



# Weekly Briefing

**Czech Republic political briefing:  
Countering Disinformation and Hybrid Threats:  
Recent Policies & Measures  
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# **Countering Disinformation and Hybrid Threats: Recent Policies & Measures**

## **Summary**

*Amidst the rising concerns over the freedom of speech and press, the Czech government has made a step back. Giving up the intention to introduce the Action Plan on Countering Disinformation and cancelling the position of Commissioner for Media and Countering Disinformation, the political representation is sending a signal that the protection of freedoms is the primary value. Nonetheless, other steps indicate that the general line of the fight against disinformation will not be abandoned, especially if foreign actors are involved in the processes. The briefing analyses the recent policies and events in the field of disinformation and hybrid threats in the Czech Republic.*

## **Introduction**

Since the end of 2021, the Czech government was preparing a new *Action Plan on Countering Disinformation*. Its draft was kept non-public until 2023 when it was published by Czech Radio. The lack of transparency as well as some of the clauses of the Action Plan aroused criticism throughout society. The strong criticism and suspicion of the attempts to introduce censorship have recently led the cabinet to revise its position. The preparation of the action plan on countering disinformation has been suspended and the position of Commissioner for Media and Countering Disinformation has been abolished.

## **Defending the Action Plan**

This office was established in March 2022. The new Commissioner was responsible for the preparation of the *Action Plan on Countering Disinformation*. However, the position existed for less than a year, for it was cancelled in February 2023 and the agenda was turned over to National Security Advisor Tomáš Pojar who coordinates the activities regarding hybrid threats, disinformation and other security issues. At the beginning of February, Commissioner Michal Klíma gave an interview to explain the main points of the draft. Klíma advocated the idea of

funding private media and NGOs by the state with the aim to engage them in a state-led fight against disinformation as well as the establishment of a state system of support for “independent” media. Michal Klíma is one of the representatives of the Endowment Fund for Independent Journalism which serves as a mechanism through which private capital provides financing to media under the condition that these are supportive of liberal democracy and its values. Many sponsors of the Endowment Fund also financed the presidential campaign of Petr Pavel and the liberal democratic parties which make up the ruling coalition at this moment. The state Action Plan, therefore, could have been modelled on such a pattern only with the very difference that the funding would come from the state budget and so from the taxes of the citizens.

Commissioner Klíma confirmed that the Action Plan included the possibility to block disinformation media and websites which corresponds with the *Action Plan on Countering Hybrid Threats* approved by the Security Council in 2021. The law enabling the state bodies to block such media is being prepared by the Ministry of the Interior. It is worth noting that the blocking introduced last year in response to the outbreak of the war in Ukraine was not based on valid legislation. Michal Klíma argued that the public did not need to be afraid of state censorship because the restrictions could be applied only in the case of a “substantial threat to national security”. According to the former Commissioner, these conditions were met last year since the Czech state could expect an attack from Russia. He called into question the analyses which indicated that the actual impact of disinformation was marginal and the costs needed for the implementation of the agenda of countering disinformation were too high compared to the benefits.<sup>1</sup>

### **Opposing the Action Plan**

In February several professional organisations turned to the government requesting a revision of the Action Plan. The Association of Publishers which is the leading representative of the media publishing houses called the plan “erroneous” and “harmful”. The association warned that the absence of an unambiguous definition of the very crucial concept of “disinformation” could pose a threat to freedom of speech and press, criticising a system of

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<sup>1</sup> Gavriněv, V. (2023, February 5). *Šéf boje s dezinformacemi popisuje utajovaný vládní plán*. Seznam Zprávy. <https://www.seznamzpravy.cz/clanek/domaci-politika-sef-boje-s-dezinformacemi-popisuje-utajovany-plan-penize-dostanou-i-media-225117>

funding of “independent media” by the state, for it could create a network of corruption to the detriment of transparency and democratic control. The organisation also addressed the process of preparation which excluded consultations with relevant actors.<sup>2</sup> The government refused to disclose who prepared the Action Plan.<sup>3</sup> The latter was criticised by the Czech Chamber of Commerce and Confederation of Industry of the Czech Republic as well.<sup>4</sup>

Several days later the government representatives announced that the Action Plan would not be implemented and Commissioner Klíma had been dismissed. It turned out that the draft of the plan was opposed even by some deputies of the ruling coalition. Chairman of the Standing Commission on Hybrid Threats of the Chamber of Deputies Lukáš Vlček believes that the existing legislation is sufficient for fighting disinformation and the only problem is the reluctance to apply it on the side of the repressive apparatus. Leaders of the deputies from the Civic Democratic Party (ODS) and the Christian and Democratic Union–Czechoslovak People’s Party (KDU–ČSL) are convinced that new legislation would be redundant while stressing the role of public media and educational institutions in countering disinformation. It is, therefore, possible that classes of media education will be introduced to the curricula at primary and secondary schools. There is, nevertheless, a broad consensus among the coalition deputies that the cabinet should not give up the strategy to counter foreign influence including the field of disinformation. In this regard, the government parties discuss the possibility of a new law covering the blocking of foreign media on Czech territory such as Sputnik or RT whose accessibility is already restricted.<sup>5</sup>

