



Building

Trust in

Journalism

- Czech Republic

Lisa Clifford

BUILDING TRUST IN JOURNALISM – CZECH REPUBLIC

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This policy report provides an overview of the challenges and opportunities that the media are facing in the Czech Republic. Based on desk research and a number of key stakeholder interviews that took place across the media landscape, it finds that the ownership of the most influential news outlets by a handful of billionaire tycoons and politicians including the prime minister has had a chilling effect on journalism in the country. The overall impact of their takeover has been a decline in the credibility and trust of the media among the public and a drop in the Czech Republic's international press freedom rankings. It has also led to fears that journalists could be self-censoring to keep their jobs though the extent to which this is happening is hard to quantify. Czech public television and radio are the most trusted and respected outlets in the country and all stakeholders interviewed said they provide balanced and ethical journalism including investigative stories. However, Czech television in particular is vulnerable as a result of changes to the regulatory body that controls its budget which could threaten its independence. The once vibrant local media sector has been decimated, especially the small newspapers that flourished after the Velvet Revolution, where declining sales and advertising revenues as well as buyouts by media conglomerates have caused ethical dilemmas for journalists forced to navigate reporting on the businessmen who own their media houses. Many local newspapers have closed or amalgamated their newsrooms, leaving an information void in communities and uninformed citizens who lack interest in local issues. The Covid-19 pandemic has exacerbated all the problems outlined in this report, particularly in the regions.

This report draws the following conclusions:

- The Czech media is less free and vibrant than it was five years ago. The buyout of the country's mainstream news media and local outlets by wealthy businessmen and politicians including the prime minister Andrej Babiš has caused the Czech Republic to sink to 40 out of 180 countries in the 2020 Reporters Without Borders World Press Freedom Index, from 16 in 2013.
- Many of the oligarchs bought the media outlets to promote their own political and economic agendas and had little interest in journalism.
- The media owned by the prime minister shows a bias towards the government that may not be apparent to all readers but was noticeable to analysts interviewed for this report.
- Journalists have been placed in a nearly impossible position if they want to work in their chosen profession, as the choice of truly independent outlets is limited. Independent, ethical journalism is therefore compromised as journalists have little choice but to follow the partisan and politicised narratives of their owners.
- Czech television and radio are trusted by around 60% of the population¹, according to surveys by the Reuters Institute. However, the Reuters survey was carried out online only so missed out members of the public who don't use the internet. According to the latest available general survey from August 2020, Czech TV was trusted by 78% of people and Czech Radio by 62%.² Analysts interviewed for this report said the journalism produced by the public broadcasters was among the best in the region, comparable to Germany, for example, despite less money being available in the Czech Republic.
- The media councils that must approve budgets for public television and radio have been taken over, or are being taken over, by members who are hostile to the principles that underpin the free press. If this continues it could mark the end of independent public service media in the Czech Republic.
- The vibrant local media sector born from the collapse of the communist regime in the late 1980s has been almost wiped out. A Czech-Slovak conglomerate bought up almost all the local newspapers, then closed, centralised or downsized newsrooms. This has resulted in a sharp decline in local content, particularly investigations.
- The independent local outlets that remain have been forced to rely on paid for content to stay afloat though it isn't always made clear to readers and viewers that stories are advertising rather than journalism.
- This decline in quality journalism at the local level has resulted in apathy among many readers and viewers who now show little interest in local issues that directly affect their lives.
- The Covid-19 pandemic has accelerated an already difficult financial situation for many outlets, particularly local media houses. Many regional papers are expected to close due to declining sales and advertising revenues.
- Business and political influence over the Czech media may become further entrenched, as tycoons willing to sacrifice profits for influence buy into the struggling sector. This could see trust in the media and the Czech Republic's press freedom rankings fall even further.

1 Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism (2020). The Czech media landscape. [online] Available at: <https://www.digitalnewsreport.org/survey/2020/czech-republic-2020> (Accessed 22 February 2021).

2 Cesky rozhlas (2020). Průzkum: Češi nejvíc důvěřují rozhlasu, pak televizi. [online] Available at: <https://digital.rozhlas.cz/pruzkum-ce-si-nejvic-duveruji-rozhlasu-pak-televizi-8271705> (Accessed 22 February 2021).

METHODOLOGY

The independent evaluation of the Czech media landscape presented in this document is based on research conducted by the Ethical Journalism Network (EJN) between July 2020 and December 2020. It was produced as a part of a project developed in partnership with the Fritt Ord Foundation (SFO) and the Evens Foundation (EF).³ The Building Trust in Journalism project aims to explore the condition and identify the needs of the media community in Hungary, Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Bulgaria in order to better define the challenges of contemporary journalism.

The report is based on a combination of desk research and key stakeholder interviews with media practitioners and experts from across the Czech media landscape. The Covid-19 pandemic meant that all interviews were conducted online, by phone or by email, as travel for in-person meetings was impossible. Fourteen interviews were carried out with journalists, editors, academics and civil society organisations in the Czech Republic. The focus was on assessing the key challenges facing the media with a view to presenting a set of recommendations. The EJN tried to include a broad spectrum of views and opinions from the media sector including staff working for outlets owned by the prime minister.

