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“Media and journalism in South East Europe –

Captured by particular interests or turning to serve the public?”

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**Session 4:**

**Public service broadcasting: governing and financing patterns - way of control and way of solution?**

Presentation by speaker:

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Good afternoon to you all,

Considering the time I have at my disposal, I will try to briefly explain some of my observations regarding the topic of discussion, and illustrate it with examples from the situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

First of all, based on my own experiences, I can confirm that the issue of financing the PBS, and the election and role of the governing bodies, are the two most effective instruments which are available to the authorities in BiH for controlling the PBS and influencing the editorial policy.

This is particularly expressed in societies in transition, in which broadcasting services stop being state services. Their transition into a PBS implies independence and a strong influence on the integration of the society and the growth of democracy.

For the authorities, all this means a loss of power and influence. This is why it is realistic to expect resistance to all progressive media reforms which would contribute to its independence.

BiH, which is, thanks to the constitution of the Dayton peace agreement, a deeply ethnically divided society, is maybe the best example in the region of how difficult it is to create a PBS whose program would be in the interest of the entire audience in the country.

In Dayton, where the peace agreement for BiH was formulated in 1995, there was no mention of media, but the PBS was organized as a copy of the constitutional organization of the state, which was, as they said, composed of two entities (Federation of BiH and Republika Srpska), and 3, so called, constituent ethnic groups.

This is why two entity PBSs were created. The first post-war elections clearly showed their disintegrating role. That is why the High Representative of the International Community in BiH soon initiated a PBS at the state level.

The intention of the International Community was that they b**e**come the PBS of all citizens in BiH, and not just for certain ethnic groups, considering the need for integration and restoration of trust among people.

This is why it was anticipated that the 3 public broadcasters function in a unified system of public broadcasting in BiH. The law of the Public Broadcasting RTV system of BiH from 2005 intended the formation of a common Corporation, which would be the link between the three public broadcasters and would perform common functions, especially in the field of technological development.

This type of organization would enable a greater financial stability, the production of mutually complementary programs, and an appropriate level of editorial independence of the PBS.

Unfortunately, due to the lack of political will, this reform of the public broadcasting in BiH has not been completed yet, even after 9 years. It does not seem important anymore that this is one of the conditions for BiH for EU integration.

The lack of political will in BiH is conditioned by the lack of acceptance of the foreseen organization and form of the PBS.

A PBS system based on the corporate organization principle in BiH implies, first of all, a rationalization of operations as well as the use of the 3 current PBSs and the idea of producing complementary programs, instead of the complete disunity, which we have at the moment.

At the same time, this also means a reduction of influence of the entity governments on the operations of each PBS and the system as a whole.

In a society of conflicting political interests, which is the case in BiH, the authorities have a need to influence the operations of the PBS. This is very explicit in the entities whose governments have conflicting political goals.

Finally, a reformed PBS prevents its division into ethnic PBSs, and the desire that each ethnic group, more precisely ethno-national political party, has their own PBS.

In that case, considering that the ethno-national ruling parties in BiH believe that they exclusively represent their ethnic group, they would have **i**mmediate influence on the PBS.

The resources and the style in which authorities gain influence over the PBS is manifested in different ways, but there are two main ones – the election and the role of the governing bodies and the issue of financing the PBS.

Everything is set up in a very simple way: out of 4 members of the Steering Board, which are proposed by the ruling parties and elected by the parliament, 3 are representatives of the constituent ethnic groups, and one is a member of the “other” category.

This is how ethno-national political parties can directly influence the operations of the PBS through the representatives that they elected. The Steering Board of the PBS at the state level, for example, has authorized itself to elect and dismiss directors and editors.

By the way, the PBS on the state level is in an especially unfavorable position, since the primary interest lays with the entity PBSs due to their pronounced statehood.

Steering Boards composed in this way are often a source of blockades when it comes to operations of the PBS if, for example, the political mentors of the Board members are not in consensus over certain questions. Unfortunately, this is an every-dayoccurrence.

One concrete example is the nine-year-long obstruction of the completion of the reform of public broadcasting and the creation of a unified corporate system. Despite this being a legal requirement, it is being opposed by the members of the Board coming from RS in the name of their entity government.

