



## POLICY PAPER

The crisis of local journalism in the V4 countries and  
the specific role of municipal newspapers in it

Conclusions of desk research in the Czech Republic

The project is supported by:



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## Introduction

One of the important requirements of the transformation after the 1989 revolution was to ensure media freedom and pluralism. Privatization led to the dominant ownership of German and Swiss publishing houses, which divided the market and influence in the Czech Republic.

*The major German publishers were hesitant to enter the Czech media market during the initial period of privatization. They were looking primarily for national media, which in those days either were unprofitable, or already had an owner. Therefore, they were ready to enter only into alliances with the Ringier company, which was fast enough to establish itself as a national publisher. The small regional German publishers were ready to invest in regional press and in small markets (Šmíd, 2004: 150).<sup>1</sup>*

At the same time, efforts were made to anchor the media legislatively. The initial effort to adopt one law applicable to all media failed to materialize. The legislative framework thus remains fragmented and inadequate, at a time when new formats are emerging at a breakneck pace, made possible by the spread of the internet.

*In 1990 policy makers planned a comprehensive all-encompassing new media law and hence the press law was merely updated. It took until 2000 to pass a new press law and a law on radio and television broadcasting and the idea of a single law regulating all media was finally abandoned. (Waschková Císařová, Metyková, 2015: 6-17).<sup>2</sup>*

After 2009, changes in ownership took place - German owners left and Czech entrepreneurs started to buy up the media.

In 2017, Federation International published a report on the media situation in the Czech Republic with the following conclusions:

1. It was made very clear that the prime ministers close link to the media he used to own is totally unacceptable for a democracy;
2. The second element was about public service media, where it is too easy for the parliament and the government through the system interlinking of adopting annual reports and electing councils to put pressure on the media;
3. Self-regulatory bodies are too fragmented to have a real impact for ethical standards and because of that, there is a need for a review.
4. Local media are in a very difficult position leaving a big part of the citizens without real independent impartial information on local interests, which has a negative impact on taking part in local debates and democracy;
5. Journalists and editors themselves have to take a more serious responsibility for their profession;
6. As an overall theme as a part of all above mentioned themes, financing of media has to be addressed both within public service media and private media<sup>3</sup>.

### Local level - current situation

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/215876194> The Czech Media Landscape

<sup>2</sup> Waschková Císařová, Lenka, and Monika Metyková. "Better the devil you don't know: post-revolutionary journalism and media ownership in the Czech Republic." *Medijske studije* 6.11 (2015): 6-17. : <https://hrcak.srce.hr/file/205836>

<sup>3</sup> <https://europeanjournalists.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/Czech-Republic-fact-finding-mission.pdf>

The general trends of media development in the Czech Republic also apply to the local level, but the effects are much more dramatic. Specific is the current zero systemic or legislative grasp of this media level, especially when it comes to print and internet media. Historical changes in media ownership, new formats and a long-standing underestimation and disinterest in the subject of regional media has resulted in the current situation - a lack of quality media.

According to the 2021 assessment of The Centre for Media Pluralism and Media Freedom, the indicator "Access to media for local/regional communities and for community media" has a high long-term risk level (75%). According to Štětka, the reasons for this lie in the lack of a legislative framework for community media and weak support for local media from the state.<sup>4</sup>

Regional editorial offices are disappearing, and the original local print newspapers are closing, mostly because no younger successor can be found to ensure their continuation. At the same time, there are many regions in the Czech Republic that are specific, have their own needs and problems, and national information is not enough to solve them. This is where the oft-mentioned link between independent quality journalism and democracy lies - local issues need to be addressed through debate, but this must be based on information.<sup>5</sup>

Because of the lack of systemic support, funding and staff capacity, quality local journalism is dying and the vacant space is being filled by formats that are usually far from quality reporting. The media formats that belong directly to local governments - municipal newspapers, television and radio - have probably filled the vacant space the most. However, these media are often unable to meet basic information needs, as the content is directly approved/controlled by elected representatives of cities and regions, and only topics that politicians commission are reported. Oživení has long pointed to the unbalanced presentation of different views in these media.

On the other hand, private regional or local media are emerging, often functioning primarily as vehicles for advertising or hidden local interests. The opacity and non-transparency of media ownership at the local level then allows for hidden ownership, for example, of the governor in the regional TV.

