



By: *Tomorrow's Affairs Staff*

Petr Pavel's victory in the Czech Republic strengthens the European and NATO alliance in Central and Eastern Europe



The election year in Europe has started well for liberal, pro-European forces seeking to strengthen alliances on the continent, after years of the rise of Eurosceptics.

Former NATO leading General Petr Pavel's victory in the Czech presidential elections has provided pro-European and pro-Atlantic forces an initial lead in a year of important elections across Europe.

The most important parliamentary election battles are expected in July in Greece, in November in Poland, in December in Spain, and in Turkey in May, where both presidential and parliamentary elections will be held.

This year, Europe is providing an important political response to the trials it faced in 2022, when the Russian aggression against Ukraine caused major disruptions in supply, but also dilemmas about helping the Ukrainian defence.

A military background is a quality, not a handicap

Retired general Petr Pavel symbolises the policy that Europe has shown throughout the last, crisis, year. It is a policy of strong ties with allies in the EU and NATO, orientation towards partnership with the US, and determination to help Ukraine, as much as necessary, in its fight against Russian aggression.

"We are not gathering against something, but for something. For the values that we defend together", said Mr. Pavel at one of the last rallies before the second round of elections. He convincingly won against his opponent, the former Prime Minister Andrej Babis, with close to 60% of the votes.

Pavel endured a rather dirty campaign, often accused by Babis, one of the richest men in the Czech Republic, of being a warmonger, because of Pavel's strong and open support for sending military aid to Ukraine.

The defeated opponent obviously misjudged

the sentiment of the Czechs towards the war in Ukraine, because he considered the military background of Mr. Pavel and his support for Ukraine, a handicap that he should exploit, and not a political quality.

Babis advocated restraint towards Ukraine, called for peace negotiations, and even questioned agreements with NATO, saying that he would never send Czech soldiers to Poland if it were attacked by Russia.

Moscow suffered a defeat

The Kremlin is certainly not satisfied with this election outcome in the Czech Republic, because the candidate (Babis) who was clearly ready to be the cause of disunity in NATO were he elected as head of state, was defeated.

Also, an "oligarch-populist", as his political profile often describes him, made him quite a favourite in the Kremlin with regard to selecting which European leaders to support, was defeated.

Regardless of the fact that the powers of the presidential office in the Czech Republic are relatively small, even ceremonial, the head of state has great political authority and legitimacy, given that he is elected in direct elections and not by parliament.

The arrival of Petr Pavel in the presidential palace (Hrad) in March will also represent full agreement on state policy with the pro-Western government of Petr Fiala with the same majority in the parliament.

Given that the Czech Republic is a leader and role model in Central and Eastern Europe, the victory of Mr. Pavel and the strengthening of liberal, pro-EU and pro-Atlantic politics in Prague will have an important impact on the politics in the region.

This may be particularly important for events in Poland and its November parliamentary elections, where the ruling Law and Justice Party and its Eurosceptic politics will have a strong competitor in the liberal-democratic

opposition.

Cooling ties with China

The very convincing victory of Petr Pavel with a voter turnout of about 70% is also a strong message from the citizens of the Czech Republic that they support the policy of the current president Miloš Zeman.

A eurosceptic and a critic of NATO, Zeman advocated ties with Russia, until it attacked Ukraine, but also with China. This orientation of the Czech Republic towards China, even if only from its semi-ceremonial president, will end with the mandate of Petr Pavel.

The newly elected Czech President will be among the first to speak with the President of Ukraine, Volodymyr Zelensky, and with the President of Taiwan, Tsai Ing-wen.

Petr Tuma, visiting fellow of the Atlantic Council in Europe, is also convinced that the new president of the Czech Republic will lead a course away from China.

“Where one could imagine some change is Prague’s position vis-à-vis China and Taiwan. Peking-friendly former president Zeman used to create obstacles for government and legislators. Now, Czechs could seriously consider leaving the agonising 14+1 China-Central and Eastern Europe platform”, wrote Tuma on Twitter.