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The Truth Behind Ekho Moskvy's Troubles

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The authorities have waged attacks against two major independent media outlets in recent weeks. First, they staged a 1930s-style public campaign against Dozhd and banned it from broadcasting on cable television. Next, the authorities gained leverage over Ekho Moskvy, Russia's largest independent radio station, by appointing a new CEO, Yekaterina Pavlova, the wife of President Vladimir Putin's deputy chief of public affairs.

The interesting thing is that the attack on Dozhd was also aimed against Ekho Moskvy. The fact is, the survey that got Dozhd into trouble — it asked viewers if the Soviet Union should have surrendered Leningrad during World War II — aired on the "Dilettante" program that it produces in cooperation with Ekho Moskvy.

According to my sources, the person who showed the transcript of that program to Putin said, "Look what Ekho has done," and Putin replied, "What has Ekho got to do with it? Dozhd asked the question." That forced Ekho Moskvy's opponents to go after Dozhd instead of the radio station.

Indeed, this is not so much a conflict between Putin and Ekho Moskvy editor-in-chief Alexei Venediktov as it is between Venediktov and Mikhail Lesin, a former press minister who was appointed to head Gazprom-Media, Ekho Moskvy's parent company, last October. Behind Lesin stands Alexei Gromov, the first deputy head of the presidential administration who raised Lesin from political oblivion and enabled his ascent to the peak of the media Olympus.

Lesin's appointment was unrelated to Ekho Moskvy. It was more a function of the fact that monopolies controlled by Putin's friends now dominate in Russia. One such structure is the media monopoly held by the Kovalchuk brothers who, with their National Media Group, Gazprom-Media and Profmedia, own almost all of Russia's private television channels and nearly 100 percent of all television advertising.

It is difficult to say exactly what prompted the Kovalchuk brothers to appoint Lesin to head Gazprom-Media, but it is unlikely the radio station played a role in their calculations. They were primarily interested in finding someone to head a media and advertising behemoth and could not have been focused on such a triviality as a politically independent radio station on the company's portfolio.

However, immediately after Lesin's appointment, Ekho Moskvy became embroiled in a series of intrigues from which the radio station quietly and doggedly extricated itself.

It really comes as no surprise that Lesin wants to finish off Ekho Moskvy.

Lesin is an odious figure. As press minister, he was instrumental in the state takeover of Vladimir Gusinsky's Media-MOST. Lesin also signed the infamous "Protocol No. 6" that granted Gusinsky freedom from jail in return for shares in his NTV channel.

It is generally held that Lesin waged a campaign against Media-MOST in hopes of building his own media holding company, but the public disclosure of his role in the whole affair prevented this and eventually led to his dismissal.

It is unlikely that Lesin is happy about working as a flunky for the Kovalchuk brothers, running the very same business he had earlier hoped to own himself. A person returning from political oblivion usually uses his newly acquired administrative resources to exact revenge and satisfy his personal ambitions.

But if Lesin does shut down Ekho Moskvy, the world will blame it on Putin, and not on the personal frustrations of a former press minister.

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