

## IMMIGRATION DISCOURSES IN THE CZECH REPUBLIC FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF THE CURRENT REFUGEE CRISIS

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### ABSTRACT

The article presents the results of a preliminary analysis focused on immigration discourses in Czech social media (including selected on-line daily newspapers). The aim of the research was to provide a sociological understanding of the attitudes of the Czechs to the current refugee crisis and to explore the ways how various forms of public opinions have been articulated by Czech social media. Therefore, the text does not deal directly with analysis of immigration policies but with discourses surrounding, producing and forming the current events. The author argues that, at a high level of generalization, it is feasible to analytically distinguish three media/public discourses in the Czech debate on immigration: dominant anti-immigrant discourse, defensive pro-immigrant discourse, and rational-expert discourse.

**Keywords:** immigration, discourse, media, Czech Republic

## GÖÇMEN KRİZİ BAKIŞ AÇISINDAN ÇEK CUMHURİYETİ'NDEKİ GÖÇMENLİK SÖYLEMLERİ

### ÖZ

Makale, Çek sosyal medyasındaki (seçilmiş çevirim içi günlük gazeteler de dahil edilmiştir) göç söylemlerine odaklanarak, bunların ön çözümlerinin sonuçlarını sunmaktadır. Araştırmanın amacı, Çeklerin güncel sığınmacı krizlerine karşı tutumlarına sosyolojik bir anlayış sunmak ve çelişti kamu görüşü biçimlerinin Çek sosyal medyası tarafından nasıl tutarlı bir şekilde ifade edildiğinin yollarını araştırmaktır. Böylece, metin doğrudan göç politikalarının çözümlenmeleriyle ilgilenmemekte ancak, güncel olayları kapsayan, üreten ve şekillendiren söylemleri ele almaktadır. Yazar, yüksek seviyede bir genellemede, Çek göç tartışmalarında üç medya/toplum söylemini analitik olarak ayırt etmenin uygun olacağı fikrini savunmaktadır: dominant göç karşıtı söylem, göçü savunan söylem ve rasyonel-uzman söylemi.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** göçmenlik, söylem, medya, Çek Cumhuriyeti

## 1. Introduction

The current refugee crisis raised the importance of debates about immigration and the future of Europe and the Czech Republic which has partially divided the Czech public opinion into separate camps and with an essential "contribution" of mainstream media caused an outburst of moral panic and anti-refugee hysteria. The gradual emergence and steady rise of anti-immigrant attitudes, social movements and even political parties across Europe have been apparent over the last two decades. The anti-immigrant propaganda, accompanied by a visible wave of Islamophobia, has gained its momentum during the last two years in connection with the refugee crisis. Media representations of asylum seekers coming as refugees from conflict zones or deteriorating states of the Near East, the Middle East and some African countries became a central issue during 2015 amidst claims that Europe was at risk of a biggest flood of refugees since WWII. Theoretical background of the study is anchored in discourse theory and analysis which emphasizes the practical ways of analyzing texts and enables identification of differential nuances among discourses on the hotly-debated issue of immigration in this mostly monocultural country with a small immigrant population.

### 2. Analyzing discourse in theory

Theoretical background of the present study mainly draws on the research conducted by the scholars like Norman Fairclough (1995), Teun Adrianus van Dijk (1995, 2002) and Ruth Wodak (Reisigl & Wodak 2009) who skillfully employ several different approaches, in order to critically analyze the written language, which are known by an umbrella term Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA).

Discourse in general is a discussion - usually of a certain topic. "The notion of 'discourse' refers to groups of statements which structure the way something is thought about, and the way we act on the basis of that thinking" (Riaño & Wastl-Walter 2006). This therefore means that use of the term discourse always refers to an adequate form of language and knowledge. French philosopher Michel Foucault (1972) went in this direction of contemplating the term discourse when he was trying to solve the question of production of knowledge through language. Within the frame of "shift from language to discourse", he considered discourse to be a group of statements and modes of speech which offer a defined range of language means for discussion of a certain topic, wherein the manner of representation of certain knowledge of the topic at the given historical moment is important. Foucault implied a relation between social action and discourse when he stated that all social practices involve meaning and that this meaning influences and forms what we do. Discourse produces objects of knowledge, with nothing meaningful (carrying meaning) existing outside discourse - e.g. things as mere physical objects do not carry meaning - they only do so within discourse (Foucault 1972). Discourse produces knowledge, things themselves do not, including subjects who exist

meaningfully only within discourse that involves them (Hall 2001).

