



# Weekly Briefing

**Czech Republic political briefing:**  
**Foreign Influence on the Political Agenda: State, Media & NGOs**  
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# **Foreign Influence on the Political Agenda: State, Media & NGOs**

## **Summary**

*The censorship measures have remained in force since the beginning of Russia's military operation in the Ukraine. In the meanwhile, public prosecutors rejected the criminal actions against Prime Minister referring to national security reasons. Nevertheless, an increasing number of public figures oppose the state's repression. At the same time, the anti-Russian campaign has intensified, being also enhanced by foreign-funded NGOs. These have penetrated the state apparatus, influencing decision-making processes in accordance with foreign interests. The ruling cabinet even assists these efforts for ideological reasons. In practice, the anti-Russian agenda coincides with the anti-Chinese one. This fact is not coincidental and should be borne in mind.*

## **Introduction**

Since February 25, 2022, the Czech interest association of leading providers of Internet services CZ.NIC has been blocking several „disinformation“ media which is an unprecedented act going beyond the existing legal framework. The private interest organisation, however, does not consider it an infringement of business or freedom of speech but a necessary and right measure given the alleged state of war and imminence of hybrid threats. At the end of March, director Ondřej Filip announced the prolongation of the blocking for another month, following an agreement with Michal Klíma, a special government representative for media and disinformation, appointed in March.

## **Disinformation and propaganda**

The Government as well as state security and intelligence bodies remain to distance themselves from the censorship decision, not claiming responsibility for the act. All actors, on the contrary, argue that the blocking is an autonomous decision made by the private subject. After a month of the controversial, non-legal measure, the liberal cabinet supported further prolongation referring to an assertion, according to which the media has been blocked because the published content represented „foreign propaganda and disinformation“. Michal Klíma

stated that the Government had evidence, however, any of that has been made published. The absurdity of the cabinet's contradictory attitude becomes obvious for the special representative admits that the blocking is untenable for a longer period.<sup>1</sup> Ministry of Justice has already declared that a government bill enabling the legal blocking of media with „harmful content“ has begun to be prepared. In other words, the ministers themselves are aware of the non-legal character of the measures that are supported and recommended if not ordered directly by them. Minister Pavel Blažek stresses that the liberal democratic state must have legal tools to prevent external actors to disseminate disinformation among the Czech public.<sup>2</sup>

The problem is that at least some blocked and damaged media have no connections with foreign subjects, therefore, such argumentation is utterly misleading. The contradictoriness also manifests itself in that the current legislation enables the prosecution of scaremongering or publishing of untrue information and hateful content. It indicates that the concept of disinformation is used to restrict the freedom of media and speech for the label of disinformation could be employed in relation to any critical or alternative point of view. Moreover, such repression is not carried out under a state of war. Three of the blocked media sued Prime Minister Petr Fiala for criminal libel since the latter proclaimed that the „disinformation“ media were financed by Russia. However, public prosecutors refused to deal with the case. The reasons given are but outrageous. The public prosecutors generally argue that some Czech media „have exaggerated the flaws of liberal democratic systems, contested their elites, institutions and processes“. The state officers express concerns over the correspondence between this „disinformation“ and interpretations presented by Russia. In addition, the public prosecutors refer to the „anxiety of a vast majority of the Czech society“ which was to make the censorship legitimate. The authorities have not inquired into the public defamation committed by Prime Minister whatsoever while presenting a one-sided narrative regarding international politics and the domestic social atmosphere instead. The lawyers defending the „disinformation“ media have revealed that the decision on blocking around 29 media altogether was based upon letters from the National Cyber Operations Centre, Minister of Industry and Trade, Minister of the Interior and a government resolution. Based on these

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<sup>1</sup> Pika, T., Cibulka, J. (2022, March 30). *Další měsíc. Dezinformační weby zůstanou po dohodě s vládou na české doméně blokovány.* iROZHLAS. [https://www.irozhlas.cz/zpravy-domov/mesic-dezinformace-weby-legislativa-ministerstvo-vnitra\\_2203300500\\_pik](https://www.irozhlas.cz/zpravy-domov/mesic-dezinformace-weby-legislativa-ministerstvo-vnitra_2203300500_pik).

