

Havel's unfinished revolution

Andrej Babiš received a warm welcome in Paris on Tues. from French Pres. Emmanuel Macron three days before the first round of the Czech presidential elections. It was a timely visit for Babiš, [Le Monde](#) wrote, regardless of what Élysée Palace said about its not being a show of support for the Czech politician. The newspaper noted that Macron has been seen in recent months more often with PM Petr Fiala, due to the back-to-back EU presidencies and Fiala's willingness to launch the European Political Community in Prague in Oct.

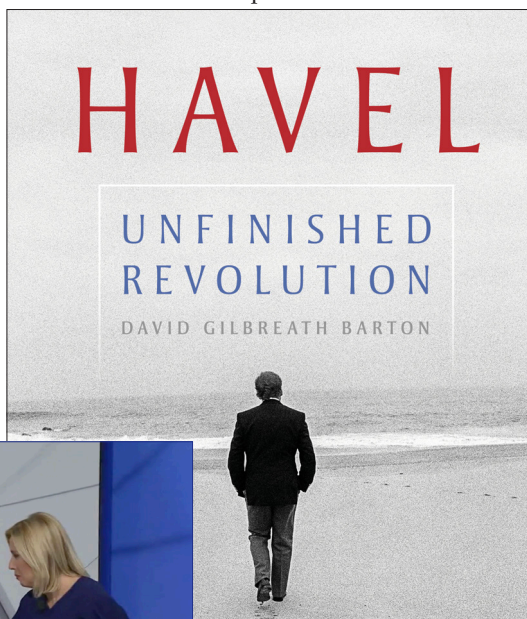
After French philosopher Bernard-Henri Lévy met with Babiš as PM for nearly two hours in Prague in late-April 2019, he reacted quite differently and [tweeted](#), "Shame on Babiš and Zeman, the Laurel and Hardy of populism." He then wrote in [HN](#) and [Le Point](#) that Babiš represents "smiling populism with an opportunistic face" and cried, "Help! If only Václav Havel came back!"

Czech politicians have been trying for the return of Havel, in one form or another, ever since he left them in Dec. 2011. As PM, Bohuslav Sobotka [unveiled a bust of Havel in the U.S. Capitol in Nov. 2014](#). He said at the time that Havel was a natural leader of the dissident movement up until the Velvet Revolution and that he considered the dissidents to be upholders of the humanism of T.G. Masaryk that permeates Czech history. Sobotka said that he too subscribes to this humanism in terms of his own politics.

Babiš ended up winning his long political battle with Sobotka. The business and political interests that were behind Sobotka's Havel-like humanism suffered at least a temporary defeat, and Babiš's rise to power was portrayed by adherents of Havel as the demise of this humanism. [Tomáš Halík](#), a Catholic priest, criticized Babiš in Aug. 2018 for saying that he did not want to accept a single migrant. Halík said that Babiš was pandering to the masses and that a statesman like Masaryk or Havel would stand up to the people and set them straight.

The Fiala government promised a return to Havelism and wrote in its [policy statement](#) that, "The promotion of democracy, human rights and civil society

is the morally right thing, but it is also advantageous for our state. In the past, our human rights and transformation policy has managed to secure our place at the heart of European politics. We will renew the tradition of 'Havel's' foreign policy, including support for development and transformation cooperation."



STAN Chair Vít Rakušan sees himself as one of the followers of Havel and states in his [official résumé](#) that he subscribes to the ideas and legacy of the former president. In [Dec. 2020](#) he wrote that he had felt since 2003, when Havel's last term in office ended, that he hadn't had a president. Václav Klaus and Miloš Zeman inherited the freedom that Havel fought for, but in many ways they deformed it beyond recognition, he said. He added that he likes to think that Havel would be pleased that there is a new generation of politicians who want to take responsibility and make the concessions and compromises needed to reach agreement.

Whether Rakušan will have a president of his own as of March 8 depends largely on what happens today and tomorrow.

He would outwardly accept Petr Pavel as his president, but his real candidate and that of STAN is Danuše Nerudová. Rakušan admitted that [she isn't a second Havel](#), but STAN and its business interests - represented most visibly by Industry Min. Jozef Síkela - are now facing the same battle against Babiš that ČSSD faced at the end of Sobotka's reign.

Today's elections are seen mainly as a contest between Nerudová and Pavel, but from STAN's perspective the real rival is Babiš. Pavel was merely seen as an obstacle that was standing in the way, and his strong finish in the campaign is a big disappointment for STAN and its collaborators on the "Nerudová project." Miroslav Kalousek, one of Nerudová's biggest public supporters, said last night that she is the only candidate who offers change after the time of Klaus, Zeman and Babiš. He tried to agree in 2015 with PM Sobotka on a [joint presidential candidate of the Left and the Right to defeat Zeman](#), but Sobotka rejected the idea, even though ČSSD and Kalousek's TOP 09 ended up getting behind a single anti-Zeman candidate, Jiří Drahoš, in the 2018 election.

This combining of forces didn't happen this time. Many of Havel's long-term admirers are now behind Pavel, not Nerudová. These elections have produced a chasm in the Havel camp. It was united in the fight against Klaus, Babiš and Zeman, but now that there is a real chance to retake the Castle after two decades of anti-Havelism, the differences are starting to show. Zdeněk Bakala's HN, for example, clearly prefers Pavel and has taken an aggressive stance against the [energy policies of Jozef Síkela](#), whom it would normally support under other conditions.

If Pavel makes it to the second round and Nerudová does not, his followers will have a better claim on the Havel legacy, regardless of what happens in two weeks. If Nerudová loses, STAN will be one step closer to implosion, much in the way that ČSSD started to fall apart under Sobotka.

In his book [Havel: Unfinished Revolution](#), David Gilbreath Barton wrote about how Klaus and Zeman interrupted Havel's plans. Havel was a liberal who wanted to rise above partisanship and demagoguery, he said. A new Havel-like president could move Czech politics back in this direction, but when Bernard-Henri Lévy called for the return of Havel, he didn't mean [Havel & Partners](#).