



S E C R E T A R I A T

**Conference on
Financing Digitalization in Eastern Europe:
The Challenge for Public Service Broadcasters
Vienna, 29 October 2012**

**Digitalization as a social, economic and political issue in South East Europe,
by Hido Bišćević, Secretary General, Regional Cooperation Council**

Mr Busek, Director General Deltenre,
State Secretary Ostermeyer,
Director General Wrabetz, Mr Kesteris,
Dear colleagues, ladies and gentlemen,

First of all, let me thank the organizers – **the European Broadcasting Union (EBU) and the Austrian Chancellery** – for the opportunity to be here and share with you my thoughts regarding the topic of today’s event: Digitalization and its impact on public service media in South East Europe.

Over the past 2.5 years, the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC) has worked very closely with the EBU in advocating for sustainable and free public service media in South East Europe. As a result of our joint efforts, I am pleased that in July this year the EBU has signed a **5-year partnership agreement with the European Union** on enabling the democratic role of public service media in countries covered by the EU enlargement policy. We are looking forward to the

implementation of the agreement and stand ready to support the process in the future as well.

This Partnership Agreement follows a series of joint activities undertaken by the RCC and the EBU, to name just a few:

- The international seminar *South East Europe 20 Years On: Transformation from State to Public Broadcasting*, held in Sarajevo in November 2011, co-organized by the European Commission's Enlargement Directorate-General and the RCC Secretariat, with support of the European Association of Public Service Media in South East Europe and the EBU. The seminar analyzed the state of public service media in South East Europe 20 years into the democratic transition, with a view to outline a future course of action in support of their freedom, independence and sustainability, as well as announced the signing of the Partnership Agreement.
- The international conference *Addressing Europe's Digital Divide: Towards Sustainable Public Service Media in South East Europe*, was held in October 2010 under the RCC and EBU auspices, with the aim to demonstrate the importance of investing in sustainable and independent public media in South East Europe to avoid a digital divide as Europe needs to complete the analogue switch-off by 2015.
- The goal of these events was to deepen the understanding between the governments and the broadcasters on a need to have viable public service media in the region ready to meet the objectives of the analogue switch-off and provide the citizens with high quality public service function.
- In line with the conclusions of the 2010 conference, a follow-up meeting, organized by the Croatian Radio-Television in Novi Vinodolski in November 2010, **established an Association of Public Service Media in**

South East Europe. The Association was founded as a non-profit professional body of the public service media in the region.

- As a concrete result, a **Protocol on Regional Cooperation in Education and Training** among 12 members of the European Association of Public Service Media in South East Europe, facilitated by the RCC Secretariat and supported by the EBU, was signed in Sarajevo in September last year.

The RCC has acted as a facilitator in the media field bringing together different actors from within the region and those outside it interested in the region, including donor coordination. It provided policy advice and expert assistance. In this context, the RCC has concretely also:

- Advocated that the component **‘How do I see my neighbour’** within the ‘Strengthening the RCC Secretariat’ project be implemented by the public service media in South East Europe, members of the Association. The project has been funded by the European Commission and implemented with the Central European Initiative (CEI). Nine short documentaries will be produced by the end of the year, one from each of the Western Balkan countries plus Moldova and Turkey, which are then to be edited in a joint production that will be aired on the national public broadcasters in the region and presented in Brussels as well. The purpose is to stimulate understanding and dialogue, reconciliation and good neighbourly relations.
- Supported the launch of the **Academy on Media Law in South East Europe**, implemented by the Association of Public Service Media and ARTICLE 19, under the auspices of the RCC and with support of the Friedrich Ebert Foundation, the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media and the OSCE Mission to Bosnia and Herzegovina – in Zagreb, in June this year. The pilot Academy sought to enhance cooperation in the development and the implementation of progressive media legislation in the

countries in South East Europe in line with European media standards. It provided media professionals (practicing media lawyers, legislators, media representatives, members of media regulators and self regulatory bodies, and academics) with a unique opportunity to meet, exchange ideas and seek solutions to common issues concerning freedom of expression and media freedom. During the sessions of the Academy, the participants updated their knowledge on media standards, increased their awareness of the best practices in media regulation in the region, and formulated recommendations for legal reforms based on the best practices in the region. Based on the satisfaction with the first Academy, most of the funds for the next edition of the Academy have preliminary already been pledged.

- Co-organized a **conference on investigative journalism and data protection**, together with RACVIAC, the Association and the HRT, in Pula, in May 2012. The event deepened the dialogue, exchange of information and knowledge transfer between journalists and relevant ministries in South East Europe, with the aim of disseminating international standards related to investigative journalism and data protection and building a more open, transparent and stable environment in South East Europe.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The mission of the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC) is to promote mutual cooperation and European and Euro-Atlantic integration of South East Europe in order to inspire development in the region to the benefit of its people.

This is why the strategic goal of the media development work of the RCC Secretariat is to bring about a change which would foster transition and development of the media sector in South East Europe towards free and professional media in the region.

Needless to say, this is becoming increasingly important as the media have played a particular role in the transitional environment within our societies.

They operate against the background of broader social and political developments in the region and, in many cases, influence them, for better or for worse. The challenges for all the media across South East Europe have aggregated over the past few years due also to the economic crisis that hit the media as well.

The fact that the digitalization process is taking place under such unfavourable economic circumstances has increased the threat of a digital divide in Europe, especially in South East Europe.

The digital divide, as a seemingly technical task in front of our institutions and authorities, carries also a social and political implications and weight, as this divide may fall within many already existing divides and divisions in our region. And, furthermore, we need to elaborate the state of play of public broadcasting media in terms of their freedom and their professionalism, whereas one could also detect many divides and departures from the European standards. In our region, still volatile and vulnerable, with so many unsettled issues and frustrating vibrations, I see both aspects critically important for the future.

