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Rain, Rain, Go Away

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The authorities have effectively prohibited the Dozhd television channel from broadcasting on cable television. The ostensible reason for the ban was a survey that Dozhd conducted on Jan. 26 that asked: "Should the Soviet Union have surrendered Leningrad to save hundreds of thousands of lives?"

That ill-conceived and inappropriate question sparked a public defamation campaign similar to those during Stalinist purges. But the survey was really only a pretext. The authorities' displeasure with Dozhd probably began two months ago when the channel aired a program by anti-corruption whistleblower Alexei Navalny regarding luxurious dachas owned by high-ranking officials, including presidential administration First Deputy Chief of Staff Vyacheslav Volodin and Deputy Prime Minister Sergei Prikhodko.

Volodin was reportedly livid over the program and convened a special meeting of the presidential administration to discuss the matter. Even though Navalny produced the program, not Dozhd, it was important to go after the messenger so that there would be no more of these reports incriminating top officials.

Dozhd cannot survive financially without access to the cable networks and their viewership of 17 million households.

Does this mean that private broadcasters will simply cancel commercial contracts as a matter of policy?

These operators are not as "private" as you might think. Although private owners ostensibly control the companies that broadcast the signal to the cable networks, the government exerts direct control over them. For example, billionaire Viktor Vekselberg owns the Akado cable provider and billionaire Mikhail Fridman owns Beeline. And when the truly independent ER-Telecom cable provider attempted to buy Akado, the deal fell through after it was nixed by senior government officials.

Actually, the troubles for Dozhd began during the anti-government protests on Bolotnaya Ploshchad. The authorities applied a great deal of pressure on the channel, and media tycoon Alisher Usmanov stepped in for the kill with a buyout offer. But Dozhd CEO Natalya Sindeyeva and her business partners were strong enough to fend off the aggressive takeover bid.

That prompted the authorities to change tactics. They understood that it was easier to dismantle the channel than to buy it out. Mikhail Lesin, the former head of the government agency overseeing the media who was linked to the state takeover of NTV in 2001, reportedly masterminded the attack on Dozhd.

The Kremlin's strategy to monopolize the media market consists of several main decisions: appointing Lesin to head Gazprom Media in October, dismantling RIA Novosti and creating Rossia Segodnya in its place with the odious Dmitry Kiselyov at its head in December, pushing Pavel Durov out of Vkontakte and now the attack on Dozhd. The goal is to erect a huge media wall to protect the authorities and isolate Russia from the free world. They are building that wall slowly but steadily.

The fate awaiting Dozhd is clear enough. It will be bought out — probably by the very same Usmanov who tried unsuccessfully to seize it earlier. Only now, with Dozhd barred from airing on cable networks, it is practically worthless. But by pushing the price down to next to nothing, it will make it easier — and cheaper — for the Kremlin and its frontman to eliminate the channel.

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The views expressed in opinion pieces do not necessarily reflect the position of The Moscow Times.

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