

Article by Simon Haselock, Deputy High Representative for Media Issues: "BiH will Enter Europe Only When the Media is Liberated from Political Control"

There is plenty of happy talk at the moment about this country joining the European club. The Stability Pact signed this month is indeed an important step for the region. But before Europe comes to the Balkans, politicians have to be evicted from the newsroom.

When it comes to television and media freedom, Bosnia-Herzegovina is light years away from European practise. Just ask the journalists trying to do their job at Zenica Radio-Television. When they report about critical letters sent to the municipality, the mayor vows to get them fired. Mayor Alic has told the journalists that it is "his" station and that they have to issue "positive" reports about this government. Is the police force "his" as well? And the housing administration? As long as politicians such as Mr Alic treat television paid for by taxpayers as their personal political weapon, there will be no seats at the European table for BiH.

At every level of government, in both entities, politicians view electronic media as booty to be won by any means and to be held at any cost. Broadcast news in BiH tends to feed the population a daily sedative that deflects attention from real issues and awkward questions. Every attempt by the High Representative to introduce some European-style regulation has been met with passivity and obstruction. That's because

politicians here are terrified that they would have to compete on a “level playing field”.

The amount of empty rhetoric circulating at the moment on media issues is an excellent illustration of how ruling parties here try to preserve the status quo and shirk their responsibilities.

Some elements of the HDZ wish you to believe that the international community is plotting to ban the Croatian identity from public media. Actually, we have merely demanded that HRT behave like any other European broadcaster and respect the laws of the land and international copyright. While expressing public concern for the “marginalisation” of the Croat people, HDZ leaders shown little interest in a proposed law for a new Federation network that will enfranchise the Croat people in public media for the first time in BiH. Meanwhile, elements of the SDA claim the international community has failed to deliver sufficient donations to RTV BiH and have vowed to defend what so-called state television. Actually, senior members of the SDA are busy setting up an ethnically exclusive commercial station (with international donations), a network of politically controlled cantonal stations and have placed RTV BiH on a list of Federation enterprises to be privatised. Serb nationalists have accused the international community of trying to somehow stifle free speech in Republika Srpska. In reality, the IMC has merely required broadcasters to offer some semblance of balance in their coverage – a basic requirement required of any station in Western Europe. Complaints about SRT from every political quarter in the RS are the best evidence that no faction is able to exert control over the network. The problem with SRT is that there is too much nationalist flag-waving and not enough journalism.

The High Representative has only asked that this country meet minimum European standards. Clearly, ending the current legal vacuum is a necessary first step to stripping away political

interference. New laws and regulations must establish genuine public service broadcasting that serves all the constituent peoples in a way that is financially transparent and practical. At the same time, there must be conditions for strong commercial broadcasting to ensure the public has a full range of choices.

The proposed law on Federation Television, which is now before the Federation parliament, represents a key element of a new legal framework. Based on a proposal by the multi-ethnic, non-partisan interim Board of Governors of RTV BiH, the law represents the first legislation in BiH that would create a public broadcasting service based on European standards. Adoption of the law will help clear the way to resolve issues at the state-wide level.

What will happen to RTV BiH? It is an old Republic BiH institution which suffers from a large debt burden, no regular financing and fails to fully represent all the constituent peoples in its programming and staff. It costs more than a million Deutsche marks a month to operate, with or without a program on the air. Emotional rhetoric alone cannot solve this financial headache. As soon as possible, it must be replaced with new affordable services at the state and entity levels that conform to Dayton's multi-ethnic principles. Its property must be used as a basis for these new services.

The interim Board of RTV BiH, which was ratified by the High Representative, has prepared useful proposals for the Federation network as well models for a future state-wide service. The members of the Board deserve credit for taking on a thankless task in an environment fraught with political ill-will.

The Office of the High Representative and the Independent Media Commission believe that a deadline should be set after which RTV BiH would be succeeded by new institutions. Given the structure of BiH under the Dayton constitution, it would

be financially unrealistic to advocate a return to a large, expensive, centralised state-wide broadcaster. It is however a worthy aspiration to build a robust public broadcasting service for the whole country, even if it takes some time to fully realise it.

In the short-term, there is a clear legal and practical requirement for BiH to be represented in international broadcast organisations, for the public to be informed of the activities of the central institutions or certain major events and for public transmission resources to be used in an efficient manner. A modest state-level organisation will need to be established to serve as a coordinating body for entity television networks and which could produce current affairs programming based primarily on the resources of the entity networks.

As for the engineering side of the equation, the transmission network in BiH represents a potentially valuable economic resource – despite extensive war-time damage. Preliminary discussions have begun on how to set up a public corporation covering both entities that would operate the primary transmission sites for broadcasting and telecommunications services. Major European firms have already expressed an interest in the project and are prepared to invest substantial sums to repair the transmission infrastructure if – and only if – a coherent legal structure is put in place for the whole country. Unlike donor governments or the World Bank, foreign investors will not travel to Bosnia pleading for cooperation. They will simply take their money and walk away.

While the international community has sought to reform the largest broadcasters, local politicians have been working to bolster their control of TV and radio stations at the cantonal and municipal level. Has anyone asked the taxpayers if they want their local governments spending money on these stations when more basic needs are not being met? These municipal and cantonal stations are politically controlled and often

ambiguously funded. As the broadcast licensing process moves forward under the Independent Media Commission, these local stations will come under increasingly strict scrutiny.

The status quo is being dismantled here, step by step. Bosnia-Herzegovina already enjoys more media freedom than its neighbours, primarily because of the presence of the international community. It is now time to bury authoritarian habits from the past and to lay the ground for the kind of public broadcasting that has played such a pivotal role in building post-war Europe. Sweeping judicial and economic reforms must be carried out to ensure the the media is truly free to do its job. Television paid for by taxpayers must be belong to the public – and not political oligarchies. The governments sponsoring the peace agreement will insist on that principle. Bosnian politicians can no longer ask for special exceptions. The European train is leaving the station, and those who resist reform will be left behind.