

PSSI PERSPECTIVES — 25

CZECH PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS IN THE ONLINE SPACE: NOVEMBER 2022

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The Prague Security Studies Institute (PSSI) is monitoring the online public debate about the presidential elections and individual candidates as part of the project “Czech Elections in the Era of Disinformation: Presidential Elections 2023”. This monthly report focuses on monitoring from November 2022, which includes the 100 posts with the biggest number of interactions¹ on Facebook by 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 disinformation² and in the mainstream media³, focused on the penetration of manipulative narratives from fringe platforms into the mainstream debate.

GENERAL OVERVIEW

Out of the total 427 texts mentioning the presidential candidates, 293 were directly focused on the pre-election campaign, while the topic of the elections dominated in all four monitored categories. However, the vast majority of content about the elections came from sites known for spreading disinformation. The number of texts mentioning the pre-election campaign increased compared to the previous month. This can be attributed both to the approaching elections date and the fact that by the end of the month, the Ministry of the Interior had already definitively confirmed nine of the twenty-one candidates⁴ who met all the conditions for running in the elections.

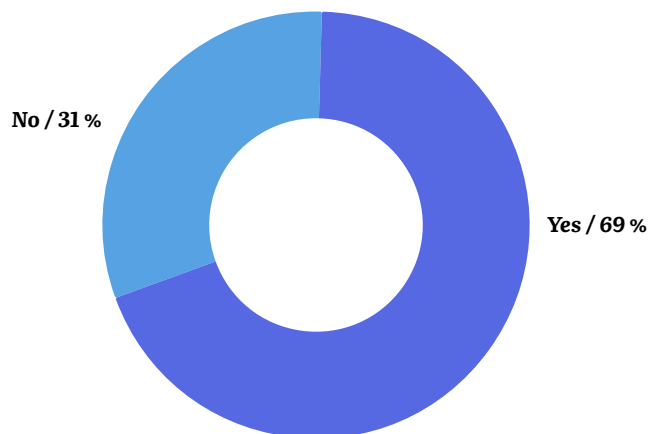
1 Interactions in this case mean reactions, comments, shares.

2 We monitored a total of 11 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 a general and long-term consensus in the expert community (see, for example, the list [konspiratori.sk](https://www.konspiratori.sk) or the [report](#) of the European Values think-tank).

3 Using the Pulsar Media Monitor tool, 100 articles from news sites with the highest visibility were selected.

4 At the time of writing: Andrej Babiš, Jaroslav Bašta, Pavel Fischer, Marek Hilšer, Danuše Nerudová, Petr Pavel, Denisa Rohanová, Josef Středula and Tomáš Zima.

