



From Media Capture to Platform Capture: Reflections on Three Decades of a Free Czech Media

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Abstract

This paper examines the evolution of the media in the Czech Republic during the first three decades as an independent state (1993-2023). The paper reflects on the media's role in the changing political landscape, where economic and political interests intertwine, exploring the transition from a state-controlled system to a media landscape characterized by extensive foreign ownership and, ultimately, a concentrated domestic ownership market. It traces the initial privatization of media outlets, followed by the flood of foreign ownership it attracted to an unexpected shift in ownership, marked by the exit of international media companies and the rise of domestic oligarchs, resulting in a media environment distinguished by influence over ideology. The paper balances the nation's thirtieth anniversary by suggesting that the challenges of media capture that characterized the preceding decade have begun to recede, only to be replaced by a new type of capture, this time in the context of platforms.

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Reflections on Three Decades of Free Czech Media

When this paper was started in August 2021, political observers in the Czech Republic were analyzing the significance and ramifications of the revelation that the Prime Minister, the 859th richest person in the world, was the subject of a lengthy police investigation over claims of fraud involving 1.7 million euros (EUR) in subsidies from the European Union. Emails from his official political party being investigated were obtained directly from the servers of his multibillion-euro chemical, agricultural, and media conglomerate, with which he had allegedly severed ties years prior in order to comply with a domestic conflict-of-interest law. As was in Donald Trump's America, the incredulity provoked by this framing no longer draws much attention; it is merely the latest in a long succession of scandals characterized by a cocktail of great wealth, contentious business dealings, and controversial behaviour. It is duly noted by the news media but will disappear in a few days, as Prime Minister Andrej Babiš's advisors know very well. This is the state of affairs at the height of the power of one of Central Europe's most notorious media moguls.

Fast-forwarding two years later to the thirtieth anniversary of the Czech state finds a rather dramatic change. A narrow loss for Babiš's right-wing populist ANO (Czech for "yes") party in the October 2021 election by a broad coalition of parties has resulted in the governing coalition making good on a critical campaign promise. This promise to pass an amendment to conflict-of-interest legislation has resulted in the almost immediate unseating of Andrej Babiš as media magnate, forcing the sale or the holdings of his media empire to another oligarch, albeit one without obvious political ambitions.

With the passing of the so-called Lex Babiš legislation, the end of the possibility of direct influence over a large share of the media by a politician has arrived. It perhaps symbolically marks the transformation from three rather tumultuous stages of classic media capture to a new stage of platform capture, and thus, a new chapter in the development of media in an independent Czech Republic has arguably been born. This paper traces the stages the Czech media have gone through in the three decades of the country's existence and argues that the most critical stage for media and democracy may only be beginning.

Beginnings

Political transformation does not take place overnight. As change bubbles under the surface of regimes, turbulence is felt in the media environment as well. Albeit perhaps naïve and chaotic in nature, the pre-transition stage of the media in Czechoslovakia is often considered to have begun with anticipation and maneuvering in light of the imminent transformational change in society and faded with the increased role of foreign investment in the media market.

The role of the media under the Communist government in Czechoslovakia was not unlike other Central and Eastern European regimes, fulfilling primarily functions of state propaganda and 'educational' capacities as opposed to more commercial and entertainment-oriented roles in democracies (Gulyas 1999, 82). This is not to suggest the role was inconsequential—quite the opposite, the mass media in the age of medium scarcity in Czechoslovakia (two broadcast television networks, three national radio stations plus regional stations, approximately thirty national and regional newspapers, and a broad range of magazines catering to various

demographics and interests) undoubtedly played a key role in society, however, one may have known that media consumption must be approached from a critical angle (Jiráček and Köpplová 2008).

The key legislative moment, opening the proverbial floodgates of a free press, was an amendment to the press law of 1966, effectively removing obstacles to private publishing, as well as deregulating the right to publish, making it a simplified, informational process. Although there were originally plans to create a comprehensive media law combining the broadcast and print sectors, in the end, the key mass mediums were to follow different paths to independence (Waschková Císařová and Metyková 2015). A combination of uncontrolled and state-controlled privatization followed, and by the emergence of an independent Czech Republic in 1993, the media market had been more or less privatized, or, in the case of the former state broadcasters (Czechoslovak Television and Czechoslovak Radio), had transformed into public organs.

