

# Identity, Activism and Hatred: Hate Speech against Migrants on Facebook in the Czech Republic in 2015<sup>1</sup>

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**Identita, aktivismus a nenávisť: Nenávistné projevy proti migrantům na Facebooku v České republice v roce 2015**

## Extended abstract:

The increased influx of refugees and migrants to the EU in 2015 has been followed by a noticeable presence of online hate speech against migrants in many countries across Europe. The article presents the results of a study of hate speech proliferation on Facebook in the Czech Republic during the summer of 2015. Its goal is to identify the producers of hate speech and determine their social background, explore the main channels of hate speech proliferation, determine the specific groups of migrants targeted by hate speech, put the hate speech in the context of online political communication, and discuss the role of media and politicians in the process of hate speech proliferation.

With regard to the works of Castells, Skocpol or Bennett and Segerberg, online hate speech can be perceived as an extreme variety of new, rapidly evolving modes of political communication as such. Social and political activism has been shifting from membership-based organizations and parties towards flexible movements and initiatives with strong emphasis on the logic of identity politics. People may or may not engage in hate speech production as lone independent actors, but they still perceive their actions as part of larger collective efforts. When we focus on hate speech as a form of civic activism or networking, new interesting patterns can emerge.

The study is based on a mixed-method analysis; computer-assisted data collection via the Social Insider software tool was further triangulated by random sampling and subsequent manual coding and analysis of selected Facebook posts, comments and other content. The question of reception and influence of hate speech was largely omitted from the analysis, due both to the research methods chosen and to the inherently cyclical nature of social network communication. Hate speech itself was identified according to a custom-made definition based on various existing legal definitions and scholarly perspectives of legal and media science.

The results of the analysis indicate that the wave of hate speech against migrants was aggravated both intentionally and coincidentally by the combined forces of disparate Facebook users, extremist groups' propaganda, news media and the design of the social network itself. As for the social background of frequent producers of hate speech, there was a strong prevalence of middle-aged and middle-class males, and a significant under-representation of both elderly and young Facebook users. The majority of the hate speech content was produced and spread in small-scale communication exchanges, i.e. under articles posted on individual user profiles etc. The communication activities of larger, well-organized populist groups, political parties or communities were visibly present, but they did not play a significant part in the hate speech production itself – although their possible involvement in agenda setting cannot be underestimated. All the datasets indicated that a vast majority of the hate speech in the given time period was aimed either against migrants in general or Muslims, while these two groups often overlapped.

The role of mass media and of the design of the Facebook platform in the entire process should be discussed further. It became apparent that the producers of hate speech themselves seldom created any substantial shared content such as articles or videos. To the contrary, many hateful comments occurred through sharing and subsequent discussion of articles produced by online news outlets. As the Czech mass media are defined by transformation, uncertainty, layoffs and disintegration of professional routines, this creates a dangerous mix that could lead to further proliferation of hate speech. The same can be said about the platform design of Facebook and other social networks – their balkanizing and polarizing effects on public communication are already well described by scholars such as Conover, Pariser, Morozov and many others, and the present study only further supports their findings and theories.

**Keywords:** hate speech, Facebook, Czech Republic, migrants, refugees, data analysis

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One of the consequences of the advent of social networking sites (SNS) is easy production and proliferation of various forms of hate speech. On every platform from Twitter to Facebook to YouTube, we can find a diversity of hateful content targeting various ethnicities and religions, women, LGBT people and other groups. The phenomenon of online hate speech has already been researched in many contexts [Citron, Norton 2011; Calvert 1997] and strategies to curb hate speech have been developed, with mixed results [Dutton et al. 2011; Kakungulu-Mayambala 2008]. However, the causes and dynamics of hate speech production are not constant and there is a significant need for continued research, especially in regional and topical contexts where the previous body of research is incomplete or entirely non-existent.

In the Czech Republic, signs of growing amount of online hate speech can be traced back to 2011 at least. Five years ago, the prevalent target of online hate speech was the local Roma population [ECRI 2015]. Since then, various factors including rising popularity of SNS, transformation of political scene and the refugee crisis in Europe have further aggravated the issue of online hate speech. During 2015, the social media and internet communication platforms in general in Czech Republic were hit by a significant wave of hate speech against foreigners and migrants, to some extent related to the ongoing influx of refugees and migrants to Europe (but not to the Czech Republic, which was neither a transit nor a target country for refugees, and thus faced no notable problems whatsoever). Based on a mixed-method analysis of a vast amount of data collected from Czech SNS and other online communication platforms between June and September 2015, this article presents a detailed overview of various aspects of this situation. The following chapters present a basic theoretical review of the field of hate speech research and the research methods applied. Then we describe the basic demographic background and behavior of producers of hate speech on SNS in the Czech Republic, the basic channels of hate speech proliferation, and the role of media and other actors in this process. The final chapter deals with the possible socio-political causes of the phenomenon.

## **State of local research. Political communication and activism on social networks**

As pointed above, hate speech against migrants on Facebook is quite a recent phenomenon in the Czech Republic. No substantial body of research exists so far, the existing analyses and commentaries on the issue are mostly produced by NGOs and similar actors<sup>2</sup>, lacking theoretical and methodological background of rigorous academic research. Given this state of affairs, it is necessary to conceptualize the issue of hate speech and formulate a suitable theoretical framework so that proper research questions and methods can be defined.

