

The gradual takeover of the Czech media system

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Changes in the ownership structure of mainstream Czech dailies are transforming what had been a relatively stable Czech media environment over the previous 20 years. Newspapers are now owned by major national business groups with political ties. This text discusses the developments in the ownership of Czech print media and illustrates the changes that the evolving ownership structure brings in terms of media content, media legislation, and public service media. It argues that changing ownership patterns have made media more dependent on the political and business elite and concludes that legislative changes are desirable with a view to protecting media pluralism in the country.

The most important development in the Czech media landscape of the last couple of years has been the sell-off of local media outlets by foreign investors who had taken over much of the Czech media market after the establishment of the Czech Republic in 1993 (Benda 2007), following the breakup of the former Czechoslovakia. It is too early to tell whether the recent takeover of local media outlets by owners with political ties will result in full-blown media capture, but signs are ominous. Supporters of media freedom hope that 2016 legislation regarding media ownership and conflict of interest will help address some of the potential problems.

The international ownership of Czech media that began in 1993 came primarily from neighboring German-speaking countries, with some participation from northern and western Europe media entities in other Central European countries such as Poland, Hungary, and Slovakia. Among the daily press, ownership shifted almost exclusively to international companies, which resulted in the shaping of the new Czech media system according to western models of journalism. The post-Communist media phase placed greater emphasis on independent reporting, developing public service media, reducing state intervention, and liberalizing the media market (Trampota 2009).

Three international publishing companies—Ringier AG, Rheinisch-Bergische Verlagsgesellschaft and Verlagsgruppe Passau—gradually gained critical mass in the Czech newspaper market.¹ The Verlagsgruppe Handelsblatt became the last to join the group of international newspaper owners in Hungary with its economic daily, *Hospodářské noviny*. From the 1990s onward, Zdeněk Porybný, editor-in-chief and main shareholder of the *Právo* daily, was the only Czech owner. In the wake of the political transition started in 1989, political parties were not involved in daily newspaper ownership, the exception being *Haló noviny*,² a daily with a small circulation. To their readers, newspapers claimed to be independent of political parties. Over time, newspaper publishers came to include local entrepreneurs who were also active outside the media industry. This was, in part, the result of their media activities expanding from periodicals to newspapers, which were mainly financial and news magazines.³

A major change occurred in 2008 when Handelsblatt⁴ exited the Czech market. The German publisher justified its decision to sell its business in the Czech market by announcing its intention to focus mainly on the development of online media. In hindsight, the departure took place at the onset of the impact of a global economic crisis, which reduced advertising revenues and the paid circulation of daily newspapers, resulting in the rapid expansion of Internet news services.

Local owners return to the fold

The key turning point in the ownership structure of Czech dailies occurred in 2013, coinciding with a major political change in the Czech Republic, and resulting in a

radical re-alignment of the political, economic, and media power in the country. Andrej Babiš's Agrofert,⁵ the Czech Republic's third largest business, announced the purchase of the Mafra media group from Rheinisch-Bergische Verlagsgesellschaft in June 2013. Among others, Mafra publishes the major national dailies *Mladá fronta Dnes* and *Lidové noviny*.⁶ The acquisition took on an entirely new dimension because, two years earlier, Andrej Babiš had founded the ANO political movement, with the aim of competing in Czech parliamentary elections in autumn 2013.⁷ ANO obtained the second highest number of votes in that election,⁸ which earned ANO a place in the government and gave Andrej Babiš the positions of Minister of Finance and Deputy Prime Minister.⁹

The departure of Rheinisch-Bergische Verlagsgesellschaft was followed by that of other international owners of Czech newspapers. Switzerland-based Ringier Axel Springer AG exited the market before the end of 2013.¹⁰ Its place was taken by J&T, a Czech-Slovak investment group, or to be precise, its members Daniel Křetínský and Patrik Tkáč.¹¹ As a result, they became the owners of *Blesk*, the biggest Czech daily. The last of the Big Three international newspaper owners, Germany's Verlagsgruppe Passau, which controlled the regional newspaper market and part of the magazine market, sold its holdings in the Czech Republic in August 2015.¹² The new owner was Penta, a Czech-Slovak investment group, which had tapped the Slovak media market earlier in 2014 and announced its media expansion in Central and Eastern Europe.¹³

