

Summary and conclusions of the Aspen Institute Central Europe Roundtable on the legislative anchoring and funding of public service media

April 16, 16-18h, meeting room of the Representation of the European Commission in the Czech Republic, Prague

The Aspen Institute roundtable clearly revealed strong concerns among experts and media representatives regarding the current government proposals regarding the funding of public service media. Jean Philip De Tender from the European Broadcasting Union (EBU) warned right at the beginning against politicians' attempts to polarize the media landscape and emphasized that the EBU considers license fees the better option, because funding from the state budget opens the door to direct political influence over independent institutions. This view was also supported by academic Marína Urbániková, according to whom European data show that state funding is more susceptible to political pressure and a potential transition to it would require a strong constitutional safeguard.

Media experts and journalists, such as Michal Klíma and Jindřich Šídlo, agreed that paradoxically, the method of funding itself does not matter as much if it can be easily changed at any time by the current parliamentary majority. They evaluate the current proposals as hasty and perceive them more as an act of political revenge associated with the fulfillment of election promises, which strikingly resembles authoritarian scenarios from Poland or Hungary, against which Petr Janyška, Filip Rožánek, and former MP Jan Lacina strongly warned. Representatives of public service media, including Czech Radio Director René Zavoral, former Czech TV Director Petr Dvořák, and the head of journalism Aneta Snopová, pointed out that the proposed changes bring the media neither more money nor more independence.

On the contrary, they see a clear political motivation in them (often reacting to specific critical reports) and criticize the "festival of demagoguery" and the total absence of dialogue from the government's side. It is precisely this ignorance that, according to Zavoral, leads to understandable employee frustration and a real threat of a strike. Opposition representatives, especially former minister Martin Baxa, defended their previous model based on fees and indexation, while labeling the current proposal as poor quality and arbitrary.

Although Ondřej Müller proposed a compromise in the form of state funding guaranteed for five to ten years in advance, politicians like František Talíř perceive that the coalition will likely push its proposal through by force, and therefore recommend already preparing a comprehensive remedial amendment for the future. Daniel Köppl tried to calm the entire tense situation, criticizing mutual media activism and the use of military terminology, which he believes blocks thinking and the search for consensus.

Several fundamental conclusions can thus be drawn from the discussion:

First, there is a broad consensus that the planned transition to funding from the state budget lacks expert justification in the current proposal and serves primarily as a political tool to weaken and take control of public service media.

Second, it shows that the true protection of independence does not lie in the type of money collection itself, but in preventing the parameters of funding from being easily and quickly changed by a simple parliamentary majority. Although academics propose ideal solutions in the form of constitutional safeguards, political actors from practice admit that achieving such a consensus in the current Czech environment is an unrealistic illusion.

In conclusion, it is evident that the whole situation is critically escalated by the hasty pushing of changes and the absence of dialogue from the side of the ruling coalition, which inevitably leads to the radicalization of media employees who are realistically considering a strike as a last resort to defend their constitutional right to freedom of expression.



List of participants:

- Michael Rozsypal: moderator
- Jean Philip De Tender: Deputy Director General of the European Broadcasting Union (EBU)
- Marína Urbániková: media expert, Masaryk University
- Michal Klíma: media expert and former publisher
- Filip Rožánek: media analyst
- Martin Baxa: Member of Parliament (ODS) and former Minister of Culture
- Aneta Snopová: reporter, Head of Reporting Dept., Czech Television
- Jan Lacina: former Member of Parliament (STAN), shadow Minister of Culture
- René Zavoral: Director General of Czech Radio
- David Smoliak: Senator (STAN)
- František Talíř: Member of Parliament (KDU-ČSL)
- Petr Dvořák: former Director of Czech Television
- Tomáš Klvaňa: representative of the organizer (Aspen Institute)
- Jindřich Šídlo: commentator, Seznam Zprávy
- Petr Janyška: long-time diplomat, currently a publicist
- Ondřej Müller: Vice-Chairman of TOP 09
- Daniel Köppl: member of the Council for Radio and Television Broadcasting
- Radka Matesová Marková: Editor-in-Chief of news at ČTK
- Rob Cameron: BBC contributor in the Czech Republic

