

Why is the Czech Republic So Hostile to Muslims and Refugees?

The significant upsurge of refugees, which came into Europe in 2015, was met with unprecedented anger and hostility from an overwhelming majority of citizens of most of the post-communist Central European countries.[1] It would appear that a synergy of several historical, cultural, political, and economic factors has created this fiercely hostile reaction.[2]

The national communities of the post-communist countries of Central Europe are relatively small. Each of the Central European nations is defined by its unique language, which is spoken nowhere else but on the territory of the nation, or among minority groups in neighboring countries of the region, and by defensive nationalism. The small and medium-sized nations of Central Europe often feel that during the course of history they have been violated by larger powers, and so they often look at the world beyond its borders with suspicion.

The multicultural nature of the Central European nations was lost at the end of World War II when, with the consent of the Allies, millions of Germans living on the territory of these nations were moved to Germany, those Central European Jews who had survived the holocaust moved to Israel, and other population transfers created ethnically pure, homogeneous national communities. During the decades of post-war communist rule, the Central European countries were cut off from social and political developments in Western Europe and unlike the West European nations, they did not experience immigration. They have continued, to this very day, to use an expression of Greg Dyke, a former BBC chief executive “hideously white.”[3]

A certain part of the populations of the Central European countries feels that it has been adversely affected by the restoration of capitalism after the fall of communism in 1989. These people have therefore assumed a hostile attitude towards the pro-Western media and the pro-Western political elites in their countries, often disdaining western democratic values. In some Central European countries, this has led recently to the election of semi-authoritarian governments (Poland, Hungary). Even countries such as the Czech Republic and Slovakia seem to flirt with populism. Needless to say, the semi-authoritarian, anti-Western, and xenophobic and Islamophobic attitudes constitute a challenge to the stability of the European Union.

Defensive nationalism

It is the purpose of this article to examine the mechanisms which have created a strong atmosphere of xenophobia and islamophobia in one of the Central European countries – the Czech Republic, in spite of the fact that only some 11,000 Muslims live in that country[4] and almost no refugees have been accepted there.

Defensive nationalism has been a defining feature of the modern history of the Czechs. It is a part of the Czech national mythology that after the defeat of a Protestant uprising against a Habsburg emperor at the Battle of the White Mountain in 1620, the Czech lands were subjugated by foreign marauders and suffered three hundred years of an “Age of Darkness,” until the establishment of the independent democratic Czechoslovak Republic after World War I in 1918. At the beginning of the Czech National Revival, Czech patriots abandoned the traditional concept of

territorial nationality and replaced it with linguistic nationality, meaning that only those individuals who spoke native Czech could be regarded as members of the nation. The whole of the nineteenth century was characterized by nationalist friction between the German-speaking and the Czech-speaking populations on the territory of Bohemia. These frictions continued during the times of the interwar Czechoslovak Republic, when because of the 1929 Wall Street crash the heavily industrialized German-speaking border regions of Czechoslovakia were seriously affected by unemployment. As a result, most of the German inhabitants of this region came to support Nazism after Hitler's accession to power in neighboring Germany in 1933. An overwhelming majority of the German population of Czechoslovakia was deported to Germany after 1945, and the post-1948 communist regime in Czechoslovakia intensely cultivated the notion of the "evil," primarily German, foreigner.

The small and the middle-sized Central European nations have never been able to rid themselves of their fear that they could be annihilated or that their national community could cease to exist. These fears were brilliantly discussed by the writer Milan Kundera in his speech given to the June 1967 Congress of the Czechoslovak Writers, entitled "On the Non-Self-Evidence of the existence of the Czech nation." In this speech, Kundera argued that the continued existence of the Czech nation could only be assured if the nation is able to make a unique cultural contribution on the world stage. For this, he added the Czechs need freedom of expression.

To this very day, the Czechs define their identity and nationality by means of their language: you are Czech only if you speak the Czech language fluently. Those individuals who do not speak Czech tend to be, implicitly, stripped of their intrinsically human qualities. The Czech (and generally Slavonic) expression for a German is "Němec." The expression is derived from the adjective "němý," "mute," "dumb."

