



Freedom of Expression and the Media in South East Europe

The Pivotal Role of Sustainable and Independent Public Service Media

"Problems affecting freedom of expression and the media need to be tackled as a matter of urgency. The Western Balkan participants committed themselves to intensify their efforts to address these issues."

Statement by the Chair of the
High-Level Meeting on the Western Balkans¹
Sarajevo, 2 June 2010

"The SEE region's public service media should become engines of technological, economic, political and cultural development of the countries of South East Europe and of the Region as a whole, supporting integration in the European Union."

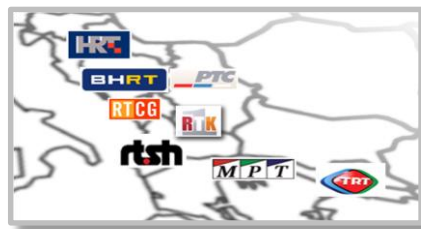
Conclusion of the International High-Level Conference on
Sustainable Public Service Media for South East Europe²
Sarajevo, 15 October 2010

This document constitutes the European Broadcasting Union's response to the call for written contributions for "SPEAK UP!", the European Commission's Conference on Freedom of Expression and Media in the Western Balkans and Turkey (6 May 2011)

We thank the European Commission for organising this important conference on the Freedom of Expression and the Media in South East Europe and for bringing together all the key stakeholders.

¹ A high-level meeting on the Western Balkans, chaired by the Spanish rotating Presidency of the Council of the EU, took place in Sarajevo on 2 June 2010 to mark the 10th anniversary of the Zagreb summit which offered the European perspective to the Western Balkans, as sealed in the Thessaloniki Agenda in 2003.

² Co-organized by the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC) and the European Broadcasting Union (EBU), the conference was attended by more than 50 participants from 10 countries of South East Europe, including directors general of public service broadcasters, and senior government and regulatory officials. The European Union (EU) and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) were also represented.



We agree with the Conference's basic argumentation that human rights and fundamental freedoms are founding values of the European Union, and measures against which countries aspiring to join the EU must be assessed. Ensuring freedom of expression and of the media are among the most important challenges facing enlargement countries (as indeed they remain to some extent for some countries which joined the European Union at an earlier stage).

Freedom of expression and of the media are fundamental human rights, and no society which does not respect these rights may be regarded as truly democratic. Truly independent Public Service Media (PSM) are both touchstones and guarantors of these important freedoms. Sustainable and independent PSM can and should serve as beacons, enablers and guardians of democracy in South East Europe (SEE) as elsewhere.

The EBU calls on the governments and legislators of the countries of South East Europe to provide their PSM with sustainable funding mechanisms and the appropriate legislative and regulatory framework in order to assure their independence, subject to a clearly defined public service remit adhering to the highest European standards while taking into account local special requirements. They should understand that sustainable funding also makes *economic* sense in terms of the wider contribution to a country's creative industries and society as a whole.

We call on the European Union to work with the countries aspiring to become members of the European Union in order to arrive at sustainable funding mechanisms and the necessary legislative and regulatory framework for their PSM during the course of the Enlargement negotiations, making them truly independent and sustainable, with guarantees that these achievements will not be reversed at a later stage.

The PSM from South East Europe have decided and are committed to work together in order to achieve full sustainability and independence for each one of them by 2020. Together with the EBU, they have agreed on a pertinent and concrete action plan that will benefit the whole media industry in SEE - public, independent and private – with one ultimate goal being to ensure freedom of the media across South East Europe. Sustainability is a *sine qua non* for the independence of any medium, but long experience in Western Europe has proven that independent publicly-funded public service media play a pivotal role in ensuring overall freedom of expression within any society.

Sustainable public service media are those which:

- receive adequate and stable funding
- have the human and technical resources required for the digital information society
- are present on all platforms including digital terrestrial, radio, mobile and online
- serve all layers of society and minorities, contributing to inclusion, to democratisation of society, to cultural enrichment, to innovation and to economic development
- are the trusted and first-choice providers of independent unbiased information, encouraging debate and discussion among citizens.

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Background

The pivotal role of PSM for freedom of expression and the media in South East Europe

In many parts of Europe public service media provide essential services to citizens: independent and reliable information, life-long learning, access to culture, quality entertainment, but also support for diversity, human rights and freedom of expression, attention for minorities, inclusiveness, preservation of cultural heritage, innovation, investment in the creative industries and regional development.

