Commissioner for Human Rights: Public service broadcasting under threat in Europe

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On 2 May 2017, the Council of Europe's Commissioner for Human Rights issued a new Human Rights Comment on "Public service broadcasting under threat in Europe" (for a previous opinion, see IRIS 2011-4/2). The Comment is divided into a number of sections, including on the independence of public service broadcasters (PSBs), stable and adequate funding, new challenges, and disinformation, and concludes with a roadmap for the future.

The Comment begins by pointing to the Council of Europe's Platform to promote the protection of journalism and the safety of journalists (see IRIS 2017-2/2), and notes that there is an emerging trend of threats to the independence of public broadcasters or of their regulatory bodies. It also notes that the growing number of alerts on the Platform concerning political interference in the editorial line of public broadcasters, insufficient safeguards in legislation against political bias, or lack of appropriate funding to guarantee the independence of the public broadcasters.

On funding, the Commissioner noted that the system of financing public broadcasters is also of utmost importance since it has the potential to keep them politically dependent, and discusses a number of developments which occurred in Bulgaria, Romania, and Greece. On new challenges, the Commissioner notes that while in some circumstances a shift is still needed from being a "State broadcaster" to a "genuine public service media", increasingly public service media are engaging in new forms of communication and platforms, such as the Internet, and not just television and radio. Notably, on the issue of "outright disinformation" being "amplified by social media", the Comment states that the existence of a strong and genuinely independent public service broadcasting is all the more important. The Commissioner notes that the problem of disinformation will not be solved by restricting content or by arbitrary blocking, but by ensuring that the public has access to impartial and accurate information through public broadcasters which enjoy their trust (noting the Joint Declaration on freedom of expression and "fake news", disinformation and propaganda, adopted by four Special Rapporteurs on freedom of expression (see IRIS 2017-5/1)).

Finally, the Commissioner calls on member states to implement the Council of Europe standards, and ensure that legal measures are in place to guarantee PSBs' editorial independence and institutional autonomy, and avoid their politicisation;

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PSBs are provided with sustainable funding; members of management and supervisory bodies are appointed through a transparent process, taking into account their qualifications and professional skills and their duties related to working for the public service; they are provided with the necessary resources to produce quality programmes which reflect cultural and linguistic diversity, paying attention to minority languages.

Commissioner for Human Rights, Public service broadcasting under threat in Europe, 2 May 2017

http://www.coe.int/en/web/commissioner/-/public-service-broadcasting-under-threat-in-europe

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