



By: TA | AP Insight

Billionaire's return steers Czechia away from Ukraine



Four years ago, it seemed that the days in politics of billionaire Andrej Babiš were numbered.

The ANO movement Babiš created (an abbreviation of Action of Dissatisfied Citizens that means "Yes" in Czech) to counter mainstream political parties was **defeated** in October 2021 by a coalition of pro-Western groups.

The **populist** leader was expected to make good on his promise to quit, rather than end up in opposition.

Instead, he immediately launched an aggressive campaign blaming the ruling coalition for every problem, from the energy crisis to soaring inflation.

He promised to revoke a much-resented increase in the state pension age and to end help for Ukraine, while ridiculing Prime Minister Petr Fiala for being a better prime minister of Ukraine than of Czechia.

On Saturday, ANO **claimed** its greatest election victory since its foundation in 2011.

"It's for me the culmination of my political career," said Babiš, 71, who was a member of the Communist Party before the 1989 Velvet Revolution in the former Czechoslovakia and has drawn **comparisons** to U.S. President Donald Trump.

Implications for Ukraine

Babiš's victory deprives Ukraine of a staunch supporter and steers Czechia toward the pro-Russian path taken by Hungary and Slovakia.

He is expected to join the ranks of Viktor Orbán of Hungary and Robert Fico of Slovakia, whose countries have **refused** to provide military aid to Ukraine, continue to import Russian oil and **oppose** sanctions on Russia.

Babiš said he was planning to abandon an internationally recognized Czech initiative that acquires artillery shells for Ukraine on markets

outside the EU.

He also opposes a NATO commitment to significantly increase defense spending and criticized a deal to purchase 24 U.S. F-35 fighter jets.

Babiš might be a vocal EU critic at home but would not present big obstacles in Brussels - Tomáš Weiss

In Europe, Babiš already joined forces with his friend Orbán to create a new **alliance** in the European Parliament, the "Patriots for Europe," to represent hard-right groups critical of EU migration and climate policies, and favoring national sovereignty.

Tomáš Weiss, associate professor of international relations at Charles University in Prague, said he would expect Babiš to apply a pragmatic approach to the EU due to his business interests. Babiš might be a vocal EU critic at home but would not present big obstacles in Brussels, he said.

"Fico and Orbán might be celebrating but they're not the players who matter at the European level," Weiss said.

Troubles in the past

Babiš made his first impact on the Czech political scene in the 2013 election, finishing second and becoming finance minister.

Among his moves, he proposed lowering taxes on beer by more than half — a policy which resonated among the beer-loving Czechs.

As the owner of the Agrofert conglomerate of some 200 agriculture, food, chemical and media companies, Babiš faced allegations that finance ministry officials used their powers to force his business competitors into liquidation.

Fearing a combination of wealth and power, Parliament approved a law that compelled

Babiš to transfer Agrofert to an independent trust fund. He was eventually fired as finance minister in 2017 over unexplained business dealings.

During his turbulent term in office, police recommended that Babiš should be indicted over alleged fraud involving EU subsidies

His popularity was unharmed, and he won the 2017 election, becoming prime minister and **forming** a minority government with the Social Democrats that governed with the support of the maverick Communists.

During his turbulent term in office, police recommended that he should be indicted over alleged fraud involving EU subsidies.

A quarter of a million people took to the streets — the biggest such **demonstrations** since 1989 — twice in 2019 to demand that Babiš step down due to his scandals, including the conflict of interest over EU subsidies.

He was hit by yet another **scandal** in 2021 that linked him and hundreds of other wealthy people to offshore accounts in findings dubbed the “Pandora Papers.”

He lost the parliamentary election a short time afterward and two years later was defeated in a run for the largely ceremonial post of president by Petr Pavel, a retired army general.

Troubles ahead

Babiš bounced back but problems remain.

He still faces fraud charges in the EU subsidies case and the new Parliament will have to lift his official immunity for a court to issue a verdict.



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He also has to meet the requirements of an amended conflict of interest law. The current stricter legislation does not allow the transfer of ownership to trust funds or relatives.

Without a majority in the lower house, Babiš prefers to govern alone, but his minority Cabinet would need the tacit support of the Freedom and Direct Democracy anti-migrant party and the right-wing Motorists for Themselves to win a mandatory parliamentary confidence vote to rule.

Another option for the three is to rule together with a comfortable majority. Babiš shares with the Motorists the rejection of EU climate and migration policies and other issues but the Freedom party wants to lead the country out of the EU and NATO, a red line for Babiš and the Motorists.

There are also questions over the stability of any support from the Freedom party, which ran on a joint ticket with three fringe extremists groups, with the possibility that disagreements over numerous issues might come to light soon.

“We’re entering an unknown future,” analyst Vladimíra Dvořáková from the Czech Technical University in Prague told Czech public television.