



## **Weekly Briefing**

### **Lithuania social briefing:**

**Lithuania has opened up its terrestrial television network to five  
Polish national television channels**

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## **Lithuania has opened up its terrestrial television network to five Polish national television channels**

This summer the Lithuanian terrestrial television network which consists of 17 free-to-air national channels includes, for the first time, five channels which are programmed by a national television of a neighbouring country; five Polish national television channels have been added in May to the existing 12 national channels, thus making about one third of the free TV offering in one part of Lithuania. The reach of the Polish television is limited to the broadcasting area (entitled “the regional network of Southeast Lithuania”) which has a high number of the Polish-speakers, the main audience of the Polish television in Lithuania. The Poles comprise 6.6% of Lithuania’s population and most of the Polish inhabitants live in the municipality of Vilnius where they make up 23% of the local population. Thus, a special Polish-language channel “TVP Wilno” is being planned to be launched for the inhabitants of Vilnius by the Polish national television.

The start of the rebroadcast of the Polish television channels in early May followed the announcement of the Lithuanian radio and television commission in late June that, according to the latest survey, the content of the television programming of Russian origin on the Lithuanian national channels has significantly decreased over the last year. The analysis quoted by the authorities showed that the weekly content of the television content of Russian origin has been reduced by one fifth - from 95 hours 33 minutes to 75 hours 6 minutes.

Below is a brief overview of the television broadcasting policies in Lithuania in relation to the regulation of television broadcasts from the neighbouring countries, explaining the rationale of the decisions taken within the context of the perceived security considerations as related to the control of information in certain cases.

Television has a very particular place in the imagery of sovereignty and freedom of the nation of Lithuania. On 13 January 1991, the Soviet army units took over the television tower in Vilnius, which has been a landmark symbol of the city since the 1980s; the violent acts perpetrated resulted in human deaths and numerous injuries of the civilians who came to protect the television tower in a sign of an unwavering support for the country’s move towards independence. Ever since this tragic episode has become linked to the epitome of an unarmed resistance of the civil society that helped to restore the independence of the country.

During the first decade of independent Lithuania, the local television channels were struggling to survive due to the lack of adequate resources and advertising revenue, even if some of the private channels were controlled by major business groups. In order to lower the programming costs, a number of these channels embarked on broadcasting a lower-cost content, which in many cases originated in Russia. This was also due to the fact that being a society in transition at the time Lithuania could easier relate to some of the content of the Russian television programmes compared to the ones from the West. Besides, the audiences in Lithuania have been able to follow the Russian-language programmes thanks to learning Russian as a second language during the Soviet period. This led to the proliferation of the Russian-language content on the national televisions and through the cable networks. A decade ago the situation was such that the Russian programming content in some national channels comprised up to half of all broadcasted content. Though the Law on the Provision of Information to the Public required all content to be broadcasted with subtitles, the influence of Russian television programming on the Lithuanian television viewers was overwhelming.

The situation has started to change due to the security concerns raised as related to the negative influence of the Russian state-sponsored media on the democratic processes in Lithuania and elsewhere, which especially exacerbated after the annexation of Crimea five years ago. Already in 2013, the Russian-language television channel “PBK” (“The first Baltic channel”, in operation since 2003) was put under the scrutiny by the Lithuanian regulators due to the misrepresentation of the tragic events of January 13, 1991. As a result of that several programmes by PBK were banned. Several programmes that were broadcasted on the Russian television channels, including “NTV Mir” and “RTR TV Baltic”, were banned in 2014 and in later years.

In 2015 Lithuania became the first country to introduce the ban on the rebroadcasts of several Russian television channels over the cable networks, including the channel “RTR Planeta”. The litigation process between the owners of the affected Russian television channels and the national regulator took place in the subsequent years but this did not change the situation. The ban was renewed in the following years. As a result of the series of bans and restrictions put on programming, by 2017 several major Russian television channels which have broadcasted globally through the cable networks were put outside the reach of the terrestrial television audiences in Lithuania. These decisions were further enforced by administrative means.

In order to answer the needs of the Russian-speaking population to access the information on television in their native language, in 2017 the government made a decision to introduce into the national broadcasting network a 24-hour Russian-language channel Current Time. The channel was set up in 2017 by the Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty and Voice of America and is being financed by the US Congress via the Broadcasting Board of Governors aimed to counter the information originating from Russia in the region. The broadcasts of Current Time in Lithuania started on 1 September last year covering 98,3% of the audiences in Lithuania.

