

Remarks by the High Representative, Wolfgang Petritsch, at the opening of a conference on Public Service Broadcasting in Transition States

*Chairman of the Presidency Belkic,
Mr Langdon,
Ladies and Gentlemen,*

First, I would like to thank the organisers, Wilton Park, who have, together with the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and the Department for International Development of the United Kingdom and the Communications Regulatory Agency here in BiH, made this event possible. The subject is important and its consideration over the next two days by experts from around the region is especially timely for Bosnia and Herzegovina.

This conference offers an invaluable opportunity to explore one of the core challenges facing the countries in transition on the difficult path to the European family of states. Public service broadcasting is, of course, a key component of a vibrant, healthy, democratic society. It helps society identify and articulate the essence of itself. Broadcasting is the fulcrum in which public opinion is formed, in which the political climate is molded, in which ideas of citizenship and statehood take root. It is an understatement to say that there are many interested parties in the debate over public broadcasting – every citizen is an interested party. It is, therefore, not surprising that the debate surrounding the reform of state controlled broadcasters to become European-style public ones is such a heated one throughout the region. This is nowhere more evident than here in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Establishing a free and fair public broadcasting service is an essential component of this country's efforts to integrate further with the rest of Europe; in turn, such a service will help promote the kind of civic values that will make BiH compatible with the democratic ethos that prevails in the rest of the continent.

The experience of this part of South Eastern Europe throughout the dark years of war in the last decade are testament to the potentially destructive power of broadcasting, if this power is concentrated in the wrong hands. The systematic manipulation of the large state broadcasters by political forces, and their well recorded role in fuelling nationalist hatred provides us all with a clear incentive – the old state broadcasters, designed to serve narrow political interests simply must be reformed to serve the greater interest of society. Given the recent history of this region, I firmly believe that the international community was right to tackle media restructuring in the context of our general task of peace implementation..

This debate – so often couched in terms of advertising markets, transmission frequencies and personalities – is about more fundamental issues. Public broadcasting is about the character and culture of society. Just think about the hundreds of millions of people around the world who understand the United Kingdom, for example, through the medium of the BBC. The quality of the BBC's programming is such that it manages to reflect the best of the society that produces it without being parochial or chauvinistic.

The equilibrium, which must be achieved between the public broadcaster and the commercial sector, is complex. Let me say it clearly and simply — we believe in a mixed broadcasting model, with public and private broadcasters exercising their distinct roles for the benefit of all citizens. Conditions must be developed to allow the private broadcasters to be profitable and the public broadcasters to be financially viable. This has been the guiding principle of all our efforts to restructure the broadcasting environment in BiH.

In the Western democracies, market forces create wealth, but there are statutory checks and balances, which prevent the market from damaging the public interest. It's the same – and even more important – in broadcasting. I would say it is crucial. The commercial broadcasting sector must be allowed to flourish – this is a democratic imperative, a cultural benefit and a commercial requirement. At the same time, the public broadcasting sector must be sustained – this is essential if democratic and civic values are to be defended and promoted. In a thriving broadcasting environment the success of one sector stimulates the success of the other – this is the underlying principle of the European broadcasting landscape. Healthy competition between the sectors is inevitable and welcome – but this should not be expressed as a “zero-sum” game.

Let me say a few words about this country. Many of you will know that the international community has been very involved in the redevelopment of public broadcasting as part of an overall media strategy within the peace implementation mandate. Having battled for several difficult years to create some distance from the political system, the public broadcasting stations of BiH are now beginning to try, with growing self-confidence, to make a more significant contribution to the evolving character of their country. They are beginning to respond to audience demand and at the same time go beyond this to produce programmes that have genuine and lasting value.

A complex process of restructuring, carried out amid criticism and often with severe practical, financial and logistic restraints, has been necessary in order to provide the basis for an impartial, inclusive and high-quality service, which is the norm in developed democracies. In May 2001 BiH Radio 1, a public service channel serving the entire country, began broadcasting. In the last twelve months the channel has established itself as the country's premier source of radio news and entertainment. Even those who were critical of the long and necessarily complicated preparations for setting up BiH Radio 1 have grudgingly acknowledged that the programming has more than lived up to citizens' high expectations. In October 2001, Federation TV was launched. The launch was hampered by political interference and attempts to destabilise the process, and the product is not always perfect. However, the service continues to grow in quality, stature and confidence. This view is supported by broadcast industry analysts whose research indicates that Federation TV has steadily increased its ratings since the launch. This is in sharp contrast to the conventional ratings patterns of new TV channels, which customarily garner a significant viewership in the first days, which then declines as the novelty wears off.

Almost 50 percent of FTV programming is now produced domestically, a ten-percent increase over the figure in the initial broadcasting period. Significantly, domestic programming attracts the highest viewing figures.

FTV has also increased its production of children's programmes and cultural programmes and documentaries, and it has sought to raise the quality of educational programmes, dramas, and multi-confessional religious magazines. Many of these projects have been completed in co-operation with independent production houses, thus sustaining a thriving creative environment for writers, journalists, technicians and other TV professionals.