In terms of the print sector, prior to 1989, publishers were either political parties or organizations based around the state apparatus (youth organizations, ministries). These structures remained intact in the immediate revolutionary months following November 1989, although internally, journalists stopped taking orders from publishers and voted amongst themselves for editors to lead the publications (Benda 2007; Šmíd 2004). This was followed by the phenomenon frequently referred to as “spontaneous privatization,” in which journalists formed joint stock companies and gained publishing rights over their titles ‘overnight.’ Due to the non-existence of any effective regulatory framework for the dissolution of state properties and the hunger and enthusiasm for a free press, “legalized theft” was allowed to take place (Benda 2007, 89).

In the broadcasting sector, the two state institutions of Czechoslovak Radio and Czechoslovak Television that had held a monopoly over broadcasting prior to 1989 were dismantled, albeit more slowly than the publishing sector. In 1991, the legal context was changed with the passing of the radio and television law (the Act on the Operation of Radio and Television Broadcasting, 468/1991/Sb.), which, among other liberal aspects, allowed for foreign ownership with few conditions. Among these was the formation of a company (*Obchodní společnost*) on domestic territory, with some expectations for the development of domestic programming (Benda 2007; Šmíd 2004). Legislation was passed creating a dual broadcasting system in the same year (Act of the Czech National Council on Czech Television number 483/1991 & Czech Radio 484/1991).

In spite of the arrival of the long-awaited possibility for the emergence of free media, not a great deal of lasting activity took place in the early years of the transition. In terms of broadcast, it would take a couple of more years for private broadcasting to emerge. In the newspaper market, besides the takeover of existing titles described earlier, only two new dailies emerged in 1990, both having clear connections with the past. One was *Lidové noviny*—a paper published in the first Czechoslovak Republic (1918 to 1938), later revived and published in an illegal samizdat format from 1987, and *Hospodářské noviny*—formerly an economic weekly published by the *Rudé právo* publishing house of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia. Attempts at national dailies associated with political parties took place, but all of them were short-lived. The only new weekly and daily newspapers to see the light of day were produced by one of the first foreign publishers in the Czech market (Ringier—Switzerland), with the publishing of an economic-focused weekly (*Českomoravský profit*, 1991), and the first Czechoslovak tabloid (*Blesk*, 1992)—both modelled after similar papers in the home country.

Internationalization

This appearance of the first media entity with foreign capital in a free Czechoslovakia was, in some ways, a very minor happening, in others, it was a historically significant event. For a country accustomed to focusing inward, it might be considered an unworthy moment to dwell on, since much attention was focused on who in the ransacked domestic environment would be able to put together a new, completely free daily. On the other hand, the emergence of a fully funded non-Soviet-affiliated foreign media entity was, at the very least, a revelation but certainly not one that could be predicted to become the dominant approach in the domestic press in a few short years.

Due to the fact that press ownership regulations were particularly lenient toward foreign investors in many Central European countries, particularly the Czech Republic, Poland, and Hungary, those nations with the most welcoming media rules saw the greatest inflow of foreign investment into the area (Wyka-Podkówka 2014). Thus, what began as a relatively minor occurrence in the chaotic recent post-revolutionary period very quickly became a trend impossible to ignore. This openness meant that not following any particular schema, over the course of the decade, both the print and broadcast market in the Czech Republic began to be dominated by foreign interests. The press saw continued expansion from Ringier, with the national daily newspaper market eventually being divided between them and two German publishers, Rheinisch-Bergische Verlagsgesellschaft mbH (RBVG) and Verlagsgruppe Handelsblatt. The regional press became consolidated owing to the merging of a number of regional titles under another publisher from Germany, Verlagsgruppe Passau. The lifestyle magazine sector was gradually consolidated by French and German regional powerhouses. The private broadcasting sector also became dominated early by foreign entities starting in 1993, first in radio, with the emergence of the national broadcast market of the French conglomerate Lagardere, and in television, with the first central European broadcast venture consisting of a joint venture with Central European Enterprises (CME) featuring US capital. CME would go on to become a powerhouse in the Central and Eastern European region with television enterprises in six countries, despite a turbulent period of struggles for ownership attributed to a lack of political capital (Sparks 1999). The result of the flow of foreign media initiatives via investment and capital injections or sole ownership ventures meant that in the first year of the new century, the Czech Republic not only outpaced all other Central and Eastern European countries in terms of foreign investment in media but also represented a significant level of ownership (Štětka 2010, 873–874).