Hate speech as a social phenomenon should be analyzed in a suitable context. If someone engages in hate speech, he has a motivation to do so and also a set of opinions and social behaviors, all of which influences his other social activities. That is to say, hate speech, at least in the present context of

anti-migrant sentiment in Czech Republic, is an issue of political communication and is perceived as such in this analysis.

Social and political activism has been shifting from membership-based organizations and parties towards fluid, flexible, ad-hoc movements and initiatives with strong emphasis on the logic of identity politics [Skocpol 2003: 221]. "There is no politics-in-general; it is always 'my politics,' as processed by my brain's neural patterns and enacted through the decisions that articulate my emotions and my cognitive capabilities, communicated through my feelings. This is the framework of human action in which the political process operates," says Manuel Castells in regard to this fact [Castells 2013: 150]. The various features of SNS communication allow the users to quickly create and enlarge issue-based communities, then quickly disband them and regroup elsewhere. Members of such communities do not share many common features, or more precisely, they derive their identification with the group from within themselves, not from perceived attachment to any external groups or values. The logic of collective action is replaced by the logic of connective action [Bennett, Segerberg 2012]. When we apply these concepts to the topic of hate speech, the implications are quite interesting.

First and foremost, hate speech against any group or individual have a high uniting potential. Many different frustrations, fears and grievances can be answered by hate speech against a chosen scapegoat, without further identification with other hate speech producers. Furthermore, hate speech could be perceived as a specific form of civic activism. Various groups of hate speech producers on Facebook can provide not only like-minded audience, but also motivation, appreciation and other incentives and rewards commonly associated with activism or party politics. In contrast to the traditional mass media environment, a given SNS message may often come from a friend or one's acquaintance. "Mobile-phone networks become trust networks, and the content transmitted through them gives rise to empathy in the mental processing of the message. From mobile-phone networks and networks of trust emerge networks of resistance prompting mobilization against an identified target" [Castells 2013: 348]. In the environment of online social networks, the hateful message, and especially various hoaxes and misinformation, may become convincing and attractive.

The issue of hatred towards migrants, refugees and other associated groups is also related to other cleavages in contemporary Czech society – it goes hand-in-hand with distrust certain politicians, the European Union, intellectual elites, multiculturalism etc., and also with support for conservative values, right-wing extremism etc. That is to say, hate speech against migrants is a highly complex issue with a potential for strong political engagement of many people from various strata of society. While producing hate speech, one can identify himself with a broad range of ideas and communities and perform a multi-layered act of political participation. The present analysis thus considers hate speech as not just a linguistic phenomenon or an individual form of behavior, but rather as a form of political participation and activism akin to other movements which grow and thrive on online social networks. The data presented below confirms that this approach is valid and leads to a better understanding of the problem.

## Methodology, definitions, research questions

As for a brief preliminary examination, the main subject of this analysis is hate speech against migrants on Facebook in the Czech Republic. Among the main reasons for this subject definition is the position of Facebook as the most prevalent social network service in the Czech Republic, on one side, and the unquestionable rise of hate speech against migrants during 2015 in the Czech Republic, on the other side. The target of most of the hate speech could be best described as “migrants”. The term “foreigners” would be imprecise since some foreigners living in the Czech Republic are not targeted by hate speech (i.e. expats from the US or Western Europe), and the terms “refugees” or even “Muslims” would not work either, since most of the hate speech producers do not differentiate between refugees and migrants, or between various ethnicities and religions of migrants from Africa and the Middle East.

One of the most obvious, but often overlooked issues of hate speech research is the very definition of hate speech. For this analysis, I decided to define hate speech in rather broad terms, as any message which publicly threatens or humiliates a group of people defined by their race, ethnicity or religion, calls for persecution or violent action against such groups of people, or spreads hatred or contempt against them. I am aware of the fact that this definition heavily depends on subjective consideration of the researcher. However, in the current situation, it is still a viable approach, as explained hereinafter.

A definition of hate speech for research purposes cannot be based on current laws, since most of the hate speech producers have a basic grasp of the legal framework in the Czech Republic and know how to avoid criminal offences for acts such as open calls for violence towards specific individuals (but even such messages occurred in the dataset). This is related to another inherent feature of hate speech and a related methodological obstacle. Hate speech is mostly contextual. Furthermore, a dataset collected by automated keyword search would not cover hateful content not mentioning any of the selected keywords. For example, a contextually clearly hateful statement such as “We need to exterminate those people” posted in a discussion about migrants will not be included in the dataset, while the same statement mentioning “Syrians” or “Africans” will be. In this respect, the results of this analysis are significantly limited. At the same time, it means that the collected data probably constitute only a small part of the total amount of hateful content on Czech Facebook and we can safely assume that the reality is even more troublesome.

I decided to apply this broad definition of hate speech also because it could help me grasp the phenomenon of hate speech in all of its complexity. The advocates of free speech could argue that an appropriate definition of hate speech covers only direct attacks against specific persons, while broad attacks against large, abstract groups of people are less harmful and their prohibition would be a restriction of the freedom of speech. However, Alex Brown points out that these two sorts of hate speech lead to two different legal approaches. The first category (direct attacks) is regulated by civil law because it is primarily a grudge between two individuals. The second category is subject to criminal punishment because these acts are primarily harmful to the entire society [Brown 2015].

