

The capture of RTVS represents a direct assault on media freedom

We urge EU institutions and other international bodies to utilise their powers to safeguard media freedom in Slovakia.

At a time when the majority of EU countries acknowledged the importance of public service media in combating disinformation, the government under Robert Fico has chosen to dismantle this institution in Slovakia. Instead, a broadcaster that will be under direct political control is to be established. This intent is clear from the draft legislation that seeks to abolish the current public broadcaster RTVS and replace it with a new entity, which will fall under the direct influence of the current administration.

The current director general, Ľuboš Machaj, offered the following commentary on the situation: "I firmly believe that the changes proposed by the legislature are intentional and run counter to the principles of European protection of public service media as outlined by international standards. It is worth noting that these standards are binding for Slovakia." "

What is changing:

- RTVS will be discontinued, and Slovak Television and Radio (STaR) will be established in its stead.
- The role of the RTVS director will be terminated as of the law's effective date, despite his term running until 2027. His successor, along with the director of STaR, will no longer be elected by Parliament but by the Council of Slovak Television and Radio instead.
- The RTVS Council will be dissolved, with the tenure of its members concluding upon the law's enactment.
- The composition and appointment method for the Council's members will see changes: their number will be reduced from nine to seven. Two of these members will be directly appointed by the Minister of Culture, one by the Minister of Finance, and the remaining four will be elected by the National Council of the Slovak Republic.
- Additionally, the Council will acquire new authority to dismiss the Director without needing to provide a reason.
- A new entity, the Programme Council, will be established to evaluate and oversee the programming "in terms of its adherence to the public service broadcasting ethos". It will comprise 11 members, with nine elected by Parliament and two by the staff from among their ranks.
- The Programme Board will be endowed with significant powers, as it will have the authority to

terminate the Director of STaR should he fail to "address deficiencies in public service broadcasting within a given timeframe or without adequate justification, as determined by the Programme Board..

The Bigger Picture: Implications on Media Freedom

- Independent media serves as a cornerstone of democracy. The proposed changes will significantly undermine democracy in Slovakia, leading to a likely decline in the country's standing on the Reporters Without Borders index. Viktor Orbán took a decade to dominate the media landscape in Hungary; Robert Fico has considerably less time at his disposal.
- The draft legislation stands in stark contrast to the European Freedom of the Media Act, which aims to establish a unified framework for media services within the EU internal market. The proposed law includes measures to guard against political meddling in editorial choices, highlighting the necessity for the independence and secure financing of public service media, alongside the transparency of media ownership and the distribution of state advertising. Furthermore, it introduces provisions to safeguard editorial independence and reveal conflicts of interest.
- European Commission Vice President Věra Jourová, who played a pivotal role in proposing the legislation, remarked that "the new draft law on RTVS may spell the demise of independent journalism within Slovakia's public service media."

Planned Legislative Timeline

- The legislation has been subjected to an abbreviated inter-ministerial commentary procedure and, as a result, will be open for comments for a mere eight days. Subsequently
- Subsequently, the bill is to be presented to the government's legislative council. According to the ministry, it is anticipated that the bill will be submitted to the cabinet in March 2024.
- Following approval by the cabinet, the draft will be forwarded to Parliament, where it will undergo discussion at both the first and second readings, the latter of which will be preceded by a committee hearing.
- The timeframe estimated for the enactment of this law is three months. There exists a possibility that the President may choose not to sign the bill, opting instead to return it to Parliament.
- President Caputová's current term is set to conclude on 15 June 2024.

Call to action:

As representatives of the undersigned organisations, we firmly oppose the government coalition's

new legislative proposal. In our view, this proposal signifies the termination of independent public broadcasting in Slovakia and stands in contradiction to the European Act on Freedom of the Media. We echo the sentiments of over 800 RTVS employees who demand the withdrawal of this proposal, cautioning that the suggested reform must not become an instrument of political control over RTVS by any government authority. We back the efforts of these employees to spark a nationwide discussion on the future of public service media as a bastion of independent journalism and cultural production.

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