Developing Public Service Broadcasting in Latvia

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I want to thank the National Electronic Media Council (NEPLP) for the opportunity to contribute to these proceedings. Your gracious invitation to remark on the proposal for developing public service broadcasting in Latvia is an honor and a privilege. I would like to thank two colleagues in particular. First, my warm thanks to Prof. Ainars Dimants, whom I met in a conference of the European Media Management Association in London several years ago, and Gints Mikelsons, whom I met in this project and has been especially helpful in organizing for this visit and my contribution.

As an international observer of public service broadcasting, I am especially encouraged by this media development project in Latvia and I look forward to sharing the results of your work in the international circles that are important for my work. Your commitment to securing the public service roles and functions of media as a system that is essential for the healthy development of civil society is both encouraging and exciting. This is not to neglect the importance of commercial media. The European approach is a dual system in electronic media, where both public service and private commercial sectors are necessary to guarantee the greatest benefits. The European dual system is a dueling system – it is continually evolving and frequently contested. This requires a society

to routinely redefine and update what its media are expected to be and do.

I have been asked to discuss the general situation describing public service broadcasting in Europe today, and then to comment on the plan for developing PSB in Latvia. Obviously twenty minutes is not a lot of time, but I hope these remarks will make a useful contribution.

I begin with the observation that Europe is not a single entity. Although economic integration has been achieved to an important degree, there is little to suggest the achievement of political, social or cultural integration. Although treating Europe as a single entity can be useful when comparisons for example with the United States or China, this view actually conceals more than it reveals when making comparisons between EU member states. Variance between conditions in member states is evident in population size and density, economic wealth in GDP and per capita income, languages, histories, geography, political structures, resources, and much else. Internally at least, there is more difference than commonality when comparing European countries. And yet much of the media policy discourse from the European Commission implies that a one-size-fits-all approach is both possible and appropriate. In my informed opinion is neither.

In broadcasting, as well, one finds considerable differences when comparing how public service media are understood, organized and managed in Northern and Southern Europe, and when comparing East with West. In Scandinavia, Germany and the United Kingdom

public service broadcasting has a long heritage and is thoroughly institutionalized after roughly 80 years of continuous operation. PSB was a project intended to improve the quality of social life, to serve as a tool for distance education, as an agent of enlightenment, and as a means for strengthening national cohesion. Public service organizations built broadcasting.

In much of southern Europe, PSB came later and in some cases only after state broadcasting, which is the standard practice in a military dictatorship. That was the case for Spain, Portugal and Greece. In this region PSB has more often been subject to political manipulation and state interference, even recently. Their experience has similarities with conditions in East Europe, although not for the same length of time or to the same degree. In the East media were long considered an essential organ for conditioning public perceptions and cultivating support for the State.

It isn't therefore very useful to talk about Europe as though it were a relatively homogenous entity with a similar set of shared experiences and characteristics across member states. That characterization doesn't accommodate the differentiated needs and varying realities of life in each country. But despite the more considerable differences, one does find important commonalities in the condition of public service broadcasting. The first I will discuss hinges on problems with legitimacy.

In the East this problem is a legacy of state broadcasting, which is often confused with public service broadcasting. In fact PSB is an

opponent of state broadcasting because this approach is explicitly intended to operate at 'arm's length' from both the market and the state. It is supposed to be an independent civil society organization. In practice the degree of arm's length protection has varied both within and between countries, and even within a particular country over time and depending on conditions. But the principle is important and offers an essential contrast with state controlled media.

In the West, the legitimacy problem is caused by a collapse of consensus that public service broadcasting is still needed. The reasons are mainly related to the growth of the commercial sector, which by now offers an enormous range and variety of channels and programs. The drive to compete has encouraged a decline in the degree of distinctiveness of public service content. This decline is correlated with an increase in imported content, both in programs produced by commercial companies abroad and in securing the rights to popular international program formats. The drive to achieve higher efficiency that is keyed to shrinking resources has also encouraged a blurring of differences.

Addressing this problem, in both the West and the East, also shares a commonality. It is vital that the public service sector articulate a clear, compelling and convincing rationale for its identity and mission under 21st century conditions. Addressing this problem effectively requires rethinking and redefining, but it is not nearly enough to invent better rhetoric. It is essential that policy-makers, regulators and public broadcasters align structures and procedures

to achieve the goals in practice. It will never be enough to talk the talk, however well the tale is told. These organizations must walk the walk that is required to fulfill their remits.