As a result, the ownership structure of Czech newspapers changed completely in a matter of two years. For Czech newspapers, owned primarily by international media companies for 20 years, 2013 marked a radical shift to ownership by large Czech-Slovak business groups, some of which were involved in politics. This also signified transition to a different type of ownership; from what Jeremy Tunstall and Michael Palmer call "pure" media owners, whose holdings are restricted to media, to what they call to industrial/media owners, whose holdings extend into industries other than media (Tunstall and Palmer 1991). While the former newspaper owners were active exclusively in the media business (creating content, publishing, and distributing), the new owners operate in other business sectors (industrial chemistry, agriculture, food processing, health care, banking, real estate, etc.) as well. Their media income accounts for a mere fraction of the overall revenue they generate across the range of their activities, and if their media activities underperform financially, they can subsidize them from their other business activities.¹⁴ The recession affected the economic performance of newspaper publishers and accelerated the departure of international owners from the Czech market. The decrease in advertising revenue, caused by cuts in companies' marketing expenditures, was considerable. The aggregate turnover of the top Czech publishers decreased by CZK 3 billion, or 20 percent between 2008 and 2011. In addition, newspapers faced the growth of news services on the Internet and a decrease in paid circulation after 2008.

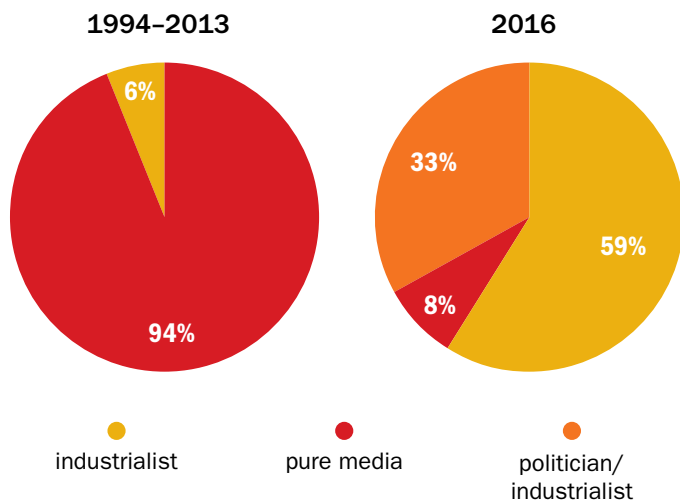
The changes in the ownership structure must also be viewed in the context of broader changes in Central and Eastern Europe. The gradual withdrawal of international owners from the region became apparent in 2009 (Štětka 2015) as media owners sought to focus on their home markets and/or on strategic sectors, particularly in new media and Internet services, to counter declining revenues from newspaper publishing.¹⁵ The Czech-Slovak business groups also offered favorable prices for the media assets, and economic benefits resulting from the sales probably played a role.

The new owners of Czech media can be described as important economic entities closely connected to political parties. Agrofert holds a specific position among them since it is connected through its owner to the executive political power of the Czech Republic. The direct involvement of an active politician of such stature is a new occurrence in the modern-day development of print media in the Czech Republic. In addition, interest in media ownership shows no sign of diminishing among the new owners, who want to extend their reach to other segments of the sector. This applies primarily to the large magazine publishers and strong commercial TV companies.

