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Defense Ministry Wants to Keep TV Channel

By Alexander Bratersky

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Defense Minister Serdyukov, pictured here with then-President Medvedev, said his ministry had invested too much in the Zvezda channel to relinquish control over it. **Denis Grishkin**

The Defense Ministry does not want to honor an April presidential order to turn its Zvezda television channel into a public station.

In a recent letter to Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev, who made the order while president, Defense Minister Anatoly Serdyukov said the ministry had invested too much in the channel to relinquish control over it.

The ministry has pumped 4.2 billion rubles ($130 million) of state funding and $10 million of private funding into the channel, according to figures provided by the firm, Kommersant reported.

A Zvezda spokeswoman declined to discuss the letter, saying only: "It was not written by us."

Deputy Communications and Press Minister Alexei Volin said his ministry is negotiating with the Defense Ministry to facilitate the transfer.

The creation of a public television station was part of Medvedev's reforms to appease the public following anti-Kremlin protests in December. The new station, to be headed by renowned broadcaster Anatoly Lysenko, was scheduled to go on air next year.

Established in 2005 partially to boost the popularity of then-Defense Minister Sergei Ivanov, who was considered a possible successor to Vladimir Putin, Zvezda later became a mainstream channel with some military-oriented programming.

"They weren't trying to turn it into a military mouthpiece — that would have been a complete failure," said Alexander Golts, an armed forces analyst at Ekho Moskvy radio.

But, he added, "the military wants to have a channel with which it can maintain influence."

By writing the letter, Serdyukov, a minister who according to the Constitution answers directly to the president, is "showing disdain" toward Medvedev, Golts said.

Medvedev was recently insulted by a number of former senior officials, including former General Yury Baluyevsky, over his handling of the brief Russia-Georgia war in 2008.

Baluyevsky, who had retired several months before the August 2008 conflict, said in a video released last week on YouTube that Medvedev acted only after a "push" from Putin.

The film is titled "The Lost Day of the War" (Ёоте≥янный день войны).

With Medvedev's political influence declining, his idea for a public television station could be "diluted," Golts said.

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