

# IN EFFECT, DO WE ELECT IMAMO LI IZBORA



## Report

### Discussion Table: **Media in the public interest: Strengthening Public Service for citizens**

Conference: [“In effect, do we elect?”](#)

October 24, 2024

The material used in the roundtable discussion can be found [here](#).

---

The roundtable discussion titled "*Media in the public interest: Strengthening Public Service for citizens*" focused on how public media should serve citizens and what obstacles hinder this goal. The discussion aimed to generate recommendations to address issues related to political bias, censorship, self-censorship, factual reporting, and the conservative approach in content presentation, especially reflected in significant gender imbalance. The discussion was closed to the public.

#### **Main Conclusions**

Participants noted a lack of political balance within the public broadcaster's operations, emphasizing the need to strengthen editorial independence and integrity. They highlighted issues of self-censorship and avoidance of sensitive topics, suggesting mechanisms for enabling freer reporting. A decline in journalism quality, particularly among young journalists, was observed, pointing to the need for better practical training. Funding public broadcasting through subscription fees was deemed crucial for unbiased information dissemination. The need for gender balance among interviewees was noted. Participants also acknowledged the need for content modernization so the public broadcaster can fulfill its educational role. It was concluded that drastic staffing and organizational changes, along with reliance on independent regulatory bodies and new EU directives, are necessary to ensure more effective regulation within public broadcasting.

#### **Political Bias**

The most prominent issue raised was political bias, with a clear lack of political pluralism in the public broadcaster's programming, especially in news segments. Participants agreed that

# IN EFFECT, DO WE ELECT IMAMO LI IZBORA



editorial policy is driven by political influence, lacking editorial and journalistic integrity. The discussion noted that editors and journalists lack the capacity and knowledge to resist political pressures and rely heavily on one-sided information when creating content. News is created without appropriate context and excludes diverse perspectives.

It was concluded that political bias is evident in the public broadcaster's programming, especially in coverage of politically significant events. The broadcaster's news programming during the observation period showed clear bias toward ruling parties. This manifested through a focus on pseudo-events and topics favorable to those in power while minimizing or entirely excluding opposition voices. More in-depth analytical approaches were only observed in topics that were not politically controversial. The need for mechanisms to ensure greater editorial independence and balanced content was discussed. One proposal suggested organizing election candidate presentations in an alternative format, as the current format may give the illusion of including diverse actors and opinions.

## **Self-Censorship and Censorship**

The topic of self-censorship and censorship is significant, with journalists often avoiding certain topics or questions that might be undesirable to political structures. This issue was also noted in other public broadcasters, such as HRT, where certain topics are marginalized or presented without proper context.

Journalists and editors are passive in initiating topics of public interest, indicating the presence of both censorship and self-censorship in public broadcasting. It was also stressed that public funding for the broadcaster must be maintained and that the public should be reminded it is their money and that they have the right to voice complaints, as the public broadcaster should be open to criticism.

## **Decline in Journalism Quality**

The decline in journalism quality was emphasized, with criticism of inadequate practical training for young journalists, who often fail to recognize the core of a topic. Journalist education, with a focus on practical work, was identified as key to improving journalism quality and promoting more objective reporting.

Fact-checking, imprecision, and unclear reporting were also cited as pressing issues for the public broadcaster. Examples were given where a presenter reported incorrect figures, which could have been a mistake but is nonetheless inexcusable. It was concluded that the public broadcaster is not sufficiently modernized and should make greater use of visuals and

# IN EFFECT, DO WE ELECT IMAMO LI IZBORA



infographics as educational tools for the audience. The current format was deemed conservative and outdated. It was suggested that the broadcaster should incorporate visuals in other segments of the news, as the only visual elements currently used are for weather and sports, which led to the recommendation that visuals should be included in other news segments as well, as the broadcaster's role is also to educate the public.

## **Conservatism in Content Creation**

The conservative nature of public broadcasting was discussed, with a particular emphasis on the lack of gender balance. Examples were provided from various programs and segments, highlighting the insufficient representation of women. The BBC's "50-50" project was highlighted as a good model for addressing this issue, as it mandates equal representation of male and female speakers in every segment.

## **Funding and the Role of Citizens**

It was concluded that citizens must be aware that they fund public broadcasting through their subscription fees and have the right to demand quality, unbiased information. The need for more transparent and stable public funding was also emphasized. Participants touched upon EU regulations, which mandate that each member state must ensure an independent public broadcaster.

## **Public Broadcasting Reform**

Participants in the discussion pointed out failed reform attempts and suggested a restructuring of the editorial team. Drastic measures were discussed, including rehiring qualified staff and relying on independent regulatory bodies and new EU directives to ensure more effective regulatory compliance within public broadcasting. The main conclusion was that the only way for RTS (Radio Television of Serbia) to be independent and serve citizens is to reset and rebuild it from the ground up.