

## **Petr Pavel's Victory Isn't Only Good News for Czechia**

**Article by Adéla Jurečková**

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The Czechs elected former senior NATO figure Petr Pavel as president in late January. In contrast to the pro-Russian and Chinese leanings of his predecessor Miloš Zeman, the new head of state has a clear pro-European and transatlantic stance. Can Pavel's victory serve as a blueprint for other countries with populists at the helm?

Most Czechs breathed a sigh of relief when Peter Pavel's vote count finally surpassed former Prime Minister Andrej Babiš' in the afternoon of 28 January. With over 58 per cent of the vote, Pavel had defeated Babiš in the runoff. Several aspects of Babiš' history had pushed the former NATO general to run for office: Babiš was an oligarch, founder and leader of the populist ANO party and former prime minister who has been prosecuted several times.

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For weeks, the presidential campaign had poisoned the public space with numerous lies and threats: from the false report that Pavel had died, to a cartridge that Babiš' wife was supposed to have received in an envelope, to the dissemination of fake text messages in which Pavel called on his voters to enlist in the Czech army as conscripts in the Ukraine war. Babiš's campaign before the runoff election exploited many citizen's fears, claiming that Pavel wanted to drag the country into the war.

### **A page from the Orbán playbook**

The Hungarian background of Babiš' campaign manager, Tünde Bartha, is just one hint about where the campaign got its inspiration from. Babiš guaranteed peace whereas his rival was a dangerous warmonger. This campaign rhetoric should sound familiar to anyone who followed the 2022 parliamentary elections in Hungary.

Unlike the Hungarian prime minister, Babiš failed. Only 6 per cent of Babiš voters said they voted for him because they saw him as a guarantor of peace. The failure of an aggressive populist campaign which stoked fears about war is both good news and a warning sign for those who would like to take a page from Orbán's playbook in the future.

In a direct presidential election, the personality of the candidate plays a decisive role, and most voters know that the president is primarily a representative figure who does not decide on the level of pensions, taxation or health policy. A certain statesmanlike calm and level-headedness goes down well – all qualities which Babiš fails to demonstrate. During an [election debate](#) for example, Babiš' said that he would not send soldiers to help in the event of an attack on a NATO member state. Besides causing

concern among Czech voters, such remarks upset NATO partners and potentially weaken their willingness to provide military assistance to the Czechia in case of emergency.

To Babiš' surprise, Czech voters appreciated Pavel's non-confrontational, calm and matter-of-fact communication style. According to polls, Pavel was voters' preferred choice because they felt he was decent, intelligent, and experienced in foreign policy, and thus would represent the country well to the outside world.

The conclusion that neither the budget nor the aggressiveness of an election campaign guaranteed its success does not necessarily apply to other countries in the region, or even to other elections in the Czechia. If there is a lesson to be learned from the presidential election about how to defeat populists, it would probably be this: you can't beat them with a pure anti-campaign. People want to vote not just against, but for something; if not for a positive vision for their country, then at least for a sympathetic personality whose qualities and competence are convincing.

Unfortunately, the former was largely absent in this election whereas the past and reputation of the 9 candidates were at the forefront of the debates. When it came to important issues for the future, such as climate change or social justice, it was common to hear vague statements. Nevertheless, more than 66 per cent of Pavel's voters said, after the election, that they voted for him rather than against Babiš. The desire to support their candidate may also have contributed to the fact that over 70 per cent of people came to the ballot box – one of the highest turnouts in the country's history. Five years ago, when the rather pale university professor Jiří Drahoš ran against incumbent President Miloš Zeman, most of Drahoš' voted to prevent Zeman's re-election. The result was that Zeman won again.

## **Foreign policy from Prague castle: a 180 degree turnaround**

The contrast between President Zeman and President-Elect Pavel could hardly be greater. Zeman is former prime minister and leader of the Social Democrats, a party that insults journalists, utters chauvinist slogans, and incites violence against refugees. By contrast, Pavel is an ex-military man who has never held political office, had to collect signatures for his candidacy, and was previously unknown to many. He is a man who always seemed polite, elegant, and almost modest.

The differences between the outgoing and the newly-elected president is most pronounced on foreign policy. At his official residence in the Prague Castle, Zeman surrounded himself with a lobby clique that cultivated close relations with Russia and China and portrayed these countries as important partners of the Czechia. In doing so, he regularly contradicted the government's foreign policy positions and made the country appear as difficult to read and unreliable to its partners. Pavel is now steering the presidency back into alignment with the government. One of his first official acts as president-elect was speaking with the prime minister of Taiwan. In an interview with the *Financial Times*, he criticised China.

*Babiš's return to the top of Czech politics is therefore far from impossible.*

So far, everything indicates that he wants to bury the hatchet between the government and Prague Castle. The mood at the press conference after Pavel's first meeting with Prime Minister Fiala, Speaker of the Chamber of Deputies Pekarová-Adamová and Senate President Vystrčil was decidedly harmonious. There is no doubt that the former NATO general stands for a close European and transatlantic partnership. Following the Czech EU presidency, which was perceived as successful, a

clearly focused and understandable foreign policy should improve the country's cooperation with its Western partners and increase its foreign policy weight. For Ukraine, this means the prospect of further support – be it political, military or humanitarian. Not without reason, Volodymyr Zelenskyy was among the first heads of state to congratulate Pavel on social media.

### **Babiš: the beginning of the end, or just a breather?**

“It looks like we are witnessing the beginning of the end of the political era of Andrej Babiš,” Prime Minister Petr Fiala commented on the outcome of the presidential elections. But Babiš sees things differently. In his press conference after the announcement of the election results, Babiš acknowledged his defeat but spoke of an “outstanding success” for himself and his ANO party. He had received far more votes than all the parties in the current governing coalition combined. Could this statement be just a rhetorical manoeuvre to disguise his failure?

Even before the election, some analysts suspected that Babiš did not want to become president at all, but already had set his sights on becoming prime minister again after the next parliamentary elections in 2025. His calculation is sure dubious – a vote for him means anything but automatically a vote for ANO; moreover, a great deal can change in the two years until the elections. Nevertheless, the hurdle to supporting his party next time around may have been lowered, especially among former non-voters who now voted for Babiš. Babiš's return to the top of Czech politics is therefore far from impossible.

What can Pavel and the current government do to finally send Babiš into political retirement? Pavel's speech after announcing his victory suggests that he understands that he must become the president not only of his constituents, but also for Babiš supporters and all those who did not show up at the ballot box. If there is one thing he should take over from Zeman, it is certainly the many trips to various, even remote and socially isolated regions of the country and conversations with the citizens living there. He should not only listen to their concerns, but also take them back to Prague and put them on the political agenda through media interviews, talks with the government and parliament, and in his own house. Babiš's strongest political card was that he partially succeeded in selling himself as the representative for those who feel overlooked and unrepresented by the Prague elites.

The country's political leadership must not forget that politics is not simply a “battle between good and evil” with them squarely on one side and Babiš on the other but also about representation and advocacy.

A large part of the Czech population suffers greatly from rising prices for food, energy and housing, and stagnating salaries. Since 2021, there have been no left-wing parties in parliament. The vacuum was a huge opportunity for Babiš, who targets left-leaning voters. The government should therefore work on improving living conditions in the peripheries with targeted economic and social policies.

Pavel should work on bridging urban-rural divides in the country. After all, more than half of the people in small communities and villages supported him – contrary to the assumption of some urban supporters, who disparagingly referred to the “peasants” who would surely all vote for Babiš and plunge the country into disaster. If Pavel helps overcome the fragmentation and polarisation of Czech society, his presidency could be considered a great success.

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