I would like to start my contribution about broadcasting, public sphere and national identity in the Czech Republic with a little story, illustrating mutual cohesion and also growing current relevance of these three topics. Just a month ago, there was a debate on Nova, a private TV channel, with representatives from two leading rival parties – the liberal and the social democratic. At the very end of the one hour-lasting clash on various issues, the TV showed a report from the last victory of the Czech hockey team on the World Championship. Then, the moderator asked both politicians to guess the outcome of the next match. Both of them seemed to outdo the other opponent in expressing stronger conviction about the success of “our team”. It may look trivial, but in fact, this final question was the most decisive, and the politicians knew that there was only one possible answer. They might have been bluffing or even lying during the previous 55 minutes of the debate, without the risk of being exposed by the public. But I am sure that if one of them had not shown the required amount of patriotism regarding the ice hockey team – one of the most powerful national symbols of the contemporary Czech Republic – people would have noticed immediately. So the TV screen proved once again that there are frameworks and structures beyond the sphere of parliamentary politics, with the power to unite people from completely different ideological backgrounds. In this case, both liberalism and socialism paid tribute to nationalism, and recalled the old thesis of Ferdinand Tönnies, who argued that every time these three powerful ideologies meet to compete for loyalty, nationalism is the most likely winner.

The presence of the past

It is possible to investigate the validity of such argument in many regions of contemporary Europe – not only in the Balkans, which was often described in the nineties as the last European bulwark of an irrational nationalistic outburst. The last elections in France and Hungary were pregnant with rhetoric calling for national unification against the evil outside national borders. The recent election campaign in the Czech Republic doesn’t fall behind very much. The governing Social Democratic Party has arranged mass meetings in a sacred place of Czech national history – a hill called “Ríp” – a mythical spot of national origin, with the obvious aim to link the glorious past of the Czech nation with the promised future of the socialists’ political programme. Billboards advertising the liberal-
conservative ODS (Civic Democratic Party) campaign warn against the threat from abroad and promise to defend “Czech national interests”, no matter what it should actually mean. But even in the campaign of other political parties, the use of this term has become a crucial strategy for gaining attention, sympathy and votes. The controversy regarding the so-called presidential decrees of Edvard Beneš, especially within the context of the planned EU accession, has filled the public space with statements about the preservation of Czech national sovereignty and has resurrected resentment towards some other nations, especially the Germans.

Such a development is not surprising to those, who, simultaneously with the fall of the Iron Curtain, pointed to the unstable and fragile character of emerging Central and Eastern European democratic regimes, which from the very beginning found themselves in search for legitimacy and whose citizens must have come through the often painful way of reaffirming and recovering their identities, for which nationalism seemed to provide a very appealing source. As Jacques Rupnik pointed out, it is much more plausible to talk about the „Return of the History“ in the case of post-communist countries than of an „End of History“, as famous but heavily questioned Fukuyama’s thesis sounds. And „the return of history is also a return of nationalistic demons, which were believed to be dead“, follows Rupnik, who was convinced already in 1990, that „the most dangerous obstacle on the way to democratic political culture will be nationalism“. The fact that the break-up of the Soviet Union, Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia after 1989 didn’t automatically involve the end of nationalism in the succession nation-states, indicates that there is something missing in the Gellner’s definition of nationalism, according to which „the principle of nationality asserts that state and nation should be congruent.“ Reducing nationalism to a solely political, modernistic, state-seeking doctrine, can’t explain its power in states which have already achieved this stage of congruency between nationality and state-sovereignty, especially in contemporary Europe – both in the East and West. Rogers Brubaker therefore talks about various types of non-state-seeking nationalism in Central and Eastern Europe which “have flourished as a result of the reorganisation of political space along ostensibly national lines”. In my opinion, the type he calls “national-populist nationalism” is the closest to that one which herds disturbed voters into the comforting arms of political parties on extreme sides of the political spectrum in the Czech Republic – into the right-wing conservative, but also into some leftist parties, such as communists. Certain features of this defensive, protective type of nationalism can be found, with a few exceptions, in programmes of all significant political parties.
Public sphere and the media: in frames of the nation

After sketching this context, I would like to turn to the second domain, which stands in the centre of my attention, and this is the public sphere and the role of media within it. My aim here will be to show how these two concepts – nationalistic project and the public sphere – are mutually interrelated and how the media provide exactly that kind of clip that holds these concepts side by side.

