



International conference

**Addressing Europe's Digital Divide:
Towards Sustainable Public Service Media in South East Europe**

Sarajevo, 14-15 October 2010

**Opening address
by Hido Biscevic, Secretary General,
Regional Cooperation Council**

Your Excellency, Mr Minister,

Distinguished representatives of broadcasters, governments, regulators, EU and other institutions,

Welcome to the Regional Cooperation Council Secretariat. It is a privilege to have you here.

The topic of this conference, a first of a kind in our region, is a challenging one for many countries of South East Europe. And thus, it is more than timely one, too.

Together with the European Broadcasting Union, we have invited you to work to ensure that our region completes the digital transition in line with the Geneva 2006 Agreement. As you know, this agreement requires national administrations to end analogue transmission along their borders by 17 June 2015. The European

Commission's recommendation however is that Member States phase out analogue terrestrial broadcasting by 2012.

In addition, but for too many obvious reasons, the conference will offer us an opportunity to elaborate the political and social state of play within the broadcasting media in our region, their complexities, constraints and roles.

There is a word encompassing both aspects of this conference.

It is – divide.

Yes, we are going to discuss the digital divide, as a seemingly technical task in front of our institutions and authorities. But, this aspect 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, their professionalism and their responsibilities, 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 frustrative vibrations, I see both aspects critically important for the future, so I will touch upon this issue later on.

Now, on a digital divide side, I am pleased to note that a country from our part of Europe, namely Croatia, has already successfully implemented the switch-over, in a situation when only 1/3 of the European Union members have done so thus far.

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.

As much as I know, Slovenia is expected to complete the process in 2011, despite some recent setbacks. Bulgaria and Greece are on track to implement the switch-over by 2012. Serbia has set April 2012 as the date for the completion of analogue switch-off; however, services have not yet been launched. Montenegro plans to complete the transition by the end of 2012. The Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia is currently in the phase of experimental digital terrestrial transmissions. Romania has recently put back its analogue switch-off date by three years to 1 January 2015. Moldova's plans are also linked to 2015. Some countries, such as Bosnia and Herzegovina, have prepared a strategy, but the implementation is lagging behind. In Albania, the Assembly is working on drafting an integral electronic media law, inclusive of digital broadcasting, with a strategy still existing in a draft form. Similarly, in Turkey, a related broadcasting law is expected to be adopted next month, stipulating the analogue switch-off within three years. Work on the draft strategy for digitalisation has currently been carried out by Kosovo authorities.

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.

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?

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 frustrative 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.

Functioning, independent and professional media should be seen as an indispensable driver of change and modernization of our societies.

I hope that, when we tackle this issue later, we will have the sincerity and courage to truly evaluate the current state of play, that we will seek answers to weather the media are the much needed additional charger to stabilization of our region and of our societies, what role they play in terms of bringing our region and our countries closer to peace, stability, cooperation and modernity.

In other words, to what extent the media drive us over the divide with the past.

Again, I come to the initial notion, the Responsibility.

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 wish us a successful conference.

Thank you.