



Weekly Briefing

Slovenia political briefing:
Government puts pressure on Slovenian Press Agency
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Government puts pressure on Slovenian Press Agency

Summary

Since the first month of the current Janez Janša government, one of targets of its criticism is the Slovenian Press Agency, the main national news provider. While the Prime Minister often expressed his pejorative opinions about its work, the main pressure was exerted by government Communication Office and its head Uroš Urbanija. The demands to the agency to disclose its editorial decisions and content policies which were rejected by the agency and its director Bojan Veselinovič, resulted in a financing freeze in late 2020 and then again since the first month of 2021. Despite the wide criticism in Slovenia and abroad and even a recent European Commission decision on the issue, it is still unclear how long the current government will continue to reject the funding of the agency.

Background: Slovenian Press Agency

Slovenian Press Agency is the national press agency and the leading provider of news from Slovenia and abroad for media outlets and the general public. It started operating on June 20, 1991, just days before the proclamation of the independent Republic of Slovenia. In the early period it thus served as an important service for the newly established country, replacing the all-Yugoslav press agency Tanjug and serving as an important provider of news about the developments in Slovenia for foreign news services and media in general. This service was especially crucial during and after the military conflict, the “ten days’ war” in June/July 1991. The special legislation, Slovenian Press Agency Act that was adopted in July 2011, determines that Slovenian Press Agency is public service provider for constant, complete, accurate and objective information about what is happening in Slovenia and the world for the needs of public in Slovenia and beyond its borders, both in Slovenian and English language. As of now, Slovenian Press Agency employs over 80 journalists and other staff. It operates in its central office in Ljubljana and has correspondents from other parts of Slovenia and different world locations. The work is organized in editorial offices for internal politics, foreign politics, economy, sports, culture etc. First foreign correspondent office opened in 1995 in Brussels, while today it also has offices in Zagreb and New York. The English language service is an

important part of Slovenian Press agency activities, being the leading news provider in English language in Slovenia, mostly catering to all main world press agencies, embassies, foreign citizens and foreign businesses in Slovenia. Slovenian Press Agency is a member of the European Alliance of News Agencies (EANA) and the International Press Telecommunications Council (IPTC). Other important services provided by the agency are photographic and audio service, a large archive of more than 2 million news items, half million photography and 70,000 audio recordings and other derived information (infographics, chronologies, tables, lists etc.).

Conflict between the Janez Janša government and the Slovenian Press Agency

Soon after the current government was sworn in in mid-March 2020, Prime Minister Janez Janša started twitting comments about the agency. The first attack occurred after the agency published news about how international organisations expressed their worries about journalist Blaž Zgaga, a critic of Janša's policies, being targeted by the new Prime Minister. Janša labelled the agency to be »the ventilator of fake news«. After it became clear that the new Slovenian Democrats' led government saw the current functioning of the Slovenian Press Agency as a potential threat, it was of not much surprise that in summer an amendment to the Slovenian Press Agency Act was proposed by the Ministry of Culture, changing the way supervisory board members of the agency were to be selected. Previously selected by the National Assembly, the amended act now gave this power to the government directly, while also abolishing the regulation that the agency was not allowed to be dependent on any ideological, political, or economic body. Although the proposal was published – and subsequently widely criticized – it has not yet been submitted to the parliament procedure. After critical Twitter remarks by the Prime Minister followed, the situation started worsening considerably in October, when the pressure onto the agency started to come from the government's Communication Office. The office is currently led by a long-time collaborator of Prime Minister Janša and a founding member of the far-right media company and TV station Nova24TV Uroš Urbanija. Following the open letter of 22 Slovenian media editors expressing their determination not to succumb to the political pressures, where one of the signees was the Slovenian Press Agency editor-in-chief Barbara Štrukelj, the Communications office started pressing the agency with specific requests. Slovenian Press Agency was requested to present different types of information and documents about its functioning, among those also information about the news content statistics and explanations for certain editorial decisions. After the Slovenian Press Agency refused to supply the Communication office with the problematic information, the Communication Office stopped the financing of public service to

the Agency in November 2020. At the backdrop of the disagreements on who is responsible for the working and financing of the agency – the government or its Communication office – and while the heated debates were going on in public and media, the freeze of funding continued for three months. At the end of 2020 the pressure by Communication Office continues with another unusual variation on the debate on the jurisdiction over the agency- an attempt by the office director Urbanija, to press charges against the director of the agency for having signed the financing contact with his office instead of directly with the government – only to be rejected by the District State Attorney's Office.

Recent developments

In December the National Assembly's Committee for Culture demanded of the government to start financing the agency again in one month, but the government fails to follow this instruction. These three months are paid retroactively only in January 2021, partly due to the responses from the European Commission. Second freeze started in February when the Communication Office rejected the invoice of the agency for the public service done in January. This second freeze continues to this day. In Early March the negotiations between the Communication Office and the Slovenian Press Agency for the yearly commercial contract for the package of agency's services for the government administration also fail, forcing the agency to stop providing its services to the ministries and government offices for the first time in 29 years after its establishment. In what was commented in media as an attempt to replace the Slovenian Press Agency another press agency, called National Press Agency, was established by a Slovenian Democrats' member Aleš Ernecl, but its prospects were short-lived. After having publicly bragged – in an interview with Canadian far right white supremacist Molyneux – about having successfully established a »new fascist media outlet« – even the Slovenian Democrats decided to distance themselves from previously close cooperation with him.

Soon after the failure of the February negotiations between the Communication Office and Slovenian Press Agency, Prime Minister Janša publicly called the director of the agency to resign, while a week later the government issued a proposal to the supervisory board of the agency to discharge its director Bojan Veselinovič. At the same time, government adopted a proposal for the Ministry of Interior to review the functioning of the agency and to inspect the actions of the supervisory board members. The employment inspection follows in late March, with the results still not final. While the supervisory board of the agency does not follow the

suggestions of the government, the pressure on them is growing as well. On April 15, a police unit starts a home-investigation of the head of the Supervisory Board, Mladen Terčelj.

In a surprising series of events in the last week of April, Slovenian Press Agency publicly submitted the requested documentation to the Communication Office, only to be rejected by them with an excuse that they are not the responsible institution. A day later the documents were sent back, this time by the Prime Minister's Cabinet, but the Agency refused to receive them. In the last days of April the standstill was interrupted by a decision by the European Commission to approve the 2.5 million of direct financing of the press agency that Slovenia notified as state aid in January. This decision was a result of the government interpretation that the financing freeze in January had to follow European Commission's approval of this funding, although the Commission representatives have already stated at that time that their approval was by no means needed.

Conclusion

After a year of government putting pressure on the Slovenian Press Agency, mostly conducted through the government's Communication Office, the recent development with the decision European Commission still leaves the situation pending. It is unclear whether the government will fulfil its obligation of financing the Slovenian Press Agency for its public service determined by the legislation or it will find another explanation why this will not be done. If the latter happens, the survival of the agency and the future of the main Slovenian news provider is seriously threatened.