



ASSOCIATION OF EUROPEAN JOURNALISTS

OPEN LETTER FROM THE ASSOCIATION OF EUROPEAN JOURNALISTS

To Mr Piotr Gliński, Deputy Premier, Minister of Culture and National Heritage;

and Mr Krzysztof Czabański, Deputy Minister of Culture and National Heritage

29 December 2015

Dear Deputy Prime Minister Gliński and Minister Czabański,

We write to express the serious concerns of the Association of European Journalists (AEJ) about the proposals outlined by members of the new Law and Justice Party (PiS) government for reforms that are intended to ‘transform’ Poland’s public broadcasting system.

The AEJ is deeply concerned that the proposed reforms, if implemented, would effectively bring public service television and radio under the direct control of the government, involve the dismissal of respected journalists for political reasons, and lead to a systematic editorial bias in the content of PBS broadcasts in favour of the present government.

Our fears have been raised by public ministerial comments suggesting that the management board of the key public broadcasting organisations may in future be chosen in a such a way that it represents exclusively the priorities and wishes of the Law and Justice Party, and that journalists who question or criticise government policies and actions may be arbitrarily dismissed. We consider that the government’s announced intention to adopt such fundamental changes within a matter of just a few weeks shows excessive haste and a worrying lack of moderation and transparency in a matter of vital concern to the general public.

Our confidence is further undermined by your government’s hasty action in forcing through parliament a law containing changes to the system of appointing judges and other measures that threaten to undermine the independence of Poland’s Constitutional Court, so watering down or removing necessary checks on the government’s power.

In view of these concerns we urge you at once to halt the work which you have embarked on to prepare such drastic and apparently one-sided plans. Instead, we ask you to delay any reforms until the issues have been fully and publicly aired in an inclusive public debate, with proper account taken of diverse views and opinions. We urge you to make a public commitment that any changes will include the necessary safeguards to ensure respect for the essential principles of public service broadcasting, including independence and impartiality.

In this context we expect and recommend that the Polish Government will be guided by the Declaration on Public Service Media Governance and the related Recommendation which were unanimously adopted by the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe, including Poland, on 15 February 2012. The Declaration states inter alia that:

„The primary mission of public service media is to support general interest objectives such as social progress, public awareness of democratic processes, intercultural understanding and societal integration, and to achieve this through a varied and high quality mix of content. As an important public source of unbiased information and diverse political opinions, public service media must remain independent from political or economic interference and achieve high editorial standards of impartiality, objectivity and fairness”.

The text of the Declaration adds, significantly, that *„public media should be subject to constant scrutiny and be accountable and transparent when performing their functions, as they have the obligation to serve the public in all its diversity.”*

It is clear to us that these principles will not be upheld unless you give up the declared intention of rushing to push through reforms which would inevitably be seen as partisan and undemocratic.

We urge you also to bear in mind that the proposed reforms, as they have so far been outlined, will undoubtedly dismay those in Eastern Partnership countries such as Ukraine, Armenia and Moldova who are striving to achieve free and fair public media, as well as those in Russia who are struggling for free expression and independent public service media as important elements of democratic politics.

We respectfully ask you, therefore, to heed our sincere concerns and to take steps to ensure that any reforms to public media are in line with the principles outlined by the Council of Europe.

Yours Sincerely,

Otmar Lahodynsky, AEJ President

William Horsley, AEJ Vice President & Media Freedom Representative -

Krzysztof Bobinski, AEJ Poland