

Article

## Comparing Czech and Slovak Council Newspapers' Policy and Regulation Development

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### Abstract

Council newspapers form an integral part of European media systems and, as such, have been analysed for their important contribution to the development of local politics. However, despite a recognition of the media's important democratic function in the transition countries of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) after the fall of socialism, the consideration of council newspapers' political role in the Czech Republic and Slovakia have been largely absent in debates surrounding the development of regulatory frameworks until recently. Interestingly, debates regarding local government transparency emerged recently (2011) in the United Kingdom, resulting in the *Code of recommended practice on local authority publicity*, underscoring the importance of this issue. However, developments in the aforementioned situations demonstrate divergent outcomes in such considerations: the British addressed the causes, the Czechs addressed the symptoms, and the Slovaks have yet to make any headway. This article utilizes qualitative analysis of policy and regulation documents to compare the trajectories of media policy and regulation of council publicity in the Czech Republic and Slovakia, ultimately contrasting it with developments in the UK, suggesting possible future trajectories for the development of this type of regulation in the CEE countries.

### Keywords

council newspapers; Czech media; media; politics; press regulation; Slovak media; UK media policy

### Issue

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### 1. Introduction

Recently, the deputy mayor in a small Czech town stated during informal conversation that the council newspaper in the town operates as the most independent news source available to the public, suggesting its editorial independence from town hall oversight. In fact, the articles appearing in this publication are often written by politicians or municipality officials themselves, leaving the editor with nothing but the singular function of collecting articles and handing them over to the editorial board the majority of which is composed of local politicians. This story clearly illustrates the conundrum of council newspapers in the Czech Republic and Slovakia.

The problem resides in the ambiguous nature of the *council newspaper*<sup>1</sup> and its problematic operation as *local medium*<sup>2</sup> or *council publicity tool*<sup>3</sup>. Even though

<sup>1</sup> Council newspaper is understood as a periodical publication published by village, town, district or regional municipalities. No information is available about the exact number and structure of council newspapers in the Czech Republic (according to estimations, there are over 1,000 of them; see Oživení (2010)).

<sup>2</sup> Local newspaper is understood as a newspaper published and distributed in the village, town, district and regional area. Czech commercial local newspapers were analysed in 2009, there were 132 local newspaper titles, 73 of which were owned by one ownership chain, cf. Waschková Cisařová (2013).

<sup>3</sup> Council publicity tool is understood as a publication produced as a public relations instrument for municipalities, such as

council newspapers remain an integral part of European media systems, they differ in key features from other types of media (e.g. ownership models, financing, newsroom structure, content production, relationship with local politics). Moreover, this ambiguous function of council newspapers has surprisingly weathered the post-socialist transition in most of the CEE countries since 1989. Despite the close scrutiny and reorganization of the media's relationship to politics being a key feature of these transitions, council newspapers (particularly in the Czech Republic and Slovakia) have been largely absent from consideration in relation to debates on the development of regulatory frameworks.

In this article, I outline the problematic relationship between council newspapers and local politics, qualitatively analysing media policy and regulation documents as a means to compare the trajectories of media policy and regulation of council newspapers in the Czech Republic and Slovakia. I then compare the findings with the situation in the UK as a means to consider possible future pathways for the development of this type of regulation in the CEE countries. Finally, I argue that such analyses are pivotal for understanding the real terms of the relationship between media and local politics and similarly imperative for determining the future media policies in CEE societies that will impact the democratic health of media in the region.

The analysis will focus on the following questions: What are the nature and impact of council newspapers as media in the Czech Republic and Slovakia? Do council newspapers serve the public or special interests? Can they still be considered local media or are they rather council publicity tools? How do the developmental trajectories of media policy and regulation of council newspapers in the Czech Republic and Slovakia differ from one another when considering the media and political system transition after 1989? What may be considered "good practice" in council newspapers policy and regulation?

## 2. Relationship between Council Newspapers and Local Politics

The changing relationship between media and politics was an unsurprisingly fundamental feature of the post-socialist transitions in the Czech Republic and Slovakia<sup>4</sup>. It was reflected mainly in the interrelated changes that occurred within policies regarding media regulation, media ownership and initiatives to foster greater media independence.

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councils' press releases etc.; see Zavattaro (2010).

<sup>4</sup> Czechoslovakia split in 1993. The media conditions (i.e. the rules applied) were similar not only up to that time, but also after the breakup where each system was reconfigured in relation to the general conditions of the post-socialist transitions in the region. For insight into transition see Jakubowicz (2007).

Efforts to ensure the independence and freedom of the media after the post-socialist revolutions produced an understandably liberal nature within the tenets of the Press Act (see Jakubowicz (2007)). Similarly, during this time, the municipality acts<sup>5</sup>—which, among other things, sought to facilitate citizen engagement with political communication—created the conditions and framework for the emergence and development of council newspapers (Svatošová, 2006).

