

The scandal engulfing German broadcaster RBB and the rot of capitalist society

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The details that have come to light in the course of the scandal at public broadcaster Rundfunk Berlin-Brandenburg (RBB) could provide enough material for a whole TV drama on the subject of “graft, greed and the help-yourself mentality.” Even an imaginative scriptwriter would have trouble making it all up.

There is Patricia Schlesinger, the RBB director-general who has since resigned and been summarily dismissed, who had her basic salary increased by 16 percent to €303,000 in the midst of the pandemic—not including “performance-based compensation” (bonuses) in the mid-five-figure range that 27 of the station’s top earners had secretly approved for achieving savings targets.

Schlesinger’s luxurious lifestyle at the station’s expense also attracted attention: the company car with massage seats and chauffeur for €150,000, the remodelling of the executive floor for €1.4 million and the luxurious dinners to which she invited the city’s VIPs to her house. It is not known what music was playing in the background, but Brecht’s *Threepenny Opera* would certainly have been appropriate.

Schlesinger’s guests included Berlin police chief Barbara Slowik, who was treated to Peruvian-style winter cod, braised lamb from the Eifel region, mango mousse, pear tart and confit plums. The head of the Charité University Hospital, Heyo Kroemer, was also invited. Schlesinger billed RBB for the costs afterwards.

She justified this without any shame, saying that it was a matter of “background discussions with disseminators” with the aim of “supplementing the RBB network.” There is no clearer way to sum up the network of swindling and collusion between public officials behind the scenes.

Then there is the 78-year-old real estate entrepreneur who has “Wolf” twice in his name, has the best connections in Berlin business and political circles and pulls all the strings. Wolf-Dieter Wolf, who rose to become a millionaire many times over in West Berlin’s notoriously corrupt real estate sector, had been a member of RBB’s board of directors, which is responsible for controlling the management, since 2003, and chairman since 2013.

In this capacity, Wolf is said to have largely singlehandedly determined the salary of Schlesinger and other top earners at the broadcaster. At the same time, he pulled strings to help Schlesinger’s husband and other beneficiaries earn lucrative incomes.

After all, Wolf was also chairman of the supervisory board of the Messe Berlin exhibition grounds, president of the Berlin Basketball Association, president of a golf course in Bad Saarow, a board member of other sports clubs, a member of the supervisory board of Berliner Bäder-Betriebe baths operator, a member of the Friends of the Berlin Opera and the Berlin State Ballet, and a recipient of the Federal Cross of Merit and the Order of Merit of the State of Berlin.

As a real estate entrepreneur, Wolf was involved in numerous projects that were supported and subsidised by the state. In the 2000s, for example, the Senate (Berlin state executive) guaranteed him the rental income for the Adlershofer Tor building project for five years. Since the business centre was mostly empty, the state of Berlin suffered a loss of €6.8 million as a result.

Schlesinger’s husband Gerhard Spörl, formerly a journalist at *Die Zeit* and *Der Spiegel*, received consultancy contracts worth around €140,000 from the Berliner Messe when Wolf was chairman of the supervisory board there. Other figures close to Wolf earned a lot of money as advisers to RBB on the planned construction of a new digital media building, the estimated cost of which has since doubled to €184 million.

Finally, there is the chairwoman of the Broadcasting Council, RBB’s second supervisory body responsible for overseeing programming and appointing the director-general. The theologian Friederike von Kirchbach was delegated to the body by the Protestant Church in 2007 and had headed it since 2013. She too had close personal ties to the old boys’ networks at the top of the broadcaster. In her capacity as a pastor, she had officiated the marriage of RBB’s personnel manager Sylvie Deléglise and legal director Susann Lange in church. In the meantime, von Kirchbach has also resigned from her position at RBB.

Different reactions

The scandal at RBB has triggered a wide variety of reactions.

Among the broadcaster’s 3,500 permanent and freelance employees, there is outrage and fury. Many have been fighting for years against austerity measures that make work hell and achieving good results increasingly difficult. The station’s freelancers have been fighting for more money for months, others are protesting against the severe austerity measures and the cancellation of programmes in the early evening schedule.

Anyone who knows RBB from the inside knows that the culture of you-scratch-my-back-I’ll-scratch-yours reaches deep down. When RBB was created in 2003 through the merger of the West German Sender Freie Berlin (SFB) and the East German Ostdeutschen Rundfunk Brandenburg (ORB), a few full-time employees were well provided for to ensure a loyal following for the management. In return, there was a hiring freeze for years. Much of the work was done by freelancers who were given no or short-term contracts. Many had to sue for years to gain at least some job security.

Many license fee payers are also angry. The monthly broadcasting fee of €18.36, which all households in Germany must pay, is a considerable burden for low-income earners. The fact that the €8.4 billion collected in this way in 2021 are being extravagantly squandered is meeting with corresponding outrage.

The other broadcasters which are part of the ARD network are trying to distance themselves as far as possible from RBB. In an unprecedented move, they expressed their lack of confidence in the management of RBB on Saturday. “We, the directors of the ARD, no longer have confidence that the executive management of the broadcaster will succeed in working through the various incidents quickly enough,” announced WDR director Tom Buhrow, who took over the ARD chairmanship after Schlesinger resigned.

