Transition from analoque to digital broadcasting: an opportunity for the European politics in the audiovisual and cultural divertity areas

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The European Parliament adopted a resolution based on the own-initiative report drafted by Henri WEBER (PES, FR) on the transition from analogue to digital broadcasting. Parliament felt that that the new audiovisual technologies should, above all, make it possible to deliver media pluralism and broadcast high-quality programmes which would be accessible to an ever-increasing number of citizens. It was essential that the development of the information society as a whole, including audiovisual services, should be socially, regionally, culturally and linguistically balanced and that, to avoid new forms of exclusion, and in particular the 'digital divide', all citizens must be assured of the possibility of taking advantage of the benefits of the information society. Parliament recommended that, to prevent adverse social repercussions, the measures accompanying the switchover must focus primarily on the interoperability of platforms and standards, and thus on the interests of citizens and consumers.

National action plans and specific measures: Parliament made a series of recommendations to Member States regarding specific measures to be adopted at national level, inter alia: the transition should not involve increased costs for the consumer, or any loss of service; efforts must be made to educate the public about digital technologies ('digital literacy'); and particular attention should be paid to access for people with disabilities.

At Union level:Parliament again emphasised the importance ofadapting national education systems to the cultural and social changes brought about by new technologies, convergence and digitisation. It also spoke of the importance of harmonising copyright in order to combat piracy, which is facilitated by digital technology. In view of the social and political impact of programme content, action should be taken to ensure:

- media pluralism by means of legislation at European and national level to guarantee that freedom of information and freedom of expression are upheld, together with the independence and editorial freedom of the media vis-à-vis those wielding political and economic power,

- an adequate level of competition and diversification of media ownership and strict separation between the political authorities and the interests of media and electronic communications groups.

The Commission was asked to launch a debate at European level on pluralism and the concentration of media ownership, with a Green Paper on the subject.

Furthermore, it is the Commission's task to support the Member States in the event of public-sector intervention, by clarifying the conditions under which public-sector intervention is compatible with EC competition law. However, any such public intervention must not distort competition, be discriminatory or place individual market players in a privileged position.

Parliament pointed out that public-service broadcasting had an obligation to ensure access for all. This remit will become increasingly difficult owing to the fragmentation of distribution networks and methods of access. The provisions on preferential access to distribution networks for services which have a universal access obligation and, in particular, the 'must carry' rules must therefore continue to play an important role after the transition, and contribute to media pluralism.

Public audiovisual services:Parliament stressed that, without appropriate funding, public service broadcasters competing with large groups - particularly telecommunications groups - entering the audiovisual market would not be able to remain strong and independent and continue to attract audiences, or generate sufficient resources to fulfil their remit. Placing a strong and independent public service broadcasting system in jeopardy involves risks to pluralism, freedom of expression, cultural diversity, access to audiovisual services and democracy itself.