

V THE DIGITALIZATION PROCESS

The decision of the RBA Council not to allocate the television broadcasting licenses with national coverage (elaborated on in the part of this Report pertaining to the implementation of the Broadcasting Law) has opened new options in the digital switchover process. RATEL officials and the Public Company "Broadcasting Equipment and Communications" (ETV) claim it is possible to complete about 70% of the technical side of the switchover by the end of the year, given the frequencies offered in the open competition are used for the continuation of the switchover process. The RBA's decision not to allocate the free frequencies to either of the candidates was commended by the Ministry of Foreign and Internal Trade and Telecommunications, which announced that these frequencies would be used for speeding up the digital switchover. Such a position received the support of the EU Delegation to Serbia, the OSCE Mission to Serbia, as well as media and journalists' associations. The Plan of the Ministry, RATEL and ETV is to use the specific frequencies (that were used by the now defunct TV Avala) for expanding the initial network for the testing of the digital TV signal. That would, in turn – through that network, which is currently broadcasting at low power and from only 15 transmitter sites – enable countrywide coverage and a real simulcast, until the final switchover. It remains to be seen if the plans and announcements of the Ministry, the sectoral regulator for electronic communications and the public company – future operator of the digital network and the simulcast – will actually come to life. First, the competition procedure conducted before the RBA was practically continued after the decision of August 9, since the unhappy applicants had the right to lodge complaints, which, in turn, would require a new decision of the RBA. If the RBA's new decision confirms the previous one, the next step will be for the Ministry of Foreign and Internal Trade and Telecommunications (at RATEL's proposal, which has already been formulated) to reassign the specific frequencies for expanding the initial network for the testing of the digital TV signal. That network, in that manner, would become the actual simulcast network, instead of test network. If the Ministry again fails to pass a decision on reassigning the frequencies (even in the case if the RBA's new decision confirmed the previous one), we will find ourselves at the beginning again: the RBA would again be obligated to call a new competition instead of the failed one, which would (again) hamper the extension of the test network into a simulcast network. That, in a short period, would enable the digital signal for at least 70% of households in Serbia.