

Czech russophobia and Putin's fifth column in Prague

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Anti-Russian hatred is a weapon that serves the current Russian government - and at the same time strips us of our humanity. The recent antics of the Czech art group Ztohoven are the latest example of this.

The art group Ztohoven has produced stickers with an original motif: a turd in the colours of the Russian flag. It distributes them in its anarcho-capitalist centre Parallel Polis and says that the stickers are to be posted "preferably in places with a high concentration of Rashists". The misnomer is meant to signify the association of Russians with unacceptable attitudes, and also to enforce this definition. As if it were possible to distinguish the political views of people in any particular place of residence. But above all, the sticker leaves no room for differentiation: it defames the Russian flag, not Putin. And it adds the inscription "Россияне, бегите домой, прекратите убивать!" (Russians, run home, stop killing!). The sticker thus not only accuses all Russians of war and insults their flag, but also calls to expel all Russian Federation citizens from the Czech Republic and holds them all responsible for the killing committed by the Russian army.

Obfuscation

There was a time when it was possible to admire the Ztohoven group for its public art and happenings. Unfortunately, over time, the reasons for admiration faded. It is hard to know whether the hanging of red underpants on the flagpole at Prague Castle [official residence of the Czech President] a few years ago is their most decadent event, or maybe that title goes to some of their public philosophising. Doesn't matter. In recent days the group has discovered its new low.

Far beyond the point of embarrassment is the moment when aggression is directed towards a minority that is already in a difficult situation, humiliating and attacking them with a mixture of vulgarity and moral violence.

The Ztohoven group's obnoxiousness was clear enough from their (let's face it, a little too obnoxious) name [A Hundred Shits]. But as long as unconventional behaviour attacks our conformism and prejudices, we are able to forgive it. However, when nonconformists attack conformism with similar roundaboutness and aggression, we feel rather embarrassed. The red underpants on the Prague Castle flagpole did not attack the stereotypes in our heads, they merely ventilated our stereotypes and degraded them further. But their latest initiative goes far beyond embarrassment. Aggression is being directed towards a minority already in a difficult situation, humiliating and attacking them with a mixture of vulgarity and moral violence. In short, the Ztohoven group has moved from non-conformist wrestling with power and the stereotypes within ourselves, towards the promotion of the bluntest stereotypes - and from these to bullying an unpopular minority and stirring up pogromist sentiments.

Collective guilt

[There are very probably Russian](#) (and not only Russian) businessmen living in the Czech Republic who are on good terms with Putin's government or directly profiting from the war. Mapping their activities and possibly confronting them in a targeted way would be an action in the style of the old Ztohoven - and would require a lot of ingenuity and energy. Spraying a defamatory sticker all over Czechia is much easier.

"Russians are responsible for their government," repeat the people who hand out stickers at the anarcho-capitalist center Parallel Polis. These Czechs are convinced that *they* can disconnect themselves from "their" government as much as they want, but they insist that Russians in Prague are responsible for the Russian government. Have the members of the Ztohoven collective drawn some responsibility from Czechia's involvement in the bombing of Yugoslavia or the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq? What would they do if someone held them responsible for the actions of former President Zeman and former Premier Babiš? They would answer something like "I voted against them, and wore red underpants as a protest..."

Many Russians protested against the war and ended up in jail, just like the thousands of Belarussians who tried to overthrow their undemocratic government through non-violent protest a few years ago. Today, some Belarussians are sabotaging the railways and risking their lives, just like some Russians. Surely the members of Ztohoven should understand the enormous power that the Internet and surveillance capitalism have given to authoritarian governments. What exactly are the Russians in Czechia supposed to do to live up to their "responsibility" in the eyes of hateful Czech kibitzers? Many Czech Russians are doing more than Ztohoven can imagine to oppose the Putin regime, but the insulting call to leave Czechia applies to them indiscriminately.

If I were Vladimir Putin

If I were Vladimir Putin, I would send Ztohoven some money to print as many of their red-white-blue turd stickers as possible. Because not only is such hate-mongering the greatest gift to him in terms of his short-term tactics. It is also in the best line with his ideology.

There is often talk of Putin's 'fifth column' in the Czech Republic. The term is often used quite broadly and pejoratively. Its meaning has shifted quite a bit from active helpers (the original meaning of the term derived from the 1936 siege of Madrid by fascist rebels, when the "fifth column" was supposed to be army sympathizers inside a city besieged by four rebel columns). It now often refers to any doubter. But let's ask the question, who is really helping Putin in today's Czech Republic?

