

Public insulting of journalists by Czech leaders

By Lucie Sykorova

Prime minister accused of grant fraud, the vice-chairman of the Chamber of Deputies sued of antisemitism and holocaust denial, the president permanently assaulting and publicly insulting journalists. This is going on in the heart of Europe – in the Czech Republic. And situation in media?

The oligarchization of the biggest media houses after 2008 has led to self-censorship, falling quality of the content, which is often more and more submitted to commercial or political interests, but also developing new high-quality media though fighting financing problems. Public trust in media and journalists is at lowest level ever. Furthermore, public service media is hit by question marks.

At the beginning of this year the director of Czech broadcast Rene Zavoral rebuked publicly one of the investigative reporters of the Czech broadcast, the author of a reportage about doubtful farming of prime minister's company Agrofert. Immediately after the reportage was broadcasted in November 2017 a "process" started.

According to the company, but also to some members of the Public TV- and Radio Council, the reportage should have been partial and poor-quality. The director of the broadcast let prepare three analysis about this case. After receiving them, he chose only one, the critical and ignored two non-critical. He declared, that reporters in Czech broadcast will get some training to avoid such "mistakes" in the future.

Most of Czech journalists and also many employees of the Czech broadcast evaluated it as an attempt to limit reporters in their work, more than 200 signed a petition. Further development is awaited now, however it was another "punch" for investigative journalists, who are already now facing big mistrust and more and more assaults from the public.

Director brings his journalists in a vulnerable situation

When the director of the Czech broadcast, Rene Zavoral did not support his own reporter, he systematically supports doubtful awards by his membership of a jury Award for independent journalists (Krameriova cena).

This award is granted every year (since 2016) by the Association of independent media (Asociace nezávislých médií), which was founded in March 2015 by editors of websites spreading many conspiracies and disinformations, but also antisemitism and anti-EU moods. The chairman is Stanislav Novotný, the former police president. He's well known for his statements like: Electing of Donald Trump means attempt to return to normality for America and the whole world; I'm for Czexit, etc.

Not surprisingly winners of the Award are mostly reporters oriented on Russia, against EU and the immigration politics of EU. Last years award-winner, the blogger Ladislav Větvicka, said in an interview for example: „...we need a president, who would be strong in negotiations about our Schengen-leaving and closing the border to Germany (Merkelland), in

case that Dublin IV. (I say Munich II.) will be approved... European fascistic-clerical groups concentrated in Brussels, push the criminal strategy of Kalerghi-plan..." etc.

Andrej Babiš, the “Czech Berlusconi”

The situation in Czech media went worse in 2013, when Andrej Babiš, the owner of the food and agro-industrial group Agrofert and the Czech Republic's second richest man, entered politics and took over the biggest media house MAFRA media group. Thereby he got control over two most influential dailies (*Lidové Noviny* and *Mlada Fronta Dnes*) and the most popular news website (*iDnes.cz*). He also acquired one of the biggest private-owned radio stations (*Radio Impuls*), the music TV channel (*Óčko*), and added the free weekly *Tydeník 5+2*, which he founded in 2012.

In 2011 he founded a populist political party Action of Dissatisfied Citizens (ANO), which celebrated big success in the parliamentary elections 2013. Andrej Babiš established an alliance in the parliament with two other political parties and became deputy prime minister and minister of finance. Therefore, he has been called “the Czech Berlusconi”.

In 2017 Andrej Babiš tried to influence the content on the daily MFdnes, which was revealed through leaked audiorecording from his meeting with the journalist from the daily newspaper MFdnes Marek Pribil.

Prime minister investigated by police but supported by president

AGROFERT holding includes more than 250 companies in 22 countries (mostly agriculture, chemical and food industry – since 2013 also German Bakery Lieken AG), yearly turnover is cca 167 billion CZK (= cca 6,2 bil. EUR). In January 2017 transferred Andrej Babiš AGROFERT holding into a trust fund (due to „Lex Babiš“ – the new law about conflict of interests).

At the moment Andrej Babiš is investigated by police for possible tax shortening and suspicion of grants fraud in the case „Čapí hnízdo“ (Stork nest). This case was investigated by OLAF (European Anti-Fraud Office), which found an error and recommended to take the project out of the grants programm. The amount of 50 mil. CZK (cca 2mil. EUR) will be therefore paid by the state.

In the parliamentary elections in October 2017, the Babiš's party ANO got the absolute winner (nearly 30% votes). Andrej Babiš was nominated as prime minister and tried to establish government. His cabinet didn't succeed in voting of confidence. After that Andrej Babiš lost the parliamentary immunity and now he's officially investigated by police.

