

PSSI PERSPECTIVES — 26

CZECH PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS IN THE ONLINE SPACE: DECEMBER 2022

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January 2023

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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 December 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 from the mainstream media³, focused on the penetration of manipulative narratives from fringe platforms into the mainstream debate.

GENERAL OVERVIEW

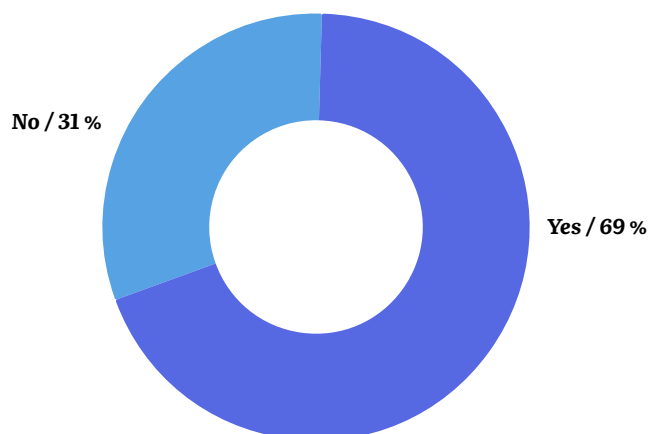
Out of the total 493 texts mentioning the presidential candidates, 340 were directly focused on the pre-election campaign, while the topic of the elections dominated in almost all monitored categories, except for the Facebook posts of the candidates themselves. However, the vast majority of content about the elections came from sites known for spreading disinformation, which wrote more about the presidential elections than in the previous month. Despite the fact that the final set of candidates changed when the Supreme Administrative Court [decided](#) on the registration of Karel Diviš and Denisa Rohanová dropped out of the elections, it did not have a major impact on the debate.

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, Zvědavce, 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](#) 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.

The Topics of Presidential Elections



COMMUNICATION OF CANDIDATES ON FACEBOOK

The most popular Facebook posts of the candidates were directly related to the election campaign in 42% of cases. The author of a significant majority of them was Andrej Babiš, whose posts made up 65% of the posts with the largest number of interactions. The candidates’ debate on Facebook was not focused on one topic. The vast majority of posts from Andrej Babiš contained unofficial communication with his fans in the form of sharing personal photos or videos. The other part of his posts was criticism of the current government for financial aid to Ukraine and insufficient aid to Czech citizens. In connection to the presidential elections and his anti-government views, he emphasized that “it would be nice if there was someone other than the five-party coalition at the Castle⁴.”

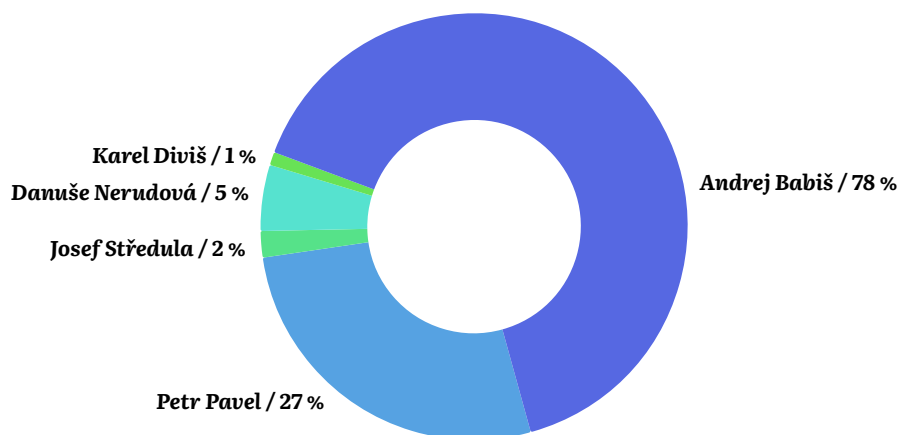
The topic of visits to Hungary by Andrej Babiš and Petr Pavel also resonated in the Facebook space of the candidates, with the latter candidate producing the second-largest number of all analyzed posts (27%). While Babiš, who presents himself as an anti-immigration candidate, traveled to the Hungarian-Serbian border to find out how the Czech Republic can help Hungary with illegal immigration, Petr Pavel visited the country to meet with representatives of civil society and talk to them about the impact of the government there, which according to him, is populist. It was “populism and Andrej Babiš’s efforts to Orbanize⁵ Czechia” that he called his biggest rivals. In his campaign posts, he again emphasized the need for experienced and calm leadership in difficult times.