In the field of media studies, the impact of ownership—whether direct or indirect—on media output has been and remains a widely deliberated theme. Foreign, or transnational ownership became an area of heightened concern as the deregulation and liberalization of media markets spread in the late 1980s and 1990s in the United States and Western Europe (Bagdikian 2002; McChesney and Herman 1997; Thussu 2006), particularly in terms of concentration and conglomeration (Doyle 2002). Two major concerns with foreign ownership include the possible manipulation of news content to the detriment of the local environment in the context of editorial independence and an extensive focus on commercialized and profitable content at the expense of content needed for a healthy public sphere (Štětka 2012). Both of these criticisms were prominent throughout Central and Eastern Europe as foreign investment in media companies increased, and concentration became an issue (Hanretty 2014).

A number of scholars and observers have reflected on the emergence of foreign dominance in the domestic media as opposed to local initiatives. The reason for the lack of euphoric free-market

publishing has been attributed to, for the most part, a problem of capital, exacerbated by a lack of willingness or availability of domestic investors to finance new publications in a printing environment characterized by a desperate need for technological innovation (Šmíd 2004, 8). In addition, the inviting regulatory environments of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) soon was to attract the interest of foreign capital, and the Czech Republic, with the most open market, was a prime location for media companies interested in expansion, particularly from Switzerland and Germany. Far from being interpreted as a hostile invasion, others felt that foreign capital provided a sort of guarantee against internal tyranny represented by the glowing coals of communist interests (Wyka-Podkówka 2014, 35).

As a result, for approximately a decade and a half after the pre-transition stage, the Czech media environment consisted of a rather remarkable consolidation of investment in local media by foreign, predominantly European-based media owners. The print market became particularly concentrated, at its peak, featuring 88 percent of national daily newspapers with foreign ownership and a virtual monopoly in the regional daily sector with 100 percent controlled by one foreign company, Verlagsgruppe Passau GmbH. The broadcast market rose to the top of the scale of ownership concentration among CEE countries, with both the private television and radio markets dominated by foreign capital, and movements toward conglomeration were also becoming reality, with trends in cross-media ownership appearing (Štětka 2010, 877).

With issues of media ownership, objective numbers appearing in quantitative studies strike fear in the hearts of many, but the reality behind them is often much more subjective. Studies based on counting look dangerous on paper, but proving the impact on culture based on numbers is notoriously difficult. In the fog of uncertainty, however, it is no less scary. Understanding the real impact of the stunning foreign investment in the Czech media has been approached by some scholars, but conclusions are difficult and often lack systematic, comprehensive, and empirical approaches. Concerns voiced in various papers have focused mostly on the impact on diversity and public opinion formation as opposed to the spread of ideology. Some have asked to what extent a commercial, popular, often tabloid approach to content creation and dissemination has had a negative impact on the ideals of a quality public sphere (Štětka 2012, 437). Others have considered to what extent Western approaches to the professional roles of journalists were at odds with local perceptions of development (Volek 2010). The traditional concern of to what extent foreign capital and media initiatives came at the expense of nurturing indigenous media industries has also been voiced (Gulyas 1999). Perhaps the strongest words depicting the impact of foreign investment came from an often-quoted passage in a paper by the European Federation of Journalists declaring the new “foreign capital monopoly” to “the old state monopoly,” and directly implicating ownership factors in “the failure of Czech newspapers to exercise the important role of public watchdog” (European Federation of Journalists 2004).

