

Case Study: The Dangerous Speech of Miloš Zeman in the Czech Republic

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Summary

Miloš Zeman is the president of the Czech Republic who was chosen in direct elections. Ever since the beginning of the refugee crisis in Europe in 2015, he has been making statements against immigrants who, according to him, present a major security threat because of their religion - Islam. His level of support varies, but a government survey [from May 2017](#) indicates around 40% support for him. His rhetoric strongly influences government policies as well as the public opinion about migrants. Despite the fact that the Czech Republic accepted one of the lowest numbers of refugees among all member states of the European Union, the public opinion about the refugees is worse there than anywhere else in Europe.¹ Zeman participated in the 2018 presidential elections and has again been nominated president. This analysis draws heavily on the [interview he gave to the Washington Post](#) in January 2017.

Dangerous Speech Framework Analysis

Social and Historical Context

Comparing contemporary Muslims with the radicalisation of Germany in the 1930s and comparing Islam to Nazi ideology are two favourite strategies that the president started using two years before he was elected. Due to the Czech Republic's history, the public is very sensitive to juxtaposing religion and culture with enforcement of a political ideology. The Munich agreement of 1938 caused Czechoslovakia to lose a third of its territory to Germany. The annexed area was inhabited predominantly by German Czechs, who welcomed the annexation by the Third Reich. Less than a year later, all of Czechoslovakia became a protectorate of Nazi Germany. The trust between the Czech Republic and Germany is still returning slowly, largely due to wartime and post-war atrocities committed by both sides, atrocities which were not discussed under Communism.² For example, the villages of Lidice and Ležáky were annihilated in June 1942 in retaliation for the assassination attempt of Reinhard Heydrich, the Reich protector. Members of the SS murdered over 300 men, women and children. After the war, on the other hand, the German population was frequently attacked, for example during the massacre in Ústí (Ústecký masakr). It is still unclear how many Czech Germans were murdered by the members of the revolutionary guard. The estimates vary between 80 and 2000. The comparisons used by Zeman point towards the revival of the concept of 'the enemy within', which is often reflected in the metaphors he chooses – for example, he uses the term 'Trojan horse' to describe refugees.

¹ <https://www.euroskop.cz/9002/28693/clanek/eurobarometr-pro-63-cechu-je-problemem-eu-migrace/>

² The communist regime reinforced the stories of the atrocities committed by Germans. At the same time, individuals were not allowed to speak of the crimes committed during the expulsion of German citizens.

While the president enjoys strong, if at times varying, support of voters, the Czech Social Democratic Party (ČSSD, the main governing party) keeps losing support.³ Because of the upcoming elections and recurring Islamic terrorist attacks in Europe, the government has changed its line on migration politics so that it now matches the president's opinions. The clearest example of this is the rejection of refugee quotas established by the EU. The Czech Republic was supposed to admit 3,000 refugees over the period of two years, but only accepted 12 and then stopped further procedures. As a result, the Czech Republic may be subject to a significant financial penalty from the European Commission. The Minister of Interior, Milan Chovanec (ČSSD) has repeatedly stressed that the quota system was rejected because it is "not functional," but after the threat of the penalty, he started talking openly about the security risk and how accepting the quota would have meant political suicide for him.

He is probably right. According to a recent study published by the Pew Research Center covering 19 states in Central and Eastern Europe, the only nation with a worse relationship towards Muslims than the Czechs are Armenians.⁴ The Czech government previously supported the resettlement of 153 Iraqi refugees, exclusively those of Christian faith, which was supposed to be facilitated by the non-profit organisation Generace 21. However, after two families left the Czech Republic for Germany in the spring of 2016 during their asylum procedure, the whole project was stopped.

In 2016, 1,475 people applied for asylum, and most of the applicants were Ukrainian. Asylum was granted to 148, and another 302 received subsidiary protection. Although in 2015, Syria was the second most common country of origin for asylum seekers, in 2016 it did not even make the top ten. Meanwhile the Czech Republic gained a reputation as a country incarcerating migrants in detention centres that do not provide respectable conditions. Moreover, the costs of staying at these centres need to be covered by the migrants themselves.

