



## REPORT ON ANEM PRESS CONFERENCE “Media Strategy – What’s Next?”

The press conference titled “Media Strategy – What’s Next?” was held on October 6 in Belgrade Media Center, in organization of ANEM. Speakers at the press conference were the representatives of six media and journalists’ associations who discussed the issue of adoption of the Media Strategy at the session of the Government of the Republic of Serbia held on September 28, 2011. Its adoption was preceded by the long process in which media and journalists’ associations had an important role, namely the associations that composed the media coalition (ANEM, NUNS, UNS, NDNV and Local Press) and the Association of Media. These associations also had the representatives in the seven-member expert working group of the Ministry of Culture, Media and Information Society, that had created, in the beginning of June 2011, the text of the Draft Strategy, subject to a public debate that followed until July 15, 2011. After the debate was concluded, the Ministry’s Sector for media completed its text of the Proposal of the Draft Media Strategy during the summer and forwarded it to the new working group, established by the Prime Minister, for final suggestions. This newly formed working group completed its text of the Proposal of the Media Strategy on September 8, 2011, which was, without allowing the public to get acquainted with the contents of this document, forwarded to competent bodies for further opinion, and then, with certain changes, to the Government for adoption.

The aim of organizing this press conference was to inform the public of the positions of six media and journalists’ associations on the adopted Media Strategy and its solutions, as well as of the further steps of these associations regarding the implementation of the Strategy. The conference speakers were: *Sasa Mirkovic* (ANEM President), *Zoran Sekulic* (representative of Association of Media and member of the Prime Minister’s Working group for drafting Proposal of the Media Strategy), *Vukasin Obradovic* (NUNS President), *Ljiljana Smajlovic* (UNS President), *Dinko Gruhonjic* (NDNV President) and *Dejan Miladinovic* (President of the Local Press Managing Board). The conference was attended by a great number of journalists (Hlas Ćudu, FONET, Tanjug, Kurir, AFP, RFE, Vecernje Novosti, Radio Beograd, PG Mreza, BETA, TV Forum), representatives of journalists’ and media associations, Ministry of Culture, Media and Information Society, domestic institutions (Serbian Chamber of Commerce), academic community as well as international organizations, donor community and diplomatic corps (Fond for an Open Society, OSCE, British Embassy, Austrian Embassy, Embassies of Poland, Slovakia, Netherlands, IREX, Civil Rights Defenders, Medienhilfe).

The first to address the present was **Zoran Sekulic**, explaining how the process of preparation of the Strategy looked like after the Prime Minister had established the working group, in which he had participated as the only and mutual representative of media/journalists’ associations. He particularly emphasized solutions of the Strategy Proposal deemed disputable by the media sector, explaining which remarks of media associations had been accepted and which not, as well as which solution, that was included in the adopted text of the Strategy, was completely unacceptable by the media sector – establishment of regional public broadcasting services – and why. He emphasized that the adopted Strategy, although not ideal, contained certain important achievements for the development of the media sector, which were primarily related to: withdrawal of the state from ownership in the media within deadlines envisaged in the Action Plan; obligation of the state to stop with direct financing of the media along with transition to the system of project financing of media content in the public interest (related to the obligation of the Republic of Serbia and incorporated in the Action Plan of the Strategy, to apply provisions of Stabilization and Association Agreement in regard to European standards in the field of

protection of competition and the control of state aid, as of January 1, 2012); the fact that the Serbian media sector, in spite of internal different and sometimes even opposed interests, found itself in a situation to jointly and uniquely advocate the common interests for the entire media sector. He announced that the associations would continue to carefully monitor the further development of the situation and to insist that the legal reform ensuing from this Strategy should begin without any delay regardless of political circumstances.

**Sasa Mirkovic** said that, within the coalition, ANEM was persistent in insisting on the privatization of all media and was opposing the establishment of the regional public broadcasting services. The idea that ANEM was insisting on and continues to do so, is unconditional privatization and creating fair conditions for all media on the market, along with project financing by which the public interest and needs of the citizens at local and regional level would be satisfied. "For us, privatization is a prerequisite condition, as, without it, the market would be compromised and influence of authorities on media co-owned by the state would be deepened, which is unacceptable", Mirkovic said. He then explained reasons for the associations, ANEM in particular, being critical toward the solution related to regional public broadcasting services. The first reason is related to the way of their financing, especially having in mind the trend of decreasing level of collection of fee for existing public broadcasting service. What is also problematical, apart from that, is the question of the method and criteria of choosing the media that would be the carriers of the function of public service in particular regions. He also mentioned that the names of six cities/towns where these broadcasting services would be established were deleted from the text of the Strategy in the last moment, which indicates that the selection of these cities/towns would be subject to a political struggle. Mirkovic emphasized that the associations had reasons to be concerned over the way in which fair conditions on the market would be created for the media and their independency ensured. He emphasized that establishment of regional public broadcasting services would additionally slow and aggravate the privatization process in the future period and have an influence not only on electronic media but that it would permanently shape relations on the whole Serbian media scene.