Clay Calvert describes the same dichotomy, only through the lens of communication theory. In the first case, we can apply to hate speech the transmission model of communication (these is a message from a source to an audience). In the second case, we can use the ritual model of communication – in the long term, the attacks against entire groups of people support negative attitudes against these groups, create a discriminatory environment and curtail their fundamental liberties and social participation [Calvert 1997].

We also have to consider the seriousness of the hate speech in terms of real impact on the victims. We could also argue that the most important cases of hate speech are those with a direct, immediate and obvious impact (physical violence, verbal attacks, clearly unlawful discrimination). However, in most cases, there are less visible effects such as psychological trauma and lack of meaningful participation in society [Gelber, McNamara 2015]. These effects could be linked to the aforementioned Brown’s second category of hate speech (broad attacks against abstract groups of people) and Calvert’s ritual model of hate speech proliferation.

Working with the basic linear model of communication, this analysis strives to find out who the main producers of hate speech against migrants in the Czech Republic are, how the hateful content is spread on Facebook, what the main narratives and themes of the hate speech are, and how the communication activities of mass media, politicians and other opinion leaders on Facebook influence the process of proliferation of hate speech.

It is important to determine the basic demographic attributes of the hate speech producers such as gender, age, education or occupation. Studies dealing with the subject of hate speech often focus on detailed analysis of content, without any deeper insight into the personalities and lifestyles of the producers, which does not benefit further application of research results in possible educational and awareness-raising efforts [Zavoral 2015].

The identification of common narratives and themes in the hate speech content was deemed important due to the preliminary research. Soon, it became apparent that the public discourse was being significantly influenced by various manipulative messages and hoaxes. This type of content often deals with particular topics such as criminality of migrants, threat of terrorism, cultural differences etc. We could thus deduce that hate speech is based on fear of those particular issues that were perceived by hate speech producers as problematic. However, this deduction remained largely unconfirmed – in a major part of the data analyzed, there were no elaborate narratives to be found, except for general hatred and distrust to various migrant groups. It can be assumed that the hoaxes based on specific narratives are passively perceived as a “proof” of hate speech producers’ fears, but their very content was not replicated in further hateful expressions. Thus, the analysis of such narratives could be (also for the sake of brevity) omitted from this article.

The question of reception and influence of the hate speech content was largely omitted from this analysis, both due to the research methods chosen and to the inherently cyclical nature of SNS communication whereby people are both producers and receivers of the message.

Because of various technical and logistical constraints (most notably the numerous privacy settings of Facebook and its lack of open API for the development of research tools), a mixed-methods analysis was performed. The collection and initial analysis of datasets was performed by the Social Insider analytics tool<sup>3</sup>, which is able to browse and download posts, comments and other communication content from most of the publicly visible pages and profiles on Facebook in the Czech Republic. The datasets were collected and sorted by five different groups of keywords. The first category, “Islam”, contained all communication content dealing with the specific topics of Islam, Muslims, Islamic terrorism etc.<sup>4</sup> The second category, “Migration”, contained expressions dealing with the general issues of migration and refugees.<sup>5</sup> The third category, “Africa”, comprised of specific mentions of migrants and people from all parts of Africa (keywords regarding ethnicities and nationalities, racial slurs etc.) The fourth category comprised of content regarding significant groups of migrants in the Czech Republic other than refugees and migrants from Africa and the Middle East, i.e. Ukrainians and the Vietnamese. Regarding the amount of data amassed, it soon became apparent that the latter two categories were relatively insignificant, since there was virtually no hate speech against those groups of migrants, or (in case of the “Africa” category) the producers of hate speech did not differentiate between various ethnicities, nationalities and religions of migrants and refugees from Africa and the Middle East. Thus, only the first two categories of content were further analyzed.

After the initial computer-assisted analysis, a detailed analysis of publicly visible Facebook pages, profiles, posts and comments of the hate speech producers was performed manually. The first step was random sampling. A random number between 0.0 and 1.0 was assigned to each post/comment etc., these numbered posts/comments were sorted in ascending order and the size of the dataset was cut down to a statistically relevant sample. The size of the random sample was determined with a view to have a 95% confidence level and a 5% margin of error in each case (with respect to the size of original datasets; the size of each random sample was usually in the range of 300–380 posts/comments).

All posts/comments in the random samples were then coded. The coding was supposed to be performed by five coders of various ethnic and gender background. Inter-coder reliability was tested by comparison of their independent coding of a test sample of Facebook comments from the Migration dataset, which were sorted into the categories of hateful, negative, positive, neutral and other, based on the aforementioned definition of hate speech. The results among four coders differed by less than 10% and were thus deemed appropriate; one coder’s results differed by a significant margin, so the study continued with the four most reliable coders. The analysis of the Facebook profiles (age/gender determination etc.) was performed in the same way. The results were further triangulated by comparison to other available studies and datasets.