Case of VLP:

The Vltava Labe Press, a publishing house under the Verlagsgruppe Passau press group, acquired a dominant role at the regional level at a time when print media still ruled.<sup>6</sup> The process began as early as 1992 with the merger of several regional publishing houses, followed by the purchase of small regional editorial offices. In 2013, the investment group Penta bought a 100% stake in the publishing house Vltava-Labe-Press from the German concern Verlagsgruppe Passau. It thus acquired the country's largest regional newspaper Deník and the Novotisk printing works. Since then, it has added dozens of other titles, and by 2022, according to its website, it manages 17 magazine titles and 130 websites of various focuses.<sup>7</sup> Although the publishing house claims a unique blend of regional and national news, local information and links are slowly disappearing, as a content analysis conducted by Waschkova Císařová showed.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> <https://cadmus.eui.eu/bitstream/handle/1814/74708/MPM2022-TheCzechRepublic-CS.pdf?sequence=3&isAllowed=y>

<sup>5</sup>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.vlmedia.cz/o-nas>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.vlmedia.cz/o-nas>

<sup>8</sup> <https://communicationtoday.sk/download/12016/WASCHKOVA-CISAROVA-%25E2%2580%2593-CT-1-2016.pdf>

An example is one of the most widely circulated local newspapers (Denik.cz), which currently contains only a regional supplement of a few pages covering the entire region.

## Methodological notes

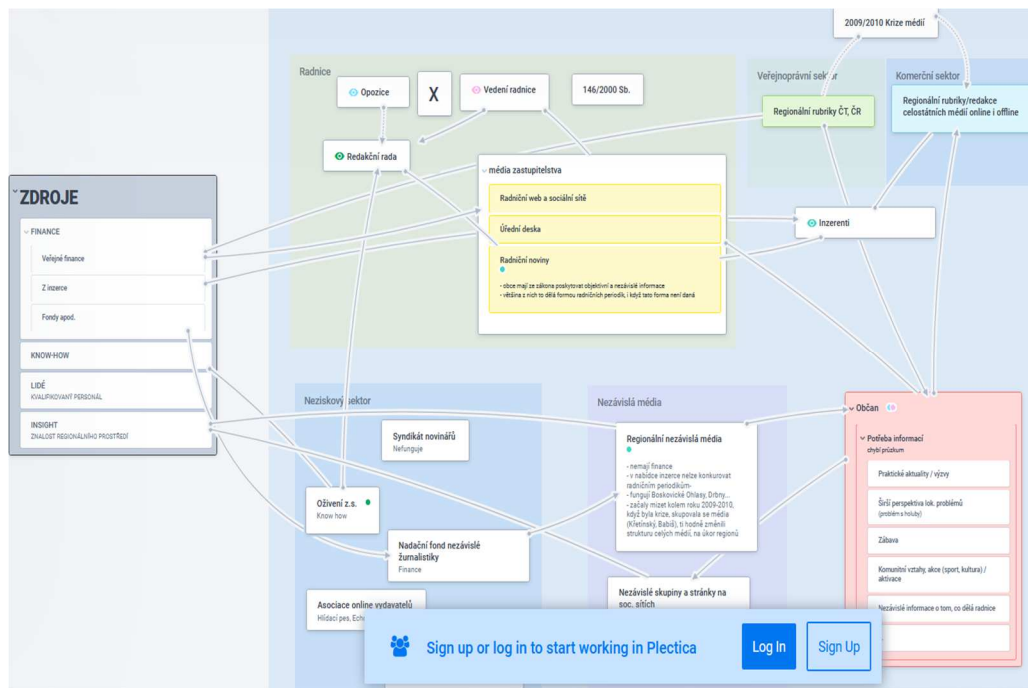
Describing the current situation of the local media environment requires the ability to describe the various forms of media that are currently being published. The text works with the concepts of local - regional - national media. Local is the name used for newspapers, their content is concentrated at the district level, regional are the areas defined by counties. The national scope is mainly meant in terms of content - the content that media outlets deliver is national or international.

# 1. Mapping relevant actors and their relationship in the regional media environment

## 1.1 Mapping the disproportionate relations in the field of citizen information

CIVIC AWARENESS WITHIN REGIONS - a view of the regional media environment developed by students in the Innovation Lab course at Charles University

The following graphic shows the mapping of disproportionate relations in the field of citizen information on matters of regional character. The map is based on the 5R framework, which looks at the systemic problem using five dimensions - Rules, Roles, Relationships, Resources and Results. At the centre of the whole system are citizens and their needs, the processing looks at the whole issue through their lens.



