Dear members of LYMEC,

On December 9, as many as 40,000 people gathered outside the Lithuanian national parliament to protest proposed amendments to the law governing the dismissal of the Lithuanian National Radio and Television (LRT) director. In addition, a petition opposing what many view as a political takeover of the LRT has been signed by approximately 140,000 people.

The amendments initially suggested lowering the threshold for dismissal from 8 out of 12 LRT Council votes to just 6. However, the requirement was raised to 7 the day after the protest. Another proposed change would introduce secret voting, meaning the reasons for dismissing a director would no longer need to be disclosed to the public. The LRT Council consists of 12 members: 4 appointed by the President of Lithuania, 4 by the national parliament, and 4 by non-governmental organisations. This composition makes it clear that political actors already hold significant influence over the decision-making process.

The proposals were rushed through without consulting journalists or independent experts who could assess whether the amended law complies with the European Media Freedom Act and the Constitution of the Republic of Lithuania. The opposition requested an expert evaluation to determine whether the proposed regulations would undermine the freedom of the national broadcaster or other principles of the rule of law. Until such an assessment is presented, most opposition members have suspended their participation in the deliberations on the amendments.

Dawn of Nemunas introduced the changes, a populist party currently governing in coalition with the Social Democratic Party of Lithuania, the Lithuanian Farmers and Greens Union, together with the Electoral Action of Poles in Lithuania. The party's chairman, Remigijus Žemaitaitis, has previously violated the Constitution and has twice been convicted for anti-Semitic statements, the most recent conviction announced on December 3. He has also been active in "alternative media" channels, where he frequently criticises LRT for alleged bias, claiming it fails to represent all political viewpoints. In these appearances, he often refers to radical and anti-state narratives voiced by individuals outside parliament or government.

Žemaitaitis recently proposed freezing the state-allocated budget for LRT for three years and later reducing the percentage of resident income tax that could be directed to it. This proposal was confirmed on October 27, with President Gitanas Nausėda offering no objection. As a result, LRT's budget will remain fixed despite inflation, meaning its real value will shrink over time.

The current governing coalition is facing criticism. In recent months, multiple protests have taken place after the Social Democrats entered into a coalition with the Dawn of Nemunas, despite earlier promises not to do so. Together with President Nausėda, they handed control of the Ministry of Culture to the Dawn of Nemunas by confirming Ignotas Adomavičius, a candidate with no relevant experience and a questionable reputation, as Minister, without explaining why he was suitable for the role.

This decision sparked widespread protests, with thousands of Lithuanians and numerous cultural institutions, artists, and figures in the cultural sector rejecting the endorsement of both the Ministry and the President. Just nine days later, following his removal of Ukrainian flags from the ministry and his inability to answer an interviewer's question, "Who does Crimea belong to?", Adomavičius resigned.

We, the Lithuanian Liberal Youth, have actively participated in all initiatives opposing the political takeover of LRT and supporting the cultural sector. Since most major protests were concentrated in Vilnius, one of our branches took the initiative to organise a demonstration in Klaipėda, where hundreds of dissatisfied citizens joined. We also sought to encourage broader participation by publishing political reactions on social media, sharing information about upcoming protests, and promoting the petition against political interference in LRT. Next week, the Lithuanian Parliament will consider and vote on the proposed changes. From Tuesday to Thursday, protests and demonstrations will be held in front of the parliament. Together, we will show the government that public opinion and freedoms cannot be ignored. **As young people, we believe it is imperative to show that we care and to resist the spread of populism into our independent press**. **Freedom of expression is both our right and our responsibility in a democratic state, and we will not allow the current government to take that away from us.** Standing in solidarity with those working in journalism and the cultural sector, we continue to chant the slogan of the current protest: *"Hands off free speech."*

The proposed changes may not alone signal a political takeover of LRT, but the erosion of press freedom and democracy rarely begins with major steps. We, the Lithuanian Liberal Youth, are deeply concerned that democratic backsliding could begin with taking over our national news agency, and we believe it is imperative for the international community to remain informed about the current issues Lithuania is facing.

Sincerely,
Smiltė Domeikytė
International Officer of Lithuanian Liberal Youth