

B. SERBIAN MEDIA SCENE IN MAY 2014

V THE DIGITALIZATION PROCESS

In the month of May, the public company “Broadcasting Technology and Links” (BTL) announced that, owing to the extension of the initial digital broadcasting network, about 90% of the citizens of Serbia will be able to receive digital television, subject to possessing the proper set top box device (STB). The network has been extended with the installation of a digital transmitter on the Deli Jovan mountain, covering most of eastern Serbia. BTL went on saying that from Deli Jovan, the citizens would be able to watch the program of the public service broadcaster (RTS), as well as that of national commercial broadcasters and two regional stations (Studio B and Belle Amie) and RTS’ HD channel. The RBA announced on May 13 that, together with BTL, it had secured the technical and formal possibilities for the regional broadcasters to join the extended digital network. On that occasion, the RBA organized a meeting, where the regional broadcasters were informed with the legal and technical aspects of the digital switchover, as well as with the opportunity to join the initial network. The system functions by having the regional broadcasters submit a request to the RBA to be allowed to broadcast in the digital network, after which BTL issues the technical approval.

The extension of the initial network is most definitely good news, because it provides a large number of households with the technical capacities to receive digital signal and try out the amenities of digital television. However, the public is yet to hear what is a “proper device”, necessary for receiving the signal, since with a STB, there will be no reception of the digital signal if the TV sets do not support the DVBT2 standard. Furthermore, since there are many STBs on the market that support the old standard (DVBT), the citizens need to be made aware of that in order to avoid wasting their money. The competent ministry should urgently adopt a specification of STBs, as well as rules for marking STBs and TV sets. This would enable the citizens to get to know if these devices support the DVBT2 standard or not. Finally, as the Digital Switchover Strategy only says that the simulcast through the initial testing network will be available solely on programs to be determined by the Ministry of Trade and Telecommunications (in cooperation with the Ministry of Culture and the RBA), while the Rules of the Digital Switchover stop short of detailing the procedures (saying that the simultaneous broadcasting of analog and digital signal will be carried out in accordance with the Strategy), the question arises as to what are the legal grounds for the RBA and BTL to decide about someone’s

right to join or not to immediately join the digital network? At some point, the initial network will most certainly evolve into a final one; it is also undisputed that all broadcasters holding valid licenses will be guaranteed access to the multiplex under equal, objective and non-discriminatory conditions. It's also unquestionably better to have the access to the initial digital network decided upon by an independent regulatory body than the Ministry. However, the mere fact that the procedures under which decisions are taken are not regulated in detail, fails to guarantee full legal security. Even more important than the matter of access to the digital network in this early stage (in which relatively few citizens have the technical conditions for receiving the signal) is the question about the fee to be charged by the ETV and BTL to the broadcasters for distribution and broadcasting, after the expiration of the free trial period during the simulcast. The broadcasters will be in the position to make a decision if they want to join the multiplex after June 2014 only on the basis of complete information about the conditions of distribution; they might opt for an alternative type of TV signal distribution (cable, DTH satellite distribution, IPTV) that would be cheaper. Unfortunately, they still don't have such complete information or any hint as to when they might get it. Consequently, the technical achievements noticeable in the digitalization process are not enough for a positive evaluation of the process as a whole. Regulatory documents, such as the Switchover Plan, are also late, as well as the awareness campaign and the implementation of the aid scheme for the vulnerable population, with the goal of purchasing equipment for receiving digital signal. Bearing in mind that the July 17, 2015 deadline is nearing (as the date for full switchover), the state will have to address a series of problems urgently and simultaneously, with an uncertain outcome.