Overview of Czech newspaper owners (2016)

Owner	Media Company	Newspapers	Non-Media Business	Readership share of newspapers
Agrofer (Andrej Babiš)	Mafra	Mladá fronta Dnes, Lidové noviny, Metro	chemistry, agriculture, food processing, forestry and timbering, renewable resources and fuels, technologies	33%
Czech Media Invest (Daniel Křetínský, Patrik Tkáč)	Czech News Center	Blesk, Aha!, Sport, E15	banking, financial services, energy business, real estate	38%
Penta (Marek Dospiva, Jaroslav Haščák)	Vltave-Labe-Press	Deník	healthcare, financial services, retail, manufacturings, real estate	17%
Zdeněk Bakala	Economia	Hospodářské noviny	corporate finance, M&A, corporate management, public relations and marketing	4%
Zdeněk Porybný, Ivo Lukačovič	Borgis	Právo	none	8%

Transformation of Czech newspaper ownership, 1994-2016



Source: Media project 1994-2016, Stem/Mark, Median

The regional trend toward media ownership by oligarchs

It's too early to know the full implications of the transition to national ownership of media in the Czech Republic, but it's clear that it is part of a larger trend across Central and Eastern Europe. A growing share of the media has become the property of local oligarchs. As a result of the interconnection between economic and political elites, the characteristics of the Czech media sector are changing.

The following section seeks to analyze the impact that the new ownership is having on the media and its role in a democratic society. Using the example of the Czech Republic, I highlight specific manifestations of these changes to illustrate the risks that the integration of media outlets in a political-economic alliance present for the media sector and the world at large.

Departure of media professionals

After Andrej Babiš, the leader of ANO and owner of Agrofert, announced the acquisition of Mafra, some of the journalists employed by Mafra's dailies responded by terminating their employment. Both editors-in-chief of the key dailies, *Mladá fronta Dnes* and *Lidové noviny*, decided to leave their managerial positions at the newspapers and start their own media projects. They reasoned that it would be difficult to exercise their profession with integrity and credibility with a political player as owner. Other experienced journalists, who had been covering developments in key institutions of Czech society, left with them. The departure

of journalists who upheld the principles of independent journalism affected the content of both dailies. The new owner also found it crucial to appoint loyal journalists to the top positions in the two dailies and he set up a mechanism that would allow him to influence the content in accordance with his interests. The owner's direct involvement in editorial meetings is not necessary to influence the content; instead, this is done through a few selected journalists with many years of journalistic experience and a senior position in the media group, which enables them to affect the editorial content.

1. Media independence

Experience to date shows that the arrival of a new type of media ownership in the Czech Republic is affecting content in at least two ways.

First, it involves the owner/political leader's pursuit of his own interest in his approach to his political movement and the coalition government. A newspaper owner who is also a political player uses his access to the media to exert pressure both on his colleagues within the political movement and on his political opponents. For example, doubts arose about the veracity of a *Lidové noviny* story that ultimately led to the dismissal of the Minister of Justice¹⁶ and a *Mladá fronta Dnes* story that attacked Prime Minister Bohuslav Sobotka (ČSSD).¹⁷ Also, the way Mafra's news dailies around the country covered what may be the most serious political affair involving Andrej Babiš to date—suspicion that a European subsidy had been misused for the Stork's Nest Farm project—in the spring of 2016 heightened concerns that the newspapers would not critically cover their owner's interests. The dailies associated with Andrej Babiš did not initiate the publication of this affair and they approached the issue reluctantly.¹⁸

The transformation of content is not instantaneous: a change of ownership does not work like waving a magic wand. Instead, the change is slow and gradual, and it becomes more visible in tense or important periods. From this viewpoint, demonstrating an intentional bias in the articles published is problematic, and a deeper analysis could yield clear results only after sustained involvement by the new owners over a longer period. The parliamentary election in 2017 may be a pivotal point, as it will take place four years after the active politician's acquisition of the media—a period of time that can be considered sufficient for the owner to establish mechanisms that combine his media and political interests.