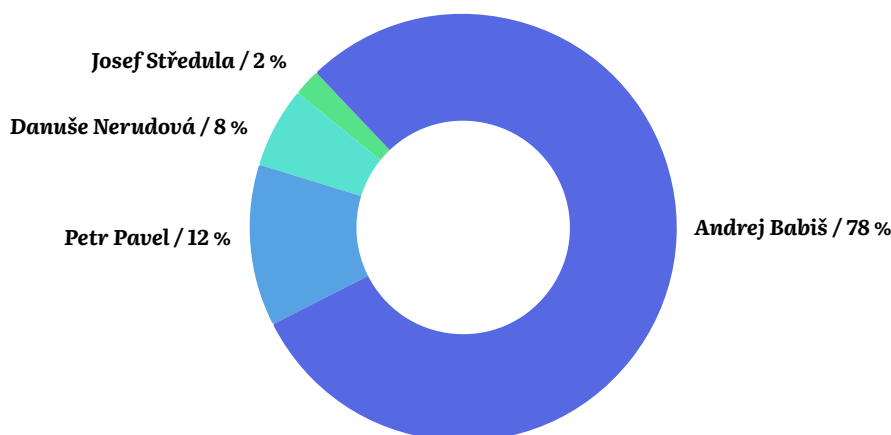
The Topics of Presidential Elections



COMMUNICATION OF CANDIDATES ON FACEBOOK

Candidates’ most popular Facebook posts were overtly framed as campaigning in 55% cases. The author of a significant majority of them was Andrej Babiš, whose posts made up 78% of the posts with the largest number of interactions. He devoted most of his posts to traveling around the country as part of his campaign and sharing videos of his supporters, while also building his communication on the topic of the energy crisis: after the trips, he assessed that people “of course are annoyed by ČEZ⁵ and of course the government is to blame.” Along with statements about what he would do as the president, posts of this type made up the vast majority of his communication. Although he was less vocal about the other candidates than in the previous month, likely due to his claim that he would run a positive campaign and “not run against anyone”, the current government has not escaped criticism from him. In some posts, he linked the criticism directly to the election campaign, while in others he expressed the financial problems of the Czech population in specific numbers. In contrast to the previous month, the topic of the candidates’ past almost did not resonate among the candidates, and the number of anti-government posts blaming the coalition for the current crisis also dropped significantly.

Most Active Candidates on Facebook Based on Interactions



5 ČEZ Group is a conglomerate of 96 companies, 72 of them in the Czech Republic. Its core business is the generation, distribution, trade in, and sales of electricity and heat, trade in and sales of natural gas, and coal extraction.

Far behind Andrej Babiš, the most popular posts based on the number of interactions were those from the candidate Petr Pavel. As part of his [motto](#) “Let’s return order and peace to the Czech Republic”, he often emphasized the importance of an experienced candidate who, in times of crisis and war, “will not cause confusion and will lead the country level-headed, communicate quickly and calmly and provide a clear direction.” The themes of the current crisis and emphasis on an experienced leader dominated his posts. He also used this theme in his [challenge](#) to Andrej Babiš, in which he responded to his new campaign slogan “a crisis manager”, while criticizing his way of solving the COVID-19 crisis. However, Babiš [refused](#) this challenge on the grounds that he was traveling to meet people as part of his election campaign. The other candidates were not very active on their Facebook profiles. The third favored candidate according to the [polls](#), Danuše Nerudová, only [emphasized](#) her determination and readiness to be the first Czech female president.

COMMUNICATION OF POLITICAL PARTIES AND THEIR LEADERS

Sentiments regarding Andrej Babiš dominated even in the most interactive posts of political entities (parties and their leaders), which mentioned this candidate in 53% of cases. Almost half of them were expressions of support from the ANO movement led by Babiš and its members or direct citations of posts from Babiš. The other half of the posts spoke negatively about this candidate in 28% of cases, while the criticism came mainly from the ruling five-party coalition, [according to](#) which “Andrej Babiš is a liar.” It does not specify exactly what Andrej Babiš is lying about, but for example, one of the ruling parties, the Civic Democratic Party (ODS), promotes the so-called [the page of lies of Andrej Babiš](#) on its Facebook, which offers “a list of very well-documented lies of Andrej Babiš.” The coalition also [responded](#) to Babiš as a “crisis manager” saying that “every one of his solutions would cause a crisis and economic problems.” Andrej Babiš was also [accused](#) of aiding Russian and Chinese interests in the Czech Republic.

The next most frequently mentioned candidate, but far behind Andrej Babiš, was the candidate of the right-wing party Freedom and Direct Democracy (SPD) Jaroslav Bašta with 29% of mentions, which were almost purely positive thanks to the activity of the SPD leader Tomio Okamura. Of the monitored subjects, Okamura had the greatest overall reach, his posts occupied 14 places in the top 20 most interactive posts. He particularly [highlighted](#) Bašta as the only “patriotic and conservative candidate”, while continuing to [emphasize](#) his dissident past and the contrast with the candidates supported by the “incompetent” governing five-party coalition. The right-wing party Tricolour also expressed support for Bašta; according to the party, only this candidate meets their three [conditions](#) for an ideal president.

