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Press Release

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Television in Lithuania in need of reforms, new report says

Television, the main source of information for citizens, is a pillar of democracy. According to a new report on the situation of television in Lithuania, both public service broadcasting and commercial television in the Baltic state still require reforms in order to offer citizens access to quality information.

The report, drafted by a journalist Arturas Racas, is released on 6 June 2008 in Vilnius in cooperation with the Lithuanian Center for Independent Journalism. It is part of the Open Society Institute monitoring series, “*Television across Europe: Follow-up Reports 2008*”. The series updates the analysis in nine of the twenty countries that were covered in the 2005 series of reports, “*Television across Europe: regulation, policy and independence*”, including Lithuania.

According to the report, the public service broadcaster, Lithuanian National Radio and Television (LRT), has managed to increase its overall market share over recent years, in contrast with the general European trend. Furthermore, LRT has substantially increased its commercial revenue, following a Constitutional Court ruling that it must be allowed to compete for advertising and raise other commercial revenue.

These achievements, however, have come at a price. The quality of television output has declined. Public-service output in the less commercial strands has lost ground to entertainment, music and reality shows. The quantity of feature films and ‘soaps’ almost trebled from 2005 to 2007, and the share of European works on LTV has fallen in recent years, though not as sharply as the proportion of independent productions.

The planned introduction of a licence fee – to ensure a key source of stable, politically independent funding for LRT – was dropped from new legislation. As a result, LRT remains completely dependent on a flow of discretionary State subsidies. This report argues that LRT cannot flourish without stable, long-term funding, if not from a licence fee levied on the public, then from a system of guaranteed State subsidies. These new funding arrangements should involve restrictions – if not an outright ban – on access to advertising.

Commercial television in Lithuania is also strong and economically viable. Even after its recent success, LRT's overall share is much less than either of its principal commercial rivals, (LNK and TV3.) However, ownership and regulation remain a cause of concern.

In Lithuania there are no legal limits to concentration and cross-ownership. Also, the regulatory system as a whole is too fragmented and lacks clear authority – as well as resources – to intervene on issues affecting quality, diversity, independent production, and the public-service obligations of commercial broadcasters. The report, which includes a series of concrete and specific recommendations, urges that restrictions on advertising be strengthened, and more robustly enforced. The approach of digitalisation adds urgency to these tasks.