

Article by Julian Braithwaite, Director of Communications: “PBS Reform Is Unavoidable”

BiH's public broadcasting system needs comprehensive reform if it is to avoid financial collapse and meet the requirements of European integration. But it is rightly now up to BiH's own institutions to decide how, and indeed whether, to carry out the necessary reforms.

Most citizens will probably have been mystified by the passionate and at times intemperate debate about what's wrong with Bosnia's public broadcasting system, and what needs to be done to fix it.

Why does public service broadcasting matter so much? Part of the answer lies in the role the old state broadcasting system played in the breakup of the SFRJ. Parts of that system were used to undermine the state and in the worst cases, to promote ethnic propaganda, hatred and a climate of fear. They contributed directly to creating the circumstances in which awful crimes could be committed by neighbour against neighbour; in which belonging to the wrong ethnicity was a death sentence. The victims of this aggressive hate speech were innocent civilians of all nationalities.

Making sure this can never happen again has been one of the priorities of the international community since the Dayton Peace Agreement was signed in 1995. And the public broadcasting system in BiH has made significant progress since the war. RTRS is very different from Pale TV. Direct and formal political control over editorial decision-making has been broken. And BiH's two entity and one state-level public

broadcasters are now part of a country-wide system, PBS. Dayton states that BiH must have institutions that protect the country's territorial integrity and international sovereignty. Having a country-wide public broadcasting system in which the three public broadcasters work together effectively is clearly an important part of that.

So why, eight years after Dayton, does the system still need reform? The reason is simple: PBS has proved to be financially and structurally unsustainable and will collapse if nothing is done. In short, PBS has been spending money it doesn't have, and has run up millions of KM of debt. There has been a great deal of angry debate about who is responsible for this. But what matters most now is how to rescue PBS from this financial situation. That's where reform comes in. Because bad management is probably not the primary reason for PBS's financial crisis. The real reasons are structural: the lack of an effective regulatory regime that ensures responsible financial management; an inefficient, duplicatory and outdated internal structure that wastes tax-payers' money; and a public subscription-based financing system that does not work properly.

Who should be responsible for fixing the situation? Some argue that the international community should, either because it was our fault in the first place or because BiH can't be trusted with such sensitive issues. The international community is certainly willing to help; to provide advice and assistance. But it should now be up to BiH's own institutions, not the international community, to decide how and indeed whether to reform.

Let me explain why. Precisely because it is now eight years after Dayton, the international community should – and is – handing over more responsibility to BiH's domestic institutions. There was a time when these institutions could not be trusted with building and protecting an independent public service broadcasting system for the whole of BiH; and

when it was appropriate for the international community to take responsibility. Those days are over. Some still question whether BiH's institutions can be trusted with reform. But it surely cannot be right for the international community to deny them the benefit of the doubt and do it for them.

There is also another reason. PBS reform is a priority for European integration. Brussels has made it clear that if the BiH authorities want to show they are serious about the reforms necessary for European integration, they will have to implement these reforms themselves. If they leave them to the OHR, they fail the test. BiH can't get into Europe through the OHR.

So what does that mean in practice? The European Union expects BiH to put in place a viable, financially and editorially independent public broadcasting system. Nobody believes the current system is sustainable in the long-term. So it is now up to BiH's domestic authorities to consider how and whether to implement the necessary reforms. They could of course choose not to; just as they could choose not to join the European Union.

But if they do want to reform PBS, the international community is ready to help. OHR has provided legislative reform proposals for consideration. The BBC has also provided a professional consultancy to advise PBS on how to modernize its structures and become more efficient. And the European Commission is prepared to advise on whether any proposed reforms meet the requirements of European integration before they are finally adopted.

Nobody will force BiH to undertake these reforms. Any legislative reforms will be up to the three governments to decide. And any internal cost cutting and restructuring will be a matter for the Boards of Governors of the three broadcasters. If they want our advice and assistance, we're

here. If they don't, they can solve these problems on their own. The choice is theirs.

The signs are that they are choosing reform. But all of us know that fine words and even good intentions mean little. In the end, only concrete actions count.

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