This paper also draws upon the work of other media scholars and organisations who have examined the media landscape in the Czech Republic including the European Centre for Press and Media Freedom, the Reuters Institute, the Committee to Protect Journalists and Reporters Without Borders. Questions ranged from enquiries into business models, modes of governance, newsroom structures and hierarchies to factors which are impacting on practice and content.

This paper does not claim to be a comprehensive study of the media in the Czech Republic. It is primarily based on expert interviews and a desk study with additional input from Czech stakeholders and experts in a peer review process. The EJN is not an expert on the Czech media. It aims to provide an external perception of the challenges that the media are facing, based on its own journalistic experience and academic vigour.⁴

3 The EJN would like to thank the Centre for Media, Data and Society at the Central European University for its support and direction in the production of this report.

4 All reports and further information can be found on the EJN's website at: <https://ethicaljournalismnetwork.org>

INTRODUCTION

As with many countries in Central Europe, the current situation for media in the Czech Republic began with the 2008 financial crisis when the foreign investors who had piled in since the early 1990s began pulling out.⁵ The local billionaires and entrepreneurs who took their place were motivated by a “combination of civic-mindedness, profit motive, and raw self-interest in using the power of the news organization for their own purposes”.⁶

This included the current prime minister Andrej Babiš who bought the country's biggest media house MA-FRA as well as Radio Impuls. The buyouts had a profound impact on the Czech media landscape and its practitioners.

“In general, most of these new owners have not used their media holdings as a political tool; at worst they have employed them more as a protective shield than an active weapon. But Andrej Babiš is a horse of another colour: he has entered politics, refused to admit any conflict of interest, and despite having been forced in 2017 to (nominally) put his companies in a trust, continues to influence them while presiding over the Czech government.”⁷

Though journalists say the country remains a safe place to work, they face extreme hostility from some politicians including the president Miloš Zeman. Journalists say his threats of violence against reporters, often couched as a joke, have contributed to increasing hostility to the media by the public, both in person and online. “I love journalists, that's why I may organise a special banquet for them this evening at the Saudi embassy,” Zeman once said, alluding to Saudi columnist Jamal Khashoggi's murder at the Saudi consulate in Istanbul.⁸

All stakeholders interviewed for this report said the editorial output of Czech television and radio was excellent – high quality, ethical and unbiased – but were equally worried that politicians like Zeman and Babiš would succeed in further stacking the media councils that govern the public broadcasting entity with loyalists who are willing to curtail press freedom.

Also of major concern to all those who contributed to this research was the decline of local journalism and the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the industry as a whole.

5 The American Interest. When Oligarchs Buy Media: A Central European Tale. [online] Available at: <https://www.the-american-interest.com/2018/11/30/when-oligarchs-buy-media-a-central-european-tale> (Accessed 22 February 2021).

6 Čísařová, Lenka, Waschková (2020) LOCAL MEDIA OWNERS AS SAVIORS IN THE CZECH REPUBLIC. They save money, not journalism. The Routledge Companion to Local Media and Journalism. Routledge 2020. Available at: <https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9781351239943-26> (Accessed 22 February 2021).

7 The American Interest. When Oligarchs Buy Media: A Central European Tale. [online] Available at: <https://www.the-american-interest.com/2018/11/30/when-oligarchs-buy-media-a-central-european-tale> (Accessed 22 February 2021).

8 Reporters Without Borders (2018). Another bad joke about journalists by Czech president. [online] Available at: <https://rsf.org/en/news/another-bad-joke-about-journalists-czech-president> (Accessed 26 February 2020).

PART 1

MEDIA OWNERSHIP IN THE CZECH REPUBLIC

The oligarchs

The predominantly German and Swiss companies that had dominated the media sector since the Velvet Revolution began selling up to local Czech billionaires and entrepreneurs in 2008, a process that was “colloquially labelled as oligarchisation, the process of transferring of news media assets into the hands of powerful local billionaires”.⁹ Journalists watched with concern as wealthy businessmen, with no real interest in media but with a strong desire to influence the affairs of the country, bought into print, broadcast and online outlets.

Among them was Babiš, then a business tycoon, whose company Agrofert bought up a large chunk of the Czech Republic’s most influential news media including its best-known newspapers, Mladá fronta Dnes and Lidové noviny, the most popular website, iDnes.cz, and the biggest privately-owned radio station, Radio Impuls.

Other businessmen buying into the media included Daniel Křetínský, who runs one of the biggest energy conglomerates, and mining entrepreneur Zdeněk Bakala whose media company Economia publishes the magazine Respekt and a daily newspaper, Hospodářské noviny.

The oligarchisation process culminated in October 2019 when the country’s richest person, Petr Kellner, announced he was buying Central European Media Enterprises (CME), which owns 30 TV stations around the region including the Czech channel TV Nova, which has a 35% audience share and 62% of the advertising market.¹⁰

Though media was not their main business and, in some cases, not particularly profitable given the declining readership and advertising revenues, the oligarchs saw great value in their investments. The amount of direct influence they exert varies and in most cases isn’t substantial, according to analysts interviewed for this research, but the threat that they could intervene has cast a shadow over the media community.