The meaning of the term discourse shall be more clearly illustrated on a concrete example of elements of study of discourse (namely, the example of the contemporary discourse of immigration in Europe):

1.) There are statements on "the immigration question", "the Fort Europe", which provide us with certain knowledge about this "thing" – the object of knowledge.

2.) There are certain rules which prescribe certain modes of speaking about this topic and exclude other ones. The rules determine what is "pronounceable" or "thinkable" of these objects of knowledge at a given moment in history. Rules can be variable, former taboos may be broken. Unpronounceability of certain taboo issues or unpopular statements happens to be influenced by a different discourse of the so-called political correctness although this barrier seems to have been breached lately by a discourse against the political correctness (see speeches of Donald Trump, the US presidential candidate, or the president of the Czech Republic Miloš Zeman). On the part of immigrants, certain statements are not heard often (according to Teun A. van Dijk (2002) "silence" or "omission" concerning certain things is also meaningful) with respect to the fact that they were originally intended to be a sort of reserve forces for the labor market of advanced European countries (France, Germany in the 1960s and the 1970s) or - as Stephen Castles (2000) pointedly puts it - they have served as "the industrial reserve army" (this being a discursive statement itself).

3.) Subjects who personify/embody the discourse ("immigrant", "refugee") have certain features ascribed to them which we expect them to be carriers of - these are once again a means of expression of the way the relevant knowledge was formed at the time. For example, negative definition of the "immigrant" subject in the context of discussion (discourse) somewhere in a restaurant - "they can't speak our language properly and take our jobs from us."

4.) We can see the way how this system of representation of knowledge (discourse) is influenced by power which gives meaning to the embodiment of the "truth" about it.

5.) Social practices within existing institutions serving for dealing with subjects can also be studied.

6.) It is important not to forget about the awareness of social change, that is, the realization that at a point later in history a different competing discourse will emerge to replace the previous one - a new view of the "immigration question".

### **2.1. A note on methodology**

Quantitative opinion polls are able to express how many people from which demographic category answered what or which options they had chosen in a battery of prepared questions. Media (content) analysis tells us about what topics or issues are covered with what intensity or significance in the given

medium. On the other hand, Critical Discourse Analysis is mainly focused on the question how an issue is discussed and how it is being talked about.

The preparation and gathering of data for a dataset, or a corpus (building), has started informally while reading the Internet news and saving the news articles and the comments below them in early spring 2015. The data were collected between May, 2015 and February, 2016 and cannot be considered comprehensive but selective. Since the beginning, the data corpus have been 'naturally' growing into a shape to comprise textual data that appeared on the Internet in Czech language in the Czech domain (.cz) and which were dealing with the topics of "immigration", "migrants", "refugee crisis" in Europe.

The very initial interest emerged from a discursive conflict (a clash of opinions including personal verbal assaults) between two independent online dailies – one may say – between the pro- immigration *Britské listy* ('British Papers') and the anti-immigration *Parlamentní listy* ('Parliamentary Papers'), and, as if using the snow-ball technique, the list of online dailies started getting longer and interconnections more complex. An important feature of online dailies (and blogs), since they form a part of the Web 2.0 social media paradigm, is the existence of comment sections below the published articles and therefore good opportunity for a reader to add her/his freshly forged opinion or give feedback to the author (as known from Facebook or YouTube). Moreover, for a researcher these settings open up an arena of discursive textual data because the comments have mostly a form of dialogue (or more correctly of a multilogue, i.e. they are multivocal). The following text contains the results of analysis and more generalized interpretations whereas direct citations were almost excluded to keep the brevity of this article.

