



EUROPEAN CENTRE FOR
PRESS & MEDIA
FREEDOM

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NORDIC ASSOCIATION OF NEWS PUBLISHERS

Fact finding mission to Czech Republic, 7th-8th October 2019

By European Federation of Journalists, Syndicate of Journalists of Czech Republic, European Broadcasting Union, Nordic Association of News Publishers, European Centre for Press and Media Freedom

Background:

According to the Press Freedom ranking made by Reporters Without Border, Czech Republic has in five years dropped 27 places from listed 13 in 2014 to 40 in 2019. The prime minister of the country, Andrej Babiš was the owner and is still the shadow owner of 30 per cent of the private media in the country, local media are under threat; the position of public service media is challenged by the parliament.

Participants of the mission:

Mogens Blicher Bjerregård, President of the European Federation of Journalists

Jean Philip De Tender, Director Media at European Broadcasting Union

Jørn Mikkelsen, editor at Jyllands-Posten, Nordic Association of News Publishers

Lucie Sýkorová, Chair of the supervisory board of European Centre for Press and Media Freedom

Adam Černý, President of the Syndicate of Journalists of Czech Republic

The fact-finding delegation met with 14 key informants among journalists, editors, directors, teachers, politicians and founders from various part of the Czech media landscape, both public service media and private media.

Summary:

During the mission we identified six elements where changes and improvements would have a positive impact on press freedom and independent media in Czech Republic:

1. It was made very clear that the prime ministers close link to the media he used to own is totally unacceptable for a democracy;
2. The second element was about public service media, where it is too easy for the parliament and the government through the system interlinking of adopting annual reports and electing councils to put pressure on the media;
3. Self-regulatory bodies are too fragmented to have a real impact for ethical standards and because of that, there is a need for a review.
4. Local media are in a very difficult position leaving a big part of the citizens without real independent impartial information on local interests, which has a negative impact on taking part in local debates and democracy;
5. Journalists and editors themselves have to take a more serious responsibility for their profession;
6. As an overall theme as a part of all above mentioned themes, financing of media has to be addressed both within public service media and private media.

Findings and recommendations:

1. Prime minister linked to own media

All the key informants we met addressed the extreme situation that the prime minister of the country, Andrej Babiš de facto is the owner of 30 per cent of the private media. Already when he first was elected to the parliament, he could benefit from his own media, which also provided him support during his time as finance minister. As prime minister he transferred his media into a trust, however according to all respondents of the mission these media inform in favour of him. This is regarded as an extreme conflict of interest. Czech Republic has since 2017 new legislation on conflict of interest so-called “lex Babiš”. However according to experts this law failed in fulfillment of its purpose and Andrej Babiš still has influence over his companies.

Journalists and editors from other media outlets who report critically on Andrej Babiš are often publicly roughly insulted and discredited by him. They face the same intimidation also from president Milos Zeman and some other political representatives. There appeared also trends to refuse giving information to critical journalists.

- We recommend Czech Republic to have a review of the legislation regarding the possibility for government members and parliamentarians to own media not only to improve transparency, but also to review the implementation of the law. Politicians running for leading political positions should not be allowed to own media or to be closely linked to them.
- We recommend all politicians to preserve political culture worthy of democratic society, treat all journalists equally and fairly and thereby respect and defend media plurality as one of the main pillars of democracy

2. Public Service Media

Public Service Media are in general well respected and seen as important for citizens to get free and impartial information. Several informants stressed that public service media have an impact on the media market as they provide citizens with journalism and informations, they hardly get through private media. However, the public service media are in risk to be more controlled by the parliament and the government because of their access to change the councils of the Czech Television (CT), Czech Radio (CRo) and the Czech Press agency (CTK) by not approving annual reports. This is regarded as a threat, because solely the tool itself could lead to more self-censorship. Almost all key informants to a various extends emphasized that the risk of not approving now six pending annual reports of the Czech Television could undermine editorial freedom in public service TV, if that would lead to the election of new councils. In any case changes could be a reality in 2020 when up to one third of the council members in the regularly way will be replaced.

In addition, the fact that ordinary members of supervisory boards of Czech radio and of Czech Television due to the law are remunerated 80 percent of the average of full-time employees opens the risk of undue interference.

- We recommend that annual reports from public service media submitted to the parliament should be recognized as an information for the parliament about finances and activities in the media, not as a proposal to vote on, to avoid instrumentalizing the reports for threatening public service media,
- We recommend the parliament to change the system of electing the board of public service media to ensure institutional independence. A possible change could be to let both houses of the parliament to take part in the election for a broader consensus;
- We recommend the government to maintain the existing model of funding of the public service media as the license fee secures the direct link between the users and the media and also keeping the principle of arms' length. In any case it is important not to transform the financing into a line in the state budget in competition with other state expenditures. Funding of media must be separated.

