**Alternatives – Media reforms for media integrity and future of independent journalism**

**Search for alternatives to corrupt media systems in the countries of South East Europe**

**SEE Media Observatory’s final regional conference**

**Novi Sad, 13 June 2016**

**Opening session:** **Future of independent journalism and media in SEE – Importance of emancipatory media policy and citizens perspective**

**Welcome speech by Dubravka Valić Nedeljković,**

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Valued participants of the regional project *“SEE Media Observatory – Building Capacities and Coalitions for Monitoring Media Integrity and Promoting Media Reforms”*, dear guests and friends, welcome to Novi Sad.

This conference concludes four years of hard work in organizing the public sector of ten countries looking at, analyzing and through the actions of the people influencing for the improvement of media integrity.

During the last moments of preparation for this conference where we will examine questions of media integrity from different perspectives, unfortunately, in accordance with common practice in the whole region and as a result of political party changes, the regional public service *Radio Television of Vojvodina* has dismissed their senior editors, management and leading journalists resulting from the recent parliamentary, regional and local elections which took place on 24 April this year. There has been strong support from the professional community including serious reactionary analytical articles. For example, a high profile columnist, Aleksej Kisjuhas from the daily paper *Danas* on 27 May in a footnote wrote “*Radio Television of Vojvodina* has become an example of social development possibilities despite limited resources. A unique paradigm in the way one lagging, superfluous, impoverished, anachronous and along the way bombarded public company, without any respect and a disgusting past can be made respectable. *RTV* has reinvented itself as a shelter, a haven and area of freedom where sensible and respectable people are “just” permitted, without pressure, to creatively and impartially pursue – journalism”.

Continues monitoring has occurred since 2006 and is currently ongoing, by the Novi Sad School of journalism, of the transformation of the publicly centralized *Radio Television Novi Sad* to a public service Vojvodina. They also conduct research for the Media observatory pointing to significant advances which RTV has achieved in the last few years. In the period when young graduate journalists received an opportunity to work with experienced editors and management they created program content which can be most commonly defined as “public interest” in sections 7 and 8 of the public media service law. Specifically they and their editors and management were dismissed, noting unprofessionalism as the reason for their dismissal.

Notable, compared to previous politically induced changes, this time the journalists disagreed and launched a series of public protests and actions under the name of “Podrži *RTV*” (Support *RTV*) deciding to support the integrity of the public service and resisting the political elite. It’s also important to note, the public, not just from Novi Sad but also from Belgrade and other cities and towns from Vojvodina and Serbia, a few thousand of them, showed their support at the protest marches and protest meetings. They have supported *RTV* because they understood the program content is suitable to their communication needs. By definition and in practice, the public created the service and they finance it and in turn have a mandate to evaluate it and be in constant dialogue with their media service and it’s journalists who ‘are’ the media and giving resistance to any pressures particularly from the political and economic elite.

Resignations are requested from the *RTV* executive body, as well as a review of responsibilities of the Council of the Republic Agency for Electronic Media who selected them, despite their own controversial structure. Likewise, that the new *RTV* executive body is elected in a transparent and legal process. Electing highly professional people with an honorable moral reputation who will conduct business in line with the public interest.

Tonight we continue the public protest ‘Podrži *RTV*’ (Support *RTV*) in Novi Sad.

It’s important to point out that many of the questions raised in the current situation with the public service broadcaster in Vojvodina about the role of regulator in (non)protection of integrity of a public service broadcaster was the focus of the Media Observatory project for the past four years. Many of the project team recommendations, based on thorough research, may be a good foundation for creating future media strategies and action plans throughout the region along with initiating public dialogue, which would in turn strengthen media integrity as a requirement for a functioning democratic society. *RTV* is only one significant example which highlights how important these internationally established projects are. Likewise, through a comparative approach they can point to a broader context in which we can point to every individual breach of media integrity, so as to give a clear view in the light of regional and global politics. The outcomes of the collective activist approach along with developed project recommendations, society will be able to influence the creators of public politics in the whole of the region by the diligent use of the law, in line with European standards, providing independence and higher integrity in the media sector.

Welcome to Novi Sad, my wish for us today is to have a critical, sharp, open, reasoned and motivated debate.