still had to resolve their license issues.

Bloomberg Television commercial director Lindsey Oliver said the company was aware of the license requirements and is taking the necessary steps to obtain one. Oliver said Bloomberg remained available to Russian viewers on satellite provider NTV-Plus.

A BBC spokesperson said service on Akado was currently being restored. A spokesperson for CNN had not responded to a request for comment by press time.

An Akado customer told The Moscow Times that the channels were working Thursday evening. The customer said he was not told the reason for the outage when he called to

complain.

Vladimir Pikov, a spokesman for communications regulator Federal Mass Media Inspection Service, said the agency was checking the facts in the case and preparing a statement.

Other cable companies appeared to still be offering foreign channels, although this was disputed by one customer.

Campbell Bethwaite of Moscow Suites, a company that manages 25 serviced apartments for short-term rent, said Akado, MTS's Stream cable service and most of the other providers they work with had dropped the channels, making state-owned Russia Today the only English-language news channel available.

The eight-hour switch-off was about more than one company and its disgruntled customers, Nossik said.

“We are now in a period of inexplicable shifts of opinion,” said Nossik. “People are in general disorientated. They try to read signals, they try to send signals.”

As an example, he cited the Duma vote yesterday in favor of making defamation a criminal offense, just six months after former President Dmitry Medvedev removed it from the Criminal Code.

Nossik speculated that a communications official had tried to interpret the needs of the moment and grab attention from above. “It is obviously someone who wanted to prove himself as a big patriot and defender of the motherland.”

“It fits with the general trend of paranoia, so [President] Putin should be pleased with the further curbing of potential enemies,” he said.

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