2. Non-transparent content and a threat to pluralism

There is also a question about the extent to which the other important media outlets owned by finance and business groups—J&T's Czech News Center, Penta's Vltava-Labe-Media—can still be regarded as “democracy watchdogs.” They must be aware that the Ministry of Finance led by Andrej Babiš can influence legislation crucial to their non-media business interests, in sectors that provide the revenues necessary to finance their media activities. This situation could give rise to a media

cartel, within which individual business groups prioritize their business interests over media autonomy and pluralism.¹⁹

Media content can also be influenced by tensions between the business groups that own the media. In this case, articles hostile to these groups or their individual representatives as well as to the minister of finance may stem from personal differences rather than the actual state of affairs.

Generally speaking, with major business groups in control of newspapers and involved in politics in the Czech Republic, media content has become less transparent and comprehensible for readers. This is also related to the fact that Czech dailies claim independence and do not publicly profess to hold political opinions or a specific worldview. This also applied to the daily newspapers of Andrej Babiš's Mafra media group. Hence, if they support specific political currents, they do so secretly and do not admit supporting specific politicians and their views.

Inequality in political competition

The second most powerful political party in the Czech Republic is connected with media outlets whose share of the newspaper market alone exceeds 30 percent, with a total reach of 1.15 million readers, or about 13 percent of the population. It can, therefore, use the media to promote its political agenda more easily than rival political parties. Experience to date has shown that using the media to attack political opponents directly undermines political competition. Issues that could threaten the media owners and their political movements are marginalized, while the media under their control can raise and stir up issues that affect their political opponents negatively (for reference, see the articles directed at the Czech Social Democratic Party (ČSSD), which is part of the government coalition). Biases in the way that competing political parties are presented in the media become even more evident in pre-electoral periods.

3. Media legislation

Andrej Babiš's political movement, ANO, is the second most powerful political party in the Czech Republic and is well represented in the Chamber of Deputies of the Czech Parliament.²⁰ An ANO member is also chairperson of the election committee in charge of drafting media laws, which means he can be involved in changing media legislation. In theory, this situation means that ANO can initiate and pursue the enactment of media legislation that could curb the power of its media competitors and create conditions favorable for an expansion of Agrofert's activities in the media.

It has to be said, however, that no legislative proposals confirming such concerns have so far been registered in the Czech environment. This is related, in part, to the structure of political power in the Czech parliament. While ANO is part of the government coalition and responsible for the common government program, in reality its coalition partners (ČSSD and KDU-ČSL) distance themselves from

some of ANO's views, causing tension between the government coalition members and exposing internal opposition to ANO within the coalition. Indeed, the other coalition parties appear unlikely to support any bill strengthening Agrofert's position in the media sector.²¹

4. Impact on public service media

The political and media spheres are intertwined in public service media. Czech TV and Czech Radio have a relatively strong position in the Czech media environment, and are major pillars of the dual media system. At a time when the majority of commercial media are under the influence of political and business groups, their role is even more crucial. Czech TV commands a share of about 30 percent of the television market, which is higher than in some other Central and Eastern European countries. With an average of 20 percent of the market, Czech Radio's position is also in a rather strong position against competition from commercial radio stations.

The greater pressure on public service media stems, on the one hand, from the decline of orthodox business models for journalism and from commercial media operators' efforts to reduce investment flows into public media. On the other, it is related to political pressure and attempts to influence the functioning of public service media. A powerful political entity that owns leading commercial media outlets is almost inevitably tempted to extend its influence to public service media as well.²²

This situation can also affect the conduct of other major political groups in the Czech Republic and create a desire to influence the content of Czech TV and Czech Radio. If the second most powerful political party controls major commercial media assets, other political parties will want to retain access to media not owned by that political entity. Thus, because of its legal status, public service media are particularly vulnerable.

The framework for the election of members of the Czech TV Council and the Czech Radio Council, the bodies that regulate public media, has long been a controversial topic. Through these councils, the Czech general public is meant to exercise its right of control over the way public service media function. Candidates for membership in the Czech TV Council and the Czech Radio Council are, therefore, nominated by civic associations, but parliament carries out the pre-selection and the actual election. Experience over the past 20 years has shown that the election by the parliament allows political parties to gain influence over individual council members, therefore holding indirect sway over public service media and the way they function. Since ANO has become a major political player in parliament, it can also influence the selection of members of the regulatory bodies that control public service media and/or use its clout in the election of the general directors of Czech TV and Czech Radio.

