

# Reporters Without Borders

<http://www.rsf.org/russie-wave-of-attempts-to-intimidate-17-02-2012,41904.html>

Europe/Ex-USSR - Russia

Panic?

## Wave of attempts to intimidate independent media in run-up to presidential election

17 February 2012

Reporters Without Borders is extremely concerned by attempts to intimidate independent national media in recent days in Russia.

"Whether the result of a [change in strategy by the Kremlin](#) or simultaneous initiatives by zealous subordinates, these manoeuvres must stop at once," Reporters Without Borders said. "The warning shot fired across radio *Echo of Moscow's* bows by its leading shareholder is the latest in a series of moves to reorganize independent media in the past few months.

"Like the ridiculous charge of being 'in the pay of foreigners,' this devious behaviour above all reflects a growing alarm within the government and its allies about the sizeable opposition movement they are facing for the first time in the run-up to the 4 March presidential election. It also reflects an unacceptable contempt for journalists and belief that they can be easily silenced."

The online television station [Dozhd TV](#) yesterday received a fax from the Moscow prosecutor's office asking it to provide detailed information about "the station's funding for its coverage of the mass demonstrations from 10 to 24 December," in which large marches were staged throughout the country in protest against alleged electoral fraud.

The query was prompted by a request filed in late December by Robert Shlegel, a parliamentary representative of the ruling United Russia party and a former spokesman for the pro-Kremlin youth movement Nashi, who told the media he regarded *Dozhd TV* as an "information sponsor" of the opposition demonstrations. It was important to verify claims that the demonstrations and the coverage of them had been financed "from abroad," Shlegel said.

*Dozhd TV* owner Natalya Sindeyeva announced that the station's lawyers were preparing to respond to the request from the prosecutor's office. She added that the station's running costs were covered by her own resources, funds provided by her husband and what it earned from advertising.

Two days earlier, [Echo of Moscow](#), one of Russia's leading independent broadcast media, announced that its board of directors is to be disbanded on the insistence of its majority shareholder, Gazprom, the partly state-owned natural gas company that is a close Kremlin ally. Acquired by Gazprom in 2001, like the popular TV station *NTV*, *Echo of Moscow* had managed until now to maintain its independence.

Defending its request for changes in the board of directors, Gazprom-Media said it was motivated by a desire to "streamline" the management of its holdings and by the "increased attention being paid to the radio station by various sides." One can only wonder at the request's timing – just weeks before a presidential election and just one month after [Vladimir Putin accused the station](#) of "pouring shit over me from morning till evening."

This is the point made by the station's journalists in a 14 February [statement](#) claiming that they were the victims of political pressure. "We understand that Gazprom-Media has been unable to react to criticism about the station from Russia's highest officials," they said.

Reporters Without Borders said today: "We urge Gazprom-Media to explain why an overhaul

of the station's board of directors is so urgent. The wave of changes in media positions two months after [the dismissal of Kommersant-Vlast's editor in chief](#) is just reinforcing the impression of a generalized attempt to get journalists to toe the line."

In the reshuffle of *Echo of Moscow's* board scheduled for 29 March, Gazprom will get five of the nine seats instead of the four it has now. The newsroom's current representatives, including editor in chief **Alexei Venediktov** and two "independent directors," are to stand down. The journalists have already chosen their replacements and insist that the station's editorial policy will not change. The newsroom's staff is not being changed either.

Gazprom-Media has not responded to offers from *Dozhd TV* owner Sindeyeva and presidential candidate Mikhail Prokhorov to buy its 66 per cent stake in *Echo of Moscow*. In the past, the company had repeatedly turned down similar offers from the station's journalists.

The accusations against *Dozhd TV* have much in common with Prime Minister Putin's claim that the anti-government protesters were [incited by the US State Department](#). One of the targets of [a series of cyber-attacks on independents news websites](#) on the eve of last December's parliamentary elections, *Dozhd TV* already had to defend its coverage of the protests on 5 and 6 December to the Federal Supervisory Agency for Communications (Roskomnadzor).

After closely examining recordings of the station's coverage, the agency concluded that they contained nothing amiss.

Putin is United Russia's candidate in the presidential election being held on 4 March. If he wins, he will recover the position he already held from 2000 to 2008.

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