

PSSI PERSPECTIVES — 24

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December 2022

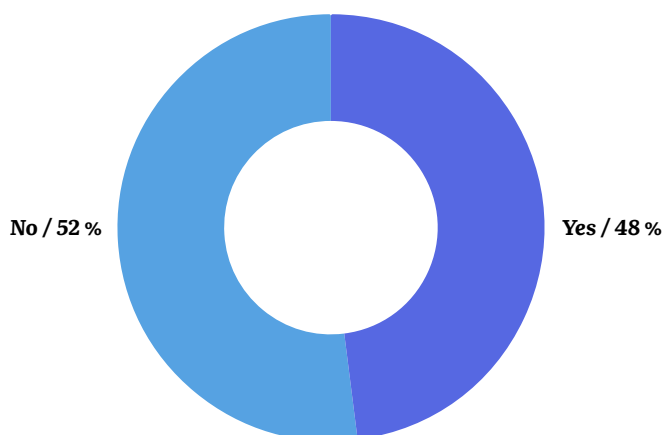
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The Prague Security Studies Institute (PSSI) monitors the public online debate about the presidential elections and the individual candidates as a part of the project “Czech Elections in the Era of Disinformation: 2023 Presidential Elections”. This monthly report covers monitoring from October 2022 which includes the 100 most interactive posts on Facebook from presidential candidates, political parties and their leaders. It is complemented by an analysis of the online debate about the candidates on websites known for spreading disinformation<sup>1</sup> and in mainstream media,<sup>2</sup> focusing on the penetration of manipulative narratives into the mainstream.

About half of the total 425 texts mentioning the presidential candidates were devoted directly to the pre-election campaign, and apart from the candidates themselves, websites known for spreading disinformation were the most active monitored outlets on the topic of the elections. Mainstream media focused more on the candidates themselves than on the context of the elections.

## The Topic of Presidential Elections



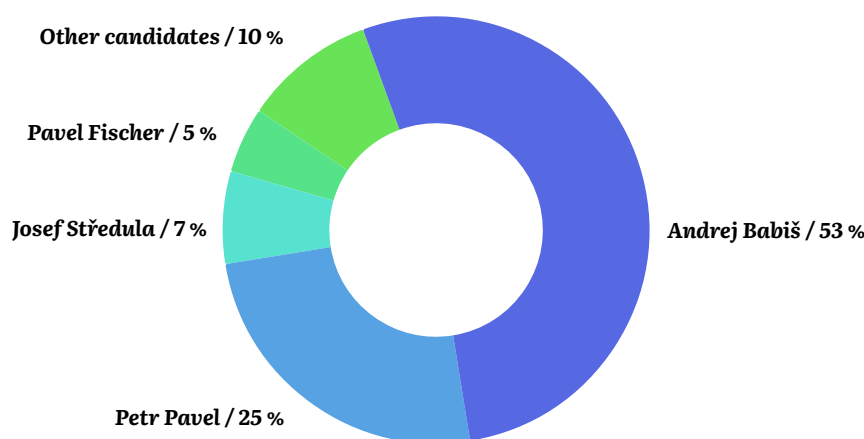
44% of the most popular candidates’ Facebook posts were openly framed as pre-election campaigning. The author of almost half of them was, at the time of monitoring, the newly announced candidate and former Prime Minister Andrej Babiš. His posts can be divided into two critically-framed categories — one in which he announced and [justified](#) his candidacy, primarily based on criticism of the government for “inflation, the

1 We monitored a total of eleven websites: Parlamentní listy, CZ24 News, AC24, Protiproud, Aeronet, Tadesco, Pravý prostor, D-Fens, Zvědavec, Otevři svou mysl and Sputnik News. These websites were selected based on their number of visits and share of problematic content, on which there is general and long-term consensus in the expert community (see, for example, the list [konspiratori.sk](#) or the [report](#) of the European Values think-tank).

2 Using the Pulsar tool, 100 articles from news sites with the highest visibility reached were selected.

energy crisis and insufficient help to the people”; and the second, in which he **spoke** negatively about his opponents supported by the ruling five-party coalition.<sup>3</sup> He paid special attention to Petr Pavel and frequently pointed out his communist past. In general, Andrej Babiš launched a quite active online campaign which can also be explained by his late announcement of the candidacy. Even so, his decision did not surprise most of the other candidates.

