

**ON THE BROADCASTING STRATEGY:
FREQUENCY ALLOCATION ANNOUNCED A MEDIA TEMPEST**

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The first radiotelegraphic station in the Balkans installed by the Italian Nobel Prize-winner Guillermo Marconi in 1904 in Volujica near Bar at that time positioned Montenegro in terms of technology ahead of many European countries. An entire century later, Montenegro is trying to keep step with the modern Europe, at least media-wise, which, again, requires a technological precondition. In this context, towards the end of the month, representatives of Montenegro will participate in a preparatory conference on digital television in Geneva, which will be held after the final design of the Montenegrin frequency plan and its adoption. After that, a tender will be announced to allocate frequencies, whose very indication has already drawn a lot of attention not just from present and potential future users, but also from international media experts and organizations. Of course, consequently from the public as well.

The Council and the Agency of Broadcasting of Montenegro (ARD) have found themselves in an unenviable situation because, before the first tender is announced for the allocation of broadcasting frequencies, the Strategy of Development of Broadcasting of Montenegro and the plan of allocation of broadcasting frequencies must be adopted. Recently, a roundtable called "Strategy of Development of Broadcasting in Montenegro by 2007" in Podgorica almost entirely passed in discussion on the principles and criteria by which foreign broadcasters will found media outlets and on how to protect domestic media, which is particularly emphasized by Montenegrin commercial broadcasters and members of the ARD Council. However, IREX consultants, commenting on the conditions of the draft Strategy, which, in order to protect national interests, require not only Montenegrin, but also foreign broadcasting companies, including Serbian ones, to produce no less than 51 percent of the programming broadcast via Montenegrin transmitters in Montenegro itself, assessed it as being discriminatory. Thus, instead of

the entire Strategy, public discussion focused on a single issue – under what conditions will media from Serbia broadcast their programming in Montenegro. There was no discussion on a series of essential determinants in the Strategy as a crucial document that will decide the fate of the vast majority of media in Montenegro, primarily local public broadcasting services and RTCG (Radio Television Montenegro), which have not started functioning yet in light of new Montenegrin laws on media, broadcasting and broadcasting services.

Foreign media experts, IREX representatives in particular, believe that 90 percent of the Strategy of Development of Broadcasting is in accordance with good international practice, but that the “problem is the 10 percent by which the ARD Council discredits not just itself, but also overall media reform in the country.” They have particularly attacked the Montenegrin agency’s attempt to define in too much detail the criteria for licensing commercial broadcasters, thus restricting freedom of broadcasting. For instance, Hendrik Busik, media expert and IREX consultant, assessed certain provisions of the strategy as having been passed under the “influence of a nationalistic and authoritarian way of thinking.” On the other hand, Montenegrin commercial broadcasters support the Agency’s criterion based on which it will be assessed whether license applicants contribute to the overall aims of the broadcasting policy, in particular with regard to Montenegrin content and providing minority programming. They back this with the negative experience of many years of unhampered broadcasting of the nationalistic propaganda machine in Montenegro via media from Serbia.

At any rate, certain Serbian media, after 2000 and the October Fifth “ideological changing of clothes” and even before frequency allocation, have already positioned themselves in Montenegro. In addition to the domesticated TV Pink, which got its frequencies in the Montenegrin media landscape in a non-transparent way (it continues to re-broadcast programming in the ekavian dialect from a Belgrade studio), TV BK is also present in Montenegro every day via TV Elmag’s smaller screen. BK re-broadcasts its news program, and lately also a newly launched morning program, as well as other programs such as the popular “Klopka” (Trap). If we take into account the regular transmission of Radio Television Serbia’s primetime TV news program on Television Montenegro’s Second Channel, it is entirely understandable that Montenegrin TV broadcasters are bitter as they cannot appear in the Serbian market because the

frequency allocation procedure is not regulated there. Without going into predictions on how much Montenegrin television stations' own production would be a "disruptive factor" in the Serbian TV landscape, even if they did have the possibility of broadcasting reciprocity, the bitter impression remains that for now there is no media harmonization in the Union of Serbia and Montenegro. Therefore, it is surprising, to say the least, that foreign experts insist that Montenegro need not fear the policy of open media doors inside the Union of Serbia and Montenegro. Without, primarily, protection of national interests, this policy may lead to the closure of the majority of Montenegrin broadcasters.

