“My Country Is Returning To Totalitarianism,” Warns Daughter Of Legendary Czech Freedom Fighter

Journalist-daughter of key ally to Václav Havel offers evidence that the US government, the European Union, and George Soros are funding a crackdown on free speech in the Czech Republic



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Many in the West remember the heroism of Czech writers and artists in the fight for freedom of speech during totalitarian Communist rule. The most famous of these dissidents was Václav Havel. But another prominent figure who fought for freedom in the former Czechoslovakia was Ludvík Vaculík, my father. “He himself was censored for more than

two decades," noted the New York Times in its 2015 obituary, "but still managed to write a series of influential articles, books and novels…"

If he were to return from the dead today, thirty-five years after the fall of communism, my father would be appalled that Czechs are once again facing government suppression of freedom of speech and the press. What would he say about the ousting of investigative journalists from newsrooms, the shutting down of web domains and a new series of political trials?

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I believe my father would say that in a democracy, one can say things that the government does not like. That one even has the right to be publicly wrong. That the basis of democracy is to be free to debate, and that the silencing of one camp by another leads to the radicalization of the whole society.



Ludvik Vaculik with his daughter, Cecilie, 1985 (Credit: Libération)

The Czech Republic, which used to be Czechoslovakia together with Slovakia, is still a free state. I can travel, I can share my opinions on social media, and I might even be able to write for a mainstream newspaper again today.

But the repression that is taking place is shocking. For example, since January of last year, the government has sought a criminal prosecution against a teacher named Martina Bednářová for statements she made during a "media literacy" class. During that class, she presented her opinion on the history of the Ukrainian-Russian conflict. The government prosecutor claimed she had denied, questioned, and approved of genocide.

Are we now going to jail Communists as they did our parents?

The case evoked the communist trials for those who remembered it. The central piece of evidence was a secret 17-minute recording on the mobile phone of one of the pupils. The school fired Bednářová the very next day.

Or take Josef Skala, former chairman of the Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia. The government indicted him in September 2022 after he announced his candidacy for president. A judge sentenced him the next month to an eight-month suspended sentence for things he said in connection with the Katyn massacre, the murder of Polish prisoners of war in Katyn in 1940.



Josef Skala (left) and Martina Bednářová (right)

The government also sentenced Vladimir Kapal, a host of an alternative radio station, and Juraj Vaclavik, an amateur historian. And yet none of the defendants had even denied that the genocide had occurred. They only disputed who was responsible for it.

Why did the government choose a communist for the first political trial? Because it knew that a communist would not win the support of the general public. But it raises questions: *Are we now going to jail Communists as they did our parents? What, then, makes us different from them?*

When I was five years old, my kindergarten teachers questioned me about my parents' pro-freedom activities. The secret police, known as the StB, bugged our entire apartment. Agents would come to our house looking for illegal samizdat. And the StB regularly took my parents in for interrogation until 1989.

Like me, Věra Jourová had an unpleasant experience from her childhood. She told *The Guardian* that when a teacher once asked her what she thought of the famous Charter 77 pro-freedom petition, she was too afraid to answer the question, calling it “a horror moment.”

But Jourová, who is today a powerful European Union Commissioner, learned a different lesson from her horror moment than I did. Where I believe in freedom of speech, Jourová, apparently believes in "Fighting Putin" with his own practices, including censorship.

I can’t believe I am saying it, but it’s true: my country is returning to totalitarianism. All of this is as shocking for journalists, artists, and intellectuals in the Czech Republic as it will be for Americans who remember the sacrifices of people like Havel and my father in the 1980s and 1990s. If we are to protect their legacy of freedom of speech and freedom from government spying, we must understand why that is.

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From Freedom To Totalitarianism



EU Commissioner for Values and Transparency, Vera Jourová, (left) talks with the EU Commissioner for Internal Market, Thierry Breton (right), who is overseeing the European Union's online censorship through the "Digital Services Act," on December 6, 2023 in Brussels, Belgium. (Photo by Thierry Monasse/Getty Images)

Jourová is one of Europe's main campaigners against "disinformation" and "hate speech." *Time* named her one of the world's 100 most influential people in the world. Last year, Jourova introduced the "European Media Freedom Act," which *The Guardian* and other major news media claim will create a more independent and transparent media.

In reality, the law, which the EU parliament passed two weeks ago, will expand government control over the media. That law goes beyond the censorship allowed by the "Digital Services Act," which came into force

last month. And those two laws will be aided by yet another law to regulate political advertising.

The Czech government's approach is completely in line with the ideology of the European Commission. My country, and the European Union, are thus together bringing back the totalitarian system of censorship opposed in 1967 by Václav Havel, Milan Kundera, my father, and hundreds of other writers, artists, and intellectuals. (Jourová did not return Public's request for comment.)

How did we get here? There was genuine freedom of speech in the 1990s after the fall of Communism. Many seasoned Czech journalists today remember those years with a tear in their eye. But gradually Czech elites in politics and business consolidated control over the media.

