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Europe/Ex-USSR - Kosovo

Dismissals

Concern about state broadcaster's decision to fire two employees

4 April 2015

Reporters Without Borders condemns a decision by Kosovo's leading state-owned radio and TV broadcaster director-general, to fire newsroom editor Arsim Halili and RTK union president Fadil Hoxha for allegedly posing a "threat" to RTK and causing "serious damage" to its image.

Their dismissals coincided with the start of a parliamentary debate on management problems at RTK.

RTK director-general Mentor Shala fired Halili and Hoxha on 26 March after they denounced cases of censorship and other irregularities on behalf of the RTK union. In recent months, they had also called for RTK to be "returned to the public" and to stop following a political agenda.

"We strongly fear that the sole aim of these two dismissals is to silence criticism of RTK's management and, in particular, criticism of censorship within this public broadcaster," Reporters Without Borders programme director Lucie Morillon said.

"We urge RTK's board of governors to rescind these dismissals. Halili and Hoxha drew attention to censorship and other practices that deserve a thorough investigation, one that could call in to question Mentor Shala's right to continue in his current position. In this light, the grounds he gave for the dismissals seem spurious."

Defending the dismissals, Shala claimed that Hoxha posed "a potential risk of causing serious damage to RTK" and had "repeatedly violated the rules of material and disciplinary responsibility, by failing to fulfil the duties specified in his contract of employment."

He also accused Hoxha of "trying to create a negative impression" of RTK in unauthorized public statements and of "damaging the image of the RTK, which constitutes a grave violation of discipline."

Shala accused Halili of "public attacks in unauthorized statements (...) presenting untruths and causing harm to the image of RTK (...) violating the rules for material and disciplinary responsibility and ignoring written requests from his immediate superior."

Insisting that the two employees had, on the contrary, been trying to repair RTK's damaged image, the union has organised so far several demonstrations to demand their reinstatement.

Their dismissals were announced on the day that parliament was due to begin debating the situation at RTK and the management problems raised by the union, which had asked parliamentarians to insist on a change of direction.

Parliament finally adopted several recommendations on RTK yesterday, including a request to the board of governors to "examine" the dismissal of Halili and Hoxha.

Lack of independence

Kosovo's biggest public broadcaster, RTK has a 10-million-euro annual budget that is voted by parliament. In its 15 years of existence, it has repeatedly avoided covering many of the country's endemic problems including in the first place organized crime, corruption and government mismanagement.

The 400-member RTK union – the public broadcaster’s biggest union – asked parliament to investigate mismanagement at RTK last year after the board of governors released contradictory figures about income and debts, with discrepancies of 3 million to 5 million euros. As a result of this request, Hoxha appeared before parliamentarians.

Halili, who is also the RTK union’s deputy president, was one of a group of 12 deputy editors who publicly criticized RTK’s editor in chief and another deputy editor in early March, accusing them of putting political pressure on their colleagues. The renewal of their contracts last month triggered a wave of protest within RTK, with the result that the board of governments finally rescinded the renewals.

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