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Press release (for immediate release)

## **Serbia: further media reforms required to adapt to European broadcasting standards**

*Belgrade and Budapest, 28 March 2006* – Since democracy was established in 2000, media reform in Serbia has been slow and inconsistent. To adapt faster to the requirements for future EU membership, Serbia needs to make a clear commitment to end arbitrariness in the field of media law and policy. In the broadcasting sector, it is essential to establish a truly independent and fully functional regulator; to appoint new management and governing bodies of the former State broadcaster, RTS, according to legal procedures; and to ensure that the regulatory framework for commercial broadcasters is implemented in practice.

These are some of the most important findings of the Serbia country report included in the series of monitoring reports, *Television across Europe: regulation, policy and independence*, released today in Belgrade. The report on Serbia was drafted by Prof. Snježana Milivojević and produced by the Open Society Institute (OSI) Budapest. It calls on Serbia's Parliament and Government to overcome the current legal and regulatory ambiguity, and abandon arbitrary habits, to ensure that a new broadcasting policy is developed and put into practice, in line with European standards.

In the past five years Serbia has passed a package of media laws, including the 2002 Broadcasting Act. This act sets down licensing procedures and legal obligations for broadcasters, and established the Broadcasting Agency of the Republic of Serbia (RRA) as the main regulator. However, Parliament's violation of procedures for appointing RRA members, and subsequent political disputes, has meant that the appointment and work of the Council has been flawed. Appointments to the Council were completed only in May 2005, after legal changes that undermined its autonomy. Another round of amendments to the Broadcasting Act in August 2005 further weakened the RRA's independence with respect to political authorities.

The State broadcaster, Radio-Television Serbia (RTS), has been operating in a legal limbo since February 2003, the original deadline for its transformation to a public service broadcaster. This deadline was recently extended to April 2006, yet simultaneous decisions allowed for licence fees to be collected from December 2005 on – before RTS has become a public service broadcaster. Political control over broadcasting persists. The Government bypassed the Broadcasting Act to appoint a new Director General of RTS in 2004, expressing its dissatisfaction with the broadcaster's news coverage. It took advantage of the subsequent resignation of the RTS Governing Board, to institutionally retain RTS in the status of a State broadcaster, dependent on the Government.

The commercial broadcasting sector remains anarchic, with more than 200 broadcasters of television programmes in 2005. This reflects regulatory chaos and subjective licensing processes, rather than healthy competition; the Serbian advertising market is obviously unable to support so many operators, and the real sources of financing are non-transparent. During the authoritarian period of the 1990s, several broadcasters established themselves under the patronage of the undemocratic rulers as market leaders. As a result of the legal vacuum and absence of public policy, these media empires are now securing their market positions and will be in a position to consolidate their dominance if no clear regulation for them is established. Private broadcasters have repeatedly shown a tendency to use news coverage to openly pursue the political and economic interests of their owners which is against basic European democracy standards.

The OSI report includes 17 recommendations targeted at Government, regulatory bodies, broadcasters and media practitioners which need to be implemented if Serbia is to progress in consolidating its democracy and preparing for EU membership.

### **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 Serbia report was drafted by Snježana Milivojević, Professor at the Faculty of Political Science, University of Belgrade, and developed in cooperation with the Belgrade Media Centre. More information on the Media Center is available at <http://www.mediacenter.org.yu>.