As the old saying goes, actions speak louder than words, and thus the exit of foreign companies from Central and Eastern Europe toward the end of the first decade of the twentieth century seems to have left behind any ideological assumptions behind the motivation for foreign ownership, pointing toward profit as the overwhelming reason for the stage of investment in the Czech media. This motive would change significantly as the Czech Republic moved into a new stage of ownership featuring wealthy local business and industry figures.

Tycoons? Moguls? Oligarchs!

Although concerns regarding excessive foreign ownership did exist as described earlier, one key aspect that the phenomena did arguably provide was stability. Not only was there an absence of direct instrumentalization by owners, but the profit factor, as being the overwhelming motivation for a significant presence on the market, was not at odds with the prevailing neoliberal views on the economy domestically nor internationally. This was all—rather unexpectedly—changed with the gradual exit of international media companies from the Central and Eastern European region. Generally attributed to falling revenues as a result of the global financial crisis of 2008–2009 (Štětka 2012, 433–456), the print media market in the Czech Republic was to significantly and abruptly change in 2013. This marked an end to over two decades of the “classic” or “pure” style of media ownership of primarily media-based holdings, to owners with major holdings in non-media areas (Tunstall 1983, 115–120). In the space of weeks, two of the largest print companies on the market were sold to three of the wealthiest business persons in the country, creating a trio of billionaire local media owners with national reach—each with extensive holdings in the areas in the industries of energy, agriculture, and investments. Andrej Babiš bought MAFRA from *Rheinische Post*, while Daniel Křetínský and Patrik Tkáč bought Ringier Axel Springer's domestic interests. The four, along with Zdeněk Bakala, owner of Economia, comprised a triad of domestic media proprietors, completely replacing foreign media owners. Two years later, Vltava Labe Press was sold by Verlagsgruppe Passau to the Penta Investment Group, bringing home the long-criticized regional press monopoly to another non-media owner with significant business interests. The final chapter in the transfer of international to local owners took place in 2020 with the domestic PPF taking over control of Central European Media Enterprises Ltd. (CME) operations in the Czech Republic. Therefore, 30 years after the dawn of a rather remarkable period of foreign investment in media, an entirely new period appeared, with only semantics surrounding what to call the new owners remaining blurred. Indeed, Štětka engaged with the question of how to address the new media owners. Drawing from Koltsova (2006), Åslund (2007), Mount (2012) and Page and Winters (2009), he mused over the appropriateness of the “oligarch” term for the new Czech media owners, suggesting that due to the “oligarchic” approach to media ownership (investment behaviour similar to individuals in states where such owners are routinely termed as “oligarchs”), the term seemed to fit (Štětka 2015).

The implications brought about by these acquisitions are difficult to exaggerate. In many ways, it represents a textbook case in media capture, in others, the plot of a Hollywood blockbuster. In either of these visions, the leading role was to be inevitably played by Andrej Babiš. After emerging on the political scene with his political party ANO in 2011, he went on to become one of the most powerful media moguls in the country less than two years later with his purchase of the MAFRA media conglomerate from the retreating German owner. Roughly half a year later, in an almost entirely self-funded campaign, he led his party to near victory in parliamentary elections. After holding positions of Minister of Finance and Deputy Prime Minister, the victory of ANO in the 2017 elections led to his becoming Prime Minister. Promising to run the state as a business, with a populist strategy that would ostensibly benefit “ordinary people,” what followed was the emergence of a technocratic populist government (Buštková and Guasti 2019, 302–330), complete with anti-elite meanderings and rejection of left-right politics, propelled by a stunning political marketing team, capturing the popular imagination.

Perhaps the greatest legacy of the post-international owners' period was that the media scene in the Czech Republic would no longer be faceless—arguably, one of the most typical characteristics of the 'internationalized' period was that of virtual owner anonymity. The anonymous side of the domestic media environment would now consist of the rather rabid disinformation environment, which emerged at roughly the same time (Štětka et al. 2021, 90–109). The new mainstream Czech media environment, however, would be associated with faces and names, with reputations impossible to ignore and political connections often worn on their sleeves. This is not to say all yearn for visibility; often, it is quite the contrary. However, the billionaire backgrounds and, in many cases, controversial holdings which made them their fortunes, combined with local influence (as opposed to foreign owners), made the ownership model significantly different. The very reason for the exit of foreign media investors—lack of financial perspective and, in most cases, outright losses, was not an issue for the new owners. Their motivations clearly stem from the possibility of influence—even if this consists of building a philanthropic image. In terms of media ownership, the domestic environment remains far from tendencies in advanced economies seeking synergetic and portfolio diversification purposes and remains at the classic, initial stage of industrial interests investing in media for reasons of influence (Noam 2018, 1096–1130).

