

European Union skeptic wins Czech presidential election

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Acting President of the Czech Republic Milos Zeman narrowly won the second round of the presidential election last Friday and Saturday with around 51 percent of the vote. His opponent, chemistry professor Jiri Drahos, received 49 percent.

In the first round of voting two weeks ago Zeman secured first place with 38.6 percent, in front of Drahos. The politically non-affiliated Drahos had been nominated by two ultra-conservative parties KDU-CSL and STAN and many observers still considered Drahos the likely winner of the second round. After the first round of voting, the three main candidates not to make it to the second round had called upon their supporters to support Drahos. Zeman's lead was just over 156,000 votes.

In particular older rural-based voters voted for Zeman, while younger voters in the cities supported Drahos. Voter turnout was slightly higher than in the first round.

The election was significant both at home and abroad. Zeman stands for an anti-European Union (EU) policy and an end to sanctions against Russia. For his part, Drahos emphasized in the election campaign his pro-European orientation and hostility to the Kremlin. "The president will continue his unfriendly rhetoric towards the EU and continue trying to orient Czech foreign policy towards Russia and China," political scientist Jiri Pehe told the news magazine *Spiegel*.

During Zeman's first term, the Chinese president came to the Czech Republic for a three-day state visit for the first time in history. Earlier, Zeman said in an interview with Chinese state television that the Czech Republic could "learn a lot from China's cohesion."

In addition to governments in Poland and Hungary, an EU-critical alliance is now in power in the Czech Republic in the figures of Zeman and Prime Minister

Andrej Babis. Right-wing forces have welcomed the result. The Hungarian government blog PestiSrácok.hu praised the defeat of the "liberal intellectual" who stood against the "son of the people" and concluded: "Zeman's victory is a blow to Brussels."

The dominant theme of the election was refugee policy. Ex-prime minister and former social democrat Zeman was notorious for his right-wing, racist views before the elections. Although there are virtually no refugees in the Czech Republic, the Zeman camp launched ads with the text: "Stop Drahos, stop the migrants! This land belongs to us!"

Although Drahos posed as cosmopolitan and liberal, the differences between the candidates, especially on the issue of immigration, were minimal. Drahos, like Zeman, spoke out against compulsory quotas for the distribution of refugees in the EU and for more security on the EU's external borders. His position became clear when he accused Zeman of having taken in thousands of Muslim refugees from the Balkans during his period as prime minister in the late 1990s.

Domestically, Zeman's election victory means that billionaire Babis and his far-right "Action of Dissatisfied Citizens" (ANO) are likely to hold on to power. ANO won the parliamentary election last fall, but has no overall governing majority. In the Czech Republic, the president appoints the prime minister and entrusts him with the formation of a government. Zeman had already appointed Babis head of government last December, but Babis had to resign a few days ago after losing a vote in parliament. Zeman immediately entrusted him with forming a new government.

Zeman can maintain the existing ANO minority government in office for a prolonged period of time because the constitution does not oblige the president to

adhere to deadlines when forming a government or calling new elections.

Babis is currently seeking to forge a coalition with the Communist Party (KSCM) and the far-right party “Freedom and Direct Democracy” (SPD). While Babis defends a free-market policy that benefits greatly from EU subsidies, he also advocates an anti-refugee policy and massive domestic rearmament. On these issues he is in line with the KSCM and the SPD.

KSCM Chairman Vojtech Filip declared that Zeman’s victory was a victory for “common sense”. Filip, head of the successor organisation to the former Stalinist state party, lined up behind the notoriously right-wing president during the election campaign.

At Zeman’s victory speech in Prague, he was accompanied by both SPD party leader Tomio Okamura and the provisional Czech Social Democratic Party (CSSD) leader Milan Chovanec. Observers see this as an indication of possible CSSD involvement in the right-wing government. The Social Democrats show signs of disintegration after the last parliamentary elections and are fighting for their political survival.



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