



Weekly Briefing

Czech Republic social briefing:
The Czechs Are Afraid of Censorship: Arguments & Facts
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Summary

A majority of Czechs are afraid of expressing their opinions in public and observe the risk of the introduction of censorship in the country. These disturbing findings have been revealed by a recent sociological survey. The briefing analyses the most relevant points of the survey and puts the results in a broader socioeconomic context. It turns out that a substantial part of the public does not accept the government's (state) interpretation of major social issues inclusive of migration, the threat of disinformation or anti-epidemic policies and does not believe in the narrative of the hybrid threat allegedly posed by China and Russia.

Introduction

The current crises, growing geopolitical frictions and the internal transformation of liberal democracies have changed the relationship between the state authorities and some of the fundamental rights and freedoms. Securitisation has affected new social areas including freedom of speech or research. The state's external relations are increasingly subjected to geopolitical interests and value-based imperatives, which undermines pragmatic and mutually beneficial economic interactions. Countering “foreign influence”, “hybrid operations” and “disinformation campaigns” leads, first of all, to the pressure on the freedom of speech with discernible tendencies to restrict it in accordance with the political priorities of the government. Not surprisingly, therefore, an increasing number of Czechs are afraid of a return of censorship.

A return of censorship?

The sociological survey which was carried out by one of the leading agencies (The Centre for Analysis and Empirical Studies, SANEP) in February reveals that a majority of the citizens fear expressing their opinions in public and believe that state censorship is being introduced.¹ The recent survey is one of the first of its kind because the issue of censorship and restriction of fundamental rights and freedoms was only marginal prior to the pandemic and subsequent

¹ *Více než polovina Čechů se bojí otevřeně vyjádřit své názory a má pocit, že se vrací cenzura* (2023, March 8). Společnost pro obranu svobody projevu. <https://www.sosp.cz/vysledky-pruzkumu/>

conflict between the Western countries and Russia over Ukraine. Given the topicality of this major issue is it probable that the public discontent with the growing pressure and restrictive policies implemented by the liberal cabinet will be deepening and may result in an open clash between a part of the citizens and the state authorities or different forms of civil disobedience if the encroachment on the rights and freedoms goes beyond a certain line.

According to the abovementioned survey, 54.7 per cent of respondents are afraid of expressing their opinions, predominantly for the following reasons: (1) threat of the loss of a job or discrimination at the workplace (57.9 per cent); (2) public bullying and intimidation (51.8 per cent); (3) disruption of relations with friends and colleagues (39.8 per cent); (4) disruption of relations with his/her partner (16.7 per cent); (5) disruption of relations with business partners (15.6 per cent). The scope of topics which are perceived as potentially dangerous in this regard is quite wide as shown by respondents' answers: (1) migration (50.8 per cent); (2) health issues, vaccination and anti-epidemic measures related especially to the COVID-19 (48.7 per cent); (3) sex, gender, marriage and family (42.9 per cent); (4) elections (38.7 per cent); (5) religion (14.5 per cent); (6) historical events and their interpretation (7.2 per cent); (7) issues concerning the European Union (6.9 per cent). To the question of whether censorship is being introduced and the freedom of speech is being restricted, 56.8 per cent of the citizens replied positively in contrast to 31.3 per cent who assert the opposite. Virtually 60 per cent of the respondents already have an immediate or indirect experience with censorship, mostly in the online environment. Interestingly, up to 64.4 per cent believe that disinformation should not or cannot be fought by political or legal means while 18.5 per cent assert that the spreading of disinformation must be prosecuted and punished and 4.7 per cent think that disinformation should be opposed by state campaigns and funding of chosen media.

According to the Czechs, there is a wide array of sources of disinformation including but not limited to the actors from Russia (6.6 per cent) and China (3.9 per cent). Quite the contrary, the main disseminators of disinformation are identified as follows: government politicians (67.7 per cent), public broadcasting (59.6 per cent), mainstream media irrespective of their ownership (56.2 per cent), opposition politicians (45.8 per cent), alternative media (40.1 per cent) and last but not least transnational corporations (35.4 per cent). The researchers also investigated in which areas were the role of disinformation considered the highest risk. The public addressed the government propaganda downplaying the impacts of the economic and energy crisis (60.9 per cent), pro-Ukrainian war propaganda (53.9 per cent), pro-Russian war propaganda (52.8 per cent), opposition propaganda misusing the economic and energy crisis (38.8 per cent), propaganda in favour of vaccination and anti-epidemic restrictions (30.5 per cent) and

propaganda against vaccination and anti-epidemic restrictions (29.6 per cent). A majority of people (64.9 per cent) conclude that the Czech state does not need new legislation covering the freedom of speech, for the valid laws regulate the field sufficiently.

