



Weekly Briefing

**Bosnia-Herzegovina political briefing:
BHRT pressured by debts faces hard times**
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BHRT pressured by debts faces hard times

Summary

State Radio-television public service BHRT is on the edge of collapse. The cause is the accumulated tax debts they have towards the state which blocked accounts of the company. That blockade was reason why BHRT's workers gathered in their union organized protests. In the meantime, an old controversy has been raised about the purposefulness of the public service and what kind national public broadcasting system of BiH needs or wants in general. Some argued it would be best to demolish a building of BHRT - and that, as such, it would disappear. Some others tried to correct the injustices or at least the inefficiency of the state authorities, the founders of BHRT, with resolutions at lower levels of authorities. Third ones use the opportunity to promise modest financial injections for all three public services in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and one which is not event public service. Story of BHRT's collapse is another story of the heavy burden produced by BiH politics and transferred it to supposedly independent public information sector.

Introduction

At the end of March, workers of the Bosnian Radio and Television (BHRT) organized a protest rally of in the building popularly called the "Gray home", headquarters of two out of the three public services in Bosnia and Herzegovina – state level BHRT and entity level Federation Radio-Television (FRT). Representatives of other union organizations in Sarajevo, as well as few public figures, supported the gathering with their presence¹. The goal of the meeting was the difficult situation in which BHRT found itself after the Tax Office of the Federation of BiH (*Porezna uprava Federacije BiH* - PUFBiH) blocked the BHRT's accounts due to debts. The workers did not receive their March salaries, and the April ones are also questionable. The current difficult situation is the product of accumulated problems that overcome BHRT as a state public service, but also reflect the political status in which BiH finds itself with its public

¹ BHRT workers told the authorities: Our microphones and cameras are not politically colored.
<https://www.klix.ba/vijesti/bih/radnici-bhrt-a-porucili-vlastima-nasi-mikrofoni-i-kamere-nisu-politicki-obojeni/220328058>

services and public policies. The agony of BHRT and its workers has not lasted since March 2022, but began much, much earlier.

RTV fee problem

After the PUFBiH blocked the BHRT account, the BiH Parliamentary Assembly (PA) received a letter from the BHRT Board of Directors (BoD) in which they informed its founder, the BiH PA, about the hopeless situation in which they found themselves and which may lead to the extinction of BHRT².

The debt that BHRT has towards the PUFBiH arose, as they say in the BHRT BoD, because the entity public services - FRT and Radio-Television of Republic of Srpska (RTRS) have been evading share the part of the RTV fee with BHRT. Citizens of both entities are obliged to pay this fee for owning a TV set, and it is the largest source of revenue for public services. The fee is 7.5 KM (around 3.85 euros). BHRT collects fees in the Brčko District (less than 3% of BiH population)³, FRT in the Federation of BiH and RTRS in the RS. This fee, as well as all marketing advertising revenue, should be paid into a single account. The system board consist by members of three BoD's – BHRT, FRT and RTRS, which was never established, is the creditor and executor of the single account. From that account, 25 percent of tax revenues should be allocated to the accounts of the FRT and RTRS. The remaining 50 percent of tax revenue collected throughout BiH should be paid to BHRT⁴. BHRT believes that on this basis RTRS owe them 63 millions of KM (32 million euros)⁵. Without payment of the debt, BHRT cannot settle the debt to the PUFBiH.

The management of BHRT says they are not avoiding to pay this debt, and all it is asking for is the changing debt payment method. In a their dramatic address to BiH PA, BHRT BoD

² Deadlock in BHRT: Is the state public service shutting down? <https://www.klix.ba/vijesti/bezizlazna-situacija-u-bhrt-u-gasi-li-se-drzavni-javni-servis/220323112>

³ Census results: There are 3,531,159 inhabitants in BiH. <https://balkans.aljazeera.net/news/balkan/2016/6/29/bih-danas-rezultati-popisa-iz-2013-godine>

⁴ The workers said that they would not silently watch the downfall of BHRT. <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/bhrt-protest-sarajevo/31774043.html>

⁵ BHRT workers are asking RTRS to pay them 63 million marks of debt as soon as possible. <https://raport.ba/radnici-bhrt-a-traze-da-im-rtrs-sto-brze-isplati-63-miliona-maraka-duga/>

asked representatives of the state, as their founders, to urgently get involved in resolving this great crisis⁶.

It needs to be said that BHRT BoD consists of four members: a Bosniak and a Croat from the entity FBiH, and a Serb and a representative of the Others from the entity RS. The BHRT BoD is elected in a complex procedure which is finally confirmed by the PA BiH in both its houses.

Blow the BHRT up

Among the first publicly expressed reactions to the announcement of the "collapse of BHRT" was that of former Secretary General of the Alliance of Independent Social Democrats (*Savez nezavisnih socijaldemokrata* - SNSD) Rajko Vasić, otherwise known for his often undiplomatic and specific language of expression, which, after all, cost him political career almost 10 years ago⁷. Somewhat forgotten Vasić posted on Twitter: "BHRT - survival or ruin!? Vasić - If you are uncomfortable, I will come to blow it up", Vasić wrote, and the media reported⁸.

This statement by Vasić produced a torrent of reactions, and the representative of Our party (*Naša stranka* - NS) in the BiH PA, Damir Arnaut, filed a criminal charge against Vasić for the act of terrorism and submitted it to the Prosecutor's Office of BiH. Prosecutor's Office of BiH confirmed that charge was also submitted from BHRT management, and both of charges are being considered in procedure⁹.

