[BG] First Private Television with National Coverage Licensed

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More than ten years after the fall of the Berlin wall, Bulgaria is about to get its first private television channel with nation-wide coverage. The licensed operator of this channel will be Balkan News Corporation, a company financed by Rupert Murdoch. The new television station will broadcast on the frequency of Efir 2, currently the state television's second channel.

According to Bulgarian law, broadcasters have to apply for two different licenses. The so-called program license, is issued by the National Council on Radio and Television (NCRT), an independent body of experts. The second one, known as the telecommunications license, is allotted by a government body - the State Telecommunications Commission - following a formal decision of the Council of Ministers.

The state-owned Bulgarian National Television with its two channels has so far been the only television with nation-wide coverage. Its near-monopoly position in the marketplace of ideas and of advertising in Bulgaria has been the subject of numerous public discussions over the years. Plans for licensing a private station with national coverage have also been discussed but were never realized.

On 30 July 1999, the government formally decided to issue a license "for building, maintenance and use of a telecommunications network and for television broadcasting with nation-wide coverage for a period of 15 years". The license was to be awarded through a competition, which was announced by the State Telecommunications Commission on 5 August 1999. The deadline for applications was 30 September 1999.

In early November, NCRT issued program licenses to three of the applicants: Balkan News Corporation (BNC), TV 2 and Media Broadcasting Services. According to Bulgarian press, BNC has been established with a capital of 50,000 leva (DEM 50,000). Shares amounting to 49,999 leva are held by News Bulgarian Corporation, a subsidiary of Murdoch's News Corporation. TV 2 is backed by European Broadcasting Services, a joint venture of SBS Broadcasting and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development. The third company, Media Broadcasting Services, is held by Britain's Logic Invest Financial Services, Sweden's Modern Times Group and Zodiak.

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The State Telecommunications Commission has chosen BNC as the most suitable candidate to be awarded a telecommunications license. According to the 1998 Telecommunications Law, the Council of Ministers still has to approve of this choice by issuing a formal decision. Following this decision, the State Telecommunications Commission will issue the license.

There is still some hope left for the other two contenders. Their program licenses remain valid and the companies might still be able to use them through some other technical means - e.g., via cable or satellite or on another nation-wide frequency should it become available.

Ministerski savet, Reshenie No 559, 30 July 1999, Darzhaven vestnik, 63/1999.

Council of Ministers, Decision No 559, 30 July 1999, State Gazette 63/1999.

Darzhavna komisia po dalekosaobshteniata, Reshenie No 22, 5 August 1999.

State Telecommunications Commission, Decision No 22, 5 August 1999.

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