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Russia's Media Watchdog Gives Ekho Moskvy Warning for 'Extremist' Coverage of Ukraine Crisis

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Ekho Moskvy is one of the leading independent media voices in Russia.

A state watchdog has warned a radio station known for its critical reporting of President Vladimir Putin's government over a talk show it broadcast about the Ukraine conflict, the station said on its website.

The warning issued to Ekho Moskvy is seen as putting further pressure on Russian media, which have experienced a series of restrictions in the 14 years of Putin's rule. If a second warning is issued within a year, the station can be shut down.

According to the copy of the warning notice by the watchdog Roskomnadzor posted on the Ekho Moskvy website on Friday, a show it ran earlier this week contained "information justifying war crimes practices."

"In accordance with the law...information justifying practices of war and other crimes, aimed

at full or partial annihilation of an ethnic or national group, is regarded as extremist activity," it said.

The notice refers to a program where two journalists covering a battle at the Donetsk airport were sharing first hand accounts of the fighting that continues despite a cease-fire reached in September.

Moscow blames Ukrainian government forces for violations of the truce, while Ukraine says Russian-backed forces are the ones firing at their positions.

"I don't understand this term "information justifying war crimes," the station's long-time editor Alexei Venediktov said on his Twitter page. "Information can either be false or true."

Venediktov said Ekho Moskvy will file a lawsuit against the watchdog. The transcript of the show was pulled from the station's website, following the warning issue.

Founded in 1990 shortly before the collapse of the Soviet Union, Ekho Moskvy ran extensive coverage of a protest movement against Putin in 2011-12 and has come under fire from authorities for its reporting over the years.

The Kremlin denies allegations of censorship or pressure on the media, saying Russians have the right to express their opinions.

Kremlin critics say authorities have clamped down on media freedoms throughout Putin's rule, with pressure ranging from a set of laws aimed at restricting freedom of speech to murders of journalists, some of which have not been properly investigated.

Mainstream television channels and print media in Russia are either state-owned or under indirect Kremlin control, while independent publications are subject to censorship and pressure.

An independent media outlet, Dozhd was taken off air earlier this year by several television providers in a move the channel's chief called censorship.

Russia ranks 148th out of 180 countries in the world for respecting media freedom according to the 2014 ranking compiled by the international non-profit organization Reporters Without Borders.

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