The changes in the relationship between the media and politics became most apparent at the national level, with the reconfiguration of the state ownership of the media, media privatization and the transformation of the state owned television and radio into a public service model (see Šmíd (2004)). Institutions, which deviated from these proscribed media model changes, were subsequently and publicly addressed, particularly in relation to the public service media (e.g. regarding the Czech television "crisis" in 2000, see Šmíd (2004); regarding the merging of Slovak television and Slovak radio, see ČT24 (2010).

It is important to point out, however, that serious discussion about the unusual position of council newspapers in the Czech and Slovak media systems only began more clearly much later, after 2006. At this time, scrutiny and reflection related to the national media transformation had largely faded and there was finally an opportunity for examining the relationship between media and politics on the local level. The configuration and dynamics of local media markets and the municipality's role in relation to them is seldom found in the academic and public discussions and publications focused on the media transition before 2000. Sükösd and Bajomi-Lázár (2003) point out this anomaly as one of the nine major problem areas in contemporary CEE media, framing it as an ownership monopoly issue:

Media monopolies at the county, city, district, town and village level are so common that they are often taken for granted. In some countries, local governments indirectly own local television stations and newspapers. As these are the exclusive channels of institutionalized communication at the local level (Internet use is growing relatively slowly), their performance is often biased in election campaigns. (Sükösd & Bajomi-Lázár, 2003, p. 21)

The authors go on to describe a rather general problem regarding council newspapers in the CEE countries. It is quite usual in the Czech Republic and Slovakia that the municipalities publish their own newspapers (see be-

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<sup>5</sup> There are three municipality acts in the Czech Republic—*Zákon o obcích*; *Zákon o krajích* (2000); *Zákon o hlavním městě Praze* (2000) and three in Slovakia—*Zákon o obecnom zriadení* (2014); *Zákon o samosprávnych krajoch* (2001); *Zákon o hlavnom meste SR Bratislave* (1990). See more later.

low). The analysis suggests, that this development creates a unique media situation: 1) these newspapers remained owned by the municipalities during the privatization of the state media; 2) they retain close ties with local politicians in opposition to the developing media tenets and initiatives which seek to eliminate political influence in media; and 3) they are often produced by municipality officials or politicians in contrast to the principles of professional journalism which have been implemented since 1989.

We should ask whether these media serve the public or special interests? Can they be considered local media or rather council publicity tools? Clarifying these distinctions is profoundly important for assessing the relationship between council newspapers and local politicians and more important, for developing an adequate legal framework regarding judicial oversight.

When trying to define council newspapers as local media, problems arise, as their characteristics (ownership patterns, business model, organization, and production settings) differ significantly from all other Czech and Slovak media. Council newspapers are the only media paid for by the “state” (in this case, by the municipalities). The only media with a distant relationship with the state are the Czech and Slovak public service media (in both cases television and radio), while the Parliaments can potentially influence public service Acts and oversight authorities. However, council newspapers cannot be classified as public service media<sup>6</sup>, because they do not have this status in the regulatory framework and in their own internal rules.

Moreover, council newspapers, while receiving money from the municipalities are simultaneously participating in the market competition for readers and advertisers (see Marťák (2013)). As such, they are government funded competitors for the commercial local media<sup>7</sup>, which continue to struggle to survive in light of

<sup>6</sup> Council newspapers were at first considered as public service media even in the analysis of NGO Oživení. However the analysis came to the conclusion, that the analysed council newspapers did not fulfil the principles of public service media (Oživení, 2010, p. 14, cf. Marťák, 2013).

<sup>7</sup> An unusual example of the possible cooperation between commercial local newspapers and a local municipality is the case of the *Finchburg Star*, a newspaper published in a suburb of Madison, Wisconsin, USA. Commercial publications were closed down but the local municipality in 2014 realized that the community needed its local newspaper. Consequently, it “embarked on an experiment: With a one-year direct financial boost from city hall—about \$30,000 to cover monthly postage, plus the shuttering of a city newsletter that competed for ad dollars—the paper would return to print”. After one year of this experiment, “the Finchburg Star is now printing a monthly edition and mailing it to the more than 12,000 residences and businesses in town. All of the paper’s revenue these days comes from advertising, though it is still getting some city support: municipality officials committed \$16,800” (see Hutchins (2015)).

the 2008 financial crisis and declining local advertising revenues (Engel, 2009; Fenton, Metykova, Schlosberg, & Freedman, 2010). In addition, municipality officials and/or local politicians contribute more significantly to the content production of these newspapers than any professional journalists (see Oživení (2010) and Kamenský (2010)). This fact strongly suggests the potential of misusing council newspapers for distribution of municipality government opinion. This potential bias (the failure to provide a plurality of opinion) conflicts with the fact that these media are financially supported by taxpayers. As Fenton et al. (2010) point out in their study of the UK local media, local municipality ownership of local news media “*is not only undemocratic but an unsustainable and ineffective use of taxpayers’ funds*” (p. 5, original emphasis). The authors go on to describe the municipal press as a propaganda tool, citing their research respondent:

It’s more a propaganda for council. If you look at it, there’s nothing about community as such like an input and it looks so very, it doesn’t look like a newspaper to me, it looks like some sort of election leaflet, which they’ve pushed through the door. (Participant, Kings Cross elderly group; Fenton et al., 2010, p. 26)

These are strong arguments for the opinion that council newspapers should be rather considered council publicity tools, a point underscored by their method of financing (the municipality establishes its public image through public money), production structure (content prepared by municipality officials, spokespersons or the PR department staff, overseen by an editorial board consisting of local politicians) and business model (council newspapers are often free sheets distributed directly to citizens’ mailboxes)<sup>9</sup> (see below and Oživení (2010)).

