

Freedom of the Press 2016 - Czech Republic

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Press Freedom Status: Free

Legal Environment: 4 / 30 (0 = best, 30 = worst)

Political Environment: 8 / 40 (0 = best, 40 = worst)

Economic Environment: 9 / 30 (0 = best, 30 = worst)

Press Freedom Score: 21 / 100 (0 = best, 100 = worst)

Quick Facts

Population: 10,551,227

Freedom in the World Status: Free

Internet Penetration Rate: 79.7%

Overview

The media environment is generally free, although there are some legal restrictions, including criminal defamation. Concentrated media ownership as well as ownership by politicians present limits to media pluralism and independence.

Key Developments

- President Miloš Zeman and Andrej Babiš, who holds the seats of deputy prime minister and finance minister, criticized the public Czech Television (ČT) on several occasions in 2015, accusing the outlet of being biased and favoring the opposition.
- The German Verlagsgruppe Passau, the last major non-Czech European media group in the country, sold its local publishing house to Penta Investments, which has media holdings in the Czech Republic and Slovakia.

Legal Environment: 4 / 30

Freedom of the press is constitutionally guaranteed, though the Charter of Fundamental Rights and Freedoms prohibits speech that might infringe on national security, individual rights, public health, or morality; speech that may evoke hatred based on race, ethnicity, or national origin is also prohibited by law. The Press Law provides a sound basis for independent journalism, and media

protections have been bolstered by Constitutional Court decisions and other institutional rulings. Freedom of information is provided for under the law.

Politicians sometimes employ hostile rhetoric against media outlets. President Miloš Zeman and Andrej Babiš, who holds the seats of deputy prime minister and finance minister, criticized the public Czech Television (ČT) on several occasions in 2015, accusing the outlet of being biased and favoring the opposition. Separately, in April, Babiš threatened to sue the U.S.-based *Foreign Policy* magazine over an article that referred to him as an "oligarch" and described him as a potential threat to democracy in the Czech Republic. Babiš is one of the richest individuals in the country, and owns a major chemical company as well as a number of media holdings.

Defamation remains a criminal offense, but prosecutions are rare, and courts have generally given only suspended sentences in recent years. A 2005 Constitutional Court ruling clarified defamation legislation, finding that value judgments are legally protected. Political satire has a long history in the country, and when such material prompts lawsuits, the courts often side with the media, protecting caricature as a valid form of criticism.

Broadcast media are regulated by the Council for Radio and Television Broadcasting (RRTV), while the public-service ČT is regulated by its own council. Print media are largely self-regulated.

Political Environment: 8 / 40

Media houses and professionals are generally free from political interference, and most outlets are able to freely make editorial decisions.

Some degree of self-censorship is present among Czech media workers, particularly at outlets whose owners have significant links with business or politics. However, there is a strong tradition of investigative reporting at many Czech newspapers.

Physical attacks and harassment aimed at media houses or professionals are rare.

Economic Environment: 9 / 30

National print media are all privately owned and consist of a variety of daily newspapers, weeklies, and magazines representing diverse viewpoints. A few private broadcasters operate at the national level along with the public ČT. The change to digital broadcasting in 2012 facilitated the launch of several new television channels, resulting in a more diverse media sector. Media advocates have expressed concern that while public media are widely respected, their financial sustainability is being undermined by tighter control of public funds and increasing restrictions on advertising. Television remains the main source of information, but the internet continues to develop rapidly as a news source. Nearly 81 percent of the population had access to the internet in 2015.

Media-related legislation includes minimal ownership restrictions, and none on foreign ownership. Many private outlets do not disclose their ownership structures. The industry had been characterized by a very high share of foreign ownership, but this has changed in recent years with the entry of Czech business tycoons into the market. The restructuring of ownership culminated in 2015 when the German Verlagsgruppe Passau, the last major non-Czech European media group in the country,

left the market. The company sold its local publishing house, Vltava-Labe-Press, to Penta Investments, which has media holdings in the Czech Republic and Slovakia.

These changes have left the country's media landscape largely in the hands of a small group of wealthy business figures, including Babiš. Media watchdogs and local journalists have warned of "oligarchization" and "Berlusconization" – that is, powerful individuals' use of media assets to influence politics – after the success of Babiš's party in the 2013 parliamentary elections. This process has in turn provoked a civil society response to change legislation in order to safeguard media independence and prevent the continued concentration of media ownership.

The economic crisis that began in late 2008 and ongoing changes in media consumption have had lasting effects on the media market. Observers have pointed to a recent decline in the depth and quality of reporting in Czech news media, due in large part to economic difficulties within the sector. The trend has been accompanied by an increase in live news coverage, tabloid-style content, and so-called "Google journalism" that is not based on primary sources. Nevertheless, a few investigative newspapers continue to fund projects of substantial depth.

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