[FR] Heading for Reform of the Audio-visual Licence Fee?

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Each year the question of the audio-visual licence fee comes up for public debate. Although the Government at one time was considering abolishing this indirect tax which, together with advertising, constitutes the main source of income for the public audio-visual sector, it is currently looking into ways of improving its yield so as to increase the two billion euros it produces. The financial requirements of the public audio-visual sector in 2004 could in fact require an increase in the 3% allocation. The MP Patrice Martin-Lalande has been entrusted with a "mission of evaluation and control" (MEC) as a special rapporteur to the National Assembly's Finance Committee.

When he was being heard by the MEC, Marc Tessier, chairman and managing director of France Télévision, spoke out in favour of simplifying the licence fee, but wondered about the methods for its collection and more particularly on whether it was necessary to link it to the fact of a person owning a television set, which is the matter at the heart of the problem today. As things stand at present, a taxpayer pays just one licence fee for all the appliances he/she has at any one address, as long as they are used for private purposes.

For his part, the secretary general of the Ministry of the Economy, Finance and Industry referred to the need to change the tax itself, by combining it with the residence tax and using the records listing persons liable to that tax. He felt that it was important to "find a linking factor", and he noted that there was a relative similarity between residence and ownership of a television set, although this option was limited (some people do not own a television set). Moreover, the director of public accounting believes that the basis for assessment of the licence fee is "structurally inappropriate because of its technological limitation, as television will gradually be watched more frequently on a computer". It will therefore be necessary to be able to tax "the possibility of accessing the public audio-visual sector", whatever the medium used for such access. Two other limits also need to be taken into account evasion of payment, currently estimated at 10% of the amount raised by the licence fee, and holiday homes, most of which are not currently liable to taxation and which could in theory bring in 300 million euros.

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When he was heard on 10 June, Alain Seban, director of media development, spoke out in favour of a moderate increase in the licence fee (currently set at EUR 116.50 for a colour set and EUR 74.31 for a black and white set) and for maintaining the link with ownership of a television set. Returning to the possibility of using the records of those persons liable to residence tax for collection purposes, he felt this was a suitable way forward, and he indeed pointed to the possibility of cross-checking these records against those for pay television subscribers.

With all this in mind, the conclusions of the MEC are to be submitted to the Finance Committee on 25 June.

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