## Who are the haters?

Hate speech on Facebook is not a devious, well-planned conspiracy. Considering both the common sense and the data analyzed, it is obvious that hateful content is not produced and

spread solely by some well-organized clique or organization, but by a larger and much more vaguely defined part of the general population. At the same time, extremist groups, politicians and other opinion leaders do play a significant role – it is only that their part in the process of hate speech proliferation is considerably smaller than it may appear at first sight.

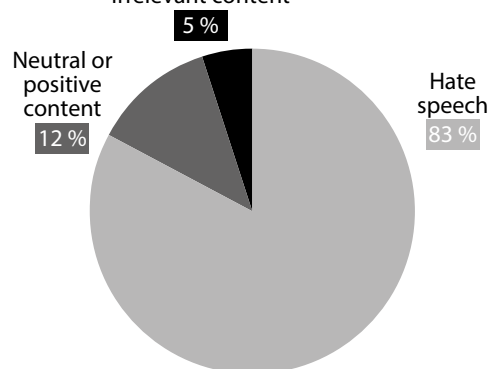
Who are the “haters”, then? In the “Islam” and “Migration” datasets, 49 000 and 88 000 Facebook posts and comments were collected during July and August of 2015. The overlap between both datasets was about 30–40%, clearly indicating that a significant part of the hate speech producers did perceive Muslims and migrants as a somehow connected group. It is also necessary to point out that this could be influenced by some actors who try to use the fear of migrants to propagate islamophobia or vice versa.

Within the Islam dataset, more than 10 000 people and groups posted at least once in the period of time analyzed. However, only 222 authors published more than 10 comments and posts. Out of these most prolific authors, over 80% (184) published hateful content. Out of those 184 user profiles, only 147 can be attributed to single private persons (the rest were page profiles). This ratio of approx. 80% of hateful comments to 20% neutral, positive or irrelevant ones (with respect the given topic) was observed in most of the analyzed datasets, with only a minor shifts in one or the other direction. There were also no significant differences between the groups of most prolific authors (more than 10 published comments or posts) and random samples of all authors –in terms of both prevalence of hateful content (about 60–80% of hateful content to 40–20% of non-hateful content, with a more even balance in the random sample) and other aspects (gender, education etc.)

Regarding the gender of both the most prolific group and the random sample of -hate speech producers, it appears that most of them are males, with a male-to-female ratio of approx. 65% to 35% (both in the Islam and the Migration datasets).

In the Migration category, there were approx. 88 000 Facebook posts/comments published in the time period analyzed. Out of the random representative sample (N = 377) of authors, 236 published hateful or very negative posts/comments towards the given group (migrants in general), 120 published

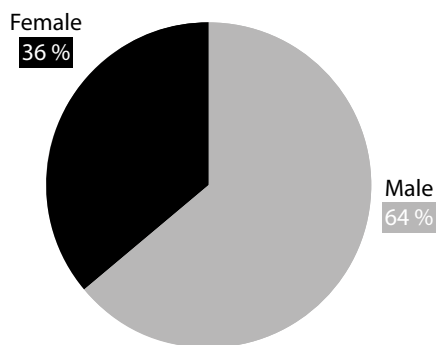
**Graph 1. Presence of hate speech in Facebook posts of the most prolific authors – the “Islam” category**  
Irrelevant content



**Note:** The most prolific authors are those who published at least 10 Facebook posts or comments containing the keywords for the selected category (“Islam” in this case) in the time period analyzed.

**Source:** Own research (N = 138)

**Graph 2. Gender structure of the most prolific hate speech producers – the “Islam” category**



**Note:** In this case, the most prolific authors are those who published at least 10 Facebook posts or comments containing the keywords for the selected category (“Islam” in this case) in the time period analyzed and their posts/comments were identified as hate speech. Out of 184 members of the original group, it was possible to determine gender in 138 cases (the rest were either page profiles or profiles with gender-neutral nicknames without any possibility of further identification).

**Source:** Own research (N = 138)

neutral or irrelevant content and 21 published positive content. Regarding the gender structure of hate speech producers in this category, it was possible to determine the gender of 212 individuals. 142 were male and 70 female.

One of the most interesting features is the average age of the hate speech producers. Further determination or approximation of age was possible for 97 people from the group of the most prolific hate speech producers in the Islam category. Almost none of the authors were younger than 25 or older than 60 years (only 2 users under 25 and 2 users over 60 – however, especially the upper age limit could be skewed due to the generally lower numbers of elderly Facebook users). Almost all of them fell into the 35–45 age cohort (44 people) or the group of 45–60 years old (31 people). In general, the average hate speech producer can be accurately described as a middle-aged male between 35 and 50 years old.<sup>6</sup>

Education level was determined only in a minority of cases (29 persons). Such quantity is too low to make any substantial judgments. However, it is still interesting to point out that these indicative numbers suggest that almost all of the more

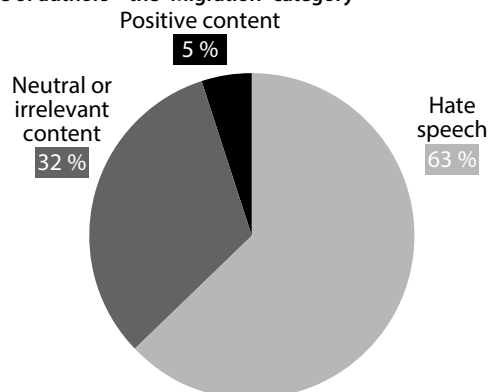
prolific hate speech producers have completed secondary education, while a significant number of university graduates were found as well. Almost all of them (when explicitly shared) had a degree in engineering, economics, IT and such. The average number of friends among all the analyzed samples (both, most prolific authors and random samples) was around 120–160. Although one may presume that the most prolific authors (i.e. the potential opinion leaders) would have more Facebook friends than the average sample of hate speech producers, this analysis did not confirm such a theory.

