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Petr Pavel: Ukraine supporter and military hero who swept to the Czech presidency

Петр Пáвел: прихильник України та військовий герой, який дійшов до президентства Чехії

Колишній генерал Петр Павел, 61-річний ветеран, який брав участь у миротворчій місії на Балканах і представляв свою країну високопоставленим генералом НАТО, був обраний президентом Чехії з 57,8 % голосів. Хоча президенти Чехії мають невелику владу у повсякденному житті, П. Павел матиме вплив на зовнішню політику та думку уряду, а також право призначати прем'єр-міністрів, конституційних суддів та керівників центральних банків. Він пообіцяв навести «порядок» у Чеській Республіці, 10-мільйонному члені ЄС та НАТО, яка страждає від рекордної інфляції та економічних потрясінь через війну в Україні. П. Павел балотувався як незалежний кандидат і був найсильнішим із трьох кандидатів, підтримуваних ліберально-консервативною коаліцією SPOLU нинішнього президента Мілоша Земана.

<https://www.euronews.com/2023/01/28/petr-pavel-polygot-and-war-hero-who-swept-to-the-czech-presidency>

Ex-general Petr Pavel has won another gritty campaign -- this time at the ballot box.

The bearded 61-year-old, a decorated veteran who took part in a high-stakes peacekeeping mission in the Balkans and represented his country as a top-tier NATO general, was voted Czech president on Saturday, beating billionaire ex-prime minister Andrej Babiš.

With the ballots from 97% of almost 15,000 polling stations counted by the Czech Statistics Office, Pavel had 57.8% of the vote compared with 42.2% for Babiš.

Though Czech presidents wield little day-to-day power, Pavel will have influence over foreign policy and government opinion, as well as the power to appoint prime ministers, constitutional judges and central bankers.

True to his military past, he has vowed to bring "order" to the Czech Republic, a 10 million-strong EU and NATO member, hammered by record inflation and economic turmoil due to the Ukraine war.

"I can't ignore the fact that people here increasingly feel chaos, disorder and uncertainty. That the state has somehow ceased to function," Pavel said on his campaign website.

"We need to change this," he added. "We need to play by the rules, which will be valid for everyone alike. We need a general sweep."

From Communist to war hero

Following in his father's footsteps, Pavel underwent a military education in former Czechoslovakia, which was then ruled by Kremlin-backed communists.

He joined the Communist Party, like his billionaire rival Babiš, and soon rose through the army ranks, studying to become an intelligence agent for the regime.

Critics fault him for his communist past, though Pavel has defended himself by saying party membership was “normal” in his family and called it a “mistake”.

When the Iron Curtain crumbled in 1989, Pavel chucked out his party ID but went ahead with the intelligence course.

Amid the conflict in the former Yugoslavia, Pavel -- trained as an elite paratrooper and holding the rank of Lieutenant Colonel at the time -- helped evacuate French troops stuck in the midst of combat between Croats and ethnic Serb paramilitaries in Croatia, earning him the French Military Cross for bravery.

"We got into several tense situations and he always managed them with deliberation and calm," said retired Czech general Aleš Opata, who served with Pavel.

He later studied at military training schools in Britain, gaining a master's from King's College London.

After his country joined NATO in 1999, Pavel soon climbed through the alliance's ranks, becoming its top military official in 2015.

With a chest full of decorations, he retired in 2018.

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Czech Republic votes for president in runoff election between Petr Pavel and Andrej Babis

What are his political views?

Pavel ran as an independent and was the strongest of the three candidates backed by the liberal-conservative coalition SPOLU of now-former President Miloš Zeman.

He has argued for better redistribution of wealth and greater taxation of the rich while supporting progressive policies on issues such as same-sex marriage and euthanasia.

Positioning himself as a counterweight to populism, Pavel anchors the Czech Republic in NATO and wants to align his country with the European Union.

"The main issue at stake is whether chaos and populism will continue to reign or we return to observing rules... and we will be a reliable country for our allies," he said after narrowly winning the first election round.

A staunch supporter of Ukraine, Pavel's political rivals have alleged he would drag the country into a war with Russia.

"I know what war is about and I certainly don't wish it on anyone," said Pavel. "The first thing I would do is try to keep the country as far away from war as possible."

Often sporting jeans and a leather jacket, Pavel is a polyglot, speaking Czech, English, French and Russian, and loves motorcycling.

He holds a concealed weapon licence, allowing him to carry a firearm, and he is married to a fellow soldier, Eva Pavlová.