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# Independent TV Rain Under Attack

By John Freedman

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Let's admit it. Ever since the Dozhd television station, also known as Rain TV, appeared in early 2010, many of us have wondered how long it could last.

We now may know.

Beginning Wednesday, Dozhd began disappearing from Russian cable servers in quick succession. A huge backlash occurred (or was orchestrated) when the channel sought to provoke a discussion around the 70th anniversary of the Siege of Leningrad by posting this question on its Twitter account on Jan. 27: "Should Leningrad have been surrendered in order to save hundreds of thousands of lives?"

The response was explosive, as was noted in a report by Itar-Tass. Parliamentarians, government spokespersons, and leaders of various public organizations lashed out, calling the question "an attempt to rehabilitate Nazism," "treachery in regards to our nation," and "a move into anti-Russian propaganda."

The last time I recall seeing such vitriol was during the trial of the Pussy Riot punk protest group in 2012. Russian society has, once again, broken into warring factions over a hot button issue. For every individual declaring support for freedom of speech and press, someone else is infuriated by a perceived lack of patriotism on the part of the television channel.

At present, at least four cable providers, NTV-Plus, Akado, ER-Telecom and Beeline, have pulled Dozhd from the air. Cable company Tricolor and the internet television provider Rinet continue to offer access to the channel.

Officially calling themselves the Optimistic Channel, the small crew at Dozhd did for nearly four years what no one else on Russian television dreamed of. They gave voice to political opposition, served up wicked political satire, and openly covered the actions and movements of individuals that the Russian government, and Russian state-controlled television outlets along with it, considered criminals — Mikhail Khodorkovsky, Pussy Riot, and the blogger-turned-politician Alexei Navalny to name just a few. They ran live broadcasts of political protests in Moscow and elsewhere.

But if you think that is all Dozhd did, you missed the point.

Through their programs and their actions Dozhd was a strong advocate for the rights of people with physical challenges; it provided opportunities for young people's issues and voices to be heard; it championed emerging musical groups, or officially neglected veterans, that stand in stark contrast to the flaccid pop that rules the waves of state-controlled television; it promoted an atmosphere that is advantageous for small business; and it played an enormous role in improving Moscow's image as a modern city of style and unique neighborhoods through their coverage and support of bicycling, parks and other green issues.

In short, Dozhd led by example in the efforts to create a civil society in Russia.

If almost four years of social activism and political daring did not bring down the ax on Dozhd, what did last week? Was it really that question about surrendering Leningrad?

It is true that passions run high where patriotism, war and national identity are concerned. And I understand and respect why the memory of World War II — The Great Patriotic War in Soviet and in Russian parlance — is sacred.

But history and sanctity make awkward partners. Priests and their followers engage matters of the sacred. Journalists, like historians, are involved in observing, recording and challenging history.

Dozhd, in wondering about the cost of human sacrifice during war, was not being disrespectful or unpatriotic. It was doing its job. It sought to provoke a discussion that might lead to useful conclusions and revelations. Those who didn't like the implications of the question might have answered in the negative and argued their point of view, even vehemently. Instead, they claimed "treason" and pressured cable providers to pull the station off the air.

In fact, the controversy surrounding the Siege of Leningrad is a smoke screen. A quick look

around us tells us that Russian parliamentarians are taking serious restrictive measures in several spheres today.

The State Duma is considering passing a law known popularly as the "law of objective truth," which, according to critics, would seriously weaken the legal concept of presumption of innocence. On Saturday a new law went into effect that allows the government to block websites with contested content without a court warrant.

The attack on Dozhd comes as the Winter Olympics are beginning, as violent protests in Ukraine continue to have a serious impact on Russia, and shortly after a few high profile releases of political prisoners (Khodorkovsky and two Pussy Riot members included). This is a time when control of information is particularly important, and Dozhd was not a controllable entity.

Natalya Sindeyeva, general director of Dozhd, told Novaya Gazeta on Friday that she believes the ban on her channel was provoked by a report on dachas belonging to Vyacheslav Volodin, Putin's First Deputy Chief of Staff, and Sergei Neverov, Deputy Chair of the Duma.

But surely the reasons are many.

For one more of the underlying triggers of the controversy we might look back six weeks to the premiere of a series of short satirical films that Dozhd broadcast under the collective heading of "The Past and the Duma."

The series marked the twentieth anniversary of the Duma as Russia's democratically elected parliament, and featured actors reading texts drawn directly from the archives of parliamentary sessions — Vladimir Zhirinovsky promising that if he were elected Speaker of the Duma he would turn the entire planet upside down, Yelena Mizulina declaring that "protection from gay propaganda is more important than even oil and gas," and Vladimir Putin, in the role of director of the Federal Security Service, making his first attack on Khodorkovsky's Yukos oil company in 1998.

The texts were all read verbatim from records available to the public on the Duma website, but that did not soften their extraordinary satirical effect. It is easy to imagine that parliamentarians have nursed a grudge ever since.

Whatever the reason for the attacks on Dozhd, the loss of this television channel would be a serious blow to the free exchange of information in Russia.

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