As concerning the needs of the Polish-speaking population, Lithuania's government endorsed the initiative of the Polish government giving a go-ahead to the project that would see the rebroadcasting of five Polish national television channels in the south-east of Lithuania – initially for a year. Interestingly, during the Soviet period the inhabitants of the southwestern part of Lithuania were able to receive two Polish national television channels which provided them with view into the world behind the Iron Curtain and the ability to follow the Polish television was cited by the contemporaries as having a beneficial impact on their worldview.

The rebroadcasting of five Polish national channels (TVP Polonia, TVP Info, TVP Historia, NUTA.TV and Power) for the regions in the south-east of Lithuania was commissioned by Lithuania's Ministry of Transportation which is responsible for the telecommunication policy. The project is being implemented by the Lithuanian radio and television center and the financing of the rebroadcasts is provided by the Lithuanian government.

The ban on rebroadcasting certain content in order to safeguard the informational domain for public security reasons is not unique to Lithuania. Over the last few years Latvia, Ukraine, and Moldova have each at different levels of intensity enacted bans on certain channels or restricted the access to the content on television originating from Russia. The bans were introduced because, as the national regulators argued, the Russian television channels were undermining the democratic processes resulting in disinformation of population. A report produced last year by the the Foreign Policy Council "Ukrainian Prism" and a Polish think-tank the Eurasian States in Transition Research Center (EAST Center), entitled "Disinformation Resilience in Central and Eastern Europe", contains a detailed assessment of fourteen Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries from the perspective of their vulnerability and readiness to react to disinformation from outside. The country assessment is based on the study which was carried out with support from the International Visegrad Fund, the Government of the Kingdom of Netherlands, the Black Sea Trust for Regional Cooperation.

The analysed countries were assessed using the developed “Disinformation Resilience Index” (DRI). The DRI is composed of three composite indicators, namely 1) the level of population exposure to the pro-Kremlin media (measured according cultural, historical and other affinities, Russian media popularity, trust ratings of Russian media, popularity of national media transmitting pro-Kremlin narratives and vulnerable groups), 2) the quality of systemic responses (measured according to institutional development, legal regulations, long-term approach, countermeasures in relation to vulnerable groups, civil society response, media community regulations), and 3) vulnerability to digital warfare (measured according to popularity of Russian social media, national online platforms spreading pro-Kremlin content, digital legislation and the presence of debunking narratives).

According to this survey, Lithuania has a medium exposure to the pro-Kremlin media influence (2 out of 4) which is on the same level as in the Czech Republic, slightly lower than in Estonia (2,1) and significantly lower than in Slovakia (2,5) and Latvia (2,9), yet higher than in Poland, Hungary and Romania (1,3 in all three cases). In terms of the level of quality of systemic responses Lithuania is assessed moderately (2,1 out of 4 where the higher score indicates the worse quality), yet it is still the second best performance; out of all 15 CEE countries examined in this report only Estonia is a clear leader in terms of systemic responses (1,6 out of 4) with the worse performance reported for Moldova (3 out of 4), Slovakia (2,9 out of 4), Hungary and Georgia (2,8 each). However, in terms of digital warfare vulnerability (where the higher score indicates the country’s larger vulnerability to masked sources of disinformation), Lithuania is a clear leader among the analysed countries being scored 1,8 out of 4.

The assessment of the countries’ readiness to take reactive or preventive measures against disinformation efforts such as by introducing the banks on the television content or even the television channels originating in the countries which are linked to security concerns or even threats is based on the assumption that a certain segment of inhabitants is “a vulnerable group” which is more vulnerable to the external influences than the rest of society. This concept has been explored by the foreign policy analysts assessing the causes for the effectiveness of certain media campaigns involving the Russian media outlets. In 2016 Cornelia Bjola from Oxford University and James Pamment from Lund University described explained in their article for the journal “Global Affairs” that vulnerability of a certain social group is arising due to the disenfranchisement from mainstream media, or lack of access to balanced information sources. Thus, accordingly, the vulnerable audiences in Lithuania are those which have a restricted

access to the mainstream information sources due to their social-economic conditions which impact their level of linguistic skills and digital skills which are prerequisite to gain access to the information content which, in the case of Lithuania, is mostly available through the internet sources. By becoming restricted in their choice of communication media (a terrestrial free television) and the language of this medium (Russian), parts of society can become a vulnerable group to the influences if no alternative options are available to them.

In reflecting the above, on the occasion of launching the regional broadcasts of the Polish channels, the Prime Minister was quoted on the record saying that “by talking with the people in this region I once again understood that the Government has to make concrete steps in order to allow access for local inhabitants the access to more varied information sources”. He underscored that the Polish channels are not an alternative to the Lithuanian channels but the means to ensure the need of society to be more informed.

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