



Büro Budapest

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HateFree Culture

HateFree Culture is a three year project (from 2014 to 2017) by the Agency for Social Inclusion one of the departments of The Government of the Czech Republic (funded: 80% EEA Grants, 20% The Czech Government). The Purpose of HateFree Culture is mostly to react to hateful manifestations and statements toward various groups of people – both online and offline. The Project tries to use all kinds of innovative approaches to transfer information and connect with many different groups and individuals. Since its beginning, the project aims to create a community of strong communication channels comprised of young people that will address increasingly more poignant topics and try to balance very heated discussions about them. It is the first initiative of its kind and it successfully uses modern communication assets and techniques that serve to connect many social actors around a controversial topic. This initiative, which is supported by the Government, was able to reach out to its young target audience, create attractive content and successfully develop a community that has spread across groups and institutions in the Czech Republic.

Social Networks

Social networks are the Focal point of the project are, especially Facebook ([HateFree Culture's](#) Facebook page has currently around 36 000 fans), which the project uses not only for sharing information about co-existence and positive examples but also as a unique (and actually the only) moderated platform for discussion of its kind in the Czech Republic. Administrators of the Facebook page are present nearly 24 hours a day, they moderate discussions, respond to tens or hundreds of comments daily and they search for information for the users. The project

simultaneously tries to communicate with people in a light-hearted, sometimes even comical approach, especially in communication with young people, who are the project's target audience. Facebook is a powerful tool for sharing important information, like debunking hoaxes about certain groups of people (Roma, Muslims, refugees...). We try to create and use attractive content and through that communicate important ideas and information. This content helps us to attract and keep the attention of young people and then be able to present them more important information. We have made a series of photo campaigns, created comics, memes and gifs. We also create a series of videos. Whether they are the recordings of artistic performances, flash mobs, or videos about HateFree zones. Our most popular video, that got the attention of all the media in the country, was a social experiment. It brought positive emotions into a debate about accepting refugees. It showed that even if online discussion is very edgy and aggressive, when confronted face to face with refugees, people would behave differently. This video has over one million views.

HateFree Art

Besides a conventional advertising campaign and communicating with the Facebook community we try to implement a number of controversial topics into public discourse in a non-violent way and allow for the opportunity of the broader public to take part in this. Because these topics are often emotional, we communicate a lot of them through art. We announced an artistic open call in cooperation with art gallery DOX and received 600 artistic pieces. 15 of them were picked as 2D projects, 10 performances and 7 videos. These are being shown in the public spaces of regional cities and the 2D art as a posters. The general public, which may not use social networks or go to an artistic institution, are then presented with our project's topics in a conventional space. Artistic performances are recorded and then spread over internet as a viral content with emphasis on the regions where they were done, so the inhabitants of that region would receive information about the topic and project. In 2015 we also announced a music competition for artists for a HateFree Song. We received almost 100 submissions. The two best will have music videos produced, which will then be premiered on the main Czech music television channel (in first half of 2016). We also work with Ben Cristovao, an artist popular with teenagers. He will make a music video for the project in 2016. We also specialise

in specific art forms. We announced an open call for poets together with the Festival of Poetry. The winning poems are going to be printed on posters and placed in regional cities.

Another very popular venue are called „HateFree Stages“ - a stand-up comedy evening shows about racism, xenophobia and co-existence. We try to connect these topics to almost absurd forms – or in the form of a regular Open Breakfast, where people of different religions, cultures and sexual orientations eat and talk together. The Large HateFree? Exhibition was opened in the Dox art gallery at the end of January. It showcases art from more than 20 Czech and foreign artists reacting to topics of xenophobia hate violence and coexistence. It got enough attention that Most of Czech media reported on it.

HateFree Zone

HateFree Zone is a network of places in the Czech Republic that joined with the idea of life without violence and hate. At this moment there are more than 100 of them and they are made up of cafes, clubs, theatres, galleries, gyms, stadiums, shops, churches and others. It is rather declarative brand by which the owner makes everyone know that in his place/business everyone is welcome regardless of their origin, sexual orientation, religion or affiliation to a certain group. It's also a guarantee that in the case of violence, it will secure its visitors or customers. These places also serve as a sort of connection for HateFree with people in regions throughout the country. We try to organize activities like exhibits, discussions, movie screenings and the like. Another brand affiliation is HateFree Fest. It is a declarative brand for festivals that guarantee visitors the same certainties as HateFree zones. So far there were 20 HateFree Fests around the Czech Republic (examples including Prague Pride, Khamoro, Refufest, Budějovický Majáles, Letiště, Dny Jeruzaléma and others). We also have our part in creating a program of festivals and increasingly we provide HateFree photo booths, in which people photograph themselves with thematic word balloons (which react to hateful comments on the internet, negative stereotypes et cetera.)