### **3. Immigrant discourses in Czech social media**

Similarly like in almost every issue of public concern in media discourse, two basic opinion groups or 'camps' can be distinguished in the debate about immigration represented by pro-immigration and anti-immigration discourses. The pro-immigration discourse can be seen as a response to the dominant populist anti-immigration discourse which has been effectively silencing the former. This inadequate representation of the pro-immigrant discourse leads to a conviction of some authors (Pospěch 2016) that the existence of two radical camps within the refugee debate is a myth. Czech sociologist Pavel Pospěch argues that while the anti-immigrant discourse represented by "radical nationalist" has prevailed over the "radical multiculturalist" camp in the public debate, the Czech media have kept on reproducing this myth. He compares it to the so-called Balkan discourse.

Danish political scientist and discursive analyst Lene Hansen (2006) explains the Balkan discourse in her study about the Bosnian War in the 1990s and identifies it with the representation repeatedly depicted by the Western media in that period that can be exemplified by an utterance like "someone is fighting in the Balkans again" and "there are no heroes or villains in this conflict." This kind of media discourse worked as a mechanism for avoiding any responsibility of the West, but after the hard evidence about ethnic cleansing and concentration camps appeared, the media had to leave the simplifying Balkan discourse about few warring nations who were just about to "sort out" some old conflict. Pavel Pospěch thinks that similar "Balkan discourse" about two camps with radically opposite opinions has been built by the Czech media in the period of the refugee crisis to foster its own image of providing a balanced coverage and reporting about current events. However, the sociologist is afraid that the situation is, in the time horizon of February 2016, quite different and that the aggression of nationalist extremist has been growing steadily (threats to refugee center workers, an assault against pro-immigration activist). One may ask why.

The problem of the pro-immigration stance is that it has been represented by intellectual elite (scientist, artists) and mostly by open-minded university students, yet by a smaller and rarer group of activists from advocacy non-governmental organizations and with a professional experience in immigration policies. These groups are viewed in the current social atmosphere in the Czech Republic with relatively high suspicion. The creativity of journalists and amateur bloggers spreads quickly among the common populace and becomes a source of labeling in everyday life. The immigration debate, and the discursive standpoints and struggles occurring within it, have brought up several neologisms which, on the one hand, nicely illustrates a Czech sense of humor and on the other hand it presents its rather dark, rude and insensitive dimension. The existence of these new terms that serve to signify the followers of the opposite camps within the framework of the immigration debate also proves survival of the pro-immigration discourse in media.

Thus, the members of the group with a negative stance towards immigration, even against refugees seeking asylum, are labeled within this discursive struggle as "Racists and Xenophobes." In some more polarized cases usually during real-life protests even with more radical signifiers as "Fascists and/or Neo-Nazis", which is in part close to the truth because some people who strongly refuse the acceptance of refugees, or immigrants in general, do so on the ground of racist theories about biological superiority, e. g. members of Workers' Party of Social Justice (Dělnická strana sociální spravedlnosti, DSSS) (Mečiar 2015: 222). Sociologically significant are not the negative attitudes of far-right extremists but their spread amongst the general citizenry and normalization of such oppositional, non-humanist and racist stances. The rest of the question in this discourse seems to be a matter of rhetoric, i. e. giving the same anti-immigrant message

with "politically correct" by covertly xenophobic statements, or "saying it out loud" with overtly racist and ethnic slurs.

The people on the opposite side of this opinion spectrum are considered extremely liberal and regularly accused of being leftists, multiculturalist, and traitors of the Czech nation. The friendliest name given to them by their opponents is the term "Sunny People" (connotation of a non-critical multiculturalist) or "Truth-Lovers" (supporters of Václav Havel and his motto: "Truth and Love will prevail over Lies and Hate.") followed by "Humanists" or "Wannabe Humanists." They are seen as unrealistic potentially dangerous dreamers about a peaceful multicultural society who are not able to see, in the eyes of their opponents, the cruel reality of the present.

In the discussion about two extreme opinions, represented by people who construct two oppositional antagonistic discourses, one may ask "What remains in the middle?" Can these two extremes fade into one another? What has been missing?

