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For immediate release

Planned TV reforms in Latvia should be reconsidered

Riga and Budapest, 12 December 2005 – Despite major reforms over the past ten years, Latvia’s television sector faces several important problems and lacks a broadcasting policy based on consensus between key actors. Regulation has suffered from a lack of independence, a situation that may worsen if currently proposed new laws are passed. The independence and financing of the public broadcaster remain unresolved, and broadcasting has suffered from restrictive provisions limiting Russian language programming. The broadcasting sector also generally lacks shared professional journalistic standards and adequate protection for journalists.

These are the main findings of the Latvia report included in the series of monitoring reports *Television across Europe: regulation, policy and independence*, released today in Riga. Drafted by Sergei Kruks and produced by the Open Society Institute (OSI) in cooperation with Providus, the report provides a detailed analysis of the situation of broadcasting in Latvia. It puts forward 10 concrete recommendations aimed at bringing the television sector in line with international standards and with its citizens’ needs.

In Latvia, the development of a broadcasting policy based on consensus has been hindered by a confrontational relationship between the main broadcasting regulator, the National Radio and Television Council (NRTP), and broadcasters and journalists. According to Sergei Kruks, “Broadcasting regulation in Latvia reflects a tradition of regarding public television as a one-way conveyor belt for the political establishment to disseminate information”.

The NRTP has tended to represent the interests of governing parties, and has exhibited ties with private broadcasting interests – for example, by delaying the licensing of a second commercial broadcaster for several years. It has also lacked adequate enforcement powers and capacity. Although recent reforms have improved this situation, the draft new Law on Public Broadcasting and the draft Law on Radio and Television would – if passed – entrust the formation of audiovisual policy, and the regulation of commercial broadcasters, to the Ministry of Culture, with no provisions to ensure the independence of the regulator.

The OSI report calls on the government to stimulate a discussion on broadcasting policy that would encompass all interested parties. At a minimum, this should lead to a significant rethinking of the proposed reforms, and the modification of the draft broadcasting laws. This, with the aim of establishing an independent regulator for broadcasting policy and commercial television, and ensuring a broad representation of civil society in regulatory bodies – including, in particular, the Russian-speaking minority. The report also calls for the regulator’s powers for monitoring and enforcing broadcasting

legislation to be strengthened, and urges the government to introduce clear and specific criteria for awarding broadcasting licences.

Both the official remit of the public broadcaster, Latvian Television (LTV), and the composition of the NRTP have reflected a tendency for political parties to assert their political influence on LTV. LTV has also become increasingly commercialised, a development encouraged by the absence of a stable system of funding, and also explicitly endorsed by its National Remit (according to which the second channel, LTV7, should increase the market share of LTV as a whole, which has led to the increase of light entertainment-type programmes). This threatens to undermine the station's public service character, and creates tension with the two commercial broadcasters competing with LTV for advertising, LNT and TV3.

The OSI report calls on the government and Parliament to clarify the system of funding for LTV, and establish clear restrictions on the amount of advertising that it may broadcast. Serious consideration should be given to introducing licence fees, as one way to ensure a stable, sufficient and independent source of funding.

The Russian minority in Latvia constitutes one third of the population. A one-sided policy of protecting the Latvian language through broadcasting legislation, has been challenged by a Constitutional Court ruling that found restrictions on foreign-language broadcasting to be unconstitutional. Nonetheless, several restrictions still remain, and the government has attempted to circumvent the ruling. The OSI report calls on the Government to remove legal restrictions on minority language broadcasting, and formulate a clear policy on minority language broadcasting as a tool for ethnic integration.

Finally, in Latvia there are no effective mechanisms for protecting journalists against media owners or political pressures, either through the NRTP or professional organisations. Moreover, there are almost no written professional journalistic standards or mechanisms for self-regulation by journalists or broadcasting organisations. The report released today urges public and private broadcasting journalists to develop a set of agreed journalistic standards, and calls on commercial broadcasters to develop internal guidelines to ensure editorial independence.

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 Latvia report was developed in cooperation with Providus. The Centre for Public Policy Providus provides policy analysis and is actively engaged in the policy process with the goal of facilitating comprehensive changes in areas important for Latvia's development. Providus activities include: publishing research and policy analyses, providing expertise to the government in the policy-making process, providing consultancy services and training, providing grant support to like-minded groups in Providus priority areas.

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