If we understand nationalism as a form of social communication (in terms of theory of Karl Deutsch) and the public sphere as a realm of the “politically considering public” (in the words of Jürgen Habermas), then it becomes evident that the development of mass media stands at the cradle of both of them. Regardless of whether historians and social or political scientists determine the birth of nations to be in or before the age of industrialisation, or whether they maintain the “primordialist” or “constructivist” standpoint towards the character of nation, they usually agree that “the mass communication have played a fundamental part in the historical development of national cultures and identities.” One of the most vivid observations of this connection was probably made by Benedict Anderson, who showed the influence of the printing press on the spread of vernacular languages and therefore, also on national “imagined communities”. In the functionalist theories of Karl Deutsch or Ernst Gellner, printed media contributed essentially to the new form of social integration, which the nation state finally became during the modernisation period – mainly through the processes of administrative centralisation and the establishment of systems of mass education.

The origins of national consciousness, which Anderson talks about, were also closely tied to the mutual notification of people who belonged to the same reading audience. According to Jürgen Habermas, this early modern, bourgeois public viewed itself in opposition to the realm of state power and gave birth to terms like “common” or “public opinion”, which became a standard part of the English, French and German languages from the late 17th to 18th centuries. Although Habermas doesn’t pay much attention to the questions of nationalism and national identity in his Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere, it is, in my opinion, important to understand the transformation within the context of these issues. The reverse process, in which, following Habermas, the public sphere started to adopt representative, ritual character again, began in the second half of the 19th century and led to the dissipation of a formally more or less clear division between the state and society, between public and private. What Habermas describes as a dialectic of “socialization of state” and “nationalization of society”, can also be viewed in terms of nationalistic efforts to couple the cultural unit – the nation – with its political framework – the state. The loosening of autonomy of the public sphere and its explicit identification with the nation-state can best be exhibited in the example of mass media regulation in the age of
electronic reproduction. As soon as the first airwaves left the first sender, state authorities realised that there was a completely new, symbolical territory which would serve as a battleground for shaping the opinions, values and identities of the public. And so the concept of Public Service Broadcasting was born, with a very clear cultural-pedagogic mission, which stemmed both from the Enlightenment ideal of informed, educated and therefore rationally considering citizens, and from the Romanticism assumption of cultural homogeneity within one nation-state. In the words of the first Director-General of the BBC, John Reith, broadcasting should preserve the democratic character of society as well as create a sense of national unity.¹² Some scholars describe this self-ascribed role of PSB in the nation-building project as “cultural nationalism”, pointing to the fact that broadcasting, especially in the case of television, has became one of the most powerful weapons within the cultural apparatus of the state, which sometimes tries to invent more than just reflect on the nation.¹³

There are, however, many people who say that this role of TV as a national medium is not valid anymore, especially in light of the significant changes in the European audio-visual market in the eighties in the West and in the nineties in the East, when states lost their monopoly over television broadcasting and new commercial and satellite stations emerged.¹⁴ It is supposed that the process of globalisation, which is best visible in the audio-visual space, has been fragmenting national identities due to the ever-increasing flow of signs and symbolical representations of other cultures. This recognition, together with the recent economic and political development, has lead to the popular statement that our life worlds are more likely part of the “global village”, than of the nation-state and that “global society” or “global public sphere” is soon going to replace the older, nation-based social structures. But, regardless of how appealing such visions might be, there is a lot of counter-evidence which questions these assumptions and points out that what seems to be a description of reality is merely a wishful desire. The return of nationalism in contemporary Europe, mentioned in the beginning, is one of the most visible objections towards it. I would like to support these doubts and defend a little bit more the sceptical perspective about the supposed end of national broadcasting highlighting the example of my own findings concerning two main Czech television stations – Česká televize (Czech TV) and TV Nova.

**Czech TV and TV Nova: does public vs. private really mean national vs. foreign?**

The situation in the Czech television markets corresponds to the principle of the dual broadcasting system, which, by now, has been adopted in most European countries.¹⁵ Besides Czech TV, which, after 1989, was transformed from an official state propaganda medium into a public service broadcasting station
operating on two channels, there are two private national terrestrial stations, *TV Nova* and *TV Prima*, and a couple of other, mostly cable channels with specialised programming in Czech. (Then, of course, an enormous number of foreign channels can also be received either by cable or by satellite.) *TV Nova*, founded in 1994 by an American-based corporation CME (Central European Media Enterprise), appears to be the most successful among all new private stations in Central and Eastern Europe. Although its original audience share has shrunk a little bit in recent years, it still holds a dominant position on TV screens in the Czech Republic. In 2000, it had a daily share of 46.4% among viewers 15 years and up (while *Czech TV 1* had 24%, *TV Prima* 16.5%, *Czech TV 2* 7.5% and the others 5.6%).

