

The Czech Republic: General Pavel is getting closer to becoming the new president

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General Petr Pavel won the first round of the Czech presidential election held on 13–14 January 2023 (he garnered 35.4% of the votes cast). His lead was highest in Prague, the surrounding Central Bohemian Region and in polling stations organised abroad. The former Czech prime minister Andrej Babiš's result was only slightly lower (35%); his support was highest in the regions seen as the bastions of his ANO party (which is leading the parliamentary polls), namely the industrial regions surrounding Ostrava and Ústí nad Labem. Support for the former rector of the Mendel University in Brno, Danuše Nerudová (13.9%), was much lower than anticipated, as her election campaign lost momentum during its final stage. The candidate representing the far right (SPD), Jaroslav Bašta, also has good reason to be disappointed with his result (4.5%). The turnout in the Czech Republic's third direct presidential election in the country's history reached a record high, over 68%. This was the highest turnout recorded for all nationwide elections, including parliamentary elections, since 1998 (for more on the importance of the recent election, see '[Czech presidential election: change on the horizon](#)').

Commentary

- General Pavel had a 14–18 percentage-point lead over Babiš in simulations of the final result, and he is a strong favourite in the second round of the election (which will be held on 27–28 January). The two main camps of the Czech political scene had begun to consolidate around these two contenders even before the first election round, as corroborated by the fact that both Pavel and Babiš achieved better results than anticipated in the pre-election polls, while the results for Nerudová and Bašta were lower than anticipated. It is expected that in the runoff Pavel will be supported by the vast majority (around two-thirds according to electoral models) of voters who cast their ballots in support of Nerudová and the senators Pavel Fischer & Marek Hilšer (who in total won over 23% of the votes). The leader of the ANO party is counting on support from the anti-establishment electorate who voted for Bašta (electoral models indicate that he will be supported by around 75% of these voters).
- In response to Pavel's high poll lead and the fact that most of the contenders have called on their supporters to vote for Pavel in the runoff, Babiš launched an aggressive electoral campaign shortly after the end of the first round. He is pursuing two goals: to mobilise the anti-government and anti-establishment electorate, and to demobilise right-wing and liberal voters. In his attempts to attain the former goal he is benefiting from the clear

backing of President Miloš Zeman, who will finish his second presidential term in March. This group of voters is the target of the recent billboard campaign, which presents the runoff as a choice between Babiš, a “diplomat who will never draw the Czech Republic into war”, and Pavel, a “soldier” (although Pavel himself has never suggested that this would be his intention). Attempts to discourage General Pavel’s potential supporters include emphasising certain controversial facts from his life such as his former activity in the Communist party (it is worth noting that Babiš was also a member of this party), and in particular his participation in a military intelligence training course which started in 1988. Furthermore, the leader of the ANO party intends to refer to the low level of support for the government (according to the CVVM polling company, in autumn 2022 a mere 28% of Czechs declared that they trusted their government) and to the fact that four out of the five coalition parties supported Pavel. This suggests that Babiš is trying to draw a parallel between General Pavel and the low level of support for the government, and to inspire doubts regarding the concentration of power and fear of the tax increases and social spending cuts which the ruling coalition are allegedly planning.

- The main challenge General Pavel faces ahead of the runoff is the need to retain the support of the electorate who voted for the centre-right and liberal candidates in the first election round. Not only did these candidates call on their supporters to vote for Pavel, but they also have become involved in his electoral campaign: this suggests that they have learned a lesson from their failed campaign to support Jiří Drahoš organised five years ago. In his contest with Zeman in the presidential runoff, Drahoš’s support from his former rivals was purely formal. At the same time, rumours emerged that the recent contenders may be offered certain political benefits, particularly Nerudová: one report suggests she may be offered a post on the Czech National Bank’s Bank Board, the body which sets the country’s reference interest rates, whose members are appointed by the country’s president. To attract the votes of this portion of the electorate, General Pavel’s supporters are presenting the choice between himself and Babiš in axiological categories (Babiš is the embodiment of abuses of power and of opaque links between the government and business, as well as a symbol of the moral crisis in Czech politics), and are emphasising specific mistakes the former prime minister made when in office (such as inefficient management of the pandemic).
- Although it will be difficult for Babiš to catch up with Pavel, who currently has a large lead over him, this election has already brought him certain benefits. Nerudová, who was a surprise candidate in this election and enjoys the support of a young liberal electorate, is openly considering establishing her own party, which could further fragment ANO’s rivals. As regards Babiš’s own electorate, no clear competitor to challenge him has emerged, and the former prime minister could even be said to have consolidated his position. The number of votes he won was a third higher than what ANO received in the last two elections to the Chamber of Deputies; he was supported by around half of those who had voted for the SPD in 2021, despite the fact that this party was running its own candidate in this presidential election.