

Former NATO general to be next Czech president

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At the end of January, Petr Pavel won the run-off election for the office of Czech president. The former NATO general is considered to be a zealous warmonger against Russia. Like the country's right-wing government led by Petr Fiala, he advocates an intensification of the conflict with Russia in the Ukraine war.

The arms deliveries made so far to Ukraine were not enough, according to Pavel. On this issue, he sees "really no reason to set limits," the military leader told the AFP news agency. The West should provide Ukraine with all types of weapons except nuclear ones, he said.

"Ukraine cannot fight such a tough opponent without tanks, drones, artillery and longer-range missiles, and perhaps not without supersonic aircraft," Pavel said. He openly criticised European countries that, in his opinion, were not delivering enough heavy warfare equipment to Ukraine. He said that "more courage" was needed to deliver modern weapons. In this context, he also called for the dispatch of F-16 fighter jets and that Ukraine be allowed to join NATO as soon as possible.

In his view, Western governments should have reacted more decisively, i.e., intervened militarily immediately after the secession of the Donbas. He advocates direct intervention by NATO ground troops against Russia. He would also agree to the deployment of NATO soldiers to protect humanitarian corridors and to a no-fly zone.

He has also gone onto the offensive against China. As soon as he was elected, Pavel telephoned Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-wen and invited her to a personal meeting. Until now, the Czech Republic has officially supported a One-China policy and did not maintain diplomatic relations with Taiwan.

The Ukraine war was the central topic of the presidential election. The massive price increases resulting from the sanctions against Russia are hitting the population harder than almost any other country in the EU, with the exception of the Baltic states.

Broad sections of the population, who must bear the burden for the war, reject the policy advocated by the future president and the government. In the presidential election, however, this opposition found no expression.

In the first round of voting, former Prime Minister Andrej Babiš and Pavel were on equal terms, with all other candidates far behind. In the run-off election on January 27 and 28, Pavel then prevailed with 58.2 percent of the vote against his opponent's 41.6 percent. Eleven of the country's 14 districts went to Pavel and in the capital Prague he got 76 percent of the vote. Babiš won only in rural areas.

The result does not signify support for Pavel's fanatical war policy; rather, it is a distorted expression of anger with the entrepreneur and billionaire Babiš. He is seen as the epitome of corruption and the subordination of all sectors of society to the interests of business. In his government from 2017 to 2021, he passed several austerity pacts, made concessions to companies and the super-rich, while at the same time giving free rein to the pandemic.

Babiš's attitude towards the Ukraine war was somewhat more cautious than Pavel's. Before the second round of elections, he even answered "no" in a TV debate to the question of whether he would support the Baltic states or Poland in the event of a Russian attack. After the broadcast, however, he quickly distanced himself from his statement.

In the meantime, Babiš has congratulated Pavel on his election victory and advised him, "Forget Babiš!" However, the oligarch is not expected to retire quietly from politics. His party, ANO, is still the strongest in parliament and expects to win the election in three years' time.

All the defeated candidates from the first round called for votes for Pavel in the run-off. Danuše Nerudová and Pavel Fischer even attended a Pavel election rally and

provided advertising space.

There is expected to be close cooperation between the president and the government when the term of incumbent President Milos Zeman ends on March 8 and Pavel is sworn in a day later. Although Pavel ran as an independent candidate, he says he voted for the SPOLU party alliance, which agreed to Petr Fiala (ODS) as prime minister, following the last parliamentary election in 2021.

Fiala leads a five-party coalition held together by their opposition to Babiš. It is dominated by right-wing, conservative parties and extends to the Pirate Party. Like the government, Pavel advocates the introduction of the euro, austerity measures and rearmament both at home and abroad.

Pavel's background as a military man and his aggressive stance towards Russia also made him the preferred candidate of the EU and its member states. Ursula von der Leyen, head of the EU Commission in Brussels, was the first to congratulate him. Slovak President Zuzana Čaputová made a point of travelling to Pavel's campaign headquarters in Prague to congratulate him personally.

Pavel stands for the growth of militarism that is being vehemently pursued within the EU. On his election posters he presented himself with the slogan "Experienced diplomat and war hero." This included a military medal next to his portrait.

Born in 1961 in western Bohemia, Pavel comes from an officer's family. He was educated at the military high school in Opava, after which he studied at the Army Military College in Vyškov. From 1983 he served with the paratroopers in Prostějov and quickly rose to become commander of an elite unit. During this time he became a member of the Stalinist Communist Party. In the late 1980s he attended a military intelligence school.

After the so-called Velvet Revolution in 1989 and the introduction of capitalism, Pavel was one of those political opportunists who used their contacts in the military and intelligence services to further their careers. Only a few years after the fall of communism, Pavel was an advocate of the NATO war in Yugoslavia and was himself deployed there.

From 2012 to 2015, he was chief of the General Staff of the Czech Army, then, until 2018, Chairman of the NATO Military Committee, the highest military position in the Western defence alliance. Pavel was the first representative from a former Warsaw Pact state to hold this position.

Already, the effects of the EU's war policy are dramatic

for the population, which is suffering from soaring inflation. Housing is becoming a luxury. According to a report by the consulting firm Deloitte, the price per square metre for housing in the capital Prague is the equivalent of €15. According to the report, a 70-square-metre flat costs more than €1,000 a month, about 25 percent more than a year ago. At the same time, the average monthly salary is around €1,600.

Buying a flat, which was very popular until a few years ago, is now hardly possible. Rising prices per square metre and mortgage interest rates have quadrupled in five years, posing extreme problems for working families.

Electricity and gas prices rose more than in almost any other country last year. In the first half of 2022, electricity prices increased by 62 percent, gas by 71. Even households with average incomes already have to spend 65 percent of their income on rent and energy costs. Government leader Fiala declared last year that the government did not have the means to compensate for these price increases for households.

The more than 300,000 Ukrainian refugees in the country are particularly affected by poverty. Of them, 58 percent were living in poverty in December. Six months earlier, this figure was 49 percent. While the government never misses an opportunity to mention the suffering of the Ukrainian population at the hands of Russia in order to justify its war policy, there is no proper official support for the refugees in the country.

At the same time, banks and corporations are making record profits thanks to massive government support. As the statistics of the Czech National Bank show, Czech banks posted a net profit of the equivalent of €4.4 billion in 2022, according to current figures. Compared to the previous year, this is an increase of €1.5 billion.



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