Owing its initial success to foreign, mainly American movies, serials and soap operas, *TV Nova* has been accused by many as serving as an instrument for an electronic invasion of American cultural imperialism, which presumably brings, on top of it, mostly just trashy, low-level pop culture. These claims were supported by the fact that the owner of the station was a foreign, American company. But, however legitimate the grievances about the quality of cultural products coming from Hollywood studios might be, the critics have underestimated the plain statistic showing that a good half of the TV audience has regularly been watching the same programmes, receiving the same messages and therefore, at least implicitly, has remained still primarily a national public. An important part in achieving the subjective identification of the viewer with “his” or “her” *TV Nova* have been weekly, half an hour lasting speeches of the Director General Vladimír Železný, who has addressed the public as belonging to one large national family.

The loyalty of the audience was proven in 1999, when Železný got into an international lawsuit with CME, the former owner of *Nova*, which had previously been excluded from proprietary rights through a series of legal and financial tricks taken out by Železný. What is the most interesting about this issue is how Železný managed to redress it into nationalistic clothing. The lawsuit is viewed by many people as a battle of Czech David against the American Goliath – and it is evident which side the public supports.

The title of the book written by Železný himself is “The Chase. We won’t give up this TV!” On the back cover, one can read a clear description of what all the buzz is about: “A well-known Czech manager has revolted against the violence of a giant American company.” It is obvious that the “we” in this context doesn’t mean only “we, the public”, but also “we, the Czech nation”.

But it is not only the outer frame that maintains the image of *TV Nova* as the medium answering to “the needs” of the Czech nation. If we look at the content of the prime-time news programme, we might discover that its agenda is in a predominant way filled with the national events or events with linkage to the national framework. This is, at least, a result from a content analysis which I carried out on *TV Nova* and *Czech TV 1* within a period of one week. That is
surely not enough to draw an accurate conclusion from the data, but, as I think, it is enough to get a basic picture of proportion between the “foreign” and “national” content within the news reports.

Concerning the sources of news, both stations used primarily (74% Nova, 77% Czech TV 1) their own news services and relied on foreign news agencies only from one quarter. Regarding the territorial focus, Nova appeared to give even more space to the domestic, national news against the news from abroad (73%) than Czech TV 1 (62%). But these statistics are not adequate for saying how much of the news programme carries national meanings. Therefore, I also measured the amount of news containing explicit or implicit relationships to the Czech Republic. It turned out that more than 30% of foreign news on Czech TV 1 and more than 20% on TV Nova were interpreted in that way. In the final numbers, both stations were almost equal: 78% of total length of news on TV Nova and 74% on Czech TV 1 were somehow related to the Czech Republic and therefore “optimised” for the national audience.

In sports news, which were measured separately for their specificity, I found even more striking evidence of presentation of national identity – which matches the remark of Chris Barker, that “television sport is currently one of the prime promoters of national discourses and sentiments”. Although the amount of sports news from the Czech Republic against these from outside was less in case of Nova (47%), while in the Czech TV 1 it was the other way around (59% domestic news), the amount of sports news about the Czech Republic or Czech sportsmen reached about 90% on both channels (87% on Nova and 92% on Czech TV 1).

Conclusion

These findings provide support for the claim made above, that the end of national television doesn’t seem to be on the horizon. On the contrary, this medium is, at least in the Czech Republic, still distributing messages and symbolical representations of national identity, placing political, economic, and cultural, as well as sports events, into nationalistic frames of reference. Such reading of the world through national glasses corresponds with the prognosis made by Peter Dahlgren on the future of television in Europe: although he acknowledges continuing transnationalization of television, he assumes that “viewing patterns will remain still quite nationalistic.” This will probably be enforced to the extent to which broadcasting maintains its position in the everyday life of the people. As some scholars argue, due to the mass media, the nation is experienced not as an abstract entity, but as a living practice, as participation in a symbolical ritual. Television, in particular, has adopted a role of national calendar, organising, co-ordinating and reproducing the social world.
coincidence that prime time news regularly attracts one of largest audiences of all programmes.
However, if it is not *national* broadcasting whose future is endangered, then *public service* broadcasting’s certainly is. Although the PSB is not the only form of television that is capable of providing the role of a symbolical national unifier, as I tried to show in the example of commercial TV Nova, it is probably the only one which can significantly contribute to the democratic character of the national polity. Everywhere across Europe, PSB is now under heavy pressure. In the Czech Republic, for example, there are serious attempts to privatise the second channel of *Czech TV* and to organise the first channel on a more competitive, commercial basis than it is now, which might later lead to its full privatisation as well. Of course, it should not mean that democracy is guaranteed exclusively via television screen. On the contrary, I think that the demand to distribute information in a democratic society by a variety of communication media is at least as important as the internal plurality of their content. But television is still the dominant medium of contemporary society, or even, for some, “the most important institution shaping the symbolic environment in which we live (and think and dream)”, and so it is too risky to relinquish it just to the supposed “self-regulating mechanisms” of market forces or to the digital future which is assumed to satisfy every individual demand. Yes, we could receive thousands of channels in our home set-top-boxes. However, a functional democracy needs demos, and the demos needs to know that it exists and how its members look like. I am really not sure if, in case of all these highly specialised commercial channels, this will be that type of message we can expect.

