How Russia Depicts the Czech Republic  
Contextual content analysis based on big data from the Internet  
26 August 2016

Introduction

This unique study was created on the initiative of Semantic Visions, who is the global leader in automatic understanding of vast information from the Internet.

We decided to write this study, because we are not careless with respect to the foreign-policy position of the Czech Republic. We took the approach of experts who have a deep understanding of processes of information impact in business and the society as a whole. After all, we are the single commercial organization capable of conducting an analysis of this extent.

In our analysis, we focus on the time period of the last two and a half years, which is the time of rapid deterioration of relationships between EU a NATO on one hand and the Russian Federation on the other. For the time period from January 2014 to July 2016, we have analyzed 68 Million Russian articles from 24 thousand sources. Because of serious findings and the need to place the study into a global context, we have additionally analyzed 373 Million English articles from 253 thousand sources (for the same time period).

In the process of developing the study, we applied the most sophisticated methods of semantic contextual analysis – computer algorithms working in an unbiased manner and thus preventing the effect of political or other preferences of the evaluators. It is thus safe to say that the presented result charts objectively reflect the media picture of reality and serve as hard data for the following interpretation by analysts.

The original goal of our study was to discover the key topics which are related to the Czech Republic in the Russian media landscape, and to assign relevance to the discovered topics. One of the reasons why we were interested in achieving this goal was the fact that in one of our previous studies we have confirmed the hypothesis that Russian media are generally subject to the policy dictated by Kremlin.

Additionally, we wanted to answer the question of how much different is the media profile of the Czech Republic from the profiles of her two highest representatives - the President and the Prime Minister. We also wanted to see whether there are any substantial differences in the media profiles of the two top representatives. It is a known fact that Miloš Zeman (Czech President) shows considerable sympathies to Russian interests. On contrary, Bohuslav Sobotka (Czech Prime Minister) defends the positions of the Czech Government and, in a broader context, the positions of EU and NATO.

Given the noticeable findings, we dived deeper into the matter and tried to answer the question whether or not the Czech President is used by Russian propaganda towards Russian public. This is because our experience shows that the whole of online media content forms public opinions. We have no doubt that the responsible Russian centers are aware of this phenomenon and use it to their advantage.
Analysis

1. Topics Related to the Czech Republic (in Russian online media)

This chart shows that Russian media the Czech Republic is primarily depicted with the two most popular sports Ice Hockey and Soccer. They are followed by the topic Travel, which is closely related to Czech spa bath resorts. The top political topics mentioned in relation to the Czech Republic are European Union, NATO, Migration, Terrorism, International Sanctions, Ukrainian Crisis and ISIS - topics which are generally related to Russia’s security. As for economic topics, the top mentioned is Food Industry followed by Finance and, at a distance, Energy. No other industries are mentioned very much except for Alcoholic Beverages.

2. Topics Related to Miloš Zeman, the President of the Czech Republic (in Russian online media)

More than three quarters of media coverage of Miloš Zeman are the topics of European Union and NATO within the context of additional security topics. The economic topics are in reverse order with the Energy at the top position.
3. Topics Related to Bohuslav Sobotka, the Prime Minister of the Czech Republic (in Russian online media)

The chart of topics related to Bohuslav Sobotka is quite similar to the topic chart of Miloš Zeman. At a glance we see the higher weight of the European Union. Further contextual analysis will show that there are principal differences hidden under the surface.

4. Two Top Topics Related to the Czech Republic, in contexts of B. Sobotka and M. Zeman, quarterly (in Russian online media)

None of the two top topics depicted in connection with the Czech Republic is related to the Czech President nor to the Czech Prime Minister. This does not come as a surprise, because the two topics are obviously apolitical. We have included them in this study especially as samples of reference.
5. Top Economic Topic Related to the Czech Republic, in contexts of B. Sobotka and M. Zeman, quarterly (in Russian online media)

The chart shows an interesting picture: both top Czech representatives, who defend the interests of the Czech industry, are only insignificantly depicted in relation to Food Industry, which is the most often mentioned Czech industry in Russian media.

6. Ukraine and European Union - the Czech Republic in comparison to B. Sobotka and M. Zeman, quarterly (in Russian online media)

In this chart, two big differences stand out between Bohuslav Sobotka and Miloš Zeman.

Firstly, during the period from the beginning of 2014 to the half of 2015 - that is during the time when Ukraine Crisis escalated, Russia annexed Crimea and the war in Donbas flared with unequivocal presence of Russia - Bohuslav Sobotka had a much more balanced ratio between the topics of Ukraine and EU than Miloš Zeman. Our interpretation is that Bohuslav Sobotka made efforts to maintain the joint position with the EU, while Miloš Zeman started his own game, which was readily accepted by Russian media.

