
Czech media freedom: Let citizens decide fate of media-abusing politicians

Media freedom must be upheld across the EU, but the Czech case is more a blunder of one politician than a systemic issue, many MEPs said in a debate on Thursday.

The plenary debate was held in reaction to a leaked audio recording, allegedly catching the leader of the Czech coalition ANO party, the former Deputy Prime Minister and Finance Minister Andrej Babiš, instructing a journalist employed by his media group on how to attack his political rivals.

Many MEPs condemned the alleged actions of Mr Babiš, but stressed that this seems to be the failure of a single politician, rather than a sign of the government's systemic abuse of media. Some said the Parliament should not be discussing the issue at all, arguing that the Czech government has dealt with the situation properly. Others noted that the problem reaches further than the Czech Republic and called for EU measures that would guarantee media pluralism in Europe.

Flavour of the debate

Click on individual names to watch the full statements:

Cecilia Malmström, the EU Commissioner for Trade, noted in her introductory speech that the Commission's competences in the field of media freedom and pluralism are limited. "The Commission can intervene in this field exclusively when there is EU legislation at stake and it appears not to be the case in this situation."

She stressed that the EU's executive body "is aware of the challenges of media freedom and pluralism in various member states" and is "closely monitoring the situation all over Europe."

"No member state in the EU is immune to risks when it comes to media pluralism," Commissioner Malmström stressed. The transparency of media ownership is an indicator of media freedom, where "the Czech Republic's perceived risk is slightly higher than the average," she added.

Luděk Niedermayer (EPP, CZ) stressed that neither Czech citizens, nor the Czech government, has done anything wrong. It is the fault of a few individuals, he insisted. Member states need to properly enforce their legislation and support independent journalism, he said, warning there are external threats too to face, such as Russian propaganda. He concluded by thanking all journalists who withstand political pressure and deliver quality journalism.

Pavel Poc (S&D, CZ) echoed the previous speaker, by saying there is no systematic manipulation of media by the Czech government, just one politician who abused the media and was then sacked from the government. Contempt for democratic institutions is a real threat to media pluralism, he said, warning of the risk of future political abuse of Czech media from politicians enjoying enormous political, economic and media power.

Jan Zahradil (ECR, CZ) considered the debate unnecessary and that the Parliament should not be dealing with this issue. We have media pluralism in the Czech Republic, there is no media monopoly, no threat to media freedom, just one oligarch who has used his media, and the Czech Republic had already adopted a law to deal with such conflicts of interests, he assured the plenary. He also said that the debate was a result of a fight between the ALDE, which criticised Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, and EPP, which now wants to counter-attack.

Pavel Telička (ALDE, CZ) was also not quite sure why MEPs were discussing the issue. The EP is supposed to deal with systematic problems, he said, and even though the behaviour of Andrej Babiš was unacceptable, this was just a single case. Instead of discussing a failure of one Czech politician, the Parliament should focus on working on the EU's future, he stressed. He also pointed out that the World Press Freedom Index puts the Czech Republic higher than other EU member states, such as France or UK.

Kateřina Konečná (GUE/NGL, CZ) also stressed that the criticism should not be directed against Czech citizens or the country per se. There is only one guilty party and that is Andrej Babiš, who bought media companies to bolster his political power, she said, noting that this is not the first time EU politicians are trying to influence media in their respective member states. She also criticised ALDE leader Guy Verhofstadt, EU Commissioner Věra Jourová, and MEP Telička for knowing all about Mr Babiš, but looking the other way. The fate of Mr Babiš is now in the hands of Czech citizens, she concluded.

Judith Sargentini (Greens/EFA, NL) said this is not the first time that an EU member state is in such a situation, pointing to the situation in Italy in 2009. Plurality of media is vital for democracy and therefore we need EU legislation that will guarantee media pluralism in Europe and ensure that media do not end up in the hands of a few individuals, she stressed.

Rolandas Paksas (EFDD, LT) said this debate was more of a provocation than anything else. We are interfering in the domestic politics of a sovereign state, he warned. While Mr Babiš is one of the most popular Czech politicians, popularity of PM Sobotka is plummeting and some people do not like it here, he said. He also pointed to other issues the Parliament could discuss, such as the way that Sweden or Germany are dealing with immigrants.

You can re-watch the entire debate [here](#).

#CzechRepublic #media

Further information

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