‘What you need to know is that they bought their media, these five or six guys, not for profit but for the influence. It’s like the cold war when the USSR and the USA were sitting at the same table, and each of them had the red button and each side knew that if any one of them pushes the button, the other one pushes it too and both of them will be destroyed. And this is the thing we have in Czech Republic. We have five guys with five red buttons, no one wants to trigger it so they do not use it much. But they can. This is the threat.’ – Czech journalist

When he became prime minister, Babiš put Agrofert into a series of trusts to avoid a conflict of interest and insisted he wouldn’t mix his media empire and politics. But analysts – and the European Union¹¹ – say that’s not what happened. “There is no shortage of examples of his interfering in his publications. In January 2014, Babiš had Vladimír Sevela fired from his job as journalist with the daily Dnes after Sevela dared to publish criticism of Agrofert. A few months later, he lectured another journalist with his group who had failed to cover one of ANO’s [Babiš’s party] press conferences.”¹²

For the prime minister, taking control of respected news outlets slowly changed perceptions of him “from a controversial entrepreneur to a respected politician”.¹³ For the media, the change in ownership was also transformative. “The most visible aspect of the prime minister’s influence has been the invisibility of certain stories. Negative stories are on the third or fourth page or not covered at all. There is a clear bias when it comes to Babiš and the affairs of government. There is a clear attempt to promote certain positive stories that benefit the government and at the same time harm the opposition or put the opposition in a negative light.”¹⁴

11 Reuters (2019). Czech PM found in conflict of interest by EU Commission – report. [online] Available at: <https://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-czech-babis/czech-pm-found-in-conflict-of-interest-by-eu-commission-report-idUKKCN1T114N> (Accessed 22 February 2021).

12 Reporters Without Borders (2016). Local oligarch conflicts of interest dominate Czech media. [online] Available at: <https://rsf.org/en/news/local-oligarch-conflicts-interest-dominate-czech-media> (Accessed 22 February 2021).

13 International Press Institute (2020). Opinion: Should we be afraid of Kellner’s takeover of Nova? [online] Available at: <https://ipi.media/opinion-should-we-be-afraid-of-kellners-takeover-of-nova> (Accessed 22 February 2021).

14 EJN Zoom interview with an independent media analyst.

9 Hajek, Roman, Stetka, Vaclav. European University Institute (2020). *Monitoring Media Pluralism in the Digital Era: Application of the Media Pluralism Monitor in the European Union, Albania and Turkey in the years 2018-2019*. Country report: Czech Republic. [online] Available at: https://cadmus.eui.eu/bitstream/handle/1814/67798/czech_republic_results_mpm_2020_cmpf.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y (Accessed 22 February 2021).

10 Freedom House country report (2020). [online] Available at: <https://freedomhouse.org/country/czech-republic/nations-transit/2020> (Accessed 22 February 2021).

A journalist interviewed for this research who works for a Babiš-owned newspaper said he had never felt pressured to support the prime minister or government policies. Moments later, however, he said he was expecting cutbacks at his paper as a result of financial difficulties caused by the Covid-19 pandemic and assumed he'd be the first to go as he'd written articles critical of the government.¹⁵

A media analyst explained how things changed at Babiš publications under the new owner including an increase in self censorship. "He isn't telling his newspapers what to write about but journalists who agreed with his views started to work there and those in charge of the newspapers are enforcing his views. There has also been a move to shorter, less complex articles, less complex journalism basically."

Unwilling to work under the oligarchs, many established journalists left the profession altogether or set up their own outlets. "Shortly after the [Babiš] acquisition [of Mlada fronta Dnes], a few former editors launched small, independent media outlets that—defying the odds and general expectations—still survive today. Some of them have even brought new advertising models to the market, such as the magazine Reporter founded by the former Mladá fronta Dnes editor-in-chief Robert Casensky."¹⁶

Other independent outlets formed in recent years include Deník N, an offshoot of the successful venture of the same name in neighbouring Slovakia, as well as the investigative news websites HlídacíPes, Neolivní and others such as Echo24 and Forum24 led by former editors from the mainstream press. This gives one young investigative journalist a reason for optimism. "As a result of this the influence of mainstream media controlled by tycoons is declining. So, I would say that we have been able to keep freedom of speech and media pluralism."

However, many of these projects tended to be small in scale, with a limited staff doing complex journalism which needs funding. Many are cash strapped and forced to rely on insecure sources of income such as grants, crowd funding and donations. This is a dilemma for journalists looking to make a decent living yet still wanting to maintain their independence. Insiders say there are very few options should they want to remain in the profession.

15 The journalist was fired several weeks after the EJM interview and in a Facebook post cited "pressure from above" on his editor as the reason he lost his job.