In addition to the municipals newspapers themselves, key players include public and commercial media of a national character and their regional editorial offices. However, the problem is that since the media crisis that began in 2009-2010 with the advent of smart technologies and the change of ownership of Czech media houses, commercial media have stopped covering regional topics to a sufficient extent and with adequate knowledge of the specifics of the local environment. Independent media, advertisers and the non-profit sector also play an equally important role. The functioning of the above-mentioned actors rests on four pillars. Finance is an essential resource for their activities. Funding can be obtained either from public budgets, advertising or various funds. Furthermore, insight into local issues, knowledge and reflection of the local environment are needed. Another important aspect is the know-how needed to do quality journalistic work. The last pillar is human resources. These should not only be sufficient, but also have adequate qualifications and, above all, the motivation to inform the citizens of the region in a high-quality, objective and level-headed manner.



These resources are distributed disproportionately among the different actors, even though each of them plays an indispensable role in this information ecosystem and needs support and conditions that enable its quality functioning. Local independent media have the worst conditions for their functioning, but they have the greatest potential to meet the needs of citizens to be objectively and qualitatively informed about the events in the region. For these media, the current situation is practically liquidating.

Students have also identified a high threshold for the creation of new independent media. This is facilitated by the virtually non-existent traditions on which this type of media could build, including its democratic function in Czech society. A follow-up problem is the general lack of media literacy and related education. The result is a vicious circle of lack of know-how, funding, staffing, and the reporters themselves, and above all, motivation for the creation of new media. The differing levels in each region do not help either.

## 1.2 Financial resources of local media

One of the main problems not only for local media in the Czech Republic is funding. It is impossible to describe the current situation of the financial functioning of the media market completely. Thanks to data from the state treasury, we focused on the relations between public commissioners and private suppliers. The situation can be most easily described in the market for regional TV stations, which must be licensed and therefore there is a list of such entities with the Broadcasting Council.

Televisions:

Financial flows between local governments and their subsidiary organisations and private regional televisions in **2018-2021**.

More than 134 entities are licensed to broadcast. Only 14 of them did not take part in any tendering procedure in the period analysed.

*Television with the highest participation in tenders 2018 - 2021*

<b>televize</b>	<b>účast v zakázkách</b>	<b>vyhrané zakázky</b>	<b>úspěšnost</b>
POLAR televize Ostrava, s.r.o	28	23	82%
VČTV s.r.o.	11	8	73%
PRAHA TV s.r.o.	10	7	70%
TV MORAVA, s.r.o.	9	9	100%
ZAK TV s.r.o.	9	8	89%
JTV a.s.	7	6	86%

The funds shown in the table below are actual amounts paid from the Treasury, not just amounts from contracts. However, more detailed data separating the purchase of advertising from the delivery of news and other journalistic formats is missing. Further, more detailed analysis is needed to answer the question of exactly what formats are delivered.

Funding paid through the Treasury shows how extreme sums of money are going from public budgets into the pockets of the almost unregulated, uncontrolled and non-transparent regional TV stations.

An example is TV Morava, which has received more than CZK 19 million from public budgets over four years, almost exclusively from the Statutory City of Olomouc and the Olomouc Region and has a 100% success rate in the tenders in which the company has participated.

The fact that there is no system of regulation of relations between private media and public institutions is shown by the amounts of money paid to private television companies by the regions. The amounts vary in the tens of millions of crowns. Out of the total amount of 146 million paid by the regions over 4 years, 3 regions - Moravian-Silesian, Central Bohemia and Olomouc - spent 73 % of this amount.

<b>kraj</b>	<b>celková částka</b>	<b>počet TV</b>
Moravskoslezský kraj	57 067 704,55 Kč	4
Středočeský kraj	33 482 212,50 Kč	2
Olomoucký kraj	15 407 601,10 Kč	3
Jihočeský kraj	9 912 878,10 Kč	3
Zlínský kraj	9 619 328,00 Kč	3
Plzeňský kraj	8 536 096,58 Kč	2
Liberecký kraj	4 277 434,70 Kč	1
Královéhradecký kraj	4 238 222,00 Kč	1
Karlovarský kraj	2 209 460,00 Kč	1
Pardubický kraj	503 569,00 Kč	1
Ústecký kraj	375 100,00 Kč	1
Kraj Vysočina	48 000,00 Kč	1
Jihomoravský	- Kč	
<b>celkem</b>	<b>145 677 606,53 Kč</b>	

Case of POLAR TV – 1 Top ten public procurers between 2018 – 2021.