Then, at the beginning of this month, the news service of the countrywide broadcaster, BH TV 1, was launched. This service reaches more than 90 percent of the BiH population from Brcko to Trebinje, from Mostar to Tuzla. Despite severe financial and technical limitations, this service has started well. The overall PBS development project has a long way to go, but the introduction of an independent, multiethnic service for all citizens of this still divided country is an important step. I am glad that within the next few months, some of the much-needed new equipment purchased by the international community will be installed to further improve the capabilities of the system. The generous participation of the donor community, particularly the European Commission, is an essential element of this whole initiative – without this investment, the PBS project would undoubtedly fail.

I am convinced that the development of an independent regulator, such as the Communications Regulatory Authority here in Bosnia and Herzegovina, is an indispensable tool to promote the conditions for a thriving broadcasting market. Indeed, without the robust participation of the CRA, we could not have reached the point where we are today, with the commercial sector properly licensed and supervised, and the public sector held to increasingly higher standards. This agency provides an essential breakwater between the broadcast operators and the government – to be effective, such agencies must be structured and empowered sufficiently to resist political interference – only then can it implement its regulatory duties across the broadcasting industry with the confidence of citizen and broadcaster alike.

This type of regulatory environment is difficult to achieve in countries with a long tradition of political interference in the media field. However, their very existence can help to play an educational role to the body politic, as I believe the CRA is helping to do here in BiH. We are beginning to see slow, but positive developments. The parties who now run the Entity governments and the State government should rightly be able to concentrate on the issues of jobs, education and infrastructure that ordinary citizens really care about. They want to dissociate themselves from the nationalist nonsense, which produced murder and mayhem and led BiH into the dark valley of self-destruction. Yet there remains a tendency, even among otherwise responsible and forward-looking politicians, to view public broadcasting in a simplistic and old-fashioned way. Some politicians still think in terms of government control; they have yet to acquire a full understanding of the complex and sophisticated dynamism which allows a public broadcaster to reflect the concerns, the tastes and the aspirations of citizens and at the same time act as a kind of conscience, reminding the country of what it can and ought to be.

In the RS and in the Federation we have sought to forge a political consensus on public broadcasting, which will

enshrine best European practice in the broadcasting legislation. Problems remain. Some politicians still hanker for the old ways, for the days when the leaders handed down pronouncements, which were conveyed uncritically by the broadcasters and received meekly by the people.

Well, politicians who still think like that, don't like the public broadcasting system that has now been established in BiH. The public television and radio stations have a clear mandate to produce news that is free and fair, not news that is censored and anodyne. In order to achieve this, politicians must give them space to develop, so that production standards continue improving and responsibility is accompanied by professionalism. I would like to underline that the Presidency of BiH, and especially its Chairman, Mr Beriz Belkic who is with us today, have sought to be supportive in this endeavor. Programming is now beginning to reflect the demands of viewers, where once it reflected the whims of bureaucrats and party hacks. The important job for politicians in this process is to help the provision of a suitably modern legislative basis for the new public broadcasters.

Accordingly, I am grateful to the fruitful contribution of the Council of Ministers in the joint working group that has developed the draft law for the public broadcasting system of Bosnia and Herzegovina. I know that this group, consisting of deputy ministers Rasim Kadic, Milan Lovric and Milovan Blagojevic, together with representatives of the broadcasters and the international community have participated in many meetings, and taken advice to assist them in preparing the draft. I know they have made every effort to design a system to harmonise the relationship between the two entity and one state level broadcasters, a vital task if the system is to be financially self sustainable.

Regrettably, the Council of Ministers has so far been unable to reach consensus on the draft, although the Alliance for Change has welcomed the draft law publicly. The objections, primarily from the Republika Srpska, ignore the clear necessity for a symbiotic relationship between the broadcasters within the system and incorrectly focus on separatist principles. Although their concerns have been addressed in detail, there remains an impasse and the law has once again failed to proceed to parliament. Without an effective legislative structure, the relationship between and within the entity and state level public broadcasters will remain under question. This is potentially catastrophic for them all. In addition, Bosnia and Herzegovina must adopt suitable legislation for public service broadcasting as a key requirement of the European Union "Road Map". For the benefit of the broadcasters, and for the citizens who must ultimately fund this system, I call on everyone to find a solution to this impasse. We must not endanger the hard fought progress of the hard working staff of the broadcasting system, and the dedicated members of their governing bodies who have struggled to regenerate the system to match the European aspirations of the citizens of this country.

I know that many of the challenges I have discussed are common to broadcasters across the region – I think we all share an understanding of the importance of public broadcasting in the process of transition to democracy. Through this conference I hope that the exchange of views and common experiences of broadcasters throughout the region can only be helpful.

If this is the last time I get to address those responsible for developing the public broadcasters in this country, I wish you all the very best of luck -you have come a long way from the very different circumstances under which you started, in some cases nearly three and a half years ago. I sincerely hope and believe that you will succeed.

Good luck for the conference, and thank you for listening.