

France: Sarkozy moves to control public television

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7 January 2009

President Nicolas Sarkozy is pressing his reform of French public TV (France Télévisions) through parliament. The reform aims to strengthen governmental control over France Télévisions by eliminating advertising, thus making public TV completely dependent on state funding, while also allowing the government—effectively, the president—to name its CEO.

The bill passed in the National Assembly on December 17, 293 to 242, after nearly a month of often-rowdy debates. It is expected to be debated in the Senate for two weeks beginning Wednesday, January 7. The ruling Union for a Popular Movement (UMP) does not have a majority in the upper house and the passing of the law is not a forgone conclusion. The government faces dissent from its own members and centrist senators over the financing of the reform.

Delaying tactics in the National Assembly by the opposition Socialist Party and its Green and Communist Party allies meant that the government could not get the law onto the statute books in time for the reform's scheduled launch January 5.

Under the Audio-Visual Law for the Reform of Public Television, all commercials are to be phased out by the end of 2011. The loss of €450 million from advertising in 2009 will be replaced with state revenue from TV licence fees and two new taxes: a 1.5 to 3 percent levy on the advertising revenue of the private channels, and a tax on telephone companies and Internet access providers.

This constitutes an attack on the independence of the public TV companies, as the cash from the tax will not come to them directly as a guaranteed income (contrary to the present funding) but be paid into the national budget. The government will decide each year what it will then

allocate to public TV.

By the government's own admission, the income expected from these taxes totals only €450 million. It will not make up, therefore, for the ultimate loss of all of public TV's advertising revenues—€833 million, or 36 percent of the operating budget—once the reform goes into full effect in 2011. The reform will result in cuts to jobs, salaries, and programme quality.

The CEO of France Télévisions will be nominated effectively by the president, and no longer by the broadcast regulatory body, the Superior Audiovisual Council (CSA). The appointment is for five years, but the president may withdraw it at any time, with the agreement of the CSA. At present, the CEOs are appointed by the CSA alone and can be dismissed only for serious infractions.

In its haste to enact the reform, the government has partially bypassed parliament. It asked France Télévisions CEO Patrick de Carolis to carry out the reform's first stage by January 5—removing commercials between 8 p.m. and 6 a.m. After initially threatening to resign, Carolis agreed and also proposed to increase the spending cuts from the merging of the group's 49 enterprises—which employ 11,000 workers—from €140 million to €200 million.

Like many of Sarkozy's initiatives, the reform is presented as a somewhat "left" measure: the suppression of public TV advertising has been an occasional demand of the French bourgeois left, who noted that it subjected public TV stations to private influence. What such arguments ignore is that, under capitalism, the elimination of advertising revenue will make public TV's financing directly dependent on the state, whose leading personnel

is intimately connected to major corporate leaders.

Sarkozy's reform has been widely referred to as a "Berlusconization" of France's media—a reference to Italian Prime Minister and business magnate Silvio Berlusconi, who owns much of Italy's private media and controls its public media as head of state. If the reform passes, Sarkozy will combine control over public TV with close links to France's main private media CEOs.

The reform is a financial godsend to private television stations—who will now have a monopoly on TV advertising—and particularly to the largest private station, TF1, owned by Martin Bouygues, a billionaire construction magnate and close friend of Sarkozy. After the presidential elections, Bouygues appointed Sarkozy's campaign manager, Laurent Solly, to the post of deputy director of TF1.

Sarkozy is further increasing private TV stations' advertising revenues by decreeing increases in the airtime they may devote to advertising. The decrees permit two commercial breaks during films broadcast on the private channels—at present restricted to only one—and also lengthen permitted advertising time on the main private stations to nine minutes per hour, from the present six minutes.

Nor is TF1 the only private station whose CEO is closely tied to Sarkozy. In 1985, as mayor of the exclusive Paris suburb of Neuilly, Sarkozy created the Neuilly Communication Club, an association where media executives rubbed shoulders, including among them Arnaud de Puyfontaine (CEO of the Mondadori-France press conglomerate), Nicolas de Tavernost (boss of the M6 private TV channel), Guy Verrecchia and Alain Sussfeld (the heads of the cinema chain UGC), Philippe Gaumont (FCB advertising agency) and Jean-Loup Tournier, the head of Sacem (the company which collects authors' royalties).

There are substantial indications that Sarkozy worked out the TV reform with his corporate backers. During the 2007 presidential election campaign, Sarkozy told *L'Express*, "I would prefer a little more advertising on the public channels rather than their lacking the resources for the production of quality programmes." However, in the autumn of 2007, TF1 presented a white paper to the government suggesting similar measures to the reform.

By January 2008, Sarkozy made a complete about-face, saying, "I propose ... a veritable cultural revolution in public television... I want thought to be given about the suppression of advertising on the public stations."

The bitterly unpopular reform—a July opinion poll showed that 71 percent of the French people oppose it—has already given rise to one of the more famous Internet videos of Sarkozy.

This summer, the Internet site Rue89 posted unofficial footage, recorded by a camera of the public channel France 3 TV when the president was waiting to be interviewed in the channel's studio. Sarkozy had had to make his way to the studio through a protest demonstration of several hundred workers. Once Sarkozy sat down, he complained about the bad manners of a technician who had not responded to his greeting.

The president complained, "We are not in the public service here, we're with the demonstrators... Incredible... And serious!" After a journalist replied "It's France," Sarkozy said, "There's going to be a change now." Then he joked about putting a journalist, Gérard Leclerc, "on the shelf." Leclerc had signed a statement opposing the proposed public media reform.

France 3 management initially requested the destruction of the video sequence and demanded that the Rue89 journalists reveal their source. Faced with public controversy and the popularity of the Rue89 video, France 3 was ultimately forced to back down.



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