

# **CZECH** **IN THE ERA OF DISINFORMATION** **ELECTIONS**

## **Czech Presidential Elections in the Online Space (2<sup>nd</sup> Round): The Topic of the War in Ukraine in the Pre-election Debate**

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**As part of the project “Czech Elections in the Era of Disinformation: Presidential Elections 2023”, the Prague Security Studies Institute (PSSI) monitored the public debate in the online space about the presidential elections and individual candidates between the first round of the elections held on January 13 and 14 and the second round of elections which took place on January 27 and 28. We specifically focused on how the topic of the war in Ukraine was used and manipulated in the pre-election campaign and in the public discussion in the online space.**

While we did not detect a clearly coordinated disinformation campaign in our monitoring before the first round of the elections, neither by domestic nor foreign actors, information manipulation interconnected with the topic of the Czech Republic’s potential involvement in the war in Ukraine intensified before the second round. One of the two final candidates, Andrej Babiš, focused his campaign on his opponent Petr Pavel when Babiš’s billboards claiming he „*will not drag Czechia into*

*war because he is a diplomat, not a soldier*” [appeared](#) across the country the day after the first round of the elections. The statement intended to indicate that Petr Pavel, who is a retired general, will drag the country into the war in Ukraine. However, [according to](#) constitutional lawyers, the Czech president does not have the powers that would allow him alone to „drag” the country into a war. In addition, between the first and second round of the elections, screenshots of a fake text message [appeared](#) online. On behalf of the presidential candidate Petr Pavel, the message invited the recipient to come to the nearest army branch office where they will receive equipment for mobilization in Ukraine. However, operators [confirmed](#) that such a message did not spread through their networks, it only spread online in the form of an alleged screenshot. Therefore, PSSI monitored how this information manipulation resonated in the online space in four categories of sources: websites known for spreading disinformation, mainstream media<sup>1</sup>, political entities (parties and their leaders), and last but not least the candidates themselves.

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<sup>1</sup> Using the Pulsar Media Monitor tool, we selected 100 articles from news sites with the highest visibility.

# Presidential Candidates

As part of the candidates' online communication on Facebook, the topic of war did not attract much attention and appeared only in 6 of the 100 posts with the highest number of interactions, 4 of which involved Petr Pavel's reaction to Andrej Babiš's statement, not Babiš's campaign itself. Petr Pavel [criticized](#) Andrej Babiš for his campaign, which, according to Pavel, caused a conflict in the Czech Republic. At the same time, he [disproved](#) the lies being spread about him in connection with the alleged involvement in the war, such as that he will drag

the Czech Republic into a war with Russia, declare mobilization, or introduce compulsory military service. Just like in the period before [the first round of the elections](#), Petr Pavel used one of the strategies for countering disinformation, so-called debunking, in other words reaction to already existent information manipulation, its detection, and explanation of the facts. This strategy potentially achieved a certain effect since the majority of the candidates' posts that included the topic of war also included Petr Pavel's debunking.

**LIE**  
Pavel will drag us into a war with Russia.

**TRUTH** 

Since the beginning of the war, General Pavel has been warning against steps that could lead to Russia's war with NATO. On the contrary, he always sought negotiations with Russia to avoid war. As chairman of the NATO Military Committee, he even successfully negotiated with the Russian Chief of General Staff Gerasimov. As president, he would advocate for speeding up peace negotiations.

**LIES WILL NOT DIVIDE US!  
SHARE THE TRUTH**

**LEŽ**  
Pavel nás zatáhne do války s Ruskem

**PRAVDA** 

Generál Pavel od začátku války varuje před kroky, které by mohly vést k válce Ruska s NATO. Naopak vždy usiloval o jednání s Ruskem, aby nedošlo k válce. Jako předseda Vojenského výboru NATO dokonce úspěšně jednal s náčelníkem ruského generálního štábu Gerasimovem. Jako prezident by se zasadil o urychlení mírových jednání.