Regarding the geographical distribution of hate speech producers, no significant conclusion could be reached. Judging by the publicly available profile information, it seemed that the authors were distributed across the Czech Republic analogically to the general population. However, this result may be skewed due to lack of available open data, various modes of user behavior and issues with Facebook location settings.

When compared with the overall statistics of all Facebook users in the Czech Republic (as presented by the Facebook Audience Insights tool), it is obvious that there was an unusually high number of men in our sample (the entire Czech Facebook audience is divided evenly, with 51% being women and 49% men) and its members were older than the average Czech user (about 24% of the entire Czech Facebook audience falls into the 18–25 age cohort).<sup>7</sup>

What conclusion could be made of the analysis of the demographical background of both the most prolific and the randomly selected producers of hate speech? First of all, we can tell who is not a typical hate speech producer on Facebook. There were just a few students or elderly people. Both elites and socially marginalized people were under-represented as well.<sup>8</sup> The resulting situation could be described as a triumph of the average, ordinary man. It is also necessary to point out that the absolute majority of hate speech producers on Facebook have few or no memories of the Communist regime in Czechoslovakia and their opinions and behavioral patterns were formed long after the revolution of 1989. Although an influence of the authoritarian regime on the population’s behavior and opinions could not be disproved, it was at best indirect. However, there is an urgent need to further research the communication patterns of elderly people (i.e. the age group that was directly

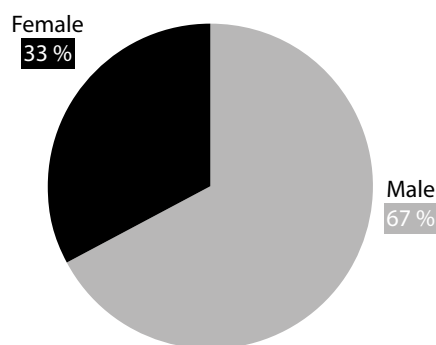
**Graph 3. Presence of hate speech in Facebook posts of a random sample of authors – the “Migration” category**



**Note:** The random sample was set as 377 authors out of the 88 000 posts/comments in the given dataset collected during the time period analyzed.

**Source:** Own research (N = 377)

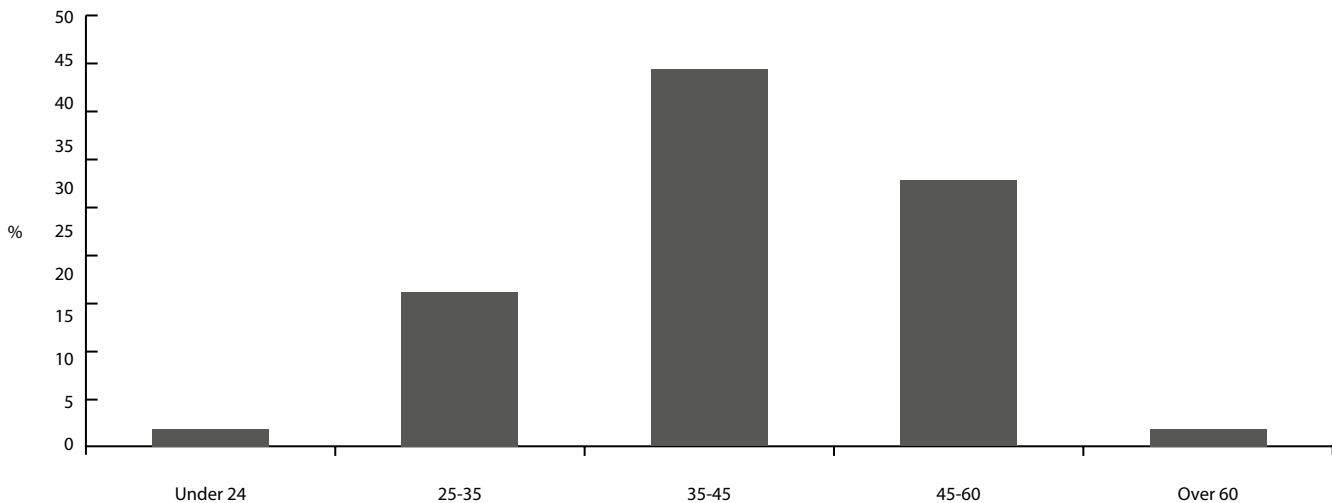
**Graph 4. Gender structure of a random sample of hate speech producers – the “Migration” category**



**Note:** Out of the random sample of 377 authors in the Migration category, there were 236 hate speech producers. It was possible to determine the gender of 212 individuals.