It seems there is also a fear, which is not so little, of a complete opening of the market which will redistribute the advertising share in favor of larger, especially mega television stations, such as TV Pink, TV BK and TV B92, with the former offering to broadcast large brands' advertisements on air in Montenegro for free. In Serbia, some 70 million euros is set aside for advertising on broadcasters, while according to monitoring done by the RTCG Department of Research and Development and the Center for Statistical Research and Prognoses "Modus," the financial potential of the advertising market of electronic TV media in Montenegro is no higher than 7,200,000 euros. Or some 10 times less than in Serbia.

What then, besides marketing, attracts Serbian television stations so much that they are fighting so hard for Montenegrin frequencies? The wealthy owners of TV BK, the Karics, do not hide their ambitions. They want television on the Montenegrin coast. The head of TV B92, Vedran Matic, believes that any restriction of media freedom either in Serbia or in Montenegro is unconstitutional. He assesses the problem of frequency licenses in this context. "I am afraid that behind this hides the Montenegrin ruling structures' fear that the state of Montenegro would not be able to control electronic media from Serbia and that they would report in a way that does not suit the Montenegrin authorities," emphasizes Matic. Perhaps this is what the formula of TV Pink's entry into Montenegro by the back door even before frequency allocation hides behind.

Local broadcasters also agree that Montenegro will pay dearly for media reform because of its small market. After all, those who are now the loudest critics of the application of the Law on Broadcasting are those who participated the most in creating the set of media laws. Montenegrin commercial broadcasters are embittered by the Broadcasting

Center pricelist, adopted by the Council of the Agency of Broadcasting of Montenegro. They believe that many broadcasters will simply shut down due to the high prices of leasing frequencies. The Broadcasting Center, which separated from Telecom Montenegro after the media laws were passed and operates as a separate company, claims that if free use of emission stations and transmitters continues, they will not survive either. So far, only the Government of Montenegro has settled dues amounting to 886,700 euros for Public Service Radio Television Montenegro services. For leasing equipment, facilities, land and infrastructure, the Broadcasting Center is supposed to collect 647,500 euros a year from 20 private radio stations and 10 TV stations, as well as nine municipal public services. For some, this is a lot, for others, it is little.

In any case, polemics regarding the pricelist and the commercial broadcasters' heated reactions have finally confirmed to the public the fact that they have not been paying for use of frequencies for years and that they have installed their transmitters onto the state network. Perhaps, out of habit, the continuous state assistance for developing independent and commercial broadcasters was excessive, but it certainly resulted in the fact that Montenegro, up until now, was one of the leading countries by the number of media outlets per capita in this part of Europe. There is no country that is so small and has so many media (with a population of just some 600,000). Therefore, out of habit and under the Law on Broadcasting regarding subscription fee and tax, 10 percent of the total broadcasting subscription fee is stipulated as assistance to commercial radio and TV stations, which is probably a unique case in media practice. The ARD Council made sure that this intention will be persevered in, already announcing a competition to allocate resources from the Agency of Broadcasting fund to commercial broadcasting services. This way, the impoverished Montenegrin citizens, during the transition period, will be helping media owners. On the other hand, neither the state nor the Agency of Broadcasting cares very much about public services, which is confirmed by public discussion on the Strategy of Development of Broadcasting.

That the burden of media reform in Montenegro will not sink just certain private electronic media is clear to everyone who carefully follows the media situation. Republic and local public services are threatened no less. Radio Television Montenegro is choking in debts and thousands of employees received only two salaries this year, despite evident programming progress towards a public service. At the local public

services RTV Niksic and RTV Budva, journalists and technicians have not been receiving salaries for a long time, but they have not been working either. They are on strike. How, then, will other much poorer municipalities in Montenegro carry out media reform and will local broadcasters succeed in transforming into public services, remains to be seen. Not only are the legally-stipulated models of information being tested; the provisions of the new media laws are also being tested to see if they can be implemented in practice. Hopefully, in the end, a brief news report on the planned media reform will not be: operation succeeded, patient died. For, the fact that certain foreign media consultants and exper(imen)ts show in their reports that Montenegro was the leader of overall media reform in the Balkans, and even broader, and that it is moving even above the standards followed in some 20 countries, does not mean that reform will succeed in practice. All that is important to them is that reform is carried out as quickly as possible. However, what is important to domicile media in Montenegro is how to survive.

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