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'Optimistic' Channel Gets a Sobering Makeover

By Eradzh Nidoev

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Dozhd gained popularity by covering rallies, like the one on Dec. 24, 2011. **Igor Tabakov**

More than a year after the start of marches against allegedly rigged Duma elections, the burning caldron that was the Russian protest movement cooled to a gentle bubbling, while its participants went back to their usual temperate lives.

Such a turn of events poses a problem for the Dozhd television station, which came to prominence with its broadcasts of the marches. As the channel tries to reinvent itself, it is forced to move away from its original intention to be the "optimistic" messenger for troubled Russians.

Dozhd was the first television channel in Russia to show the mass demonstrations in December 2011. Due to its willingness to broadcast news not usually shown on state or commercial channels, audiences labeled it an opposition channel. However, it was not created for this.

The channel was originally meant to be optimistic and recruited young people who lacked previous media experience and the self-censorship habits of other channels' news teams.

"I think we were able to do it," Dozhd owner Natalya Sindeyeva told The Moscow Times. "Optimistic for us is the sense, the aftertaste that you get after watching the channel. After watching Dozhd, you don't get the feeling that everything is bad, that you should leave the country. After watching Channel One, you want to commit suicide."

However, audiences have grown frustrated with Dozhd and say it has stopped being the optimist it claims to be.

"When Dozhd channel was founded, it was like a private happiness to me," one viewer said. "I believed that it would be a real optimistic channel that would tell us how our world is great despite all the problems and the horror. Eventually, the channel started to impose its own views on political and social problems and offer coverage just about the problems and the horror, forgetting about its own slogan."

One of the channel hosts, Mikhail Kozyrev, said that though management did not make Dozhd optimistic, the "opposition" role people ascribe to it is too simplistic to explain what the channel is now. Kozyrev said Dozhd will enter history as a channel that invented a new way to communicate with its audience.

"We did not film a reality show, but we turned the cameras on and filmed everything that we did. I do not know of any analogies of this in the world," Kozyrev said. "Foreign television journalists are shocked when they see Dozhd. They wish they had such a channel in England."

Kozyrev added that Dozhd was not created as an opposition channel but adapted this role to fill the niche for an alternative point of view. As the protests cool down, that role — whether intentional or not — needs a transformation.

Dozhd will undertake several changes in a couple of months. The focus will be on enhancing the channel's news offers, Sindeyeva said. For example, the prime-time channel will get a five-hour block of live evening news shows.

Hosts with a range of opinions will discuss the most crucial problems in Russia. Dozhd will also rebuild its studio and add new correspondent and host spots.

This is not the channel's first makeover. It launched a variety of new programs in September, including lifestyle, culinary and late-night shows. The experiment didn't work out, so Sindeyeva decided to concentrate on news.

"It became clear that Dozhd is a news channel first of all, and we need to prioritize," she said.

Playing with the lineup is risky, especially considering that the project is still unprofitable. Sindeyeva wants the channel to stay independent and had to sell her house and move to the city to maintain it.

One of the factors that make Dozhd unique is that it is considered nonprofessional. The current staffers are mostly in their 20s. Nearly all the reporters have never worked in broadcasting, and even top editors are often forced to wing it.

"I do not consider Dozhd a serious TV channel," said Artyom Galustyan, the content manager of Kommersant's website. "It was and remains an amateur work by a group of people."

One of the most common problems at Dozhd are technical glitches. Due to its tiny budget, the channel does not have a lot of money for new film equipment. A correspondent has to go to an event, shoot the video with a small camera, go to live coverage with the help of devices that usually don't work, then return to the studio, write a big story, cut and edit video on his own, all in a couple of hours.

Despite the hard work, Dozhd staffers said they take pride in the fact that the station remains one of the most honest and open in Russia.

"At Dozhd, you can really do your job," said one Dozhd journalist, who asked not to be identified. "Dozhd is a place where you can be a liberal or impartial journalist."

The channel's audience grew more than tenfold when it covered rallies in Moscow and other cities. Sindeyeva said that after its upcoming transformation Dozhd will continue to give Russians a dose of optimism.

"If Dozhd exists, then there is a chance that something will change," she said. "I believe in this, otherwise I wouldn't understand why I started it."

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