## **Disinformation and militant democracy**

The agenda of the Commissioner for Media and Countering Disinformation has been transferred to national security advisor Tomáš Pojar who will reportedly limit himself to the fight against disinformation originating abroad. It coincides with the agenda of the Centre

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<sup>2</sup> Unie vydavatelů nesouhlasí s Akčním plánem proti dezinformacím (2023, February 15). MediaGuru. <https://www.mediaguru.cz/clanky/2023/02/unie-vydavatelu-nesouhlasí-s-akcnim-planem-proti-dezinformacim/#.Y-yBMpMDeQo.twitter>

<sup>3</sup> Cibulka, J. (2023, January 19). Vláda tají plán proti dezinformacím. ‚Podíleli se na něm odborníci,‘ tvrdí, jejich jména ale nezná. iROZHLAS. [https://www.irozhlas.cz/zpravy-domov/dezinformace-plan-vlada-klima-vnitro-chh-cthh\\_2301191230\\_cib](https://www.irozhlas.cz/zpravy-domov/dezinformace-plan-vlada-klima-vnitro-chh-cthh_2301191230_cib)

<sup>4</sup> Odborná veřejnost chce být součástí diskuze o boji proti dezinformacím (2023, February 8). Svaz průmyslu a dopravy České republiky. [https://www.spccr.cz/images/dezinformace\\_otevreny\\_dopis\\_profesnich\\_sdruzeni.pdf](https://www.spccr.cz/images/dezinformace_otevreny_dopis_profesnich_sdruzeni.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> Bartoníček, R. (2023, March 20). Zákon proti dezinformacím zřejmě nevznikne. Stačí bojovat pravdou, míní Benda z ODS. Aktuálně.cz. <https://zpravy.aktualne.cz/domaci/zakon-proti-dezinformacim/r~739a7c12c71611ed8b4e0cc47ab5f122/>

against Hybrid Threats at the Ministry of the Interior and goals set by the *National Strategy for Countering Hybrid Interference*, related Action Plan and last but not least the *Analysis of Czech Republic's Readiness to Counter Serious Disinformation Wave (Analýza připravenosti České republiky čelit závažné dezinformační vlně)*. The *Strategy for Countering Hybrid Interference* is related to the *National Cyber Security Strategy* and new legislation regulating the powers of Military Intelligence in cyberspace, introducing the screening of foreign investment and preventing the spreading of terrorist content online. These represent the recent changes in the normative basis in the field of countering hybrid threats and disinformation.

According to Prime Minister Petr Fiala, the activities of the National Security Advisor will be based upon the *Analysis of the Czech Republic's Readiness to Counter Serious Disinformation Wave* which was approved by the cabinet in February. Interestingly, the Ministry of the Interior had rejected to make the document public at first but the department changed its mind after an intervention of the Constitutional Court.<sup>6</sup> Experts from the Ministry of the Interior, Ministry of Defence and Ministry of Justice, who elaborated the material, come to the conclusion that the Czech Republic does not have sufficient systemic, organisational, personnel, legal and other capabilities and instruments needed for an effective response to a series of disinformation operations. The country is lacking a comprehensive concept of media education as well as independent fact-checkers and also a sufficiently pluralist media environment. Under the current circumstances, the state bodies are capable of monitoring and analysing disinformation in the field of internal security, however, they fail in active countermeasures. According to the document, the Czech information space has been contaminated by disinformation for a long time which has resulted in the gradual deterioration of qualities of public discourses, loss of trust towards liberal democracy, the disintegration of social cohesion, polarisation and radicalisation. The ministries warn the government that the Czech society is not resilient enough, being, quite the contrary, prone to accepting disinformation. From the document follows that resilience should be strengthened by prevention and defence. The former is positive in its content and includes the protection of fundamental rights and freedoms, transparency of democratic processes and institutions, implementation of media education, the inclusion of social groups in political processes and development of a pluralist media environment. The latter is rather repressive, being based on active measures aimed at the protection of the existing political regime in line with the concept

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<sup>6</sup> Cibulka, J., Pika, T. (2023, March 1). *Jen ,vlivové působení cizí moci'. Vláda po kritice osekala plány tažení proti dezinformacím.* iROZHLAS. [https://www.irozhlas.cz/zpravy-domov/dezinformace-vlada-plan-pojar-klima-akcni-plan\\_2303011745\\_cib](https://www.irozhlas.cz/zpravy-domov/dezinformace-vlada-plan-pojar-klima-akcni-plan_2303011745_cib)

of militant democracy.<sup>7</sup> One can expect that the increasing emphasis will be put on the second way.

## **Conclusion**

The government has given up its *Action Plan on Countering Disinformation* after a wave of criticism from both the public and experts. Even though some of the most controversial measures will not be introduced in the short-term horizon, the approval of the internal document elaborated at the Ministry of the Interior by the cabinet indicates that the ruling coalition wants to continue developing a system of countering disinformation and hybrid threats. Despite the undisputable existence of plenty of controversial websites and online channels, their actual impact is rather overestimated by liberal actors. Authors of illegal content can be, moreover, prosecuted even under the present legislation.

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<sup>7</sup> *Analýza připravenosti České republiky čelit závažné dezinformační vlně* (2022). Ministerstvo vnitra České republiky. <https://www.mvcr.cz/chh/clanek/analyza-pripravenosti-ceske-republiky-celit-zavazne-dezinformacni-vlne.aspx>