**Source:** Own research (N = 212)

Graph 5. Age of prolific hate speech producers – the “Islam” category



**Note:** In this case, the most prolific authors are those who published at least 10 Facebook posts or comments containing the keywords for the selected category (“Islam” in this case) in the time period analyzed and their posts/comments were identified as hate speech. Out of the 184 members of the original group, it was possible to determine age in 97 cases.

**Source:** Own research (N = 97)

affected by living under the authoritarian regime), who may not be active on Facebook but could frequently use other digital channels such as e-mail.

## Places and channels – where do they hate?

Just as any other communication platform, Facebook (and SNS in general) is a complex environment with an uneven structure – some pages and users are more influential than others, some types of messages spread faster, communities and users behave in a multitude of ways. One of the key research questions was to determine where (i.e. through which pages and profiles) and how the hateful messages are created, shared and amplified. As always, a precise answer would require a separate study and even that would be insufficient – the SNS environments are especially fluid and communication schemes may change frequently. Nevertheless, we can sketch possible scenarios, based on the available data, that could serve as preliminary hypotheses for further research.

When looking at the datasets collected, it appears that the majority of hate speech content is produced and spread in small, seemingly private (at least in users’ perception, not according to the Facebook settings)<sup>9</sup> communication exchanges; under articles posted on individual user profiles; etc. One could presume that the pages of various extremist movements such as the *Islám v České republice nechceme* (IVČRN)<sup>10</sup> play a significant role in hate speech proliferation, but in relative terms, this does not appear to be the case. The role of these pages is more likely that of an opinion leader and agenda setter – they bring various hateful narratives into the public discourse, but the largest part of the proliferation effort is done by unorganized individual users, motivated by their own opinions and convictions.

This can be confirmed by the results of an analysis of all the datasets combined – in absolute terms, the influential extremist pages such as IVČRN were quite prolific authors of comments and posts (dozens of comments and posts every month), but in relative terms, their contributions were only a

drop in the sea of hateful content on Facebook in the Czech Republic. Different reach of posts of various Facebook profiles and accounts should be taken in consideration (judging by the Facebook Insights tool, the monthly audience reach of pages such as IVČRN has to be in the hundreds of thousands of people), but this factor has to be omitted due to the technological limitations of the tool used for this analysis. Even then, it remains obvious that extremist groups and politicians should not be considered as the single cause of hate speech proliferation on Czech Facebook.

## Media and hate speech

The role of mass media in the process of induction and aggravation of hate speech cannot be overlooked. One of the most interesting findings of this analysis is the fact that the hate speech producers themselves seldom create any substantial shared content such as articles or videos. In contrast, many hateful comments occur through sharing and subsequent discussion of articles produced by online news outlets, blogs or TV channels. Seemingly neutral online news articles with headlines such as “Number of Syrian refugees in the EU is rising” are often shared with hateful intent and create a basis for further hateful discussion among friends or like-minded group members.

Although a detailed analysis of this phenomenon would require another article, Garth Jowett’s take on the dynamics of propaganda is worth mentioning. According to his analysis, for a propagandist such as an extremist group or politician, it is much more efficient to push his messages through respected mass media and not \*through his own branded communication channels, which could be naturally perceived as biased and untrustworthy [Jowett, O’Donnell 2012: 25–26]. It is not necessary to convince every single member of the public that a certain ethnicity or a religion constitutes a problem – one just has to convince the journalists that it is worth discussing. In a local media environment defined by transformation, uncertainty, frequent layoffs and disintegration of professional

routines [Balčytienė et al. 2015], such a tactic often proves to be very effective.

A brief observation shows that when there were any URL links in the Facebook posts analyzed (also containing hate speech), they mostly did not link to any fringe groups' or alternative news sites, but to mainstream mass media portals such as iDnes.cz or Novinky.cz (dozens of shares every month). The only exception to this rule was the clickbait-heavy alternative news portal Parlamentní listy, which was the most popular in terms of "hateful shares" (hundreds of shares every month). What that means for the journalists is up for debate. Although no one can prevent a possible hateful misuse of his otherwise harmless article or TV report, there are certain things that can be suggested – for example, tabloid-style headlines or securitization of the refugee issues in news articles appear to have the potential to proliferate and incite hate speech.

## The roots of hate. Platform design

If we want to look for the root causes of the existence of hate speech, we should probably delve into a complex socio-political analysis; however, that is not the goal of this article. The proliferation of hate speech against migrants on Facebook certainly has many causes, including various individual and social frustrations, insecurities, undeniable structural issues and geopolitical threats, and psychological phenomena. Out of many possible points of view, there is one that should be discussed in detail here. One of the causes of quick aggregation and spreading of hateful content on Facebook is the design of the platform itself. Many authors [Morozov 2012; Pariser 2011] have already pointed out various dangerous flaws in the platform design, mostly motivated by commercial interests.