Historical hang-ups

These historical hang-ups seem to have played an important role in contemporary politics in the Czech Republic. The linguistic definition of "Czechness" has led to the exclusion of the Roma community from the Czech nation and to racist attitudes towards the Roma as representatives of "the other." At the same time, distrust towards the Germans survives in a section of the population. When the Czech Republic was about to join the European Union in 2004, people from those regions, which were inhabited by a majority German population until 1945, were afraid that the descendants of the Germans who were deported from these areas after World War II would claim back their property that had been confiscated from them. The then Czech President Václav Klaus demanded guarantees that no such claims can be made from the descendants of the German expellees.^[5]

During the first direct Czech presidential election in January 2013, the right-of-center candidate, Karel Schwarzenberg, lost not only because as Foreign Secretary and Deputy Prime Minister he was associated with a relatively discredited right-wing government of the day, but also because the successful presidential candidate, Miloš Zeman, was able to show Schwarzenberg as a representative of German interests.^[6]

Miloš Zeman's victory in the 2013 presidential race meant a victory for populism.^[7] Zeman quickly came to stylize himself into a defender of the interests of the underdog. Long before the arrival of Donald Trump on the US political scene,

Zeman started cleverly to manipulate the frustration of the Czech have-nots in order to strengthen his political position. From the beginning of the 2015 European refugee crisis, Zeman seems to have distilled all the above mentioned historical attitudes of the Czechs into a potent xenophobic anti-refugee and anti-immigrant mixture.

President Zeman as a prime catalyst of Czech anti-refugee hatred

Historically, the Czechs have held the office of their President in very high regard. They still remember with reverence the founder of the interwar democratic Czechoslovakia, the President Liberator Thomas Garrigue Masaryk, who stood above politics and in a way for many Czechoslovaks embodied a continuation of the office of the Austro-Hungarian Emperor. For many people, the Office of the President conferred high honor also on playwright Václav Havel, the first post-communist holder of this post, and on his successors Václav Klaus and Miloš Zeman.

Since becoming the President of the Czech Republic, Miloš Zeman has become notorious for many controversial and factually inaccurate public statements. Just like in the case of Donald Trump, Zeman's democratic mandate and the revered status of the Presidential Office have given his controversial statements credence with many members of the Czech public. Since the beginning of the European refugee crisis, President Zeman has thus become a major catalyst for the construction of a mendacious anti-refugee narrative in the Czech Republic.

From the beginning of the refugee crisis, President Zeman became a symbol of defiant anti-Muslim, anti-refugee, racist, and xenophobic rhetoric. He became notorious for saying that "no one has invited the refugees," that the refugees are "like a tsunami which will kill me,"^[8] that "90 percent of refugees are economic migrants,"^[9] that the refugees are "Islamists who are coming to subjugate Europe,"^[10] and that they are "criminals."^[11] On the anniversary of the 1989 Czechoslovak Velvet Revolution in November 2015, Zeman sang the Czech national anthem on stage with an extremist anti-Islamic activist who demanded that gas chambers and concentration camps be set up for Muslims.^[12]

Some of Zeman's public pronouncements were particularly embarrassing. In October 2015, he said during a visit to a small Czech town, "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."^[13]

Zeman's anti-Muslim and anti-refugee statements have been enhanced by the officers of the Czech Presidential Office; in particular by his Press Spokesperson Jiří Ovčáček. Hynek Kmoníček, the Head of the Foreign Affairs Department of the Office of the Czech President, said on Czech Television that the refugees are "dangerous foreign blood."^[14]

Zeman has been criticized^[15] for his statements by Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, and was also singled out^[16] in a report by the Council of Europe's European Commission against Racism and Intolerance. ECRI demanded that Czech law should be changed so that politicians like Zeman who spread islamophobia and racism can be prosecuted. But the Czech Justice Ministry said^[17] that no such changes would be introduced.

International criticism has probably increased President Zeman's popularity amongst the Czechs. According to a 2015 opinion poll^[18] 72.3 percent of Czechs like Zeman^[19] for his anti-refugee statements. In September 2015, 69 percent of Czech

citizens were against accepting refugees and migrants from the Middle East and from Africa. Only 4 percent of Czechs were of the opinion that the Czech Republic should accept the refugees permanently.

A strongly hostile attitude to Muslims and refugees

Although there is a small percentage of the Czech population who actively go out of their way to help refugees stranded in Greece and the other Balkan countries, a majority of the Czech population seems to hate and fear refugees and Muslims. An anti-Islamic group called “We do not want Islam in the Czech Republic” received almost 140,000 likes on Facebook and presented a petition with 145,000 signatures to Czech Parliament, demanding that immigrants should be barred from the Czech Republic.[20] In July 2015, an anti-immigration demonstration took place in Prague where activists carried gallows and nooses “for the traitors of our nation”[21] who would like to help refugees. Later on the Prague Municipal Authority decreed “Bringing a set of gallows to a demonstration cannot be seen as threatening behavior.”[22] Occasionally, people have been assaulted in public for their pro-refugee views.[23] The Czech police are reluctant to investigate these incidents. Eva Zahradníčková, a well-known Czech pro-refugee activist, regularly receives death threats on Facebook. When she complained to the police about this, she was told that Facebook is registered in California and that was outside the jurisdiction of the Czech Republic – so the police cannot do anything in this matter.[24] Pavla Gomba, head of UNICEF Czech Republic, testified on Czech Television[25] that when they tried to run a campaign against the malnutrition of children in Africa, they were swamped by hate mail from the Czech public. “The same idea is repeated over and over again in these emails: Let these children die, let them die. Do not try to save them. Do nothing, because if they die, we will have more and if they die, they will not turn into future refugees who will swamp Europe,” said Pavla Gomba in the Czech TV program *168 hours*.