Far behind these candidates were Danuše Nerudová, whose texts made up 5% of the posts, and Josef Středula with 2% of the posts. While Danuše Nerudová shared the latest election polls in which she is leading, Josef Středula emphasized that he is running “for the right to a decent wage, heat and energy, housing and health.”

4 The Prague Castle is the official seat of the President of the Czech Republic.

5 Referring to Viktor Orbán, Hungarian Prime Minister.

Most Active Candidates on Facebook Based on Interactions



COMMUNICATION OF POLITICAL PARTIES AND THEIR LEADERS

Almost half (49%) of the most interactive posts by political entities (parties and their leaders) were sentiments regarding the right-wing Freedom and Direct Democracy (SPD) candidate Jaroslav Bašta, with all of these posts expressing support for the candidate. The author of a significant majority of them was the leader of the SPD, Tomio Okamura, who called for the support of Jaroslav Bašta, and at the same time emphasized that “no one else among the candidates, including Andrej Babiš, wants to dismiss Fiala’s government.” Given his relatively frequent criticism of Andrej Babiš for “collusion” with the government on the issue of training Ukrainian soldiers⁶, it can be assumed that Tomio Okamura highlights Jaroslav Bašta as the only anti-government candidate, despite the fact that Andrej Babiš also has his reservations against the government. According to Tomio Okamura, Jaroslav Bašta succeeded in uniting Czech patriots, while Zuzana Majerová, chairperson of the right-wing Tricolour party, and also the movement Otevřeme Česko - Chcípl pes⁷ expressed open support for him on their Facebook.

The second most frequently mentioned candidate was Andrej Babiš with 26% of mentions, most of which were negative. More than half of them came from Tomio Okamura, who criticized Andrej Babiš for the mentioned alleged “collusion” with the government and claimed that he is “not a patriotic or conservative presidential candidate.” Posts from Tomio Okamura made up 73% of the total debate of political subjects on Facebook.

Not far behind Andrej Babiš was Danuše Nerudová, who made up 19% of the total mentions, and always in a negative way. In this case, Tomio Okamura’s posts also significantly dominated. He criticized the candidate for her alleged scandal with the trading of degrees at the Mendel University in Brno, where she was a rector, or for her views on education, healthcare, and the introduction of the Euro currency. At the same

6 According to the Ministry of Defense of the Czech Republic, the training of Ukrainian soldiers is based on a bilateral agreement between the government of the Czech Republic and Ukraine, and in the future it is planned to transfer it under the assistance mission of the EU. On October 17, the European Union approved an assistance mission for Ukraine aimed at training its soldiers on the territory of the member states.

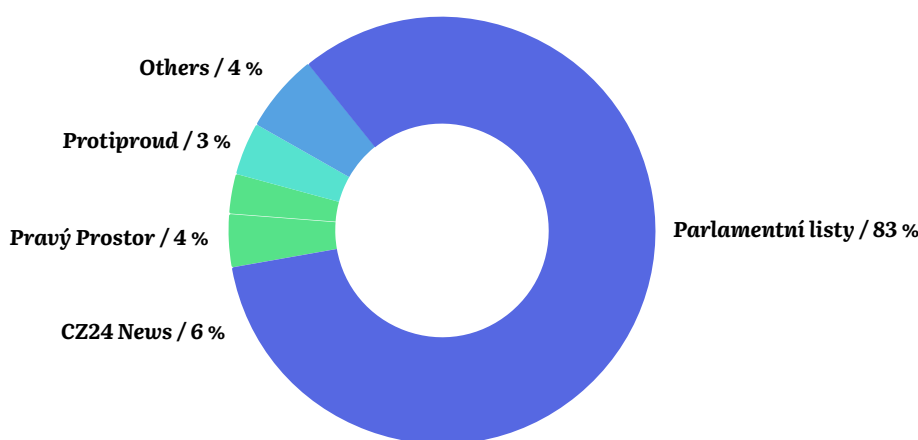
7 The PES movement (formerly Chcípl PES) was created “as a reaction to the long-term inability of the government and the opposition to effectively solve the so-called covid crisis.”

time, Tomio Okamura [shared](#) a video of the incumbent president Miloš Zeman’s interview, who talks about the candidate’s weaknesses. Zeman, on the other hand, [expressed](#) his support for Andrej Babiš.

