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## INFLUENCERS AND CZECH POLITICS

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### Summary

The changes in the media landscape brought about by the rise of new media and social networks are gradually reflecting in Czech politics. Previously, it was extremely important for a political party to maintain good relations with journalists; today, it is more important to hire the right influencers and people who understand what type of content and information the youngest citizens of the Czech Republic are looking for and demanding. Resisting this necessity is naive. It is crucial to understand what has happened in society over the past 20 years and why a short two minute clip on Instagram can have a greater impact, than ten-page essays in the most prestigious media outlets.

### Key Takeaways

- Influencers are now an integral part of the advertising apparatus that has permeated society as a whole, including politics. The success of Filip Turek and Motoristé sobě is just a tiny part of the whole story.
- In the Czech Republic, there has been a phenomenon of political influencers who have each chosen a different strategy to monetize their influence.
- However, the current issue represents not only undisclosed cooperation with political parties and excuses about "strict separation of private and work matters," but also the massive escalation of entertaining content that only pretends to be amusing, while in reality it aggressively sells and influences, most often targeting the youngest and most vulnerable.

The success of Filip Turek and Motoristé sobě is the tip of the iceberg. The influence of influencers and various internet celebrities on political activity is rising in proportion to the increasing presence of social media in consumable media. Gone are the days when newspaper columnists and knowledgeable magazine commentators dominated the media scene, and heated political arguments were an essential part of Sunday lunches. This new information world has changed beyond recognition in the last 20 years, alongside the changes in how parties and politicians communicate with their voters, and how voters engage with their political parties.

New communication methods and channels naturally bring forth various problems and challenges. For instance, how relevant is an Instagram account that selectively portrays only the appealing aspects of a political reality while conspicuously ignoring other issues, for individual decision-making. Or, is it acceptable for influencers to be directly or indirectly paid by political entities, without publicly disclosing this collaboration, maintaining the character of being an "independent" commentator? And can individuals' behavior on social media be regulated simply based on their engagement with politics and support of their favorites?

These are the questions that will be explored in this paper.

## What has happened to us?

At the turn of the millennium, the emergence of new media was accompanied by general sense of optimism. Theorists and journalists predicted that the advent of new bidirectional communication channels would lead to a revival and actuation of civil society, where people would overcome the last barriers to assembly and dialogue, thus creating a global democratic village. "The world is flat," proclaimed Thomas Friedman (2007), and he was right, though a little differently.

Twenty years later, we are witnessing something different from the global democratic village of equal individuals. The rise of individual internet giants and social networks has quickly transformed postmodern societies into something that could aptly be described as being a raw awakening in this dystopia of the 21st century. Today, you can publish your thoughts, ideas, and dreams on many different platforms almost without restriction, but the reality is that when you are competing with content generated by entities hundreds of times more successful and powerful, your voice simply stands no chance of being heard. It's like reciting your own poetry in the middle of a Metallica concert. You can do it, but hardly anyone will listen, and the vast majority won't even notice you. Who will dominate in this world? Will it be small internet activists and nonprofit organizations, or will it be technological firms with nearly unlimited financial and human resources? Answer that yourself.

The average citizen is confined to social platforms that are driven by their own interests, and concoct rules defined by opaque algorithms where it is only possible to do what they permit you to do. These rules are as opaque and confusing as the algorithms themselves, all the while, constantly changing. And of course, by their own admission, comes at the cost of your personal information.

In today's world, these internet giants and countless third parties know more about you than you know yourself, using large amounts of data collected over long periods, to predict your behavior with better accuracy than your closest family members. Casual remarks you post in any selfie - whether publicly or in private- is a future identikit that has unfortunately been proven chillingly present. Privacy, as we understood it throughout the 20th century, no longer exists in practice. Everything you've written, everything you've ever published and perhaps deleted ten years ago, everything others have disclosed about you without your knowledge, and everything various institutions have gathered - you may not even be aware of any of it, but it's all still with us. At any moment, it can be brought to light and become the subject of public discussion or, in a worse case, internet lynching in a matter

of seconds. No one is exempt, not even newborns who have barely been in the world for a few minutes, proudly showcased by their parents. And why has all this happened? For attention in a world where everyone wants to be seen.

## Self-capitalization: Influencers among us

One of Germany's most significant contemporary philosophers, Byung-Chul Han (2016), describes today's world as a narcissistically self-exploiting system, whose sole interest is human consumption through self-capitalization. The disciplinary societies of the 19th century that required individuals to fulfill basic roles and submit to a hierarchical order are a reality of only the past. Today, you can become a YouTuber reviewing videos of dubious themes and quality, a polyamorous asexual, or a bride of a French historical bridge. No one tells you what you should become, and therefore, there are no objective measures of success. Self-realization has no compass or guide rails; what matters most is being successful and being seen. Success in today's world is judged by how well you have managed to sell your personality to other people.

We live in a society where people - their lives, personalities, and opinions - are their own product, selling each part of themselves. Like any product, the value exists only when exposed to the consumer's eyes and sold. Hence, an influencer without reach and without sufficient viewership is as valuable as a bread roll lost among the shelves.