Lex Babiš and the End of an Era

Parliamentary elections brought about a rather surprising change in the autumn of 2021 with the victory of a broad coalition of parties (“Spolu”) formed to supplant Andrej Babiš and consequently ANO from power, foreshadowing a dramatic change in the domestic political environment and the media environment. Babiš's MAFRA thus needed to transform from a position of reporting on the government with delicate soft censorship to a new, opposition-oriented, attack approach, and dealing not only with the impact of the long-awaited court case related to EU subsidy fraud (the so-called Čapí Hnízdo case) but also influencing the upcoming presidential election of 2022, in which Babiš would be a leading candidate. Babiš's remarkable acquittal four days before the election was doubtlessly a triumph, but seemingly too late for his marketing team to use it to turn the tide of public opinion in his favour in the second concurrent battle for the presidency of the Czech Republic.

Simmering in the background of these events was an election promise the newly elected government coalition vowed to make good on—an amendment to the conflict-of-interest law, which aimed to limit ownership by politicians, a potential legislative coup which could possibly bring an end to the reign of Babiš over Czech media and politics and dramatically reduce the threat of future cases of political instrumentalism. In August of 2023, the so-called Lex Babiš legislation was signed into law by the former opponent of Babiš in the presidential election, Petr Pavel. The bill strengthens oversight by the Office of Supervision of the Management of Political Parties and Movements and specifically restricts senators, deputies, government officials, and the president from operating radio and television broadcasters and publishing publications. It only applies to the actual owner of the media operator and not to the controlling person to avoid circumventing the prohibition. Subsidies and investment incentives intended for government officials via corporations are also prohibited.

The consequences of the passing of the amendment were immediate. Within one month, MAFRA would be sold. Unsurprisingly, the purchase was made by another billionaire with significant

industrial interests and no track record in media. Speculation abounds about the intentions of the new owner (Karel Pražák—owner of investment group Kaprain), who, at the press conference after the purchase, said that it is unclear if they would keep the media company or sell it to one of the many interested parties (*iRozhlas* 2023).

From Media Capture to Platform Capture

The concept of media capture in its classic, original form describes the impact of government and/or vested interests networked with politics on influencing the media (Green 2021; Mungiu-Pippidi 2008; Schiffrin 2017). Czech Republic was arguably rather immune to this classic form of media capture in the foreign ownership stage but became increasingly vulnerable to it as local owners bought up the majority of the media from exiting foreign owners (Vojtěchovská 2017). Indeed, non-media owners with wealth that allows them to maintain loss-making media outlets in exchange for an agenda-setting role in public affairs, furthermore willing to loosen standards to make the news media more profitable, has been an identifying characteristic in the period since the transition to local owners of the last decade (Kotisoava and Waschková Císařová 2021).

With new legislation forbidding media ownership by politicians, it is possible to see the exit of Babiš and his media empire as the symbolic closing of the third stage in the independent Czech Republic's media development. The Czech media environment in the late Babiš era had begun to adopt more and more characteristics of the expanding understanding of capture, which has become more complex as a result of the transformation of the revenue model for the media in the context of the decline of scarcity and the rise of digital media (Schiffrin 2021, 8–10). Indeed, the concept of media capture has progressed from the original instrumentalist focus and taken on a pivotal role in describing the confounding nature of the functioning of the contemporary news media in the context of a heavily concentrated, global, digital platform-based environment featuring transnational media entities such as X, TikTok, Alphabet companies including Google and YouTube, and Meta companies including Facebook and Instagram. The traditional capture threat of commercial and political interests using their leverage to impact public opinion has become compounded by a business model that has collapsed in the face of significant technological change (Nechushtai 2017; Partin 2020).

