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Czech Republic: largest protest since the Velvet Revolution

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On 15 November, 400,000 people demonstrated in Prague in the country's largest anti-government protest since 1989. The demonstrators rallied against a bill that would change the funding model for public service media. The legislation, which passed its first reading in the Chamber of Deputies in the early hours of 24 October, would abolish television and radio licence fees and replace them with direct funding from the state budget. At the same time, the budget for public radio and television would fall by approximately 15% compared with current revenues from licence fees.

The opposition and President Petr Pavel have criticised both the substance of the proposed changes and the procedure used to advance the bill, including its unannounced addition to the parliamentary agenda as a priority item, restrictions on debate and the imposition of a fixed voting deadline. The first protests took place shortly after the vote, with 25,000 people demonstrating in Prague alone. On 3 November, employees of Czech Television and Czech Radio held a day-long general strike.

The demonstration has highlighted the mobilisation of the opposition electorate, but the opposition itself remains hampered by fragmentation and a lack of charismatic leaders: none of its leading politicians played a central role in the protest. Initial indications from the governing camp, notably strong support for the bill among its politicians and electorate, suggest that the prospects of halting the changes are currently slim.

Commentary

- **The proposed changes to the funding of public service media fulfil the governing parties' campaign pledges and are highly likely to enter into force largely in their present form.** Given the expected resistance from both the opposition-dominated Senate and President Pavel, the new regulations are unlikely to take effect before the second half of 2027. Under the Czech Republic's political system, a majority in the Chamber of Deputies is sufficient to override a presidential veto. The prime minister has left open the possibility of amending the bill, which passed its first reading, during subsequent stages of the legislative process. He explicitly mentioned the option of allowing people to pay television and radio licence fees voluntarily. The government's increased activity on this issue stems from its poor performance in the recent *local and Senate elections* and its failure to deliver on a substantial part of its social agenda.
- **Funding public service media directly from the state budget will make them dependent on the governing camp.** Concerns about a shift in editorial coverage also stem from the period when Andrej Babiš, now prime minister, controlled leading private media outlets.

Despite his assurances that he would not interfere in their editorial decisions, leaked recordings of his private conversations with journalists and the content of articles published at the time demonstrate that these outlets served as tools to advance his political and business interests. Slovakia is an important point of reference in the Czech debate on public service broadcasting. There, the predecessors of the current government abolished television and radio licence fees in 2023 at the initiative of the liberals, effectively helping the subsequent Robert Fico's government to expand its influence over the media.

- **The protest brought together politicians from all the main opposition forces, which have struggled to attract public attention a year after the elections to the Chamber of Deputies.** As a result, President Pavel has emerged as the main opponent of the Babiš government. He enjoys the support of the opposition parties, but has no direct affiliation with any of them. Pavel does not intend to seek the premiership in the future, unlike Vít Rakušan, the leader of the liberal Mayors and Independents (STAN) party, who attended the protest. His party has surged in the polls in recent weeks, reaching 23.5% (up 6.5 percentage points since August and 12.5 points since last year's elections) and cementing its position in second place, just behind Babiš's ANO (29.5%, down 5 percentage points since the elections), according to a Kantar poll published on 8 November. This rise reflects the party's success in the recent local and Senate elections. Meanwhile, Mikuláš Minář, the head of the organisation behind the demonstrations, has shown no ambition to enter party politics. He previously organised major protests against Babiš's former government, the largest of which drew 250,000–300,000 people in November 2019.
- **The prevailing editorial stance of Czech public service media aligns more closely with the opposition than with the governing camp.** This is reflected in opinion polls showing that around 80% of voters supporting the opposition centre-right trust Czech Television, the country's most-watched broadcaster, compared with only half of those supporting the governing parties. Public service media highlight controversies involving government politicians, particularly Babiš, who has been the subject of numerous investigative reports exposing conflicts of interest arising from his dual role as a politician and businessman and shedding light on scandals linked to him. The considerable autonomy enjoyed by public service broadcasters has contributed to the Czech Republic's high ranking in this year's Reporters Without Borders World Press Freedom Index, in which it placed 11th out of 180 countries, ahead of the likes of Germany and the United Kingdom.
- **The Babiš government is focusing on addressing the material concerns of ordinary Czechs and is seeking to present the abolition of television and radio licence fees as part of these efforts.** The measure will reduce household expenditure by the equivalent of approximately 8 euros per month. The government has already managed to cut electricity prices by around 10% by transferring the cost of the renewable energy surcharge from consumers' electricity bills to the state budget. Benefits for children under the age of three will also increase from 2027. In addition, small business owners have benefited from a change in the basis for calculating social security contributions, while participants in private pension schemes have gained from changes to how these schemes operate. In response to a sharp rise in global oil and fuel prices, the Czech

government has introduced caps on retail fuel prices and profit margins, and reduced excise duty on diesel to the EU minimum. At the same time, the high expectations generated by last year's election campaign mean that voters may still feel that the Babiš government has not delivered enough, particularly in the areas of mortgage lending and housing availability. The government has deferred until 2027 the start of legislative work aimed at reversing the pension reform introduced by Petr Fiala's cabinet (which raised the retirement age) and setting it at 65 for both men and women.