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Speaker: Tina Mendelsohn, Presenter Cultural Programme 'Kulturzeit', ZDF TV, Mainz, Germany

Chair: Justin Frosini, Adjunct Professor of Constitutional Law and Director of the Center for Constitutional Studies and Democratic Development (CCSDD), Johns Hopkins University SAIS Europe, Bologna, Italy

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**Is Public Service Broadcasting Under Pressure?**

*Part of the International Journalism Series*

Drawing upon her professional experience with German broadcasters ARD and ZDF, as well as the British networks BBC and Channel 4, Tina Mendelsohn outlines the general challenges facing public service broadcasting (PSB) today. She explores the concern that public service broadcasting has become 'old' media and explains how there is a push at the BBC and ZDF, among others, to reorganize, restructure and invent new programs in order to address this. She argues that the roots of this issue reach far beyond the media, involving questions around democracy and what the public is today.

Mendelsohn begins with current successes of public service broadcasting. Together, ZDF and ARD have the largest PSB budget (more than €8 billion) and offer the most extensive programming in the world. They outweigh commercial broadcasters in Germany in terms of market share: ZDF ranks first with 12.5% share, followed by ARD, and then lastly the commercial channels. Of the twelve prestigious *Adolf Grimme* prizes announced last week (the Oscars of German television), eleven were given to ARD and ZDF programs.

Despite the apparent successes of PSB in Germany, not all is well. After recently establishing a license fee (approximately €18 per month) for all citizens and residents of Germany rather than only for those who own televisions, PSB faced a wave of criticism. PSB was painted as being old, not representing minorities, experiencing a decline in quality, not reaching young people, and spending too much in the coverage of sporting events.

The recognized role of PSB, Mendelsohn explains, is to provide 'public value'. In Germany, interestingly, the term is 'basic care' (*Grundversorgung*), which is required by

the German constitution and media laws. This provokes the question that public service broadcasters are facing anew today: Should PSB focus on marginalized areas that commercial channels do not cover, such as the arts and education, or should PSB broadcast content for everyone?

Reflecting on the history of PSB and its governance, Mendelsohn argues, is crucial to understanding and addressing its challenges today. PSB was in many ways an outcome of WWI, when the task of public mobilization and the need to create national solidarity were the topics of the day. PSB continued to grow in importance during WWII and thereafter. Ideally, PSB is meant to be governed by public groups, but in effect it is governed by the activities of political parties and external regulators. Commercial broadcasting in Germany and the UK emerged in the early 1980s with the rise of neoliberalism. This new entrant changed viewers' expectations and made them feel much more like customers. Beyond the competition between PSB and commercial broadcasters, Mendelsohn highlights the emerging struggle between European states and the European Union over the regulation of PSB.

Until now, the success of PSB programs, as in the commercial broadcasting sector, has been gauged mainly by ratings. Mendelsohn explains that we have entered a new era of measurement to assess the quality of PSB. The importance of ratings has decreased in the wake of top-down testing. In accordance with the European Commission's request for a value test for all European public broadcasters, PSBs now run tests with the help of private contractors. In Germany, between 2009 and 2010, 41 public value tests were conducted, each costing up to half a million euros. Mendelsohn cites instances in which the cost of these tests outweigh the production costs of the programs themselves. Some criticize testing as a 'bureaucratization' of the sector.

Finishing with the question, 'Is public service broadcasting under pressure?', Mendelsohn argues that it depends. In addition to the more obvious economic pressures, television is under political pressure; reporters have faced repercussions for speaking out against what they perceived as certain abuses of political power. However, much current thinking on this question implies that if you take away pressures from economic, political, and media sources, all will be fine. Mendelsohn believes this is not the case. Public service broadcasting needs to determine how to offer the most meaningful content and how to measure their impact effectively, especially given the new ways youth consume media. What is required is a discussion about what the public is and what it needs. Politicians need to recognize this. Some now do. Mendelsohn concludes her presentation with a comment she received from the President of Bavaria, Horst Seehofer, who stated that society needs a rebirth of public service broadcasting, based on a complementary, rather than competing, concept of television broadcasting and the new media.