Staci Zavattaro (2010) argues that council newspapers are part of council publicity, stating they are:

one of the various ways in which cities are selling themselves as commodities; another way cities try to control shaping their social realities; “counter-

<sup>8</sup> Fenton et al. (2010) suggest a better way of spending taxpayers’ money for local information—namely to establish local government subsidies for local news-hub start-ups, which could come from local government advertising.

<sup>9</sup> There are exceptions, e.g. the council newspaper *Kopřivnické noviny* published by the municipality in the town Kopřivnice with roughly 20,000 inhabitants. This newspaper utilizes a standardized newspaper layout and is sold at the newsstands (see <http://www.koprivnice.cz/index.php?id=koprivnicke-noviny-koprivnice>). The hybrid nature of council newspapers particularly comes into relief in this case, as it strongly resembles a commercial newspaper although it is not (cf. Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity (2011)).

strategies“ that public administrators use to cut out the media, which...has become increasingly hostile toward governments. (Zavattaro, 2010, pp. 192, 200)

Referring to the aforementioned, we can conclude that council newspapers perform as a function of localized political advertising and marketing. The question remains how do the trajectories of media policy and regulation of council newspapers in the Czech Republic and Slovakia differ in relation to the media and political system transition after 1989. While the Czech Republic identified the core of the council newspapers' problem and tried to solve it, Slovakia identified the same problem but did nothing.

### 3. Differences in Czech and Slovak Council Newspapers' Policy and Regulation Development

As previously stated, the problem of understanding council newspapers as media was utterly neglected in the Czech and Slovak media transition<sup>10</sup> and it remains a neglected area in media and journalism analyses up to the present day. Only after council newspapers were initially criticized by non-profit organizations in both the Czech Republic and Slovakia after 2006 as potential sites for undue political influence, power, and potential corruption, were the questions regarding their nature and impact raised.

While the questions were recognized as serious in both contexts, the response differed in the respective contexts with regard to addressing the vague nature of council newspapers and their potential for abuse by local politicians. In the Czech context, they prescribed a solution without adequately considering the implications that might accompany it; in the Slovak context, they have yet to implement a solution. This raises the question, how exactly the trajectories of media policy and regulation of council newspapers in the Czech Republic and Slovakia differ during the societal transition after 1989.

#### 3.1. The Czech Republic: Searching Solutions without Adequately Considering Implications

In the Czech Republic the first critic of the council newspapers<sup>11</sup> was the non-profit NGO called *Oživení* in

2006, as part of their program focused on disclosing the potential abuse of local politicians' power (Oživení, 2010). After analysing one hundred regional, town and village municipality publications, the following findings were observed. First, municipalities annually spend hundreds of millions of Czech crowns (millions of Euros) on publishing council newspapers. Second, dissenting opinion with the municipality government perspective was present in only 27% of analysed council newspapers. Third, more than 20% of the analysed articles were anonymously attributed; concurrently the less anonymity observed in the respective newspapers, the more plurality was observed in their content. Fourth, in 75% of the analysed newspapers, the editorial board was composed of municipality officials; only 8% of the analysed newspapers had opposition politicians as members of the respective editorial boards. Finally, the investigators found that the more the newspapers' production processes were outsourced and the more opposition politicians were present on the editorial board, the more pluralistic was the content (Oživení, 2010, pp. 7-16).

These findings are similar to the data<sup>12</sup> from a deeper case study using mixed methods on the narrow area of the ten biggest towns in one region (Olomouc region) in the Czech Republic (see Table 1). The analysed council newspapers are mostly freesheets, published by municipalities themselves with unclear cost structure (Kamenský, 2010, cf. Oživení, 2010).

The authors from the NGO *Oživení* point out that the state of council newspapers "severely restricts local democracy" (2010, p. 6), because there is a clear conflict of interest when local politicians control information about themselves, which is published at the expense of public money (2010, p. 11). The possible abuse of council newspapers is summed up by Svatošová (2006), who outlines five questionable practices related to council newspapers: 1) the ban on publishing critical views on municipality governance; 2) unpaid promotion of local economic actors; 3) unclear procurements related to the newspapers' production; 4) biased reporting on the outcomes of municipality governance; and 5) unilateral campaigns for solving particular local problems.

<sup>10</sup> Several Bachelors and Masters theses are focused on the topic of council newspapers (Černá, 2010; Černý, 2014; Červenková, 2011; Hándlová, 2011; Kamenský, 2010; Šedá, 2009, 2013).