5. Polarization between traditional and new media

New owners are interested primarily in traditional media, which have a historically established position in society. As a result, political-financial groups have mainly entered the media sector through printed media, a few radio stations, and websites associated with traditional newspapers. New proprietors are expected to enter the TV market in the future. The journalists who left publications after ownership changes are mainly trying to operate independently in cyberspace. Several new media projects launched online after 2013, aiming to provide an alternative to the traditional media, which had become the property of oligarchs. While more media outlets professing to respect the rules of free journalism are emerging online, in traditional media—print, TV and radio—the range is diminishing.

This situation is causing a great deal of fragmentation in the public debate on key issues across society. While social media are an important source of website visitors, they are also responsible in part for growing polarization. News websites, primarily those that launched recently and are smaller, are struggling for economic survival. Income from online advertising is low, and news sites operate in a highly competitive environment. The Czech Internet market is considered saturated, and websites associated with traditional media groups occupy leading positions, making it harder for emerging news websites to establish themselves. New independent media sources, purporting to counterbalance the power of business-controlled media outlets, remain fragile and face an uncertain future.

Possible measures to protect media pluralism

Shared traits can be identified in the development of the media in the Central and Eastern European countries after 1990, but differences in the way the various media sectors were formed should also be underlined. For example, the degree of political parallelism, which Hallin and Mancini (2004) describe as the interconnection of the media and political entities, was relatively low in the Czech media system until 2013. This applies primarily to printed media, which are subject to minimum regulation. Unlike some other countries in the Central and Eastern European region, the development of the Czech media system in the last 20 years can be regarded as stable, without sudden reversals or legislative changes that could have restricted its autonomy.

Since 2013, the structure of the Czech media sector has changed. Andrej Babiš's appearance on the political stage, powerful influence, and involvement in major media have made the political and media spheres more intertwined than they were until 2013, and reduced the autonomy of the media sector. In terms of content and organization, the Czech media sector displayed less political parallelism (Hallin and Mancini 2004) during its post-1989 development phase than countries that followed a Mediterranean (or polarized pluralist) model. With minor fluctuations, in terms of the development of mass print media and political parallelism, the modern Czech media system was close to a democratic-cooperative model in the 20 years that followed 1989,²³ partly as a result of the country's geographical location

in the vicinity of Germany and Austria (Jirák and Trampota 2008). However, the changes in the media system after 2013, particularly in the ownership of daily newspapers, are pushing the Czech Republic closer to the Mediterranean model that is more common in South and Southeastern European countries and typified by the intertwining of media and political parties.

The majority of Czech political representatives continue to emphasize the need for a diverse and free media sector, with public service media playing an indispensable role. Politicians claim that they are interested in protecting pluralism in the Czech media. However, it is becoming apparent that the protection of pluralism will likely require the adoption of new legislative measures.

While media legislation has been quite stable in the Czech Republic and has only been modified slightly (in response to EU media regulations, for instance), the situation has evolved so rapidly that the parliamentary Chamber of Deputies amended the Conflict of Interest Act in the autumn of 2016 to ban future government members and other politicians from operating radio and TV outlets and publishing periodicals. The new wording of the act omits new media and the Internet. The adoption of this measure can theoretically be regarded as positive for the protection of media pluralism. If natural mechanisms preventing an undesired amalgamation of media and politics fail, a legislative measure appears to be the solution to keep both areas separate. In practice, however, it is not clear if the new measure, which can be circumvented through the transfer of assets to related parties, will indeed help address the current situation. It may ultimately result in reduced transparency about ownership and attempts to conceal the true owners. This would create another negative factor affecting the functioning of media in a democratic society.

