

For immediate release

Czech television sector in dire need of reform

Prague and Budapest, 20 February 2006 – The television sector in the Czech Republic is marred by excessive politicisation. The lower house of Parliament, the Chamber of Deputies, in particular, has excessive – legal - influence over both the country’s broadcasting regulator (RRTV), and the public service broadcasters, Czech TV. The television sector also remains uncompetitive, dominated by two nationwide commercial stations and two public service channels.

These are the main findings of the Czech Republic report included in the monitoring series *Television across Europe: regulation, policy and independence*, released today in Prague. Drafted by Eva Rybkova and produced by the Open Society Institute (OSI), the report provides a detailed analysis of the situation of broadcasting in the Czech Republic. The most comprehensive analysis ever published on broadcasting in the Czech Republic, the report also offers 18 concrete recommendations addressed at bringing the television sector in line with citizens’ needs.

The Czech broadcasting sector has experienced over the past years severe turbulences. In 2000-2001 public service television lived through a deep crisis: unhappy with the political interference they suffered, a group of journalists hijacked the station and broadcasted their own, independent newscast. Earlier, in 1999, a dispute erupted between the U.S. investor, Central European Media Enterprises (CME), and the Czech government over the management of the largest commercial television station, TV Nova.

Such problems stem from the vagueness of existing broadcasting legislation, and the excessive power that the Chamber of Deputies exerts over the Council for Radio and Television Broadcasting (RRTV). The OSI report released today calls on the Czech Government to put forward legislation aiming at building a professional, independent, pro-active and modern Broadcasting Council. Its membership should cease to reflect the distribution of power in the Chamber of Deputies, and should ensure a broad social and professional representation.

Public service television has also to be reformed and supported. The stranglehold of, again, the Chamber of Deputies over the governance structures of Czech TV should be terminated. The Government should initiate a public debate on the best ways to appoint members to the Czech TV Council and Czech Radio Council. At the same time, Czech TV should be ensured a stable, long-term and neutral funding.

Czech commercial television stations suffered from a low level of transparency of their ownership. To ensure a transparent and competitive television market the OSI report recommends that the Broadcasting Council should be legally entitled to monitor all tiers of ownership in companies operating television and radio stations.

Digitalisation of broadcasting, a process that made substantial progress in 2005, is expected to spark competition in the television sector, the report states. However, there are worries that the current dominance of the two nationwide commercial television stations, TV Nova and Prima TV, could continue if the Broadcasting Council succumbs to commercial televisions lobbying and grant them a large part of the digital licences taken out for tender. The OSI report calls on the Czech Government to initiate a public debate on digitalisation policy.

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 www.eumap.org. More information on the Open Society Institute is available at www.soros.org.