televize	POLAR televize Ostrava, s.r.o.
Město Bruntál	2 013 080,00 Kč
Město Frýdlant nad Ostravicí	2 013 440,00 Kč
Město Orlová	2 393 864,00 Kč
Město Studénka	2 807 200,00 Kč
Statutární město Opava	5 504 090,35 Kč
Město Nový Jičín	7 703 465,00 Kč
Statutární město Frýdek-Místek	9 673 296,60 Kč
Statutární město Havířov	10 255 996,30 Kč
Statutární město Karviná	10 876 690,00 Kč
Statutární město Ostrava	15 890 696,10 Kč
<b>celkem</b>	<b>69 131 818,35 Kč</b>

Print media - publishing

Example Haná press, s.r.o. - publisher of Večerník and the online site vecernikpv.cz. It is listed as an independent local media outlet. However, according to the data from the state treasury, it is evident that one of the important sources is public funds.

In the period 2018 - 2021 Haná press, s.r.o. received CZK 5 794 390,00 from ten municipal authorities and their contributory organisations. Most of the payments are in the tens of thousands and are mostly for the purchase of advertising space. However, two institutions have larger contracts with Haná Press.

The Statutory City of Prostějov paid a total of CZK 2,257,605.00 in the period under review, of which more than CZK 880,000 in 2021. The contract for the publication of the Prostějov Town Hall Gazette in 2020-2022 for CZK 718,200, increased to CZK 1,045,750 by an amendment in 2022, can be found in the register of contracts, while at the same time they are part of the advertising orders from the Municipality, for example for the pre-election supplement to the printed evening newspaper Život ve městě II.

The example shows the symbiosis between newspapers and politicians in the locality. It is obvious that the basic principle of democratic oversight cannot work in such a relationship and the newspaper is not fulfilling this function. At the same time, the distinction between informing and advertising is blurred. The delivery of an editorial newspaper works on the principle that the client supplies the materials and background for the content, the 'newspaper' merely processes them and sends them for checking before publication.

## 2. Legal regulation

### 2.1 Basic characteristics of the legislation

Since the revolution, there have been efforts to unify media laws. Instead, media laws remain progressively outdated, rules for online media are lacking, rules for private media do not prevent conflicts of interest, and coupled with weak oversight bodies, the regional and local level in particular operates completely without oversight.



[231/2001 Sb.](#) Act on the operation of radio and television broadcasting

[132/2010 Sb.](#) Act on on-demand audiovisual media services

[496/2012 Sb.](#) Act on Audiovisual

[46/2000 Sb.](#) Press Act

[483/1991 Sb.](#) Czech Television Act

[517/1992 Sb.](#) Act on the Czech Press Office

[484/1991 Sb.](#) Act on Czech Radio

## 2.2 Assessment of legal requirements and supervisory authority practice

Following an [analysis of regional news broadcasters](#) in 2020, Oživení sent four complaints about violations of the ban on election campaigning in regional media and 9 complaints to the Broadcasting Council for failure to maintain objectivity and balance in the news broadcasts that the regions buy.

The Broadcasting Council plans to conduct its own content analysis based on our suggestions. The Office for Supervision of Political Parties and Movements (hereinafter referred to as the Office), which monitors violations of election laws, has already commented on our complaints and issued two fines.

What does the Authority assess?

The basic question that the Office is assessing concerns two concepts - when it is "promotion of a candidate or a political party running for office" (in the case of regional elections under Section 56a of the Regional Elections Act) and when it is only "information about the activities of the municipality (region) and its bodies or representatives". There is no correct interpretation, it is up to the authority to draw the imaginary line with its decision-making practice and which content is already considered as election promotion. In our view, the current practice of the Office is highly formalistic and ignores the context of the situation.

In particular, the Office identifies as election campaigning interviews with governors in which they have the opportunity to present their views in the run-up to the election or an introduction highlighting the governor's personal activities and commitment and outlining plans for his or her next term. The Office assesses as simply informing those articles that summarise and evaluate the past electoral period and contain only the achievements and positive introductions of the outgoing politicians.

From our analysis of the municipal newspaper, the following key recommendations for evaluation

- The sheer imbalance and bias of the content is an important indicator that the municipal newspaper is being misused for election campaigning. It is mainly measured by the fact that other candidates usually have minimal space to express themselves, to present their own evaluation of the past election period. The Office's assessment should keep in mind that the newspaper is funded by public money and goes free to all citizens.
- The Authority should assess the newspaper in the context of the election campaign conducted by the individual entities.
- Articles evaluating the whole period can hardly be objective information, but it is possible to meet the requirements of balance when the rapporteur presents an evaluation of all relevant

candidates - if the opposition has no chance to evaluate the past period, it would be appropriate to subject such articles to greater scrutiny by the Office.

