The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Journalists Quit En Masse Over Owner's Interference

By Mark Lammey

April 01, 2014

The editorial staff of two news agencies have quit because their owner repeatedly interfered in their work, amid growing concerns that censorship in the Russian media has become rife.

Former editors and writing staff at the Ekho Moskvy in Petersburg news website and EKHOweekly newspaper said Monday in a statement that they had resigned, leaving one freelance editor to hold down the fort.

Staff at the news outlets — founded by Ekho LLC, which is headed by Sergei Nedovodin — were pushed to their limits and several of them were being paid less than shop assistants, according to the statement, published Monday on Ekho Moskvy's website.

"We even had cases when an editor couldn't call a reporter in the field because he had no money. In another instance, our editor went to work wearing an evening dress because she had no money to buy trousers," they said.

The former staff members said they were prepared to carry on for the good of the "fabled freedom of speech," but had no choice but to leave when their owner tried to dictate editorial policy.

They were also prevented from publishing the opinions of members of Ukraine's interim government. "We were told that Russia is in a state of war and that Ukraine is the enemy."

"The founder wanted to determine the publications' editorial policy himself, choose what we write about, publish blogs, edit headlines, make decisions about paid information sharing with politicians and state authorities. He has an administrative account — he writes whatever he wants on the site without having the chief editor check it," the journalists said.

Alexei Venediktov, chief editor of Ekho Moskvy radio station in Moscow, said that his news agency is in no way linked to the stations or the dispute in question, but that he supported the journalists' cause, nonetheless.

Media freedom in Russia has recently been under the microscope due to difficulties experienced by a number of news outlets so far this year.

Independent television station Dozhd was dropped by several of Russia's biggest cable companies over a World War II poll it posted in January, a move widely interpreted as a blatant attempt to shut down the channel, which gives airtime to Kremlin opponents. The subsequent drop in revenue has forced the channel to appeal for donations to stay afloat.

Furthermore, the chief editor at Lenta.ru, one of Russia's most popular news websites, was fired last month over an interview with a Ukrainian nationalist it published. Her replacement has a reputation for being pro-Kremlin, leading many observers to conclude that the change up was part of a Kremlin-orchestrated media crackdown.

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