



Weekly Briefing

Latvia social briefing:
Strengthening the independence and capacity of public media in
Latvia
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Introduction

In October Latvian Parliament supported the draft law on public electronic media (public media) and their management to ensure efficient and transparent management, independence and responsibility of public media before society, as well as promotion of quality work. The discussion went on how to strengthen the independence of the media in Latvia and not allow political appointments of editors-in-chief for public media. Doubts were expressed that Public Electronic Mass Media Council¹ (new supervising authority for public electronic mass media which will complement existing national supervisor – National Electronic Mass Media Council²) may not be enough to cope with all the tasks, and there is a question of the Council's independence, as its three board members will be appointed by President, Parliament and Council for Implementation of the Cooperation Memorandum between Non-governmental Organizations and the Cabinet of Ministers accordingly.

However, the Human Rights and Public Affairs Committee of the Parliament, who is responsible of foundation of new Public Electronic Mass Media Council, explained that one should trust the Council, which will approve the editor of electronic media. The task of the editor would be to monitor the implementation of the social media guidelines developed by the Council. The editor monitors the implementation of the guidelines not from the side-lines, but together with the Board, and if necessary tells the Board that we need to talk about this and that, and “the Board opens the wallet and looks at the possibilities and implements the guidelines”, the Committee explained. It is expected that Latvian media will be strengthened by this decision.

¹ Public Electronic Mass Media Council (PEMMC) – a newly-founded independent supervising authority & holder of state capital shares in public media in Latvia that, in accordance with its competence, will represent the public interest in the field of public electronic media.

² National Electronic Mass Media Council (NEMMC) – the current Latvian independent, autonomous institution that represents the public interest in the field of electronic mass media. The Council supervises the compliance of the operations of electronic mass media with the Constitution of the Republic of Latvia, Electronic mass media law and other relevant legislation.

Public Media Law has been finalizing - one more step towards foundation of Public Electronic Mass Media Council

On 20 October 2020, the Human Rights and Public Affairs Committee of the Parliament supported in the third reading the legislative draft “On Public Electronic Mass Media and Their Management”³. Its goal is ensuring efficient and transparent management, independence and responsibility before society, as well as promotion of quality work in public media. “The legislative draft is large and vitally important for Latvia’s public media sector. It will form a new framework for public media. Finally, the functions of the Public Electronic Mass Media Council will be divided. This will ensure the Council is not simultaneously responsible for both monetary and supervisory topics” the Committee’s chairman Artuss Kaimiņš previously said. **It is intended that the new law will outline the strategic goal of public electronic mass media, their legal status, operations, financing, management and monitoring principles.**

The legislative draft states that public electronic mass media are capital associations in which all capital shares are owned by the state. The newly-founded the Public Electronic Mass Media Council (PEMMC) will be the holder of state capital shares in public media.

PEMMC will consist of three members. One will be picked by the State President, one – by the Parliament, and the last one – by the Council for Implementation of the Cooperation Memorandum between Non-governmental Organizations and the Cabinet of Ministers. The legislative draft details multiple requirements a person needs to meet in order to become eligible for a post there. For example, candidates are not allowed to be members of political parties or associations of political parties. Editorial policy formation will be the responsibility of the editor in chief of public media. It is also possible that PEMMC members may be allowed to be elected for repeated terms, but no more than twice in a row. In turn, the members of the council will be elected from among themselves for one year.

Thus, it is expected that the PEMMC will be independent, and it will be an opportunity to form a professional team, and members of the Council’s board will not be allowed to use their authority to directly or indirectly influence editorial decisions of public media.

The legislative draft submitted in October states that state budget grants for implementation of public orders will not be allowed to be lower than their value of the previous

³ <https://balticnewsdesk.com/baltic-news-network-news-from-latvia-lithuania-estonia-one-more-step-made-on-the-path-towards-foundation-of-seplp/>

year. It will be prohibited to post all kinds of commercial announcements anywhere in the programmes presented by public media, including the internet.

The new draft law also provides for the establishment of a public electronic media ombudsman. It is planned that it will monitor the compliance of the services provided by public electronic media with the purpose and basic principles set out in the draft law, as well as the codes of ethics and editorial guidelines for public media. It is also envisaged that the Ombudsman will have the right to address the Parliament with a reasoned submission, urging the removal of a PEMMC member or the entire Council, if the ombudsman has established that the Council member's actions or omissions pose a threat to the editorial independence of public media.

Public media will receive an additional 10 to 12 million euros for public media over five years

In October the Human Rights and Public Affairs Committee of the Parliament decided that the future PEMMC will have to submit a concept on a public electronic media funding model, which would envisage, among other things, reaching the European average funding level within five years. This would mean an increase in funds for public media from 36 million to 48 million euros, which would be an additional 12 million euros.

The Human Rights and Public Affairs Committee supported the law stipulating that the concept of PEMMC would have to be submitted to the Committee within six months of the establishment of PEMMC. The document will need to provide a funding model that will provide independent, adequate and predictable funding for public service media. PEMMC will also have to develop another concept from six months after its creation: the creation and operation of a unified public electronic media.

In Latvian Television programs, at least 10% of the broadcast time will have to be provided for audio-visual works by Latvian independent producers

The Human Rights and Public Affairs Committee of the Parliament decided that in Latvian Television programs, at least 10% of broadcasting time will have to be provided for audiovisual works made by Latvian independent producers. Independent producers had initially suggested 15% instead of the above 10%, explaining that the proportion should be set so that the independent production industry has a clearly defined place and perspective for working with the public media.

Representatives of the industry pointed out that independent producers have formed an important part of Latvia's electronic media culture and social memory since the 1990s and are “the history of Latvian culture and recent times, without which a high - quality Latvian - language media environment is unthinkable”, is claimed in the letter from the independent producers to the Committee.

Additional 30 000 euros are granted to Latvian public media with regard to Covid-19

On Tuesday, 20 October, the Government decided to allocate 30 930 euros to the National Electronic Mass Media Council (NEMMC) from contingency fund. It is planned that additional funding will cover the costs of creating and distributing additional content related to Covid-19, as well as the costs of epidemiological safety measures in the Republic of Latvia, which are necessary to reduce the risk of employees and interviewees becoming infected with Covid-19.

The recent informative report prepared by the Ministry of Culture on the impact of the Covid-19 emergency on the financial capacity of public media to ensure the fulfilment of the public order has indicated that the Latvian Radio needs an additional 17 098 euros, which after 20 October decision will be transferred to cover the costs of creating and distributing additional content related to Covid-19.

Summary

In October Latvian government and Parliament was occupied with public media support issues. First, legislative draft “On Public Electronic Mass Media and Their Management” (Public Media Law) was submitted for third reading by the Human Rights and Public Affairs Committee of the Parliament. Public Electronic Mass Media Council (PEMMC) operation conditions and management rules were developed, as well as procedure for appointment of Board members. PEMMC will have to submit a concept on a public electronic media funding model, which would envisage, among other things, reaching the European average funding level within five years. PEMMC will also have to develop another concept from six months after its creation: the creation and operation of a unified public electronic media.

Also, the Parliament of Latvia supported decision to provide more broadcasting time on Latvian television to independent producers.

In October there is also additional funding granted to Latvian mass media (Latvian Radio and Latvian Television) to cope with Covid-19 crisis consequences and produce new content related to informing population about Covid-19 safety measures.