Debunking hoaxes

One of the main activities of the project is done by necessity. Systematically debunking hoaxes and fact-checking certain news reports, rumours and gossip concerning different groups. We cooperate with certain institutions, experts, Government and Police Departments, who provide us with necessary information and help to debunk myths and disinformation. At this moment we also work together with certain media that debunk hoaxes to directly share with us and to inform public about them. We ourselves also try to indulge the public and we create guides for common internet users to help them distinguish fake information from the factual. Users are also more and more frequently asking us directly about some news or to inform us about questionable material. . So far we have debunked about 60 hoaxes. Users are becoming more interested in debunking. Since we started this activity, we have recorded about 40 000 individual visits to our website monthly.

Nation-Wide Media Campaigns

So far we have managed to do two large media campaigns on social networks, radio and TV. The first was „Hate doesn't suit you“ and its purpose was to get the attention of young people and bring them to our social networks. Because appearance is very important for most young people, we decided to make campaign with a simple idea – and that is that hate doesn't make you look good. The TV spot was filled with a viral photo campaign of more than 80 famous and not so famous Czech personalities from different backgrounds and places with hateful expressions. The public can then create similar photos thanks to our application on our web site. The second media campaign was called „We're in it together“. It attracted the attention of mainstream Czech media. Its main point was in a TV spot with real people who have to suffered hateful comments over the internet. We recorded and photographed them in real life everyday situations and put the hateful comments to be seen there with them. In the photo campaign we made a portrait of 40 well known and normal people in their natural habitat, in a positive situation and put one of the hateful comments there with them. It was the first time that Czech celebrities showed that even they have to deal with hate, threats and that hate on the internet doesn't concern only minorities, but everyone.

Hate Speech Targeted at Roma People

One of our main projects was against hate speech targeted at Roma people. At least until the Czech public shifted its focus on Muslims and refugees.

The majority of our population have a very long standing problem with this phenomenon and its roots can be found throughout our history. For many decades, the main medium on which hate towards Roma people was processed and distributed was urban myths, gossip, and more recently online hoaxes.

Even during our country's First Republic (1918-1938) Roma people were called "gypsies", but back then this was not perceived as an offensive word. However there was still clearly anti-Roma laws put into effect. Villages and towns were autonomous in some degree and for example prohibited access to Roma people. This period even with these regressive laws are seen today by some parts of Czech society as something of a "golden age".

Some people would think that the era of socialism would make the situation for Roma people somewhat better. Actually, it was the opposite. Almost all Roma children were sent to special segregated schools; Roma women were sterilized (mostly in the east region of Slovakia). Social exclusion became one of the most wide spread instruments of Communist regime. Most of Czech gypsies were unfortunately viciously murdered by Nazi occupiers and collaborators and the Communist regime, faithful to the idea of brutal social engineering, transferred many Roma people from Slovakia to the e territory of Czech and Moravia for construction projects and put them newly built pre-fabricated housing estates accommodations. Torn out of their traditional way of life and put under enormous social engineering pressure, Roma people were socially excluded, without access to education and forced to adapt to survive in such harsh conditions.

There were some hopes for improving the situation after the Velvet Revolution. However they were not fulfilled. Instead of systematic progress and an effort to help out Roma people and break the circle of social exclusion, they became the target of populist politicians. Because of their unfavourable socio-economic status and exclusion, Roma people became targets for newly risen extreme right groups, the gambling lobby and drug dealers. Many young Roma people turned to criminal careers like pick-pocketing, drug dealing or gambling and were immediately hated by the white majority.

The essential part of hate speech against Roma people is the idea of parasitism. The idea that Roma equals a “leeching” of the social welfare system is so rooted in Czech modern folklore, that it became a self-spreading and self-functioning phenomena. Roma are the number one enemy of the self-claimed “decent people”.