Buhrow has every reason to take cover. The fact that he himself has a company car with massage seats, as he meekly admitted, could still be dismissed as a trifle. His salary of €413,000 is considerably higher than that of Patricia Schlesinger. Even the Chancellor earns considerably less, with a basic salary of €242,000, rising to €362,000 including allowances.

Among the directors of the nine ARD stations, Schlesinger was only in fifth place with her basic salary of €303,000. As far as we know, there are no bonuses at the other broadcasters, but there are other sources of income. For example, many directors and managers hold supervisory board positions at subsidiaries. How much they receive for this has not yet been disclosed, neither has it at RBB nor at other broadcasters.

Opponents of publicly-funded media see a new chance to finally get rid of the system. “The scandal is not the excesses of the system, the scandal is the system itself,” writes Eric Gujer, editor-in-chief of the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, who always supports the most right-wing political viewpoints in Germany. The far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) also argues along these lines.

The Business Insider website, which uncovered the scandal at RBB, is 97 percent owned by the Springer Group, one of the most powerful private media empires. The remaining 3 percent is owned by Amazon founder Jeff Bezos.

Compared to Springer, the corrupt networks at RBB appear rather modest. Social Democratic Chancellor Gerhard Schröder once casually announced: “All I need to govern is *Bild*, *Bams* and the tube”—referring to Springer’s *Bild* tabloid, its Sunday edition *Bild am Sonntag* and the television. German Chancellor Angela Merkel was close friends with the publisher’s heiress, Friede Springer. And in 2008, *Bild* editor-in-chief Kai Diekmann served as best man to former German Chancellor Helmut Kohl at his second marriage, together with media tycoon Leo Kirch.

Public and private media

In the final analysis, the RBB scandal and the extent of the graft and corruption it has brought to light can only be understood in a wider social context. For a long time, public broadcasters were considered a more serious and reputable alternative to private television, which was only allowed in Germany after a constitutional court ruling in 1981.

Private stations such as RTL were deliberately used as part of the so-called “spiritual-moral renewal” proclaimed by Chancellor Helmut Kohl (Christian Democratic Union, CDU) to lower cultural standards and promote reactionary currents. “Our policy with regard to RTL has always been to ensure that RTL is linked to the conservative camp or to prevent it from sliding to the left,” wrote Christian Social Union (CSU) Secretary General Edmund Stoiber to his party leader Franz Josef Strauss in 1988.

However, the “independence” of the public broadcasters has always been a fiction. They have always been kept on a short leash by the state governments and the establishment parties through bodies such as the Broadcasting Council. Critical reporting and viewpoints were only possible up to a certain point. Nevertheless, critical journalists

always managed to gain a certain amount of freedom and enjoyed much support.

This has fundamentally changed in recent decades. The social polarisation of society, the concentration of wealth and assets in the hands of the richest 10 percent and the closing of ranks of the establishment parties, whose policies hardly differ from each other anymore, is also making itself felt in the newsrooms at public broadcasters.

Critical voices have largely fallen silent. Journalists who do not come to terms with this hardly stand a chance any longer. The major news programmes, such as “*Tagesthemen*” and “*heute journal*,” have degenerated into propaganda broadcasts that spread the government’s warmongering and hide unwanted news—such as the imperialist war crimes in Yemen, Iraq, Africa and elsewhere.

The younger generation, in particular, has long since given up informing itself through public broadcast television. Hence the hysterical campaign to control and censor social media and the banning of pro-Russian media like RT and Sputnik from cable and the internet. Viewers are to be deprived of any possibility to form their own critical judgement.

Patricia Schlesinger personifies the transformation that has taken place in wealthy sections of the middle class. From 1997 to 2001, she was the presenter of the television magazine “*Panorama*,” which repeatedly offended the ruling class because of its critical stance. Today, she has become a symbol of graft and avarice. Nothing remains of her former socially critical stance; instead, envy of those who are even richer and earn not hundreds of thousands but millions of euros a year prevails.

The Greens have undergone the same transformation, becoming the leading party of German militarism, which panics in fright at any social movement from below.

The revival of critical, culturally elevated media is inseparable from the development of an independent movement of the working class against the bankrupt capitalist system, which only produces social and cultural decline, war, and dictatorship.

The *World Socialist Web Site* points the way there. Although it has only a tiny fraction of the financial resources of the public and commercial media, it is able to deliver high quality and critical journalism that is second to none in many areas—the pandemic, the international class struggle, the causes and background of the Ukrainian war.

It relies on the cooperation of socialists around the world who share a common goal—to arm the working masses with a historical understanding of the capitalist crisis and their own tasks, i.e., with a socialist perspective.

Anyone disgusted by the RBB scandal and the political, cultural and moral rot it exposes, and seeks a progressive way out, should read and donate to the *World Socialist Web Site* and join the Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei (Socialist Equality Party).



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