A systematic construction of a false narrative

It is perhaps remarkable that in spite of this intense hate, no larger anti-refugee or xenophobic political party exists in the Czech Republic. Anti-immigration activists Martin Konvička and Tomio Okamura tried to stand in the Czech regional elections in the autumn of 2016, but they failed to win substantial electoral support. The main reason for the non-existence of a strong anti-immigration party in the Czech Republic seems to be, however, that all the mainstream parties have included anti-refugee and anti-immigration rhetoric in their public statements. The powerful oligarch Andrej Babiš, the Czech Deputy Prime Minister and the Chair of the most popular Czech political party ANO repeatedly makes anti-refugee public statements, rejecting the EU refugee quotas[26] and demanding that the EU borders should be hermetically sealed so that no refugees can enter Europe. Most mainstream Czech politicians make similar statements.[27] Traditional anti-German feeling in the Czech Republic is now directed against the Chancellor Angela Merkel for her refugee open door policy.

A commentator has recently noticed that a certain amount of conformism in Czech society may be contributing to the spreading of ingrained anti-refugee attitudes. To be anti-Muslim is regarded as normal in Czech society. Bohumil Kartous was present recently at a party on the occasion of the opening of a new restaurant in an East Bohemian town. Suddenly, someone started distributing stickers with the logo of the highly controversial, extreme right-wing organization “We do not want Islam in the

Czech Republic” (IVČRN). Everyone present placed the sticker on their lapel, without protest and without any questions. “The gathering had suddenly turned into an NSDAP meeting,” says the commentator.[28] “No one thought of rejecting the label. No one dared to stand out in the crowd.”

Daniel Howden from the organization Refugees Deeply argues[29] that anti-refugee attitudes are artificially constructed in the countries of Central Europe by the media primarily for commercial reasons. While opinion polls in the Czech Republic consistently indicate that up to 80 percent of the Czech population hold anti-refugee attitudes, Howden quotes the analysis of the Prague sociologist Daniel Prokop, who assembled a representative group of Czechs and mapped out their attitudes to refugees against the twin axes of attitude and importance. He discovered that in fact the refugee issue is not a top priority for most Czechs: only some 29 percent of Czechs were strongly against refugees and saw this as an issue of major significance. But the Czech media constantly frightened the Czech public showing Muslims and refugees as violent criminals. Howden records the well-known scandal when it transpired from a recording, secretly made at an editorial meeting that the top executives of the Czech private TV station Prima openly ordered their journalists systematically to demonize refugees in its news and current affairs programs.

The Czech media do seem to be constructing an artificial anti-refugee narrative and do seem to be reinforcing one another while doing so. One particularly potent myth was unmasked recently when it created a nationwide scandal in Sweden. Over many months, the Czech media have been constructing an artificially created image of Sweden as a “refugee hell” – once an affluent and safe country, which has allegedly now become dangerous, impoverished and unsafe due to the fact that in 2015, it accepted many tens of thousands of “marauding refugee criminals.” A normally well-regarded Czech digital TV channel (DVTV) released an interview with a popular Czech-Swedish writer Kateřina Janouchová, who spoke at great length about various allegedly horrifying aspects of the current Swedish “refugee hell.” All the information in this interview was false, as was pointed out by the Swedish daily newspaper *Dagens Nyheter*[30] and by Swedish public service television, who have meticulously debunked all of Janouchová’s assertions.[31] The interview caused a nationwide scandal in Sweden and even the Swedish Prime Minister Stefan Löfven made a comment about it. Worried, Swedish commentators have been asking what Sweden could be doing against the construction of a false image of their country abroad. But judging from reactions on Facebook, many Czech viewers have not been persuaded by the evidence provided by Swedish television, which showed that Janouchová’s assertions about Sweden were fabrications.