WEBSITES KNOWN FOR SPREADING DISINFORMATION

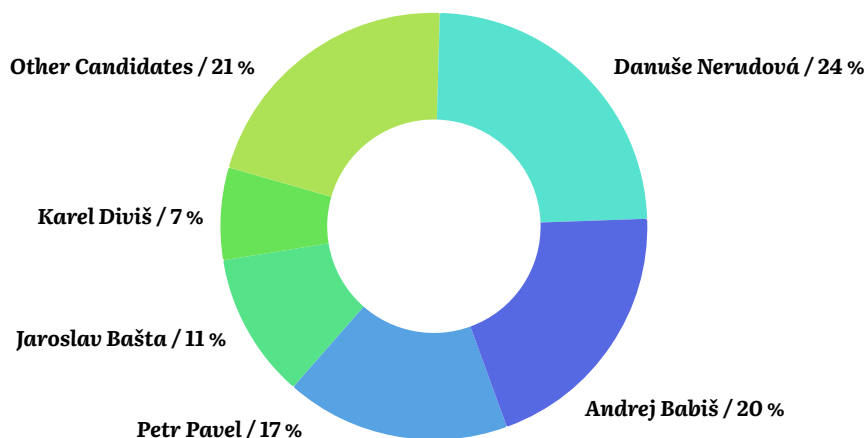
On websites known for spreading disinformation, presidential candidates were mentioned in 193 articles, with 78% of the texts mentioning them directly in the context of the elections. Undoubtedly, the most active website was Parlamentní listy, where 83% of the articles were published. This website is [a bridge medium](#) between mainstream and disinformation media and provides space to voices from the whole political spectrum, including extremists. The debate about the candidates was more diversely divided than in previous months, with Danuše Nerudová receiving the most attention in December, covered by 24% of the articles. Most of these texts were tuned negatively. The subject was again the alleged case of purchased diplomas at the Mendel University in Brno. Two former nationalist potential candidates, Jana Bobošíková and Alena Vitásková, who, in addition to the case at the university dealt with the collection of signatures for candidacy, also received space for criticism of Nerudová on these websites. According to Alena Vitásková, it is a [“miracle of miracles”](#) that the Ministry recognized Danuše Nerudová’s signatures under the petition sheets, since Vitásková herself “knows in detail how high the error rate is.” Websites known for spreading disinformation also [responded](#) to the [support](#) of the candidate among students: “Auntie Nerudová would clearly win the student elections — if it is still true that children are the future, then it is rather sad news for this country.”

The Most Active Websites Know for Spreading Disinformation



The other most frequently mentioned candidates were Andrej Babiš (20%), Petr Pavel (17%) and Jaroslav Bašta (11%). Most of the articles about Andrej Babiš contained his statements, which were either directly related to the [presidential elections](#) or [criticism of the current government](#). In the case of Petr Pavel, negatively tuned articles prevailed, while his communist past became the main topic again. This candidate was also [criticized](#) by Jana Bobošíková, namely for his studies, during which he allegedly “was subordinated to Moscow and the Soviet Union all the time.” Another article described him as an “orthodox communist who, like a fox, changes his fur but does not change his habits.”

