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An ex-General wins the Czech presidential election

Petr Pavel is the new President of the Czech Republic, bringing one of the dirtiest election campaigns in the country's history to an end

It is official: Petr Pavel, a former soldier with the rank of general, is the new President of the Czech Republic. Pavel won a run-off election last weekend against ex-Prime Minister Andrej Babiš. About 58 per cent of the eligible voters voted for Pavel, while Babiš received about 42 per cent of the votes. Thus, what most polls had predicted came true: a clear election victory for Pavel. Babiš congratulated his opponent already on Saturday evening, admitting his own defeat.

With this, one of the dirtiest election campaigns in Czechia's recent history came to an end. In the days leading up to the election, Babiš in particular had repeatedly tried to denounce Pavel personally. Repeatedly, for instance, he claimed that the former NATO general wanted to lead the Czech Republic into war against Russia. In the last days before the election, more false reports and disinformation were spread. It is still unclear who is behind this, but it is suspected that Babiš's campaign team might be involved.

In the Czech Republic, the president has been directly elected since 2013. The previous incumbent, Milos Zeman, could not run again after having served for two terms. With a turnout of around 70 per cent, it was clear that there was a high level of interest in this election among the population. The election campaign was remarkable in several respects. Babiš and Pavel emerged as clear winners from the first voting round, which took place in mid-January, with around 35 per cent of the vote each. While the 61-year-old Pavel repeatedly emphasised that he was concerned with values such as decency, respect and adherence to democratic principles, Babiš put social issues in the foreground of his campaign and staged himself as the defender of the interests of the rural population.

A question of the past and future

One of Babiš' central and catchy advertising slogans stated: 'Periphery against Prague'. From the beginning, he also tried to undermine Pavel by calling him a candidate of the right-wing liberal government of Prime Minister Petr Fiala, although the latter had repeatedly stressed that he was independent and had not been nominated by any party. It is true that Pavel is not a party member, but like two other candidates, he was supported by the coalition.

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Both opponents had one thing in common, however, as they found themselves caught up with their communist past in the course of the election campaign. Pavel began his military career in the then-Czechoslovak army. Babiš, on the other hand, is accused of having worked as an informer for the secret service. Yet the two dealt with their accusations in very different ways. While Pavel has always acknowledged his past and has since publicly regretted his membership in the communist party, Babiš continues to deny having worked for the secret service.

In the days leading up to the election, the war in Ukraine was also a major topic time and again. Babiš in particular tried to make political capital out of it. One of his election posters read: 'I will not drag the Czech Republic into a war. I am a diplomat, not a soldier.' In a televised debate on public radio shortly before the election, Babiš even said that he would not send Czech soldiers if neighbouring Poland were attacked. Although he regretted this statement later, the uproar was considerable. Pavel, on the other hand, clearly declared his support for NATO and always affirmed that he wanted to establish the Czech Republic as a reliable partner on the international stage.

Restoring dignity to the office

Like in other European countries such as Germany, the President of the Czech Republic has predominantly representative duties. However, he also appoints the judges of the Constitutional Court and sets up the government, including the Prime Minister. He is also commander-in-chief of the armed forces and may refer laws back on a one-time basis to the parliament. A special legitimacy derives not least from the fact that the president is directly elected by the people. The previous incumbent, Milos Zeman, has never shied away from interfering vociferously in day-

to-day politics. With his often-polarising views on issues such as migration, gay rights or the role of the media, he has repeatedly divided Czech society.

No such thing is to be expected from Pavel. On the contrary, one can assume that with him a new spirit will enter Prague Castle and that he will be clearly distinguishing himself from his predecessor. During the election campaign, he promised repeatedly that he wanted to restore dignity to the office and put an end to lies in politics. This was not least directed at Andrej Babiš and his way of doing politics. These positions earned him the support of a clear majority of the Czech population and this is what he will have to be measured against in the future. In addition, at no time did he raise doubts about his foreign policy views.

The former chairman of the NATO Military Committee will project the Czech Republic as a cosmopolitan and democratic country and as a reliable partner of the EU and NATO. The cooperation with Petr Fiala's government should work smoothly in this respect. Domestically, the new president will face the challenge of reuniting society and, above all, reaching out to those who did not vote for him. This will also be decisive in determining whether the polarisation between the urban elites and the people outside of the larger cities will continue to increase or whether society will move closer together once again. This is no easy task, especially since high inflation and the consequences of the war have increased social hardship and many citizens are dissatisfied.

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But what will happen to Andrej Babiš? He accepted his defeat without reservation and immediately congratulated Petr Pavel on his election victory. At the same time, however, he spoke of a very good election result for himself. He had received significantly more votes than the governing coalition in the last parliamentary elections. Babiš will probably remain the leader of the opposition in parliament. In his party ANO ('Yes') he remains uncontroversial. Many observers assume that he will now try to become prime minister again in the next parliamentary elections. Babiš himself has fuelled this speculation as he repeatedly hinted during the election campaign that he would actually prefer the office of prime minister to that of president. So, despite all the personal scandals, he will remain a political player to be reckoned with.

His party ANO is still the strongest force in the polls and he has a solid clientele, especially in the rural regions of the country, where support for him is unconditional. However, his further political success will also depend crucially on how the social and economic situation develops in the coming months and what measures the government will take. In any case, Babiš has managed to distinguish himself as the representative of the interests of the little people. He will certainly continue to play this card and criticise the government for its lack of social policy. Political developments in the Czech Republic will therefore remain exciting.



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