The fact that Facebook strives to keep the users on the site as long as possible by using various tricks and optimizations, in order to maximize advertising profits, is not explicitly harmful or dangerous, as long as the system is used for purposes that are not primarily political. However, when politics, civic activism and public discussion come into play, things get more complicated. Social networks tend to create highly homogeneous communities of like-minded people, who then further radicalize their opinions [Liao, Fu 2013; Conover et al. 2012; Yardi, Boyd 2010]. Furthermore, highly emotional messages tend to go viral more often than tamer content [Berger, Milkman 2012]. On a very basic level, this could be illustrated by the frequent use of the so-called clickbait headlines.<sup>11</sup>

Some of the Facebook features may also launch a spiral of silence [Noelle-Neumann 1974], or, as we may say in this context, a spiral of hate. The network constantly suggests popular pages or articles which the user might like. This seemingly innocent feature can have a grave impact if hate speech is involved. In the time period analyzed, hate speech against migrants was quite prominent on Czech Facebook. In such situation, if a user likes any article or page dealing with migration issues, the network could (and often did) propose that the user might like a highly viral article or page – obviously, with a hateful or at least strongly partisan view on the given issue. Thus, even positive educational activities of various actors designed to combat hate speech potentially increase the visibility of viral hateful content – all caused by the questionable platform design.

## Political communication against or with hate speech?

From the point of view presented in the previous chapter, the process of creation and proliferation of hate speech and extremist views may appear to be driven only by some mysterious cabal of software coders and omnipotent machines. The role of inadequate platform design and its ineffective human management is important, but other, more sociocentric perspectives have to be considered as well. People do not use SNS and other digital communication platforms in a homogenous and uniform manner. Their patterns of use are dependent on many factors, especially education, age, membership of various social groups, family status etc. The way people use SNS also depends on their political opinions and party affiliations. Right-wing users (when compared to ones of leftist orientation) consider their communication activities as more political, are more active, create dense and more interconnected communities, and express opinions that are somehow more homogenous [Conover et al. 2012; O'Callaghan et al. 2013].

The left-right distinction in Czech politics is different from the US context and the current debate regarding migration is not clearly split along the standard left-right cleavage. However, when we compared the aforementioned camp of hate speech proliferators and their liberal counterparts, we could observe similar dynamics as in the works above.

This basic distinction could be seen even in the simple prevalence of hate speech producers among the most prolific actors in Czech Facebook discussions about migration, refugees and Islam. When compared to the random sample of all authors of the content gathered, the prevalence of hate speech producers in the most prolific group was higher (see Chapter "Who are the haters?"). Another visible specific of the right-wing users' behavior is their open identification with their political opinions. Although no relevant statistics have been produced in the Czech Republic so far, a simple observation can suggest that unlike their liberal counterparts, the members of the anti-migration camp often exhibit various forms of identification throughout their profile and cover photos (nationalist motives, memes or logos of favorite political parties) and thus increase their visibility even further.

Discussing this process, we have to consider the implications for online communication by political parties. It comes as no surprise that various parties and politicians try to exploit certain features of SNS communication and start populist campaigns with a strong viral potential. The most striking example of this tactic is probably the Facebook communication of Czech MP Tomio Okamura, whose strong anti-Islamic and anti-migration rhetoric won him a large base of followers on Facebook.<sup>12</sup> However, regarding the datasets analyzed, it seems that the activities of various politicians do not work as direct incitement of hate speech, but more as agenda setting.

## Conclusion

During the summer of 2015, a few notable phenomena related to the issues of hate speech and political communication in general could be observed on Facebook in the Czech Republic. Regarding the sources of hate speech against migrants, it is

apparent that various opinion leaders, populist politicians and extremist movements worked as agenda setters and inspiration sources for their audience, but the largest part of the hateful content on Facebook was produced by ordinary users in small interactions. It is also apparent that most of the hate speech producers published such content only occasionally and the group of extremely prolific hate speech producers was rather small (hundreds compared to dozens of thousands users). The same finding could be applied to various channels of hate speech proliferation – large and well-known extremist Facebook pages play only a minor part and most of the hateful discussion takes place on individual user profiles.

Automatic data collection combined with manual qualitative analysis allows us to find out more about the demographical profile of the hate speech producers. In the given timeframe, most of them were middle-aged men with secondary education and came from a lower-middle class background. Apparently, hate speech against migrants on Facebook is not a prevalent issue among social elites or socially excluded people – if they happen to produce hate speech as well, they probably do so elsewhere.

Considering both local and global political and media discourse in the summer of 2015, it comes as no surprise that most of the hate speech was targeted against refugees, migrants and Muslims, with no clear distinction between those groups. The anti-Islamic agenda fuels anti-migration sentiments and vice versa. To further explore the roots and causes of hate speech, it is necessary to continue studying the very content of hateful messages and identify the most common tropes and opinions therein.

If we focus solely on the environment of social networks, there are a few notable issues that further aggravate the problem of hate speech proliferation. The design of Facebook gives a new dynamic to hate speech. Attractive and highly emotional hateful posts quickly go viral, seemingly neutral news reports are put into new contexts and give rise to additional hateful comments. Due to the features of the Facebook network, like-minded communities of hate speech producers are easily established and expanded.