The middle-ground, the golden center of any rational debate is the answer to the previous question. As the least interesting for potential reader and the least controversial for journalist to work on this discourse has been underrepresented and rather overlooked in the public debate about immigration and the refugee crisis. The realist/rationalist discourse seems to represent an approach in which the refugee crisis is being considered with "cold head", realist and critical point of view without xenophobic and racist excesses.

The following three subchapters are dedicated to presenting a more detailed description and analysis of the three identified discourses of the current immigrant debate in Czech social media.

### **3.1. Anti-immigration discourse: from xenophobia to open racism**

The opinion nuances within the anti-immigration discourse are quantitatively expressed in the report that is monitoring hate speech in the Czech social media (Zavoral 2015). The author of the report divides the public discourse into three subsections. The first part of debaters in social media (30%) does not have any sense for a detail and does not distinguish between immigrants from Africa and the Near East. The ones in the second section (45%) are able to differentiate between a refugee from a war zone and an economic migrant, although social media analyst Petr Zavoral (2015) critically argues that they might do so only not to be directly labeled as racists. It seems to be the implicit, covert form of racialized discourse. Three quarters of utterances in this discursive formation confirm that these debaters would like to see no foreigners in their country, and in the case of utmost necessity only a war refugee of Christian denomination who arrives with ragged clothes in the first "safe" country and who rather nicely awaits his asylum somewhere in a camp behind barb-wired fences. Only the third, the least represented (25%), part of debaters shows no prejudice or

they seem to be convinced anti-racists. This section of the public debate on immigration has become a source of the discursive formation of the pro-immigration discourse.

The anti-immigration discourse in the Czech Republic carries similar features to debates in other European countries. Sjöberg and Rydin (2008) in their study about discourses of media portrayal of immigrants in Sweden point out the generalizing view of mainstream media that has a great effect on how immigrants are perceived (and how they look at themselves). The media present immigrants as a homogeneous mass that leads to an impression that "immigrants are all the same."

The image of typical refugee consists of the following characteristics: a young man (18-35 years) of Middle-Eastern phenotype looking for fortune and welfare in naïve Europe. The stereotype of a young man knocking on the doors of the European Union caused the never-ending discussion about what the real proportion of men, women, and children has been and what it means to the Europeans, or the Czechs eventually.

The virtually produced and ideal war refugee depicted in the Czech social media should be primarily a woman, a child, or an elderly person. A man in productive age should have a weapon in his hand and struggle for his country (Zavoral 2015). Several questions can be asked in this context. The first question can be posed whether the hypothetical request ("he should fight") can be anthropologically rooted in the Czech auto-stereotype that a man has to fight for his country's freedom like the Czech soldiers who fought against Nazism in the WWII on both the Western and the Eastern front and in the local resistance groups. Without a doubt, all these men (and let us not forget women!) were heroes (heroines), but even in those hard times most of the Czech men stayed at home to take care of their own families. Moreover, in the case of civil war in Syria the second question arises as to which side to fight on, since we are talking about a complicated multilateral conflict.

The following element of the anti-immigrant discourse seems to have emerged out of de-ethnization (of an image) of immigrant. Long before the current refugee crisis, some migration studies scholars (Allievi 2005, Spielhaus 2006) argued that after decades in which immigrants' religion was rather overlooked or considered a private matter, the focus has shifted from ethnic identity of immigrants (e. g. the Turks in Germany) to an emphasis on religious identity. The shift has caused a new process of homogenization of immigrants into the image of Muslims (Mečiar 2014).