16 The American Interest. When Oligarchs Buy Media: A Central European Tale. [online] Available at: <https://www.the-american-interest.com/2018/11/30/when-oligarchs-buy-media-a-central-european-tale> (Accessed 22 February 2021).

'Journalists have little choice. They can work for one oligarch or another. A few can go to the public service media but there are not that many jobs. Journalists are stuck in a vicious circle.' – Former journalist, lecturer, researcher

Public service media

The Czech public broadcasting entity is by far the media most trusted by local audiences¹⁷ and is seen as independent and capable of doing the critical, unbiased journalism that is absent from the oligarch-owned outlets.

Though increasingly susceptible to political influence, Česká televize (television) and Český rozhlas (radio) "perform excellently with a budget much lower than German TV for example", according to one Czech analyst. Public television and radio are funded by an annual license fee which hasn't increased in around 15 years.

The balanced and ethical news output of both of the public broadcasting entities is in sharp contrast to neighbouring Poland where EJM research found public media continues to provide the government with a platform for governing party propaganda and narrative domination in an overall environment where hate speech, xenophobia, racism and the harassment of journalists is becoming more commonplace and accepted by some elites. In Hungary, an EJM report said the public media has become a blatant propaganda tool for the government.

Politicians in the Czech Republic have avoided directly influencing public media – at least so far – but this could be changing as in recent months the government has been stacking the powerful broadcasting councils that govern television and radio with allies who aren't friends of free media. Czech Television is seen as particularly at risk from the new members recently appointed to the Czech Television Council. The council is a body "through which the public exercises its right to control the activities of Czech Television. [The council] consists of 15 members elected and repealed by the Chamber of Deputies. The members are chosen ... to represent major regional, political, social and cultural opinions and ideas. The Council members are elected for a period of six years with two thirds of the members elected each two years."¹⁸

17 Around 60% of those surveyed by the Reuters Institute in an online poll said they trusted public television and radio. Digital News Report Czech Republic (2020). [online] Available at: <https://www.digitalnewsreport.org/survey/2020/czech-republic-2020> (Accessed 22 February 2021).

18 <https://www.ceskatelevize.cz/english/the-czech-television-council>

The three new members elected in 2020 are “linked to political forces in the Czech Republic who are not on friendly terms with Czech TV”.¹⁹ The remaining independents will be replaced with allies of the government this year when six new members are appointed. Council members are not politicians but some have connections to political parties. Insiders say the new members have changed the balance of power on the council and are already voting as a block.

“The worries that the public broadcaster may be under threat spiked in mid-November when the [council] ... dismissed its advisory board: the five-member Supervisory Commission. Disagreeing with the move, the president and vice president of the council promptly resigned. Unlike the council, the commission has access to all documents at CT. It is assumed that evidence is now being gathered that will support accusations that the broadcaster is being run inefficiently or corruptly, a longstanding point of attack against the management.”²⁰

Though the council doesn’t control the editorial direction of the station, members appoint its director and must approve the annual report and budget. Analysts warn that the inevitable consequence of this shift in power is that public service media will become a safer, friendlier space for politicians to spread their messages.

‘There is fear that this will finally tip the balance to the side that wishes to control Czech Television and make it an instrument of, if not government propaganda, then at least stop Czech TV being the voice of independent journalism. Right now, as we speak, there’s an intensifying pressure from the government and certain other political actors, including the president, that that is driven by clearly by the attempt to curtail the independence of Czech Television and to bring it under more direct political control.’

‘If the parliament manages to finalise the process of changing or transforming the media council in the interests of the government and president then I’m afraid that that will be the end of the independence of television.’ – Media analyst

Czech Radio is regulated by its own nine-member council which “are elected and removed by the Chamber of Deputies of the Parliament of the Czech Republic so that important regional, political, social and cultural streams of opinions are represented. Candidates to be elected members of the Council are proposed to the Chamber of Deputies by organisations and associations representing cultural, regional, social, trade-union, employer, religious, educational, scientific, ecological and national interests. Members of the Council are elected for the period of office of 6 years, at the same time one third of members shall be elected every two years.”²¹

Analysts say the radio council is now dominated by people who are either openly pro-government, or who are enablers of those political forces that seek to muzzle critical, independent journalism within Czech Radio. Candidates supported by parties that back the government filled two vacant seats on the council in September 2020. “The tendency towards stifling critical voices at Czech Radio has been apparent for a few years though, as the number of council members who dared to oppose those tendencies has been progressively declining, until there are no such voices anymore. It does not mean that the Czech Radio is now an instrument of government propaganda – things are not nearly as bad (yet) as in Poland or Hungary. However, as a rule, it is much easier now for pro-government and illiberal commentators and other public actors to get a platform on the Czech Radio, and for the government politicians or those supporting the president to get an ‘easy ride’ on their shows.”²² There have also been allegations of censorship at Czech Radio, notably a case in which the station refused to broadcast an award winning documentary on the Czech judiciary that it had commissioned but that had allegedly upset some in government.²³

For now, however, Czech Radio remains a high quality, professional service, particularly its online portal iRozhlas.cz which has won prizes for complex, investigative pieces relating to political corruption and corporate crimes. A journalist working for the website told EJN that, editorially at least, she’s unaware of any political interference. “We provide precise, verifiable and balanced news reporting. Two independent sources of information are required before we publish any news. To maintain independence and impartiality we have internal managing system that restricts any political or other external influences to impact the content of news production.”

