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The Czech Republic before the second round of the presidential elections

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The first round of the presidential elections in the Czech Republic (12-13 January) was won by the current President Miloš Zeman (with 38.6% of the vote). His opponent in the second round (26-27 January) will be Jiří Drahoš (26.6%), a chemistry professor who had hitherto not been involved in politics; until the start of the election campaign he had been the head of the Czech Academy of Sciences for the last eight years. Drahoš's campaign staff are made up – apart from scientists – of people previously associated with the right, mainly the ODS and KDU-ČSL parties. His foreign policy advisor is Petr Kolář, a former ambassador to the United States and Russia, who has been critical of the Kremlin's policy.

The other candidates, who finished the first round with shares of around 10% of the vote each, were the former diplomat Pavel Fischer, the popular songwriter and businessman Michal Horáček, and the doctor and social activist Marek Hilšer. All three of these, like Jiří Drahoš, have criticised Zeman for his attacks on the liberal elite and journalists, which have polarised society. They also distanced themselves from the pro-Russian and pro-Chinese aspects of his foreign policy. Of the seven candidates who did not make it to the second round, five have supported Drahoš, who can also count on the favour of the right-wing opposition. Those who have announced they will vote for Zeman include Andrej Babiš, the Prime Minister and leader of the ANO 2011 political movement, as well as Tomio Okamura, who heads the xenophobic Freedom and Direct Democracy (SPD), and the leader of the Communist opposition party.

Commentary

- The chances of both candidates in the second round are pretty much equal. Miloš Zeman, who as president over the past five years has regularly visited the smaller towns of all the regions, has a large and disciplined electorate, as confirmed by his result in the first round. Zeman's electorate regard him as a defender of the interests of the 'ordinary people' in opposition to the metropolitan liberal elite, while celebrating his eloquence and effectiveness in achieving his political goals. Zeman's build-up of support in opposition to the so-called 'Prague café society' has also consolidated a large group of die-hard critics. As a result, he has limited opportunities to attract new voters in the second round, and will probably focus on discouraging potential voters for his opponent from participating in the elections. He will try to portray Drahoš as a 'supporter of admitting

migrants', recalling the latter's signature on an appeal by scientists 'against fear and indifference' in August 2015, which claimed refugees should be provided with adequate assistance in Europe. However, Drahoš is currently emphasising his opposition to immigration quotas as a part of EU policy. Another potential weak spot for Drahoš is his campaign chief, Jakub Kleindienst, whom the media (including those critical of Zeman) have mentioned in the context of two corruption scandals.

- Jiří Drahoš has attracted voters by presenting himself as the opposite of Miloš Zeman. During the campaign, the staid professor adopted a consensual attitude and has avoided making clear declarations with regard to controversial matters. This strategy has brought him the favour of people who are tired by Zeman's confrontational style. In the eyes of many Czechs, however, Drahoš may appear too weak a candidate to act as a counterweight to Prime Minister Andrej Babiš. This is why over 30% of the votes were won by more outspoken critics of the current President, such as the conservative Pavel Fischer and the more left-inclined Michal Horáček and Marek Hilšer. If he does not win over their electorates, Drahoš will not be able to win in the second round; but at the same time, making clearer declarations, for example, on his socio-political opinions, expose him to the risk of losing another part of the electorate. For this reason, it is expected that Drahoš, like Zeman, will focus on running a negative campaign against his opponent. He will continue to criticise the current President by recalling the numerous scandals and controversies which have attended Zeman and his closest associates. We may also expect that the competitor to the current president will present the second round of the elections as a geopolitical choice between the pro-Russian Zeman, whose campaign has been financed by lobbying groups related to Russia, and Drahoš, who sees Russia as a challenge to the cohesion of the West.
- The people officially supporting Zeman's re-election include Andrej Babiš, the Prime Minister and leader of the ANO 2011 political movement. His government is exercising sovereignty in the Czech Republic despite lacking a parliamentary majority, thanks to the support of the President. In December, Zeman appointed Babiš Prime Minister despite the latter's legal problems (Babiš has been accused of embezzling grants from the EU). On 16 January, deputies failed to back Babiš's government in a vote of confidence, but Zeman announced that he would wait until the leader of ANO got 101 votes in parliament, and would then reappoint him as Prime Minister. Given that the swearing-in of the new President is scheduled for 8 March, Zeman will be able to deliver on this promise regardless of the outcome of the election. If a reformed government under Babiš again fails to receive a vote of confidence, in the third stage, the President would appoint as prime minister a person designated by the President of the Chamber of Deputies (this would probably be Babiš again). If this government also fails to receive the support of the majority of deputies, the head of state has the right to call early elections. However, in contrast to Drahoš, Zeman has ruled out such a scenario. By doing so, Zeman has implied that he is prepared to keep Babiš in power without a parliamentary majority up to the end of his term. In this way, Zeman has made it clear to the Prime Minister's numerous electorate that he is the guarantor of the implementation of ANO's programme.

- The results of the first round of the elections, pointing to equal chances for both candidates in the second round, has led Babiš to put a moderate amount of distance between himself and Zeman. The premier did not withdraw his endorsement, but he called on the President to clearly advocate a pro-Western orientation in foreign policy, and to cut himself off from his two closest associates, around which several ambiguities concerning their business ties with Russia have arisen. Babiš has thus sent a signal to public opinion, both at home and abroad, that in contrast to Zeman he is not interested in maintaining particularly close contacts with Moscow or Beijing. At the same time, the Prime Minister is preparing the ground for possible cooperation with Drahoš if he should win in the second round. Regardless of the tactical alliance between Babiš and Zeman, where both politicians help each other to remain in power, in the long term the ANO leader could benefit from a victory for Drahoš – a person without political experience, and who has displayed no ambitions to build up a competitive political camp to ANO. Babiš has probably also taken into account that a substantial part of ANO's electorate supported opponents of President Zeman in the first round of the elections.
- The presidential elections were ignored by the major groups on the Czech political scene, none of which put forward a candidate, as they were focused on the parliamentary elections (held last October). At the same time, they did not want to confront the President, who a few months ago was considered the favourite, as they believed they would have been spending their money on a losing fight. Of the nine candidates taking part in the first round, six of them had at best very little political experience, and their views on a number of issues are still largely unknown. The good result which most of them achieved testifies to the large and persistent demand in the Czech Republic for new people in politics, who could replace the disgraced leaders of both right and left, who have ruled the country during the past 25 years. This trend was manifested not only in the electoral success of Andrej Babiš and his ANO 2011 political movement in last year's elections, but also the good results which the Pirate Party and the xenophobic Freedom and Direct Democracy received.