The same applies to cross-ownership. So far, regulation on cross-ownership has been lenient, and affects only some audio-visual media. The determining factor used to assess media acquisitions is the market share compared to the competition. This is now proving to be an excessively liberal criterion, allowing owners to acquire major media outlets across sectors—TV, press, radio, and the Internet. Legislative amendments should also aim to reduce cross ownership. Again, the question remains whether tighter regulation limiting cross-ownership could have unintended consequences. The experience in Slovakia, for example, shows that regulation of cross-ownership fosters concealed ownership, and the media scene is becoming less transparent about ownership.

It is also important to ensure that public service media retain a strong position. In practice, this means securing continued funding, preferably through the implementation of license fees, and curbing political influence in the election of members of the councils overseeing public service media as much as possible. Pressure from civil society, which is suggesting legislation on a new election model that would have council members appointed directly by respective interest groups rather than elected by parliament, may play an important role. While the observance of media

legislation and its practical implementation require civic and cultural maturity, which is by no means guaranteed, these steps could, in theory, help to curtail the threat of media capture in the country.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ In 1993 the share of these three publishers accounted for 53 percent of the total paid circulation of the Czech market. The subsequent consolidation of daily paper ownership resulted in an increase in the three firms' share to 73 percent in 2001, and by the end of 2010, it had exceeded 85 percent of the paid circulation. It remained at this level until the 2013 ownership changes.
- ² The entity controlling Futura, the publisher of *Haló noviny*, is the Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia ("KSČM"). KSČM understands the *Haló noviny* daily as a tool for promoting the party. The daily's circulation sold and its readership are not audited and official statistics are not available. However, the influence of *Haló noviny* on the Czech daily paper market can be regarded as very marginal.
- ³ Some news and financial magazines had been acquired by Czech entrepreneurs or financial groups before 2000. PPF, the biggest finance group in the country, owned the *Euro economics weekly*; Karel Komárek's K&K Capital Group owned *Profit* and *Czech Business Weekly*; Zdeněk Bakala owned the *Respekt weekly* and Sebastian Pawlowski owned *Týden*. The number of magazines published by Mladá fronta, whose ownership František Savov claimed in 2012, also gradually increased.
- ⁴ The Dow Jones–Handelsblatt group was the majority owner of *Economia*. In 2007 Dow Jones & Co., an American publishing house, sold its 23.5 percent stake to Verlagsgruppe Handelsblatt. One year later, in September 2008, Verlagsgruppe Handelsblatt (VHB) stated that it had sold its 88.36 percent majority stake in *Economia*. The buyer was Respekt Media, whose sole shareholder is the investor Zdeněk Bakala.
- ⁵ Agrofert encompasses some 250 companies and it achieved the third highest turnover among Czech companies in 2015 (CZK 167 billion).
- ⁶ Agrofert concluded an agreement with Rheinisch-Bergische Verlagsgesellschaft mbH to purchase Mafra, a leading Czech media group, on June 26, 2013. Agrofert described this move as an important step toward building its media division. The acquisition was completed in October 2013.
- ⁷ ANO was registered as a political movement in May 2012, allowing it to participate in parliamentary election.
- ⁸ ANO received 927,240 votes in the election of autumn 2013, which accounts for 18.65 percent of active voters. The winning Social Democrats (ČSSD) received 20.45 percent (more than one million votes).
- ⁹ President Miloš Zeman appointed the new government led by Prime Minister Bohuslav Sobotka (ČSSD) on January 29, 2014. It has 17 ministers coming from ČSSD, ANO and KDU-ČSL. Andrej Babiš's ANO movement has six representatives in the government, ČSSD has eight representatives and KDU-ČSL has three.
- ¹⁰ Formerly Ringier AG; following a global merger with Axel Springer, it operated as Ringier Axel Springer AG from 2010 on.

