

V THE DIGITALIZATION PROCESS

On March 1, 2010, the telecommunications Minister Jasna Matic told the daily Blic in an interview that Serbia has received a 12.5 million euro grant from the European Union for the purpose of switching from analog to digital television broadcasting. The prerequisite for starting to use these funds is the appointment of the Director of the new public company “Broadcasting equipment and communications”, which appointment is still pending. “For the time being, we have an Acting Director and I was told that the Director will be appointed at the next session of the Government”, the Minister said. However, although more than a month has passed since the interview, the Director of named public company had still not been appointed at the time when this Monitoring Report was completed.

In her interview, the Minister also explained why it was necessary to establish a separate company. The European practice is that there is a single broadcasting system in order to reduce the costs, instead of having every television station set up its own network of transmitters. Until now, several stations have broadcast their program through the RTS network, but it always leads to an awkward situation. The European practice is that you ought to make a single system dealing only with that”, Jasna Matic said.

Asked about the modalities of the transition from analog to digital broadcasting and the duration of the potential simulcast period (the simultaneous digital and analog transmission), the Minister explained that the transition in Serbia may not be gradual. “Our Broadcasting Law stipulates that, as soon as a frequency is freed in the broadcasting spectrum, it shall be immediately assigned to someone else on an auction. In other countries, the spectrum is not that saturated and hence there is enough room for you to move it bit by bit. We don’t have that option here and consequently we shall make an instantaneous transition from analog to digital broadcasting.”

Apart the fact that the Director of “Broadcasting equipment and communications”, has not yet been appointed, there has been no visible progress in the period covered by this Monitoring Report in any of the activities provided for by the Action Plan of the Strategy for the Transition from Analog to Digital Radio and Television Broadcasting in the Republic of Serbia. This brings into question the sincerity of the state’s intentions to proceed with digital television broadcasting in April 2012.

VI THE PRIVATIZATION PROCESS

On March 4, 2010, the Privatization Agency issued a public call for participation in the public auction for the privatization of the public companies Radio Leskovac, Radio Televizija Brus,

Televizija Pozega and Radio Pirot respectively, the Public Company for Information Mladenovac and the Public Information Company Radio Pozega, to be held on April 23 in Belgrade.

On March, 12, about a week later, the media reported that the Public Company “Stampa, radio i film” (SRIF) from Bor has accused Branislav Rankic, the Mayor of that city from the Serbian Radical Party (SRS), of having placed a ban on the salaries of the employees of the said company, because they had aired a one-hour film about the trial of the SRS leader Vojislav Seselj in The Hague. The row of SRIF and Rankic erupted after a 20-minute propaganda film about the 20th anniversary of the Democratic Party (DS), which was aired by SRIF in the scope of a live program featuring several officials from the DS Municipal Board. SRIF published a press release saying Rankic had been a one-hour guest appearance on TV Bor to be aired instead of the controversial film about the Seselj trial in The Hague, which Rankic refused. Rankic also confirmed to the Beta News Agency that he had refused to make a transfer from the municipal budget for SRIF salaries and said he would do it “when SRIF starts treating the SRS as they treat the DS”. “SRIF now has the opportunity to make amends, or to ask DS for the salaries”, Rankic said. SRIF noted that Rankic’s decision to withhold the salaries of its employees was tantamount to blackmail and an attempt to interfere with the editorial policy. The company reminded it was not supposed to receive funds from the budget of the SRS but from the municipal budget, which was financed by all citizens of Bor.

The events in Bor represent yet another testimony about the untenable position of local public media and an additional argument in favor of privatization. The fact is also that the current legal framework does not provide for any systemic mechanisms for defending the independence of the editorial policy of these media. Their employees are left at the mercy of local power players and are unable to autonomously pursue their editorial policies in the interest of the public.