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Introduction

Just 15 years ago, the Czech media market was held up as an example of a post-communist country whose media market thrived in terms of plurality, good practice and journalistic culture, as well as the political and economic systems and citizens' attitudes and opinions on the media (Toepfl, 2013). There were strong private media outlets owned by profit-oriented foreign companies, mostly German, and experienced publishers (which brought different issues). However, the recession of 2008 started a process that deflected this trend, a development that Václav Štětka (2011) linked to the then current situation in Italy. Although the Czech media landscape is still quite open and diverse, as evidenced by its 17th-place ranking in the 2025 World Press Freedom Index (Reporters Without Borders, 2024), new challenges are emerging that raise concerns.

Outlets and owners

Since the pilot study of the EurOMo research project, major changes have occurred in the ownership of Czech media outlets. Mafra, a media house, which controls approximately one quarter of the Czech press market and publishes important outlets in the Czech media landscape such as Mladá Fronta Dnes and the online news site iDnes.cz, was bought by billionaire Karel Pražák. This made the ownership less problematic, as the previous owner (via trust funds), Andrej Babiš, was and still is an active politician. This has commonly led to speculation (sometimes confirmed, as in the case of journalist Marek Příbil, who consulted Andrej Babiš about some of his articles), regarding the influence of the owner and potential editorial breaches. Journalists were placed in a difficult position, which they rationalised in different ways (Kotišová & Waschková Císařová, 2021).

Although concerns about the influence of the Mafra owner are less prevalent in public debate nowadays, the trade between Pražák and Babiš shows that the media is still one of the assets through which the Czech business elite diversifies its portfolio. As our datasets show, most outlets are owned by Czech billionaires from other sectors, such as fossil fuels and financial markets (Daniel Křetínský), the chemical industry (Karel Pražák), search engine operations and other digital services (Ivo Lukačovič), and financial services and telecommunications (Renáta Kellnerová), to name a few. While finishing the EurOMo work, it was announced that another fossil fuels billionaire, Pavel Tykač, is buying a 50% share of aforementioned publishing house Mafra through his company Tymeprax.¹ The transaction must be approved by the Czech authorities (Aust, 2025). What raises concerns of the Mafra newsrooms independence from the new owner's influence is his recent statement that he bought the company to protect it from progressive left-wing opinions (Štěpení, 2025).

This fact also stems from the common structure of Czech media ownership: a publishing house is owned by one or more parent companies, which ultimately end in a shareholding company whose shares are not publicly traded, and information on the company's ownership is not explicitly stated in the business register. However, this information can be obtained in either the annual reports

¹ Since the trade is not confirmed yet, it is not projected to the search engine and corporate structure of EurOMo.

uploaded there or the Register of Beneficial Owners². Both tools facilitate obtaining information on Czech media ownership. The latter is especially useful in cases where the ownership chain extends to foreign countries such as Cyprus (Ivo Lukačovič, Karel Pražák and the Penta Group), the Netherlands (the Kellner family) and Luxembourg (Daniel Křetínský). The rationale behind this could be tax optimisation, but it could also be to obfuscate the ownership structure, as we cannot know if there are any other companies or individuals involved in the chain.

This shows that, while substantial, the changes in media ownership were not conceptual. The Czech media market continues to play a role in the concentration of political, economic and media power in the country. Compared to other European countries, the Czech Republic is characterised by sectoral transformation towards business (advertising and paywalls) and structural transformation towards politics rather than economic factors (Berglez et al., 2025).

In 2024, an important case demonstrated the value of the media to Czech billionaires when journalist investigations revealed that arms entrepreneur Michal Strnad had attempted to take over the popular Czech online news outlet Seznam Zprávy through various manipulations involving the then editor-in-chief (J. Zelenka, 2024; F. Zelenka & Štorkán, 2024). As a parent company, Seznam.cz is a specific case (see Distribution) and is a powerful player in the advertising sector, which is an important source of revenue for media outlets.