- ¹¹ The agreement on the takeover of Ringier Axel Springer CZ by Daniel Křetínský and Patrik Tkáč was announced on December 20, 2013.
- ¹² The agreement on the sale of Vltava-Labe-Press, a regional daily publisher, Astrosat, a magazine publisher, and the Group's other media activities, was announced on August 12, 2015. The assets changed ownership on November 3, 2015.
- ¹³ Penta Group agreed on the acquisition of the 7 Plus, Centrum Holdings and Trend Holding media companies in Slovakia on September 3, 2014.
- ¹⁴ Agrofert's consolidated revenue totalled CZK 167.134 billion in 2015. The revenue of Mafra, the media group controlled by Agrofert, totalled CZK 2.573 billion in 2015 (which accounts for 1.5 percent of Agrofert's total revenue).
- ¹⁵ In its official statement announcing the sale of its media assets in the Czech Republic, Ringier Axel Springer stated that it would focus more on digital media activities, in which it holds a leading position.
- ¹⁶ Minister Hana Válková said in an interview with *Právo* that the media owned by Andrej Babiš, in particular *Lidové noviny*, had been exerting pressure to have her removed from her position. "For the last few months, I would often open *Lidové noviny* and find an article that covered some of my past mistakes in a negative tone. It was like recycling my alleged mistakes," she added. According to the minister, some of the mistakes mentioned by the paper were only conjecture. In an interview with *Mladá fronta Dnes*, which is also part of the Mafra Group, István Léko, *Lidové noviny's* editor-in-chief, denied claims of targeted attempts to remove the Minister of Justice.
- ¹⁷ The article was published in *Mladá fronta Dnes* on Friday, February 19, 2016, with the headline "Sobotka's People Buy a Hotel Suspiciously Cheaply." It covered the sale of the Kladenka mountain lodge to the owners of Bison & Rose, a PR agency. Its co-owner Jiří Růžička spoke vehemently against the article, describing it as intentionally biased and deceptive. "I would say *MF Dnes* is lying, with the apparent objective of undermining political competitors... I would like to stress that, in addition to these facts, I have conclusive evidence that journalistic work is misused at *MF Dnes* to fight against the newspaper owner's political competitors," he said.
- ¹⁸ According to a Newton Media analysis, *Mladá fronta Dnes* published 27 articles and *Lidové noviny* 24 articles about the Stork's Nest affair between January 1 and March 28, 2016, whereas *Právo* published 65 articles in the same period. The media that most actively covered the Stork's Nest controversy were the websites *Parlamentní listy.cz* and *Echo24.cz*, as well as Czech TV's ČT24 news channel.
- ¹⁹ "The environment is protected and a disinformation cartel is formed so information will not surface. This is the biggest threat," media analyst Václav Štětka said during a discussion at the Faculty of Social Sciences of Charles University in Prague in June 2015.
- ²⁰ The Chamber of Deputies of the Czech Parliament has 200 members in total and 47 of them are ANO representatives.
- ²¹ "We should call a spade a spade. *MF Dnes* and *Lidové noviny* are not independent newspapers. They belong to Andrej Babiš, who uses them actively as a tool to exert business and political influence, running false and biased campaigns against opponents of his views on their pages," Prime Minister Bohuslav Sobotka said.
- ²² In the spring of 2015, Andrej Babiš's Agrofert complained about coverage on the Czech TV investigative journalism show *Reportéři ČT*. In the complaint, Agrofert voiced its concern that the reporters had intentionally tried to promote the notion that Andrej Babiš was involved in a conflict of interest and that Agrofert had reached its prominent position thanks to his influence. The complaint elicited a dismissive reaction on the part

of Prime Minister Bohuslav Sobotka (ČSSD), who emphasized the importance of public media independence. The chairman of another governing party, Pavel Bělobrádek (KDU-ČSL), referred to the complaint as an “attack on free media.”

- ²³ Certain political parties tried to launch their own dailies after 1989 but the end results were largely an economic failure (Jirák and Trampota 2008, 19).

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