19 EJN interview with a media analyst.

20 International Press Institute (2020). In the middle of pandemic, Czech Television risks repeat crisis. [online] Available at: <https://ipi.media/in-the-middle-of-pandemic-czech-television-risks-repeat-crisis> (Accessed 22 February 2021).

21 <https://www.czech.radio/node/8018055>

22 EJN interview for this report.

23 Sykorova, Lucie. The Mathematics of Crime – censored by Czech Radio? [online] Available at: <https://www.mappingmediafreedom.org/2019/05/07/the-mathematics-of-crime-censored-by-czech-radio> (Accessed 22 February 2021).

Local media

'The local media which existed 20 years ago has disappeared. It was completely wiped out.' – Political scientist

The global trend of “declining newspaper circulation, decreasing advertising revenues, increased competition with online media, investment cuts and redundancies” that have impacted on local news organisations in democratic countries around the world has been partly to blame for the collapse of a formerly vibrant local market that boomed after the Velvet Revolution.²⁴

However, experts say that it was the acquisition by the Czech-Slovak conglomerate Penta of 70 local dailies which exacerbated this decline. As Penta closed or amalgamated newsrooms and cut staff, parts of the country were left with so-called ‘blind spots’, places with no independent media coverage of current affairs.²⁵ Investigative journalism was also hit hard, with few in depth stories being produced unless a local reporter could interest a colleague from Prague in the story.

'Penta are still pretending they have these district dailies, but in fact the vast majority of the content is produced in Prague and a really small amount is about the district. Penta also own hospitals which is a conflict of interest if you want to report about healthcare in your region. But what if the hospital is owned by the same person as your newspaper?'
– Former local journalist

An analyst who studies local journalism said many of the remaining independent papers are stuck in the past, with a limited online offering and traditional ways of writing stories and laying out pages, refusing to consider new business models. As a result, their days could be numbered.

'You can see when a weekly is dying because they change to a fortnightly.'
– Local journalist

24 Cisarova, Lenka, Waschkova, Metykova, Monika. *Closed doors, empty desks: The declining material conditions of the Czech local print newsroom (2020)*. Journal of Applied Journalism and Media Studies, 9 (1), pp. 21-38. [online] Available at: <https://sro.sussex.ac.uk/id/eprint/83124> (Accessed 22 February 2020).

25 Hajek, Roman, Stetka, Vaclav. European University Institute (2020). *Monitoring Media Pluralism in the Digital Era: Application of the Media Pluralism Monitor in the European Union, Albania and Turkey in the years 2018-2019. Country report: Czech Republic*. [online] Available at: https://cadmus.eui.eu/bitstream/handle/1814/67798/czech_republic_results_mpm_2020_cmpf.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=1 (Accessed 22 February 2021).

The definition of what constitutes ‘independent’ regional media is also increasingly unclear. Local outlets rely heavily on paid for content, often from local government, though this isn’t obvious to readers as it is not marked or easily distinguishable in the newspapers and on their online news pages and social media. With advertising and readership dwindling, local media houses are compromising their ethical principles. “Advertisers will block stories with a negative effect on their market and so will politicians from local authorities.”²⁶

One journalist who until recently worked for a Babiš-owned newspaper in Olomouc in the east of the country said he had considered the ethical implications of working for the prime minister but had decided it was actually the least problematic option if he wanted to remain in the local media. “Watching how regional journalism worked, they look independent, but you find that they are financed by local government. And for some of them, it’s the main source of finances. When you do an interview with some businessman he asks, ‘how much you want for it? I say ‘nothing. It’s free.’ Then he says, ‘your competitors said that I need to pay to have this interview.’” – Local journalist

Misinformation and disinformation

Sitting outside the traditional media ecosystem are the misinformation and disinformation websites. Many take a pro-Russia, anti-European Union, anti-refugee line and have varying degrees of influence, though gain credibility when politicians spread misinformation.

“Partisan and alternative sites have continued to maintain their active presence in the Czech online news ecosystem — partly as a result of exposure via social media. Many of these sites have been labelled as disinformation websites by various NGOs as well as by the Centre against Terrorism and Hybrid Threats, set up by the Ministry of Interior in 2016. While *Parlamentnily.cz* (17%) attracts as many weekly online users as some mainstream news sites, the reach of the other web projects (pursuing anti-EU, pro-Russian, and a generally anti-liberal agenda), including Russian-funded *Sputnik.cz* (2%), remains limited.”²⁷

Also worth noting is the Czech phenomenon of chain emails, messages from pro-Russia propaganda sites that many regard as spam, designed to target people who aren’t on Facebook, particularly the elderly. These emails appear to be news but contain content taken directly from disinformation websites produced

26 Nordic Association of News Publishers (2019). *Fact finding mission to Czech Republic*. European Federation of Journalists, Syndicate of Journalists of Czech Republic, European Broadcasting Union, European Centre for Press and Media Freedom. [online] Available at: <https://europeanjournalists.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/Czech-Republic-fact-finding-mission.pdf> (Accessed 22 February 2021).