**LHANÍM NÁS NEROZDĚLÍ!  
SDÍLEJTE PRAVDU**

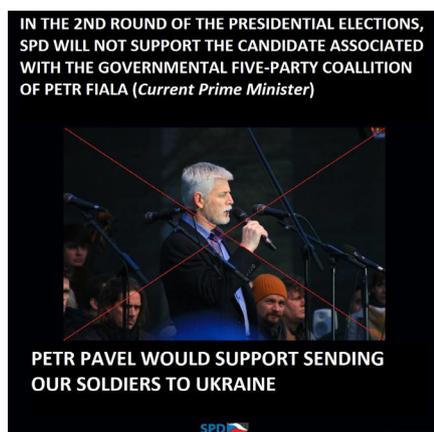
A rather significant reaction (in the media, but also on social networks, and among political representatives) was incited by Babiš's [answer](#) to a hypothetical question in a pre-election debate on the public Czech Television on whether he would send Czech soldiers to help in the event of an attack on Poland or the Baltic states: „No, certainly not. I want peace, I don't want war. And there is no way I would send our children and our women's children to war.“ The purpose of the question was probably to establish his position on Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty, according to which an attack on one member of NATO is an attack on all of its members. Although

Babiš corrected himself on his [Twitter](#) shortly after the broadcast of the debate, he raised critical opinions (not only) from members of the government, according to whom Andrej Babiš is questioning the Alliance commitments and damaging the Czech reputation abroad. Petr Pavel [had](#) a similar opinion. On his [Facebook](#), Andrej Babiš perceived these reactions as a distortion of his statement.

# Political Entities (Parties and Party Leaders)

Of the 100 posts on Facebook with the highest number of interactions on the accounts of political entities, the topic of the alleged dragging of the Czech Republic into a war appeared in 20% of the posts, while the author of one quarter of them was Jindřich Rajchl, the chairman of the PRO party focused on conservative values, and at the same time a former member of the non-parliamentary right-wing movement Tricolour (Trikolora). In his posts, he [supported](#) the candidate Andrej Babiš precisely on the grounds that Babiš does not want to drag the Czech Republic into a war. In one of his posts, Jindřich Rajchl also commented on the fake text message about mobilization and questioned the falsehood of the message: „a) it is either a hoax with the aim of scaring people and harming Petr Pavel in the 2nd round of the presidential elections; b) or there was an error in the system settings and the software sent the text message a few weeks earlier than was originally planned.” He thus supported and further spread this piece of disinformation and a potential alarming message.<sup>2</sup>

The topic of the alleged dragging of the Czech Republic into a war did not escape the attention of the right-wing Freedom and Direct Democracy (SPD) party members, especially the leader Tomio Okamura. According to him, the SPD movement will not support Petr Pavel in the second round [because](#) „according to his public statements, [Pavel] would support sending our soldiers to Ukraine, thereby directly dragging our country into a war.” In this post, he also shared Petr Pavel’s tweet from March 8, 2022, in which he calls on Czechs not to be afraid to do more for Ukraine — to offer, for example, NATO troops and air support. Tomio Okamura also shared this tweet in another popular post on Facebook, saying that Pavel wanted to send NATO soldiers, including Czech ones, to Ukraine and thus drag the Czech Republic directly into the war already a year prior. Given that Petr Pavel’s tweet talks about help primarily in the form of protecting civilians, Okamura’s claims constitute information manipulation and fearmongering with the aim of discrediting the candidate. However, this post was still shared by 1,600 Facebook users. Another SPD member and MEP Ivan David jumped on a similar wave.



Similar arguments in support of Andrej Babiš as opposed to Petr Pavel resonated on the opposite side of the political spectrum as well. [According to](#) Kateřina Konečná, an MEP and chairperson of the Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia (KSČM), Andrej Babiš „is not a choice of the heart, but a choice of who of the two offered pair poses a lesser threat to citizens’ wallets and war rage.” After the first round of the presidential elections,



we could observe a certain unification of opinion of the opposition parties, both from the right and from the left, who chose Andrej Babiš as a necessary lesser evil.

