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The full text of this report is available at <http://www.eumap.org> and at <http://www.cij.hu>.

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For immediate release

Hungarian television sector in dire need of reform

Budapest, 9 May 2006 – The television sector in Hungary is marred by excessive politicisation; the public broadcaster MTV is going through a deep identity and financial crisis; the diversity of television programming is limited in both the public and the private sectors; the 1996 Television Act is inadequate and requires urgent and fundamental reform.

These are the main findings of the Hungarian report included in the monitoring series *Television across Europe: regulation, policy and independence*, released today in Budapest. Prepared by Péter Bajomi-Lázár and produced by the Open Society Institute (OSI), in cooperation with the Budapest based Centre for Independent Journalism, the report provides a detailed analysis of the situation of broadcasting in Hungary. The report also offers concrete recommendations addressed at bringing the Hungarian television sector in line with citizens' needs.

Despite the formal declaration of media freedom in 1989, broadcasters in Hungary are still exposed to political pressures. Over the last fifteen years, political elites have continuously exerted pressure on broadcasters, especially on public service media, in an attempt to improve their own coverage.

The 1996 Radio and Television Act, which was intended to end political disputes (the so called “media war”) over who controlled the media and what societal values it should cultivate, has in fact only aggravated the situation by over-regulating public broadcasting. Political control over television was also institutionalised with the establishment of a National Radio and Television Board (ORTT) with excessive powers over broadcasters.

The report presented today recommends the immediate amendment of the 1996 Radio and Television Act, to decrease the political dependence of ORTT members and reform the current licensing procedure in order to avoid political interference. Such an amendment should also relax content regulation in general, and remove the requirement of impartial information in particular, as currently such regulation is the major excuse for political interference with editorial freedom.

The current institutional framework for broadcasting does not offer guarantees for the protection and enhancement of broadcasting independence and plurality. At the national level, Hungarians can today watch terrestrially three public service television channels — m1 and m2 from Magyar Televízió (MTV, Hungarian Television), plus Duna Television — and two commercial television channels, RTL Klub and TV2. There are also 38 cable channels, most of them offering specialised programmes. This large number of channels, however, does not translate into a real programming choice.

Today, the overwhelming majority of television programmes available to Hungarian watchers have first and foremost a commercial content, with investigative reporting and programmes addressed at minorities or vulnerable groups almost completely absent.

The OSI report also calls for amendments to the 1996 Radio and Television Act to improve the funding of public service broadcasters. Hungary's public service broadcasters have faced a deep financial crisis over the last decade. The television licence fee was abolished in 2002, further limiting the public broadcaster's independence.

In response, the public broadcasters have tried to compete with the commercial channels — but so far with little success. Despite increasingly desperate attempts to imitate the formats pioneered by commercial channels, including reducing other strands such as education and documentaries, MTV has made an audience loss every year since the appearance of the two national commercial channels in 1997. The audience share of public service m1, at 15 percent today, is well below the European average.

Finally, the report draws attention to Hungary's lack of preparedness with respect to new technologies. The current Radio and Television Act does not even mention digitalisation, thus hindering technological development and the enrichment of the audience's choice. An amendment to the Act is required in order to ease the digital switchover.

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 Hungarian report was prepared by Péter Bajomi-Lázár from the Hungarian Press Freedom Centre (<http://www.sajtoszabdsag.hu>) and produced in cooperation with the Center for Independent Journalism (<http://www.cij.hu>). The Center for Independent Journalism, Budapest was founded in 1995 as a non-profit organisation with a mission to support independent media, raise professional standards in journalism, and promote fact-based, fair, balanced reporting in Hungary. The Center offers media training to professional and student journalists on a non-profit basis, organises workshops and roundtable discussions on specific media issues, and cooperates in international media training and research programs.