As this case and our data show, the Czech media market and its most influential figures are largely divided between owners whose interests span various sectors, including those that are heavily regulated by the state (Vojtěchovská, 2017). The main risk is the instrumentalisation of the media in line with the owners' business or other interests, even when editorial independence is guaranteed. The public is therefore right to be concerned that media content is published merely to serve the interests of the outlet's owners. This suspicion can sometimes grow, as it did when the tabloid newspaper Blesk started to criticise the then-minister Josef Síkela because the state had bought the company NET4GAS, which distributes gas to the Czech Republic, in which Blesk's beneficial owner, Daniel Křetínský, was also interested. The newspaper dedicated several front pages to this topic and the minister's criticism (Klímová, 2023). Mr Křetínský exerts considerable influence over the Czech media landscape by owning several press outlets (tabloids and magazines) and radio stations through his holding company, Czech Media Invest, which also has assets in other countries, particularly France. Other European media companies with a presence in the Czech Republic include the Kellner family's CME (operating in Bulgaria, Croatia, Romania, Moldova, Slovakia and Slovenia) and the Penta Group's News & Media Holding, which publishes numerous outlets in Slovakia.

In addition to private media, which have gradually become part of wider corporate or holding structures, there is a second important sector of the market: public service media such as Czech Television, Czech Radio, and the Czech News Agency. They still have high societal relevance, as illustrated by their high population reach and public trust, which remains relatively high (Štětka, 2024) and increases regularly during times of crisis, despite attacks on PSM from different political parties. However, the loss of trust can also be partly due to not representing some anti-

² It should be noted here that access to the Register of Beneficial Owners becomes limited on December 17th, 2025. Interested organisations, including NGO's or media, will have to ask for permission at regional courts where the companies are located. The Czech Ministry of Justice wants to solve this problem with a new law but it is unclear when it will come to force (Cibulka, 2025). It will influence media and other ownership transparency heavily.

systemic views (Smejkal, 2025). On the other hand, it can be increased by offering various content for different societal groups through different platforms (Urbániková, Guyanese, Smejkal, 2025).

Nevertheless, their position is endangered because of underfunding, especially as the licence fees, which make up the majority of Czech TV and Radio's income, were only raised this year after more than ten years of stagnation. 2025's public debate also highlighted the unstable and unclear position of public service media. Some entrepreneurial journalists and content creators argued that PSM have an unfair advantage when they publish their work on the same podcast platforms as them because of their strong organisational background. Public debate on the role of Czech Television and Czech Radio (the Czech News Agency is usually excluded because it is economically self-sufficient thanks to its news and other services business) usually focuses on the licence fee and who should pay it, which undermines a more general understanding of PSM as an important societal cohesion actor (Jetmar, 2024). However, an important memorandum discussing the various roles and activities of Czech TV was approved by the Council and is set to be signed by the Director General and the Minister of Culture. The memorandum deals with issues such as the proportion of foreign and regional news, the educational role of entertainment programmes, and the role of Czech TV's online news websites, which, according to the document, should play only a minor role in the television's production (Potůček, 2025). The document is planned to be revised every five years, which could help to defend against political and economic power holders.

While the direct and beneficial owners of traditional media outlets (including online news outlets) can be easily traced in the Czech system, it becomes more complicated regarding accounts on very large online platforms (VLOPs), as defined by the EU's Digital Services Act. There are two categories: accounts belonging to traditional media outlets and those belonging to content creators. Most analysed outlets, including public service ones, do not name the person(s) responsible for the account, meaning that content production is less transparent to the public. In the case of content creators, some information is always missing. For example, XTV, which presents itself as an alternative to traditional media, lacks any details about the editorial board or employees. In the case of Kecy a politika, we can only presume who the direct owner of the channel is based on two-year-old news reports. In the case of the Jsem v obraze account, the platform is not transparent about the creator Johana Bázlerová's other politically oriented activities, which include previous works for a political party, the Senate chairman, and currently for the British Embassy.