All European countries that score high as regards freedom of expression and the media boast strong independent sustainable public service media. Conversely, countries having weak government-controlled “state” media score low on all basic freedoms.

In South East Europe, some public service broadcasters must operate on an annual budget of less than 10 million euro. (By comparison, the public service broadcasters of Germany, Britain and France each have billions of euros annually at their disposal.) These underfunded PSM are in desperate need of modernising their infrastructures and training staff while at the same time facing high costs associated with digitisation and the preservation of irreplaceable audio-visual archives.

Often, broadcasters’ staff and national administrations are unprepared for the rapidly changing media environment. Public service media are left weakened and vulnerable to outside influences which compromise their independence.

Two years ago, the EBU recognized that the situation of the media in several European countries was degrading and that several of its members, including in South East Europe, were facing budget cuts and changes to their legal and regulatory environment which curtailed their ability to act independently from political pressure. As a response, the EBU established a Special Assistance Project (SAP) aimed at assuring, developing and maintaining the independence and sustainability of PSM in Europe and neighbouring countries.

Sarajevo Conference

On 14-15 October 2010, in cooperation with the Regional Cooperation Council (successor to the Stability Pack for South Eastern Europe) and as part of the Special Assistance Project, the EBU organized in Sarajevo a conference addressing the issues of sustainability and independence of PSM in South East Europe.

The conference participants - more than 50 directors general, media experts and government, broadcaster and regulatory officials - agreed:

- to establish an enduring cooperation designed to ensure the sustainability of all public service broadcasters in South East Europe by 2020,
- to promote and adhere to the values and principles of public service media, as recognized by the European institutions, including the Council of Europe and European Union, and
- to call on the European Union to support this goal politically as well as financially under its aim to prepare for future enlargements and guarantee Europe’s cohesion.

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Knowing the many and varied benefits to society of investing in truly sustainable PSM as demonstrated by two studies commissioned by the BBC³, the participants further agreed that the Region's public service media should become engines of technological, economic, political, and cultural development of the countries of South East Europe and of the region as a whole, supporting the Region's integration in the European Union.

As stated at the Media Transformations conference organised by the Mediacentar Sarajevo on 18-19 February 2011, evidence from other large and small European countries shows that providing PSM with sufficient and stable funding within an appropriate legal and regulatory environment results in strong, creative and innovative media industries. The ensuing competitive environments raise the quality of private and public broadcasters and of the independent production sector, and brings added benefits to the creative industries.

In late 2010, the European Parliament adopted by 522 votes to 22, with 62 abstentions, a resolution on public service broadcasting in the digital era: the future of the dual system which stated:

“Recalling the crucial role that broadcasting plays with regard to European audiovisual production, the resolution notes that the co-existence of public service and commercial broadcasters has ensured a diverse range of freely accessible programming, which benefits all EU citizens and contributes to media pluralism, cultural and linguistic diversity, editorial competition (in terms of content quality and diversity) and freedom of expression.”

Regional ownership and cooperation

The conference in Sarajevo was followed by a meeting on 26-27 November 2010 in Novi Vinodolski, Croatia, at which the directors general of those EBU members which had been represented in Sarajevo established an association of Public Service Media in South East Europe (PSM in SEE) under the chairmanship of Josip Popovac, acting director general of HRT. They also agreed on a concrete action plan addressing the urgent issues of cooperation.

The members of the association met again on 14 April 2011 in Istanbul hosted by the Turkish Radio & Television corporation (TRT) to assess progress made and take stock of the work of the various working groups established in Novi Vinodolski. Special attention was given to the urgent need of the digitisation of archives as well as to co-productions and new media. Petar Karanakov, CEO of MKRTV (Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia) and Secretary General of the association, said the new organization aimed to bring added value by preserving and promoting the cultures of South East Europe. He proposed that digitalization of the archives of the association's members should be centralized in one or two broadcasters in the interests of efficiency.

³ These BBC studies conclude that the BBC - as a public service media - generates about twice the economic value of the license fee invested in it (...) delivering real value to the creative and media industries, which in turn spill over into the wider economy.

