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SEEMO Interview with Radka Betcheva



► [Radka Betcheva CV](#)

SEEMO: The European Broadcasting Union (EBU) is well known in Europe. Not only between journalists and media, but also most “ordinary” people know EBU thanks to the Eurovision Song Contest. Can you please present what is EBU doing.

The EBU is indeed best known among the public for the Eurovision Song Contest (ESC), which is viewed by around 180 million people worldwide every year. This year, despite the live Contest being cancelled, a replacement programme Shine a Light was still watched by over 73 million people.

However, the European Broadcasting Union (EBU) is much more than the ESC. The EBU is the world's foremost alliance of Public Service Media (PSM). We have 116 Member organisations in 56 countries in Europe and an additional 34 Associates in Asia, Africa, Australasia and the Americas.

Our Members operate nearly 2000 TV and radio channels alongside numerous online platforms. Together, they reach audiences of more than one billion people around the world, broadcasting in more than 160 languages.

We believe strong PSM is at the heart of democratic societies and are committed to championing and upholding its unique value at both a national and international level.

We do this by:

- Helping our Members deliver the best content
- Defending PSM's interests
- Championing the impact PSM has on society and
- Supporting our Members' digital, organizational and cultural transformation

We provide services to Members in key areas such as content, advocacy, knowledge exchange, training, networking and facilitating alliances.

The EBU engages with national authorities such as parliaments, governments and regulatory authorities to ensure the development and adoption of appropriate legal and financial frameworks for PSM. We work closely with different partners and international organizations (like yours – SEEMO) – EU, OSCE, Council of Europe, EFJ, IFJ, and others.

Ultimately, our mission is to make PSM indispensable.

SEEMO: Why is public broadcasting important? Why we need public service media ?

Because PSM is crucial for our societies and for our democracy.

PSM provides a platform for a democratic discourse, informs citizens, provides a pluralism of opinions and points of view, engages people in the decision-making process, and aids social cohesion, tolerance and solidarity.

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PSM serves everyone in the society and fosters better understanding between communities. It promotes values, national history, culture, traditions, sport, creative industries, talents. It brings the nation together around big cultural, sporting events and creates the sense of belongingness to a common history, culture, values and traditions. We need PSM to strengthen our societies, to become more understanding and tolerant.

This is a service funded by the citizens, serving all citizens and responsible only to them.

Now during the COVID-19 pandemic, PSM all over Europe have proven their indispensable role in society. EBU research shows a significant increase in audiences for PSM. People turned to their national broadcasters in record numbers to seek credible and trustworthy news and information. Many PSM in Europe have provided TV schooling and education for children. And in many countries PSM have been the only providers of culture during the crisis – offering theatre, opera, ballet, concerts etc.

PSM plays an indispensable role for democracy. In contrast to the commercial media which work for profit and often serve different and hidden agendas, PSM works for the citizens. If private media cannot publish a story which would make them lose advertising, PSM should bring the topic for discussion because it is of public interest. PSM give different voices, use different sources, and promote pluralism. This is vital for our democracies, especially in a period when we see a threatening rise of populism and authoritarianism.

It doesn't mean that PSM always get it right but it's a concept that we all strive to achieve.

I am very passionate about PSM. My mother worked her whole life in Bulgarian National Radio. She was an engineer who designed the studios for BNR. Her picture with the team is in the Museum of Bulgarian Radio.

When I look back at my childhood, when I was playing with the microphones in the BNR studios while my mom was working, I think that there is so much history, culture, richness, creative work and ambition for perfection in this institution. If the walls could talk – they would tell stories... Radio and Television have been the cradle of culture, music, creativity, talents... They are amazing institutions.

When Chernobyl happened – it was the Bulgarian National Television which revealed to people in Bulgaria what happened and advised them how to protect themselves after a few days of total silence. This is the real mission of PSM – to serve the people even if this might be against the will of those in power.

SEEMO. But public service media are very expensive, especially in crisis like with Covid19 many people are asking why should we pay money for TV and radio, if we can have it free of charge thanks to private / commercial channels. What is your comment?

We should not look at PSM as an expense, but as an investment in our society and in our democracy. Who will take care of the weak and the marginalized groups if not PSM? Now during the COVID-19 crisis – it was the PSM who reached out to minorities and explained to them how they should protect themselves and others in their own languages. Only PSM has the capacity to reach out to all members of society and provide them with relevant content. Diversity and pluralism are core values of PSM.

Now during the crisis PSM gained a record number of viewers and listeners. Why? Because, people were looking for credible and trusted information, not for sensationalism. People were looking for education for their children. They wanted to feel part of a wider community and not so alone. And they wanted to be entertained while in lockdown. Excellence is another core value of PSM and it would be hard to match in recent months.

SEEMO: What are the main problems of public service media in South, East and Central Europe?

The main problems of PSM in South, East and Central Europe are the real transformation from state media into a genuine PSM, the funding and the independence.

Many public broadcasters have still not accomplished their transformation from state media to PSM. They have been defined as public service media in the legal frameworks, but in reality, they are still struggling to become a genuine service to the citizens. Even the language used in day-to-day life shows that politicians and ordinary people confuse state media and PSM, still calling PSM state media.

We should make a clear distinction between state media and PSM. State media are funded by the state, work for the State and responsible to the State. Public service media are funded by citizens, work for citizens and are responsible only to the citizens. We should support this transformation, since good, professional and credible PSM helps society and supports democracy.