Of the government coalition’s contribution to the debate, only Ivan Bartoš, Minister for Regional Development and Deputy Prime Minister for Digitization, achieved higher attention in the form of

<sup>2</sup> Spreading an alarming message is prosecutable in the Czech Republic.

interactions. [According to](#) him, „the only person mobilizing is Andrej Babiš himself. He is mobilizing the disinformation scene that makes fools of people and pushes dangerous lies into society“. Another popular post was

from one of the governing parties, Civic Democratic Party (ODS), which quoted the Minister of Defense, Jana Černočová, [calling on](#) Andrej Babiš not to abuse the profession of soldiers in his campaign.

## Websites Known for Spreading Disinformation

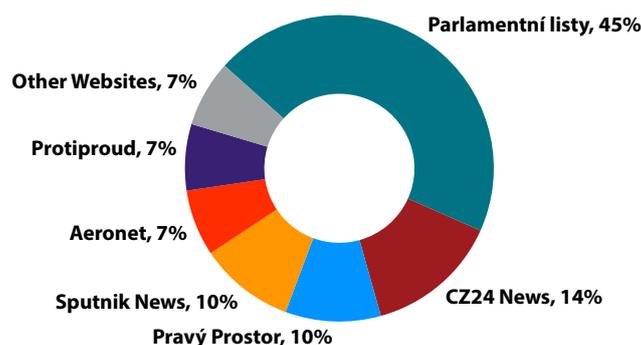
On websites known for spreading disinformation, the topic in question appeared in 29 articles and the most active one of them was, similarly to the period before the first round of elections, *Parlamentní listy* with 13 articles. This website does not have a negligible reach within the Czech media scene — according to the statistics of the [SimilarWeb](#) tool, the average number of visits on this website was 4.6 million per month from October to December. Some of the opinions of the previously mentioned opposition politicians, including Jindřich Rajchl defending the election of Andrej Babiš, or Ivan David, have penetrated this website. Jana Zwyrtěk Hamplová, a senator and former member of the left-wing Czech Social Democratic Party (ČSSD), [promoted](#) a similar narrative on these websites. According to her, Andrej Babiš is „at least a hope in the efforts for peace and not dragging our country into an unnecessary war.“ We can thus see the unification of the opinions of the opposite ends of the political spectrum on the candidates in the second round in this case as well.

Of course, Andrej Babiš was also defended in the media by members of his party, the ANO movement, specifically by his former Deputy Prime Minister<sup>3</sup> Karel Havlíček, who

sought a more conciliatory explanation of the argument about dragging the Czech Republic into a war than other monitored political entities. [According to](#) him, Petr Pavel's military background represents a greater tendency towards forceful solutions than diplomatic ones. Later, the *Parlamentní listy* website also [shared](#) information from a televised presidential debate in which Andrej Babiš defended his billboard with the words „it is not about Mr. Pavel. I'm saying that I will not drag Czechia into a war.“

A misleading headline offering space for manipulation appeared in an [article](#) that reported on an interview with Petr Pavel. The headline quotes the candidate saying „I would send my sons to war,“ while only stating in the body of the text that it was in response to a direct question on how Petr Pavel would behave if the Czech Republic was in danger, mobilization was announced and his sons received call-up papers. A similar manipulative activity could be [observed](#), for example, in the case of Tomio Okamura who also shared a video from the presidential debate without context with the words „Petr Pavel would be proud if his son went to war in solidarity with the allies.“

The Most Active Websites Known for Spreading Disinformation - Share of Articles Devoted to the Topic of War



<sup>3</sup> Also, the Minister of Industry and Trade and Minister of Transport in Second Cabinet of Andrej Babiš.

Other monitored websites known for spreading misinformation wrote harshly and negatively about Petr Pavel in the context of war. The C24 News website with the second-highest number of articles [reported](#) that Petr Pavel wants to declare a war on Russia, emphasizing that Russia is a nuclear power. In some articles, criticism of Pavel and his alleged desire for war was combined with criticism of the government or NATO. According to one author on this [website](#), „the risk that Pavel will drag us into war with Fiala [PM], Černochová [Minister of Defense] and NATO is absolutely real (for me personally bordering on certainty).“ The CZ24 News website, which aggregates content from other problematic platforms, recorded an

average of 1.3 million monthly visits from October to December, according to SimilarWeb statistics.