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Facilitation and alliances

As part of its Special Assistance Project, the EBU is facilitating the coordination of activities by media development agencies connected to its Members such as Deutsche Welle Akademie, Canal France International and the BBC World Service Trust.

It is also developing alliances and joint actions/platforms with such bodies sympathetic to media freedom as the Council of Europe, UNESCO, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), and the Sarajevo-based Regional Cooperation Council (RCC – also see above).

In March 2011, the Director General agreed in Vienna with the OSCE's Representative on Freedom of the Media, Dunja Mijatovic, that the two organizations would cooperate to amplify their organisations' common messages on media freedom and independence. Similar agreements have been made with the International Press Institute and the South East Europe Media Organization (SEEMO), both also based in Vienna, and the EBU, OSCE and IPI are considering organizing a joint conference on media freedom in Eastern Europe in late 2011.

At the time of writing, it is hoped that a Memorandum of Understanding between the EBU and the Council of Europe will be signed by the Director General and by Council of Europe Secretary-General Thorbjørn Jagland at the Deutsche Welle Global Forum in Bonn. This year's Forum (20-22 June 2011) is suitably entitled Human Rights in a *Globalized World - Challenges to the Media*.

An MoU already exists between the EBU and the International Telecommunications Union, and the Project is exploring whether the EBU can collaborate with the ITU's own programme to assist the digital transition in Central and Eastern Europe.

A third MoU is under preparation with UNESCO, and it is hoped that this can be signed in autumn 2011 by the EBU's Director General, Ingrid Deltenre, and her UNESCO counterpart Irina Bokova.

In cooperation with such partners, the EBU will seek to influence governments and legislators in South East Europe on urgent and long-term issues of the funding of PSM and the appropriate legislative and regulatory environments.

Enabling the pivotal role of PSM for freedom of expression and the media in South East Europe

Together the association of PSM in SEE, the EBU is proposing a multi-annual regional project aimed at addressing not only the most urgent needs but also at putting the national broadcasters in the region on track for sustainability and independence. Only then will they be able to fulfil their roles in society to the full, for the benefit of the citizens of the countries that they serve, the region as a whole, and their countries' future accession to the European Union.

Urgent comprehensive and coherent regional and European action is required by governments, broadcasters and other stakeholder. The EBU proposal, endorsed by the association of PSM in SEE, aims to (1) further an intensive and strategic cooperation amongst the broadcasters and (2) lay the foundations for the future sustainability and independence of public service media in South East Europe as guarantors of democracy and freedom of expression.

Immediate activities should include training, consulting and strategic advice, work on defining missions/visions and the reorganisation of company structures to cope with the rapidly-changing media environment. This can be best achieved by sharing experience and maximising synergies.

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Planned activities also include cooperation in news production, co-production of documentaries on the troubled history of the region, the preservation of historic audio-visual archives, cooperation between training centres, and underlying research – including a thorough assessment of the history of media transition in the region over the past two decades.

Next Steps

This conference provides the ideal platform to consolidate and further develop initiatives that have already been taken, and enlarge the cooperation amongst stakeholders in order to convince governments and legislators of the benefits of freedom of the media to society and, more in particular, of the benefits of investing in PSM and guaranteeing their independence.

The EBU invites all stakeholders to join forces in pragmatic activity-driven initiatives by developing, strengthening and safeguarding the pivotal role of public service media.

It urges the European Commission to fund large-scale regional sector-specific and cross-sector projects as well as to invest in country-specific projects.

It supports a proposal of the RCC for last year's Sarajevo conference to be followed up in autumn 2011 by a meeting on the pivotal role of PSM in safeguarding freedom of expression and the media in South East Europe.

The EU Amsterdam Protocol of 1997 recognises the importance of public service media in ensuring democracy, pluralism, social cohesion and cultural and linguistic diversity. These principles were reaffirmed in the EU Council Resolution of 25 January 1999 concerning public service broadcasting:

>> public service media need to bring to “the public the benefits of the new audiovisual and information services and the new technologies”.

>> public service media’s ability “to offer quality programming and services to the public must be maintained and enhanced, including the development and diversification of activities in the digital age”.

>> “... public service broadcasting must be able to continue to provide a wide range of programming in accordance with its remit as defined by the Member States in order to address society as a whole”.

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