

More Pressure on Liberal Media as Ekho Moskvyy Gets New CEO

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Yekaterina Pavlova, a former deputy head of the pro-Kremlin Voice of Russia radio station, has been appointed chief executive of opposition-leaning radio station Ekho Moskvyy.

The decision Tuesday triggered speculation that the Kremlin was seeking to bring the station under its control. The news also comes shortly after Dozhd, another independent media outlet, said earlier this month that it may have to shut down because major cable operators had dropped it — and that authorities may have been behind the move.

At a meeting with Ekho Moskvyy staff, Pavlova promised not to change the station's "format" but said she would "optimize expenses," Tatyana Felgengauer, a deputy editor-in-chief at the station, wrote on Twitter.

Pavlova previously worked as a producer and editor at state-controlled Rossia Television from 2000 to 2010 and as a deputy head of Voice of Russia from 2010 to 2013.

Political analyst Dmitry Oreshkin said that Pavlova's appointment marked the beginning of "soft pressure" on Ekho Moskvyy, and that the Kremlin could try to force advertising companies to stop working with the station.

The radio station would then have to seek funding from state-controlled Gazprom Media, which has a 66 percent stake in Ekho Moskvyy, and the new chief executive could say that they need to change the station's editorial policy for that, he said.

Oreshkin said that since the economy is slowing down, and while the situation in neighboring Ukraine is spinning out of control, the Kremlin is trying to maintain stability by cracking down on independent media.

"The Kremlin wants the media to trumpet its victories," he said.

Pavlova's appointment also comes after pro-Kremlin politicians slammed a post published by writer and columnist Viktor Shenderovich on a blog hosted by Ekho Moskvyy. Vladimir Vasilyev, leader of United Russia's faction in the State Duma, urged Ekho Moskvyy to apologize for the post last week, while controversial television anchor Dmitry Kiselyov called Shenderovich a "scumbag" on Sunday.

Ekho Moskvyy's supporters have said the comments were a prelude to a full-blown attack intended to bring the station under Kremlin control. They said that Shenderovich's post — in which he compared the Sochi Olympics to the 1936 Olympics in Nazi Germany — criticized rather than vindicated fascism.

The situation around Ekho Moskvyy shares parallels a scandal linked to Dozhd, when pro-Kremlin politicians lambasted the channel over a poll related to the Siege of Leningrad during World War II. Shortly after the politicians' outcry, major cable operators stopped transmitting the channel.

In another move seen by some as a crackdown on media freedom, television anchor Dmitry Kiselyov, known for his severe criticism of the opposition, was appointed head of the news agency that will replace RIA Novosti, Rossiya Segodnya.

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