Towards a European policy on radio spectrum

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PURPOSE: to present the EU's priorities on radio spectrum availability.

BACKGROUND: current radio and TV broadcasting frequencies have been co-ordinated through the "Regional Agreement for the European Broadcasting Area", which was agreed upon in Stockholm, 1961. In 2004, the Telecommunications Union (ITU) set up the Regional Radiocommunication Conference (RRC) in order to plan new terrestrial digital broadcasting frequencies to coincide with the switch over to new terrestrial digital broadcasting frequencies (174-230 MHz and 470-862 MHz). The new plan will apply to Europe (including the Russian Federation), Africa and parts of the Middle East. Ultimately, it will replace the 1961 Stockholm plan.

When analogue TV broadcasting is switched to digital transmission (same image resolution and size, same number of channels etc.), then three to six times less radio spectrum will be needed. This means that some 300 to 375 MHz of the current amount allocated to terrestrial broadcasting could be freed up for other use. At the end of the switchover process a considerable amount of "unused" spectrum will become available, referred to as the "spectrum dividend".

CONTENT: in this Communication, the Commission considers what the EU's approach towards the spectrum dividend should be and how it should present this approach at the RRC-06. It seems increasingly likely that the switch-off date for analogue TV broadcasting will be 2012. The Commission is, therefore, seeking a debate now on how to make the best use of the spectrum dividend. In order to address these issues, the Communication addresses the following:

1) A European perspective on the future use of the spectrum dividend: The Commission calls on the Member States to launch a debate on how best to use the spectrum dividend. The debate must take account of proposals from the Radio Spectrum Policy Group (RSPG) and the need to secure the single market for equipment and services.

2) A consistent regulatory approach to the spectrum dividend: The Commission, together with the Member States, should ensure that the regulatory treatment to be given to the spectrum dividend complies with the EU framework for electronic communication services. It calls on the Member States to apply this consistently across the EU.

3)The advantages of securing EU- wide harmonisation for parts of the dividend: The Communication states that part of the spectrum dividend should be earmarked for EU-wide harmonisation. According to the report it is, as yet, too early to predict or specify the exact amount needed. Nor is it possible, at this stage, to predict which services should be operated in the harmonised band. However, it is important to begin the process of debate and reflection across the EU now. The Commission, together with the Member States, should begin by:

- assessing the benefits, and the feasibility, of harmonising some of the frequency bands of the spectrum dividend;
- analysing the key characteristics of such harmonised bands; and
- developing a common strategy to support the objective of a harmonised dividend.

4) The need for a future-proof approach to RRC band planning: The Commission wishes to see future RRC planning offering sufficient technical flexibility to cope with a wide variety of future broadcasting services and to allow for the alternative use of the same spectrum by other technologies and services. It, therefore, calls on the Member States to perform a review of the technical bases of the RRC planning in order to identify unnecessary restrictive requirements, which could otherwise undermine the principles of flexibility and technology neutrality.

5) Supporting a short transition period: The Commission calls on the Member States to adopt a common position in the RRC negotiations in order to ensure that the end of the transition period, namely the end of the general legal protection of analogue channels, will take place a the earliest proposed date – as close as possible to 2012.

The Commission concludes by stating that the switch over to digital broadcasting is as much a political issue as it is a technical one. Technical decisions taken at RRC-06 will undoubtedly influence the transition process towards digital broadcasting. The Commission, therefore, calls on the Member States to maximise their "negotiating" weight by adopting common positions and common negotiating strategies whenever possible. The Commission calls for the political support of the Council and of the European Parliament to achieve the goals set out in this Communication.