<sup>11</sup> Even the Czech professional journalists' organization (*Syndikát novinářů ČR*) was unaware of this problem. The organization has actually accepted municipality officials working for council newspapers as its members (SNČR, 2004). The organization later admitted the potential problem with the close relationship between council newspapers and local politics and commented on this issue that municipality officials should not

be considered professional journalists (Jelínek, 2005) and that council newspapers should be distanced from the municipality as much as possible (SNČR, 2006; cf. Oživení, 2010; SNČR, 2013).

<sup>12</sup> There is lack of complex data about council newspapers in the Czech Republic. Even *Oživení* could not collect data about the overall structure of council newspapers. Only partial information is available about specific Czech regions. These data are from the year 2009, which is valuable in comparison with the findings of *Oživení* and Transparency International Slovakia.

**Table 1.** Selected council newspapers' features in the Czech Republic.

Town	Population	Title	Type	Print copies	Period (per year)	Distribution	Publisher	Costs (per year in 000 CZK)
Olomouc	100 373	Radniční listy	freesheet	55 000	12	by mail, free of charge to households	municipality	4 152
Přerov	46 503	Přerovské listy	freesheet	20 700	11	by mail, free of charge to households	municipality	850
Prostějov	45 378	Radniční listy	freesheet	24 000	12	by mail, free of charge to households	private company, contract with municipality	1 965
Šumperk	27 754	Šumperský zpravodaj	freesheet	14 000	22	by mail, free of charge to households	municipality	811
Hranice	19 302	Hranická radnice	private freesheet supplement	n.a.	52	free of charge on special distribution places	municipality	500
Zábřeh	14 099	Zábřeh	freesheet	6 300	23	by mail, free of charge to households	municipality	791
Šternberk	13 834	Šternberské listy	paid newspaper (price 7 CZK per copy; 21 000 sold copies per year)	1 200	21	sold in local newsstands and shops	municipality	582
Uničov	12 098	Uničovský zpravodaj	paid newspaper (price 2-3 CZK per copy; 38 313 sold copies per year)	2 150	20	sold in local newsstands and shops	municipality	200
Jeseník	12 096	Jeseník město a lázně	paid newspaper (price 10 CZK per copy; 9 000 sold copies per year)	850	12	sold in local newsstands and shops	municipality	350
Litovel	10 063	Litovelské noviny	paid newspaper (price 8 CZK per copy; 14 880 sold copies per year)	1 300	12	sold in local newsstands and shops	municipality	435

Source: Kamenský (2010).

Qualitative interviews with journalists from three media outlets published in Prague 6, Prague 21 and Buštěhrad revealed that these newspapers had been established as alternatives to the council newspapers: "The municipally owned media were being denounced for being biased and favouring the government" (Hájek & Carpentier, 2015, p. 6). Moreover, the team that established *Buštěhradské listy*, originally worked in the council newspaper *Buštěhradský zpravodaj* but had resigned due to political pressures.

In the spring of 2012, after publishing a critique on

the local government, the editorial board became the object of severe political pressure. The organizational structure of the municipal title was changed so that the local government could have more control. As a consequence of this change, the editorial board decided to resign and to establish a new, independent title. (Hájek & Carpentier, 2015, p. 7)

However, as the analysis of regulation development shows, the NGO Oživení considered the problem from the beginning as a political one and proposed the formulation of new anti-corruption amendments to the



municipality acts (Zákon o obcích, 2000; Zákon o krajích, 2000; Zákon o hlavním městě Praze, 2000) (cf. Černý, 2014, pp. 19-20). The second part of the proposed changes was the formulation of an amendment to the Press Act (Oživení, 2010, p. 18). The proposal uses the term “public service periodical press” and supports regulation leading to objectivity, impartiality and the publishing of pluralist opinion.

The authors<sup>13</sup> of the amendment proposal from the NGO Oživení later enacted their recommendations—the council newspapers’ anti-abuse measures—as a part of the *Governmental anti-corruption strategy for the years 2011 and 2012*. However, the only means of implementation of this measure at the time was the Press Act amendment (Strategie vlády, 2011, p. 18). Moreover, the government version of the Press Act amendment, which was presented in the Chamber of Deputies in February 2012<sup>14</sup> (Sněmovní tisk 603, 2012), had a distinctly different content (Stenografický zápis 36. schůze PSP, 2012; Stenografický zápis 57. schůze PSP, 2013). There were three important parts to this proposed amendment—council newspapers were referred to as the “periodical press of the local government unit” (not “public service periodicals”); people who could publish alternative opinions no longer included every citizen, but only members of municipality council, including those from the opposition; and the publisher was obliged to present objective and impartial information (Sněmovní tisk 603, 2012). This version of the Press Act amendment was later approved by Parliament and is in force since November 2013 (Sněmovní tisk 603, 2012; Tiskový zákon, 2013). The amendment of the Press Act changed the original, liberal tone of the Act—e.g. the objectivity and impartiality regulation is not applied to the commercial press, only to council newspapers (see Tiskový zákon (2013)).

Thus, the intention of the NGO Oživení to solve the problem between local politics and council newspapers led only to the Press Act amendment. Ultimately it did not solve anything but rather complicated the understanding of council newspapers as local media instead of the more acceptable understanding of them as council publicity instruments.