The second major problem is funding. PSM are often victims of inadequate funding, restrictions and unproportionate budget cuts. PSM operate in a certain economic environment and it is, of course, normal that if there are financial challenges in the country PSM will take their share of responsibility. However, PSM budget reductions should be proportionate and should not affect PSM's ability to deliver on their mission. PSM have a broad and important remit in society and should be able to fulfil it. Reductions of budgets and legal amendments should be done in close consultation with the broadcasters and in the context of their remit.

The third big challenge to PSM is independence. PSM need to have institutional and editorial independence in order to gain and maintain the trust of the audience. Only PSM which are able to report freely, to reveal misdeeds, to scrutinize those in power and to discuss controversial issues are able to build credibility in society. For this, PSM need independent editorial policy.

People should know that PSM is at their service where they could find unbiased information, pluralism of opinions, an objective picture of what is happening in their society. Unfortunately, we often see threats on PSM's editorial independence and it is not always easy for PSM in young democracies to defend their independence and to resist external pressure which can come in many different forms – economic, political, legal etc.

At the EBU, we support our Members in defending their institutional and editorial independence and help ensure sufficient safeguards are in the legal frameworks to protect the broadcasters. But implementation of these legal frameworks in practice is a challenge so we all have a responsibility to keep up the pressure.

SEEMO: A big problem is a strong political influence on public service media. Very often a new government means also a new general director. Or we have general directors who are good with all politicians, and are supporting whoever is in power, so public radio and TV is not representing interest of all citizens. How to change it?

There are a few ways to change this. The first one is to ensure sufficient safeguards for independence in the PSM legal frameworks. We often see grey areas in the legal frameworks, which could be abused to pave the way for undue political interference.

There are clear European standards on PSM independence. Council of Europe Recommendations on PSM independence and PSM governance provide clear guidance to national lawmakers on how to safeguard PSM institutional and editorial independence.

The EBU adopted six core values in 2012 in Strasbourg and one of which is independence. A peer to peer system has been launched in the EBU to ensure implementation of the PSM values in practice. The EBU provides legal advice and expertise.

The Council of Europe also provides legal expert opinions on draft laws and proposed amendments. However, laws are often not properly implemented and observed. We often see blunt violation of the letter of the Law, or changes of Laws overnight, or no proper public consultations, or not consulting even the PSM. This is an area where still a lot of work and perseverance are needed.

Many of PSM's legal frameworks are introducing governing bodies who should ensure distance from politics and should serve as a buffer between politics and PSM. These governing bodies are entrusted with the election of the top management of PSM. However, the real depoliticization of these bodies is a challenge. I believe that efforts here should be focused first at improving the legal frameworks and secondly ensuring their proper implementation in practice. This is a process, but we should be insistent and perseverant.

I believe that national authorities, PSM, parliaments, governments, civil sector and the international community should support the process of proper definition and implementation of PSM legal frameworks.

Another approach to fight for PSM institutional independence is to work with the professionals within PSM and with the new generation, to make them aware and familiar with the European standards and best PSM practices. In this way we could create a critical mass of professionals which will be sensitive to human rights and freedoms and will react from within the organization when there is a challenge to independence.

The third way is to continue media literacy programmes and raise awareness within society and among politicians about what PSM is, why it is important for society, and how it contributes to society and democracy. The EBU has a special project "Contribution to Society" where a lot of data is collected on how PSM supports the creative industries and societies.

We should also engage more with the EU institutions – European Commission and the European Parliament. I believe that the EP as the highest political body in Europe could be crucial in explaining the importance and relevance of PSM for society and democracy and to defend independent and professional PSM as an important democratic institution.

SEEMO. For SEEMO is the work of investigative journalists very important. Several investigative journalists working for public broadcasters in the SEEMO region got for example the annual CEI SEEMO investigative journalism award. What is EBU doing to improve the investigative reporting in public RTV in the SEEMO region?

Investigative journalism is key part of the remit of public service media. We strongly encourage our Members to develop and practice investigative journalism. PSM are in the best position to offer such programmes to the citizens, since they do not have hidden agendas and they are not dependent on different centres of power.

We have an EBU Investigative Reporting Network, which connects investigative journalists from our Members to exchange information and learning.

We also support Members through the EBU Partnership Programme to develop skills in investigative journalism. We use EC funded projects, for example, the EC funded project for Technical Assistance to PSM in the Western Balkans. One of the key areas of the project is investigative journalism and a lot of capacity building and exchange of practices and information has been done in the framework of the project. We have strongly supported the establishment of the investigative reporting editorial office at the public broadcaster in Montenegro RTCG.

Investigative journalism is an area which deserves special attention since this is really an area where PSM could show their distinctiveness, relevance, independence and excellence.

SEEMO: The South East Europe Media Organisation has a long year and good cooperation with EBU. EBU was several times SEEMO partner, starting from our joint conference 2008 in Ljubljana. EBU has several times as partner supported the annual South East Europe Media Forum (SEEMF) like last year in Zagreb, but also EBU is supporting SEEMF 2020. How can SEEMO help EBU?

We have established excellent cooperation over the years. I think that it is very important to continue this cooperation and consolidate our efforts to strengthen PSM in South, East and Central Europe.

It is of crucial importance to be unified and speak in one voice when we see threats to journalists, or threats to independence of media and in particular public service media. We are stronger when we are together, and our message is stronger when we speak in one voice. SEEMO has supported many EBU campaigns when we are concerned about PSM funding or independence. I believe that we should continue to react on such cases and be loud in defending freedom of media and freedom of expression.

I also believe that joining forces in providing platforms for discussion of challenges to PSM, and media in general and looking for new approaches, models, solutions could only support the development of media. We should be innovative and explore all possible ways and tools to push for more professional, more independent and more adequately funded PSM and media in general.

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