

Polish public television as “political loot”

KEY WORDS

Polish public television, TVP S.A., Polish media system, TVP’s political entanglement

ABSTRACT

Because of its responsibilities regarding society, public television has been a constant element of European media systems for many years. For more than 15 years TVP has played the role of a public TV broadcaster, being constantly politically limited in fulfilling goals assigned to it by Polish law. Over the last 15 years TVP has had eight presidents and all political groups have tried to strengthen their influence over it, treating TVP as “political loot” of the victorious party. The authoress implies that these dealings are a result of political practice and low level of political culture. This results in TVP not aiding in the process of development of Polish democracy and civic society. Therefore, the sense of existence of TVP in its current form may be reasonably brought into question.

Introduction

Studying various publications on Polish public television (TVP) over the last several years, apparent is how little changes in statements and opinions on it by journalists, media experts and politicians. The issue that is raised most often is its political entanglement and the fact that it has become “political loot”. This is sad, given the fact that 2009 marks 15 years of free television. It would seem that it is long enough that it finished with its communist influence past and the difficult early years of system transformation. In communist times, the fact was that its biggest problem was that it was highly politicized. In the transformation period, there were lengthy heated debates on its future, on ways to transform it into a broadcaster with a public mission where journalists and producers could work independently and freely.

Can we say, from 15 years of experience, that these plans have been realized? Does our public television do its job as it should? Does it serve its recipients, employees and Polish democracy? Answers to these questions are not easy since long is the list of arguments for and

against¹. TVP has enjoyed numerous successes but it also faces serious problems, of which the most dangerous is the issue of its political entanglement. In this context, the sense of existence of TVP in its current form may be reasonably brought into question.

Theory of public television

Public television has been a constant element of European media systems in liberal democracies in the latter half of the 20th century, a realization of media responsibility public doctrine. Even though it may be difficult to define its public role and goals, we can agree that it should be:

- media institution within which functions public television should be public property, it should be entirely or partly financed from public funds (subscription in the past, presently also other forms of financing and be independent of outside influences (mainly political),
- public broadcaster goals should be specified in the form of a legal act,
- its programme offer should be diversified in order to meet the needs of various recipient groups, special care groups particularly (children, seniors, minorities),
- it should be on the highest possible intellectual and technical level, it should introduce innovation and be competitive on the media market,
- it should be informative, educational and entertaining, it should treat people like citizens, not consumers,
- it should promote national culture and identity².

All of the above specifications were fulfilled in the creation of status and objectives of Polish public television. TVP, after over 40 years of functioning as a monopolistic state broadcaster, based on the Radio and Television Act from December 29, 1992 was transformed into a public broadcaster. On January 1, 1994, it became a media institution with State Treasury public company status, financed from subscription fees and advertising, with legally outlined objectives known as “mission”. It is to create for Poles in different regions of the country and abroad, a diversified programme offer, of high quality and objectivity, with informative, journalistic, cultural, education and sport content. Another goal is to support artistic and intellectual activity, culture and education, including civic education and to consider the needs

¹ Cf. K. Jakubowicz, *Media publiczne. Początek końca czy nowy początek*, Warszawa 2007, p. 222–257.

² Ibidem, p. 22; A. Jaskiernia, *Publiczne media elektroniczne w Europie*, Warszawa 2006, p. 211–229; B. Ociepka, *Dla kogo telewizja? Model publiczny w postkomunistycznej Europie Środkowej*, Wrocław 2003, p. 71–73.

of ethnic and national minorities. It must be reliable in reporting and commenting on events and phenomena taking place domestically and internationally. It must provide knowledge to aid people in functioning in the state, society and daily life, in forming opinions and making civic and private decisions. It needs to enable people to take part in public life and to control those in power by providing reliable information and presenting diversified points of view and opinions. It should be public opinion forming. It should also aid in the shaping of public order by propagating pro-health and pro-family attitudes and fighting social pathologies as well as respecting the Christian values system³.

Despite mounting criticism regarding public television activity, public media are still very popular, at least in Europe, and considered an element of a democratic media system since among their goals are tasks believed to be incredibly important to effective functioning of democracy and the development of civic society⁴. Among public TV tasks (their mission), it is emphasized that aside from its informative, educational and cultural functions, equally imperative is its political function – civic education, necessary for active and conscious taking part in political life and to control those in power, for political socialization and creation of public debate forum where articulated can be people's interests, opinions and a consensus regarding imperative public and political matters can be reached.