Are the concerns justified?

Analysing the results of the survey (despite possible inaccuracies emerging from the limited scope of the sample), several preliminary conclusions can be drawn. The proportion of citizens who are afraid of either censorship or sanctions for public expression of their attitudes is not negligible. Even if these concerns were mere feelings, it sends negative signals to the liberal democratic state authorities. However, the concerns are justifiable since there are examples that illustrate the restriction of freedom of speech, for instance, the prosecution of voices in breach of the official interpretation of the war in Ukraine, dismissal or suspension of academicians expressing critical attitudes towards government foreign policy, termination of joint research with Chinese or Russian counterparts, preparation of a new law on countering disinformation, blocking of alternative media based on a “recommendation” from the military intelligence service, and so on and so forth.²

Aside from direct state interventions and legal consequences, there is a concurrent social pressure to express opinions about some issues in a certain way. The survey corroborates the high degree of social polarisation accompanied by a low level of tolerance and understanding throughout society which entails damages to relations both in private and professional life in the case of using the right to free expression. The controversial topics reflect longer-term moods in society. The question of migration has been brought back to the public discourse in

² *Schvalování útoku Ruska na Ukrajinu může být trestným činem, varuje nejvyšší státní zástupce* (2022, February 26). iROZHLAS. https://www.irozhlas.cz/zpravy-domov/igor-striz-rusky-utok-nejvyssi-statni-zastupce-rusko-ukrajina-schvalovani_2202260944_jgr. Vaculík, R., Havlík, A. (2023, March 15). *Za podporu války padlo už devět trestů a 58 obvinění*. Novinky.cz. <https://www.novinky.cz/clanek/domaci-za-podporu-valky-padlo-uz-devet-trestu-a-58-obvineni-40425849>. Cibulka, J. (2022, April 28). *Blokace dezinformačních webů pokračuje, zákon stále chybí. Provozovatelé hrozí žalobou*. iROZHLAS. https://www.irozhlas.cz/veda-technologie/technologie/zaloba-dezinformace-weby-blokace_2204280620_cib. Cibulka, J. (2022, April 5). *Hybridně působí ve prospěch Ruska. ‘Vojenští rozvědčíci zveřejnili dopis, proč žádali blokaci webů*. iROZHLAS. https://www.irozhlas.cz/zpravy-domov/vz-rozvedka-armada-blokace-webu-cenzura-svoboda-projevu_2204050644_cib. Hodulík, J. (2022, October 17). *Zákon o blokaci dezinfowebů má bránit demokracii, ale podle odborníků ji spíš ohrožuje*. Respekt. <https://www.respekt.cz/kontext/zakon-na-blokaci-dezinfowebu-ma-branit-demokracii-ale-podle-odborniku-ji-zatim-spis-ohrozuje>. Fujáček, J. (2023, January 13). *Umlčování, nebo úspory? Ústav se po přestřelce zbavil bývalého velvyslance Druláka*. Echo24.cz. <https://www.echo24.cz/a/HeznS/zpravy-domaci-petr-drulak-vypoved-velvyslanec-ve-francii-ustav-mezinarodnich-vztahu-ministerstvo-zahranici>. Šára, F. (2023, January 17). *Univerzita Karlova prověřuje své smlouvy s vysokými školami v Číně*. Novinky.cz. <https://www.novinky.cz/clanek/veda-skoly-univerzita-karlova-proveruje-sve-smlouvy-s-vysokymi-skolami-v-cine-40420267>. *Vědecké sankce vůči Rusku* (2022, March 4). *Věda a výzkum*. <https://vedavyzkum.cz/ze-zahranici/ze-zahranici/vedecke-sankce-vuci-rusku>

connection with the mass inflow of refugees from Ukraine, even though the negative stance regards mostly immigration from the Middle East and Africa. Paradoxically, the latter migrants are not interested in staying in the Czech Republic, unlike the Ukrainians. The Czech society is strongly divided over the COVID-19 issues despite its growing irrelevance. Migration and health policy have, nevertheless, become the major points of the public discussion, being addressed by both liberal democratic and populist camps. At least the migration coincides with the ongoing culture wars whose part is family, marriage and gender as well. Notwithstanding the high degree of tolerance and equality in Czech society, influential pressure groups have radicalised the public discourse by enforcing minoritarian interests to the detriment of the majority. It may account for why the issue of family and gender is placed in third place in terms of concerns about free expression.