<sup>2</sup> Koutník, O. (2022, March 21). *Vypneme dezinformační weby, chystáme k tomu zákon, plánuje ministr.* Seznam Zprávy. <https://www.seznamzpravy.cz/clanek/domaci-kuzy-vypneme-dezinformacni-weby-chystame-k-tomu-zakon-planuje-ministr-194370>.

documents, the non-legal measure, being in breach of the Charter of Fundamental Rights and Freedoms, was introduced.<sup>3</sup>

### **Censorship and its critics**

In response, an increasing number of critical remarks have been emerging in the public discourse despite the silence among a majority of politicians. Former Prosecutor General (1999–2005) and Minister of Justice (2013–2014) Marie Benešová considers the measures to be a restriction of freedom of speech while the social atmosphere, exaggerated reactions to the Ukrainian crisis and discrediting of those with alternative views „hysteria“. Former Minister of Justice (2009–2010) and respected lawyer Daniela Kovářová criticises the enforced absence of open discussion whereas former right-wing deputy (1998–2006) and rector of one of the Czech universities Zdeněk Koudelka condemns the present „seeking of the internal enemy and witch-hunting“, comparing the repressions in the Czech Republic to the notorious era of McCarthyism in the US in the 1950s. To such a comparison does the warning conveyed by the signatory to the anti-Communist Charter 77 Otto Černý correspond, according to whom the right to different opinions shall be protected, all the more that the country is not in the state of war with Russia, even though the anti-Russian politicians claim the opposite.<sup>4</sup> The existing censorship is flagrant to such a degree that it provokes criticism even among some experts and commentators who are well-known for their Atlanticist orientation. Roman Joch, the former advisor to Prime Minister Petr Nečas, defends the right to dissenting views and opposes the restrictive measures. He believes that censorship is acceptable and needed only in the case of an attack on a country that is a member of NATO, supposing that the Czech state will have to compensate the owners of the media for the blocking.<sup>5</sup>

These examples show the controversial character of the Government's policy and the existence of opposing views throughout different political camps. At the same time, criticism of internal censorship does not mean support for Russian politics. It is beyond any doubt that

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<sup>3</sup> *Žalobu na premiéra Fialu smetlo státní zastupitelství ze stolu. Rovnost před zákonem je pouhou iluzí* (2022, March 23). Nespokojený. <https://www.nespokojeny.cz/nulova-vymahatelnost-prava-zalobu-na-premiera-fialu-statni-zastupitelstvi-smetlo/>.

<sup>4</sup> Szaban, O. (2022, March 22). *Udává se za názor. Čím dál víc. Křeček zasáhl, nebyl sám.* <https://www.parlamentnilisty.cz/zpravy/kauzu/Udava-se-za-nazor-Cim-dal-vic-Krecek-zasahl-nebyl-sam-696664>.

<sup>5</sup> Koulová, Z. (2022, March 25). *Svoboda slova se má suspendovat za války. Ale v té teď nejsme, vzkazuje vládě Roman Joch. Prosoudí podle něj velké peníze...* *Parlamentní Listy.cz.* <https://www.parlamentnilisty.cz/arena/monitor/Svoboda-slova-se-ma-suspendovat-za-valky-Ale-v-te-ted-nejsme-vzkazuje-vlade-Roman-Joch-Prosoudi-podle-nej-velke-penize-696893>.

the proportion of the pro-Russian stance is a minority. Not only these opinions but also those providing an impartial or moderate interpretation of the events in the Ukraine have been marginalised, excluded from the public discourse and criminalised under certain conditions. Apart from critics of censorship, more and more voices questioning the Czech state's Russia policy and official interpretation of the Ukrainian crisis can be heard in public. Many of the sober comments are made by former high-level state officers, retired military servicemen or former members of intelligence services. Andor Šándor, Jan Schneider, Martin Koller, Jaroslav Štefec or Jiří Wagner share a negative attitude towards the extremely one-sided official narrative based on the assumption that the Russian leadership has been endeavouring to restore the Soviet Union, invade the Czech Republic, carry out „terrorist acts“ against chosen targets (as allegedly demonstrated by Vrbětice in 2014 or Salisbury in 2018) and establish a totalitarian regime, no matter whether fascist or Soviet-like. These clichés are being disproved by authors of some of the censored media and that is why they have been blocked.

### **Revealing foreign influence**

The massive media campaign together with the political offensive has been amplified by activities of NGOs and personnel changes in the state apparatus. Minister of Foreign Affairs Jan Lipavský has started to prepare a reorganisation of its department to weaken the role of officials connected with former governments and the Prague Castle.<sup>6</sup> It is related to the incumbent cabinet's efforts to put an end to tendencies towards multivector, pragmatic foreign policy while deepening ties with the Western centres of power. These efforts reflect the proclaimed goal of the revision of the relationship with China and Russia. Pivot to the West is enabled by the victory of liberal forces last year, the death of the leading Czech businessman Petr Kellner who was thought to influence the political elites so as to develop economic cooperation in China, Russia and beyond, and last but not least the objective weakening of the role of President Miloš Zeman.