The final form of the Press Act also provoked journalistic criticism, mainly in relation to the absent penalties and oversight, or out-of-date definitions of the media, with regulation relating only to print and not audiovisual or new media (see Vrána (2012) and Knajfl (2012)). The municipality acts remained unchanged regarding the original proposal related to council newspapers regulation.

<sup>13</sup> The director of the NGO Oživení analysis and author of the Press Act amendment is Oldřich Kužilek, an ex-politician, now working for the NGO (taj, 2010).

<sup>14</sup> For a detailed description of the Press Act amendment development see Šedá (2013) and Černý (2014).

Understandably, deeper insight into the actual changes within the functioning of council newspapers related to the regulation changes have yet to be ascertained, as the amended Press Act has only been in force since the end of 2013. However, specific consequences of the Press Act amendment are described in a case study analysis<sup>15</sup> conducted in 2014. Černý (2014, pp. 74-76) outlines three primary conclusions: 1) the council newspapers’ editors-in-chief did not change their way of communication with municipality government, as the local politicians from the leading party are yet dominating in the council newspapers; 2) opposition politicians have slightly better access to the council newspapers—about roughly half of the responding editors-in-chief actively seek and incorporate views from opposition politicians, often in special sections; 3) the structure of the newsroom, editorial board and journalists’ routines have not changed. To the point, editors-in-chief address issues of objectivity and impartiality by promoting access for the opposition within the editorial board. Moreover, all municipality council members can publish their views in the council newspapers’ special section. Similarly, they can do so by the so called “advice method” where the opposition have information in advance about the content and topics in the council newspapers so as to adequately respond to them in their own texts. However, respondents within the case study admitted that they use the latter “advice method” more often than any active sourcing of opposition politicians.

Specific cases demonstrate that the Press Act amendment has not brought plurality, objectivity and impartiality in the council newspapers. These cases appeared most often before and after the first municipality elections (in autumn 2014) after the Press Act amendment went into effect. For example, in some council newspapers, the opposition parties have had problems to secure pre-election political advertising since the ruling party bought up all available advertising space in advance (Kremr, 2014; Ševčíková, 2014).

Moreover, even success in the municipal elections has not guaranteed access to the council newspapers. Consequently, one new local party, which obtained the second highest number of votes and gained one fifth of the municipality council membership in the city borough Praha 10, decided to establish their own alternative newspaper<sup>16</sup> (Dobré noviny, 2015; cf. Hájek & Carpentier, 2015), stating their reasoning as follows:

We face censorship twenty-five years after the Vel-

<sup>15</sup> The case study research design involves qualitative in-depth interviews with the editors-in-chief of eight council newspapers (Černý, 2014).

<sup>16</sup> Their original plan was to collect 80,000 Czech crowns (€2,900) through a website for publishing one issue (which was achieved within 10 days), ultimately, 124,183 Czech crowns (€4,500) was collected from 175 people (Dobré noviny, 2015).

vet Revolution....The council newspaper published by the Praha 10 city borough is the mouthpiece of the councillors and the mayor. They consider this newspaper as their personal advertising for public money. Citizens and opposition councillors have no access to the council newspapers. (Dobré noviny, 2015)

On the other hand this situation also stimulated stronger public reflection and action related to the problem of council newspapers. For example, anybody can now rate all council newspapers in the Czech Republic through the webpage [www.hlasnatrouba.cz](http://www.hlasnatrouba.cz) [in English: mouthpiece], which was launched in March 2015 by the NGO Oživení as a continuation of their council newspapers' analysis project. This NGO similarly plans to repeat the content analysis of council newspapers in 2015 (Kameník, 2015).

In summary, council newspapers' development in the Czech Republic was correctly identified as problematic through the NGO analysis, resting upon their unclear status (council publicity tools or local media) in the Czech media system. In attempting to redress this issue, the NGO proposed mainly the municipality acts amendments. As my analysis shows, the outcome did not produce the expected solutions, but rather further complicated the matter of council newspapers' status. The proposed solution obviously failed to address how various political opinions during the legislative process could be fairly promoted. The ongoing problem with the status of council newspapers in the Czech Republic and their relationship to local politics suggests that the issue has only become more entrenched.

### 3.2. Slovakia: No Solutions on the Horizon

The development of the Slovak media began conterminously with the Czech media—namely the law and developments were the same up to 1993, including identifying and addressing concerns related to council newspapers. In Slovakia however, council newspapers' status

was not perceived as a problem in need of solutions.

In November of 2007, the Slovak branch of the NGO Transparency International ordered a public opinion research report concerning council newspapers. The findings showed that a quarter of the respondents considered council newspapers as propaganda tools for municipality leaders (Rončák, 2008, p. 1).

Subsequently, Transparency International conducted a content analysis of thirty council newspapers published by municipalities in Slovak villages, towns and boroughs, which produced results similar to the findings from Oživení's analysis in the Czech Republic and case study from the Olomouc region (cf. Oživení, 2010; Kamenský, 2010). The Slovak analysis revealed that council newspapers are published mainly by municipalities themselves or by their organizations. In only two cases were the municipalities outsourcing their council newspapers' production. Problems were identified related to reporting the actual costs of publishing council newspapers (wages, overheads etc.), leading to speculation that these numbers are deliberately obscured.

