

FREEDOM OF THE PRESS

Czech Republic

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Freedom of the press is constitutionally guaranteed, though the Charter of Fundamental Rights and Freedoms prohibits speech that might infringe on national security, individual rights, public health, or morality, or that may evoke hatred based on race, ethnicity, or national origin. Libel remains a criminal offense, but prosecutions are rare. The Press Law provides a sound basis for independent journalism, and media protections have been bolstered by Constitutional Court and other institutional rulings. According to the Institute for the Protection of Journalists, members of the Czech Syndicate of Journalists—the largest professional organization of journalists in the country—are “often consulted on media matters by judges.”

In June 2011, the Senate approved an amendment to the controversial 2009 “muzzle law,” which banned the publication of information—particularly the names of individuals—obtained from police wiretaps, as well as information about individuals involved in criminal acts (both victims and perpetrators). Violators are subject to exorbitant fines and up to five years’ imprisonment. The new amendment, which took effect in August, makes an exception for information considered to be of “public interest.” However, courts retain the authority to determine whether the level of public interest outweighs the privacy rights of those involved. In 2010, legislators had already softened the law to allow journalists to publish the names of politicians or other state officials involved in criminal proceedings related to corruption, and reduced the severity of the law’s prescribed punishments.

Freedom of expression advocates were shocked by an unusual March 2011 raid on the offices of Czech Television, the public broadcaster, which was conducted by 10 armed military police officers in masks. The officers confiscated newsroom computers, lists of news sources, personal items, and papers unrelated to an allegedly classified version of a 2007 declassified military report that supposedly sparked the raid. The television station lodged a formal complaint of abuse of office, leading Defense Minister Alexandr Vondra to immediately suspend three officers who led the raid.

National print media consist of a variety of daily newspapers, weeklies, and magazines representing diverse points of view, though the economic crisis may have increased pressure on outlets to please major advertisers. German and Swiss corporations own 80 percent of newspapers and magazines. There are three broadcasting companies on the national market: one public, Czech Television, and two private, TV Nova and Prima TV. The media market is growing due to the rise of digital services, with over half the population in 2011 subscribing to digital television. Media-related legislation includes minimal ownership restrictions, and none on foreign ownership. Most electronic media outlets are privately owned, and they generally convey diverse views without fear of government or partisan pressure. Media advocates have expressed concern that while public media are widely respected, their financial sustainability is being undermined by tighter control of public funds and increasing restrictions on advertising. Observers also point to declining depth and quality of reporting in Czech news media, with weak accountability among

2012 SCORES

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Free

PRESS FREEDOM SCORE

19

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POLITICAL ENVIRONMENT

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the tabloids in particular, which gained popularity at the expense of the traditional press during 2011.

The internet continues to develop rapidly, with 73 percent of the population enjoying regular and unrestricted access in 2011.

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