Then, suddenly during the COVID pandemic, the forces of corruption and totalitarianism grew stronger and more apparent. Czech journalist, Markéta Dobiášová, inadvertently came across evidence that CNN Prima News TV station had, in collaboration with then-Prime Minister Andrej Babiš, violated anti-pandemic measures while the country was suffering in a rigid lockdown.

Dobiášová is a formidable journalist. The recipient of six major journalism awards, she has worked in all major television institutions in the country, including the public *Czech Television*. In 2020, she was head of the investigative team at *CNN Prima News*.

But she was no match for a vindictive news media, allied with powerful corporate advertisers and the Czech and EU governments. *CNN Prima News* fired Dobiášová early in 2020 after she refused to censor her own report to cover up the TV station's connection to the government.

“During the pandemic, scientific authority became a vehicle of censorship.”

Dobiášová then went to work for two other mainstream print media outlets. There she revealed that government officials were not only violating human rights, but were siphoning billions from the state coffers through illegal pandemic measures. “Conflicts of stopped being addressed,” Dobiášová told Public. Then, those publications, too, pushed her out.

Big media similarly forced out other journalists,including Angelika Bazalová, a former editor of the *BBC*'s Prague bureau and *Czech Television*. Bazalová also got in trouble for investigative journalism into the response to the pandemic and the handling of vaccination statistics.

“During the pandemic,” another conscientious journalist, Petr Šourek, told Public, “scientific authority became a vehicle of censorship.”

Government demands for censorship skyrocketed during the pandemic, according to The Society for the Defense of Freedom of Expression. "These interventions were very often based on alleged 'fact-checking,'" said Gabriela Sedláčková, operations manager at the Society. “Opinions and expert controversies about the origin of the virus or the effectiveness of vaccines that deviated from the mainstream were suppressed even though they were backed up by concrete facts."

The government hired outside help for censorship. In the fall of 2020, the Ministry of Health hired a company called “Semantic Visions,” to ostensibly promote COVID vaccines. A former arms dealer named František Vrabel, and a Californian-born millionaire named Jan Barta, created Semantic Visions in 2011.



Jan Barta (left) and František Vrabel (right)

How did they get the job? It may have helped that Barta had contributed tens of millions in donations to the campaigns of the ruling political parties in the Czech Republic, and millions to the campaign of the current President Petr Pavel.

The seed money for Semantic Visions came from Barta's investment group, "Pale Fire Capital." In 2011, Barta's business partner Dušan Šenkypl, the future co-organizer of the "Smart Quarantine" project, in which the Ministry of Health later invested hundreds of millions, also joined Semantic Visions.

The US and UK governments gave a $250,000 grant to Semantic Visions in 2019 to supposedly "fight disinformation." That same year, Vrabel waged a media campaign and claimed, without direct evidence, that enemies were "trying to undermine our democratic system from Russia."

Czech Television, a public institution, but one that is, by law, supposed to obtain and verify its information sources on its own, was also a client of Semantic Visions, discovered Dobiášová.

Vrabel had his fingers in other censorship initiatives. He ran a group called "Nelež", which means "Not-lie", which works with the The Global Disinformation Index to demand that companies not advertise on sites that it labels as spreaders of disinformation.

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Soros And The Elf Spies



Hungarian-born US investor and philanthropist George Soros smiles after delivering a speech on the sidelines of the World Economic Forum (WEF) annual meeting in Davos on May 24, 2022. (Photo by Fabrice COFFRINI / AFP) (Photo by FABRICE COFFRINI/AFP via Getty Images)

Bohumil Kartous, a partner to Vrabel, formed a nonprofit group called Čeští elfové, which means “Czech Elves,” in 2018. It works to “monitor disinformation” on social networks, websites and in chain emails. Kartous and his “elves” monitor supposedly subversive groups on Telegram, WhatsApp and other applications.

Various “elves” spy groups exist across Eastern Europe. Lithuania established its elves spying apparatus in 2013. A representative of the Czech Elves attended the “Elf Academy” in Lithuania along with representatives of thirteen countries.

Today’s “elves” are spies little different from the ones who bugged my childhood home. These “elves” groups are either front groups for government military and intelligence agencies or “cut-outs,” meaning groups that can claim to be NGOs when, in truth, they are working for government agencies.

Vrabel, Barta, and Kartous met with and collaborate with representatives of powerful financial interests at the Aspen Institute Central Europe. The US government heavily funds the Aspen Institute, which many view as a US government cut-out. Public documented last year how Aspen Institute worked alongside the FBI during the summer of 2020 to “pre-bunk” the Hunter Biden laptop, even though the FBI had known the laptop was Biden’s since December 2019.

In response to a query from Public, a spokeswoman for Aspen Institute Central Europe, said, "While Aspen Institute Central Europe is part of the global Aspen Institute network, they are strategically and financially independent of each other.”

