



S E C R E T A R I A T

Contribution to the European Commission's conference

SPEAK UP!

Freedom of Expression and Media in the Western Balkans and Turkey

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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, professional and responsible media in the region.

In doing so, the RCC Secretariat keeps in mind the European standards and values, the reality, needs and aspirations of the countries of South East Europe, and its own resources.

In its *Enlargement Strategy*¹, the European Commission states that “freedom of expression and of the media, which is an integral part of any democratic system, remains a concern in most enlargement countries”. The strategy underlines that the Commission’s “focus will be on areas such as [...] the role of public service broadcasters in pluralistic democracies” and announces that “a conference on freedom of expression and the media in the enlargement countries in spring 2011 [...] will provide an opportunity to take stock of progress in these areas. IPA support will be provided as a follow-up to the conference, where appropriate”.

In the same document, the Commission points out that “[t]he Regional Cooperation Council (RCC) has a key role in guiding and monitoring regional cooperation”.

¹ *Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament and the Council: Enlargement Strategy and Main Challenges 2010-2011*, 9 November 2010.

The RCC and its Secretariat recognize the indispensable role the public service broadcasters have in building a free, democratic, pluralistic, tolerant and inclusive society, as well as the challenges they face in fulfilling that role.

The public service broadcasters provide essential services to citizens: reliable information, life-long learning, access to culture, quality entertainment, but also support for diversity, social cohesion, innovation, preservation of cultural heritage, investment in the creative industries and regional development. In exercising this role, it is imperative that they safeguard editorial independence and nourish professional excellence, while ensuring sustainability. Such public service broadcasters should be the leaders, within a pluralistic media landscape, in promoting knowledge society, economic growth, promotion of European values, EU integration and reconciliation in the region.

For this reason, together with the European Broadcasting Union (EBU), the RCC brought together broadcasters, government officials, regulators and experts from the enlargement countries and wider South East European region to an international conference in Sarajevo in October 2010, where the participants agreed “to promote and adhere to the values and principles of public service media, as recognized by European institutions, including the Council of Europe and European Union”. The participants defined sustainable public service broadcasters as those which are the trusted and first-choice providers of independent, unbiased information, encouraging debate and discussion among citizens. They agreed that the region’s public service media should become the engines of technological, economic, political, and cultural development of their countries, supporting integration in the European Union.

In line with the conclusions of the October conference, a follow-up meeting, organized by the Croatian Radio-Television in Novi Vinodolski in November 2010, established a European Association of Public Service Media in South East Europe. The Association was founded as a non-profit professional body of ten public service media in the region, seated in Zagreb, Croatia, with the membership being open to all public service media (PSM) from South East Europe. Acting Director General of the Croatian Radio-Television (HRT) was named its first president.

The Association’s statute defines its aims and objectives to promote development of PSM, foster productive contact between professionals working in the field, examine and debate issues affecting PSM, facilitate cooperation between PSMs of South East Europe, provide programmes of expert training for PSM practitioners, exchange knowledge and experience in the field of technology, programme, organisation, legislation, as well as cooperate with other international organisations in building up and realisation of these objectives. The Association is founded on the principle that the close relationship between PSMs and their audience enables them to uniquely fulfil four key roles: forming a close relationship with the audience; enhancing and promoting European culture with its rich diversity; supporting people in preparation for a multicultural society underpinned by democracy and tolerance; promoting and preserving the values of national cultures and languages in Europe.

With this in mind, the RCC Secretariat finds it important to strengthen the role of public service media in building democratic, pluralistic, tolerant and inclusive societies in the enlargement

countries of South East Europe, by safeguarding the freedom of expression and the media, the rule of law, and good governance.

The RCC Secretariat has therefore recently proposed to the European Commission to jointly organize an event on the role of public service broadcasters in safeguarding the freedom of expression in the enlargement countries of South East Europe, in Sarajevo, in early autumn 2011. The event would be designed as a follow up to the 6 May Commission's conference on freedom of expression and the media in the enlargement countries, carrying forward conclusions of the May conference in the part related to public broadcasting.

Together with the Association of Public Service Media in South East Europe and in consultation with relevant partners, the RCC Secretariat is designing a project in this direction. The project of support to democratic, pluralistic and inclusive societies through strengthening the independence of public service media in the enlargement countries of South East Europe would be centred on the following components:

- Investigative journalism education, with focus on anti-corruption, and with participation of relevant journalists and editors from each public service broadcaster of the region. The education could be provided in cooperation with a partner institution and would be structured through three essential modules: basic, anti-corruption, and masterclass. Before the end of the project, the participants would come up with a 60-min political magazine the contributors of which would come from all the broadcasters.
- Minority journalists' education – targeting journalists and editors who cover minority issues, with a purpose of training them to cover a wide range of topics. Since journalists coming from the ranks of minorities are often focusing on minority issues only, this type of training would aim at providing them with a broader range of journalistic skills, inclusive of the investigative journalism ones.
- Addressing prejudices – a two-fold documentary coproduction: 1) How we see ourselves and the region – a documentary coproduction the aim of which is to change often negative perceptions and stereotypes among the peoples in the region about their neighbours, thus improving the climate of tolerance and dialogue; 2) How others in the region see us – with young directors and teams from different broadcasters preparing documentaries on the others in the region, e.g. a director from Bosnia and Herzegovina does a story on Albania. The documentaries would connect the past and the present with the European future, and be made following the principles of investigative journalism.
- Annual meeting of chief editors/leadership of each enlargement countries' member of the Association of Public Service Media, to evaluate the implementation of the project and the situation with regard to strengthening the independence of PSM. The meeting would assess the progress made and give recommendations on transfer of best practices within the region, with support of the RCC Secretariat.

The RCC Secretariat believes that the approach outlined above would contribute to the development of more democratic, pluralistic, tolerant and inclusive societies in the enlargement countries of South East Europe; strengthen freedom of expression and the media, the rule of law, and good governance in the region; strengthen editorial independence of public service broadcasters; help maintain higher professional standards and enhance their long-term sustainability; as well as support knowledge society, economic growth, preservation of cultural heritage, promotion of European values and European Union integration.

More information on this event is available at http://ec.europa.eu/enlargement/speakup-conference/index_en.htm.