

For immediate release

## Television in Bulgaria not yet up to EU standards

*Sofia and Budapest, 9 December 2005.* Despite all major reforms of the regulation of the electronic media that took place during the last 7-8 years, the Bulgarian broadcasting industry still faces a number of problems, particularly concerning the full implementation of EU media standards and guidelines. Broadcasting legislation is largely inadequate, and policies on new technologies and digitalisation have yet to be developed. The public broadcasters and the broadcasting regulatory authority still suffer from a lack of political independence, while in the commercial broadcasting sector there is a lack of transparency on media ownership and capital.

These are among the main findings of the Bulgarian country report, included in the series of monitoring reports *Television across Europe: regulation, policy and independence*, released today in Sofia. Produced by the Open Society Institute (OSI) the report calls on the Bulgarian government to ensure that the country's broadcasting policy is urgently reviewed, and brought fully into line with EU standards and with the needs of both citizens and the broadcasting industry.

According to the OSI report, there are currently strong deficits in Bulgarian broadcasting legislation. This has resulted in a number of cases of strange and contradictory regulatory decisions in recent years, subsequently annulled by the Supreme Administrative Court. It has also had negative implications for the development of the entire media environment, which is characterised by a lack of stability and predictability.

The possibilities for political interference are, to a large extent, due to the composition of the broadcasting regulator, the Council for Electronic Media (CEM), whose members are appointed only by State authorities (Parliament and the President), a prerequisite for direct political pressure over the electronic media.

Economic interference is mainly due to ineffective legislation, and is enabled by the fact that, in general, media ownership remains unclear. The imperfect Law on Radio and Television, and its improper implementation, has resulted in the direct financing of the CEM — as well as the BNT and BNR — from a State subsidy voted by Parliament, rather than from an independent public fund.

In the commercial sector, lack of transparency on media ownership and capital creates possibilities for the establishment of media monopolies or the entrance of money with unclear origin into the media industry, and also affects the editorial independence of broadcasters. There are no restrictions on media ownership, as such, envisaged in the Law on Radio and Television. There is no public register of media ownership and no effective anti-monopoly regulatory mechanisms.

Lack of transparency has also fuelled continuing arguments about the validity of the radio and television ratings offered by the different agencies — whose owners allegedly control, or have huge shares in, the electronic media. There is also no clarity about the distribution of advertising revenue;

precise data on advertising expenditure is not available and the CEM does not have the remit to collect it.

The OSI report calls for official policies on modern technologies and digitalisation to be developed as soon as possible, in particular as the present situation seriously impedes the technical modernisation of BNT and BNR. It also calls on lawmakers to tackle the ineffective broadcasting legislation that, together with political infighting, has led to the paralysis of the licensing of terrestrial broadcasters.

#### **Note to editors**

This report will be presented by the country reporter Asia Kavrakova, program director at the Open Society Institute, Sofia and Danail Danov, independent consultant and program director of the Media Development Center, Sofia, during a round-table, entitled *Public television in Bulgaria in the context of the European regulatory framework and practices*, to be held 10.00-13.00, Hotel Bulgaria, Dessislava Hall, 9<sup>th</sup> December 2005.

It is part of a series of 20 country reports monitoring “*Television across Europe: regulation, policy and independence*”. The countries included in the EUMAP report encompass Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Estonia, France, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Macedonia, Poland, Romania, Serbia (without Montenegro and Kosovo) Slovakia, Slovenia, Turkey and the UK. 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>.