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For immediate release

## Estonia lacks clear broadcasting policy

*Tallinn and Budapest, 14 December 2005* — Although Estonia has made huge progress in creating a public broadcasting system and liberalised private broadcasting sector, a clear broadcasting policy is lacking and progress is still needed to fulfil all international broadcasting standards. Regulatory reforms have stalled, financing of the public broadcaster (ETV) remains unpredictable and insufficient, and ETV's policy towards the Russian-speaking population remains unclear. The sector also lacks a clear policy regarding media concentration, clear procedures for processing citizen complaints against broadcasters or mechanisms to guarantee editorial independence at private broadcasters.

These are the main findings of the Estonia country report included in the monitoring series *Television across Europe: regulation, policy and independence*, released today in Tallinn. Produced by the Open Society Institute in cooperation with Tartu University's Department of Journalism and Communication, and the Meediaseire, the report calls on Estonia's government to push through or initiate a number of policies and regulatory reforms.

Estonia still lacks a clear and comprehensive policy for the broadcasting sector, and particularly on the role of broadcasting in general and the rights and relations of citizens in relation to broadcasting. Moreover, regulation remains very light and the Ministry of Culture does not play a sufficiently active role in monitoring broadcasters and enforcing fulfilment of their legal and licence obligations.

Although the Ministry of Culture has initiated proposals for the establishment of a new independent regulator to carry out all supervision and licensing, the reform process has stalled as a result of lack of consensus between different ministries. According to the author of the report Urmas Loit, "Estonian broadcasting requires a structured debate among all interested parties that would yield a clear broadcasting policy on regulation, clarify the role of public broadcasting and ensure its financing."

The public broadcaster *Eesti Televisioon* has become increasingly public service-oriented, especially since it ceased selling advertising in 2002. However, its funding is unstable, non-transparent and insufficient. Constraints on funding – in breach of legal commitments made in 2001 – prevent the broadcaster from fulfilling its public service obligations to the highest quality. The OSI report calls on the Estonian government to introduce legislation or rules to ensure adequate, stable and predictable funding for ETV.

While ETV has retained a vital position in the sector, its strategy concerning programming for the Russian-speaking minority – more than one-third of the population - remains unresolved. This is both the result of financial constraints (preventing the establishment of a second channel), but also of the lack of a clear broadcasting policy *vis-à-vis* this minority.

The commercial broadcasting sector has consolidated since the late 1990's into two companies fully controlled by Scandinavian media companies, enabling them to achieve profitability. However, consolidation has also exposed the lack of a clear policy on media concentration and cross-ownership. The Estonian Government and broadcasting regulators have failed to issue a clear opinion on the limits of concentration.

Mechanisms for processing complaints are inadequate or missing at both the public and private broadcasters. In particular, since all broadcasters left the Estonian Press Council, this has left a situation where there is no clear process by which citizens may file complaints and have a clear right to their processing, without any preconditions set for the complainants.

The OSI report calls on the Estonian Government to initiate, in consensus with the broader broadcasting community, a clear broadcasting policy that outlines a vision for public and private broadcasting. The policy should include participatory mechanisms for citizen, clearly define the role of public broadcasting *vis-à-vis* the Russian-speaking minority, and clarify and strengthen regulatory structures. It should also define tasks and goals that are measurable and whose fulfilment is therefore assessable.

The report contains a set of recommendations directed at further deepening the reforms that Estonia has successfully engaged in over the last few years.

#### **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 Estonia report was developed in cooperation with Tartu University's Department of Journalism and Communication, and the Meediaseire.