

Beat The Ignorance: Learning About Immigration

Background

The Czech Republic has been a sovereign, democratic state for more than two decades. While Czech citizens have social and political freedoms, most civil initiatives and organizations remain suppressed by Czech societal norms. Since the Velvet Revolution, many Czechs have resisted organized campaigns, demonstrations, and rallies, especially those in public spaces, as they were compulsory under the former communist regime. Recently, however, a significant proportion of the Czech population has organized themselves in response to the current refugee crisis.

In November 2015, “We Do Not Want Islam in the Czech Republic,” (WDNWICR) a social movement founded on anti-Islamic rhetoric, organized a rally in the historic center of Prague. The participants represented the demographics of the Czech Republic: politicians of the Czech far right stood alongside members of the working and middle classes; degrees of education varied from high school diplomas to Ph.Ds. Martin Konvicka, an associate professor of biology at the University of South Bohemia, took the podium. Konvicka, known for his anti-Islamic statements, such as “As the future winners of the elections, we will, my dear Muslims, grind you into a meat-bone flour” and “If it comes to the worst, concentration camps for Muslims will luckily be established, not unfortunately,” was accompanied by Milos Zeman, president of the Czech Republic. Zeman, the foremost political figure in the country, was lending his support to the “WDNWICR” movement and their anti-Islamic doctrine.¹

Mission and Demonstration of Need

This project seeks to contextualize the current refugee crisis for the Czech population through a documentary highlighting former refugees living in the Czech Republic. We aim to educate the Czech people about the current refugee crisis, while combating sentiments similar to those expressed by the “WDNWICR” movement and select members of the Czech government that are held throughout the country.

Recent public opinion surveys by the Czech Republic Academy of Sciences display the need for immediate action. Only two percent of the Czech population believes that the Czech Republic should accept refugees and provide means of assimilation. Additionally, over 70 percent of the population is completely against accepting any refugees from the Middle East and Northern Africa, and 79 percent of the population responded “strongly against” or “likely against” the refugee quotas suggested by the European Union.²

The Project

This project will address the general Czech population, with a focus on high school students and teachers. It will culminate in a documentary that focuses on the story of Nilob Nahib, Afghan refugee who came to the Czech Republic. We believe that, by telling the story of Nilob and her family that assimilated successfully into Czech society, the general population will understand better with the current refugee crisis. We will screen the documentary at Impact Hub Prague, Brno, and Ostrava. The screenings will be followed by a discussion with Nilob, select members of PANT, and us, the students who made the documentary. Additionally, we will prepare an exhibition on the topic of migration that will present the historical phenomena of migration, its causes, variations, advantages, disadvantages, and dangers. This transferrable exhibit will be in all Impact Hubs for the documentary screenings, but will also be moved to different frequently attended locations in Prague throughout the summer.

¹ Josef Kopecky, *Bylo to za hranou* (That Is Too Much). November 2015. Online access: zpravy.idnes.cz

² Martin Buchtik, press release, June 2015. Online access: cvvm.soc.cas.cz

Additionally, because the current refugee crisis is not taught in the Czech educational system, as part of our project, we will create a set of worksheets that will address both the topic of migration more broadly, as well as the specificities of the current refugee crisis in Europe. These worksheets will be distributed to schools throughout the Czech Republic, and will be accompanied by a DVD copy of the documentary. PANT will use their long-term involvement with high schools across the Czech Republic to distribute materials to at least 32 high schools that participate annually in their activities already, and will oversee rotation of the transferable exhibition to at least 24 of them throughout the 2016 - 2017 school year.

About PANT

PANT is a non-profit civil society group that focuses on modern history and human rights. In 2010, they launched an educational portal modernidejiny.cz ("modernhistory.cz"), which offers over 2,000 methodological papers, presentations, historical sources, mini studies, audiovisual testimonies, and 27 documentaries made by PANT. As of today, the website is used by 90% of high school teachers in the Czech Republic. Additionally, PANT organizes historic conferences at high schools, and workshops for teachers. Thanks to their expertise and connections, we will be able to successfully target high school student population and guarantee methodic quality and utility of project's outcomes.

Expected Outcome and Sustainability of the Project

All our outcomes focus on enhancing participant's critical thinking, and aim at avoiding tempting for simplistic explanations and conclusions. Showing the complexity of the topic of migration and refugees, including the problems of developing countries, and the possibilities and principles of development cooperation will achieve those goals. We estimate that at least 3,800 high school students will take part in interacting with the worksheets and exhibition (120 students per school with rotating exhibition), plus many more will have access to the DVD and accompanying materials. We estimate an attendance of 200 people per Impact Hub screening, plus additional viewers of the exhibition stationed in Prague.

The topic of immigration and refugee crisis will become even more acute in the upcoming months as another significant influx of refugees is expected. The European Union as a whole and individual member states will continue negotiations about the strategy of dealing with the crisis. Due to the rapidly changing situation, there will be the need to continue working on additional materials and adjusting to the binding decisions that will be made by EU, or the Czech Republic. Both project coordinators are dedicated to continue working with PANT on this important topic even after the summer, and \$1,000 of requested funding is dedicated to follow up material that would be sufficient to cover expenses for two other complete editions of worksheets.

Applicant Profiles:

Matthew McCarthy '17 is a History major with a concentration in Central and Eastern European Studies at Grinnell College. Last summer, he served as the Digital Humanities and New Media Technologies Intern for the Prison Public Memory Project, an organization that uses public history, art, and new media technologies to engage communities in conversation about the complex roles of prisons in society. Matt is currently off-campus in Prague, Czech Republic, where he is continuing his study of Czech language and interning at the ASPEN Institute Prague, a Central European non-ideological space for policy innovation and inclusive dialogue.

Michaela Gelnarová '18 is an intended International Relations and Communication major at Grinnell College. She is currently working for the Office of Communication and Technology Services at Grinnell College, thanks to which she gained advanced knowledge and experience working with audiovisual materials and editing programs. Michaela serves on the Peace and Conflict Studies committee, and is the president of the International Student Organization. She is also has experience with creating a curriculum for Czech language classes.