

The Slow Death of Russian Independent Media

By [Andrei Malgin](#)

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Ominous storm clouds were gathering over the Ekho Moskvy radio station last week. That is serious because Russia only has one opposition-minded television channel, Dozhd, one such newspaper, Novaya Gazeta, one such weekly magazine, The New Times, and one such radio station, Ekho Moskvy. So if anything happens to that radio station, a very noticeable gap will appear in the already modest ranks of Russia's independent media.

The reason for the scandal with Ekho Moskvy was a phrase that one of the radio station staff members permitted himself to post on Twitter. He wrote that when he learned of the death of the son of Kremlin chief of staff Sergei Ivanov, he realized that there is a higher justice. Although he offered no further clarification, his readers understood his meaning.

They knew that while driving several years ago, Ivanov's son had run down and killed an elderly woman in a crosswalk in front of numerous witnesses. Not only was he never punished for his crime, he put pressure on investigators and relatives of the deceased, even going so far as to file false charges against the woman's son-in-law for having supposedly

beaten him at the scene. And now Ivanov's son has drowned while swimming in the sea.

Of course, it was improper to post such a comment on Twitter, and the author himself soon realized that and removed it a few hours later. But in those few short hours it managed to set off a rapidly escalating chain reaction. Gazprom subsidiary Gazprom Media holds a controlling stake in Ekho Moskvyy. Mikhail Lesin, the head of Gazprom Media, instructed Ekho Moskvyy editor-in-chief Alexei Venediktov to fire the employee who posted the thoughtless message. Of course, Venediktov refused, first because an employee has the right to post whatever he wants on a personal Twitter account and, second, because the employee in question happens to be one of his best journalists.

Lesin undoubtedly anticipated that answer and responded by ordering Venediktov to either fire the employee or resign himself. What's more, the Ekho Moskvyy board of directors even scheduled an urgent meeting to discuss the station's editor-in-chief as well as its entire broadcasting concept. Lesin revealed in an interview that he would not oppose turning Ekho Moskvyy into a music station. That made it clear to everyone that the authorities had been waiting for an opportunity to close down the troublesome station and that the tweet was the pretext they needed.

Also recall that a few months ago the authorities cracked down on Dozhd TV on equally trivial grounds, with the result that almost every cable operator refused to air the channel, in turn leading to the departure of its advertisers and the loss of its livelihood.

Everyone is wondering how the current conflict will end now that Lesin and Venediktov have reportedly reached a backroom compromise. However, I am more interested in something else — namely, the fact that, with all of the many pro-Kremlin radio stations out there that strictly prohibit any opposition members from speaking, Ekho Moskvyy, the only independent station, consistently airs the viewpoints of numerous pro-Putin State Duma deputies.

Venediktov has repeatedly told listeners who accuse him of wasting precious air time that he includes those commentators to maintain objectivity. That is what he states publicly. But privately, he admits that he does so to prevent the authorities from closing the station down.

The same was true of Dozhd TV, but even appearances by pro-Putin speakers did not save the channel — and they will definitely not save Ekho Moskvyy. The fate of the radio station does not hinge on the ratio of pro-Kremlin to anti-Kremlin commentators, but just how far the authorities are willing to pursue their witch hunt.

In Putin's Russia, straddling the fence never saved anybody.

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