- It is also important to consider the graphic design - information about the Governor's official day could be mere information, if it were designed as such - like a small written notice. If it is a full-page format with a large photo of the governor and her personal signature, it is again difficult to perceive the content as a simple message.

## 2.3 Case study – Liberec Television - how does media supervision work in the Czech Republic?

We have analysed a contract between Liberecký kraj (Liberec Region) and Liberecká TV, s.r.o. who is a local news media company. According to this contract Liberecká TV delivered television coverage of local news. The contract had a major flaw because it enabled the client to review and approve video spots (labelled as news) before they were aired thus making it possible for the political leadership of Liberec Region to censor what was going to be broadcasted. This is contrary to the statutory provision of Act on the Operation of Radio and Television Broadcasting which states the obligation of the broadcaster to broadcast in its own name, on its own account and under its own responsibility and to be responsible for the content of the broadcast.

We contacted the Broadcasting Council and pointed out this misconduct in November 2020. In May 2021 the Council decided to alert Liberecká TV to make amends. Later we reviewed the new contract between aforementioned subjects to find out that the essence of the described problem remained unchanged. In November 2021 we contacted the Council again, this time also suggesting the possibility to issue a fine for the offence. The Council however only submitted comments which the contractor (Liberecká TV) was obliged to accept. Even though there was a new contract between Liberecká TV and Liberec Region the story repeated itself once again and in April 2022 we contacted the Council for the last time. The council finally decided to initiate misdemeanour proceeding, which is currently in progress.

## 3. Analysis of selected local government news channels

### 3.1. Local government news channels

The long-term decline of independent local media has resulted in other media taking up the space. Across the Czech Republic, the space is most often filled by media financed or directly published by local or regional governments. With the development of the Internet and the reduction of technical costs of information dissemination, municipalities, cities and regions now offer - regional television broadcasts, printed municipals newspapers with free distribution to mailboxes<sup>9</sup>, mobile radio, other news on their websites and social networks are experiencing dramatic growth. All formats have the same characteristics - the source and initiator are politicians or their press department, while those who produce the content often lack independence (being directly subordinate to politicians) and/or professional standards.

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<sup>9</sup> not all municipalities have free distribution directly to mailboxes, sometimes the newspaper is charged for and citizens can buy it at information centres, municipals, etc.. e.g. Vysoké mýto, Polička? Litomyšl? However, the model with flat distribution still prevails.

As our analyses<sup>10</sup> show - in cases where media are regulated - for example, in the case of regional TV stations supervised by the Broadcasting Council - there are also violations of the rules, which the Council cannot enforce (Liberecká TV case study). Instead of the media fulfilling their critical role, giving feedback to politicians, they cooperate with each other in a symbiosis.

At the same time, it is evident that these media are strongly influencing the regional media market; the above-mentioned overview of funding shows that some regional media receive sufficient funding, but the problem is their poor quality and unprofessionalism, which makes them a mouthpiece for political representatives in the regions. The second part is made up of professional publishing houses that have focused on the market for regional publications with links to public money. For example, the regional publishing house was created from an advertising agency. According to its website, the company offers professional sales representatives to sell advertising in the municipal and regional newspapers they publish.<sup>11</sup>

**My řešíme vaši propagaci, vy rozvíjejte váš byznys**

- Na druhé straně je vždy profesionál**  
Naši inzertní poradci jsou profíci. Ročně zpracují a administrují až 4 000 objednávek do 60 různých novin a časopisů. A to už je pořádná porce.
- Jste vždy v pohodě**  
Trochu spolupráce od vás budeme potřebovat. Bez podkladů a pár základních informací to přeče jen nejde. Ale zbytek práce už je na nás – zvolíme formu, graficky zpracujeme a navrhne vhodná média.
- Dárek za vyplnění formuláře**  
Vkládáte do našich rukou propagaci vaší firmy. Je tedy fér, když vás hned na začátku odměníme. Získáváte 10 % slevu na první inzerát.

The Press Act No. 46/2000 Coll., defines what kind of printed matter is to be regarded as periodical press and what subset constitutes the periodical press of the local government. Periodicals are any newspapers or magazines that are published under the same title, with the same content, with a uniform layout and at least twice a year. Publishing of the press means the activity of the publisher in providing the content, publication and public dissemination of the printed matter.