Despite all the aforementioned issues, Czech media ownership remains quite transparent. It is positive that Czech media outlets have recently made their ethical codes more transparent in cooperation with the Czech Syndicate of Journalists (NFNŽ, 2025; Syndikát novinářů České republiky, 2025). The main risk seems to be the inclusion of media in wider holding structures owned by the richest people in the country, who then use the media to further their own business, political or other interests. Independent or alternative media, meaning those with a worldview different to the dominant one, have a smaller reach among the general public. There is also a risk in the VLOP space, which is not so transparent because it is not normalised, where the ambition to produce news-related content should be matched by a willingness to be more open about ownership backgrounds. We also consider the lack of any official information on state funding or advertising from third countries by outlets or publishers to be a potential problem. From a financial point of view, this remains the main concern, as does the practice of giving advertising space to

political parties in outlets as a tax optimisation tool, which was already discovered in the pilot version of EurOMo.

Distribution

Media ownership in Czechia also influences distribution. The most visible example of this is První novinová společnost a. s., which is responsible for most of the country's press distribution. The three largest local newspaper and magazine publishers, Mafra a.s. (37.51%), Vltava Labe Media a.s. (35.04%) and Czech News Center a.s. (27.02%), own a majority stake in the company and therefore have a dominant position in the press distribution sector (První novinová společnost a.s. annual report, 2025). While this concentration of power in both news provision and distribution does not pose a severe risk to media transparency, given that information is easily obtainable, it does pose a significant risk to media plurality. This is more significant in terms of the ownership of these media outlets by the Czech economic elite.

In the TV sector, the position of the holding company PPF a.s., which owns companies in both content production and transmission, is concerning. The former is represented by the Netherlands-based company CME Media Enterprises B.V., and the latter by the international group Cetin, which provides telecommunications infrastructure, and O2, which operates in the internet and telecommunications provision sector. The latter company also operated an IPTV service, but in March 2025 it merged with the TV Nova streaming service Voyo, and now both operate under the Oneplay brand. The second commercial TV group, Prima, also offers a VOD service. Both services successfully compete with global streaming services in the local market.

The amendment to the Czech Copyright Act from 2024 was also motivated by the relationship and financial flows between global intermediaries and local publishers. This amendment transposed the EU Directive on Copyright in the Digital Single Market into Czech law. In 2021, the established Association of Online Publishers (Asociace online vydavatelů) became a collective administrator for its publishing members. Representing a greater number of online publishers could strengthen their position in negotiations with global VLOPs, which, despite a slight decline last year, remain important intermediaries between news producers and consumers (Štětka, 2024). It should be noted that this active association, which is a member of News Media Europe, does not have a similarly strong counterpart representing the interests of journalists themselves, despite some efforts by members of the Czech Syndicate of Journalists.

Dependence on digital intermediaries is problematic for all European countries, at least due to the lack of transparency surrounding their algorithms and policy changes. The Czech Copyright Act amendment highlighted these issues, too. Before the law came into force, digital intermediaries (most prominently Google) decided to stop showing previews and photos of media articles so that they would not be obliged to pay media outlets for advertising space. This resulted in an intrinsic loss of visits and, consequently, revenues too (Jetmar, 2022).

Regarding non-linear distribution, the Czech media landscape has one specific feature: a local digital service provider called Seznam.cz, which offers a search engine, email client and news-related services such as news feeds, advertising solutions, integration of online discussions on other websites, a blogging platform and a social media-like network. The parent company of this provider also owns three of the outlets in our sample. Despite not being the most visited website in the Czech Republic, it ranks just behind the global hegemonic services of Meta Platforms and

Google (Sdružení pro internetový rozvoj v ČR, 2025). This establishes Seznam.cz as a key player in news distribution. The Seznam.cz homepage plays a vital role in news discovery, as can be seen from the services listed on it (in the default version, users can personalise the layout after signing in). Firstly, there is a search bar, followed by headlines from Novinky.cz and Seznamzpravy.cz, and then headlines from other Seznam-owned media, such as an online tabloid and an online sports daily. Below all of these, there is the aforementioned newsfeed containing articles from other publishers. Although they are in a lower-priority position on the website, this integration can still represent an important source of revenue for publishers cooperating with Seznam.cz, who of course take their share. This example of a service again illustrates the significant conjunction between news provision and distribution in the Czech Republic.