### The Most Active Candidates on Facebook Based on Interactions



Criticism of the past in the context of the former regime also resonated in the case of Andrej Babiš himself, who, on the other hand, was **addressed** negatively by candidates supported by the five-party coalition. The announcement of Babiš’s candidacy caused relatively negative reactions among these candidates. Petr Pavel **perceives** his candidacy “as a threat to the Czech Republic because of the populism he personifies.” Petr Pavel was the second most active in the number of highly interactive posts, with 52% directly on the topic of elections. This candidate was particularly active in so-called counter-messaging, i.e., responding to the narratives being spread about him. It mainly involved **explaining** his past.

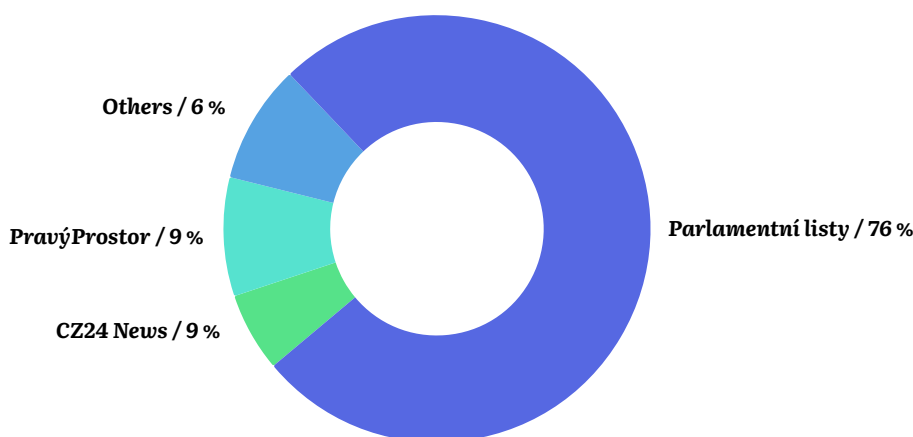
The most interactive posts of political entities (parties and their leaders) mentioned Andrej Babiš in 59% cases, while the active support of the ANO movement and its members contributed to this to a large extent. 18% posts promoted negative sentiments towards Andrej Babiš, coming mainly from representatives of the government coalition. **According** to current Prime Minister Petr Fiala, “Babiš is seeking immunity at the Castle<sup>4</sup> and the Czech Republic does not deserve that.” The next most frequently mentioned candidate, though far behind Andrej Babiš, was a candidate of the right-wing party Freedom and Direct Democracy (SPD) Jaroslav Bašta with 10% mentions which were solely positive thanks to the activity of the SPD leader Tomio Okamura. Of the monitored subjects, it was Okamura who had the greatest overall reach, with his posts occupying 13 places in the top 20 most interactive posts. He expressed his support for Bašta mainly by promoting the candidate’s anti-government and anti-European **stances**. In this case, the topic was also the dissident past of the candidate, which was positively **highlighted** as a fight “for freedom, democracy and human rights.” The goal of this messaging could have been to create a contrast with aforementioned Babiš and Pavel.

3 The coalition endorsed three candidates: Pavel Fischer, Danuše Nerudová and Petr Pavel.

4 The Prague Castle is the official seat of the President of the Czech Republic. Andrej Babiš is facing charges in a \$2 million EU subsidy fraud case.

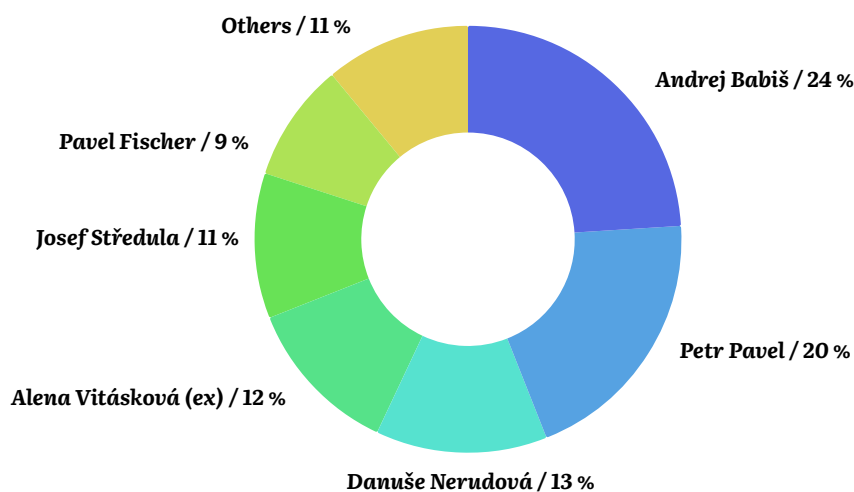
On websites known for spreading disinformation, presidential candidates were mentioned in as many as 127 articles, with 72% of the texts mentioning them directly in the context of the elections. Undoubtedly, the most active website was Parlamentní listy, where 76% of the articles were published. A majority of the texts was devoted to Andrej Babiš (24%), but they mostly informed about his candidacy and surveys of electoral preferences in a neutral manner.