In contrast, the periodical press of the local government is characterised by the fact that its publisher is always closely linked to the local government in some way. The publisher may be the local authority itself (municipality, region, capital city of Prague, municipal district), or a legal entity established, founded or controlled by the local authority, or any other publisher which provides the publication of the press on the basis of a contract with the local authority.

## 3.2 Municipals Newspapers

What are municipals newspapers?

This term refers to newspapers published by local government units (county, city, municipality) that report on local issues with public money and under the authority of the public administration. They

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.oziveni.cz/2020/10/analyza-2020-radnicni-zpravodaje-stale-slouzi-politikum-misto-obcanu/>

<sup>11</sup> <https://regvyd.cz/vitejte/chci-inzerci/>

therefore clearly have the characteristics of public media, as we know, for example, from Czech Television or Czech Radio.

Municipal newspapers are paid for by the taxes of all of us. The press law requires objectivity and balance in municipals newspapers, a space for debate on local issues. But the reality is different. Municipals newspapers, which most of us receive free in our mailboxes, still remain primarily a PR tool.

An analysis of 50 municipals newspapers in the largest cities shows that more than a third of them still lack any space for opposition. Most cities and towns set out in their own rules that they will provide objective and balanced information in their newspapers. But they cannot achieve this because the content is dominated by the political leadership.

We also addressed questions to all the editors of the analysed municipals newspapers. Twelve of them responded to the questions, two thirds of the respondents confirmed that the articles are subject to partial or full control of the municipals management. The credibility of the information is also undermined by the fact that most articles lack a signed author.

### How municipals newspapers are contributing to the crisis in local journalism

Municipals newspapers are often the only source of information about local events and citizens expect to find objective and balanced information in them. However, the reality is that most of the content is under the direct control of politicians in the city administration. For much of the content that is devoted to the political activities of the City Hall, the newspapers offer only one-sided information, usually supplemented by a statement from the mayor or a council member.

The problem of objectivity of the presented information is closely related to the fact that the editorial board of the newspaper is appointed by the city council in 85%. In almost half of the municipalities analysed, the opposition is not represented on the editorial board at all, in another third in such a small number that they cannot have any real influence on the shape of the newspaper.

To save money, newspapers attract advertising in large quantities. This makes it difficult for independent local media, which cannot do without advertisers. Regions are overwhelmed by formats that fall short of the quality of news media, burdened by interest pressures, affiliations and opaque ownership structures.

It remains very unclear to the reader what printed material they actually have in their hands. Whether it is a source of objective information or an advertising leaflet of the municipals. The situation is further complicated by cases where politicians publish their own publications, which are easily confused with the municipals newspaper. This was the case, for example, with the Krásné Letňany group headed by billionaire Pavel Sehnal. He ran in the municipal elections in Prague 18 and his group sent out a copy of Letňany List in which it presented its own programme. News server novinky.cz reported on the entire case on 1 September 2022.

### Content analysis of municipals newspapers

Oživení regularly analyses the content of municipals newspapers before local elections. The aim is to evaluate the content of municipals newspapers, which are local public service media, according to a uniform methodology. Similarly to the national so-called public service media, these newspapers are published under certain public authority and with public money in order to inform citizens about what is happening in local government.

Positive indicators	Negative indicators
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The area on which the activities of politicians and the municipals are reported, the so-called political area (POP)	Anonymous political surface with unknown author (ANON)
An area with alternative views on the politics of city management (ALT)	A political platform with a damaging form, which usually involves the dehumanisation of opponents (irony, corrective comments, etc.) (POSK)
Future Decision Information Board (BUD)	Above-standard number of references in the text to the city leadership (mayor + council members)
Local Government Resolutions Information Area (USN)	Above-standard number of photos of politicians in the city leadership (mayor + council members)

## Results of the analysis-recommendations for local governments

On the basis of the analysis (which is a data annex to the document), we list the factors that led to better results in terms of benefits for citizens and a higher degree of plurality of opinion.