The biggest concern regarding distribution is not transparency, but rather the concentration of ownership and cross-sector synergies, as seen in the Czech press, business synergies between telecommunications and TV, and the operation of VODs, or in the case of Seznam. These risky conjunctions are not well known to the public. There is more awareness of the lack of transparency of VLOPs and their intermediary role, which are still not subject to corresponding regulation given their enormous power in information distribution (Bailo, Meese & Hurcombe, 2021) in today's society.

Legal framework

The Czech legal framework for media ownership and transparency is robust, although there are only a few regulations. The Act on the Operation of Radio and Television Broadcasting (231/2001 Sb.) sets out the regulations that companies and their owners must comply with in order to operate a radio or TV broadcasting service. When applying for a licence to operate radio or TV broadcasting, company applicants must provide basic information such as their address and VAT number, as well as details of the executive and statutory bodies and the ownership structure (shareholders and voting rights). Applicants must also submit a business plan and details of their financial resources and declare any other interests they have in the same or other media sectors. However, all of this information is only intended for the Council for Radio and Television Broadcasting and is made public afterwards by other means. We can also suppose that the Council's role will strengthen in the coming years, as it will probably become responsible for enforcing some of the European Media Freedom Act (EMFA) regulations when the Act is transposed into Czech legislation.

Other media laws, such as the Act on Rights and Obligations in the Publication of Periodical Press and Amendments to Certain Other Acts (the 'Press Act'; 46/2000 Sb.), only vaguely regulate ownership transparency, typically by requiring the publisher's name and contact details to be published in the outlet or on its website. The same applies to digital audiovisual on-demand services. Any attempt to comply with European regulation may be counterproductive, as was the case with the AVSMD implementation. In autumn 2024, the Council for Radio and Television Broadcasting announced that it would prepare a register for audiovisual content creators competing with television broadcasters. This led to a loud backlash and adjustments to the register this year, which now requires creators of informational, entertaining or educational content to upload at least 52 videos a year. The most problematic aspect of these criteria is that the profile should have an average of 500 thousand views per year (Council for Radio and Television Broadcasting, 2025), a threshold that many creators, even influential ones, can only reach to a limited extent.

Another important law regulating media ownership was the Conflict of Interest Act (159/2006 Sb.), or its amendment (14/2017 Sb.), which forbade media ownership to politically exposed persons. It was nevertheless half-way solution – the amendment was accepted mainly because of the power concentration of then Minister of Finance, and current to-be prime minister, leader of ANO political movement and billionaire Andrej Babiš owning then also publisher Mafra, a. s., who moved his ownership under two private trusts so he de facto still controlled it including his media assets. Because of that, another amendment came in 2023, which forbade this private trust solution and basically led to a purchase of Mafra by Karel Pražák. To mergers and business including media, general antimonopoly and anti-concentration rules apply with no special treatment for the sector, which can be seen as a minor risk for media ownership diversity. Nevertheless, at the end of the year 2024 the Constitutional Court cancelled the amendment of the Conflict of Interest Act for procedural reasons. It is possible for politicians in high functions to own media now again, which concerns the European Commission (2025a).

As another risk we can see the usually slow process of transposition of European regulations to the Czech legislation (European Commission, 2025b). The reasons could be the requirement of complicated changes in Czech legal order and short implementation deadlines even (Whelanová, 2024). It leads not just to official warnings in the form of infringement procedures from the European organs but also to more unclear media environment and delay of important norms regulating services most of population use every day as was the case with Digital Service Act (for example EMFA can be implemented more easily since it's a regulation, not directive). It is more delicate since most contemporary regulations of VLOPs or media concentration originate from the European Union. Therefore, Czech legislation often cannot comply with normative expectations regarding today's media landscape, which has been radically transformed by digitalisation.

Final remarks

This concentration of economic and political power poses a risk to the transparency, plurality and freedom of the media in general. Justified concerns about VLOP's role in contemporary news consumption have been amplified by increased distrust of the media and an inability (or unwillingness) to implement meaningful regulation. The strong role of platforms therefore poses another significant risk: for instance, illiberal discourse can spread from them (Nesbitt, 2024). If we were to use the landscape metaphor, the Czech media landscape would be quite open with good visibility; however, it is highly divided between powerful domestic actors and the threat of a destructive forest fire.

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