### The Most Active Websites Know for Spreading Disinformation



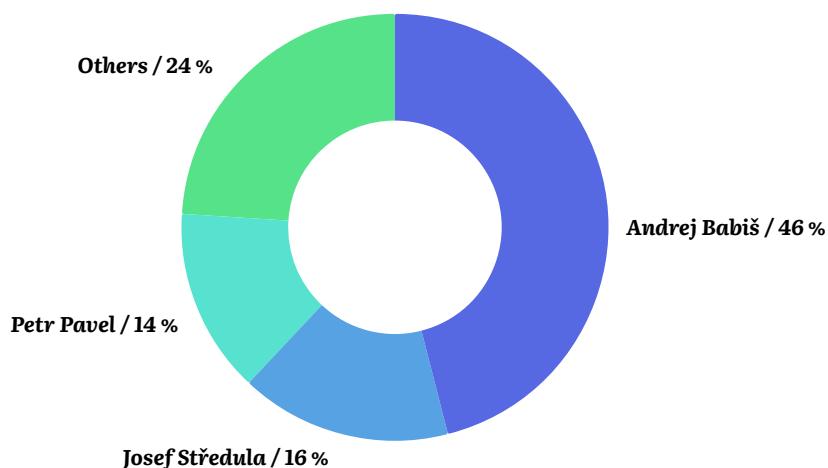
The second most frequently mentioned candidate was Petr Pavel (20%) once again. A significant majority of the texts mentioned him in a negative manner, mainly because of his past. In this context, an unflattering statement of his former classmate Pavel Beneš, which was [published](#) in full by Parlamentní listy and to which the candidate himself [responded](#), was often mentioned. In several articles, a nationalist and Eurosceptic politician Jana Bobošíková and Alena Vításková, who withdrew her own candidacy, were given space to criticize not only Petr Pavel, but also the candidate Danuše [Nerudová](#). When she was still running, Vításková was [supported](#) by the right-wing platform Pravý Prostor, which also supports Jaroslav Bašta and, on the contrary, is critical towards Andrej Babiš.

### The Most Frequently Mentioned Candidates



In the mainstream media, Andrej Babiš was also mentioned the most. His name appeared in 38% of the monitored texts, which mostly reported neutrally about his candidacy and the reactions it provoked in other politicians. Opinions about the past of Petr Pavel from the already mentioned [Pavel Beneš](#) or the historian [Petr Blažek](#) have also reached the mainstream media. Both claim that Petr Pavel is not telling the truth and is presenting a false story about himself. A candidate and trade unionist Josef Středula was mentioned in 15% of the articles, mainly in the context of a trade union [demonstration](#) against the government and poverty, at which Středula spoke. [Criticism](#) appeared claiming Středula has misused the demonstration for his election campaign. In general, however, the topic of the elections received less attention in these mainstream news sources than from political entities or websites known for spreading disinformation.

### The Most Frequently Mentioned Candidates in Mainstream Media



So far, the candidates' past before 1989 is emerging as a big topic of these elections. Whether it casts a positive or negative light on the relevant candidates, it is clear that the other candidates are fading into the background of the online space for now. Overall, the attention in the debate about the elections is dominated by Andrej Babiš, who waited almost until the last moment to announce his candidacy. In the following month, a certain consolidation of the pre-election debate can be expected, since at the time of writing this report, the Czech public already knows the 9 candidates officially admitted into the race by the Ministry of Interior.

For verified information about presidential elections and the candidates, follow our fact-checking partners [Demagog.cz](#) and [HlídacíPes.org](#).

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