

[AL] Approval of Digital Strategy Paves the Way for Official Digital Switchover

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On 2 May 2012, the Council of Ministers approved the Strategy for Digital Switchover, which will pave the way for the official start of the switchover to digital broadcasting (see IRIS 2010-6/6). The first version of a strategy for this process appeared in 2005, right after the first digital multiplex emerged on the market. Ever since, there have been several attempts to draft, revise and approve the strategy. This version of the strategy was the work of an ad-hoc committee, composed of the responsible ministries, public service broadcaster, electronic media regulatory authority, representatives of electronic media, etc. The Parliament approved a law that would regulate this sector in 2007 (see IRIS 2007-8/6), which has not been implemented so far. After approval of the Strategy, the head of the National Council of Radio and Television called for the speedy approval of the draft law on Audiovisual Services, currently before Parliament, so that both the Strategy and the new law could begin to be implemented.

Even though the Strategy has only now been approved, the first multiplex started operating in 2004 (see IRIS 2005-7/9), while the second emerged four years later. As a result, the Albanian public is generally familiar with the process, which is advantageous for a smooth switchover. On the other hand, as the consultations on the strategy have showed, the situation of prolonged broadcasting with no regulation has resulted in several challenges regarding switchover. These challenges consist in guaranteeing fair and free competition in the market while guarding investments already made, overseeing that public interest is regarded as being above any business interest, enabling access and fair conditions for local operators, guaranteeing the transition to switchover for the public service broadcaster, along with a guarantee of the fulfillment of the public mission, ensuring sufficient information, know-how and funds for sectors of the public that cannot afford switchover, etc.

The Strategy addresses these issues by outlining the ownership of multiplexes, the modalities for the network and access to local multiplexes, the funding for a public awareness campaign and the subsidy for decoders, the transition costs of the public broadcaster, and licenses of the commercial multiplexes. The aim of the strategy is to set the necessary guidelines for the final switchover to be completed by 2015. For this purpose, an inter-institutional committee has been set up, which will oversee the implementation of the switchover.

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