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How to Reform a Public Broadcaster Without Capturing It

Dorita Visalgienė, Dmitrij Kulik, Alius Kubilius, Arūnas Burinskas

A Reform That Did Not End the Debate

In June 2026, after months of dispute, Lithuania adopted, and the President signed Law No. XV-981, reforming the legal framework for LRT, Lithuania's national public broadcaster. The text that was finally signed was more restrained than some of the earlier drafts that had alarmed critics. It included explicit language protecting editorial independence, narrowed the grounds for dismissing the Director General, and added procedural protections. Several provisions that had drawn criticism were narrowed or removed.

Still, the signature did not settle the argument. The Lithuanian case is worth looking at beyond Lithuania because the law improved, yet the argument over safeguards continued. This is especially relevant at a time when public service media governance and financing are once again contested issues in Central Europe. The question is familiar to many democracies: how can a public broadcaster be made more accountable without giving political institutions practical leverage over the institution that is supposed to provide independent public-interest journalism?

LRT is not an ordinary public body. Citizens fund it, and it must be accountable for how it uses public money. At the same time, it exists to inform those citizens, including when government, parliament, or powerful interests are uncomfortable with scrutiny. That tension is built into public service media: the same institution must spend public money responsibly and remain able to scrutinize those who allocate it. Weak oversight erodes trust; oversight routed too closely through political institutions can erode independence.

Why Accountability Became a Safeguards Question

The reform debate began with governance and accountability. Audit findings and the public discussion that followed raised questions about management, internal controls, and the use of public resources. These issues could not be dismissed as merely political. Public broadcasters need credible internal governance, transparent procedures, and responsible use of funds. Independence is not a license to avoid scrutiny.

The dispute escalated when the reform moved into the institutional architecture surrounding LRT: the Council, the Director General, a new Board, a Council Bureau, rules on leadership dismissal, financing, and editorial autonomy. Each of these rules affects where practical power over LRT sits. They determine not only whether the broadcaster is supervised, but also who can influence it, how leadership can be pressured, and whether oversight can become a channel of control.

What Changed in the Final Law

The final text did improve in several important places. Start with editorial independence. The law states that LRT carries out its mission independently and impartially, without political or other external influence over the content it creates and disseminates or over editorial decisions. It also places editorial policy guidelines in the hands of the heads of LRT's radio and television news services and the chief editor of LRT's online portal. For a reform criticized as a possible route into editorial influence, this wording matters.

The law also narrowed the rules for dismissing the Director General. The Director General may be removed before the end of the term only by a two-thirds majority of all Council members and only on limited grounds, such as no longer meeting the reputation or legal requirements, or committing a gross breach of duties. This was narrower than the dismissal rules critics had feared in earlier stages of the debate.

Procedural protections were added as well. Before dismissal is decided, the Director General must be informed in advance and given the opportunity to provide written or oral explanations. If the question is considered in a closed meeting, the meeting must be minuted, and the Director General has the right to access the minutes. These protections do not address every transparency concern, but they make the process more constrained than a purely discretionary removal procedure would.

Another important change concerns the LRT Council. The law now states that Council members must act independently and must not follow instructions or express will from the institutions that appointed them. If a Council member experiences pressure, this must be reported to the Council and made public. That does not remove concerns about appointments, but it gives Council members a legal basis to resist instructions.

Another criticized provision was also narrowed. The adopted wording does not constitute a broad exclusion of outside journalists or of all external media actors from LRT. It restricts the transmission, retransmission, or distribution of other radio or television broadcasters' programs through LRT's channels or website without Council permission. That is a narrower provision than the broad media-participation restrictions that had generated criticism.

For that reason, the adopted law should not be treated as simply the most radical version of the reform. It is a revised text with meaningful concessions. A fair assessment has to recognize that the final law improved in several areas.

Civil Society as an Informal Safeguard

The version of the LRT law finally adopted by the Seimas was not the same political product as some of the earlier drafts. Part of the reason was the public reaction. The demonstrations, the petition, and public statements by LRT journalists made it harder to describe the changes as a routine governance reform.

This did not amount to a veto. The law still went through, and questions about LRT's governance and financing remain. But the criticism changed the margins of the debate. Some of the provisions that had raised the strongest concern were dropped, tightened, or rewritten before adoption. The unity shown by LRT journalists and the wider journalistic community also mattered. It helped sustain public attention and made the freedom-of-expression dimension of the reform harder to set aside. Several of these changes also responded to concerns reflected in the Venice Commission opinions, even if not all of those concerns were resolved. The protest element, therefore, should not be treated as a side story. It helps explain why the final law became less problematic than earlier proposals, even if it remains contested.

LRT journalists played a particular role here. Once they spoke publicly, the dispute became less about a single director general, a single council, or internal management disagreements. It became harder to avoid the larger issue: whether journalism at a publicly funded broadcaster can remain independent while the rules governing leadership, supervision, and financing are being changed.