The Czech Internet (i.e. social media) saw an eruption of such a "Muslimization" of the refugee debate in the months following January (Charlie Hebdo terrorist attack) and then May 2015 (intensification of a migration flow within the current refugee crisis). The rational element of the discursive event was covered

by a discussion on the relations between religious groups and the secular state and on how far can these groups go in their demands for concessions from side of the state and society. Pavel Barša (Multikulturní centrum Praha 2015), a Czech political scientist, contributes to the discussion about how people who are against the presence of Islam and Muslims on "their" soil are the same people who thought that civil society in the West had already won over the religion in connection to a weakened position of the once-influential Catholic church. He thinks that they are now unpleasantly surprised by the renewal of public presence of religious affairs which they have opportunity to observe in previously or seemingly secularized European societies. Barša explains the phenomenon on an example from France where members of the 1968 generation react in the same irritated manner as the Czechs do. We shall not forget that the roots of the Czech secularized society (59% of atheists) reach deeper than to the Socialist Era of Czechoslovakia (1948-1989) to the beginnings of modernization in the 19th century. The so-called atheization of society (Fiala 2007) does mean that Czechs would not feel a need for spiritual life (Nešpor 2004) they only seem to prefer its non-theistic and non-denominational forms (a strong disbelief in the Catholic Church, respectively religious association and its representatives). What has been just stated may help to understand the negative attitudes of the Czech against any politicization of religious sphere and affairs. For that reason, anti-Islam and, at the same time, anti-immigration social movements similar to Pegida in Germany or the English Defence League in Great Britain (besides regular far-right parties) have emerged also in the Czech Republic (e.g. Czech Defence League (Mrva 2014), Bloc against Islam (Mečiar 2015)).

Besides speculations about the expansion of Islam in Europe, the other elements of the discourse include argumentation that immigration poses a threat to European and national culture(s), the state security, and the safety of women (negative reflection of the so-called Cologne Attacks on New Year's Eve 2015) which leads to criminalization of migrants. However, the official data on crime rate do not support the suspicion of anti-immigration debaters (and of elected politicians in mainstream media) that a crime rate among newcomers is higher than among autochthonous population. But they nonetheless hold the tendency to believe any hoax that appears on the Internet and prefer not to approach the question with critical thinking.

The darkest, one may dare to say neo-totalitarian, aspects of the anti-immigration discourse have been identified in the form dehumanization or reification of refugees and represented by instances of the absolute lack of compassion for the people stricken by the loss of safety and home. The analysis of language used in television reporting of two Czech major TV stations (Tkaczyk, Pospěch & Macek 2015) proves how powerful can be the influence of mainstream media on social media (that is on the representations of what people think when they are hidden under the veil of anonymity sitting behind a laptop).



The dehumanization of refugees in TV coverage has been signified by using metaphors as "the waves of refugees", "masses", "tsunami" (and in speeches of various right-wing politicians even "hordes") which supposed to convey the gravity of situation. In terms of securitization of the migration crisis, military terms as "an invasion", "siege" or "infiltration", further police terms (based on the metaphor of "hunt") as "a capture", "custody" and "security guards" were employed in the television reports. The reification of migrants has been expressed either by referring about them in a passive voice ("they were apprehended by", "they are expected to") or by placing them in a sentence into a position of object and rarely as active agents (subject). In other words, the people are being transformed into things that have to be held, controlled and placed somewhere.

The lack of compassion that has emerged in the Czech social media along overtly racist subtexts is associated with the most negative and nihilistic level of the people ("the Racists") who articulated related utterances within the anti-immigration discourse. The most extreme textual instances contained responses to the news about the loss of human lives (of refugees) – on the Mediterranean Sea or in the Channel Tunnel etc. – that sounded disappointed about the numbers of deceased while wishing for higher casualties. Needless to say that fear and anxiety concerning the future shall not be a justification for such opinions.

This has been an overview of the most striking elements of the anti-immigration discourse which is followed by a brief insight into the pro-immigration discourse.

### **3.2. Pro-immigration (humane) discourse**

Among the positive contributions of the pro-immigration supporters belong the respect for human rights and its defense, and the struggle for the open civil society. Further, they form the critical minority that criticizes even covert forms of xenophobia and racism, and in some cases also filing criminal lawsuit against perpetrators (as hate crimes).

Although these "Sunny People" are described by the greater part of the Czech media – and are thus perceived by other citizens – as naïve humanists or even the traitors of nation, they seem to be the only segment of individuals who have tried to understand the reality of becoming a refugee, have been actively helping them and who see and treat them as just other human being, a person.