Platform capture acknowledges that news organizations of all types rely on platforms to gain access to their networks, audiences, data, publishing guidelines, funding, and advertising revenue, and this dependence informs editorial, organizational, and commercial decisions (Radsch 2023). The trend is not limited to a few Western democracies; the threat to the survival of the news media is global. The widespread threat of platform capture is partially due to the fact that digital news has surpassed traditional media, owing to smartphones and 4G networks becoming increasingly affordable (Jin 2013). As a direct result, social media and other digital platforms are not merely another important newsroom delivery channel but the overwhelming main channel. In the United States, for example, recent data shows 86 percent say they often or sometimes get news from digital sources, with half of all US adults saying they at least sometimes get news via social media (Liedke and Wang 2023). In the Czech Republic, the share of individuals reading news online in 2022 was 83 percent (Eurostat 2023). The most visited site for news in the Czech Republic is *Novinky.cz*, owned by the local internet portal *Seznam.cz*. However, with those using social media in Czechia as a primary source of news at 53 percent and rising (Štětka 2022), it is not clear how

long this popularity will last. Other areas of platform capture may be instructive: *Seznam* also owns a formerly very popular local search engine which for years was able to capture a fair share of the search market, but in recent years has declined significantly, with it now hovering close to the European average of 90 percent for Google (StatCounter 2024).

Beyond accessibility, another reason that the public turns to digital platforms is due to a decline in trust in traditional media (Coster 2023). In countries where a lack of trust in the media is high, citizens seek alternative sources. At 34 percent, the Czech Republic has a very low trust in the media (Mihelj and Štětka 2022), and thus, the movement toward digital platforms is instructive. Since digital platforms are a key source of disinformation and polarization (Ardia et al. 2020; Baines, O’Shaughnessy, and Snow 2020; López-García et al. 2021; Wooley and Howard 2019) citizens seeking ‘alternative narratives’ may be at risk as they become accustomed to accessing news and information via digital platforms, particularly in the highly active Czech disinformation environment (Štětka, Mazák, and Vochocová 2020). Studies have shown that Czechs are indeed vulnerable to disinformation and conspiracies being spread online, with one survey showing very serious levels at 40 percent (*STEM* 2021). Although perhaps well-monitored by a collection of NGOs and, to a minor extent, the Ministry of the Interior, mechanisms do not exist to protect the public from an ever-hostile disinformation scene.

Perhaps the most decisive way in which platform capture influences the public sphere is through its impact on the traditional foundations of the financing of the news media (Holder et al. 2023). To support media ventures in the global advertising desert created by the duopoly of Alphabet (Google) and Meta (Facebook, Instagram), smaller organizations are faced with the prospects of financial capture through being forced to rely on various levels of funding, including philanthropists with expectations and native advertising (Schiffrin 2017). In a number of countries around the world—including the Czech Republic—Google and local publishers have been signing payment deals. Non-disclosure agreements govern these arrangements; thus, neither the amounts nor the precise formula used to determine the payments are frequently disclosed to the public (Schiffrin and Mateen 2023). Those that have made deals with Google in terms of paying for news are destined to have a distinct advantage—it is not clear if the sums Google is paying a select number of Czech media organizations for the right to distribute their news content will grow with new ventures appearing (Jetmar 2021). Additionally, a reluctance to criticize negative practices by big media companies in the areas of competition, commerce, privacy and more, or ‘bite the hand that feeds them,’ takes the plague of capture elsewhere. There is an obvious power imbalance between newsrooms that are running on small margins and some of the biggest and most profitable digital corporations in the world.

Finally, a major concern with platform capture is the decline in quality as a result of the lack of funding for independent news ventures. Thus, not only professional journalists themselves but also news organizations are declining, adding to the phenomenon of ‘news deserts’ (Dear 2023). To summarize, research on the understudied area of platform capture points toward the speeding up of the demise of the news business model, the promotion of polarization, and the allowing of false information to proliferate and thrive (Usher 2021). Evidence of these factors in the Czech Republic is clear, and rapidly, platform capture is arguably becoming a more serious threat than the receding one of classic media capture via instrumentalization of non-pure media owners.

From Here to Where?