In practical terms this means taking care in the reconstruction of methods for governance, for nominating executive managers, for ensuring ethical practices and appropriate editorial guidelines, for constructing the most conducive methods for funding the enterprise, and for guaranteeing public accountability. This is not to suggest that a particular method is better than an alternative. What is best, and what is feasible, always depends on the society context.

A second commonality across European countries is caused by the economic recession since 2008, which causes complications for state finances, more public debt and painful austerity measures. In most countries there isn't enough public treasure to pay for all of the benefits and services that people expect. Public broadcasters have typically done a remarkable job in providing more channels and programs on more platforms with less money and fewer employees. Digitalization is a key factor here because it has not only grown opportunities for development in the quantity, variety and quality of the offer, but also accounts for growing friction between electronic and print media as more operators compete in markets that are not growing at the same pace as competition. There is less money available for public media, and the money that is available must often be taken from the same pot that pays for other vital public services including education, healthcare and infrastructure.

Addressing this problem requires more clearly defining the remit in each country. The purview of public service media, meaning the areas in which it should and should not be active – which platforms, which genres, which services – this purview issue has become increasingly important, and complicated. Again, legitimacy must be established and that first requires a clear, compelling and convincing rationale for the public service enterprise in media, and then properly aligning strategies and operations.

A third and final commonality across European countries is connected to what I've described so far – it is demand for methods to ensure accountability in the public sector. That is important because public money is involved and legitimacy is partly a function of accountability for any public sector organization in a democratic society. Pressures for increased accountability came to a head in the United Kingdom in the early 2000s and were associated with complaints against the BBC about the quantity and variety of new channels and services being offered in the emerging digital environment. Expansion into online media, the success of the BBC iPlayer, proliferation of themed channels and niche services – all of this and more culminated in a pointed challenge to the BBC's legitimacy and claims that it was no longer acting as a public service organization. Commercial actors accused the corporation of stifling competition and distorting the media market, a refrain that has been repeated everywhere since 2005. In response, the BBC and its governors proposed a method for validating new initiatives, called the public values test – or, as often described in policy documents, 'ex ante evaluation'. This approach requires assessment of the potential

added public service value of a new initiative, as well as its likely impact on the commercial market if approved. Ex ante evaluation was eagerly welcomed by the European Commission, which had grown tired of dealing with the proliferation of legal challenges and complaints against PSB in the member states.

This trend indicates the need for every PSB system to design instruments that will ensure accountability not only in the performance of the institution as a pubic entity, but also in its impact on and relations with the private commercial sector. Here we are also dealing with the tensions between national authorities working to craft a system that is both desirable and feasible at the domestic level, but can be problematic for the EU. There is no easy solution to these complications. Reasonable and affordable instrumentation to ensure accountability must be developed, and an acceptable balance between national and supra-national needs is a focus of required negotiation.

That concludes my quick overview of the situation for PSB in Europe today. In summary we can say that the best and most suitable approach for organizing, resourcing and managing public service broadcasting depends largely on conditions in the domestic context. There is more variance than similarity between EU member states, and the one-size-fits-all media policy framework is therefore highly problematic. Despite the differences, there are commonalities and these are largely in the aspects briefly discussed: the problem of legitimacy and identity; complications caused by economic recession; the demand for accountability and instrumentation to measure that;

and tensions between national needs and international requirements. The key requirement is a clear, compelling and convincing rationale for PSB in the 21st century.

I will conclude with comments about the plan and proposal for public service broadcasting in Latvia.

It is clear that diligence has been taken to establish a viable framework. In brief, this plan is impressive and the proposal is comprehensive. The outline and ingredients demonstrate a thoughtful process of research, deliberation and design, based on a keen awareness of the issues. It is obvious that this proposal addresses the specific needs for Latvian society today, with an eye on the greatest benefits a public service platform should provide. At the same time, the proposal addresses the general problems that I have observed, and does so in useful ways. I would like to elaborate on these general observations.

First, it is an impressive plan and a comprehensive proposal. Reviewing the plan one finds that every relevant dimension of organizational status, structure and process is addressed:
- Mission, values and objectives
- Clear and specified goals for performance
- An assessment practice for determining public benefits
- Consideration of segmentation and channel profiles
- Organizational structure
- Production strategy and guidelines
- Governing bodies and oversight protocols

- Expectations for management
- Tri-media operations and the role of social media
- Content development and professional training
- Marketing strategy

The proposal is also comprehensive in the sense that various scenarios have been constructed and choices made on the basis of what is most likely to succeed in practice, and to be of the greatest overall benefit for the public. That is evident, for example, in section 1.7 on the legal model and section 1.8 on personnel and management.