Rončák (2008) provides basic information about the structure and features of thirty analysed titles. Five of them from the biggest towns (see Table 2) show clear similarities with the Czech examples (Table 1) the majority of which were published by the municipalities themselves, with a similar interval of publication or unclear cost structure.

Again, local politicians from the leading parties were identified as having direct influence on the council newspapers content, being members of editorial boards or working directly in the newsrooms (even the mayor was sometimes editor-in-chief). Municipality officials rather than professional journalists were found most often to work in the council newspapers' newsroom. Finally, the local opposition was found to have no voice in the council newspapers, with some council newspapers explaining this by their intention to be "deliberately apolitical" (Rončák, 2008, pp. 2-3).

**Table 2.** Selected council newspapers' features<sup>17</sup> in Slovakia.

Town	Population	Title	Periodicity (per year)	Publisher	Costs (per year in 000 SK)
Zvolen	50 000	Zvolenské noviny	52	private company, 100% owned by municipality	400
Nové Zámky	42 262	Castrum Novum	52	municipality	900
Šal'a	24 500	Šal'a	12	municipality	n.a.
Vranov nad Topľou	23 000	Vranovský hlásnik	10	municipality	130
Snina	21 325	Naša Snina	12	municipality	30 (without distribution costs)

Source: Rončák (2008).

<sup>17</sup> There is a similar lack of complex data about council newspapers in Slovakia as in the Czech Republic. Only partial information about 30 selected titles from the Transparency International Slovakia analysis is available (Rončák, 2008), from the year 2007.

Lukáš Marťák (2013) produced a deeper analysis<sup>18</sup> of Slovak council newspapers and reached similar (and at times sharper) conclusions as Transparency International. According to his analysis, “in the Slovak council newspapers today, forms of control are present which remind people of the previous regime. It is as if the media in the post-communist environment is still tied up in the same practices” (pp. 104-109). Marťák posits that council newspaper journalism performs as a “political servant”:

The disruption of their independence is still present, as well as the abolition of their right to freedom of action and interference by the most powerful local politicians. It is clear from our findings that municipal politicians have real power and they have actual power even in relation to council media. The problem may arise, when municipality leaders consider the council medium as “their own baby”. This opinion is threatening in relation to their powers, because it is only through these statements that they are able to deny the mission of the mass media. Beyond words or thoughts, the danger to council media (funded by citizens) comes from politicians’ deeds. Mayors are often the murderers of council newspapers. When the newspapers are dead from the denial of basic journalistic values, they provide the long-standing funeral of the medium. (Marťák, 2013, p. 105)

Despite similar findings regarding council newspapers as in the Czech Republic, no specific steps towards any solution were taken in Slovakia. Seven years after Transparency International’s analysis, its author, Ivan Rončák, reflects:

It was just a small research project, probing into the current state....We did not have the ambition to bring about the legislative initiative, but rather only to contribute to the public debate. The initiative is generally unconsidered in the political environment (e.g. political parties). I have worked with the findings in the drafts of anti-corruption measures, but there was no independent trajectory to produce legislative change. (Rončák, 2015)

The author added that this council newspapers analysis was part of the solution to the problems in local poli-

<sup>18</sup> This analysis was based on qualitative interviews (23) with three types of respondents: 1) municipality political leaders; 2) local politicians, members of municipality councils, members of committees for media, members of council newspapers’ editorial boards; and 3) journalists, respectively employees of council newspapers; in three county towns in eastern Slovakia in 2012. An additional method was the use of focus group interviews with selected experts (see Marťák, 2013, pp. 11-16).

tics (regarding corruption). He confirmed that the Slovak insights into council newspapers came from the assumption that council newspapers are publicity tools for municipality politicians.

As the regulation analysis revealed, the Slovak council newspapers are, from the legislative point of view, defined as other periodical publications and are regulated by the Press Act. There is no special section for these types of print media, as the Slovak Press Act (Tlačový zákon, 2008) is similarly liberal and similarly structured as the Czech Press Act. Akin to its Czech counterpart are the municipality acts (Zákon o obecnom zriadení, 2014; Zákon o samosprávnych krajoch, 2001); Zákon o hlavnom meste SR Bratislave, 1990), which allow municipalities to publish council newspapers.

A significant difference in the Slovak media policy compared to the Czech media policy is the existence of the Press Council of the Slovak Republic (*Tisková rada Slovenskej republiky*), which provides ethical oversight to all newspapers, including council newspapers. However, when the Council receives complaints regarding a newspaper’s impartiality or bias, its sanctions are rather symbolic (Rončák, 2015). The Press Council recently discussed two complaints regarding council newspapers, and in both cases the decision was that newspapers did violate the journalistic code of ethics. The problem was mainly a failure to provide space for oppositional viewpoints in the council newspapers’ content (Rozhodnutie TSRS 07, 2008; Rozhodnutie TSRS 08, 2008).