Hoaxes, gossip and myths are really rampant in Czech society. Many people believe, that Roma get medicine for free, that they are given good housing for free by the government and that they have lower sentences and punishment for violent crime. Sometimes these myths are even self-contradictory. It is even considered humorous in social justice and anti-hate speech movements. For example many people can hold simultaneously two kind of contradictory beliefs. They say that Roma people are illiterate, yet they are smart in some wicked way that they are able to cheat the state in terms of welfare.

Or the idea, that literally no Roma people have jobs. Yet still they are the worst workers.

The basis for hate speech should now be clear. But how does it manifest in public space? Well, the fascinating invention of internet can give us insight into the minds of people who are part of hate speech dissemination. Or I should rather say insight into their roles, for many people find the anonymous dimension of the internet quite fit for having tough guy roles.

A few years back Facebook was full of groups and pages named for example “Gypsies to gas!” or “Exterminate the black filth!” and such. Posts and comments were one of the examples of how low can people get in an online environment.

For anyone living in the 21st century it can't be any surprise that the internet and social networks are not pleasant places when we get on to topic of minorities, social justice and hate speech.

What is most interesting is the fact that we clearly have a suspicion that such an atmosphere on the internet has led many politicians to the conclusion, that they can clearly participate in this and claim votes based on anti-Roma sentiment.

Politicians like Tomio Okamura and Otto Chaloupka didn't hold themselves back when they released many anti-Roma statements in media and they can be considered as one of the influential persons that pour fuel onto the whole hate-speech issue against Roma people.

Their predecessor was politician Miroslav Sládek who practically made his whole political career on Roma issues. One of his most famous lines, one that almost became folk sense is: "Roma people should be criminally responsible since their birth, for that is their first crime."

Politicians like Okamura relied heavily on anti-Roma sentiment, but as all across Europe, Roma had to step aside and make space for new public enemy, Muslims. But that doesn't mean that the anti-Rome sentiment got in any way weaker.

Yet there is maybe some sort of principle to be seen in this. Roma people are afraid that when hate for Muslims will pass (and it will), the focus will return to them. We in HateFree Culture are trying to fight against anti-Roma hate-speech.

The situation in Czech Republic is however still much better than Slovakia and for example Hungary. For now Czech democracy has proven that it is strong enough to withstand pressure from populistic and extreme right-wing parties like the Workers Party or Okamura's Dawn. It seems that hate-speech against Roma has become so commonplace for people and with such predictability that they don't consider it a political topic.

They simply don't elect parties that are solely based on this anti-Roma bandwagon, because they think that being anti-Roma is "normal" thing, not a political attribute.

There are good sides and bad sides of this, as with any other thing. Hate speech and attitude against the Roma people become so common and part of everyday life, that people are no longer rallied to political acts against Roma. Parties based on anti-Roma sentiment bore the general public , because they don't offer anything else than they consider "normal. There is a certain saying in Czech Republic, and that is that we are "all talk and no action". It is generally perceived as a negative trait but in this sense, it may have positive spin. It is kind of good that people keep to words and do mostly no physical harm against Roma people. Yet the downside is that it also applies to people who claim that they will try to solve the problem with social

exclusion. Overall it could be said that situation in Czech Republic is in some sense better than in other countries.

Anti-Roma speech did not carry extreme right-wing groups into parliament like in Hungary or Slovakia. It is an everyday part of life which is unfortunate yet it stripped hate-speech from its political rallying power. But the situation of Roma people is getting better. Thanks to campaigns like HateFree Culture many young people see through the urban myths and lies that cloud the true situation and identity of Roma people. Young Roma artists, mostly musicians are getting their ground in mainstream Czech media and overall the atmosphere is becoming somewhat more kind and informed.

People are slowly realising that offensive statements and name calling are leading nowhere. The internet gave hate speech new ground to exist on but it also did the same for anti-hate speech campaigns. Yet we need to be on alert. Roma were mostly replaced now by Muslims and refugees and what is future going to bring us still remains shady and obscure. People are now overall more sensitive to hate-speech but it may be just temporary.

We at HateFree Culture try to get Roma people's voice in the media. We are trying to lift up positive examples and to demolish old myths about the Roma community. And so far it is working. However there is a lot of work in front of us. Hate-speech is slowly receding with the older generation as their myths and their gullibility to misinformation goes with them.

The future, so far, looks kind of promising. But we should not rest or falter now. It only takes few fabricated tales to make it boil again. But through examining anti-Roma claims and tales and debunking them in an analytical way, we can prove that this sense of obscurantism where hate-speech grows has no place in a rational and democratic society.