**Vukasin Obradovic** also elaborated on withdrawal of the state from media ownership and creation of regular conditions on the media market, which were significantly disturbed by direct influence of the state. He emphasized that one of the main associations' requests was related to the termination of the state's share in the media market as of January 1, 2012, and enabling equal conditions to all actors on the media market through the implementation of the Law on State Aid Control. He announced that the media coalition would monitor preparation of the budget for the next year, since the government at all levels, as well as all public companies, ought to end financing the media production through direct subventions, which was also envisaged by the Law on Local Self-Government. Finally, he said that the associations would insist on the state's protection of public interest in ways different to what had been the case until now, namely through project financing of media projects, public calls and transparent criteria of allocation of funds to the media for fulfilling public interest determined by the state.

**Ljiljana Smajlovic** said that she had no trust in good intentions of the Government, believing that the Strategy was adopted in order to make an impression before the EU that the Serbian authorities respected the needs of citizens and journalists. She assessed that the reality was completely different and that the real media strategy of the Government was to control the media and to intimidate journalists. Smajlovic said that the associations would insist on implementation of all changes the Serbian Government had agreed upon with the adoption of the Media Strategy.

**Dinko Gruhonjic** said that the associations had succeeded in convincing the state that it should withdraw from the media ownership, but that the state had abided by the position that six regional public broadcasting services would be established, calling them "a virus" that had been injected into the public information system in Serbia. He questioned their financial sustainability and their influence on fair conditions in the media market, and especially on (un)sustainability of other media in these regions. He also stated that certain minority parties had stepped up with the demand that two new media in the function of public broadcasting service, in addition to foreseen six in Serbia, be located on the territory of

Vojvodina. Gruhonjic also discussed the existing influence of national minorities' councils on the editorial policy of media and demand of the associations that the Strategy define the ways which would guarantee the independence of these media. He emphasized that it was necessary to convey a public discussion on the role of these councils in the administration of the media, which would result in amending the Law on National Councils. He also mentioned that defining the accountability of national councils towards the media would also be related to (de)etatization of media, given that these councils were financed from the state budget, and consequently the media founded by them.

**Dejan Miladinović** elaborated on the grave position of local media and expectations of the media sector from the Strategy in terms of improving their position. According to him, the Strategy is only one step forward in good direction, while the improvements regarding the local media could be expected if the provisions of the Strategy are to be applied soon, primarily those provisions relating, firstly, to withdrawal of the state from ownership in media, secondly, and particularly important for local print media, to ensuring customs and taxation alleviations for printing paper and other printing materials, and thirdly, to budgetary financing of media content, rather than media, through competitions and under equal conditions.

After the panelists' exposals, in the part of the press conference reserved for the questions of journalists and discussion with the attendants, the opinions of other interested parties in development of the media sector were heard. **Rade Veljanovski**, professor at the Faculty of Political Sciences and a member of the first working group for drafting the Media Strategy, said that the Strategy provided for some solutions that were good, but in essence all the questions that were disputable before the beginning of the work on the Strategy remained disputable still, only they were now an integral part of the Strategy. He said that even a glance at the Strategy could only lead to the conclusion that there would be more state media, namely the media that would be under the direct influence of the state and political forces in Serbia, than presently. As particularly problematic issue he emphasized the formation of regional public broadcasting services, their financing and monitoring of their work, as well as the harmonization of the Strategy with some of the important international documents, such as the Council of Europe Recommendation – R (96) 10 on the guarantee of the independence of public broadcasting service and Recommendation R (2000) 23 on the independence of the functioning of regulatory authorities in the broadcasting sector. Representing the OSCE, an organization that has monitored the whole process, **Dragana Solomon** commended associations on their professionalism and unity during the work on the Media Strategy. She asked the representatives of the associations how they would, in their belief, legally solve the problem of six regional public broadcasting services and national councils as the founders of the media, namely, those areas that the Strategy, according to the associations, had ambiguously defined. Responding to this question, **Sasa Mirkovic** said that the associations' efforts would be primarily related to the implementation of provisions relating to state assistance to the media, saying that if those provisions were to be implemented consistently, it was possible that the formation and financing of regional public broadcasting services would be taken into question due to collision of the Strategy solutions with the rules on state aid control. **Zoran Sekulic** added that in the final stage of the work of the working group there were serious debates related to the topic of media privatization deadlines, which were too long and disputable, according to opinion of the media community, but the media sector had managed to succeed in including provision regulating the way of financing the media after January 1, 2012, in the Action Plan, while it was expected that the implementation of this provision, i.e. the fact that some media would lose the state aid, would force the media to enter the process of ownership transformation before the deadlines stipulated by the Action Plan of the Strategy.

*According to media associations' opinion, Media Strategy is not ideal and is not optimal, but at this point is the most of what the media have managed to obtain. As the Strategy is only a framework, the associations will work hard and strive that the new legislation be of the highest quality and in the best interest of the media sector, as well as for the withdrawal of the state from media ownership and implementation of the new rules on state aid to the media be realized as soon as possible.*