The regulation and policy analysis resulted in findings, which demonstrated that no significant changes regarding greater regulation of council newspapers was subsequently enacted, despite several controversial revelations pertaining to their use. One can assume that council newspapers in Slovakia are understood as local media, not council publicity tools, due to the oversight of the Press Council. But the oversight authority does not have adequate decision-making powers.

There are also other controversies concerning council newspapers in Slovakia, which underscore the need to clearly and officially classify the status of council newspapers. A local online journalist characterizes the council newspaper in his city as competition paid for by citizens’ taxes: “It serves the propaganda purposes of the mayor and the municipality leaders from the taxpayers’ money. Impartiality should be implemented through the new editorial board, but the space devoted to the mayor, however, has not diminished and still forms a substantial part of the newspaper” (Bučko, 2013).

Politicians have also complained about the bias of the council newspapers. For example, a mayor candidate complained before the municipal elections that the council newspaper in the Bratislava borough of Petržalka “does not provide free or objective information about the political rivals of the current mayor...,”



although the municipality paid over €100,000 towards its publication” (Nechala, 2014).

There was even a nationwide conflict caused by the council newspaper *Náš kraj* published by the regional municipality in Banská Bystrica. The new regional governor was accused of using council newspaper for his own self-promotion, including hate speech (Repa, 2014) and his admiration for the fascist Slovak state (Vražda, 2014). In 2014, a criminal complaint against this council newspaper was filed by the district prosecutor on the suspicion of having committed an offense regarding the denial of the Holocaust and approval of the crimes of political regimes. The police later dismissed the complaint (Mab, 2014) and the council newspaper is still published under a slightly altered name (Bystrický kraj, 2014, 2015). According to Slovak Transparency International, this was an unprecedented situation:

[The regional governor] distributed from the council monthly partial propaganda leaflets to an extent unparalleled by any of his predecessors. Not only are there the traditionally numerous photos of the regional governor and unlimited space for interviews with him, but personal attacks on opponents were added without publishing reactionary commentary, all the while celebrating the wartime Slovak Republic. We call for a cessation of funding for such council monthlies through public money. (as cited in Roháček, 2014)

#### **4. Comparison: When Two Do the Same Thing, It Is Not the Same Thing**

As demonstrated, Czech and Slovak council newspapers face similar problems. Analyses demonstrate how they differ from the professional press in myriad ways—their business models, employees, content, etc.—so that they can fairly be defined as council publicity tools. However, from the legislative viewpoint, Czech council newspapers are regarded as media, while in Slovakia, no resolution was proposed and council newspapers are still seen as local media.

A “good practice” solution to the problem of council newspapers remains to be ascertained in the Czech Republic and Slovakia. Adopting the western media model is hardly a solution in light of the critiques found in Hallin and Mancini’s (2005, p. 218) path dependent premise of media system development, and those advocating against any CEE transition to a Western media model as “final destination” (Sükösd & Bajomi-Lázár, 2003, p. 15). Moreover, problems related to media development are more widely shared by a variety of national media systems regardless of their status as “in transition” or “developed” (see Waschková Čísařová, 2013; Sükösd & Bajomi-Lázár, 2003).

Consequently, it is also important to consider the

Czech and Slovak council newspapers’ development within a comparative framework in relation to council newspaper policy changes in the United Kingdom. While the Czech and Slovak approach has been identifying the problems and—in the Czech case—addressing the indications, the British approach can be viewed as actually addressing the root causes.

##### *4.1. United Kingdom: Deeper Insight Brings a Clear Solution*

Interestingly enough, the debate about council newspapers in the United Kingdom occurred at the same time and for the same reasons as in the Czech Republic and Slovakia. Similar problems were identified in relation to the status of council newspapers—namely a need for objective information for local readers without producing the conditions for unfair competition with the local commercial media (a point underscored by the 2008 financial crisis) (see Explanatory Memorandum to The Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity, 2011).

The policy documents and regulation analysis reveal, that in-depth debates about the transparency of local government in the United Kingdom resulted in the 2011 *Code of recommended practice on local authority publicity*<sup>19</sup> clearly indicating the importance of this issue. This solution from the very beginning sought to define council newspapers as local politics publicity tools (not media), yet more precisely and in detail name the consequences of such a definition regarding the council newspapers’ very existence within the broader media system. The Publicity Code is applied to municipalities’ publication of free newspapers and newsheets and these publicity tools should be lawful, cost effective, objective, even-handed, appropriate, have regard for equality and diversity, and be issued with care during periods of heightened sensitivity (Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity, 2011, p. 2). Moreover, the Publicity Code sets the rules (among others) to solve local authority publicity problems: assess their value for taxpayers money; assess the content as to whether it provides balanced

<sup>19</sup> *The Code of recommended practice on local authority publicity* came into force as part of the *Local Government Act* on 31<sup>st</sup> March 2011 and the Publicity Code regulates municipal publicity only in England. There was extensive debate about the Publicity Code content, and the whole policy is a part of a larger project *Making local councils more transparent and accountable to local people* (Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity, 2011). The Publicity Code was reviewed in 2010 (350 responses) utilizing the opinions of experts; publishers; people from newspapers; business etc. Moreover, as was stated, “there will be a post implementation review of the Publicity Code in 3 to 5 years after it comes into effect” (Explanatory Memorandum to The Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity, 2011, paragraph 8, 12).

