

THE CONVERSATION

Meet Miloš Zeman – the Czech Republic's answer to Donald Trump

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Wants to make Czech Rep great again, thinks xenophobia is the perfect way to do it. Reuters/David W Cerny

In the days following the attacks in Paris that killed 130 people, world leaders expressed their solidarity with France. Many also reiterated that the actions of a few terrorists do not represent a faith.

Others took the opportunity to spread extreme positions about Islam. Donald Trump, for example, has argued that Muslims should be banned from entering the US. Meanwhile, the president of the Czech Republic, Miloš Zeman decided to mark what many saw as a period of mourning in Europe after Paris by attending a rally organised by an anti-Muslim organisation.

Just as Trump continues to appeal as a presidential candidate, the Czech public can't seem to get enough of Zeman despite his xenophobic behaviour. Some even seem to love him because of it. He has become a symbol of defiant anti-muslim, anti-refugee, racist and xenophobic rhetoric. According to a recent opinion poll, 72.3% of Czechs like Zeman for his anti-refugee hate speech.

Zeman has been criticised for his actions by Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein, the UN high commissioner for human rights, and was also recently singled out in a report by the Council

of Europe's European Commission against Racism and Intolerance.

In fact, the ECRI has call for Czech law to be changed so that politicians who spread islamophobia and racism can be prosecuted. But the Czech Justice Ministry has said that no such changes will be introduced.

Riding a wave of anti-islamic and anti-refugee hysteria in the Czech Republic, Zeman has made increasingly strident public pronouncements on this issue. During a visit to southern Moravia, for instance, he said that Muslim refugees would follow their own laws rather than complying with those of their host country: Zeman said:

Unfaithful women will be stoned, thieves' hands will be cut off and we will be deprived of the beauty of women because they will have to have their faces covered. I can imagine that in some cases this might be beneficial, though.

This from the man who holds the highest office in the land. His position may be ceremonial but Zeman is an important public figure, not simply because of his role as a representative of the Czech Republic but because of his personal popularity.

Rise to power

Zeman, an economist, was subjected to a certain amount of discrimination under the pre-1989 communist regime in Czechoslovakia for his dissenting views – among them a courageous, critical analysis of the Czechoslovak economy, published shortly before the fall of the Communist regime.

Having been part of the Civic Forum movement that helped oust the Soviet-backed regime, Zeman joined the Czech Social Democratic Party and quickly became its chairman. He proved to be a skilled politician and under his leadership in the 1990s, the Czech Social Democratic Party became a serious political force.



Zeman speaks at an anti-Islam rally. EPA/ Filip Singer

In 1998, Zeman became prime minister – a post he held until 2002. Not long after his tenure ended, he had a number of conflicts with various leading members of the Social Democratic Party. In 2007, he left the party and retired.

Then, in 2013, he became the first president to be elected by popular vote (the post was until the then appointed by parliamentary votes), opening a new chapter in his political life. His spectacular success came down to a decision to appeal to the overwhelming majority of

Czech citizens who live outside the metropolis of Prague. Beyond the middle classes of the capital, the standard of living is generally much lower, so he based his campaign on anti-establishment rhetoric. He presented himself as the voice of the weak and mocked the Prague media and political circles.

It seemed at the time that Zeman's victory in the presidential race had a healthy impact on Czech politics. His election to high office was seen as breaking the hegemony of the smug, right-of-centre political establishment. For a while, it seemed like he was giving a voice to the disenfranchised and dissatisfied majority of the Czech population. Meanwhile, an unpopular right-of-centre government was collapsing under the weight of a major corruption scandal.

Shift to the right

A new Czech government came into power in **January 2014**. The Social Democrats became the junior partner in a coalition with a new right-wing grouping led by deputy prime minister, Andrej Babiš. This powerful oligarch sees Zeman as an electoral ally and has **spoken** in favour of his anti-refugee stance.

Confident of government support, Zeman has adopted stridently populist views, whipping up fear of Islam and the refugees in the Czech population for blatantly political purposes. His pronouncements have become more and more extreme. He has spoken of Islam as an “**anti-civilisation which is financed from the sale of oil and drugs** and more recently, his Islamophobia has evolved into an extremely hostile and inhumane attitude towards the refugees arriving in eastern Europe from Syria.

Zeman may not hold any meaningful power but his deliberately outrageous and controversial interventions are generating irrational fear in the Czech population and normalising sloppy thinking and racism. According to a recent opinion poll, **88% of Czechs believe that the refugees constitute the same threat to Europe as Islamic State**. Zeman has a lot to do with this conviction.

Over the past few months, with his absurd public statements, Zeman has developed into a kind of Donald Trump figure. Just as Trump thrives on controversy in the US, many Czechs seem impressed by Zeman's courage to say unsayable things. But as a legitimiser of intolerant, racist and xenophobic attitudes, he is becoming a real problem for the Czech Republic – and Europe as a whole.



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