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Possible Light at the End of the Tunnel for Dozhd

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President Putin answers questions during his annual call-in talk show.

A favorable comment made by President Vladimir Putin during his annual call-in show on Thursday seems to have triggered a change of fortune for embattled independent television channel Dozhd, which is threatened with closure after being dropped by numerous major television operators.

"If the disappearance of Dozhd from television screens is a result of some kind of checks and excessive attention on the part of the regulatory organs, then for my part I will do everything to counteract that attention," Putin said.

Shortly after Putin's statement, on Friday the Russian Association of Cable Operators announced their willingness to aid Dozhd in conducting negotiations with cable operators in order to put the channel back on the air, stating as a condition that Dozhd would have to deal with all cable operators on equal terms.

"They should decide for themselves what commercial model they are working on — they can not work with one operator on one model, with another operator on a second model, and a third for another operator," association head Yury Pripachkin said, Itar-Tass reported.

Dozhd was dropped by a series of television operators after posting a poll in January asking viewers if the blockade of Leningrad was worth the cost in human lives. Perceived as unpatriotic, the poll drew criticism from conservative political figures, while liberals denounced the subsequent dropping of the channel as a move to close a news outlet known for giving airtime to Kremlin opponents.

Dozhd's revenue dropped precipitously following the loss of cable operators, and the channel's finances were further complicated at the end of March when the owners of the Krasny Oktyabr business center, which hosts the Dozhd office, announced that they would not allow Dozhd to renew their lease after its end in June.

Dozhd chief Natalya Sineyeva said in early March that the channel might be forced to close by the end of the month, yet also announced her intention to change the channel's business strategy and pursue new viewing platforms like Smart TV, or online television streaming. Dozhd has also reached out to viewers with an aggressive fundraising campaign, asking for donations and selling merchandise.

While the offer of negotiation with cable operators provides a glimmer of light for Dozhd, the channel's finances are still grim, and the company will need to be able to afford a move to a new office space by June unless Krasny Oktyabr can be persuaded to renew their lease.

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