

Baltics unite in supporting the independence of the Lithuanian public broadcaster

Latvian Television and Estonian Public Broadcasting are making an appeal to the Lithuanian Parliament (Seimas) for respecting the independence of the Lithuanian National Radio and Television, which came under the threat recently by the initiative of some politicians.

The Lithuanian Parliament (Seimas) is debating the conclusions and proposals by the *ad hoc* Parliamentary Commission, which has been formed to carry out a scrutiny of the LRT management and financial and economic activities. The proposals of the Commission are being debated on the eve of the elections – in 2019 Lithuania will be holding three different elections – presidential, municipal and election to the European Parliament.

“Public broadcasters in all the three Baltic States have played an important role in the struggle for freedom of speech and freedom in general while creating our young democracy. The Baltic States like nobody else know what “state” radio and television means and they don’t want to have such state broadcaster in their own country,” in their statement say Chairman of the Board of the Latvian Television Ivars Belte and Director General of the Estonian Public Broadcasting Erik Roose.

The Commission announced the conclusions of its investigation and their intent to make changes in the LRT management structure aiming to make it more similar to that of state-owned companies.

The Commission proposes to make changes in the Law on LRT reducing the LRT Council powers and functions, to shorten the Council members’ term of office and change their appointment procedure so that it would coincide with term of office of the appointing institutions. The proposed amendment means that politicians in power will have more influence to control the newly appointed LRT Council members.

The more that suggestion to change the principles of the LRT Council formation do not in any way come from the conclusions of the Parliamentary Commission and their aim at increasing the national public broadcaster’s transparency.

The Parliamentary Commission suggests introducing a new collective management body – the Board. The appointment, rights and obligations of its members are, in principle, regulated as set out in the law on Joint-Stock Companies. The number of members could be between 5 and 7. Director General would be the chairman of the Board but the majority of its members should be “independent” members appointed by the LRT Council from the short list provided by the Selection Commission of supervisory boards or boards of state-owned enterprises, which is also a governmental institution. Bearing it in mind, we see it as an alarming sign that politicians in power will attempt to incorporate their supporters to the LRT Board and have a major impact on governance of the Lithuanian public broadcaster.

In the conclusions of the Parliamentary Commission there is a one more threat related to the Lithuanian Radio and Television Commission (LRTK), which shall have the right to apply the sanctions provided for in the legislation in relation to the LRT and LRT Executives. As the Chairman of the LRTK is appointed and accountable to the Parliament it could be understood as interference in the institutional independence of LRT.

Commission suggests to strengthen and expand the Journalist Ethics Inspector’s function enabling the Inspector to perform the public information monitoring in all media, including the monitoring of radio and television programmes. The latter enhances the Inspector’s powers in respect of the LRT content.

Ivars Belte and Erik Roose agree that it is necessary to require transparency and accountability from the national public broadcaster. However, it is not tolerable to make LRT more dependent on political influences – it has nothing to do with principles of democracy, openness, transparency or even freedom of press.