Somehow in the shadow of Vasić's statement, BHRT workers organized previously mentioned protest. The messages were in short: "the situation is catastrophic, we need a help,

⁶ Deadlock in BHRT: Is the state public service shutting down? <https://www.klix.ba/vijesti/bezizlazna-situacija-u-bhrt-u-gasi-li-se-drzavni-javni-servis/220323112>

⁷ Rajko Vasic resigned, Dodik accepted. <https://6yka.com/novosti/rajko-vasic-podnio-ostavku-dodik-prihvatio>

⁸ Arnaut files criminal charge against Vasic for 'BHRT blasting': this is extremely serious threat. <https://hayat.ba/arnaut-podnio-krivicnu-prijavu-protiv-vasica-zbog-miniranja-bhrt-a-ovo-je-izuzetno-ozbiljna-prijetnja/636404/>

⁹ Two reports in the Prosecutor's Office of BiH: Ready to mine BHRT, Rajko Vasic can be accused of terrorism? <https://faktor.ba/vijest/dvije-prijave-u-tuzilastvu-bih-spreman-minirati-bhrt-rajko-vasic-moze-biti-optuzen-za-terorizam-/158735>

or end is near". The protest demanded the urgent unblocking of BHRT's accounts and a legal solution on the RTV fee payment problem¹⁰.

Entity instead the state

While only the most optimistic ones waited for the BiH PA to meet the demands by BHRT workers and BoD, the reaction came from the lower, entity level of the legislature. Representatives of the House of Representatives (HoR) of the FBiH, Sanela Prašović Gadžo (Alliance for a Better Future – *Savez za bolju budućnost* - SBB) and Irfan Čengić (Social Democratic Party of BiH – *Socijaldemokratska partija BiH* - SDP) proposed at the session of the FBiH Parliament a Resolution on Public Interest in BHRT. The Resolution instructs the PUFBiH to enable uninterrupted work and access to transaction accounts of the BHRT because it is in the public interest for BiH citizens¹¹. Representatives Prašović-Gadžo and Čengić called on the Council of Ministers of BiH and the BiH PA to ensure consistent implementation of the Law on Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) of Bosnia and Herzegovina - BHRT, as well as the Office of the High Representative (OHR) and the international community to fulfill their obligations under the General Framework Agreement for Peace in BiH in the part related to the content of this Resolution, and to provide programs to support the development of BHRT¹².

The FBiH Parliament adopted this Resolution. BHRT workers thanked the parliamentarians¹³. Few days later, PUFBiH unblocked BHRT's accounts, but management said there is not enough money on them to pay the salaries of the workers¹⁴. BHRT Director General Belmin Karamehmedović said that unblocking the accounts does not solve the problem of long-term financing¹⁵.

¹⁰ BHRT workers told the authorities: Our microphones and cameras are not politically colored. <https://www.klix.ba/vijesti/bih/radnici-bhrt-a-porucili-vlastima-nasi-mikrofoni-i-kamere-nisu-politicki-obojeni/220328058>

¹¹ Noon protest: Voice of workers for the salvation of BHRT, the state raised its hands from the public service. <https://www.source.ba/clanak/BiH/601885/dt>

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ BHRT employees have not yet received their salaries: Accounts are blocked, and the state government is ignoring them. <https://www.klix.ba/vijesti/bih/uposlenici-bhrt-a-jos-uvijek-nisu-dobili-plate-racuni-blokirani-a-drzavna-vlast-ignorise/220401043>

¹⁴ The accounts of the Radio and Television of Bosnia and Herzegovina have been unblocked, but there is no money for salaries. <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/bhrt-blokada-racuna-rtrs-ftv-taksa/31788884.html>

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

Help or “help”

From the state level of government, Council of Ministers, it was announced that they will soon vote on granting financial aid to public television broadcasters, to which a little less than seven million should be distributed¹⁶. However, according to the proposal, most of the money would go to the RTRS - 2,265,000 KM (cca 1,150,000 euros), while a million and a half KM (cca 770,000 euros) would go to FRT and BHRT. What is interesting is that same amount of the money – million and half of KM, was also provided for the Radio-Television of Herceg-Bosna (RTV HZHB), which does not have the status of a public service but was founded by lower middle levels of government in the Federation of BiH, cantons with a Croat majority. In any case, this assistance does not solve even close to the problems that BHRT has, but it provides the context of the attitude of the existing policies in BiH towards public services and the media in general.

Conclusion

The public broadcasting system follows state structure of BiH, but its current situation as well as beforementioned distribution of the money to specific parts of it provide an insight into certain ethno-national policies and their intentions. There are three public services - one at the state level (BHRT) and two on entity level (FRT and RTRS). From a logical point of view, in a country with roughly three million inhabitants, one public service would probably be more than enough - someone would argue. But in that case, national policies would have to share spheres of influence in one service. Thus, Serbian politics with the SNSD and its President Milorad Dodik has complete control over RTRS, Bosniak politics led by the Party of Democratic Action (*Stranka demokratske akcije* – SDA) and its President Bakir Izetbegović has its "shares" in the FRT, while the Croatian Democratic Union (*Hrvatska demokratska zajednica* – HDZ), long expelled from the FRT entity broadcaster, has found a strategy in establishing and strengthening RTV HZHB, which helps with public money at all levels. In such a division of power, BHRT as balanced and professional public service focused on the needs of the public, from these three political parties remains, on the end of a day – superfluous.

¹⁶ The Council of Ministers plans to distribute almost seven million KM to public TV broadcasters, including RTV Herceg-Bosna. <https://www.klix.ba/vijesti/drzava-planira-podijeliti-skoro-sedam-miliona-km-javnim-tv-emiterima-na-spisku-i-rtv-herceg-bosne/220331116>

At the same time, BHRT is a symbol of BiH, and at least the party that swears in that state cannot give let it disappear easily.