An influencer (regardless of how attention is garnered) is almost a perfect example of self-exploitation by Marx's sense of the concept. Young people, who desire to not depend on 9-to-5 jobs as the previous generations did, have now become full-time workers without any defined work schedule in a new company: Self-Presentation. They are individuals who carry their work camp within themselves, being both the overseer and the prisoner.

An influencer is a mandatory employee who never finishes and never accomplishes anything. Their position is conditioned by the constant and unending flow of content, either expansion (success) or depletion (failure) of their viewership. Do or die - that is the world for today's young people. This immense and never-ending pressure of self-realization, self-portrayal and the competition for attention with others, is one of the reasons why there is a proliferation of mental health issues among children and young people. Today's world is not just about the spoiled young generation complaining endlessly about soy lattes and avocado toasts, which older people consider undoubtedly better from a material standpoint. It is a harsh and unforgiving state when success comes with a huge price tag, and overnight, you can go from being the center of every crowd to public enemy number one. No one is completely certain of their current status. No one is certain of anything. This is the world online in the 21st century for young people.

## Feri, Jie a Bázlerová incorporated

Influencers use different tactics to enter politics, and later profit from contact with political parties. The first, more classic approach, is exemplified by Dominik Feri - who until his conviction of sexual assault against women, (April 2024) was the number one Instagram influencer among younger users, having over 500,000 followers. A young and successful man from a less prosperous part of the country, sufficiently exotic and liberal to become beloved to internet hordes. Feri started as a local politician associated with TOP 09 and gradually climbed up to the Chamber of Deputies, where in the 2017 elections, he garnered an impressive 15,003 preferential votes, only 4,000 less than longtime leader Karel Schwarzenberg (19,370) and more than Miroslav Kalousek (8,018; ČSÚ 2017). As the youngest councilor and parliamentarian in Czech history, Feri naturally used his channel to promote TOP 09

as well as to increase his own visibility. Some younger users knew his yellow triangle better than the yellow bar on ČT24.

From today's perspective, it was a classic self-aggrandization of a politician who immediately admits his party affiliation, and therefore, his view of the world and ideological background. His inexcusable criminal behavior naturally damaged the image of the politician-influencer, despite possibly engaging in less problematic activities in the realm of new media – especially in terms of user-intended identification and ideological transparency. No one expects an active politician to impartially report successes, let alone failures within his own party. Julius Caesar didn't do it and neither will the mayor of the last village. The user knows who Feri was kicking/rooting for, so it is much easier to identify and understand the reasons for his actions.

The second way influencers can monetize their influence, is through background work. A prime example is Šimon Ehrlich, likely the owner of the anonymous x.com account [@jietienming](#), who engages in trolling and sharp comments towards ideological opponents of ODS/SPOLU (approximately 74,500 followers). Ehrlich also served as a social media manager for ODS municipal politicians Jakub Stárek and Alexander Bell, further working for ODS MEP Vrecionová and Minister of Health Válka (Zelenka, 2022; Pospíšilová, 2023; Šafaříková, 2024).

The biggest problem with this connection is that while Ehrlich claims to strictly and professionally separate his private agenda from his professional mission, in reality, things may be different. In the end, public funds (Ehrlich is paid by the Office of the Government) allow the [@jietienming](#) account to function even better, ensuring a steady stream of public resources that undoubtedly strengthens this troll's position for attacks on his ideological opponents and anyone who displeases him in any way. This all happens without effective control and without truly being held accountable for his actions.

The goals and motivations of influencers are hidden, as is the way they finance their activities.

Johana Bázlerová faces a similar problem, managing the [@jsemvobrazě](#) account with 195,000 followers. While this account focuses on infotainment on politics, Bázlerová herself (as a private individual) helps the STAN movement with social media (Vachtl, 2024). Like Ehrlich, she defends herself against allegations of conflicts of interest by consistently separating work and personal activities. However, if you look at her Instagram Feed, you won't find any posts even minimally critical of the current government or the STAN movement. It's difficult to bite the hand that feeds you.

However, with a closer look at this situation, finding an effective solution is almost impossible. If the Czech Republic is to be a democracy, made up of free people who can do what is legal, it is difficult to prohibit an adult from promoting a political party on their social media account, even if they are paid for it and are publicly shamed if they were to admit so. Because the internet is full of people who promote services or products without admitting it, they are rewarded either by financial means, benefits, or favors.

So another question arises: why should political influencers adhere to stricter rules than those who only talk about makeup or weight loss? Bad or pseudoscientific advice on guaranteed weight loss methods may be a much bigger problem for society than a political influencer kicking for their breadwinner. Moreover, even traditional media, which some parts of the public still consider the standard for the correct approach to information, have often struggled with content balance. For example, if you look at Respekt's investigative journalism and articles on the Bakala case and his controversial role in the Moravian-Silesian Region, you will find such contributions were as rare as critical comments on the Babiš government.

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Karel Sál studied political science at the Institute of Political Studies, Faculty of Social Sciences, Charles University, where in 2016 he defended his dissertation entitled Democracy in the Crisis of Disinterest: the effects of the use of online elections in the electoral process of selected countries. His professional interests include e-Government, internet elections and information freedom. He is the author of several articles, speaks at international conferences and is the founder and editor of the think-tank [e-politics.cz](http://e-politics.cz).

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