- Editorial Board

The desirable functioning of the editorial board is influenced by its institutional anchorage within the local government, i.e. issues related to its formal establishment and statute. In 86% of the sample, the editorial board is appointed by the municipal council or the mayor. In both of these cases, there is a conflict of interest, with the council leadership exercising direct influence over the content of the newspaper. **If the editorial board is appointed by the city administration, the plurality of opinions in the newspaper is reduced.**

The number of opposition members represented on the editorial board has a direct impact on the diversity of opinions. The presence of the opposition on editorial boards leads to more pressure to publish the opposition's opinion. **Plurality of opinion is significantly increased when the opposition is present on the editorial board.**

- Internal rules for publishing municipals

34% of the municipalities surveyed had no rules for publishing municipals implemented. In such cases, therefore, the activity is carried out in a very informal way, probably without clear responsibilities and accountabilities for content production. It can be assumed that in such an environment it is much easier to undesirably influence the content of the periodical in favour of the political force currently in power. Data analysis confirmed that **opinion pluralism was significantly higher in the presence of written rules** than in the case of publishers without such rules. The existence of rules, provided that they regulate at least the basic parameters for ensuring objectivity and balance, is clearly a prerequisite for greater objectivity and diversity of opinion in the content of municipals reporting on the activities of local government bodies and offices. The basic recommendation for municipalities is therefore that they should establish internal rules for the publication of their newspapers.

- Information on future decisions

The amount of space in the newspaper devoted to informing citizens about future decisions on which people can have a direct influence reflects the tendency of the municipals to involve citizens in public decision-making. In order for people to engage civically, express their preferences in public debate and influence their councillors, they need to be informed of these opportunities. For newspapers that contained at least some information about a future decision, both the IRON and BENEFIT index took on higher values than for those newspapers that contained no mention of a future decision. Thus, our

analysis suggests that those **newsrooms that attempt to report on future local government decisions in their newspapers also allow for a higher plurality of opinions in the content.**

- Anonymous political area

An anonymous area is an area of text that has no author (or editorial abbreviation clearly identifying a particular author). In general, texts that are published anonymously create an easier space for censorship and defamation of opponents. In the case of municipals newspapers, anonymous texts facilitate the purposeful and uncritical presentation of political leadership. Our analysis shows that **newspapers with low anonymity allow for greater plurality of opinion in content.**

- Promotion of political leadership of local governments

The content of local newspapers routinely mentions and portrays local government officials, especially those in the local executive branch who have a dominant influence on local politics (e.g. mayors, councillors). This is therefore a very common and natural component of local news coverage. At the same time, however, it can be a tool for disproportionate political agitation by these officials at the expense of providing objective and balanced information about local political events. The basic criterion for assessing the degree of political promotion in municipals in our analysis is the number of mentions and photographs of the mayor (governor, mayor) and councillors (deputy mayors, deputies), which is expressed in terms of the number of mentions and photographs per standardised A4 page of political space. This allows us to accurately compare the concentration of mentions and photos in municipals of different formats. **Our analysis shows that those newspapers that mention the city leadership less perform better in the overall ranking.**

- A damaging form of political surface

The presence of a damaging form fundamentally damages the level of public debate in the periodical and reduces the chances for a balanced exchange of views. It usually manifests itself in the targeted dehumanization of opinion opponents (individuals or groups) by ironizing them, distorting their statements or actions, and publishing corrective comments without the possibility of adequate defense.

#### Comparison of analysis results with previous years

The pleasing news is that a number of the areas assessed have seen a slight improvement compared to the 2018, 2014 and 2006 analysis. 15% more local governments have established their internal rules for publishing municipals than in 2018. There was a very slight increase in informing citizens about future local government decisions (0.35%); the amount of anonymous space remained virtually unchanged, with a 0.11% improvement in the amount of space with damaging content. Political promotion space also decreased slightly, with 0.19 mentions per A4 page of POP.

#### Questionnaire survey among editors of municipals newspapers

As part of our analysis, we sent questionnaires to all 50 editorial offices of the municipals

newspapers we surveyed. 14 of them provided us with responses indicating that only 16% of the editors had a journalism degree and 75% of them would appreciate professional training for journalists. This finding confirms our hypothesis that many mistakes are made by editors out of



ignorance. Moreover, editorial work makes up on average half, and often only 20%, of an editor's workload, so there is no room for better quality output. 63% of respondents would appreciate staff reinforcements in their work.

According to 9% of the editors, the content of the articles is fully controlled by the city management; 55% of the respondents answered that the articles are partially controlled. These findings are consistent with the results of the content analysis of the newspapers on the high degree of control of the content by the city management.