Petr Pavel and the government also appeared as protagonists of the war on the right-wing platform Právý prostor which shared Ivan David's [opinion](#) that „if the government candidate General Petr Pavel succeeds in the elections, the government will pass it off as consent of the citizens to the involvement of our country in the war in Ukraine.“ In this case, websites known for spreading disinformation attempted to [confirm](#) the manipulated information and spread it further.

## Mainstream Media

The topic of war appeared in 14 articles out of 100 with the highest visibility in the mainstream media, while the most popular article published on Seznam Zprávy [reported](#) on the fear Andrej Babiš's campaign caused among children in schools. In the articles, the media also provided space for the [opinion](#) of experts, according to whom Andrej Babiš, with his billboards, „parasitizes on people's fear and continues the tradition of the Soviet bloc propaganda.“ At the same time, some of the media made efforts to set the record straight when it comes to the Czech president's power to declare war by [sharing](#) a statement of constitutional lawyers according to whom „the president of the Republic does decide about mobilization, but on the one hand, only based on a proposal and with the consent of the government, and on the other hand, only during a state of war decided by the Parliament.“ Out of the 14 articles informing about the topic of war, 5 articles were devoted to the

opinions of experts or verification of information used in Andrej Babiš's campaign, which we perceive as a positive development.

The statement of Andrej Babiš about possible aid to Poland in the event of an attack also penetrated the mainstream media. In addition to the candidate's own [reaction](#) to the criticism leveled at him because of this statement, the media quoted an article from the Polish media [informing](#) about the „surprising words of the candidate who would not send troops in case of an attack on Poland.“ Among the reactions of the members of the government coalition, the [reaction](#) of the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Jan Lipavský, appeared in the mainstream media, according to whom Andrej Babiš damaged the Czech Republic abroad with his statement.

# Conclusion

Manipulative narratives about the alleged dragging of the Czech Republic into the war in Ukraine were not the dominant content in the public debate in the online information space in any of the four monitored categories — websites known for spreading disinformation, mainstream media, political entities and the candidates themselves. This manipulation rather dominated the offline pre-election campaign on billboards or in pre-election televised debates. Just as before the first round of the elections, the manipulative content in the online space was limited mainly to websites known for spreading disinformation. Mainstream media focused more on the nature of the debate itself. The most visited website known for spreading disinformation, Parlamentni listy, mostly provided a space for expression to political entities that manipulated the topic of war, other more fringe platforms were harshly reserved against the candidate Petr Pavel and further spread the manipulation. As a reason, they mostly referenced the candidate's military past or informed about him banding together with the government or NATO which will lead the Czech Republic into a war.

We observed a similar trend to a lesser extent among political entities. While in the Facebook communication, we also recorded statements by members of the government with critical sentiments towards Andrej Babiš's

campaign, the number of posts was dominated by those from fringe and opposition movements, who, on the other hand, supported Andrej Babiš. In this case, too, we observed attempts to spread fear of the election of Petr Pavel and dragging the Czech Republic into a war. We could observe a relative unification of the opposition across the political spectrum, both the left and the right, who decided to support Andrej Babiš before the second round as a lesser necessary evil compared to Petr Pavel, even though there was a split of opinions on Babiš before the first round.

When it comes to the communication of the candidates themselves, in the case of Petr Pavel, we could see the use of debunking as an effort to counter disinformation, as he also did before the first round of elections. We also observed a relatively positive development in the mainstream media which sought to disprove manipulated information by giving space to experts and constitutional lawyers. However, similar efforts to spread manipulative information, especially by political representatives or, in the case of elections, the candidates themselves, pose a future risk of polarizing the society and undermining trust in democratic institutions and constitutional officials by means of spreading disinformation about their powers and fearmongering.

For verified information about presidential elections and the candidates, follow our fact-checking partners [Demagog.cz](https://demagog.cz) and [HlidaciPes.org](https://hlidaciPes.org).

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