

Dozhd Gets 50-Day Lifeline After Telethon

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Crew members at Dozhd's studios filming as a host conducts an interview with a guest during a fundraiser.

Independent television channel Dozhd has extended its operation for at least 50 days in a fundraising campaign launched to save the channel after major cable networks refused to air it.

The money was collected during a week-long telethon from March 24 to 30 that sold yearly subscriptions to Dozhd, souvenirs featuring the Dozhd logo and tickets to a gala, as well as through public donations and sales of advertising space on the channel's website. The telethon sought to bring freedom of the press into the spotlight, even inviting guests on air to discuss the topic.

Dozhd, which is known for covering opposition activities, found itself in hot water earlier this year after publishing a poll that asked whether Leningrad should have been surrendered

during the Nazi siege to save hundreds of thousands of lives. The poll triggered complaints from officials, and cable operators subsequently dropped the channel, though they said the move had nothing to do with the poll.

Last week, Dozhd owner Alexander Vinokurov said the channel would still have to shut down if its landlord did not reconsider extending the lease for the channel's headquarters beyond June 20. Vinokurov said that hiring a new space and preparing it for the channel's operation would require millions of dollars and more than 18 months' time.

But Dozhd spokeswoman Darya Simonenko said by phone Monday that Dozhd would not have to shut down if it lost its office, and that the channel's representatives would soon hold a news conference about the channel's plans. The date had not yet been set, she said.

There is hope among some of Dozhd's anchors that the channel may continue to produce video reports remotely even if the office is lost, three anchors told The Moscow Times last week.

Dozhd general director Natalya Sindeyeva was expected to briefly sum up the telethon results in an interview at Dozhd late Monday, Simonenko said.

The channel has not disclosed how much money it collected, but Vinokurov wrote on his blog on Dozhd's website last Monday that the channel's month-long operation costs a minimum of 20,600 million rubles (\$582,000).

The termination of Dozhd's contracts with four major cable networks in February caused the channel to lose 80 percent of its revenue and was seen by some observers as part of a wider media crackdown by the Kremlin, which also included the restructuring of state news agency RIA Novosti into Rossia Segodnya and the replacement of management at the Lenta.ru news website.

Deputy Communications and Press Minister Alexei Volin on Monday indirectly denied that authorities were involved in Dozhd's troubles, however, and said the channel would have no problem resuming contracts with the cable networks "if it finds an economic model that is interesting to broadcasters," he said, Interfax reported.

The channel is eager to resume talks with four broadcasters about returning Dozhd to their viewing grids at market prices, general director Natalya Sindeyeva told Interfax earlier Monday.

Last week, Sindeyeva asked some cable networks to put Dozhd in their viewing grids free of charge until the end of the year.

The move apparently would serve as a sort of litmus test, just as last week's telethon had, according to Sindeyeva. She said the telethon was partly meant to determine the feasibility of whether the channel could operate on money collected from regular donations of its viewers, she told online magazine Snob in an interview published on the eve of the telethon.

Mikhail Fedotov, head of the Kremlin human rights council, supported Sindeyeva's idea Monday, saying Dozhd could exist on money from donations and advertising, Fedotov told Interfax.

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