27 Reuters Institute. *Digital News Report Czech Republic (2018)*. [online] Available at: <https://www.digitalnewsreport.org/survey/2018/czech-republic-2018> (Accessed 22 February 2021).

by pro-Russian actors or political parties, particularly around elections. Their power is that recipients often forward them on to family and friends to warn them about the 'lies' of the mainstream media, making them powerful tools of disinformation as they come from a personal contact and therefore have a greater impact.

'We have found the highest incidence of these chain emails by far in the Czech Republic. It doesn't seem to be such a big phenomenon in the other countries.'

- Media analyst

PART 2

IMPACT OF OLIGARCHISATION ON THE MEDIA LANDSCAPE

Analysts point out that one consequence of communism still evident today is that Czechs have a natural tendency to be distrustful of institutions including the government and churches.²⁸ But historical suspicion isn't why Czechs don't trust what they read and watch in the media. That is mainly down to "the fact that most mainstream news media are in the hands of oligarchs and business groups, with an adverse effect on perceived editorial autonomy".²⁹

At the local level, the disappearance of independent media houses, replaced by stories that look like journalism but are actually paid for by advertisers or government, has created distrust and a dangerous apathy among media consumers who lack interest in local news.

They really don't care [what's happening locally] until there are some problems, but they just write angry comments on social media. But when it's time to vote, they don't vote or vote for the same parties.³⁰ – Local journalist

As discussed above, many experienced journalists have left the industry or set up alternative independent outlets in recent years. Younger colleagues who began reporting on major events that in the past would have been handled by better-trained reporters took their jobs.

Journalism education, including training in basic ethical principles, wasn't a necessary prerequisite³¹ for the early career journalists taking over from the veterans who retired or resigned due to the political pressure outlined in this report. Editors interviewed by EJNI also noted that academic courses at well-established journalism schools at universities in Prague, Brno and

Olomouc don't all teach the practical skills needed to work in modern newsrooms, nor do they offer training for mid-career journalists. A journalist interviewed for this report who studied journalism at university said she would have found it more useful to take courses in economics or law to better understand the issues she was covering.

The issue of media ownership has seen the Czech Republic sink to 40 out of 180 countries in the 2020 Reporters Without Borders World Press Freedom Index, from 16 in 2013^{32/33}. However, all those interviewed for the report believe the country remains a largely safe place to practice journalism. "I have not encountered any threats or other forms of intimidation," said one investigative reporter. "Certainly, we face criticism from readers, especially on social networks. It mainly concerns topics related to Russia, the Czech president and refugees. However, a large part of these 'critics' are actually trolls."

She said reporters receive an increase in abusive comments and threats via social media whenever politicians step up the rhetoric against the media. The journalist cited an example involving the chairman of the far-right Freedom and Direct Democracy party (SPD), Tomio Okamura, who published a post to his more than 200,000 Facebook followers which included a photo of a journalist who asked him questions that he didn't like during an interview.³⁴ SPD supporters threatened her with rape. Zeman once greeted journalists at a press conference with a fake Kalashnikov; has accused them of "brainwashing people" and "manipulating opinion"; and joked with Russia's President Vladimir Putin that there are too many journalists and some should be "liquidated".³⁵

However, there have been no physical attacks in the last few years. Some journalists, however, say they will never feel safe again after the killing of Ján Kuciak in neighbouring Slovakia in 2018. Kuciak was a respected colleague and some of the journalists interviewed for this report had worked closely with him.

28 Unlike other countries in the region, the Czech Republic is a largely secular country. 2019 research by the Pew Research Center found that seven out of 10 Czechs have no religious affiliation at all. <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/01/02/once-the-same-nation-the-czech-republic-and-slovakia-look-very-different-religiously> (Accessed 22 February 2021).

29 Reuters Institute. Digital News Report Czech Republic (2018). [online] Available at: <https://www.digitalnewsreport.org/survey/2018/czech-republic-2018> (Accessed 22 February 2021).

30 Figures from the Czech Statistical Office show turnout of almost 38% in the most recent regional elections held in October 2020, slightly up from 2016 when turnout was 35%. Turnout for the parliamentary elections in 2017 was higher at nearly 61%, according to the Council of Europe.

31 The public broadcasters have their own internal training for new recruits.

32 Reporters Without Borders. Czech Republic Increasing Media Concentration (2020). [online] Available at: <https://rsf.org/en/czech-republic> (Accessed 22 February 2021).

33 Reporters Without Borders. World Press Freedom Index (2013). [online] Available at: <https://rsf.org/en/world-press-freedom-index-2013> (Accessed 22 February 2021).

34 <https://www.facebook.com/tomio.cz/posts/2634348536575945> (Accessed 22 February 2021).

