Article by the High Representative, Paddy Ashdown: “Time To Tell The Truth About PBS”

The more that gets said about public broadcasting in this country, the more confusing it seems to become. You, the citizens of this country, could be forgiven for wondering what’s really going on.

It’s time to tell the truth about what is really at stake. The public broadcasters are facing financial collapse. And unless they sort themselves out it could affect your relationship with the European Union. You need to know why.

The public service broadcasting system is an important institution in any European country. It’s role is, independently, to inform and serve the public in a way that the commercial broadcasters cannot.

But as anyone who remembers the role played by the state broadcasters in the breakup of the SFRJ and the war in Bosnia, reform of the public broadcasting system is particularly important for this country’s future.

You need to be sure the public broadcasters can never again be used for propaganda, for promoting ethnic hatred and division. And you can be sure that the European Union will want to be sure of that too before they let Bosnia and Herzegovina travel much further down the road to Europe.

So let me clear up some of the myths that have been in the media recently.

Myth 1: PBS already meets Europe’s standards

The only standards that matter now are the conditions set by the European Commission for BiH's further integration into Europe.

BiH's public service broadcasters need to be part of a single system that is sustainable, financially and editorially independent and in line with the Dayton Peace Agreement. What that means is that there must be safeguards to prevent the broadcasters ever again being used to destroy the country.

At this moment, your broadcasters don't meet those standards.

Myth 2: The international community is responsible for all the problems in the public broadcasting system

You don't have to look any further than Serbia to see a public broadcasting system in crisis for many of the same reasons as PBS, including political interference, a lack of sustainable financing, inefficiency and overstaffing. The difference is, RTS doesn't have an international community to blame.

Your public broadcasters were warped by the war. They have come a long way, not least due to the support of the international community.

Myth 3: The international community is responsible for solving the problems in the public broadcasting system

Wrong. This is BiH's broadcasting system, nobody else's. It is the responsibility of the PBS management and governors to get their costs under control and ensure that modern professional standards are applied. And it is the responsibility of your politicians to strengthen the legislative and regulatory framework that provides for sustainable, financially and editorially independent, public broadcasting in this country.

Myth 4: The international community does not care what happens to the public broadcasting system

Wrong again. The European Union has made PBS reform a condition for European integration. You won't get into Europe without reform.

But the only sustainable solution is one that your institutions agree with and take responsibility for. The OHR cannot reform PBS for BiH if BiH is to convince Brussels that you are serious about backing these reforms.

The international community is ready to help those who want to be helped. The BBC Consultancy to PBS is providing excellent professional advice. But if you reject good advice, don't expect us to give you financial support. In the next few days, the European Commission has to consider whether to provide 1.5 million Euros to PBS. Unless the PBS management can convince them their money will not be wasted, BiH will lose that money.

Myth 5: The reform proposals are a plot between the OHR and the domestic authorities to silence FTV before next year's local elections

One of the less attractive sides of public debate in this country is that when people have lost an argument they try to discredit its proponents by accusing them (anonymously) of criminality or political manipulation.

Your domestic politicians and parliaments rightly have a role in reforming the PBS legislative and regulatory structure, as in any European democracy. The OHR is assisting them by providing draft legislative proposals. But it will be they, nobody else, who has the final say on any reform legislation.

Myth 6: The public broadcasting system does not need to cut costs and staff in order to survive; it only needs more money

Why should you, the citizens, have to pay more money to people who have shown little willingness to spend it responsibly?

The management of PBS have run up millions of KM of debt for Bosnia and Herzegovina. They now say they just want more money. It's a scandal.

PBS does need a better financing system. But more urgently, your broadcasters need to cut its costs. If they do not, they will collapse – its that simple. RTRS is taking the tough decisions, including by cutting staff. FTV and PBS are not. It is an open secret that there are many people in Fed TV who never even turn up to work. Why should you pay for them?

Myth 7: The OHR will sell the "Grey House" to SFOR

OHR will not sell the "grey house" to anybody. We do not believe it is economically viable to refurbish a building designed for a different era in broadcasting, and that it would be better to move out. But whether or not you do depends not on us – but on PBS's management and your parliaments.

Let me be clear. BiH faces a choice. Either reform now, get European support for your broadcasters and meet Europe's conditions for further integration. Or delay, lose 1.5 million Euros in aid, watch your broadcasters collapse, and send a clear signal to Europe – that you're not interested.