According to professional estimates, around 22,000 Muslims live in the Czech Republic, which has a total population of 10.5 million. Many of these individuals are second or third generation migrants. Approximately 1,000 of them belong to organised religious associations and all of them are well integrated. No spike in aggression towards them has been registered so far. Islamophobic groups in the Czech Republic primarily focus on their ideological enemies, targeting social media pages and organising demonstrations, rather than attacking individuals. One exception to this, however, occurred in 2016, when a number of shops and cafes in Prague that openly supported the government campaign Hate Free had their displays demolished, and hateful slogans and swastikas were sprayed onto their windows. Five attackers received suspended sentences and were ordered to cover the costs of the damages within their capabilities. Parties and movements that were born out of the Islamophobic movement did not succeed in local elections. Political scientists identified two reasons for this: their focus on a single issue, and the fact that these groups' opinions are already widely shared by traditional parties and the president himself.⁵

Message

"Let me start with Nazi Germany. In the '30s in the last century, the Germans were decent people. The nation of Goethe and Schiller and so on. In only three years, they became the fanatic Nazis. They all were not victims of this ideology but strong supporters of this ideology. And now, just imagine, you have a Muslim community of approximately 2 billion people. If the Germans were able to be ...

³ Zeman left ČSSD in 2007, and in 2010 he became the leader of the newly founded the Party of Civic Rights ZEMANOVCÍ (Strany práv občanů ZEMANOVCÍ).

⁴ http://assets.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/11/2017/05/09154356/Central-and-Eastern-Europe-Topline_FINAL-FOR-PUBLICATION.pdf p. 46.

⁵ <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5180693/>

radicalized during three years only, there is a serious danger that those people — you might call them moderate Muslims — might be radicalized by, for instance, Islamist State.“

[11.1.2017, Washington Post](#)

A selection of direct and indirect quotations repeating this message in Czech media:

Zeman also repeated his opinions about Muslims and used the comparison with Nazi Germany. According to him, moderate Muslims can become radicals too, similarly to 'Goethe's and Schiller's nation', which turned into fanatical nationalists in mere three years'.

[12.1.2017, IDnes.cz](#) - one of the most widely read Czech news websites

I will explain this to you using the example of Nazi Germany. In the 1930s the Germans were rightful people. In mere three years they turned into fanatical nationalists. And now imagine that there are around two billion Muslims in the world. If Germans radicalised, why wouldn't moderate Muslims do the same? - states Zeman, adding that due to their attitude towards women he does not believe that successful integration is possible.

[12.1. 2017, Parlamentní listy](#) - the most popular Czech alternative medium

Zeman also repeated his views on Muslims and used his comparison to Nazi Germany again. In his opinion, moderate Muslims can undergo radicalisation as well, just like Goethe' and Schiller's nation turned into fanatical nationalists in mere three years.

[12.1.2017, iRozhlas.cz](#) - the only Czech public radio

A selection of earlier statement made by Miloš Zeman about Islam and/or Muslims and Nazism in Czech as well as foreign media:

In the 30s, the overwhelming majority of Germans were decent people, the nation of Goethe and Schiller and so on,” he says. “In a few years, they became Nazis, even fanatic Nazis. And the radicalisation of the – till these times – moderate Muslim population might be like the case of the German population. It might be easier than the German population, [because] you have a very radical ideology based on a religion.

[14.9.2016, The Guardian](#) – quoted widely in the Czech media

Unfortunately, the reaction of the member states of the European Union is similar to their reactions to Hitler's Nazism in the 1930s, i.e. protests, manifestations, demonstrations and that's more or less it - said Zeman.

[4.3.2015, Novinky.cz](#) – the most widely read Czech news server

A moderate Muslim is a contradictio in adjecto, so a contradiction in terms, just like a moderate Nazi is a contradictio in adjecto. For example in April 1945 there was only one moderate Nazi who proposed negotiations on the separate capitulation of the Great German Reich to the Allied forces. His name was Heinrich Himmler, he organised the murders of Jews. Of course, I can see that Muslims can convert. But on the other hand, conversion means death penalty for those who do. I mean this is no religion of love and definitely no religion of tolerance, it's a religion of hate.

4.8.2011, Reflex (interview 'Islam is the enemy' [Nepřítelem je islám], authors: Viliam Buchert & Ivan Hamšík) – the most popular Czech weekly newspaper focus on society and politics.

Zeman delivered a clear message to refugees/migrants that they are not welcome in the Czech Republic. If the German chancellor 'invited' refugees to Germany, Zeman does the opposite. He reiterates the reasons why refugees, especially Muslims should not come and warns them against doing so.