35 Committee to Protect Journalists (2018). Reporters harassed, verbally assaulted covering Czech presidential election. [online] Available at: <https://cpj.org/2018/01/reporters-harassed-verbally-assaulted-covering-cze> (Accessed 22 February 2021).

'No one expects that in a country in the middle of Europe, something like this can happen. I hesitate to say 100% yes, we are safe, because you can never be sure. But at the moment, there are no signs of any danger.' – Media analyst

But the enemies of press freedom have other ways of controlling journalists rather than resorting to violence.

'Mostly they try to shut them down through lawyers, particularly those working in small, regional media who cannot afford lawyers. They don't need to threaten to kill you, they just need to threaten you with a lawyer. It's worse than threatening to kill you.' – Local journalist

PART 3

MEDIA NARRATIVES AND COVID-19

Covid-19 has been the dominant media narrative of 2020 in the Czech Republic and around the world, squeezing out all other stories. One interviewee believes there has been too much reporting on the virus with the inclusion of “alternative” voices for shock value, adding little to the story, but most agree that the mainstream Czech media have covered the pandemic well.

The media was generally supportive of the government in the early days of the crisis, regardless of ownership. Some outlets became more critical over issues such as the shortages of personal protective equipment (PPE) for medical staff and there were complaints about lack of access to the government’s online press conferences for media that was critical of their handling of the pandemic.³⁶ One criticism of both the public and private media, however, was that journalists relied too much on statistics without providing essential context which at times confused readers and viewers.

General agreement is that Czech TV and radio did particularly well during the pandemic. Audiences increased for TV and radio and the hostile voices in politics were temporarily muted as Czechs tuned in to familiar and trusted sources of information.

‘Especially during the first Covid wave in the spring, people almost instinctively turned to public service media, especially Czech TV, but also the public radio. And that’s not very really surprising. Because anytime there is a sort of catastrophe or crisis, then the population almost instinctively goes in the direction they feels is the most trustworthy.’ – Media analyst

Some online outlets which rely on subscribers have also prospered as readers scrambled for well-reported, reliable news. In general, however, “Czech audiences have not seemed prepared to spend money on quality journalism online, a fact which remains unchanged months into the crisis.”³⁷

The pandemic has only exacerbated the decline of print media. “Respekt, one of the country’s most important print weeklies, reported a 60-70 percent drop in advertising revenues compared to pre-pandemic levels. Another weekly, Týden, ceased publication on March 23 for a month. Jaroslav Plesl, editor-in-chief of the MF Dnes daily newspaper, admitted in April that the number of copies sold during the pandemic has dropped to only 30,000 per day.”³⁸

Local media has been especially hard hit, with one expert interviewed for this report predicting as many as one-third of local publications could be gone by the end of 2020, leaving the remaining independent outlets with difficult choices. “For small and independent media outlets, paid content could become a tempting source of income.”³⁹

Almost unavoidable is that “given the fall in advertising revenues and a generally uncertain economic outlook, it looks likely that Czech media will enter a period of stagnation. New or costly media projects which have been postponed may not resume at all. The ongoing fall in sales of daily print newspapers will accelerate.”⁴⁰

Though some national and regional outlets will close and jobs will be lost, the ownership structure of the Czech media with its wealthy benefactors may save others.

“The thing is that a lot of those media outlets are owned by businessmen and not for the purpose of profit, more for the purpose of exercising their influence. So for those people, even if they will now have two years in red numbers, they care, but not to the point of closing the business.” – Political scientist

36 International Press Institute (2020). Czech critical media denied access to online press conferences during Covid-19. [online] Available at: <https://ipi.media/critical-media-denied-access-to-online-press-conferences-during-covid-19> (Accessed 22 February 2021).

37 Free Press Unlimited (2020). A LOCKDOWN FOR INDEPENDENT MEDIA? Effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the media landscape and press freedom in Central and Southeast Europe. [online] Available at: <https://kq.freepressunlimited.org/evidence/a-lockdown-for-independent-media-effects-of-the-covid-19-pandemic-on-the-media-landscape-and-press-freedom-in-central-and-southeast-europe> (Accessed 22 February 2021).

38 Ibid.

39 Ibid.

40 Ibid.

CONCLUSION

This report provides an overview of the challenges to journalism in the Czech Republic, particularly the oligarchisation of the media sector and the devastating impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. It is based on a series of stakeholder interviews with representatives from across the Czech media landscape.

Predictions about the future of the media in the country are generally gloomy. The pandemic has accelerated an already difficult financial situation for many outlets. This comes on the heels of the near total buyout of the country's most influential media outlets by a handful of wealthy businessmen and politicians including the prime minister.

There is no doubt that attacks on the public service media will continue, with fears among many stakeholders that the Czech Republic's trusted and respected public television and radio could one day resemble that of its neighbours in Poland and Hungary where the media and political spheres are completely entwined and government exerts overwhelming control. However, there is fierce opposition to this within the Czech media industry and it is by no means inevitable that the end of independent public service media is near. An increase in the license fee could help stave off this decline, as could a change in the government and a reform of how members are appointed to the governing media councils.

