

Public TV Chief Promises Unbiased Coverage

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Lysenko acknowledged that the public TV channel, a brainchild of Dmitry Medvedev's presidency, would face severe financial difficulties in its first year.

The head of Russia's first public television channel said Thursday that its coverage would be free from political bias but also would not become a voice for the opposition.

Anatoly Lysenko also acknowledged that the channel, a brainchild of Dmitry Medvedev's presidency, would face severe financial difficulties in the first year after its creation in May.

"You want us to give you the menu, but we don't know how much we will have in our pockets," Lysenko told reporters.

The channel, Public Television, was established under a decree signed by Medvedev in September 2011 and is to operate under a special endowment. But its initial financing is coming from a government grant of 1.5 billion rubles (\$48 million) and a loan of 600 million

rubles (\$19.5 million) from state-owned Vneshekonombank, which it has to return in March with interest.

Responding to early criticism of possible pro-government bias, Lysenko said he didn't see government financing as a tool to influence the channel's editorial policy.

"The budget money is not the money of Medvedev or Putin. It is public money," he said.

He said the channel would maintain a neutral stance in its reporting.

"The authorities might not be pleased that we will not please them, and the opposition might be saddened that we won't attack the authorities," said Lysenko, a seasoned journalist and a pioneer of glasnost-era Soviet television.

Speaking afterward in an interview, he said the channel's biggest challenge would be reporting on racially tinged issues.

"This is one of the most explosive topics, and you need the hand of a surgeon to address them," he said.

Mikhail Ostrovsky, head of the channel's supervisory council and a former senior presidential administration official, said the channel might face a deficit up to 500 million rubles (\$16.2 million) next year.

Medvedev had hoped that Public Television would replace Zvezda, a channel run by the Defense Ministry, but the plan collapsed under opposition from Defense Minister Anatoly Serdyukov, who answers directly to President Vladimir Putin. Zvezda, however, did lose its federal subsidy of 1.5 billion rubles to Public Television.

Ostrovsky said Public Television will at first be carried on cable television but later will be available in digital television packages that also include national terrestrial television channels like Channel One and Rossia 1.

Most of the country will be able to watch the channel by the end of next year, Andrei Romanchenko, head of the state-run Russian Radio and Television Network, which oversees digital television channel development, told reporters earlier this week.

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