At the same time, he grounds his message in the Czech historical context. He targets those who argued in favour of the Czech Republic taking in refugees. By comparing Muslims to the highly developed people that Germans were considered to be before World War II, he suggests the possibility of another

agenda, hidden as of yet: the desire to rule and expand geographically. In the context of his other statements, he talks about migration as organised invasion. He repeatedly stated and keeps stating that the invasion is organised by the Muslim Brotherhood, and he gives more seeming credibility to his statements by claiming that he received his information from highly ranking Muslim officials (he usually mentions a prince of Saudi Arabia, always without a name).⁶ Talking about the 'organised invasion' creates an illusion of credibility - even if his followers have never heard of the invasion, they can easily find out more online. At the same time, framing the crisis as an invasion (as opposed to, for example, a humanitarian crisis) creates space for alternative interpretations. The source of information, a Muslim prince, so an insider - always nameless and vaguely defined - is another pillar of credibility. The fact that the president's statements were described as unfounded and speculative by a wide range of experts (i.e. experts on Islam, security experts, highly ranking military officials like the second highest NATO official Petr Pavel) did not influence their content.

The fact that he keeps repeating his repertoire of statements mainly during the meetings with his supporters in regions around the Czech Republic⁷ has two effects. Firstly, he confirms the stability of his opinions in the eyes of his followers. Secondly, the opinions get into the public eye (to the media and to social media) over and over again, which ensures that they spread and become a permanent element of the public sphere.

As the cited above statements illustrate, President Zeman repeatedly compares Islam to Nazism. Unlike with Islam, however, the Czech society has had a lot of experiences with Nazism. Experts estimate that between 340 and 360 thousand people died as a direct consequence of the Nazi occupation under the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia (1939-1945). According to the Czech Statistical Institute, there were over three million so-called Czech Germans (about 30% of the whole population) living on the territory of Czechoslovakia. They inhabited primarily the border regions, especially the Sudety region, which was dependent on export revenues to neighbouring Germany. For that reason, the world economic crisis affected the Czech Germans much more than other Czechs. Unemployment was rising rapidly, and many of them joined Konrad Heinlein's nationalist party which was hoping for annexation to the Third Reich (in 1935 his party unexpectedly gained 77 seats in the Czech parliament). In 1938 the Munich agreement was signed, granting partial annexation for the Sudetenland region.

The Czech Germans function in Czech consciousness as inner enemies who cannot be trusted. After the Second World War, the majority of Germans were deported to post-war Germany and many others, including women and children were murdered on the Czech territory, their property handed over to the Czechs. The relations between the two nations were finally settled only thanks to the very compromise-oriented Czech-German Declaration signed in January 1997.

Due to the low numbers of Muslims in the Czech society (a professional estimate puts their number at 22,000) and due to the fact that they live mostly in big cities like Prague and Brno, however, most Czech citizens do not have any direct experiences with them. They then learn through the media that the highest political authority in the country considers Muslims to be as dangerous as Nazis. Using the total number of Muslims without any differentiation between them in terms of their values or the forms of Islam that they practice causes even more fear in the society.

⁶ *'During my visit to the United Arab Emirates a prince told me that the Muslim Brotherhood is the umbrella organisation for all Muslim terrorist groups.' Its members include the head of Al-Qaeda, the head of the Taliban and others, the president quoted the Arab politician. The other source of information are statements made by the Moroccan foreign minister. 'Recently, when he was here, he told me that the Muslim Brotherhood is trying to rule not only over the whole Muslim world but also over the whole world, they have it in their ideology too', says Zeman. 'Based on these sources of information from Muslims and prominent Arab politicians I suspect that the Muslim Brotherhood is organizing this invasion with the financial support of a great number of states.'*
http://www.rozhlas.cz/plus/interviewplus/_zprava/milos-zeman-invazi-migrantu-do-evropy-organizuje-muslimske-bratrstvo--1570308

⁷ Zeman is currently touring the country for the fourth time.

In the context of the increased numbers of immigrants, primarily Muslims, that came to Germany in 2015 (none of whom arrived in the Czech Republic itself) one can get the impression that the enemy is already at the borders. According to this logic, if the Czech Republic decided to accept the asylum seekers, it would be doing itself a disservice. This line of thinking is also present in Zeman's statements when he calls migrants 'a Trojan horse'.