These changes are supported by particular interest groups and influential think-tanks such as the *European Values Centre for Security Policy* (EVC). Not by coincidence, one of its experts Martin Svárovský is expected to be appointed new Deputy Foreign Minister. The EVC

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<sup>6</sup> Šídllová, T., Soukeníková, E., Machová, M. (2022, March 30). *Diplomacie bez Zemana: Končí „hradní“ spojka, povýší Lipavského mluvčí*. Seznam Zprávy. <https://www.seznamzpravy.cz/clanek/domaci-diplomacie-bez-zemana-konci-hradni-spojka-povysi-lipavskeho-mluvci-195972>.

was established in 2005 to promote Euro-Atlanticism and liberal democracy while fighting against internal „authoritarian“ tendencies or external influence from „autocracies“. The think-tank is financed by a wide array of foreign subjects including the US Department of State, National Endowment for Democracy, USAID, NATO Public Diplomacy Division, European Commission, Taipei Economic and Cultural Office, Taiwan Foundation for Democracy or Ukraine Crisis Media Centre. In the last years, it was especially the US Department of State that provided substantial funding from abroad together with the Czech Foreign Ministry.<sup>7</sup> The financial flows help to understand the radical, sometimes extremist agenda, which even provoked criticism from academicians from the Charles University, according to whom the think-tank’s activities were lacking objectivity, being a pure ideology instead.<sup>8</sup>

## Conclusion

The liberal establishment recruits the staff and advisors from the abovementioned foreign-funded circles, which may result in an excessive dependency on external actors and their interests, particularly from the US. The political NGOs penetrate the state administration, undermining pragmatic relations with non-Western partners. In January, the EVC established its branch in Taipei to „support the sovereignty of Taiwan“.<sup>9</sup> The EVC cooperates with the *Friends of Free Russia* (FFR), an association set up by a group of Czech liberal deputies and senators with the aim to support the opposition in Russia.<sup>10</sup> Both subjects jointly call for confrontational policies against Russia, disseminating the US and NATO narratives in conjunction with other interest groups and NGOs such as the *Association for International Affairs* or *Czech Elves*.<sup>11</sup> These connections and financial flows should be uncovered to identify the sources of foreign influence in the Czech Republic.

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<sup>7</sup> *Annual Reports* (2022). European Values Center for Security Policy. <https://europeanvalues.cz/en/about-us/annual-reports/>.

<sup>8</sup> *Podivné postupy Evropských hodnot. Mluvme o bezpečnosti, ale bez ideologie* (2016, November 06). Lidovky.cz. [https://www.lidovky.cz/nazory/mluvme-o-bezpecnosti-ale-bez-ideologie.A161105\\_102245\\_In\\_nazory\\_sij](https://www.lidovky.cz/nazory/mluvme-o-bezpecnosti-ale-bez-ideologie.A161105_102245_In_nazory_sij).

<sup>9</sup> *European Values Center for Security Policy introduces its Taiwan Office with Czech and Taiwan’s Foreign Minister’s endorsement* (2022, March 21). European Values Center for Security Policy. <https://europeanvalues.cz/en/press-release-european-values-center-for-security-policy-introduces-its-taiwan-office-with-czech-and-taiwans-foreign-ministers-endorsement/>.

<sup>10</sup> *Čeští poslanci a senátoři vytvořili platformu Přátelé svobodného Ruska* (2021, March 16). iDNES.cz. [https://www.idnes.cz/zpravy/domaci/rusko-pratele-svobodneho-ruska-langsadlova-hilser-poslanci-putin.A210316\\_131012\\_domaci\\_klf](https://www.idnes.cz/zpravy/domaci/rusko-pratele-svobodneho-ruska-langsadlova-hilser-poslanci-putin.A210316_131012_domaci_klf).

<sup>11</sup> *Veřejné prohlášení Přátel svobodného Ruska a české občanské společnosti k západním opatřením a sankcím za ruské porušení mezinárodního práva a nelegální vpád na ukrajinské území* (2022, February 25). European Values Center for Security Policy. <https://europeanvalues.cz/en/verejne-prohlaseni-pratel-svobodneho-ruska-a-ceske-obcanske-spolecnosti/>.