

Russia Sees Harsh Crackdown on Independent Media

By [The Moscow Times](#)

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Journalists at Dozhd admit the state propaganda is taking its toll, convincing Russians to believe in the supremacy of national interests.

Among the five TV journalists interviewing Russian Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev, the odd one out was easy to spot. Mikhail Zygar's questions were sharper than those of the others, who headed back to spacious television studios while Zygar broadcast his piece from a Moscow living room.

The Dozhd news channel, whose editor-in-chief Zygar was given a Committee to Protect Journalists award last month, rose to prominence in 2011 with its coverage of the mass protests against President Vladimir Putin — which state-owned television largely ignored.

As other Russian television channels have grown increasingly subservient this year, providing propaganda backing for the annexation of the Crimean Peninsula and Russia's aggressive policy toward Ukraine, Dozhd didn't follow the lead — and is now paying for it.

Putin's government has been careful not to order the channel to shut down, but a Kremlin-instigated smear campaign has driven this rare independent broadcaster to the brink of demise.

Past strollers and bicycles in the hall, a Soviet-era apartment in central Moscow now houses the studio of Dozhd, whose combined online and TV audience is about 12 million. Anchorman Pavel Lobkov sits on a chair in what was once a spacious living room.

The 47-year-old Lobkov shrugs off the challenges, recalling his early days in television during the Soviet Union's perestroika era.

"Things were probably even tougher then: We had no Internet, no Skype, no mobile phones. I went live from war zones, so these comfortable surroundings of an apartment can hardly unsettle me," he said.

Lobkov spent most of his television career on NTV, a legendary channel taken over by state-controlled natural gas company Gazprom in 2001, a move that forced independent journalists to flee.

NTV, owned by oligarch Vladimir Gusinsky, was a leading TV channel that offered a view different from the Kremlin. The government effectively wrested the channel from Gusinsky's control and entrusted it to Gazprom to run in Putin's first major crackdown on independent media.

Now at Dozhd, Lobkov says he's reliving the same pressure and harassment campaign he experienced at NTV when "all tools of the government were used."

Pressure on independent media intensified this year as the Kremlin sought to unify the country behind the annexation of Crimea and Russia's involvement in eastern Ukraine.

Since its inception in 2010, Dozhd had its studio in a former chocolate factory on the Moscow River, but its landlord broke the lease in November, forcing the channel to look for new space. Sympathizers offered Dozhd a place elsewhere, but last week they were told they can't broadcast out of there anymore.

Dozhd doesn't want to make public its new temporary location.

During Putin's 15 years in office, the Russian television landscape has been sanitized to the point where news coverage on all channels is almost identical. State channels toe the Kremlin line, and private channels, most of which are owned by Kremlin-friendly oligarchs or state-controlled conglomerates like Gazprom, are just as obedient.

As recently as January 2014, Dozhd broadcast both online and on cable networks, expanding its reach to Russian regions that still largely get their information from state-owned television. Its troubles began when Dozhd was aggressively covering the daily anti-government protests in Ukraine, which state-owned television dismissed as a neo-Nazi coup.

The crackdown came in late January, when Dozhd hosted a history program on the 1941-44 Siege of Leningrad and put a question up for a vote: "Would it have been worth it to surrender Leningrad to save lives? Famine in the city, now called St. Petersburg, during that epic siege

killed more than 500,000 people."

The question caused a stir for its implication of a lack of patriotism, prompting Kremlin officials to call for a shutdown of the channel. Dozhd apologized, but that didn't seem to help.

Putin's spokesman, Dmitry Peskov, accused Dozhd of "crossing a moral and ethical red line," while the State Duma condemned the channel for "neo-Nazism" and "betraying your own people."

Nearly all cable networks dropped Dozhd in a matter of days, and since then the channel has been treated like a leper.

Problems multiplied in summer, when the Russian parliament passed a bill that barred cable channels from running ads, according to Natalya Sindeyeva, who has led Dozhd since its interception. The channel cut its expenses in half, shed about 30 percent of its staff and reduced its monthly budget to 20 million rubles (\$357,000) — just a fraction of any state TV budget — before being hit with the eviction notice.

Talks with potential landlords have so far been futile.

"We were told several times: 'We're sorry, we've got other business interests and we're not prepared to take this risk,'" Sindeyeva said, adding that she believes the channel is being persecuted for political reasons.

"If it's not in the business interests [of cable networks] to cut off Dozhd, then what other reason can it be? There can be no explanation other than the political one," she said.

Zygar, the editor-in-chief, insists that broadcasting out of an apartment is a temporary measure that doesn't affect the quality of the content Dozhd is providing, and says its audience is still growing.

Russia was ranked 148th out of the 180-country press freedom index by Reporters Without Borders this year, sandwiched between Malaysia and the Philippines. But Russians themselves are not protesting on the streets to defend media freedoms.

Journalists at Dozhd admit the state propaganda is taking its toll, convincing Russians to believe in the supremacy of national interests. But the country's shrinking economy and decline in living standards — the ruble has lost about half its value since January — could soon change that.

"As the economic crisis deepens, this mood will subside. People will start asking questions [like] why life is so bad. Is it really that the United States is really to blame for everything?" Lobkov said.

Dozhd raised about \$1 million in a crowd-funding campaign in March, proving that the demand for independent media in Russia is still there, Zygar said.

"The situation that our country has gotten itself into is a lot more serious, and in this situation our audience needs our work even more, so we don't even think about stopping," Zygar said. "It's our work. It's our fight."

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