In order for public television to meet these objectives, it is key for it to be politically independent. Level of independence is dependent not only on legal regulations delineating the status of public broadcaster and its objectives but also the level of political culture, and even more so, on political class awareness of the fact that respecting free media is necessary for effective functioning of a democracy. This includes public media which are particularly sensitive and susceptible to political entanglement. Publications on public media emphasize that public TV level of independence is one criterion necessary in determining democracy consolidation level and shows a given country's political culture. It is no wonder then that countries in which democracy is relatively new (3rd wave of democratization) have the biggest problems with public television being free from political influences⁵.

³ The Radio and Television Act, art. 21.

⁴ K. Williams, *Media w Europie*, Warszawa 2008, p. 64–68.

⁵ B. Dobek-Ostrowska, *Miejsce i rola mediów masowych w procesach demokratyzacyjnych*, [in:] *Media masowe w demokratyzujących się systemach politycznych. W drodze do wolności słowa i mediów*, ed. B. Dobek-Ostrowskiej, Wrocław 2003, p. 13.

It can be concluded that together with consolidation of democracy and stabilization of a democratic media system, should grow public television's independence. The question remains then – is 15 years a long enough time to achieve such independence?

Political history of Polish public television

Unfortunately, the answer to the above question is negative. Obviously, it would be hard to expect that experiences from the previous political system would not affect the building of a new media system or independent public television. Previously, for over forty years of communist times, TVP was treated as a tool used by the authorities to influence society. Television was a medium fully controlled by the regime and its employees, even if they did not accept the system, were active in it and subject to the system authorities. Recipients did not have an alternative, even if they were not happy with the situation, they, to a large degree, believed that there is no other way, in accordance with the saying “he who has power, has television”.

Democratic transformation, which took place in Poland in 1989, also regarded the media system. Rather quickly, within a few months after the fall of communism, a competitive, free media market was established. After the Radio and Television Act in the sector of electronic media took effect, began the process of building a typical European media system, in which, aside from the public sector, there is also a private one. Hence, TVP troubles with being independent from political influences are not due to faulty regulation but result from faulty political practice. The result was that since the beginning public television became the object of various political bargaining, taking place more or less overtly⁶.

It is a fact that all significant players on the political arena engaged in this activity. Some did it openly while others – behind the scenes, some brutally, others – more subtly. Despite the fact that regulation included solutions to avoid executive and legislative influences, TVP's regulating organ, the National Broadcasting Council (Krajowa Rada Radiofonii i Telewizji – KRRiT), was filled with people from the political arena. This way, TVP was not freed from political influence and what took effect was a new way of filling supervisory boards and public media management, according to a political bargaining system. It is no wonder that TVP became “political loot” which was either “won” or “recaptured”. Contrary to democratic system principles, governing party practices resulted in the onset of participacy and the *spoils system*, meaning those who win, “take all”, including the public

⁶ Cf. D. Waniek, *Dylematy ładu medialnego RP. Standardy europejskie a praktyka polityczna*, Kraków 2007.

media. In democratic systems, what should take place is the *merit system*, that is appointing people based on qualifications and experience, regardless of their political orientation. In a particratic system, it is hard to find independent experts since it is almost impossible to be promoted when not affiliated with some party. As a result, specialists (and non-specialists even more so) look for a party which will promote them⁷.

Karol Jakubowicz's theory regarding public media can be confirmed based on public television presidents, all of whom can be easily connected to a specific party, were appointed by that party and represented their interests.

- The first TVP SA president was Wiesław Walendziak (1994–1996), previously a well known opposition journalist. During his rule, TVP “took a right turn”, many young, right-wing journalists were hired, known as “pampers”.
- Next president was Ryszard Miazek (1996–1998) from PSL, he “took a left turn”, fired “pampers” journalists and brought back those fired earlier.
- Robert Kwiatkowski, longest running president (1998–2003), was left-wing, connected to Aleksander Kwaśniewski and considered by the right wing to be part of the “power holding group” made famous during the Rywin scandal.
- Next was Jan Dworak (February 2004 – May 2006), connected to PO, dismissed once PiS came into power, which in coalition with LPR and Samoobrona in late 2005, created an amendment to the Radio and Television Act, enabling the “re-gaining” of public media.
- Bronisław Wildstein (May 2006 – February 2007) became president of the “re-gained” TVP, radically right wing, famous for the so-called Wildstein's list, quickly dismissed.
- Andrzej Urbanski (April 2007 – December 2008) was next, a trusted associate of Lech Kaczyński, previously the head of the President's Office.
- Piotr Farfał (December 2008 – September 2009) followed (technically he was acting president), connected to LPR.
- Bogusław Szwedo (September 2009 – December 2008) was the next acting TVP president, in charge of the PiS–SLD dominated the Supervisory Board of TVP S.A., recommended by PiS.
- In December 2009, he was replaced by Romuald Orzel.