Secondly, the charts show that there is a correlation in the Russian media between the values depicting the Czech Republic and those of Miloš Zeman. There is no correlation of the Czech Republic and Bohuslav Sobotka.
7. The Topics of USA and NATO - the Czech Republic in comparison to B. Sobotka, M. Zeman, quarterly (in Russian online media)

And again this picture shows the same surprising situation, in which there is no correlation between the positions of Bohuslav Sobotka and the entire Czech Republic. On contrary, there is a correlation between the position of Miloš Zeman and the Czech Republic. The Russian media lay minimum emphasis to the position of the Czech Prime Minister (who is the top executive agency) with respect to the relationship of the Czech Republic to the USA and NATO, which form the basic security framework for the Czech Republic. From the Russian standpoint, Miloš Zeman is the maker of the dynamics of the bilateral security duos (Czech Republic and USA, Czech Republic and NATO), however he does not respect the positions of the Czech Government. This fact is concealed in the Russian media.

8. M. Zeman as Related to Ukraine, USA and NATO, daily (in Russian online media)

At this point we will take a closer look at three peak values related to Miloš Zeman. The first one concerns Ukraine, the second the USA and the third NATO.
Zeman’s usage of the expression “fascist” (later also as "Bandera’s fascist groups") corresponds to how Russian propaganda uses it. Thus Miloš Zeman assumes the role of the speaker for Kremlin and conveys the message that was purposed to delegitimize the new Ukrainian Government in the eyes of the Western world.

The lash of Miloš Zeman against the U.S. Ambassador gained extraordinary attention in Russia. Russian media not only depicted this incident as Czech emancipation against the “bad” USA, but they even reported about it untruthfully. To our surprise, the most frequent article title with respect to this event was "Czech President Gives Ultimatum to Barack Obama" (which never really happened). For the benefit of the Russian scene, Miloš Zeman confirmed his position of a fighter against the USA, thanks to which he gained the disproportionately large media coverage.
Miloš Zeman assumes the role of opponent to EU and NATO, which he confirmed with his call for a referendum on Czech exit from the EU and NATO in July 2016.

The charts show a very uneven view when considering the Czech political system. The Czech President, who wields incomparably lesser executive authority than the Prime Minister, achieves a much greater coverage in Russian media. This is true not just quantitatively, but also by the means of proximity to the highest executive representative of the Russian Federation - Vladimir Putin. This proximity is important, because it strengthens the importance of the given foreign official in the eyes of the Russian public.
13. Comparison of Relative Weights of German and Czech Highest Representatives (in Russian online media)

The German duo (president Gauck - chancellor Merkel) definitely shows much higher weight of the executive leader, which corresponds to their positions within their constitutional system. For the Czech representatives (President Zeman - Prime Minister Sobotka), the chart shows a completely reversed weight, even though in the Czech Republic the role distribution of the executive leader and the non-executive head of state is similar to their distribution in Germany.

14. Comparison of Relative Weights of German and Czech Highest Representatives (in global English online media)

These comparison charts are based on data from global sources in English language and we have included them in the report for reference. The left chart shows the relative weight of the two top German representatives, while the right chart shows the relative weight of the two top Czech representatives. For the German duo, the ratio is similar to the ratio in Russian media. However, in case of the Czech duo the ratio is very different when compared to the Russian content. In the global English content, the presence of Bohuslav Sobotka exceeds the one of Miloš Zeman. It is notable that the presence of Miloš Zeman in global English media is still significant; and we argue that this is caused by his controversial attitudes towards the West.

In global English and in Russian media, the ratio of the Czech President vs. the Czech Prime Minister is totally different than the ratio of the German President vs. the German Chancellor, which only proves how much Miloš Zeman is important for Russian propaganda.
Summary

- Russian media depict the political positions of the Czech Republic according to the positions of the Czech President. They conceal the fact that his opinions often contradict the official political position of the Czech Government, even though the Government is the highest executive agency according to the Czech Constitution.

- Russian media purposefully amplify the voice of Miloš Zeman, who is compliant to the agenda of Russian propaganda. An example of this amplification is the 19-times greater relative weight of the Czech President in contrast to the German President (in comparison to the respective prime ministers of the Czech Republic and Germany). Having said this, we need to point out that German President wields similar constitutional authorities, however, his opinions go against the interests of Russian propaganda.

- Political positions of the President of the Czech Republic are quite clearly exploited by Russian propaganda towards their own population, which is being constantly persuaded (and quite successfully at that) about the seriousness of the threats to Russian security - the threats which allegedly come from the Western world (NATO, USA, EU). For instance, in Russian media, Miloš Zeman is linked to Vladimir Putin 11-times more often than Bohuslav Sobotka. We are highlighting this fact because the proximity to the Russian President is granting the much-increased respect towards Miloši Zemanovi in the eyes of the Russian public.

Conclusion

The findings above lead us to believe that Russian media take advantage of the political positions of the Czech President in order to support Kremlin’s expansive and aggressive foreign policy. The reason for this is the strengthening of their own narrative about threats to the existence of Russia and the need for rightful defense of their motherland.

We consider it dangerous that the name of the Czech Republic is misused by a foreign power to assert their own interests, which are in contradiction to the national interests of the Czech Republic.

26 August 2016

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