**How the right-wing is fighting back against 'cancel culture' in the Czech Republic**

By **David Hutt**  •  Updated: 11/05/2021

**While the current trend in Europe appears to be censoring social media content, the Czech Republic is considering the opposite.**

Czech MPs have passed the first reading of a legal amendment that would criminalise social media firms if they ban content that is deemed to be in the public interest.

It's being seen as an attempt by the Czech right-wing to fight back against the so-called cancel culture seen elsewhere in Europe.

The motion was brought forward to the lower house of parliament by Vaclav Klaus Jr, the son of a former prime minister and founder of the small right-wing Trikolora party, as well by MPs from various other political parties.

If passed, the amendment to the country's criminal code could lead to social media operators or administrators facing a three-year prison sentence, a temporary ban on activities or a hefty fine if they censor content that is either in the public interest or does not violate domestic criminal law or international treaties.

Czech MPs appear to be cutting their own path as other European legislatures introduce laws that require social media firms to remove content when demanded by national regulators.

Last May, France introduced a new government-sponsored law to compel social media operators to take down hateful content flagged by users within 24 hours. But the French Constitutional Council a month later struck down most provisions of the law as they were deemed unconstitutional, for violating freedom of speech.

In Germany, the 2017 Network Enforcement Act that requires social networks to remove content that infringes on hate and defamatory speech in the German Criminal Code has caught on elsewhere on the continent.

If ratified, the EU’s long-planned Digital Services Act, a draft for which was released by the European Commission last December, will greatly empower social media operators to choose what content they deem permissible or not through notice-and-action mechanisms.

**Is this amendment about fighting back against 'cancel culture'?**

Klaus Jr has proposed such a change to the law since at least 2018 and the amendment was first tabled in the Czech parliament in January 2019.

The coalition government opposes the measure. So, too, does the Pirate Party, the parliament's second-largest opposition group.

The amendment was co-sponsored by Radim Fiala, vice-president of the far-right Freedom and Direct Democracy party (SPD). Some members of the ruling ANO party, of Prime Minister Andrej Babis, also supported the amendment, as did lawmakers from the centre-right Civic Democratic Party (ODS), the largest opposition party.

Proponents of the amendment argue that not only does censorship by social media firms violate the EU’s Charter of Fundamental Rights, there are also currently no laws that stop the firms from deleting content posted on their platforms. The amendment has now been sent to parliament’s constitutional and legal committee for review.

Miroslav Mares, a Czech political scientist and expert on right-wing politics at Masaryk University, reckons there is a chance that MPs could adopt the amendment but it’s almost certain to be rejected by the Senate, parliament's upper house, or the Constitutional Court.

But even if it is eventually rejected, Mares added, the issue of free speech may become important on the political right’s campaign trail ahead of October’s general election, which is expected to be tightly fought and could see a number of far-right parties hold sway over which of the larger parties forms the next government.

According to a survey published in 2017 by global monitoring agency vpnMentor, the Czech Republic had one of the lowest rates of internet censorship in the world. But Mares said the issue of free speech is becoming divided between two competing narratives in Czech politics.

For some, Mares noted, the issue of free speech is tied to liberal democracy and the legacy of Vaclav Havel, an anti-communist figurehead who defined the Czech Republic’s liberal establishment when he became the first president of the country after the fall of communism in 1989.

**'The new left wants to destroy freedom of speech'**

Last year, President Zeman sparked controversy when he lashed out at the Black Lives Matter movement for being “racist, since all lives matter”.

Expecting a public backlash over what he saw as political correctness, he added: “I do not need any new Big Brothers; I do not need any new opinion leaders.”

In his speech to parliament when introducing the amendment, Klaus Jr railed against what he called the “new left”, a label he and other politicians from the political right often use to describe the Pirate Party, which tends to champion “progressive” issues.

“I want to defend freedom of speech and democracy and not let the attacks of the new left grow,” Klaus Jr stated.

“They distinguish between ‘Hate Speech’ and ‘Fair Speech’, between evil statements and correct ones... This is, of course, devastating for the society in which we live,” he went on, adding that the “new left” wants to “destroy freedom of speech.”

Mares, of Masaryk University, said that the “new left” label is an attempt by certain parties to present the Pirate Party as a “vanguard of Western neo-Marxism”, a term that is commonly used across Europe and North America to refer to “progressives”.