It is worth noting that neither foreign policy nor international politics were mentioned by the respondents despite their topicality and frequently controversial character. It indicates that this area remains largely beyond the interest of the public and that the dominant Czech discourses continue to be local-oriented and—to put it in a critical way—provincial. Last but not least, a great part of society calls into question the intensifying efforts to expose, counter and suppress disinformation from the part of the state bodies. Most citizens challenge not only the meaningfulness and efficiency but also the very legitimacy of the state-led fight against disinformation. They claim quite realistically that disinformation practices and lies have been used by all relevant actors starting from government and opposition politicians alike, public and private media as well as mainstream and alternative media ending with corporations and foreign state entities. Such a perspective is in sharp contrast to the liberal discourse according to which the principal threat to freedoms and democracy is posed by domestic “disinformation media” and hybrid actions conducted by external entities using the former in their foreign interests. Some journalists, nonetheless, object that the actual impact of the so-called disinformation media is overestimated and their role is much weaker than the state and mainstream media do indicate.³

³ *Prezident Pavel už dělá chyby. Snížení valorizace důchodů ale podepíše, miní šéfredaktor Balšínek* (2023, March 14). Český Rozhlas Plus. <https://plus.rozhlas.cz/prezident-pavel-uz-dela-chyby-snizeni-valorizace-duchodu-ale-podepise-mini-8950443>. Compare with *Audit národní bezpečnosti* (2016). Ministerstvo vnitra České republiky. <https://www.vlada.cz/assets/media-centrum/aktualne/Audit-narodni-bezpecnosti-20161201.pdf>. *Vláda chce stíhat šířitele dezinformací či podpořit nezávislá média, píše Deník N* (2022, December 27). ČT24. <https://ct24.ceskatelevize.cz/domaci/3553728-denik-n-vlada-ma-plan-pro-boj-s-dezinformacemi-chce-stihat-jejich-siritele>. *„Jsmo na vrcholu dezinformační války,“ říká analytik Vrabel. Vláda chystá důslednější boj proti živým kampaním* (2022, April 12). ČT24. <https://ct24.ceskatelevize.cz/domaci/3471111-jsme-na-vrcholu-dezinformacni-valky-rika-analytik-vrabel-vlada-chysta-duslednejsi-boj>

Conclusion

The securitisation processes entailing the imposition of restrictions on freedom of speech are accompanied by interventions against foreign media and social platforms. The former applies, first of all, to Russian RT and Sputnik which are blocked in the Czech Republic while the latter regards TikTok. At the beginning of March the National Cyber and Information Security Agency (NÚKIB) issued a warning aimed against this application referring to an alleged high security threat.⁴ The Agency recommends prohibiting the use of TikTok both by state and private subjects. The Office of the Government has already cancelled its account and individual ministries have ordered all employees to uninstall the application.⁵ TikTok has almost 2 million users above 18 years old in the Czech Republic and belongs to the most dynamic applications. By January the number of users increased by 34 per cent year-on-year.⁶

⁴ *The TikTok app poses a security threat* (2023, March 8). National Cyber and Information Security Agency. <https://www.nukib.cz/en/infoservis-en/news/1942-the-tiktok-app-poses-a-security-threat/>

⁵ *Neprodleně odinstalujte. České úřady i firmy masivně zakročily proti TikToku* (2023, March 17). iDNES.cz. https://www.idnes.cz/zpravy/domaci/tiktok-aplikace-hrozba-podniky-firmy-zakaz.A230317_090107_domaci_itimp

⁶ *Největšími sociálními sítěmi v Česku zůstávají YouTube a Facebook* (2023, February 27). Mediaguru. <https://www.mediaguru.cz/clanky/2023/02/nejvetsimi-socialnimi-sitemi-v-cesku-zustavaji-youtube-a-facebook/>