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For immediate release

Oversaturated and under-resourced, television in Bosnia and Herzegovina is still a hostage to political obstruction

Sarajevo and Budapest, 30 November 2005 — Much has been achieved in the reconstruction of broadcasting in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) since the war there ended ten years ago. But fundamental problems remain in the television sector.

With one of the weakest economies in Europe, BiH is the only European country with no broadcaster that covers its entire territory and population, yet with three public service broadcasters in full-blown competition with each other, as well as their commercial rivals. With over 100 private licensed outlets trying to survive in market conditions that are poor even by regional standards, commercial broadcasting is as overcrowded and inefficient as the public sector.

These are the main findings of a report on BiH included in series of monitoring reports, *Television across Europe: regulation, policy and independence*, released today in Sarajevo. Produced by the Open Society Institute (OSI) in cooperation with the Mediacentar Sarajevo, the report provides a detailed analysis of the situation of broadcasting in BiH. It also offers 13 concrete recommendations addressed at bringing the television sector in BiH in line with its citizens' needs.

Between 2002 and 2004, the market share of BiH's three public service broadcasters fell from 38 to 32 per cent. These three broadcasters are now caught in a race to broaden their appeal, before their popularity dwindles to the point of collapse.

The complex governance system imposed by the Dayton Accords a decade ago has encouraged the three national leaderships to emphasise nationalist preoccupations, rather than the needs and interests shared by all citizens. These divisions have been strongly projected into public broadcasting. Indeed it was only in October 2005 that the elected authorities managed to finally pass any substantial legislation on public broadcasting, while the privatisation of municipal and cantonal broadcasters is far from complete, although all preconditions are in place.

For its part, the international community wasted years before pushing ahead with vital reforms to the broadcast system. Even now, the High Representative yields to nationalist pressure to undercut the principles of public service broadcasting. Flawed by political compromises, the new legislation on public service broadcasting, adopted on 5 October, establishes a system that is too complex and politicised, and is likely to not be viable in the longer-term. With four legal entities

– three broadcasters and one joint corporation – this system has serious potential to become too expensive for BiH to afford, and too fissile to endure.

The OSI report calls on the international and BiH authorities to legislate for a sustainable public broadcasting system – one that would not be a hostage to nationalist elites, and that could be funded by an affordable and efficiently collected licence fee.

The report also emphasises the need for a comprehensive media strategy that would prepare the country for digitalisation. To date, the only parties able to design such a media strategy have lacked either the will (in the case of the international community) or the interest (in the case of Bosnia’s own political elites) to do so.

Civil society groups are still too weak to pressurise the country’s elected leaders to live up to their international commitments in broadcasting, while political divisions are replicated among journalists and other media professionals. In the commercial sector, lack of reliable media market research, a weak economy, strong competition from neighbouring countries, and unfair local competition and price-dumping, hold back the development of advertising. Concentration and competition issues have only been partially addressed, because the Law on Competition has not been implemented.

More positively, the country’s regulatory authority, the Communications Regulatory Agency (RAK), has continued to demonstrate an impressive degree of independence and transparency, one that is matched by few other transitional states. Yet media experts agree that, without the shield of international and civil society protection, the RAK’s independence may not survive.

The OSI report calls on the RAK to engage actively in developing the broadcasting policy and legislation that are needed for BiH to discharge its responsibilities as a member of the Council of Europe and a future candidate for EU accession.

Note to editors

This report is part of a series of 20 country reports monitoring “*Television across Europe: regulation, policy and independence*”. The reports were prepared by EUMAP, the EU Monitoring and Advocacy Program of the Open Society Institute, in cooperation with OSI’s Network Media Program. All reports are available online at <http://www.eumap.org>. More information on the Open Society Institute is available at <http://www.soros.org>.

The Bosnia & Herzegovina report was developed in cooperation with the Mediacentar Sarajevo. Founded in 1995, the Mediacentar works on strengthening independent media and journalism in BiH through education, training and research. It is owned by the Open Society Fund for BiH. More information about the Mediacentar Sarajevo is available at <http://www.media.ba>