The tale of media ownership among countries in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) bears many similarities and points for comparison, with all going through major transformations from state-controlled to free market economies in which free media plays a decisive role. Hallin and Mancini's (2004) concept of instrumentalization, or the manipulation of the media by outside parties, politicians, social groups, or businesses looking to gain political clout and utilize the media to meddle in politics, has been a significant feature in all CEE states resulting in various degrees of capture. The last three years of Babiš's reign as prime minister saw the Czech Republic's position in Reporters Without Borders (RSF) rankings, which regularly monitor objective threats to media pluralism, stagnant at 40. Reports confirmed assumptions: Czechia ranked extremely high risk in areas connected to media ownership concentration issues, the impact of commercial forces and owner influence on content and editorial autonomy, and social inclusiveness (Štětka and Hájek 2021). In each case, all roads clearly lead back to the state of ownership. The weak, dated legal context in competition did little to protect the plurality of voices, and that same regulatory area discouraged transparency of ownership by making virtually no demands on owners. Questions of editorial autonomy were obvious with the explicit conflict of interest posed by the country's arguably most visible politician at the helm of a key media conglomerate, not to mention those raised by other owners with business interests in key areas. However, there is evidence that after three decades as an independent state, the Czech media clearly have fared the best of their closest neighbours. Looking at the Visegrad Group (V4) in terms of data from Reporters Without Borders, the Czech Republic ranked a remarkable seventeenth place in 2024 (after ranking a record high fourteenth place in 2023), Slovakia at twenty-ninth, Poland at forty-seventh, and Hungary at sixty-seventh (Reporters Without Borders 2024).

It cannot be ignored that there is reason for optimism in terms of the domestic media environment. The Lex Babiš amendment to media legislation has dismantled the risk of direct political influence and reduced the risk of direct media capture. Although influence by business tycoons owning large amounts of legacy media remains an obvious threat, the continuation or reflowering of a Berlusconi-Babiš scenario has been avoided—lest there be the unlikely impact on 'Internet media,' which the new amendment does not include. Additionally, a positive progression is that the relatively small, independent media opposition still shows no indication it cannot survive.

As reviewed in this paper, the three-decade development of the independent Czech media has seen three dominant stages: internationalization, rampant commercialization, and influence by domestic oligarchs. A fourth stage, that of platform capture, is an emerging reality. With distrust in mainstream media at an all-time high and continued migration toward online news, citizens are left to the whims of a rabid domestic disinformation environment and a lack of funding for long-term news media enterprises with no connection to global tech companies. As Marincea (2023) notes in assessing the state of the Romanian media, "The challenge that we are now facing is how to regulate and control the spread of a media business model that is clearly increasingly harmful to societies' health, democratic politics, public education and knowledge, without strengthening censorship and authoritarian practices, without using the same tools that brought us here or giving extra power to unaccountable it corporations" (101).

In recent times, there has been increased discussion concerning the decline of democracy, the death of liberalism and the triumph of illiberalism, global trends which are strongly evident in Central and Eastern Europe. Štětka and Mihelj (2022), building upon Habermas's (1989) public sphere

concept, offer a definition of the threat to democracy in a media context, seeing an illiberal public sphere as “a communicative space comprising both traditional and new media that promote and amplify illiberal actors, views and attitudes” (3). Although the authors note that the illiberal public sphere is in its infancy in the Czech Republic, the direct threat of its development can be seen in nearby states in the “frontline of illiberalism” (10) of Eastern Europe, such as Hungary and Serbia. As mentioned earlier, the basis for escalation in the context of platform capture is clear: the spread of illiberal themes and moods from social media and messaging sites from the margins to the mainstream, the decline of trust in legacy media and institutions, and a hyperactive disinformation environment.

A pan-European approach to dealing with digital media giants and stemming the bleeding of local news may bring positive results to the domestic environment through the European Union’s Media Freedom Act, which comes into force on August 8, 2025, but it is not clear to what extent dependency will be impacted. For the time being, the stages of foreign ownership, power, and commercialism that the Czech Republic knew in the early stages of its development may be making a comeback in the form of platform capture but at a decidedly more complex level.

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