

Rare Russian Bastion of Independent Media Suffers Identity Crisis

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Alexei Venediktov, chief editor of Ekho Moskvy

As several top commentators publicly severed ties with Ekho Moskvy, experts speculated that the editorial policies of Russia's leading independent radio station have shifted to accommodate a changing society, not to do the Kremlin's bidding.

A number of prominent opposition-minded analysts, economists and literary figures have announced in recent days that they will no longer allow their work to be published on Ekho Moskvy's website, citing their indignation with a series of increasingly incendiary blog posts by chief editor Alexei Venediktov's personal assistant Lesya Ryabtseva, who is as unfledged as she is outspoken.

Over the past few months, 23-year-old aspiring journalist Ryabtseva has made a name for herself by pushing the envelope, often by liberally heaping crass criticism on respected figures that have generally enjoyed a great deal of deference, particularly within the confines

of Ekho Moskvyy and other sources liberal media.

But youthfully hyperbolic though Ryabtseva's posts on Ekho Moskvyy's blogs may have been, they have proven popular by new media standards, attracting hundreds of thousands of clicks, and provoking heated debate across Russia's most popular social networks.

In her most recent post, Ryabtseva set her sights on former Prime Minister Mikhail Kasyanov — decrying his "cowardice." His crime: canceling a scheduled interview with Ekho Moskvyy upon learning it would be conducted by the 20-something assistant.

Kasyanov served as prime minister under President Vladimir Putin between 2000 and 2004, but has since become a vocal Kremlin critic.

"If you, politician, are pissing your pants at the prospect of not being able to choose which journalists [will interview you], you're essentially admitting that [journalists] are better than you," Ryabtseva wrote Wednesday of Kasyanov's refusal.

"If you, politician, are pissing your pants at the prospect of uncomfortable questions and abrupt answers ... you certainly should not remain in politics," she wrote. Throughout the post, she referred to Kasyanov using the familiar form of "you," a practice generally reserved for children and close relations. In addressing politicians, the formal use of "you" is generally preferred.

Citing the latter excerpt from Ryabtseva's recent post, Boris Akunin — one of Russia's most revered contemporary novelists, and a popular political blogger — announced he would no longer allow Ekho Moskvyy to publish his writings.

"This [excerpt] means that Ekho is not for someone like me. I understand there should be a 'wide spectrum of opinion,' but this [excerpt] has no relation to opinions. It is simply revolting," Akunin wrote in a statement published to his Facebook account.

Ekho Moskvyy's website strives to aggregate the most insightful, trending posts produced by Russian-language bloggers. Being one of the most popular media websites in Russia, this platform offers bloggers the opportunity to multiply their readerships.

But despite the benefits that come with heightened visibility, such prominent commentators as economist Konstantin Sonin, opposition blogger Andrei Malgin and media expert Oleg Kozyrev followed Akunin's lead, refusing to allow their works to be published by Ekho Moskvyy going forward.

These departures are not unprecedented.

In an earlier post, Ryabtseva referred to the members of Russia's political opposition as a group of "merciless — and at the same time spineless — jerks who lie to themselves."

In another, she griped: "At work we are surrounded by morons, who neither know nor understand anything."

Interpreting these rants as personal attacks directed at him, Ekho Moskvyy's founding editor Sergei Korzun announced his own resignation from the station in May, citing what he

described as its deterioration of journalistic standards.

Speaking with The Moscow Times on Thursday, Kozyrev speculated that perhaps Venediktov has not been crying himself to sleep at night over the slew of recent resignations and severed ties. Rather, it may all be part of an elaborate PR campaign, Kozyrev suggested.

"I think he may be doing all this in a bid to bolster Ekho Moskvyy's popularity," Kozyrev said in a phone interview.

Still, he expressed doubts about the likelihood of success in this scenario. "I don't understand how you can increase your readership by attacking your core audience," he said.

In the eyes of Vasily Gatov, visiting fellow at the University of Southern California's Annenberg Center on Communication Leadership & Policy, after Russia's annexation of Crimea and the terse diplomatic standoff with the West that followed, the views of Russian society on a whole have shifted, and Ekho Moskvyy is simply ambling to adapt to these changes.

"It is possible that the power of the 86 percent [President Vladimir Putin's latest approval rating, according to a recent Levada Center poll] has become too strong to ignore, so Ekho Moskvyy is endeavoring to adapt to the new situation, and to move more toward the mainstream," he told The Moscow Times.

"On the other hand, in the absence of fresh, new ideas [owing to a brain drain and a lack of competition] these efforts to adapt to the majority are playing out in a very odd manner," he said.

In an apparent bid to assuage the increasingly wary public, Venediktov apologized to "our readers and website visitors who may have felt hurt by the blog posts."

"I urge [everyone] to remember that sometimes tone can override subject matter," he said in a blog post of his own on Thursday.

Meanwhile, Ryabtseva does not seem to be cowering in a fit of remorse. During an interview last week, a journalist with Snob magazine told Ryabtseva that her blog posts were "ignorant trash devoid of any meaning." The 23-year-old brushed off the jab, assuring her interviewer that "everybody reads [her blog posts] anyway."

Ekho Moskvyy has long been championed as the last bastion of the free and impartial press in Russia. In his 2008 profile of the station, David Remnick, editor-in-chief of The New Yorker magazine, said it was his primary source of Russian news and analysis. And fans have often lauded the station for its capacity to highlight the true zeitgeist of modern Russia.

It has earned its share of powerful enemies along the way. Ramzan Kadyrov, the strongman leader of Russia's predominantly Muslim republic of Chechnya, referred to Ekho Moskvyy in January as "the mouthpiece of anti-Islam" and threatened to "call Venediktov into account."

But it has likewise made some powerful friends. Over the years, Venediktov has developed a personal relationship with Putin, enjoying privileged access to Russia's most powerful man.

Nevertheless, Venediktov has long maintained that the only reason he enjoys the luxury of freedom is because the radio station has turned a profit for its main stakeholder, state-run gas giant Gazprom.

Despite the imperative of profits, speaking with *The New Yorker* back in 2008, Venediktov expressed the goal of not being subsumed by the mainstream.

"We are a radio of influence, rather than a mass radio station," Venediktov told Remnick at the time. "If you want to be a mass station, a crowd-pleaser, then we should probably be paying more attention to the life of Paris Hilton. But if we did that then those who are listening to us would not be listening. We'd lose them."

Critics of the current state of affairs at the station fear that is precisely what has happened: Ekho Moskvyy has shifted its priorities, preferring the likes of Paris Hilton to influence.

Over the course of its 25-year history, Ekho — as it is often referred to among the Russian intelligentsia — has become the center of gravity for Russian liberals, the only thing capable of uniting this divergent group of dissidents whose primary weakness has been an inability to form a consolidated political force.

If this magnet loses its pull, the Russian opposition faces further fragmentation.

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