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How can Slovakian television respond to citizens' needs?

Bratislava and Budapest, 21 December 2005 – After almost a decade of highly politicised broadcast media, the Slovak television market has seen tremendous improvements in the past several years. Yet, despite these improvements, further reforms of the public service broadcasters are necessary to ensure their political and economic independence. In the commercial sector, transparency of media ownership needs to be improved, while local television broadcasters require additional support to ensure media diversity. Finally, despite some signs of an increase in quality television programming, both journalists and broadcasters need to take steps to address tabloidisation and promote investigative journalism.

These are among the main findings of the Slovakia country report in the series of monitoring reports *Television across Europe: regulation, policy and independence*, released today in Bratislava. The report was produced by the Open Society Institute (OSI) in cooperation with MEMO 98. While recognising the progress of the Slovak public broadcasters, and the reforms carried out to date, the report calls on Parliament to continue its endeavours to build an independent public service broadcaster, and urges all broadcasters to support high-quality programming. The report contains 16 specific recommendations targeted at decision-makers and regulators.

In the 1990s, the public service television broadcaster, STV, served as the mouthpiece of the various governments that ruled the country, particularly during the years when Vladimír Mečiar was Prime Minister (1994-1998). However, after 2000 the government adopted legislation that helped to stabilise and standardise the media sector, including new laws on the public service broadcasters (STV and SRO) that redefined their statutes. The introduction of people-meters in 2004 also had an immense impact, as it brought a clearer picture of the market that was useful both to advertisers and broadcasters. Collusion between politicians and the media has decreased, although it is still present to a certain extent in several media outlets.

Under new management from 2003, STV also embarked on an ambitious process of reform — by August 2003 the station was in the black for the first time in almost a decade. However, although widely acclaimed for its reforms, STV's management under Richard Rybníček was also criticised for having turned the public station into yet another commercial station, competing for high ratings and advertising money.

The OSI report released today calls for further reforms of the public broadcasters, in particular to ensure the station's independence from political pressures. The report urges Parliament to amend current legislation to change the system for appointing the members of the STV and SRO Councils. These amendments should permit civil society and professional organisations to nominate members to sit on these Councils, and require all STV and SRO Council members to have proven media expertise and experience. The report also calls on

Parliament to amend the Law on Licence Fees to link future increases in the licence fee for public service broadcasting directly to the rate of inflation. This would ensure sufficient and more stable financing for the public service broadcasters.

In the television sector, the commercial station, TV Markíza — operated by the US company Central European Media Enterprises (CME) — continues to enjoy an extremely strong position, which it gained back in the mid-1990s when STV's credibility was plummeting. However, competition in the television sector has been boosted by the emergence of other commercial stations, in particular TV Joj.

In such a dynamic market, the OSI report argues that it is important to put in place a regulatory framework that can ensure transparency of media ownership and capital. The report calls for the main broadcasting regulator, the Council for Broadcasting and Retransmission, to be granted further powers — including through amendments of the Law on Broadcasting and Retransmission — to enable it to ensure transparency in the broadcasting sector and prevent concentration of ownership. The report also urges the Council to exercise its existing powers to the full, in particular by publishing the names of all broadcast licence holders together with their ownership stakes.

While the national broadcasting market is growing, local broadcasters are experiencing serious financial turbulence. Many are dependent on support from the local authorities, a situation that undermines their independence. To spark diversity in broadcasting, the OSI report calls for increased support for local television broadcasters that pursue quality and independent programming – for example, by earmarking part of the revenue from licence fees or through local taxes.

Finally, despite a gradual improvement in current affairs programming, more needs to be done by broadcasters themselves to tackle the tabloidisation of content and a lack of solid investigative reporting. In particular, the report calls for journalist organisations to focus on building a culture of solid and independent journalism, by continually supporting the training of journalists and encouraging the adoption of a media code of conduct.

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.

The Slovakia report was developed in cooperation with MEMO 98, which is an independent, non-partisan organization created in 1998 to monitor the Slovak media scene with the aim of ensuring that all citizens have free access to balanced public information. More information about MEMO 98 is available at www.memo98.sk.