The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Dozhd Television Faces Closure But Strives to Stay Afloat

By Oleg Sukhov

February 04, 2014



A demonstrator showing his support for Dozhd TV at an opposition rally in Moscow on Sunday. **Igor Tabakov**

Dozhd, Russia's only opposition-oriented television channel, on Tuesday announced that the decision of large cable providers to drop it could lead to its closure and attributed the move to a Kremlin-driven campaign to get rid of them.

All major cable companies, including OnLime, Akado, NTV Plus and VimpelCom, dropped Dozhd recently in what many political analysts say signalled a bid by authorities to crack down on the channel's critical coverage. The move comes just months after critics warned of a narrowing media landscape in light of President Vladimir Putin's decision to abolish the RIA Novosti news agency.

Dozhd found itself at the center of a scandal after it published a poll last month asking whether it would have been better to surrender Leningrad during the Nazi siege of the city

from 1941 to 1945 in order "to save hundreds of thousands of lives."

Pro-Kremlin politicians immediately slammed the channel, saying the question exonerated Nazism. Dozhd's supporters, on the other hand, said it had done nothing of the sort and that the government was using the poll as an excuse to stamp out media freedom.

The channel's owner, Alexander Vinokurov, said at a press conference Tuesday that Dozhd had planned to become a profitable company in 2015 before the apparent campaign against the outlet jeopardized these plans.

Dozhd's general director Natalya Sindeyeva said that Tricolor TV — which announced Monday that it would also stop transmitting Dozhd — accounted for a large share of the channel's audience.

"We have already said that if Tricolor TV dropped us, this would mean the channel's death," Sindeyeva said. "From a business standpoint, this could lead to our closure, because we will not be able to make a living."

The number of cable companies broadcasting Dozhd fell from 273 to 252, Vinokurov said. Though many minor cable operators remain, Dozhd's rejection by the largest cable companies has seen its audience shrink by eight times, he said.

Before the scandal erupted, the channel was available to 17.4 million subscribers.

Dozhd's management said previously that advertising companies had also been pressured by the authorities to stop cooperating with the channel in recent years.

But Vinokurov and Sindeyeva have no plans to shut the channel down for the time being, vowing instead to find ways to save it.

In an effort to stay afloat, Dozhd has offered to give its content to all cable operators free of charge until the end of 2014, Vinokurov said. The channel will also start negotiations with major cable operators and unnamed "third parties" on resuming cooperation, he said.

According to Sindeyeva, the channel will not make any concessions to the authorities in terms of its content and editorial policy, however.

If negotiations with cable operators fail, Dozhd could appeal to President Vladimir Putin to halt the authorities' campaign against the television company, Sindeyeva said.

The cable companies' actions have triggered a backlash from Dozhd subscribers, some of whom pledged to file class action lawsuits against them, Vinokurov said.

But he said Dozhd did not plan to file any lawsuits because the channel's aim was to establish "long-term friendship" with cable companies rather than claim money in court.

Alexei Kudrin, a former finance minister who fell out with the Kremlin in 2011, questioned the cable companies' actions and said that the Dozhd poll could not be grounds for halting the channel's operations.

“The cable providers' decision to drop [Dozhd] raises some questions,” he said in comments carried by Interfax. “Why did this happen ... if many of them signed agreements [with the channel] shortly before New Year's Day?”

Opposition leader Alexei Navalny shared this sentiment, writing on his blog Tuesday that his Anti-Corruption Fund would file lawsuits against the cable providers. He also said that he knew a great deal of people who had subscribed to a cable company specifically to watch Dozhd.

“The jerks from the cable companies are not really indignant about anything but are just political prostitutes carrying out a patently illegal instruction to introduce censorship,” he wrote. “We are saying that the jerks are stealing money from subscribers who paid for Dozhd in their television packages.”

Commenting on possible reasons behind the campaign against Dozhd, Vinokurov said the authorities had paid close attention to the channel ever since it covered an exposO by Navalny last November. In the exposO, the politician accused Vyacheslav Volodin, Sergei Neverov and other top United Russia officials of illegally acquiring luxury land plots in the Moscow region.

Sindeyeva attributed the campaign to the channel's independence from the Kremlin.

“They cannot just call us and ask what a certain editor did,” she said.

Analysts have also said the crackdown may stem from fears that have arisen among the authorities in the wake of large-scale protests in neighboring Ukraine. In addition, an apparent attempt to prevent critical coverage of the Sochi Olympics in February may play a role, observers said.

Vinokurov said the poll about the Siege of Leningrad had nothing to do with the matter.

“They set the goal of finding an excuse and they did find it, though they could have found any other one,” he said.

Vinokurov also said authorities had aimed to halt the channel's operations through indirect methods without officially closing it.

Critics have accused Putin of gradually eliminating media freedom by bringing all major outlets under his control since NTV television was purchased by state-controlled gas giant Gazprom in 2001, while its owner Vladimir Gusinsky was arrested and had to emigrate. Some pundits have speculated that while the Kremlin previously tolerated a small amount of dissent, its media policy shifted to outright censorship after controversial pro-Kremlin television anchor Dmitry Kiselyov was appointed head of news agency Rossiya Segodnya, previously known as RIA Novosti, in December.

Russia's media landscape is dominated by Kremlin-controlled broadcast television, which gets 97 percent of all television advertising revenues. Cable and satellite television channels, including Dozhd, account for the remainder and have a much smaller audience.

Contact the author at o.sukhov@imedia.ru

Original url:
https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2014/02/04/dozhd-television-faces-closure-but-strives-to-stay-afloat-a31705