Another relevant factor is the radical difference in the Czechs' and Germans' ('old enemies') approach towards the refugee crisis. While Germany's chancellor Angela Merkel invited the Syrian refugees into her country in the name of Germany's citizens, Zeman presents an entirely different position (Syrians are supposed to stay and fight for their country themselves, or flee to those countries that are culturally closer to them, etc.). Moreover, Germany is the most influential state in the European Union, whereas the Czech Republic plays a rather secondary role. Due to the migrant situation, the two neighbouring countries have once again become political opponents. It is important to consider the Muslim-Nazi comparison in terms of this newly tense situation.

In the following answer during the interview for the Washington Post, Zeman mentions gender inequality in the Muslim world which he views as one of the main obstacles to the integration of Muslims into the European society. This statement can be found in the Czech media as well:

There is a strong difference between American and European culture and Muslim culture. And this is the attitude toward women. For Muslims, the women are, well, inferior, inferior beings. So, this is unacceptable in European culture. I could give you other examples, but I think this concerns a half of the population.

Once again, this is a long-term opinion of Zeman, who refuses to differentiate between individual Muslim-majority countries and the attitudes towards women represented there. He has also asserted that Muslims want to introduce their own laws in Europe, including Sharia religious law. This is a strong and simple argument, which resonates with many people. What is more, the abovementioned example illustrating the impossibility of the integration of Muslims implies that it is mainly men who present a danger. Even earlier, Zeman stated that most of the migrants are 'young men with iPads' (he probably meant iPhones) and this image combined with their religious beliefs creates a convincing impression of danger for 'our' women, a common hallmark of Dangerous Speech.

Speaker:

Miloš Zeman, contrary to his anti-immigrant and anti-multicultural rhetoric, is a politician whose origins lie on the left side of the political spectrum. In the past, he was repeatedly elected to the Parliament from the lists of the Social Democratic Party; he was the leader of that party for eight years and for four years he headed a strong, majority government. His party leadership is considered the most successful period of time for the ČSSD, and within the party - which currently leads the government - Zeman is very well respected, especially by the older members. Even though the current government was formed by the anti-Zeman wing of the social democrats, the government had to repeatedly deal with the president's influence. The conflicts reached their peak when a government crisis broke out in May 2017 and led to the resignation of the Prime Minister, Bohuslav Sobotka, from his post of party leader. He was replaced in that capacity by the aforementioned Minister of Interior, Milan Chovanec.

Zeman announced in March 2017 that he will run for president again, but he also said that he will not participate in any debates with other candidates. He still tours the country, however, and organises public debates with citizens where he never fails to present his anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim opinions. In general, among his voters he is perceived as the people's politician who cares about the problems of ordinary people.

Audience

The statement was published in an interview with the Washington Post, a United States newspaper, but Zeman clearly aimed it at his supporters at home and Czech citizens in general. He was counting on the Czech media to pick up the international interview, which most of the Czech mainstream and alternative media did. The statement was also probably meant for the new American president Donald Trump. (Zeman claims to have been invited by his American counterpart into the White House but the visit never took place.)

The debates in the Czech regions take place both in schools and on the premises of private companies. They are mostly public, but there have been reports that adversaries of Zeman's politics are blocked by his security team (or sometimes police too), and that students asked him only questions that were approved by their teachers beforehand. That way, most of the questions Zeman needs to answer come from his supporters. He and his team treat media in a similar manner – he gives interviews only to the media outlets that support him. An extreme example of this behaviour is a television programme on one of the private channels called 'A week with the president' (Týden s prezidentem). The show is hosted by the wife of Zeman's chancellor, Vratislav Mlýnař, so Zeman does not have to defend his views – he only uses the safe space he created for their constant rehashing.

According to the [analysis of the results](#) of presidential elections in 2013, Zeman's supporters come primarily from smaller cities and municipalities. Regional capitals and metropolises did not vote for him. In terms of numbers, there are vast disparities between the historical regions of the Czech Republic. The Czech lands, a region enveloping the state's capital city Prague, voted for Zeman's opponent Karl Schwarzenberg. Moravia, on the other hand, voted for Zeman. Moreover, people under 29 do not tend to vote for Zeman who recruits many of his supporters among people over 60. His voters are also most likely to have primary or lower high-school education.

