The position of public service television in the candidate countries

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The problems faced by public service broadcasting in Central and Eastern Europe are not unfamiliar to public service broadcasters in the West. There are, however, special features too. First of all, broadcasters in the candidate countries had a totally different starting-point from that of broadcasters in the West, as they were built on the basis of the old Communist state broadcasters. Secondly, they are confronted with several major challenges almost simultaneously, whereas the public broadcasters in the West faced these challenges over a much longer period. The challenges in question have been:

- Independence;
- Efficiency and competitiveness;
- Pluralism and creativity;
- Digitization.

The transformation and renewal of an existing organization is a very difficult undertaking and many public broadcasters still suffer as a result of their legacy. Problems are often caused by the need to ensure continuity, as well as by public perception. Political support and financial means are essential. It is not surprising, therefore, that transformation and restructuring are taking far longer than was originally foreseen.

Transformation implies, on the one hand, greater distance from the State, and, on the other, reorganization into modern public enterprises, with effective internal management structures and financial control. There is a need to deal with overstaffing, to improve the qualifications of staff, to increase salaries. The Council of Europe and other European bodies have already done much valuable work as regards distance from the State. In terms of organization and funding, however, the necessary transformation of the public service broadcasters remains unaccomplished in many of the countries in question.
A few words now about the shock of commercial competition which the public broadcasters in the region had to face. Sometimes, such a shock can be healthy; it can accelerate changes and stimulate recovery. Czech Television provides a good example: it has been able to withstand fierce commercial competition after some very heavy initial setbacks in terms of audience. But such a commercial shock can also be fatal, and the survival of public service broadcasting cannot be taken for granted, especially in smaller and economically weaker countries. There, outside support is needed and it would be a pity if Western aid focused exclusively on private commercial broadcasting.

There is widespread speculation that commercial broadcasters could take over the role of public service broadcasters. However, because of the commercial pressures and the limited financial resources, the possibilities for the commercial channels in terms of programming will also be limited. Sometimes the advertising market in the country is too small for the number of commercial channels that have been set up. Consequently, not all of these broadcasters would be able to survive and there will be a process of consolidation and concentration. Public broadcasters then need to be there to act as a counter-weight to financial power and private monopolies and a guarantor of media pluralism.

As far as domestic production is concerned, it is true that the role of public broadcasters in the candidate countries is not yet as strong as it usually is in Western countries. The figures show, however, that in the last couple of years, their investment in commissioned production has steadily increased. The key point is the marketing of these productions on a European level. In the EBU, we have been encouraging the coproduction and exchange of programmes among our members. We have recently started a new project called Night Trade. It gives innovative productions the opportunity to be transmitted in late-night slots on television channels throughout Europe. I would encourage our members from the candidate countries to participate actively in this project because it is an opportunity for those productions to obtain a "window" throughout Europe. Although not undertaken on a commercial basis, this exchange is important in preparing the market for the future.