That said, I am pleased to note that two countries from our part of Europe, Croatia and Slovenia, have successfully implemented the switch-over. This demonstrates the potential of our region to keep abreast of new technologies in the broadcasting sector.

Still, most of the countries in South East Europe have had to postpone or are yet to start implementing the transition.

These RCC members are in danger of facing a digital divide – a technological disparity with social and economic implications closely linked to the role and

sustainable development of independent public service media in South East Europe.

Another difficulty is that many public broadcasters in the region have still not completed fully the transition from a state into a public broadcaster, and digital transition represents an additional burden, both in terms of human and financial resources.

The most common obstacles to switch-over are the lack of political decision and relevant legislation, absence of the related strategy, and lack of political will and funds to implement the legislation and the strategies where they exist.

The approach to switch-over needs to be market driven, but at the same time, the states should be involved in the process to ensure it is completed without damage to the sustainability and public service role of the broadcasters.

The broadcasters, on their end, need to design effective strategies that will allow them to compete with the private sector, which is important for media plurality and democratic societies but cannot replace the public broadcasters, especially in their education role and in serving specific population, such as people with disabilities, older people, minorities, etc.

We should also have in mind that researches show that digital switchover is largely seen by the general public as an unpopular policy that people often see as coercive.

This is partly because the national governments' rationale and motives for switchover are not entirely understood and trusted, and partly because people think analogue television will be 'taken away' and therefore they will have to incur costs to be able to continue to watch television. Addressing the issue of social acceptability of switchover is a public duty to be fulfilled by the state, as large parts of the population see little or no reason to adopt digital television. Thus, both

government and industry must work together if switchover is to be achieved with the set timeframe.¹

Distinguished participants,

It is important to raise awareness of a need to timely complete the digital switch-over in order for the public broadcasters to remain key actors in the evolving knowledge society; to provide reliable information, inspiring children's and educational programmes and quality cultural and entertainment programmes; and to be motors for regional development and investment in the creative industries.

But, in our region it is extremely important not to allow for the digital divide to create additional information-exchange gaps, communication alienation or inability to share relevant information and programmes, thus hampering the much needed social, cultural, political and human ties, reconciliation, tolerance, understanding and coexistence of different cultures and social identities in South East Europe.

In our part of Europe, burdened by the heritage of 1990s, the public broadcasters have an additional responsibility – to help create, through dialogue and cooperation, conditions for overall progress in the region and a climate of mutual opening and moving the regional realms from the past to the future, from historical prejudices and stereotypes to common European values.

Indeed, what is the landscape of the region against which the public broadcasters operate? What do we see at the screen of South East Europe at this point in time? And how does this picture influence the media, what impact it may have on editorial policies, how is it reflected in the media-state relations, where and how professionalism fits in, is freedom equaled by responsibility?

¹ Petros Iosifidis: The Internatioanl Communication Gazette, Volume 68, No. 3, 2006; <http://gaz.sagepub.com>. See also: Klein et al., 2004.

Let me stress one point on this screen of South East Europe that I believe should be shared by both public services: the broadcasters and public servants, the politicians.

That point is very simple, but critically important.

It is the Responsibility.

This corner of Europe is still unsettled in terms of uncompleted peace and unfinished transition. The region is still not at peace with itself. Political leaders still have numerous strategically important issues to resolve in order to stabilize their countries and allow for their societies to move forward. Democratic institutions still need to be fully stabilized. Unresolved open or bilateral issues influence the very character of social life and social values and behavioral patterns, equally within the domestic agenda as in the relations with neighboring states and nations. There are too many evidences of social instability and frustrating social environments. Divisions and antagonism still prevail over the understanding and dialogue. Distorted values add to the inherited complexities and inwardness. Isolationism still serves nationalism. Sensationalism serves social frustrations. Former social paradigms and values are gone, new identities are built more often on negative aspects of globalization than on genuine values of democracy, human rights, rule of law and social tolerance.

All this poses a challenge.

Political elites deal with open and unresolved issues. They may resolve them, hopefully, sooner rather than later. European idea, and EU membership, certainly provides the biggest, if not the only relevant tool. But, as long as these issue remain, together with the consequences of recent past and uncompleted socio-economic transition, they influence not only the political and economic agenda, but

also the very fabrics of our societies, the nature of values that we live by, cultural codes and behavioral patterns.

And this is where, in my mind, the media play critically important role.

At the Regional Cooperation Council, we recognize that only sustainable public service media are able to fulfill their roles in society to the full: for the benefit of the citizens of the countries they serve and the region of South East Europe as a whole – and for the European Union they hope to join. We also count very much on the readiness of the media to carry, by their editorial policies, the core of our mission. That is the mission of promoting European values, dialogue, learning to live with the differences, the mission of tolerance and mutual understanding.

I hope this conference brings us closer to that goal, even more so in the digital era, which brings along a plethora of challenges, but also opportunities.

I am confident that the opportunities will be seized by both the broadcasters and governments. I also call on the international financial institutions to recognize the multi-faceted nature of the problem and lend its support to the digitalization process, given the economic crisis and the limitations faced by the broadcasters and the governments.

The RCC remains committed to supporting the public service media in South East Europe to the best of our knowledge and ability, by advocating their independence, professional development and sustainability, both among the stakeholders in the region and those outside it, particularly in the European Union, with the wider purpose to increase their contribution to democratic, pluralistic and inclusive societies.

I wish us a successful conference.

Thank you.