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## **CZECHS ALARMED AS POPULIST LEADERS TAKE AIM AT PUBLIC MEDIA**

- 17.06.2019

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EurActiv (17 June 2019)

Czech journalists and media analysts are raising alarm over the threat to the countrys public media from mounting pressure on the press by populist politicians.

Members of the bodies supervising the Czech news agency ČTK, Czech Television and Czech Radio are elected by lawmakers and now press watchdogs warn that some nominees might affect the quality of their coverage.

In the week starting on 17 June, the Czech parliament is likely to propel Michal Semin, a journalist and writer who has blamed American elites for the 9/11 terror attacks, onto the ČTK council.

There is a big risk that a man with very extravagant views will sit on the board of a major public medium, Adam Černý, head of the Czech Syndicate of Journalists, told AFP.

If elected, Semin will join council member and journalist Petr Zantovsky, who has said he would not mind ČTK running news from the server of Sputnik, the Russian state-backed news agency.

Semin was nominated by the opposition far-right, anti-EU SPD party, while Zantovsky was the nominee of the ruling populist ANO movement of billionaire Prime Minister Andrej Babiš.

Semin topped a first-round vote in early June, backed by ANO and SPD.

Those two parties may end up with five people on the seven-member ČTK council, which appoints the agencys director and takes major decisions on its business.

Czech public media are in jeopardy, said Tomas Trampota, a media sociologist at the University of New York in Prague (UNYP).

I see Semins nomination as a threat.

### **Embarrassed over media**

Semin, the head of the D.O.S.T. (Enough) movement backing the SPD, once called Czech Television a Bolshevik museum and a media swamp.

In 2016, he said the official explanation of the attacks in New York and Washington on September

11, 2001, was a fairy tale and that the attacks were in part orchestrated by US elites, with Israel benefitting from the aftermath.

Semin told AFP that public media should reflect the plurality of opinions in society. The uproar over his nomination was big media manipulation, he added.

It has strengthened my resolve to run and proved that I'm right about being more than embarrassed over our media world, the public one in particular, Semin said.

He said he was asked to run for the post by SPD leader Tomio Okamura, with whom he shares the desire for a Czexit from the European Union.

### **Far-right leaders gather in Prague ahead of EU vote**

Prague will on Thursday (24 April) host a meeting of populist far-right party leaders seeking unprecedented success in European elections next month following a steep rise of anti-EU movements across Europe.

Okamura has repeatedly called Czech TV journalists liars, while PM Babiš has dubbed them a corrupt bunch.

Babiš leads a minority centre-left government of ANO and the leftwing Social Democrats with support from the Communists for a parliamentary majority.

He is in the media spotlight because of police charges against him over EU subsidy fraud, an EU probe into his dual role as a politician and entrepreneur, and allegations that he served as a secret Communist police agent in the 1980s.

Denying the allegations as a smear campaign, the food, chemicals and media mogul is currently facing a wave of rallies against him across the Czech Republic — but he also enjoys stable 30-percent voter support in opinion polls.

### **Kalashnikov for journalists**

Charles University political analyst Josef Mlejnek described Babiš as a pragmatic politician who was building ties with the SPD on the media front.

Public media are able to correct politicians blather, their view of the world, fake news. That's why they want to control, destroy or debase them, Mlejnek told AFP.

This mainly concerns the populist camp.

The Czech Republic ranked 40th on the 2019 World Press Freedom Index, which was put together by press watchdog Reporters Without Borders (RSF).

It slid from 34th the year before, with RSF singling out President Miloš Zeman — Babiš's political ally — as a threat.

Zeman is known for telling Russian President Vladimir Putin that journalists should be liquidated,

waving a dummy Kalashnikov at reporters at a press conference and slamming Czech TV for manipulating public opinion.

Experts fear the situation could get worse next year when lawmakers reshuffle the Czech Television and Czech Radio boards.

Given the parliaments current composition, there is considerable risk that the boards will become politicised and public media will fall prey to political power, Černý said.

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