Second, the results demonstrate a thoughtful process and offer solutions to typical challenges. The scenario results that I already mentioned are one example. In sketching the scenarios for personnel both the costs and the potential for collaboration are considered, and the conclusion reached is to merge the two current organizations (LR and LTV) so that redundancies can be eliminated for greater efficiency. At the same time this will better guarantee a collaborative, cooperative community rather than wasteful competition that hinders achieving goals and would not provide the most value for money. It's clear that the designers of this plan have done their homework and are familiar with the problems that arise when multiple organizations are involved, for example in the Netherlands and Sweden – despite some benefits, of course.

Similarly, the proposal sketches a plan for measuring the public benefits for the investment of public money. The criteria are clear and appropriate – reach, quality, credibility and efficiency. Reach is

required to establish whether or not the new organization is serving the public as a whole. Quality matters for establishing how and how well the public is being served. Credibility is vital and requires independence to truly serve the public's interests. Efficiency is essential for ensuring that public funding is spent appropriately and that as much benefit as possible is derived with the least waste. The instrumentation and procedures for assessment are doable – there's nothing here to raise costs or cause concern. Some of the data is already collected, for example audience ratings and financial accounting results, and what's new is standard for this practice – a quantitative survey using a random sample. The public benefits assessment is important for satisfying international demands and at the same time for ensuring integrity and diligence by the organization in the performance of its obligations.

Finally, in this regard, I would note the discussion towards the end about financing. Careful thinking is evident in the construction of a mixed funding model that initially requires some EU investment, but over time will be handled domestically with a combination of public subsidy from the state budget, a reasonable media fee, a proportion of advertising and sponsorship, and selling the organization's production services to external clients. Moreover, the proposal envisions development as a process that will unfold in stages. Eventually the EU investment must end and the proportion of revenue earned from the license fee will grow modestly so that direct subsidy from the state budget can also be decreased. This is a reasonable and well reasoned.

Third, the proposal envisions a PSB system that is grounded in the historic ethic of public service broadcasting but also balances that with the contemporary needs of Latvian society. Historic ideals are evident in the vision, where the emphasis supports strengthening democracy and contributing to a healthy national identity. It is equally evident in the mission, which highlights the importance of public service media for information and education. Tolerance and openness are familiar highlighted features. But this proposal is not confined to familiar, historic tasks. It also envisions a public service organization that will inspire people, facilitate discussion and dialogue as a participatory feature, and will play a key role in cultivating creativity and innovation in audiovisual media. Social media management objectives are repeatedly emphasized throughout the document.

That leaves only whatever potential criticisms of the proposal I might offer. Here I must be careful because I am not a citizen or resident of Latvia, and therefore not qualified to act as a judge. It is not for me to say what and is not the best option for this society. As I said near the beginning, Europe is not a single entity. The best and most practical solutions for Latvia are not for an outsider to presume to know better.

But I can offer a few critical suggestions for possible improvement or clarification of some aspects of the proposal. I will conclude with some general comments about what is required for this plan to work in practice.

In the section on media content I suggest careful thinking about how the requirement for balance in representation is achieved. This pertains to the discussion about the *head count*. Although the idea is good in principle because a public service organization is expected to support and facilitate improved social relations between different segments of the population, and especially when there is conflict or friction. Fair representation is a factor, obviously. Improved social relations and society cohesion depends in part on how a minority the Russian-speaking population in Latvia is both represented in proportion and portrayed in content. But too strict a set of rules will be stifling. Every story isn't best told by focusing on everything and everyone. The issue, in my view, is not representation within every program but across the full range of programming. So I think more clarity would be helpful here.

I also suggest some further thinking would be useful regarding the relationship between content development and professional training. These are treated separately in this plan. I fully support including both of these aspects, and find it refreshing and encouraging that each is given such prominence here. But I worked as the Head of Program Development for three years at Yle in Finland, and before that was responsible for the radio training curriculum at Yle. Over time we found that the best way to develop professional skill is not by focusing mainly on training people but rather on developing their programs. In other words, content development is the best way to achieve every kind of development. People perceive things differently when you say, 'We want to help you improve your program' than when we say 'we want to fix you.' Professional

program makers care about the work they do and the programs they make. And that is where creativity and innovation are most needed for practical results. So I advise the designers of this proposal to think about how to approach both tasks as an integrated practice, and recommend putting content development in the driver's seat.