The government of RS believes that the PBS Corporation would mean that jurisdiction is being transferred from the entity to the state level.

The primary source of financing of operations of the PBS is through the income of the RTV tax, which is collected through telephone bills by telecom operators. The second source is through marketing.

The PBS is facing a constant decline of income through the RTV tax, due to many reasons. One is especially indicative: the invitation to the Croats in Bosnia, by the leader of the Croatian Democratic Union party, to boycott paying the RTV tax (less than 4 Euros per month). The reason is that the PBS supposedly does not satisfy the needs of the Croat population in BiH.

Thus, there is constant pressure on the PBS, and its credibility is constantly being undermined. The ultimate goal is, therefore, a PBS in accordance with own political ambitions.

The second type of pressure on the PBS is preventing it from having a stable and constant stream of revenue. Recently in the parliament, a bill was forwarded to the House of Representatives which proposed that the PBS should be financed from the state budget on a yearly basis. This initiative did not receive a “green light”.

Marketing, the second form of income, is also subject to lots of political manipulation. Under the *sch*eme of ethnic divisions, large state-owned companies are under full control of *certain* political elites. This is also the case with telecom operators, who are the biggest advertisers and through which it is possible to influence the operations of the PBS.

In the past, we have even seen sugge**st**ions from one religious community about which media and broadcasters should and should not be used for advertising.

Of course, there are also subjective weaknesses and mistakes when it comes to the operations and decision making at the PBS, which influence its position, but this is a topic for another discussion.

The negative consequences of unstable financing are numerous. The most difficult one is the demise of a pluralistic program which has to be present in the PBS. This is seen through the lack of own production of original high-quality programs, targeted at the widest audiences. Therefore, the PBS is becoming a less recognizable and credible source of information.

Due to the lack of money, the PBS is turning to the production of commercial content and is turning away from its actual mission.

Journalists, editors, and other staff are under constant fear of losing their jobs. This is a fertile ground for developing auto-censorship, which prevents journalists from performing their job professionally and doing investigative journalism.

Finally, low paid journalists are leaving the PBS and going to better paid jobs, even outside of journalism.

In short, as a result of the combination of the election of governing bodies and unstable financing, the PBS is subject to high and constant pressure from the governing authorities, even though, at least normatively, a high degree of independence is foreseen for the PBS.

We can conclude that the 3 public broadcasters in BiH are under constant pressure and clearly favor certain interests of the authorities, some of them more, some less, and some completely.

To turn around this trend and establish a credible PBS operating in the interest of the citizens, it is necessary to, in my opinion, secure the following conditions:

1. In the case of BiH, conclude the reform of the PBS, and instead of a divided PBS, especially along ethnic lines, establish a broadcasting system that will be governed on a corporate basis. For BiH, it is important to stop divisions and prevent media segregation, to avoid having a copy of the educational system called “two schools under one roof”.

2. To insure an election process of independent Steering Boards, whose members will be professionals with relevant experience who will be able to refuse pressure from the authorities. Representatives of the civil society should be actively involved in their structure, election procedure, and the evaluation of the Boards' work. *The public needs to be interested in the work of the Steering Boards.*

3. It is necessary that each government secures a stable source of income of the PBS, which will not be subject to political interventions and changes. I would give advantage to the RTV tax in combination with a limited time slot for advertising. The RTV tax should be collected by an authoritative body, such as the tax collection office.

This, however, must be preceded by the restructuring of the way public broadcasters are being managed, so that on the basis of the optimal program plan, the PBS could estimate the financial resources necessary for its operations.

In my opinion, financing the PBS from the state budget is the least acceptable (or unacceptable) option.

4. Enabling the PBS for functioning in a digital age. This refers primarily to the production of high-quality programs and their distribution by a convergence of platforms, which offer us ICT, such as DTT, Broadband, UMTS...

5. Creating a legal framework which enables the implementation of relevant European recommendations with the goal of securing sustainability of the PBS and editorial independence from any types of pressure.

That is why I believe that all countries in the EU integration process should fulfill this PBS reform condition.

Thank you for your attention.