The following statement, which pointedly exemplifies the discourse and serves as the critical thorn in the side of many Czechs, comes from a well-known independent Czech journalist and academic Jan Čulík:

In the Czech Republic fervent hatred of refugees has been very widespread, even though very few refugees have actually entered the country. Anti-refugee hysteria is encouraged by politicians, and by the media for political and commercial ends.

(Čulík 2015a)

I must say that I am somehow starting to lose my enthusiasm to spread the good name of Czech society and culture throughout the world when suddenly I find that eighty percent of Czechs are behaving as the worst racist scum. Normalization nihilism and post-communist selfishness sprouted in recent days in a really poisonous, revolting flower.

(Čulík 2015b)

The critical opponents have argued that the pro-immigration supporters (and debaters on social media) make a mistake by accentuating the common human dimension and experience and therefore are not able or willing to see and discuss the potential risks of immigration. Nonetheless, they have formed so far the only barrier against dehumanizing racist discourse both, in virtual (articles, blog contributions, comments) and physical-social reality (protests, volunteering, dialogues and arguments). The *raison d'être* for the pro-immigration discourse is linked to relentless reminding that we have moral responsibility to help those in need because this virtue lies at the base of human civilization.

### 3.3. Realist-expert discourse

The realist-expert discourse, within the debate about immigration and the current refugee crisis, bears more realistic point of view and is voiced largely, although not exclusively, by a community of experts. It may be summed up by the following statement: "Immigrants have been and will be arriving every day, we have to find a way how to accommodate those who are refugees." The discourse appears to have two genres - the expert genre and the one of laymen. In the beginning of the debate on the refugee crisis, Czech politicians had tried to present themselves as experts, in doing which they mostly failed, and their unpreparedness was revealed in its absurdity. By the time some of them improved their knowledge about this social issue, discussed it with experts on migration and have visited, or claim to have visited, refugee centers.

The expert genre contains mostly explanatory statements, offers more information about immigration, and does not use offensive strategies against opposing opinions. Migrants are treated and spoken of as humans with their own rights and obligations. A clear distinction is made between refugees and economic migrants although in practice it may be sometimes hard and time-consuming to determine an immigrant status correctly and fairly. The economic migrants who are not granted asylum must return, or be returned, to the country of origin, although it is admitted within this discourse that the state does not possess effective mechanisms for their repatriation. In this case, the failure of the state to deport migrant is made a virtue out of necessity by presenting it as an opportunity for selection of suitable candidates for granting residence permit (skilled, educated, culturally close immigrants in the active economic age – "cultural closeness" is quite frequent elements in the Czech debate on immigration).

Rationalization of the immigration debate is constructed by the expert discourse though explanatory statements arguing that the Czech Republic is not main final destination for many migrants and the country does not lie in the main path of the migration flow. In spite of the fact that the current refugee crisis comprises the largest migration movement in Europe since the end of the WWII and the country has received highest number of asylum applications in the last 17 years, the number of migrants who wished to stay in the Czech Republic and who have a chance of being granted asylum is a very small fraction of the whole current immigration in Europe. The big concern is being voiced over the personal safety of employees and volunteers in non-governmental organization that provide legal advice and integration courses to refugees since the overtly negative attitudes of local inhabitants sometimes gain a form of verbal assaults which seems to pose a risk of turning into hostilities of more physical kind.

Laymen (i.e. non-experts who are not dealing with immigration professionally) following the realist stream of the immigration debate usually re/interpret contents of the expert genre. Their positive role rests upon spreading correct information about the issue, and formulation of constructive criticism that is oriented towards searching for solutions within the legal framework of the state.

#### **4. Conclusion**

The preliminary analysis attempted to develop a model of three discourses on the immigration debate in the Czech social media and on-line dailies. The author's intention for writing this article was based on the necessity to examine and understand the spread of anti-refugee hysteria and social selfishness in the Czech population which is nurtured by manifest non-scrupulousness of contemporary media. In the search for sensation "that sells" they have failed in fulfilling the role of a watchdog of civil society and have become an essential source of moral panic and irrationality. Rational and critical voices are not as sound as the ones motivated by xenophobia.

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