

Prosecutors Initiate Check of Dozhd TV

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Natalya Sindeyeva

Prosecutors on Thursday said they were examining embattled Dozhd television for possible extremism charges related to a viewer poll about World War II, as the independent channel attempted to rally amid strong political pressure directed against it.

At least four large cable providers have stopped broadcasting Dozhd, bringing the total loss of audience for the channel to 20 percent, although it has increased its number of paid Internet subscribers as it launched a drive to gain support.

The removal of Dozhd from cable packages came after it ran a poll on Sunday that asked viewers whether the Soviet city of Leningrad should have been surrendered to avoid the death of 300,000 to 1.5 million people during the blockade of the city by the Nazis from September 1941 to January 1944.

Russians revere the blockade victims and survivors as heroes, and the poll incited a small number of displeased comments, but was removed within ten minutes.

Three senior Dozhd officials have apologized since Sunday for unintentionally offending their audience, but senior federal and St. Petersburg lawmakers have called on prosecutors to "take action" against the channel.

The channel's editor and political analysts have called the unanimous denunciation of the poll by officials part of an orchestrated attack on free speech that they say intensified with the closure of respected state news agency RIA Novosti by the Kremlin last month.

Dozhd is the most prominent television channel not controlled by the government, and it devotes considerable coverage to opposition activities.

President Vladimir Putin's spokesman Dmitry Peskov late on Wednesday joined the chorus of pro-Kremlin figures expressing outrage over the poll, calling for an "absolutely intolerant reaction of viewers to what has happened," Peskov told Dozhd in an interview.

"As soon as we start to show even that slightest tolerance to such polls, our nation will start eroding, as well as the genetic memory of our people," Peskov said.

Cable provider Rostelecom, which operates in Moscow through the OnLime company, and NTV Plus late Wednesday joined Akado and Dom.ru in halting broadcasts of Dozhd.

As a result of the blocked access to the channel on cable packages, the channel lost about 20 percent of the "technical broadcast circulation," Dozhd general director Natalya Sindeyeva told Ekho Moskvyy radio late Wednesday.

But with the loss of cable television audience, the number of paid subscribers for the website skyrocketed Wednesday, Sindeyeva said.

"If other [cable television] operators remain, I think we will pull through the situation," she said.

Financial constraints are not the only potential problem facing Dozhd, with St. Petersburg prosecutors saying Thursday that they were examining the channel for extremism, meaning inciting hatred toward a group of people united by ethnicity, nationality or other things, Itar-Tass reported, without elaborating.

In addition, the Federal Mass Media Inspection Service accused Dozhd in a letter to the channel's management of violating media law with its poll by failing to respect the rights and legal interests of other citizens, Interfax reported. But the media watchdog said the letter would not result in any sanctions for the channel, since it was not an official warning.

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