However, in the meantime the presidential elections took place with Miloš Zeman as the winner. Regardless of the charges he renominated Andrej Babiš as prime minister.

In relation to the case of Andrej Babiš, the press and media freedom in the Czech republic was discussed on the 30th of Mai 2017 on the meeting of the Committee on Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs and then on the 1th of June on the plenary session of the European Parliament:

<http://www.europarl.europa.eu/ep-live/en/committees/video?event=20170530-1400-COMMITTEE-LIBE>

Czech president: journalists should be liquidated

Journalists covering election night late January 2018 at the Czech presidential campaign headquarters in a Prague hotel were verbally assaulted, shoved, and prevented from filming by Zeman's supporters. Czech police investigate the incident for breach of peace. Zeman's spokesman, Jiri Ovcacek, sent a text message to one of the assaulted female reporter, saying he felt sorry and condemning the attack. Milos Zeman did not give any statement.

Miloš Zeman is in the habit of insulting and threatening the media. On the first day of his presidency in 2013, he stated that some journalists were "brainwashing people" and "manipulating opinion." On the first day of his reelection in January 2018 he mentioned his opinion about journalists as stupid people. In 2017, he joked with Russia's President Vladimir Putin that there were too many journalists, and some should be liquidated. In October 2017, during a press conference Zeman was greeting journalists with a dummy Kalashnikov with "for journalists" written on the side, which he had been given to him as a gift.

What means the truth to electors, readers, viewers?

Most of electors probably do not care much about the truth anymore. As wrote the reporter Carl Bernstein for The Guardian, 29.4. 2016: "I think that today, too many people are not interested in the best attainable version of the truth. They are really interested in information that will buttress what they already believe. Ammunition for their political beliefs that they already hold".

This would explain another phenomenon of Czech politics, the success of Tomio Okamura, the Chairman of the radical right-wing Party for Direct Democracy (SPD) and current vice-chairman of the Chamber of Deputies. His party received 11% of the vote in the parliamentary elections in October 2017, although his campaign was based only on the fear of migrants and islamisation, which is in the Czech republic not topical problem at all (there are practically no muslim migrants in the country). At the moment Tomio Okamura is sued of antisemitism and holocaust denial...

However he is one of the most arrogant and hostile politicians towards journalists. He is insulting and disgracing them constantly, selecting who gets accreditation to press conferences organized by his party, and who gets answers from them and who not, which is becoming a "popular" habit of Czech politicians. And the public? Just applauds these methods, and, encouraged by politician's behavior, assaults journalists too, calling them useless and annoying...

Tomio Okamura also publicly called for bringing the public service media, Czech television, and Czech radio, under the direct state control. And here he has got one big ally – Andrej Babiš. He has hinted more than once that he would not be against the idea of nationalizing Czech TV.

Andrej Babiš, Tomio Okamura and Miloš Zeman concur that TV Barrandov is their favourite. A channel owned by another rich businessman, Jaromir Soukup, a former boxer, even host of all evening political shows and interviews. The channel strictly ignores all rules and principles of independent high-quality journalism. The message, which these politicians send to the public by promoting and favoring this TV channel, is clear: high-quality and professional journalism is not needed, even contrarily...

Focus needed as threats on media are increasing

#1 After 2008 the ownership of most media has been concentrated into hands of few local billionaires; at least one of them verifiably tried to misuse the ownership for his interests, and self-censorship in those newsrooms has increased. Some of well-respected journalists decided to leave these media and to found their own news-websites. Traditional media are slowly losing their standard through this situation, which has of course an impact on public – they rightfully lose their trust in these media and in media as such.

#2 Some politicians in power after parliamentary elections in October 2017, often verbally assault and insult journalists as such, and their behavior encourages people to do the same. Journalists are facing vulgar insults, dirty language and mockery, after the presidential elections in January in few cases also violence.

#3 Politicians are also introducing a new “habbit” – some of them started to select journalists, some of journalists do not get accreditation to press conferences and are just ignored – do not get any answer.

#4 Local journalists have often very bad working conditions. More of them are forced to work as freelance without any benefits, but with the same duties as employees. Regional media practically resigned from doing investigative journalism – they cannot afford it.

#5 Journalists in the Czech republic are not united and integrated by naming these problems. Most of active journalists are not members of the Syndicate of journalists and there does not exist any other professional organization for journalists.