3. Self-regulation and ethics

The self-regulatory mechanism is very fragmented: The publishers association has its own mechanism and so have the journalists. Furthermore, the boards of the public service media – tv, radio and news agency – are all considered as a complaints commission towards the directors. The public radio and tv themselves have established an ombudsman institution, which is seen more regularly in more countries.

- We recommend the media actors to agree on common ethical guidelines that should count for **all** media platforms and should be clearly marked for the citizens to note which media signed and are following the ethical standards;
- We recommend establishing a common self-regulatory entity respecting to deal with complaints regarding all media that have signed the ethical standards. This should be followed by a campaign among all media stakeholders to the recognition and commitment to be a part of a such independent media council with both journalists, editors and representatives for the public on board;

- We recommend all media stakeholders to urge for media literacy activities and to take part in providing media literacy also among themselves.

4. Local media

Listening to key informants it is obvious that local media are in a difficult position. Free independent and impartial private media hardly exist as they are more or less instruments for either businessmen and oligarchs for marketing or for politicians running their campaigns. Journalists and editors informed us, that regarding political news they are limited in topics they can write and tell about, which is caused especially by rising dependence of media on the money from advertisers. Some local websites are simply reduced to be media for press releases.

Advertisers will block stories with a negative effect on their market and so will politicians from local authorities when it comes to their positions. Furthermore, the lack of real independent media will lock journalists to stay at such “marketing media” as they won’t have any other choice. It was significant that local journalists were afraid to meet the mission as they believed that the owners could consider such meeting as disloyalty in an extend that it could lead to dismissals. One positive move comes from the public service TV when it starts up or increases its regional stations, which could make a difference for the citizens.

- We recommend public service media to make local and regional news a priority and to ensure citizens independent information;
- We recommend regions from all levels of society to engage in local media and through media literacy activities to emphasize free and independent media as a public good;
- We recommend media actors across the industry to engage with international organisations in developing new activities.

5. Lack of quality journalism

There is a tendency, that journalists and editors are not delivering high quality journalism in an expected extend as it should not be neglected that some key informants stressed that poor journalism is a problem. The reasons could be both lack of resources and lack of education and training which also lead to the fact that the profession seems to be increasingly resigned, maybe also because there is a perception that the citizens don’t really care.

Enforced by an increasing number of online “junk media” it is even more difficult for the citizens to know which media they could rely on. In addition, political leaders often are successful in selecting the journalists by whom they want to be interviewed to get a better picture of themselves. When media with resources for investigative journalism as Czech Television and Czech Radio, it is extremely important show full support for their journalists in particular when they succeed in award winning journalism.

- We recommend journalists and editors together to raise awareness of their own vulnerable situation and to develop innovative ideas for media;
- We recommend a review of the education of journalists and to establish a coherent mid-career training;
- We recommend media and their editors to support their journalists in investigative journalism;

- We recommend journalists and editors to create a broad debate in the industry regarding reliability and credibility for proper and honest journalism;
- We recommend journalists and editors to unite and be better organized as unity in the journalistic and editorial society will have an impact. Capacity building projects are highly recommended.

6.Sustainability in the media

Business models are always one of the key elements for the development of media. Particularly in the digital age the struggling to find new business models for media has increased in all countries. At the same time oligarchs also in Czech Republic in a broad scale control private media. In such a market it is difficult for small start-ups to innovate new models although some individuals are trying.

To enhance such a development, 12 businessmen have established an Endowment for Independent Journalism to support start-ups and investigative journalism with grants. The aim is to compete the Babiš-oligarch controlled media market. However, the grants are not big enough with a sufficient long-term perspective to ensure sustainability of new innovative media.

- We recommend public and private support of new sustainable business models, and that such support in any form always should fully respect keeping the principle of arms' length;
- We recommend business and funds to invest in free and independent media like it has happened within the Endowment;
- We recommend all media to budget for investigative journalism also on local level and to see it as an investment for the future;
- We recommend the European Commission to develop grant programs at a European level to support independent journalistic start-ups in particular at local level as similar challenges exist also in other EU countries. Such program could be run in a similar way as the successful IJ4EU program.

The organisations on this fact-finding mission will be ready to assist journalists and editors in Czech Republic on further recommendations and when possible to take part in meetings, debates and actions when needed.