Journalists across the country, in public and private media, national and local, are bracing themselves for challenging times ahead.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations will focus on providing long term solutions to some of the issues that journalists and the media are currently facing in the Czech Republic. These recommendations are aimed at policy-makers, media, NGOs and CSOs and donor communities who are active in the support and development of freedom of press and the media.

- A series of common ethical guidelines for the Czech media should be developed through coordination between the leading media platforms in the country. All media should be encouraged to sign up to the guidelines and commit to implementing them in their working practices. A nationwide capacity building programme should be developed to assist journalists in applying the guidelines in their practice.
- We reinforce calls made by other stakeholders for a self-regulatory entity to deal with complaints against the media that have signed up to the ethical standards. This body should comprise of journalists, media practitioners and editors with representatives from the public on its board, and be publicised with an advocacy campaign which explains the benefits of self-regulation to the media.
- News outlets which rely on paid for content must provide clarity to readers and viewers by distinguishing between editorial, sponsorship and paid for advertising content. This is particularly important in the local context where advertorials often look like editorially-commissioned stories, leading to distrust in the media and in the wider sector in general.
- Smaller, independent outlets, particularly at the local level, have suffered badly in recent years as politicians and conglomerates have bought up much of the sector. The remaining independent media would benefit from direct financial support from the media development and donor communities in order to develop content and resources for staff.
- EJN supports calls for the Czech Republic to review legislation regarding the ownership of the media by politicians and members of the government. Politicians running for office should not be allowed to own media outlets.
- We also support calls for greater transparency of media ownership and the closing of loopholes in the Conflict of Interests Act. This would ensure that politicians are not allowed to control media companies while in office.
- Stakeholders from the media in the Czech Republic should contribute their specific expertise and knowledge and play an active part in the debates which are currently taking place across Europe and around the world about the future role of public service media.
- EJN fully supports the idea presented by other stakeholders that reports from the public service media which are submitted to the parliament should be provided as information for the parliament about finances and activities, not as proposals to vote on, which in turn offers another way for politicians to control Czech television and radio.
- Recruitment to the councils that regulate public service media should take place in an open and transparent manner, representing the geographical spread of the Czech Republic as well as its diverse range of industries and occupations. The system of appointment to the broadcasting councils should be reformed: politicians' influence over the councils and Czech television and radio must be decreased.
- Journalism training and education should be made more practical and include internships and opportunities to develop real world experience, giving students the skills they need to work in modern newsrooms. Many academic journalism programmes focus on the theoretical and lack any proper connection with practice. There is an opportunity for partnerships with international academic institutions and the provision of journalism training by distance or online learning. Guest lectureships and teaching secondments would also provide media students with knowledge and learning from journalism experts outside the country.
- Digital education for mid-career journalists is particularly important in this current environment. A thorough understanding of the latest technologies could give older journalists the confidence to develop new ways of working, ensuring the independent media sector continues to flourish, diverse revenue streams are developed and alternative business models explored.
- Better and further education of citizens on how to understand and engage with online media and recognise disinformation and hate speech across all platforms is important. A media literate audience would encourage greater professionalism among journalists and push for the inclusion of diverse voices that better represent all communities including minorities.

- Greater international collaboration could be a source of solidarity and support to the Czech media. Regional and international networks provide knowledge-sharing and peer-to-peer learning opportunities. Networks can also help when lobbying and campaigning for media freedoms. Cross-border collaborations via international networks such as the European Journalism Centre (EJC), the Global Investigative Journalism Network (GIJN) and the International Centre for Investigative Journalists (ICIJ) could provide greater scope for large scale investigations as well as identify funding mechanisms and opportunities for independent journalism.
- News outlets both public and private should develop internal policies and practices to ensure the advancement of women, particularly into senior and decision-making positions. Good practices, both nationally and internationally, on gender equality should be shared and discussed and role models developed as an important prerequisite for more gender balanced newsrooms.

ABOUT THE ORGANISERS

Ethical Journalism Network (EJN)

The Ethical Journalism Network works to promote media ethics, good governance and the self-regulation of journalism with the aim of strengthening independent journalism and building a responsible and ethical public sphere in an age where trust in the media is at an all time low.

www.ethicaljournalismnetwork.org



Evens Foundation

The Evens Foundation aims to contribute to rethinking and building a European reality committed to the values of diversity, freedom, responsibility and solidarity. We identify and support innovative ideas and achievements through our prizes and calls, initiate experimental projects bridging the gap between research and practice, and facilitate knowledge exchange through our lectures, seminars, debates and publications.

www.evensfoundation.be

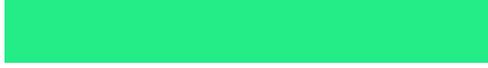
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Fritt Ord Foundation

The Fritt Ord Foundation is a private non-profit foundation that is intended to protect and promote freedom of expression, public debate, art and culture. We work internationally, concentrating on projects directly related to freedom of expression and free journalism.

www.frittord.no





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