

Ljubljana, 13th of July 2020

Respect for independent, integrous and unbiased journalism is a key element of any democratic country governed by the rule of law. The Slovenian Press Agency (STA) is concerned and surprised about the government-proposed changes to several media laws, including the Slovenian Press Agency Law. We have been neither informed about the changes to the law which took effect in 2011 and was drafted with the purpose to ensure managerial and financial independence and autonomy for the STA, nor were we in any way involved in the process. Neither was the broader public, while the government decided to limit the public consultation period to only 5 business days.

Established 30 years ago next year, the STA has developed into a modern multimedia company in the course of the past decade. Apart from performing its public service of informing the public, it also provides information services to a majority of national and local media, key state institutions, political, business and civil spheres, and the international public. Its core services have been expanded with a variety of new products and innovative solutions, while the agency also cooperates in a number of international projects, both development-oriented and commercial. The STA and its team represent a respectable, credible and innovative media outfit in Slovenia, which is also demonstrated by a high level of trust and satisfaction expressed by its subscribers and users. The existing legislation ensures full transparency of operation and finances, with the agency's annual business reports having faced no criticism in either chambers of parliament ever since the law took effect. The STA operates successfully, transparently and in the public interest.

The legislative changes proposed by the government would constitute a significant interference in the public funding of the STA and in its governance. The STA would no longer be funded directly from the budget, a source that has come to represent an decreasing share of its total funding, but would receive a part of the RTV Slovenija subscription fee. Its supervisory board would no longer be appointed by the National Assembly, but directly by the government. Changes are also planned concerning the recall of the general manager and the appointment of the editor-in-chief.

Handing appointments back into the hands of the government would be a massive setback for the autonomy and independence of the STA. Under the existing law, the agency's supervisors

are appointed by the National Assembly with an absolute majority, and they in turn appoint the general manager through an open call for application. This guarantees that a plurality of interests are represented in the process. The proposed changes, however, open the doors to attempts at direct influence on editorial policy at each change of government, destabilising editorial policy. It is notable that Slovenia has had six different governments since the Slovenian Press Agency Law took effect in 2011, but the agency has remained stable, following a clearly outlined editorial policy and development course. The Slovenian Press Agency Law is based on the French legislation regulating the operations of the French press agency, the AFP, which clearly states that the agency must not, under any circumstances, be affected by influences and views that would compromise the accuracy and integrity of its reporting, meaning the agency must not be dependent, legally or actually, on any ideological, political or economic group. We find it telling that this provision would be struck out of the Slovenian Press Agency Law under the changes proposed by the government.

We are especially concerned about interferences planned in media legislation in general, above all in independent public services, which includes the public broadcaster RTV Slovenija. Subordination of the media to the politicians currently in power, which is indicated in several other proposed changes to media legislation, as well as numerous public statements of the biggest government party, are a clear cause for alarm in 21st century Europe, especially considering scenarios that have already played out in other countries. The proposed changes are not a step towards helping the media or adapting the legislation to new technologies, nor an instrument to promote the development of the sector, they show the intention of the government to expand its political interests to a field where these have no place.

If the state in its capacity of the owner of the STA (and RTV Slovenija) wants to ensure long-term stability of STA's operation and help other media, it should increase budget funding for the public service, and help other media with fiscal policy measures and solutions put in place seen in other countries. A key value of democracy is on the line – freedom and independence of journalism, and we urge you to use your voice and influence against such interferences in Slovenian media.

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STA Journalists' Representation,
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Members of the STA editorial board