⁷ K. Jakubowicz, *Media publiczne...*, p. 228.

It is apparent that all KRRiT members, those deciding who presides over TVP, had political affiliations. It should also be noted that over the last fifteen years of TVP, there have been eight presidents, with an average of under two years in office. This is not a long enough time to develop a long term strategy. Moreover, a change of president also results in changes in other managerial positions, in editorial offices and journalists. Usually, the president's closest associates are replaced by those loyal to the next president, regardless their professional qualifications. It is no wonder that it is said that positions in TVP are of the highest risk.

Journalists working in such conditions can be frustrated and simply afraid of losing their jobs, which does not favour journalist independence, editorial autonomy or solidarity. In such conditions, we cannot talk about responsibility toward society since journalist fate is not determined by his achievements but by the current political line realized by TVP authorities. Moreover, pay is directly related to the number of broadcasted programmes which means that journalists find out what the current trends are (even if it is not official) and wanting to make money or be seen, they act in accordance with their new bosses' expectations.

It is a paradox that with the stabilizing of Polish democracy, political games for control and influence over TVP instead of becoming less of an issue are growing in intensity. Until 2005, the situation was somewhat better. There were members of the opposition in both KRRiT and TVP and people in some way connected to media. After 2005, no appearances were maintained. When PiS won presidential and parliamentary elections and entered into coalition with LPR and Samoobrona, it began to take over everything in accordance with the rule 'winner takes all'. For PiS, the public media were crucial and needed to be 'regained'. What resulted was an amendment to the Radio and Television Act, dismissal of the old KRRiT and appointment of a new council, for the first time comprised only of representatives of the ruling coalition. Next, new TVP authorities were chosen, guaranteeing loyalty to those in power. Between 2005–2007, during PiS rule, TVP clearly became pro-PiS and pro-president. Popular then became the vetting of officials and agents, programmes such as *Misja specjalna* (Special Mission) and numerous press conferences by the ruling coalition.

After early elections in 2007, when the PO–PSL coalition came into power, declared was a betterment of the situation at TVP. In order to do so, prepared was a new media amendment. Its approval, however, could not take place as it was vetoed by the president and the coalition could not get enough votes in Sejm to overrule the veto. Meanwhile, in December 2008 what took place on Woronicza St. was a sort of 'coup', as a result of which

Andrzej Urbanski was replaced by Piotr Farfal from LPR. “PiS lost its influence over TVP. Public television was from now on ruled by LPR and Samoobrona people and TVP’s new president is an old activist of the ultra-nationalist Młodzież Wszechpolska [...]. *PiS activists have to make room for old LPR activists* – ironically said one TVP employee.”⁸

In 2008 and especially 2009, the situation at TVP was constantly discussed by Polish media⁹. It was said that political trade on influence over TVP continues and the scandalous spectacle “is taking place with open doors”. Everyone has grown used to it and no one is shocked by it any longer or no one even cares (with the exception of politicians). Even keen political scene observers and active media recipients may have had difficulties with keeping up with what was going on. There were numerous announcements of Farfal’s dismissal, law suits being filed, TVP president’s conflict with the KRRiT and the new Supervisory Board of TVP, as well as various protests against the situation at TVP. People were demanding changes in public television, there were talks of new alliances and informal coalitions being formed and broken, first PO–PSL, later PiS–SLD. These unlikely coalitions (due to programme differences and history), formed in order to better the situation of public media, were created to pass or reject various new amendments.

