

The events that unfolded since the beginning of the year at the Bulgarian National Television (BNT) marked a record in the media's modern history: in under 12 months the state television was consecutively headed by four general directors. Currently, the Electronic Media Council (EMC) is about to elect a fifth one. The events that lead to this situation can chronologically be represented as follows:

16 March 2004 - The mandate of BNT General Director Kiril Gotsev is prematurely terminated by the EMC because of a disputable advertising contract with the Russian advertising company Video International. The official grounds are severe and consistent violations of the Radio and Television Act (RTA) with evidence of violations dating back to 2001 and 2002. Borislav Gerontiev is appointed interim Director General.

14 May 2004 - Prof. Emil Vladkov is elected to the post after a contest for the position.

29 June 2004 - Emil Vladkov files his resignation citing irreconcilable differences with his team.

5 July 2004 - The EMC accepts Vladkov's resignation and reappoints Borislav Gerontiev to the position of interim Director General.

The relationship between this sequence of events can simply be described with the words: vagueness and lack of transparency. In its turn, this resulted in a tension within the BNT and unleashed a serious managerial and structural crisis. It is true that the problems within the state-owned media have been bulging for longer than a decade, but it is also true that most of them were artificially "imported" through the decisions of the regulatory authority.

Even until today, almost seven months after the election of Emil Vladkov, it still remains unclear what criteria governed the supervisors' decision to rank him in the first contest position. Moreover, apart from the EMC chair Margarita Pesheva who openly voiced her support for him, no other council member was willing to share their vote. After Vladkov's resignation, only Lilia Raicheva revealed that during the secret vote she had abstained from supporting all three candidates: Emil Vladkov, Simeon Vassilev and Ivan Takev. By refusing to disclose their vote, the council members also tried to conceal the reasons for voting one way or another. This was yet another occasion where their supposedly independent regulatory decision was overshadowed by external dictate and corporate influence.

It is also of certain importance that the vote for Prof. Vladkov was accompanied by a formal procedural violation: part of his contest documentation was submitted after the application deadline. In addition, Vladkov offered his own candidature for the position as he was able to furnish neither a reference, nor the required evidence of support from any professional organisation. Whereas, in the procedural rules for the contest, the supervisors had stated that references from the profession would be one of the governing assessment criteria.

Even before the final round of the contest on 13 May, some of the BNT employees (in the face of the Chair

Council of the Union of Bulgarian Journalists, the Podkrepa Trade Union Section at the Union of Bulgarian Journalists and the Board of the Tehnika (Техника) voiced their support for Simeon Vassilev. Immediately after the decision of the EMC, some of the news reporters in the state-owned media protested the new appointment publicly. They defined the election of Emil Vladkov as unrealistic and illogical, and their position was later supported by the trade unions in the BNT. The group of the discontent was joined by the programme and financial directorates. Several reasons were provided by those protesting the election Vladkov: the unsubstantiated choice made by the EMC, the participation of Vladkov (as a member of the BNT Board of Directors) in the managerial decisions of the dismissed Director General Gotsev, and the lack of dialogue with his team. In addition, the EMC decision was objected by the Union of Bulgarian Journalists and the Bulgarian Media Coalition.

Unlike their colleagues from the Bulgarian National Radio after the election of Ivan Borislavov as Director General, the employees of the public television preferred to avoid radical forms of protest and to stick to solutions allowed by the Labour Code. On 17 May, a General Assembly meeting of the television was convened, which, two days later, with the votes of two thirds of the proxies, adopted a declaration against the election of Emil Vladkov and requested the resignations of the EMC members. The General Assembly elected a Contact Group to represent the position of the protesters during the meetings with all relevant institutions. The nine group members held a series of meetings with the EMC, the parliamentary groups of the Union of Democratic Forces, the National Movement of Simeon II, the Movement for Rights and Freedoms, and the Parliamentary Media Committee. However, the lack of sufficiently clear-cut grounds prevented the protest at the BNT from gaining the representative power and public support it needed. Part of the protest's effect was also amputated by the fact that some of BNT's most famous faces - the news presenters and the current affairs' programme hosts - preferred to remain passive onlookers of the debate.

