

PETR PAVEL TO BECOME NEXT PRESIDENT OF THE CZECH REPUBLIC

Pavel secures decisive victory over ex-PM Babiš in presidential elections run-off

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INTRODUCTION

Retired army general Petr Pavel has secured a decisive victory over former Prime Minister Andrej Babiš in the second round of the Czech presidential elections. Securing 58% of the popular vote, from a turnout of more than 70%, Pavel, whose win is largely seen as a victory over illiberal populism, will now succeed outgoing President Miloš Zeman in March.

In the Czech Republic, the role of the president is largely ceremonial, however the head of state, who is also the Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces, holds the power to appoint the board of the Czech National Bank and the country's Constitutional Court (with approval from the Senate, the upper house of parliament). Otherwise, most executive power is held by the prime minister, a position currently held by Petr Fiala.

While the Fiala Government has repeatedly clashed with the outgoing President over multiple issues, Pavel's political proximity to the pro-EU/NATO centre and the Czech centre-right suggests foreseeably improving relations between the president and the government.

Below, Aretera takes a deeper look at the results of the second round of the presidential vote.



This memo will cover:

-  the key takeaways from the election results,
-  the significance of Petr Pavel's victory,
-  a look at the Czech political landscape,
-  short-term implications for Czech politics.

A DECISIVE VICTORY

On 27-28th January, Czech voters went to the polls to take part in the second round of the country's presidential elections. In line with pre-election polling, retired army general Petr Pavel has secured a decisive victory over billionaire former Prime Minister Andrej Babiš, receiving more than 58% of the popular vote in the run-off vote. Following a remarkably high turnout (68.2%) in the first round of the presidential elections, more than 70% of voters took part in the second round, increasing Pavel's political legitimacy and the already high significance of this crucial electoral contest.

The victory of the retired army general over the country's ex-PM is widely seen as a defeat for Czech populism. Babiš and his ANO movement, which governed the country between 2017 and 2021, have increasingly turned populist in recent years, as reflected in Babiš' controversial rhetoric shown by the ex-PM during the election campaign.

Pavel, who secured close to 3.36 million votes against Babiš' 2.4 million, largely benefitted from a number of factors. These include endorsements from all former presidential candidates (except from Jaroslav Bašta, the candidate of the right-wing populist SPD), his general appeal to the public and the "anti-Babiš effect", that is, the vast majority of the ideologically and structurally diverse Czech political arena uniting against the populist ex-PM.

Most of the election campaign was centered around the personality of the candidates, in addition to prominent issues such as high inflation and Russia's war against Ukraine. Pavel took a decisive stance in favour of supporting Kyiv in wake of Russia's continuing aggression, while his presidential election rival controversially accused him of planning to drag Czechia into the war.

ELECTION RESULTS

Second Round of the Presidential Vote (27-28 th January)		
Candidate	Affiliation	Popular Vote (%)
Petr Pavel	independent	58.3%
Andrej Babiš	ANO	41.7%
First Round of the Presidential Vote (13-14 th January)		
Candidate	Affiliation	Popular Vote (%)
Petr Pavel	independent	35.4
Andrej Babiš	ANO	35
Danuše Nerudová	independent	13.92
Pavel Fischer	independent	6.75
Jaroslav Bašta	SPD	4.45
Marek Hilšer	independent	2.56
Karel Diviš	independent	1.35
Tomáš Zima	independent	0.55

(Source: Czech Statistical Office, Turnout: 68.2% in the first round, 70.2% in the second round)

THE NEXT PRESIDENT OF THE CZECH REPUBLIC

Petr Pavel is a retired military general who served as Chief of the General Staff of the Czech Army between 2012 and 2015 and as Chair of the NATO Military Committee between 2015 and 2018. Following his departure from the army, he became a lecturer and a consultant. He is also known for launching the Stronger Together initiative in 2020, the aim of which was to help Czech citizens fight against the COVID-19 pandemic. Aside from his brief membership in the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia (1985-1989), which made him subject to scrutiny during the election campaign, he is a political newcomer who has not been previously involved in national politics.

In the presidential race, Pavel ran as a pro-Western independent but has also been endorsed by the centre-right SPOLU alliance which includes three of the five coalition parties behind the government of Czech Prime Minister Petr Fiala. He is an outspoken critic of populism, as well as a strong supporter of his country's pro-EU/NATO stance and helping Ukraine. On course to succeed outgoing President Miloš Zeman, whose term ends on 8th March, he will be the country's second democratically elected head of state, as previous presidents were elected by parliament. As President-elect, Pavel's first actions will include phone calls with the leaders of Ukraine and Taiwan, indicating a stark shift in presidential foreign policy in comparison with Zeman who had close ties to Russia (prior to the invasion of Ukraine) and China.

LOOKING AHEAD

In the Czech Republic, the role of the president is largely ceremonial, however the head of state, who is also the Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces of the Czech Republic, holds the power to appoint the board of the Czech National Bank and the country's Constitutional Court (with approval from the Senate, the upper house of parliament). Otherwise, most executive power is held by the prime minister, a position currently held by Petr Fiala. His government has clashed with President Zeman multiple times over a constitutional debate about how much say the head of state actually has in confirming ministerial positions; most recently when Zeman refused to appoint Petr Hladík, Fiala's candidate for Environment Minister. As president, Pavel, who was also endorsed by SPOLU, is expected to have a smooth cooperation with the country's government.

While ex-Prime Minister Babiš has lost the presidential run-off vote, he stressed that he has garnered more votes than the five parties in Fiala's coalition government during the last parliamentary elections. His leading opposition ANO movement is likely to remain the most popular Czech party (currently polling at around 30% against SPOLU's 25%). Meanwhile, the Fiala Government, which has the support of 108 of the 200 MPs in the Chamber of Deputies (the lower house of parliament) is expected to remain stable in the short term.

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If you would like to schedule a discussion of this paper, please contact:
[Dominik Istrate](mailto:d.istrate@areterapa.com), Advisor for Central & Eastern Europe at **d.istrate@areterapa.com**

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