Soros and his Open Society Fund have for the past ten years financially sponsored the "Reconstruction of the State" initiative, which is advocating for digitization of the civil service, digital IDs, and "media regulation,” a euphemism for censorship. The Open Society Fund did not respond to our request for comment.

Today's "elves" are spies little different from the ones who bugged my childhood home.

The Czech government insists George Soros is not involved in suppressing freedom of speech, and its "Centre against Hybrid Threats" accuses those who point to Soros' influence of spreading "disinformation." As evidence they point to a website, atlaskonspiraci.cz, which is funded by Soros' Open Society Fund.

Many others are involved, including the French news agency, Agence France-Presse, an NGO, Demagog.cz, whose ostensible role is to factcheck content on Facebook, and the Prague-based Central European Digital Media Observatory. The "Observatory" uses researchers from the Kempelen Institute of Intelligent Technologies in Slovakia and the Czech Technical University. They are now using artificial intelligence for "debunking disinformation".

The Observatory is part of a network of eight similar European national and regional centers. The network operates in 15 countries and is under the umbrella of the European Digital Media Observatory. The Observatory did not respond to our request for comment.

Some of the above groups may have helped create the Military Intelligence Service's blacklist for the government's unprecedented censorship in February 2022, when it shut down dozens of websites it said were spreading Russian propaganda.

Allies of the government defended its actions. "You have seen this many times in wars, for example in Vietnam [...] you have to be able to convince people with information that what you are doing is right," a former vice-chairman of the Christian Democratic Party, and current

Member of European Parliament, said on a talk show in October 2022. “Disinformation is the opposite of targeted truth.”

In truth, “targeted truth” is nothing other than government propaganda.

“We Are Fighting Back”



Ludvík Vaculík, Milan Kundera and Ivan Klíma at the Congress of Czechoslovak Writers in 1967 (Author’s photo)

All of this is extremely bad news for anyone who cares about freedom and the memories of Vaclav Havel, my parents, and everyone else who fought and died in the struggle against Communist Totalitarianism.

Despite two acquittals, the persecution of the teacher, Bednářová, for supposedly defending genocide is still ongoing. Meanwhile, Semantic Vision boasts of “collaboration” with *The New York Times*, *The Guardian*, *TIME*,Bloomberg, AFP and others on its website.

At the same time, people are resisting the crackdown. After a public outcry, the government unblocked the websites blocked in 2022, and last month, a court ruled that the shutdown was illegal. The judgment officially confirmed that it was indeed the government that had ordered the takedowns.

Some political leaders are speaking out. "It is possible to have different views on the war in Ukraine even while resolutely rejecting the horrors of that war,” said President Václav Klaus during the persecution of Bednářová. “When Henry Kissinger says that the war must be stopped and considers accepting the status quo on the battlefield as a starting point for further negotiations, is he endorsing genocide?”

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An NGO called Against Criminalization and Persecution is defending freedom of speech. Many of its members include dissidents who were persecuted by the communist regime in former Czechoslovakia. The group has raised money from citizens in support of the Bednářová, whose husband is seriously ill, and who is unable to work, as a result of the persecution.

And I and others are calling out the bad actors. In addition to Jourová, there is a Michal Klíma, the government's media and disinformation commissioner. Klíma, like me, is the child of dissidents. Michal’s father, Ivan Klíma, survived a stay in the Terezín concentration camp as a child and was a close friend of my father’s.

In April 2023, I criticized Klíma on Twitter, calling him the government’s "chief censor" and saying I could not understand how the son of a man

fighting for freedom of speech could have degenerated so much.

Klíma responded by advising me to "study more history of Russia and Europe in the 20th century. Especially with regard to the drive for influence that Russia has consistently shown towards Central and Eastern Europe."

I replied that I would recommend him to study more Russia today and what Klíma, at the behest of the government and, by extension, the Union, is copying, "whether it is censorship, political trials, censorship of vaccine damage, propaganda of digitization of currency, ID cards and health data."

Klima did not respond after that. But not long after, the government shelved its "Anti-Disinformation Bill" and abolished the Anti-Disinformation Commissioner. Klíma did not respond to Public's request for comment for this piece.

As for Semantic Visions, Jan Balatka, one of its managing directors, told Public,"We no longer have any relationship with František Vrábel." And a news publication recently reported that that Mr Vrabel owes three million Czech crowns to an Afghan businessman, Fawad Nadri.

The rising popularity of smaller independent media, and their ability to survive on donations from their supporters, shows that people prefer to form their opinions. "When I understood that editorial offices of major media would not allow me to investigate these topics," Dobiášová told me, "I decided to set up my own platform."

Other civil society actors are demanding reform. Farmers are protesting in Prague as they have in other European capitals. As in Germany, the Czech government has labeled them as "pro-Russian disinformers." People are waking up to what the government is doing.

We have much to learn from our parents. In a 1967 speech, my father suggested to his fellow writers that they "strike out everything that oozes servile soul." We have a moral obligation to uphold their commitment to fighting for freedom. If we don't, then our parents' struggle for freedom will have been for nothing.

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