Outside the public expressions of the protest, another matter of interest was the situation inside the BNT, together with the public announcements documenting it, which reached the audience. An especially important detail was that Emil Vladkov's first order following the signing of his contract on 15 May, was to dismiss the director of the Current Affairs Department Maria Dimitrova, known to be a supporter of former Director

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General Kiril Gotsev. The very same day, Valia Ahchieva was appointed in her position. The host of the *Otkrito* ("Frankly") programme was later promoted to the post of Programme Director, after Vladkov changed the structure of the BNT. The relevant decision was enforced with the support of Paun Tsonev and Ivan Takev. The change was objected by Boyka Boizunova and Sevda Shishmanova.

According to the newly-introduced scheme, the then independent Information Department was made subordinate to the Programme Department. For this reason, the Newsroom editorial team submitted an official opinion to the Board of Directors of the BNT, objecting the newly introduced changes and their effectiveness. As a result and in violation of the requirements of the RTA, the Labour Code, the Internal Rules and the status of BNT journalists the management of the news was made subordinate to the Programme Director, whereas the editorial teams of the News and Current Affairs Programme Departments were dismissed and replaced. Without the prior drafting of any job descriptions, 400 persons from the news department and topical programmes staff, signed annexes to their contracts and were respectively promoted or lowered in position according to their attitude to Vladkov and his team. As a result, the personal responsibilities remained unclear. Meanwhile, Simeon Vassilev, the head of the Information Directorate and Vladkov's competitor in the contest, was dismissed.

The pressure exercised by Vladkov and his team against the protesters is not only formally institutional. Immediately after being elected, the Director General of the BNT publicly announced that the news in the BNT under the management of Simeon Vassilev had serviced corporate interests. After that, the BNT Board member Ivan Takev called the protesting employees "a handful of Simeon Vassilev supporters" and, through personal conversations, tried to convince his subordinates to give up on the protest. The contact group members were also subjected to various forms of pressure, whereas the TV management tried to challenge the legitimacy of the held General Assembly.

Meanwhile, orders in the newsroom regarding the release of information about all decisions taken by the Board of Directors were issued "top-down". However, the minutes from the sessions were not presented to the on-duty teams. They received only excerpts from the texts and were unable to make an independent assessment about the importance of the decisions and the points emphasised in them. The newsroom staff did

not receive copies of Vladkov's orders and the Board decisions even when those orders affected them directly. The information reached them only by excerpts or unofficially. This contradicts entirely with Vladkov's statement made during the contest and afterwards of his intention to work in full transparency.

The most revealing fact about the chaos during the newly-elected management is the unprecedented statement by Paun Tsonev, who read in prime time the decision of BNT Board to send the contract signed by Kiril Gotsev regarding the medical servicing of BNT staff in a private clinic to the Prosecutor's Office. What is scandalous here is that the statement was made in violation of media legislation, since it had already been announced in the 8 o'clock evening news, which was on air immediately before that. The only difference between the two texts was the addition made by Paun Tsonev that "...the BNT Board will not allow any other television employees to act on intimate or mercantile grounds..." Obviously, the goal of this act was to settle personal scores and manipulate public opinion in a particular direction. There are other examples also, which show that viewers were receiving partial information about the actual situation in the BNT. For instance, no announcements were made in the news about the meetings of the contact group with the political forces, or about the demonstration of the protesters in front of the BNT, when a horse wearing the sign "Number 10" was brought in. The explanation of the news editor Georgi Mladenov in this respect was that he was looking for balance in the presentation of the information, without breaching the authority of the institution, and he also expressed his reluctance to waste the time of the audience with "backstage problems". In an official declaration, the protesters called him a "censor". However, Mladenov admitted that he was pressed by the management about the release of certain pieces of information regarding the decisions of the Board of Directors and the meetings of Emil Vladkov with the Finance Minister Milen Velchev and Prime Minister Saxe-Coburg Gotha. Paun Tsonev's statement was also released without his permission. The evidence of the management's breaching the independency of the news team is the explanation in writing given by Georgi Mladenov with respect to the TV information, which came on air on 15 June about the opening of the reception of the Bulgarian Music Company for the employees of the BNT. The said report is addressed to Vladkov, the Programming Director Valia Ahchieva and the Board Members.

The chaos in the news department was partly restricted after the decision of the Board from 25 July to "freeze" any further changes in the Information Directorate. However, four days later this was the reason stated by Vladkov for his resignation. He announced then, that he was leaving because he confronted opposition to his ideas by his colleagues in the team.

The EMC accepted Vladkov's resignation, but the public was still not convinced that these were his actual reasons to leave. For sure, his voluntary withdrawal is not the end of the "backstage conflict" in the BNT. It is maybe someone's attempt to reduce to harmlessness the high voltage tensions discharging "on air." ■