Such voters enjoy the president's rhetoric based on simple quips, folk logic, and easily understandable comparisons. These are also the groups of people who express the biggest fears concerning migrants and foreigners in general. Their personal experiences are limited due to their place of living, education, and economic situation. Zeman often alleges that most of the 'so-called refugees' are actually economic migrants who come to Europe to take advantage of social benefits. Most of his voters are employees and pensioners – the former automatically contribute to the social system and the latter are dependent on it. Concerning the constantly mentioned upcoming demographic crisis, the refugees are considered to be 'economic dead weight'. Quite frequently in these debates the question comes up about why don't we first take care of 'our' people, 'our' sick children or 'our' pensioners who cannot afford medicine, instead of caring for foreigners.

Under these circumstances, Zeman appears to be the perfect advocate for the groups of people constituting his voters. He presents himself as a modest pensioner from the countryside who does not go on expensive holidays and does not buy fancy cars or any other luxuries. In reality, he is quite the opposite - he spends his free time on a boat on one of the Czech lakes, loves traditional pork-based cuisine, and is at his happiest when gifted with a bottle of one of the classic Czech alcohols.⁸

Medium

The Washington Post is not considered a trustworthy medium among Zeman's supporters, and even if they know of its existence, it falls under the category of traditional media - which means that, from

⁸ *'My attitude towards greens is positive through and through. However, I do demand a connecting link called pig to be inserted between me and them.'* <https://www.blesk.cz/clanek/zpravy-udalosti/276878/70-nejlepsich-hlasek-milose-zemana-cesky-prezident-slavi-sedmdesate-narozneniny.html>
Zeman also wrote a book 'My Vysočina' about the beauty of his beloved region Vysočina where he usually spends his holiday.

their perspective, it is politically correct, not objective, even deceitful. Nevertheless, it is an attractive space for them. The fact that Zeman finds listeners abroad and his opinions are repeated by the local media including full quotes lends the president and his works relevance. His supporters get confirmation that the president talks the exact same way in front of them as he does in front of an American journalist from the traditional media; that way he seems genuine, brave etc., as demonstrated by the title of an article published on Parlamentni listy (the most widely read alternative medium in the Czech Republic) - 'There will be uproar. Milos Zeman attacked Muslims in the American press with an unflattering comparison.'

Zeman gave the interview at the presidential residence which used to be the residence of Czech kings - the Prague castle. It is a symbolic location that had to be visited by the 'enemy' journalist. This way, the president sent a message to his supporters that he does not bow down to anyone, and also sent a message to his opponents that even a journalist working for a prestigious newspaper needs to ask for an audience if they wish to speak to the president.

Responses

Supportive responses

Zeman's supporters reacted primarily on Facebook where they shared Czech articles quoting the interview, mostly from various alternative and conspiracy media. Most of the reactions in the comment sections directly under the articles were also positive. Many praised the president for being admirably 'consistent' in his opinions or for the fact that 'he listens to no one'. Zeman was also frequently compared to Vaclav Havel, the first president of the Czech Republic who went to the USA on his first trip in his presidential capacity after the Velvet Revolution. In this context Havel's supporters - the opponents of Zeman - are ridiculed as people who do not mind that their president 'bowed down' to a superpower while criticising Zeman for his cooperation with Russia.

Opposition/Counterspeech

The reactions coming from the consumers of the media typically characterised by higher levels of education and stronger economic status were the exact opposite of the supportive responses - they expressed shame for their president's behaviour, but the authors were also in no way surprised. At the same time, doubts emerged – formulated, among others, by the ex-Czech diplomat Petr Kolář - whether Miloš Zeman would actually go to the White House as he promised in the beginning of the interview. The visit was supposed to take place in April 2017, but it did not.

This time his opinions about Muslims did not provoke as many counter reactions because, as was demonstrated above, the president has already used the comparison to Nazism multiple times. One example of an exception is the commentary published on the website of the Czech public radio, which warned against fearmongering that could [turn the nation of Komensky and Smetana into fanatical rasists](#). In the past scholars of [Islam](#) and other experts reacted to Zeman's analogy between Islam and Nazism. They called it nonsensical, demagogic etc. Subsequently, threatening pamphlets were published about the experts themselves, including the scholar Bohumil Ostřanský. Zeman's opinions were also already oftentimes rejected by the representatives of states with Muslim majorities via the Organisation for Muslim cooperation.

Incidents of Violence or Discrimination

No incidents of violence have been recorded yet in conjunction with the statements discussed above.