Parlamentní listy

Parlamentní listy, a hugely popular Czech website,[32] owned by Ivo Valenta, member of the Upper House of Czech Parliament and a gambling oligarch, has been in the forefront of disseminating racist, anti-refugee and anti-Muslim fake news. The website is extremely influential and is daily followed by hundreds of thousands of readers. Its business model seems to be based on disseminating alarmist news and racist material and provoking fear in the Czech public. The website is also pro-Russian and anti-EU. The name of the website “The Parliamentary Newsletter” is a misnomer – the publication has nothing to do with Czech Parliament. Nevertheless, Czech politicians frequently give interviews to the website because of its large readership, thus legitimizing it. The website is accessed more than 600 000 readers per month, i.e. 6 percent of the Czech population. Many of the articles published

on *Parlamentní listy* are probably criminal offences of slandering a race, an ethnic group or a religion and inciting hatred against ethnic and religious minorities, which according to Articles 355 and 356 of the Czech Criminal Code are punishable by three year's imprisonment, if these offences are committed in the media. But the Czech authorities do not prosecute.

Here are a few examples of *Parlamentní listy* headlines:

- *Alláhu Akbar! They yelled when they were shooting people in the Quebec mosque. We can see now who it was that committed the attack in Canada*[\[33\]](#)
- *Sociologist Petr Hampel: We have the right to deal with the refugees as though they were aggressors. The traitors of the Czech nation are helping them to exterminate us like the whites have exterminated the Red Indians. The Czech Human Rights Ombudsman, she is the real Neo-Nazi*[\[34\]](#)
- *This is death. There will be bloody tragedies. Hatred of the Czechs, monstrous behaviour, treachery, suicide, collaborators, chaos*[\[35\]](#)
- *We will not feed any Muslims. Everything in this country has been stolen, everything is owned by foreigners, says a general and a war hero*[\[36\]](#)
- *There is a danger that the Islamists will repeat Lenin's 1917 revolution!*[\[37\]](#)
- *Zhirinovskyy: I support Trump. Close the borders! Hundreds of millions of Africans are on their way here. Hooligans, criminals*[\[38\]](#)

Although *Parlamentní listy* was created quite independently in the Czech Republic, it is quite similar to *Breitbart News* and it in fact often now copies material from the American website.

Further research must be conducted to find out what motivates people to follow a website like this in large numbers and to let themselves to be influenced by such writing.

The extreme hatred against Muslims and refugees, felt by many in the Czech Republic, seems to be a bit of a psychological conundrum. All the historical hang-ups discussed in the first part of this article, seem to have merged with frustration felt by many people who have been left behind by the current capitalist regime in the Czech Republic and who let themselves to be emotionally manipulated into fearing a non-existent danger. Just as in several other Central European countries, the current popular mood in the Czech Republic is destabilizing and worrying.

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scholars, is a monograph entitled National Mythologies in Central European TV Series How J.R. won the Cold War, Sussex Academic Press.

Photo: Syrian refugees families, Orlok | Shutterstock
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Footnotes:

- [1] In 2015, 726 949 persons came into Europe via Greece across the Mediterranean; in 2016, 362 376 persons came to Europe via Greece and Italy. In the first five weeks of 2017, 9931` persons came to Europe. See <http://blisty.cz/art/80046.html> and <http://data.unhcr.org/mediterranean/regional.php>
- [2] Research suggests that hostile reaction towards refugees and immigrants is common throughout Europe, but the countries of Central and Eastern Europe are the most hostile. See <http://www.chathamhouse.org/expert/comment/what-do-europeans-think-about-muslim-immigration>
- [3] "Dyke: BBC is 'hideously white'". *BBC News*, 6th January, 2001, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/scotland/1104305.stm>
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- [10] “Czech President Miloš Zeman: The immigrants are islamists. They are trying to subjugate Europe”. *Britské listy*, 5th November, 2015. <http://blisty.cz/art/79737.html>
- [11] “Czech President Miloš Zeman: The refugees are criminals”. *Britské listy*, 6th November, 2015. <http://blisty.cz/art/79745.html>
- [12] “Czech President Miloš Zeman sings the national anthem with a proponent of concentration camps and gas chambers for muslims”. *Britské listy*, 17th November, 2015. <http://blisty.cz/art/79892.html>
- [13] “Czech President Miloš Zeman: Refugees will stone unfaithful women to death”. *Britské listy*, 17th October, 2015. <http://blisty.cz/art/79464.html>
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- [23] “An experience of a Czech politician on public transport: This is the traitor who invites muslims to rape our Czech women!” *Britské listy*, 4th March 2016. <http://blisty.cz/art/81402.html>
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- [38] "VIDEO Žirinovskij: Podporuji Trumpa, zavřít hranice! Stovky milionů Afričanů na cestě. Chuligáni, kriminálníci. A vy, pátá kolono, co vás platil Obama..." *Parlamentní listy*, 31st January, 2017. <http://www.parlamentnilisty.cz/arena/monitor/VIDEO-Zirinovskij-Podporuji-Trumpa-zavrit-hranice-Stovky-milionu-Africanu-na-cestech-Chuligani-kriminalnici-A-vy-pata-kolono-co-vas-platil-Obama-473559>