The Most Frequently Mentioned Candidates

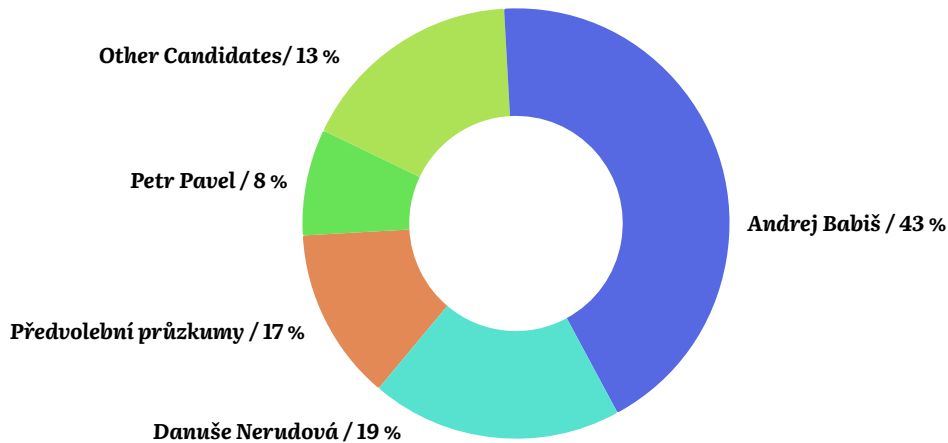


The SPD candidate Jaroslav Bašta also got more space to express himself on websites known for spreading disinformation where he [complained](#) “that he does not get enough space in the media and has to fight with the media barrier” and [also](#) “that he is not invited to debates”. Support for the mentioned candidate also spread on these websites, especially on the websites Parlamentní listy and “the counterrevolution magazine” Protiproud. They [informed](#) about the unification of Czech patriots, because “for patriotic voters who reject the continuation of the reign of national destruction, there is essentially no other choice than Jaroslav Bašta.” However, an interesting discrepancy of opinions can be observed on the right-wing website Pravý prostor. While one author on this website [writes](#) about Jaroslav Bašta as “the only true patriotic candidate”, another [questions](#) “that the SPD chose Bašta as their candidate for president when they certainly have better personalities in stock.”

MAINSTREAM MEDIA

As the date of the elections approached, the mainstream media also wrote more about the candidates in connection with the elections. As in the previous month, Andrej Babiš was the most frequently mentioned candidate, but this time in a slightly smaller number of articles (43%). In approximately the same ratio of texts, Andrej Babiš was written about in neutral sentiments, or this candidate was quoted. The mainstream media often [wrote](#) about his “embarrassing situation among children” when Andrej Babiš, like the other candidates, appeared on the TV show [Prima K tabuli!](#) (translation: To the Blackboard!) and visited a classroom. At the same time, the media gave Andrej Babiš [space](#) for defense. They also [informed](#) about his new election clip, in which “he appeals to people with a reference to the alleged successes of his government and with proclamations that the interests of Czech citizens come first for him.” More often than in the previous month, the mainstream media wrote about Danuše Nerudová, while this candidate was most [criticized](#) in connection with the violation of the law on higher education institutions at the Mendel University in Brno during her leadership, based on an inspection that Deník N [pointed out](#). The candidate’s [statement](#) in which she declared that “her biggest handicap is that she is a woman, young, and also beautiful” also became a source of [criticism](#) and ridicule. Petr Pavel’s rhetoric also penetrated the media, who first [stated](#) that he “doesn’t know if he would support Danuše Nerudová against Andrej Babiš in a possible second round of elections.” A few days later, however, the media [reported](#) that, according to Petr Pavel, Andrej Babiš is a bigger threat and against him, he would support Danuše Nerudová in the second round. At the same time, candidates Andrej Babiš, Danuše Nerudová and Petr Pavel were mentioned neutrally in almost a fifth of the articles in connection with pre-election polls.

The Most Frequently Mentioned Candidates in Mainstream Media



EVALUATION AND FUTURE PROSPECTS

Attention to the candidates was more diversified than in previous months. While Andrej Babiš still led in the number of most interactive posts on Facebook, interest in him decreased in the remaining three monitored categories. Danuše Nerudová came to the fore more in connection with the case at Mendel University and Jaroslav Bašta received more support than in previous months, especially from Tomio Okamura. The past of the candidates entered the debate again, but it was only written about in connection with Petr Pavel. The decision to register Karel Diviš for the elections and the exclusion of Denisa Rohanová did not significantly affect the debate. Due to the approaching elections, we do not expect a fundamental change in the course of the public debate. It can be expected that the most attention will be given to Andrej Babiš, Danuše Nerudová and Petr Pavel who are leading in the pre-election polls. The debate will probably also be devoted to Jaroslav Bašta, especially thanks to support from right-wing parties and websites known for spreading disinformation. In connection with the above-mentioned candidates, it can be assumed that the debate on the case at Mendel University or dissecting the candidates' past will continue.

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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