2 In terms of some of these decrees, 3 million Germans were expelled after the end of the Second World War out of the country and their property was confiscated.
5 R. Brubaker: Myths and misconceptions in the study of nationalism. In: J.A.Hall (ed.), ibid., p.276. Brubaker mentions following types:
a) nationalising nationalism of newly (or newly reconfigured) states, oriented towards the „core nation“
b) transborder nationalisms of „external national homelands“
c) nationalism of national minorities.
d) national-populist nationalism

The characteristic of this type of nationalism follows: „The bearers of such putative threats are diverse but can include foreign capital, transnational organisations, notably the IMF, immigrants, powerful foreign cultural influence and so on. This kind of nationalism often claims to seek a ‚third way‘ between capitalism and socialism, is often receptive to anti-Semitism, brands its political opponents as antinational, ‚un-Romanian‘, ‚un-Russian‘, etc., is critical of the various ills of ‚the west‘ and of ‚modernity‘, and tends to idealise an agrarian past. The social and economic dislocations accompanying market-oriented reforms - unemployment, inflation, tighter workplace discipline, etc. - create fertile soil for the use of such national populist idioms as a legitimation strategy by governments or as a mobilisation strategy by opposition.“ Ibid, p. 278.


10 B.Anderson: Imagined Communities. Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism. Verso, London and New York 1991. It should be noted that certain features of what Anderson describes as „print capitalism“ have been examined earlier by Marshall McLuhan, who’s book The Guttenberg Galaxy (1962) conveys the same argument. Basing on a general statement that „the medium is the message“, McLuhan argues that the medium of print is the message of nationalism.

11 J. Habermas, ibid., p. 166-229.

12 D.Morley, K.Robins, ibid., p. 10.

13 According to Stuart Hall: „Far from the BBC merely ‚reflecting‘ the complex make-up of a nation which pre-existed it, it was an instrument, an apparatus, a ‚machine‘ through which the nation was constituted. It produced the nation which it addressed: it constructed its audience by the ways in which it represented them.” Cited in: D.Morley, K.Robins, ibid., p. 196.

14 „Perhaps, when there was only one channel on offer and ,we‘ all watched the same programmes, it was arguably the case that television unified the nation. But what about the present day when we have five channels, fifty channels or one hundred channels? How unifying a medium is television if we watch only what we have always liked and do so on segmented specialist channels – the sport channel, the movie channel, the music channel?”(Ch.Barker: Television, Globalization and Cultural Identities. Open University Press, Buckingham, Philadelphia 1999, p.6).


17 The aim of the nationalistic project has always been to bridge the gap between family and society, between the public and the private.

V. Železný: Štvani ce. Tu televizí nedáme! Knihcentrum, Praha 1999. On several places of the book, Železný tries to play a nationalistic card by pointing out that TV Nova was from the beginning specifically Czech phenomenon, and its success reached through the outstanding abilities of Czech managers and journalists.

The data were collected between 15th and 21st of April 2002 from the evening news programmes „Událostí“ (on Czech TV 1 between 19.15 and 20.00) and „Televizní noviny“ (TV Nova, between 19.30 and 20.00). The percentage distribution for every category concerns cumulative length of reports, not their total number.

Ch. Barker, ibid., p.68.


P. Scannel, cited in: Ch. Barker, ibid., p.66. Similar issue stays in centre of attention of D. Morley: Home Territories. Media, Mobility and Identity. Routledge, London and New York 2000. Morley has also pointed to the fact that the television programme may become a specific form of social control and/or social exclusion, by distinguishing these who watched certain programmes from those who didn’t.

J. Wieten, G. Murdock, P. Dahlgren (ed.): ibid., p.X.