Tomorrow's Affairs
Analysis of today
Assessment of tomorrow

By: TA | AP Insight

Czechs oppose the government's intention to control the media with a mass protest



Hundreds of thousands of people rallied in Prague on Sunday against a plan by the government of Czech billionaire Andrej Babiš to overhaul funding for public broadcasters that many say will erode media independence and democracy.

The massive protest took place at the capital's Letná Park, where huge crowds gathered during the 1989 Velvet Revolution, which ended more than 40 years of communist rule in the country.

The rally, just two days before the anniversary of the 1989 protests, drew an estimated 350,000 people, said Mikuláš Minář, the lead organizer from the Million Moments for Democracy group.

They demanded that the government withdraw its plan and expressed concern that Babiš and his coalition partners pose a threat to democracy.

“We do witness here something extraordinary today,” Minář said. “It's just a beginning.”

Under the plan, the country’s public radio and television broadcasters would be financed from the state budget, replacing the existing system of regular fees paid by individuals, households and businesses.

The broadcasters would receive about 15% less money than they do now, which could lead to layoffs, limited production and program cancellations.

Critics say the overhaul would give the three-party coalition the means to take control of the media, similar to what populist governments did in Slovakia under Prime Minister Robert Fico and in Hungary, before former Prime Minister Viktor Orbán was ousted from power in April.

“We refuse the Slovak scenario,” one protest banner read. “Hands off the media,” said another.

One of the protesters, singer Šarka Dumišincová, said that for her “the media represent freedom.

And the fact that someone here is trying to control that freedom is unacceptable to me. That’s why I’m here today.”

The government apparently wants to rush the bill through Parliament

The ruling coalition unexpectedly moved ahead with the plan in the lower house of Parliament on Oct. 24.

Its lawmakers limited the opposition's speaking time before voting at 4:36 a.m. to advance the bill through the first of three parliamentary readings.

Thousands took to the streets the following day to protest the rushed process, and public media employees went on strike on Nov. 3.

> Media freedom and the rule of law in the Czech Republic were debated Wednesday in the European Parliament

The strike was backed by labor unions, universities, students, churches, artists, athletes and international media organizations, among others.

“We are here to stand up against the rule by force in the style of 4:36,” Minář said Sunday, referring to the time the bill cleared its first reading.

Media freedom and the rule of law in the Czech Republic were debated Wednesday in the European Parliament.

EU Justice Commissioner Michael McGrath said national legislation must ensure that funding for public service iis based on transparent and objective criteria and guarantees "adequate, sustainable and predictable financial resources.”

Babiš has opposed other EU policies

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He returned to power in the Czech Republic after his ANO, or YES, movement, won the country's election last year and formed a coalition with two small political groups — the anti-migrant and pro-Russian party Freedom and Direct Democracy, and the right-wing Motorists for Themselves.

Babiš has opposed some key European Union policies on environment and migration and rejected financial aid for Ukraine and guarantees for EU loans to help it fight the Russian invasion.

His government has been under fire from NATO allies for failing to spend enough on defense.

Protesters also condemned its defense policy and demanded the resignation of the Freedom party leader, parliamentary Speaker Tomio Okamura, and Defense Minister Jaromír Zůna. The party is in charge of the ministry.

"While (Russia's President Vladimir) Putin threatens Europe, the pro-Russian (party) is systematically undermining the state's defensive capability and endangering national security," Minář, the main protest organizer, said.