In terms of tactics, Putin is treating the Russians like a gang leader. He is letting them know that they are doomed to belong to his gang - because the outside world hates them, and even if they try to break away from it, it will do them no good. Hate that is not directed at Putin and the war, but at Russians indiscriminately, is therefore what Putin needs. It is literally the water of life for him. In this sense, the Ztohoven group are Putin's fifth column; by stirring up this indiscriminate hatred, they are doing the current ruler of Moscow an invaluable service.

But it's not just about immediate benefits and tactics, it's also about values and ideas. If Putin believes in anything, it is nationalism in its darkest form: the notion that people are the property of their nation and its state. To the anarcho-capitalists of the Ztohoven group, such an idea should be abhorrent, the antithesis of what they believe. But they apply it in relation to Czech Russians! The actions of all Russians should be defined by Putin's guilt, they have no right to escape it. For them there is to be no "parallel polis", they are prisoners of their state and Putin's Ztohoven guards are herding them back to Putin's prison.

The Russians and our humanity

Russians are victims of Putin's dictatorship and they are victims of this war. Certainly, the nature of their sacrifice is different from that of the Ukrainians, but still we cannot fail to see it. [Historian Timothy Snyder](#) summed it up quite well in his testimony to the United Nations. In the same testimony, Snyder rejected the notion of 'Russophobia' as a tool of Russian propaganda. He is certainly right that this is a term that Russian propaganda likes to use often. But we should have the courage of our conjectures: the greatest ally of propaganda is not a lie, but a half-truth. Russian propaganda can work with the image of anti-Russian hatred (it is quite indifferent what exactly we call it) also because this hatred exists and spreads. Snyder is right that we should not draw an equivalence between Russophobia and the anti-Ukrainian dehumanizing hatred of Putin's current propagandists - the latter is undoubtedly worse today. But it is also true that we should hold ourselves to somewhat higher standards than we hold Putin's propagandists to.

We will continue to live with Russia. It is vitally important for us, and even more so for its neighbours such as the Ukrainians, that hatred should diminish in the future so that peace and dialogue can be imagined. We cannot ask for easy forgiveness from Ukrainians on whom and on whose loved ones bombs are dropped. Various attitudes, including hatred, are perfectly understandable among them, including hatred that is directed at unfairly selected targets.

Something different applies to Ukrainian state representatives: it is understandable that Ukrainians turn their hostility even towards Russian culture, but when a Ukrainian ambassador to the Czech Republic links the massacre of Ukrainian civilians to Dostoevsky, it is beyond what we should expect from a diplomat.

Bombs are not dropped on us and our loved ones, so we have a different kind of responsibility: not to give in to hatred and to contribute in an empathetic way to peace when it is possible.

Medieval Christians tried to harness the demon of war with the doctrine of just war. In addition to a number of assumptions, such as just cause for war or legitimate authority, which have made their way into contemporary law of war, they emphasized another thing we have forgotten: the just state of mind. It was important to them not to cultivate hostility beyond a certain point, not to let hostility consume one's own soul. We don't need to believe in God to know that the soul needs to be cared for. We are not only harming Russian civilians, including those who have emigrated and are speaking out against Putin in significant numbers, by our willingness to hate unjustly, to spread justified resentment against Putin and his generals or chauvinist propagandists. We are hurting ourselves and our humanity.

Defamation of a nation

The Czech Criminal Code contains the offense of 'defamation of a nation, race, ethnic or other group of persons'. It is brief:

(1) Whoever publicly defames

(a) a nation, its language, a race or an ethnic group, or

(b) a group of persons because of their real or supposed race, membership of an ethnic group, nationality, political opinion, religion or because they are actually or supposedly without religion, shall be punished by imprisonment for up to two years.

(2) The offender shall be punished by imprisonment for up to three years if he commits the act referred to in paragraph (1)

a) with at least two persons...

It is hard to say what the latest action of the Ztohoven group is other than a defamation of “a nation”, namely the Russian nation. The Czech authorities today are very proactive if someone approves of the actions of an aggressor. In defending this proactivity, which is understandable even though it often touches on freedom of speech, it is often argued that in addition to the unacceptability of war aggression, there is also a kind of moral hygiene of society: it is unacceptable to tolerate the approval of criminal war and war crimes. To a certain extent, one can agree. But not to tolerate hatred of the Ukrainians who were attacked today is not a very strong proof of moral courage. Czech society will show real moral courage if it is able not to tolerate the spread of unjust group hatred against Russians.

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