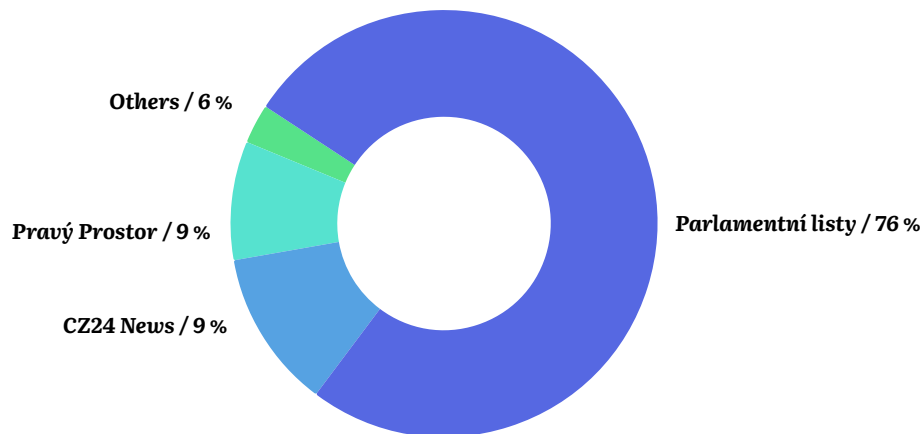
WEBSITES KNOWN FOR SPREADING DISINFORMATION

On websites known for spreading disinformation, presidential candidates were mentioned in 127 articles, with 85% 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. This website is [a bridge medium](#) between mainstream and disinformation media and provides space to voices from the whole political spectrum, including extremists. The most articles were devoted to Andrej Babiš (32%), while half of these articles gave space to his opinions, most often [criticism](#) of the government. In the second half of the articles, Andrej Babiš was mentioned negatively, with repeated narratives about him as a [liar](#) “who really only cares about two things: not sitting in jail and having the best possible time for his Agrofert⁶.” Some websites

6 Agrofert is a Czech holding conglomerate operating mainly in the sectors of agriculture, food industry, chemical industry and media, founded by Andrej Babiš.

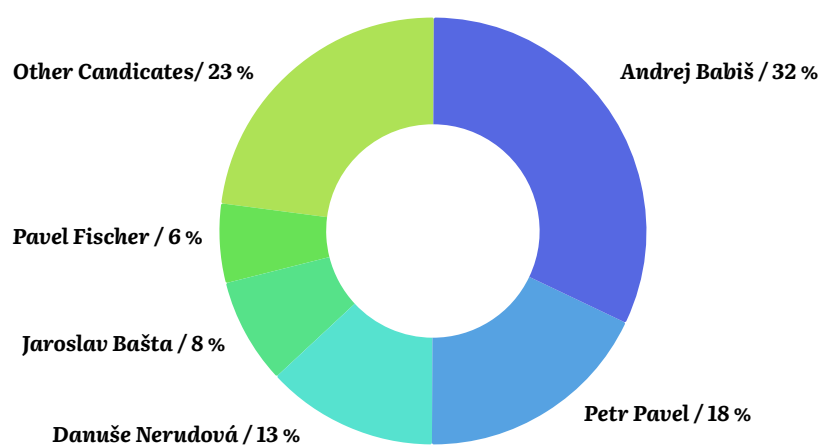
known for spreading disinformation deliberately [call](#) him “The Big Stork” in Slovak language in connection with the Stork’s Nest case, which probably means they want to point out his Slovak origin. Andrej Babiš is [accused](#) of falsely creating the impression that the Stork’s Nest company, which was connected to Babiš’s conglomerate Agrofert, met grant conditions as a small or medium-sized business to fraudulently acquire around €2 million in EU subsidies.

The Most Active Websites Know for Spreading Disinformation



The second most frequently mentioned candidate was once again Petr Pavel (18%), followed by Danuše Nerudová (13%). In the case of Petr Pavel, his alleged connection to the US resonated, due to the strong support he gets from Petr Kolář, who, [according to](#) an anonymous strategist, is employed by the American legal and lobbying firm Squire Patton Boggs. Pavel was also [described](#) as a “mysterious uncle from the USA” by the nationalist and Eurosceptic presenter and former politician Jana Bobošíková, who withdrew her own presidential candidacy. Bobošíková also criticized Danuše Nerudová for an alleged [fraud](#) at Mendel University, where the presidential candidate used to be a rector.