and factually accurate information, guards against overt political statements; and insures that any publicity describing the council's policies and aims is as objective as possible, concentrating on the facts or explanations or both; oversees that public money is not used for political campaigns; insures that in political controversies all positions are presented; insures that any local authority publicity should not seek to emulate commercial newspapers in style or content; and that the local authority publicity should identify itself as a product of the local authority (Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity, 2011, p. 3, paragraph 10, p. 4, paragraph 15-16, 19, p. 5, paragraph 28, 30).

The more particular rules related to council newspaper publishing were the rule of periodicity and content, which sought to solve the problem of unfair competition for commercial local newspapers:

Where local authorities do commission or publish newsletters, newsheets or similar communications, they should not issue them more frequently than quarterly, apart from parish councils, which should not issue them more frequently than monthly. Such communications should not include material other than information for the public about the business, services and amenities of the council or other local service providers. (Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity, 2011, p. 5, paragraph 28)

There is an oversight authority with the adequate decision-making powers—compliance to the Publicity Code is overseen by the *Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government*. In this role Eric Pickles, attracted attention<sup>20</sup> in April 2014 for publishing a press release about those councils, which were breaking the Publicity Code rules. He reported that five councils of various London boroughs were given a fortnight to explain why steps should not be taken to stop their “propaganda on the rates”, mainly due to their lack of objectivity or balance, while publishing council newspapers more often than four times a year (Press release, 2014). The Secretary announced, that he was prepared to take further steps against those councils that undermine local democracy (Press release, 2014). One year later (in March 2015), the Secretary issued proceedings in the Court seeking to enforce the Publicity Code in the Royal Borough of Greenwich (to only maximally publish council newspapers quarterly in-

<sup>20</sup> The media quoted Eric Pickles strict assessments: “It is scandalous that bloggers have been handcuffed for tweeting from council meetings, while propaganda on the rates drives the free press out of business. Only Putin would be proud of a record like that...‘Town Hall Pravdas’ not only waste taxpayers’ money unnecessarily, they undermine free speech” (Press release, 2014).

stead of weekly; see Government response, 2015). Another four councils were sent notices again in March 2015 (see Policy, 2015).

However the British journalists’ organizations find themselves in the strange position of commenting on the development of the Publicity Code and trying to stand up for the local commercial newspapers on one hand, and often also representing the council newspapers’ journalists on the other hand. For example the National Union of Journalists (NUJ) faced this conundrum after its general secretary Michelle Stainstreet said “there was “no case at all” for Communities Secretary Eric Pickles to be given statutory power over them. She also denied that council newspapers are used to deliver political messages or that they divert advertising revenue from local papers” (Hollander, 2013). This opinion angered journalists in local commercial newspapers in light of council newspapers’ competitive advantages in the marketplace. Moreover, Amanda Brodie, the chair of another professional organization (the Chartered Institute of Journalists) stated: “We are astonished that the NUJ has come out against the proposed legislation, which is aimed at supporting local newspapers, and can only help to safeguard journalists’ jobs. This is not a political issue, as the NUJ seems intent to make it” (Hollander, 2013).

Thus, the British policy, having identified the problem regarding unfair competition with council newspapers sought specific solutions through a series of initiatives (public debates, numerous analyses), a clear line of council publicity, and a commitment to enforce compliance of the rules. In the Czech Republic and Slovakia the NGOs identified the problem of unclear classification and possible misuse of council newspapers. In both states, however, council newspapers are still understood as local media, even though the analyses show their close relationship with the local politics and significant differences from the professional media. The second problem of policy and regulation development in the Czech Republic and Slovakia is the absence of an oversight authority with adequate decision-making powers. In these problems, the Czech and Slovak states would do well to follow the British “good practice” policy and regulation development.

## 5. Conclusions

The British policy concerning council newspapers contrasts the Czech and Slovak policies. While problems were identified in all three countries, only in Britain were specific initiatives taken to establish an oversight authority. However, any initiatives for strengthening state regulation over the media are met with skepticism in CEE countries because of their experiences under socialism.

In summary, we can state that Czech and Slovak council newspapers serve the special interests of local

politicians. They can therefore be considered as council publicity tools and they should become part of the local policy and regulation with appropriate oversight authority.

The British example indicates that the CEE countries can benefit from the experience of their western counterparts concerning the issue of council newspapers. The Czech Republic and Slovakia should more effectively address the anomalies in their media policy in ways that provide real solutions for the development of democratic media practices, while at the same time remaining sensitive to the proclivities of the context.

If the development of the CEE media and societies is to continue along a democratic path, it remains pivotal to continue examining the terms of the relationship between media and politics along all levels of society, especially if there is to be a promising path forward regarding the media's role in fostering and securing more inclusive democratic practices in the CEE countries.

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