

The Czech Republic's pro-Russian president is in trouble

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A rare victory for liberals in central Europe

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AS DEMOCRATIC checks and balances buckle in Poland and Hungary, the Czech Republic has seemed to many like the next Central European country in line to succumb to the populist scourge. Andrej Babis, a billionaire businessman, won October's general election despite facing fraud charges. He now collaborates closely with his country's pro-Russian president, Milos Zeman. Liberals fret that the pair pose a growing challenge to the rule of law and to the Czech Republic's pro-Western orientation. But Czech voters and institutions appear to be pushing back. Although Mr Zeman came top in the first round of the country's presidential election, scoring 38.6% of the vote on January 12th-13th, he fell well short of a majority. The runner-up, Professor Jiri Drahos, a soft-spoken political novice who previously led the Czech Academy of Sciences, won a larger-than-expected 26.6%, which puts him in a good position to displace the incumbent in the run-off at the end of the month. Three days later, on January 16th, parliament rejected Mr Babis's attempt to form a minority government. As the leader of the largest party, he was invited to try to do so by the president, though he controls just 78 of the 200 parliamentary seats, lacks a coalition partner and is accused of fraud in connection with EU subsidies for a development project carried out by one of the many companies he controls via the Agrofert conglomerate (he denies any wrongdoing). All told, the presidential second round, on January 26th-27th, is shaping up as a referendum on the direction of the country, if not the region. [⋮]
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