The Most Frequently Mentioned Candidates

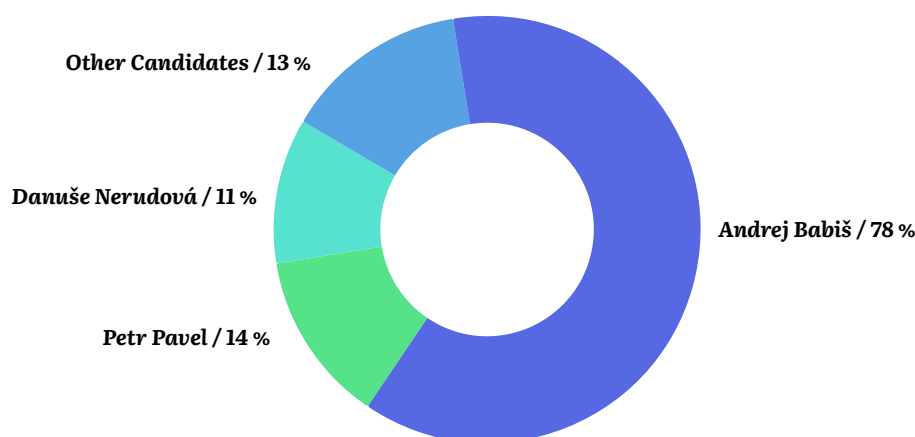


The topic of the final list of candidates according to the Ministry of the Interior also resonated on websites known for spreading disinformation. They questioned the rejection of some “alternative candidates”⁷ due to errors in the signatures, as well as the admission of only “candidates of the National Front”, among whom they include “everything rotten and stinking on the Czech political scene”, including Andrej Babiš, Danuše Nerudová, and Petr Pavel. It is interesting that Pravý prostor, which presents itself as a right-wing platform, includes the right-wing SPD candidate Jaroslav Bašta in this group. It can be assumed that they are referring to the National Front from 1954, which was a de facto instrument of the totalitarian power of the Communist Party. This alleged fraud was linked to criticism of the direct election of the president, which they consider “an ever-increasing mummery that we will unfortunately never get rid of.”

MAINSTREAM MEDIA

Mainstream media wrote directly about the election campaign more often than in the previous month, in 70% of their articles. The most frequently mentioned candidate was again Andrej Babiš (62%), mostly negatively and neutrally. The media wrote neutrally about him especially in connection to his campaign or to his decision not to participate in any debate with his opponents. Criticism of Babiš came again mainly from the five-party coalition because of him going to court in the Stork’s Nest case. In the same context, on the other hand, he was defended by members of the ANO movement. An article was also leaked to the media in which experts claim that Babiš “polarizes Czech society more than the current president”. The next two most mentioned candidates, but far behind Babiš, were Petr Pavel (14%) and Danuše Nerudová (11%), who were mentioned mostly neutrally, or their statements were quoted. Petr Pavel criticized Babiš for his non-participation in debates and also the government for slow anti-crisis measures, while the government, especially Prime Minister Petr Fiala, expressed support for Pavel. Even though the candidates’ pasts generally did not resonate as much in the pre-election campaign as in the previous month, candidate Danuše Nerudová started the next phase of the campaign, in which she emphasizes that “while her opponents have to deal with the past, she intends to focus on the future.” Although in general, the mainstream media paid more attention to the election campaign than in the previous month, websites known for spreading disinformation still covered the topic more actively.

The Most Frequently Mentioned Candidates in Mainstream Media



7 The website Pravý prostor lists, for example, Karel Janeček, Tomáš Březina and Karel Diviš among the alternative candidates.

EVALUATION AND FUTURE PROSPECTS

Although the past of the candidates was initially looming as a big topic of these elections, it was not prominent in the November online debate, with the exception of Danuše Nerudová's communication. Together with Andrej Babiš and Petr Pavel, she was mentioned the most in three of the four monitored categories, while these two candidates started a rather positive campaign with the purpose of highlighting their qualities for the position of a president instead of slandering each other. The topic of the current energy crisis came to the fore, either as an analysis of its solution in the case of Pavel, or as a tool for criticizing the government in the case of Babiš. Overall, during the observed period, it was Andrej Babiš who attracted the most attention as he launched a relatively extensive active campaign. Compared to the previous month, Danuše Nerudová attracted more attention, while Petr Pavel was written about a little less. For now, the other candidates are still in the background. In the following month, a greater consolidation of the pre-election debate can be expected, as 9 candidates were announced at the end of November and officially admitted to the elections by the Ministry of the Interior.

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

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