



Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe
The Representative on Freedom of the Media
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Statement at the Permanent Council
(Review of Current Issues)

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Mr. Chairman, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Since December my Office has been closely monitoring the developments at Czech Television in line with my mandate. Following the appointment of a new Director General of the Czech TV on 20 December, journalists, supported by the television staff, started a protest against what they believe to be serious political interference in the editorial operation of the TV station. These actions, including demonstrations and declarations of solidarity by leading Czech writers and intellectuals, have led to a major public debate about the future of independent professional journalism in the framework of a public TV station which a decade ago was still directly controlled by the State.

The Council on Czech Television, the supervising authority of the public television, had dismissed the former director general and appointed a personality who is understood to be linked directly to outside political influence.

The main argument during the critical public debate is, that this Council as constituted, does not seem to be sufficiently protected from direct political influence, be it governmental or parliamentary. Although the Council has been defined as an independent institution, the Chamber of Deputies of the Parliament appointed in April 2000 all 9 members according to proportional partisan pattern. Apparently the alleged low level of protection of the body against political interference has resulted in the current unsettled situation in the Czech public television.

Having been approached from several sides on my assessment of the events in Prague, I asked Minister of Foreign Affairs Jan Kavan in a letter of 28 December for his Government's views regarding this matter. I am grateful for the comprehensive and frank reply from the Minister of 4 January. In his response, the Minister informed me that the Czech government "is aware of imperfections of the current media legislation as well as the importance of proper media law for functioning of democracy in its real form". Therefore, the Government has decided to address the legal core of the problem by changing the law. The new draft is to be consistent with relevant European standards on public broadcasting such as Council of Europe guidelines. He assures me that the whole issue will be settled through parliamentary means in harmony with democratic traditions of his country. Further he wrote: "I am fully aware of the importance of independent public television and radio for democracy and I am sure that the Czech constitutional bodies will do their best to protect and strengthen this position without interfering in the internal affairs of the Czech TV".

I welcome the Government's approach to solve the current conflict in a forward-looking way.

I also welcome that the current dispute on the future of Czech Television has become a subject of intensive public discussion within the country. It is an important discussion about the administration of the country's public service broadcasting system and about the quality of journalistic independence of the national broadcaster. Journalists, writers, intellectuals, politicians, but also trade unions, NGOs and the broader public take part. It is a discussion, which in one form or other is of interest to participating states of our organization, in particular to those, which have a long history of direct state control of media. But this discussion is also of interest to all of us, because political interference with critical and professional journalism is not limited to the post- socialist world. The ongoing

public debate reminds us of the great civil, cultural and intellectual history of Prague, the city of one of the oldest universities of Europe.

The great example of British BBC has proved: Public service broadcasting will remain one of the cornerstones of democratic pluralism and should be organised according to well-established principles of transparency, independence and accountability.

I am convinced that the current lively debate in Czech Republic has opened the discussion on this subject in other OSCE countries especially in Central Europe.

Let me conclude with a personal remark. Foreign Minister Kavan's response mentioned a famous political essay on freedom, which the President of his republic had written as a samisdat text during times of dictatorship. In a personal statement I had myself referred to Vaclav Havel's essay which I had once published in the eighties as a book editor. The Minister reminded me that he personally had been involved at the time in publishing the same essay. You see with regard to freedom of expression we are all swimming in the same stormy river.