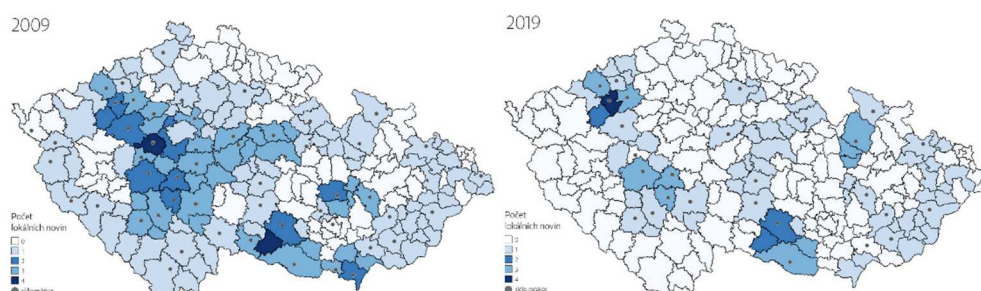
[A pilot content analysis of the municipalsmunicipals](#) was also carried out by Jaromír Volek, PhD in cooperation with Focus. This analysis included a different sample and different methods, but reached similar conclusions and recommendations. Based on the comparison of the analyses, we agreed to establish cooperation.

## 4. Conclusions from the local roundtable - definition of the biggest problems of local journalism and proposed corrective measures

The project brought together journalists, editors, publishers and researchers in a roundtable to define the basic problems of local journalism and at the same time to find consensus on appropriate measures to remedy the crisis situation. Consensus was not easily found, and those present agreed on the following list of points. Before the roundtable, everyone filled out a questionnaire, and from the answers we show the percentage of agreement.

### 4.1 "Information deserts" expanding

As demonstrated by Lenka Waschková Císařová's [research](#) from 2019, which she presented at the roundtable, the number of independent local media has declined from 60 to 29 titles over the course of ten years. In addition, the place of traditional local media has been taken by chains (Nationwide regional daily prints) that replace local information in their content with regional or national news.



Thus, in many areas we do not find independent (i.e. not controlled by the local government) and local (containing truly local information) media. This creates an "information desert". The creation of information deserts, i.e. places not covered by independent media, results in lower voter turnout, more expensive public procurement and a lack of oversight of local politicians. The empty media space is then filled by media dependent on local government, which are often used to promote the city's leadership and sometimes prevent pluralism of opinion.

## 4.2 Economic model, system of financial support for media

The existence of local media is not economically sustainable. However, as the previous chapter shows, their positive impact on society is undeniable. It is therefore in the interest of society to support their activities financially.

All participants in the roundtable believe that public funding for the media should be introduced. There is no clear consensus on the form of financial support. Over 60% think that support for the media should be provided by state institutions, while others would opt for private funds (such as the existing [Foundation for Independent Journalism](#)) or professional organisations.

Regarding the form of the subsidy, 90% of the respondents were in favour of a direct operating subsidy (as is the case in Canada, France, Russia and Austria). In terms of indirect subsidies, the optimal option seems to be a reduction in VAT on printing or a reduction in postal rates for municipalities. Alternatively, a combination of both types of support.

When introducing financial support for the media, the risk of purpose-built media must be guarded against.

Most of the experts present were in favour of linking financial support to criteria for quality journalism.

## 4.3 Low level of professionalisation, setting criteria for quality journalism and media self-regulation

The experts present agreed that the regions are overwhelmed by formats that fall short of the quality of news media and are burdened by interest pressures, ties and an opaque ownership structure. They also identified the low level of professionalism of journalists and the lack of uniform journalistic standards as problematic.

Most of the experts present considered it desirable for private local media to set up their own regulatory mechanisms. There is no coherence between the sub-existing self-regulatory mechanisms; journalists set their own and publishers set different ones.

Related to this is the requirement for common codes of ethics that would apply to all media platforms and contribute to overall transparency.

Over 65% of those present considered the low level of professionalisation of journalists to be a problem. This problem is linked to low staff capacity, lack of resources, and low social prestige of the position of regional journalist.

## 4.4 Conflicting interests of private media owners, opaque ownership and ties, interest pressures

Under the Conflict of Interest Act, politicians are prohibited from publishing periodicals or broadcasting. However, the law does not cover cases in which a politician is not the formal operator of a media outlet, but exercises influence over it, for example through a trust fund. The management of online media is not considered a conflict of interest at all.

A common demand of the roundtable participants is to adjust the current state of affairs and to strengthen overall supervision of compliance with the Conflict of Interest Act.



#### 4.5 Promoting cooperation between actors - creation of a sharing platform

The participants of the roundtable unanimously stated that they lack any coordinated cooperation of experts in the field of local journalism. Experts duplicate their research, do not share their conclusions and lack sufficient space for discussion of the current situation.

Therefore, as a first step, we have created a common group to share outputs and inform each other.

Another common issue identified by participants was the lack of capacity for administrative activities and they unanimously supported the request for a joint European grant.