That being said, we cannot perceive hate speech on Facebook as a problem caused solely by ill-advised platform design. The network, after all, is created by and consists of people. There is an obvious symbiotic relation between mass media and the Facebook audience, one which pushes the journalist to a more emotional, fearmongering and tabloid style of work. The same could be said of politicians, although the exact relations between politicians and the Facebook audience should be a topic of another research study. Then there is the hate speech itself. The analysis of the datasets collected proved that only a small part of the hate speech content consists of explicit slurs and violent verbal attacks that could be easily removed by algorithmic detection. Most of it is more-or-less contextual and many users are smart enough to publish hateful content without explicitly violating the existing laws in the Czech Republic. To combat this issue, broad cooperation of service providers such as Facebook, politicians, law enforcement authorities, journalists and other actors is needed.

Due to its methodological and technical limitations, this analysis was only able to present an observation of basic patterns and correlations. There is a strong need for further qualitative research using a wide array of methods, so that the causal relations of hate speech could be properly understood and answered. Regarding the data analyzed, it could be confirmed that Facebook in Czech Republic was struck by a strong wave of anti-migrant and anti-Islamic hate speech in the summer of 2015. Although the exact causes of this remain to be determined – especially in a country with a very low number of recent migrants and refugees – the factors which allowed this wave to rise are known. The side effects of mass media transformation, the specific features of Facebook communication and a general rise of the logic of connective action in the public discourse were the most prominent among them. As none of these issues will be solved anytime soon, the need for further research on hate speech in online social networks is now greater than ever.



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## poznámky

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- <sup>2</sup> The best example of ongoing, yet limited research on this topic are regular studies done by the Hate Free Culture project [Zavoral 2015].
- <sup>3</sup> For a more detailed description, see <http://www.socialinsider.cz/>
- <sup>4</sup> Keywords such as: *džihádista; muslim; Arab; mohamedán; machometán; musulman; islámista; Arabáč; Arabák; korán; teror; terorista; muslimové; Arabové; muslimská komunita; muslimák; muslimáci; Arabáci; islamofil; islamofilie; islamismus; islamizace; proislámský; muslimská propaganda; islám migrace; islám uprchlík; islám imigrace; islám azyl; šaría; ručníkář*; in various combinations and search parameters.
- <sup>5</sup> Keywords such as: *migrace; imigrace; uprchlický tábor; uprchlíci; uprchlík; přijímací středisko; pobytové středisko zařízení; azylové středisko zařízení; záchytné zařízení pro cizince; přistěhovalec; imigrant; cizinec migrant; azylant; azyl; národnostní menšina; běženeč; nelegální pobyt; neregulární pobyt; cizinecká policie; nelegál; ekonomický migrant; finanční podpora uprchlíkům; přistěhovalectví; utečenci; utečenec uzavření hranic; neregulární migrant; žádost azyl*; in various combinations and search parameters.
- <sup>6</sup> The age of the Facebook users analyzed was determined either directly (when publicly stated in the Facebook profile) or indirectly (by approximating the age from the profile picture, wherever possible). The same applies to gender. The only way of determining education level was when it was shared publicly, so the statistical relevancy of this finding is not sufficient and it should be perceived only as a superficial insight.
- <sup>7</sup> For more data about Facebook audiences in the Czech Republic, see <http://www.facebook.com/ads/audience-insights>
- <sup>8</sup> However, it is beyond the scope of this article to explore the reasons for the lower participation of these groups in hate speech proliferation – there could be a variety of factors, most notably different communication habits and low number of social media users in certain social groups.
- <sup>9</sup> This phenomenon is worth of a separate case study – user behavior is especially important here, since most of the users probably have a very vague idea of the complex privacy settings on Facebook – although all of the conversations and information exchanges researched were publicly visible, in most cases the user obviously did not perceive them as such, and instead used the standard tropes and modes of private one-to-one conversation, or one within a closed group of friends.
- <sup>10</sup> “We do not want Islam in the Czech Republic”, commonly abbreviated as IVČRN. An influential Islamophobic movement established in 2009 as a Facebook discussion group, related to various extreme right actors at both local and international levels, such as the English Defence League [Mrva 2014; Goodwin 2013]. It has been mentioned regularly in the national reports on extremism published by the Department of Security Policy of the Czech Interior Ministry [MVČR 2015].
- <sup>11</sup> During the period analyzed, an interesting phenomenon could be observed – in many cases, hate speech was proliferated in discussions about news articles with neutral and informative content, but with very emotional, often misleading headlines suggesting a threat of refugees or migrants. Although this cannot be proved here, we could suspect that online journalists frequently use such headlines to boost the number of visits at their websites.
- <sup>12</sup> More than 232 000 fans in January 2016.

## Abstrakt:

V roce 2015 se na internetu v České republice zvedla vlna nenávistných projevů proti migrantům, zejména muslimského původu. Tento článek prezentuje výsledky výzkumu nenávistných projevů vůči migrantům a uprchlíkům na Facebooku v České republice v létě 2015. Za pomoci kombinované metody analýzy využívající automatický sběr dat a následnou manuální triangulaci výsledků bylo možné odpovědět na některé základní otázky o procesu vytváření a šíření nenávistných projevů na Facebooku. Je zřejmé, že vlna nenávistných projevů proti migrantům v roce 2015 byla cíleně i nezamýšleně podpořena společnými aktivitami různých uživatelů Facebooku (především mužů ve středním věku příslušejících ke střední střídě), propagandistickými aktivitami extremistických skupin, zpravodajstvím masmédií a také designem samotné komunikační platformy.