Conflict and trade continued on, meanwhile Farfal was still president whose activity and past were controversial, and not just in Poland. In spring of 2009, the media informed that ARTE Television¹⁰ authorities have broken off their contract with TVP as of mid February since Farfal “does not share common values with them [...]. We hope to renew our cooperation once the management at TVP changes”¹¹. At the same time, the Appellate Court in Warsaw ruled that *Gazeta Wyborcza* had the right to call Farfal a “former neo-Nazi”. In 2006, in the article *Były neonazista w TVP (Former neo-Nazi at TVP)* “*Gazeta Wyborcza*” wrote that the 28 year old Farfal, recommended by LPR, was in the 1990s the editor of a

⁸ *Ludzie PiS tracą pracę w telewizji*, Dziennik.pl [accessed: 20.01.2009].

⁹ Cf. headlines about the atmosphere of press debate about TVP, for example: *Zemsta przystawek (Revenge)*, “Puls Biznesu” 30.12.2008; *Jak Prawo i Sprawiedliwość wróciło do gry o TV (How PiS came back into the game)*, “Rzeczpospolita” 30.01.2009; *Farfal zagarnął TVP dla siebie i LPR*, (Farfal and LPR taking over TVP) “Dziennik” 16.03.2009; *Trwa inwazja LPR na publiczną telewizję (Invasion on public television)*, Dziennik.pl, 8.05.2009; *Telewizja Farfala telewizją Libertas (TVP is now Farfal and Libertas television)*, Dziennik.pl, 12.05.2009; *W TVP zakaz sondaży, bo Libertas źle wypada (No more surveys at TVP as Libertas gets bad ratings)*, “Gazeta Wyborcza” 5.06.2009; *PiS znów bierze TVP (PiS takes over TVP again)*, “Gazeta Wyborcza” 4.06.2009; *Gratuluje skutecznego sojuszu Platformie i LPR (Congratulations on the new alliance)*, “Rzeczpospolita” 14.07.2009; *Hipokryzja polityków w sprawie telewizji (Politician hypocrisy in case of public television)*, “Rzeczpospolita” 1.08.2009.

¹⁰ ARTE is a German-French culture channel, with headquarters in Strasburg, promoting culture and European values, cooperating with TVP since 1993.

¹¹ *Zrywamy współpracę z TVP, Farfal ma inne wartości*, Wirtualnemedi.pl [accessed: 6.03.2009].

racist “Front” magazine in which he wrote, “we do not tolerate cowards, informers and Jews”¹². The ARTE issue opened a storm of protests against Farfal. The Media Ethics Council expressed their “deep concern for the situation at public media” and accused the authorities of “not understanding media mission and being ruled by political reasons”¹³. Famous artists and intellectuals called for TVP boycott on May 3rd, as a protest against TVP authorities. In their appeal is stated that, “Television has been taken over by former neo-Nazis and extreme nationalists. Its public mission is being carried out by people you would welcome into your house”¹⁴. It was noted that “LPR has invaded public television”¹⁵ by putting party people and members of Młodzież Wszechpolska in positions in headquarters and around the country. During the Euro parliament election campaign, Farfal and TVP were accused of “making TVP a propaganda channel for the Libertas party which put nationalists on its election lists”¹⁶.

In summer of 2009, there was a series of press articles on TVP and its president. Among the most popular topics discussed was Farfal’s conflict with the new Supervisory Board of TVP and his refusal to stand down as well as the alleged secret agreement between TVP and father Rydzyk based on which TVP agreed to make available for TV Trwam its archives free of charge¹⁷.

The political commotion at TVP continues on and this situation probably will not change any time soon since it would require political elites to reach an apolitical agreement in this case. Everyone declares the need and will to make TVP apolitical but they do just the opposite. One forecast of the future situation states, “the plague that TVP is suffering from, meaning Farfal, is about to be replaced by another one, that is of a PiS–leftist alliance supported by people connected to Czarzasty, a former secretary at KRRiT, famous for successful appropriation of public media for the left wing”¹⁸.

TVP S.A. and Polish democracy

The treatment of television as political loot, one that is fought for by all political parties needs to be criticized. However, we are still far from mature democracy and high political culture in which such behaviour and situations would be condemned. Normally,

¹² Ibidem.

¹³ *Rada Etyki Mediów ostrzega prezesa TVP*, Wirtualnemedia.pl [accessed: 1.04.2009].

¹⁴ *Artyści przeciwko Farfałowi*, Wirtualnemedia.pl [accessed: 1.04.2009].