The Lithuanian case also matters outside Lithuania. No one argued that public broadcasters should be free from oversight. The concern was different: if the rules on leadership, supervision, and financing are changed in the wrong way, oversight can turn into pressure. Public mobilization did not write the safeguards into the law, but it helped keep the independence issue in the debate until the final text was adopted.

Where the Risks Remain

The harder question is what remains after those improvements. The issue is not whether every clause is dangerous. It is how the clauses work together.

The first remaining concern is how Council members are appointed. The reformed Council has 15 members. Four are appointed by the President, four by the Seimas, and seven by named organizations. This broadens representation beyond the previous model. Still, eight of the fifteen seats remain filled through constitutional political institutions, the President and Parliament. A legal duty of independence is important, but the way members enter the institution still matters.

A second concern is the number of new bodies and links in the governance chain. The law creates a Council Bureau, a small administrative unit funded by LRT resources and designed to support Council work through documents, materials, and analysis. From 2028, a five-member Board is introduced. The Board is framed as a professional management body. It will address organizational, financial, and administrative matters, including budgets, structure, staffing, and the selection of a candidate for the Director General position.

None of this is automatically illegitimate. A public broadcaster may benefit from stronger professional governance. But in this type of institution, additional governance layers also create new points at which influence can be exercised. A Board or Council Bureau may improve management. The concern is whether, in this institutional setting, they also shift practical power closer to the Council.

Leadership decisions are another sensitive area. The final law provides protections for closed consideration of dismissal, including minutes and access for the Director General. That is better than an unrecorded or unexplained process. But it does not fully settle concerns about how transparent leadership-removal procedures will be in practice. Public confidence depends not only on whether a dismissal is technically lawful, but on whether the process is visibly protected from selective use.

The timetable creates its own unease. The transitional provisions require careful interpretation. Some changes apply before the full new governance architecture is in place, and the law provides that the term of a person appointed as LRT Director General before the law enters into force is treated as a first term. This left open the question of whether new rules should apply to an incumbent leader or only to future office-holders. Even narrowly tailored rules can raise concern if their timing appears targeted or ambiguous.

Funding is perhaps the least visible, but one of the most important, safeguards. The consolidated legal text provides that LRT's state-budget allocations for 2026 to 2028 are equal to the 2025 allocation, while the ordinary financing formula applies later. For public service media, funding is a safeguard of independence. Predictable financing reduces exposure to annual political bargaining. A freeze or delayed formula does not prove political pressure, but in terms of institutional design, it can be read as a vulnerability.

One drafting detail is worth mentioning, but carefully. The newly amended operative dismissal grounds are limited. At the same time, the interim consolidated text still contains residual wording referring to the termination of the Director General's powers after the expression of no confidence. This should be treated as a legal clarity issue rather than evidence of a separate removal route.

The May 2026 annual-report episode shows why this distinction matters. The LRT Council did not approve LRT's 2025 annual activity report. The final dismissal rule does not list non-approval of an annual report as grounds for removing the Director General. The episode is relevant because it showed how ordinary accountability tools can become politically charged while leadership rules are being rewritten. Its relevance is illustrative, not evidentiary.

How Leverage Accumulates

This is the quieter way leverage can accumulate. No single clause captures a broadcaster. The issue is the combined effect of appointment rules, supervisory powers, leadership removal procedures, financing, and transitional timing. Each element may be defensible separately. Together, they decide whether accountability strengthens a public broadcaster or exposes it to political influence.

This does not require assuming bad faith. Institutional pressure can emerge from design, not only from intent. The same clause can operate differently depending on who appoints, who votes, who controls resources, and when new rules take effect. That is why public service media safeguards cannot be assessed only clause by clause. They must also be assessed as a system.

For other European democracies, the lesson is practical. Public broadcasters should not be immune from reform. Public service media need audits, sound management, ethical rules, transparent procurement, and responsible use of funds. Weak governance can damage independence by undermining public trust.

Accountability reforms work only when institutional protections match them. Leadership rules should be clear and, where possible, prospective. Oversight bodies should be independent in both law and practice. Financing should be stable enough to avoid annual pressure. Editorial decisions should remain outside political management. The law-making process itself should be careful, consultative, and evidence-based, especially when the institution being reformed is part of the democratic information system.

The Line Between Oversight and Leverage

Germany's principle of Staatsferne, distance from the state, is useful here as a reference point, not as a template. It does not mean that public broadcasters operate outside the law. It means that public service media must remain institutionally distant from governments, parliamentary majorities, and party interests. Each country will design that distance differently. The underlying question is the same: does the governance model keep the broadcaster accountable to the public or make it dependent on political actors?

The Lithuanian case is useful precisely because it is mixed. The final law contains genuine safeguards and removed or narrowed several earlier concerns. It is not a simple media-capture story. But it also leaves unresolved questions about appointment channels, governance layering, transparency, financing, and transitional application. Those questions are not technical footnotes. They are the places where independence is protected or weakened in practice.

Contact: Alexander Groborz, Head of Europe and International Politics Programme,
Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung Warschau