[BE] French-speaking public broadcaster’s remit defined for 2023–2027

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Every three to six years, the Belgian French-language public broadcasting body (RTBF) negotiates a so-called “management contract” (equivalent to the “contracts of aims and means” in France) with the government of the French-speaking community of Belgium. This contract lays down, on the one hand, RTBF’s public service obligations and, on the other, the financial resources and frequencies allocated to it by the government for the duration of the contract.

The next management contract, which will cover the period from 2023 until 2027, is currently being negotiated. As part of this process, the government of the French-speaking community issued a detailed “notice of intent” in February 2022, proposing a number of obligations that RTBF would have to meet. The parliament of the French-speaking community was then required to conduct a broad consultation of stakeholders and experts from the audiovisual and cultural sectors, which took place in May and June 2022. In particular, the *Conseil Supérieur de l’Audiovisuel Belge* (the regulatory body for the audiovisual sector in the French-speaking community – CSA) was asked for its views on 10 May 2022. Once the hearings are complete, the parliament will issue an opinion on the government’s notice of intent. This opinion will include recommendations that the government will need to take into account in its negotiations with RTBF.

As part of the consultation, the CSA published a report on RTBF’s public service remit, including a review of the previous management contract. It also set out various issues that, in the CSA’s opinion, should be taken into account in the next management contract.

The report paints a picture of a company whose broad range of activities ensures it plays a key role in French-speaking Belgium. RTBF runs four linear television channels (one of which is a televised version of a radio station), six main radio stations, several additional or event-based radio stations, and Internet radio stations. It has also built an online media library called Auvio, where television programmes broadcast by RTBF and some other channels (including private channels) are available on demand to users who have created their own account on the platform. Auvio is generally free to use, although advertising is shown during the videos and there is a subscription-based section. It also uses recommendation algorithms.

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The CSA proposes that Auvio's new role as a distributor of third-party audiovisual media services should be discussed. It might be necessary to adapt current legislation to take this into account. The role played by recommendation algorithms in enabling Auvio users to find audiovisual content in the public interest should also be examined. The CSA also questions the monetisation of personal data gathered from Auvio users and calls for greater transparency with regard to its users. The CSA believes a democratic debate should be encouraged, focusing in particular on the characteristics of a modern-day "public service algorithm". Finally, it suggests reducing the volume of advertising on Auvio, for example by prohibiting commercial breaks during news bulletins at RTBF's request.

As regards content, the CSA believes that RTBF should broadcast cultural programmes at peak viewing times and on its main linear channels. Certain content (such as children's programmes and programmes accessible to people with sensory disabilities) should not be limited to online distribution via Auvio.

The CSA also proposes that the concept of RTBF's own productions should be limited in order to exclude repeats and televised radio, for example. RTBF meets its current quotas for European television programmes (currently 60%) and, on its radio stations, for musical works in the French language or originating in French-speaking Belgium. The CSA believes these quotas could therefore be increased. In the same way, it thinks RTBF should invest more in coproductions with independent producers and strengthen its web-based activities. The CSA also notes that RTBF's provision of online editorial information is currently being questioned, with press publishers complaining of unfair competition.

Finally, the CSA suggests that the prior assessment of new audiovisual services or of changes to existing audiovisual services should be more efficient. It supports new initiatives aimed at increasing equality between women and men, and would like RTBF to send it a detailed annual report on its use of public money, broken down into its individual public service obligations.

Conseil supérieur de l'audiovisuel de la Communauté française de Belgique (CSA), Bilan du contrat de gestion de la RTBF 2019-2022

https://www.csa.be/rtbf-2023/

Regulatory authority for the audiovisual sector of the French-speaking Community of Belgium (CSA), review of the RTBF's management contract 2019–2022

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