¹⁵ *Trwa inwazja LPR na publiczną telewizję*, Dziennik.pl [accessed: 8.05.2009].

¹⁶ Ibidem.

¹⁷ *Tajna umowa Farfała z ojcem Rydzykiem*, Dziennik.pl [accessed: 29.08.2009].

¹⁸ *Ciemna noc w mediach*, gazeta.pl [accessed: 1.08.2009].

public opinion outrage would result in the end of political careers for any of those taking part in such practices. This game being played at TVP is fatal in consequences for all:

- **for TVP itself** – it has become increasingly difficult to fulfill its delineated tasks, particularly in conditions of growing financial difficulties and challenges connected with the digital conversion. If the focus is on political and personal conflicts, there is no time to concentrate on truly important issues such as redefining public broadcaster goals and providing it proper financing;
- **for viewers and society** – increasingly, people are of the opinion that public television is for politicians instead of ordinary people, hence, it will be all the more difficult to convince them to pay the subscription fee for “politicized television”. The idea of public television has been compromised, proper relations between broadcaster and recipients have not been built since if people are not protesting, it means that they do not believe that it is their problem;
- **for the political class** – the on-going and growing in strength conflict at TVP proves how cynical and hypocritical all politicians are. People do not believe that politicians attempt to ‘regain’ TVP for society, for the common good, democracy, etc. They know they have been cheated by politicians who have been playing these games purely for themselves and who have taken over public television which should belong to the people;
- **for Polish democracy** – independent media are necessary for proper functioning of democracy and the development of civic society. Public media play a special role since it is expected of them to educate citizens, they are to create a public sphere in which civic society would find fulfillment¹⁹. In order for democracy to become more mature and effective, the people must be sure that this is the right chosen path and be active. Meanwhile, the civic education which people are getting from all the commotion at TVP is contrary to those beliefs. They can be convinced that politics is a “dirty game” and become discouraged to be active. This stunts the development of civic society and limits public debate to personal conflict instead of overcoming problems together. We can even state that Polish public television in its present form, even though it was created to aid in the building of democracy, it rather harms it. Since we have not been able to create a truly public or citizen television instead of a politicized one throughout these years, the question is – why do we need such television at all?

¹⁹ M. Mrozowski, *Media publiczne: dziedzictwo przeszłości – perspektywy rozwoju*, ”Studia Medioznawcze” 2001, No. 1, p. 41.

Conclusion

Another crisis on Woronicza St. was reported by media on September 16, 2009; acting president Farfal did not let inside the TVP building the newly elected the Supervisory Board of TVP. The conflict between Farfal, KRRiT and the Supervisory Board (made up of four people recommended by people and four – by the left wing) continues on with everyone watching the scandalous events, most of which are incomprehensible to us.

What is the government's reaction to all this? Slawomir Nowak, the head of Prime Minister's office, said, "Farfal should not be TVP president for even one minute longer. If there was will, he would be dismissed by now. Not all is in the hands of Minister of the Treasury. The new PiS–SLD coalition is now dividing the political loot at TVP"²⁰.

On September 17, "Farfal is saved again. At least for now. The Supervisory Board did not dismiss him because during the meeting absent was Minister of the Treasury Aleksander Grad's representative [...]. Grad has already twice saved Farfal from being dismissed. Did he do it for the third time?"²¹

On September 21, 2009, the new Supervisory Board of TVP finally dismissed Farfal but he refuses to resign, questioning the validity of the decision. Meanwhile, Boguslaw Szwedo, head of the Supervisory Board, recommended by PiS, has been appointed acting president. Taking over power at TVP took place with great commotion since Farfal "did not accept the situation" and did not allow security to let Szwedo into the building on Woronicza St. on the pretext that he did not have the right pass. The head of KRRiT has announced filing of a law suit against Farfal.

In early October 2009 the situation has somewhat calmed down. The press focused on the PiS–SLD coalition, its management and 'routine' activities which centered around firing of previous management people. In December, Szwedo was replaced by Romuald Orzel as new TVP president.

²⁰ Radio Zet 10.09 2009, from: www.wirtualna.polska.pl [accessed: 17.09.2009].

²¹ A. Kublik, *Farfal ocalony. Przynajmniej na razie*, "Gazeta Wyborcza" 17.09.2009, p. 5.