Third and finally, I think it is very important to be clear that even convergence does not erase all the differences and unique distinctions that are important for professional practice. There are unique skills involved with telling a story well without pictures – with painting a picture in words. There are unique skills in presenting a story effectively in video – in letting the pictures tell the story and not cluttering it with too much speaking. Also people continue to use media in ways that are distinctive. I like to read the morning paper while waking up and having coffee. That is a common situation. I like to relax when I watch television and I don't want to do much other than sit back and enjoy the experience. I listen to radio while traveling or exercising. When I sit at the computer I want to interact, to search and click and move around the internet. So it's important that the managers of the new organization respect differences and unique talents and skills, and not only pursue the important synergies that will result. I should also say, however, that it is important for professionals to accept that there will be new opportunities for creativity, for learning and producing and making programs in the merged organization. It will take time, effort and practice to realize all the benefits and to solve the inevitable problems, but I am sure it will be worth the cost and complications involved with making the transition.

And then regarding the general comments, I would like to conclude with brief discussion of four aspects that will together determine whether this plan, or any plan, works in practice. These aspects are political will, popular support, management competence, and organizational work cultures.

As we all know from experience and observing every democracy in action, political will is often hard to muster and usually difficult to sustain. If the political establishment in Latvia supports the need for public service media here, and has the will to follow through on this proposal – even if stipulating modifications where necessary – then there is reason to expect a successful result. But if political will is lacking, or if partisan politics are more important to many politicians than their responsibility to serve the public interest, then I daresay this has limited chances for success.

At the same time, however, I would also note that the key task is not primarily political in the sense of securing the support of political parties and their representatives. Obviously that is important, vital in fact because we are discussing a proposal for policy. But at the end of the day, it is the general public that decides what will and won't happen. In a democracy citizens cast votes that elect politicians, and they pay the taxes that cover the costs for everything. A key task and success factor is creating that clear, compelling and convincing rationale for and among the people of Latvia. They will decide whether the new public service media organization is worth paying for and worthy of their attention and use. When designing proposals

and making plans we all tend to take a rather mechanistic and technocratic approach. That is the only way to cover all the complexities in an efficient manner, and to ensure that we've truly considered what is possible and how it would need to be done. But that is not the platform for mustering popular support and building a consensus among people. For that a vision must be articulated – an aspiration must be communicated in a way that inspires a desire to see it come true and the confidence to support its enactment in practice. This will require leadership more than management. It will take time to change popular perceptions, as well. This will not happen mainly because the way PSB is described sounds better. It will depend on the experiences that people have with the new organization and its programs. It will depend a lot on how this new organization handles crises. Will the management stand up to politicians that want to interfere with content or operations? Whose side will the company be on when there is a conflict? Will it stand for the people against power, or accommodate power mainly?

Third, I would note that the devil is in the details, as we say. There is a lot in this package. As we all know from lived experience, much of what we plan and envision never comes true. Military strategists frequently quote General Helmuth von Motke from the 19th century, who said, "No plan survives the battle field." Provided that there is sufficient political will and popular support, then the final and significant factor that will determine the degree of success hinges on the adaptability, determination and competence of the managers who will be put in charge of making this work in practice. Choose well and popular support and political will can be strengthened – the practice

can produce more even than this proposal envisions. Choose unwisely, for example only because the person is politically attractive or the next in line, and the result can be catastrophic. Popular support can collapse and political will evaporate, perhaps to an extent that would make it all but impossible to even try again sometime later.

Finally, I want to emphasize that the degree to which this plan works in practice will mainly depend on the professionals who make the programs and provide the services. Organizational culture and professional identity are powerful and significant factors. To a very large degree, who we are is determined by the kinds of work we do and how we understand the value of this work. If the professionals working in the new organization challenge themselves to do more and be better, if they are willing to work at changes that are required for a true developmental design to happen, if they are committed to professionalism in the finest sense of that idea – not mainly for my personal benefit and selfish interests, but for the benefit of the people I truly want to serve and the responsibilities I have in this work, then there is every reason to expect a highly successful result in 5 to 10 years. It won't always be easy, it won't always be fun, and it will sometimes be painful and difficult. But in the end I believe it will be a satisfying accomplishment and a fruitful experience.

Let me conclude with again in thanking you for the invitation to participate and this opportunity to contribute. I truly wish you all success with this initiative, and I am eager to support this good work.

Thank you.