

Thousands descend on Prague seeking PM's resignation

Andrej Babis hits back at claims of conflict of interest as Czech protests increase



Protesters holding a large Czech flag gather on Wenceslas Square in Prague on Tuesday to protest against prime minister Andrej Babis © AP

James Shotter, Central Europe Correspondent YESTERDAY

Tens of thousands of Czechs descended on central Prague on Tuesday night to call for the resignation of prime minister Andrej Babis, in one of the biggest protests in the central European nation since the 1989 Velvet Revolution.

Brandishing placards reading “Yes to truth not lies” and “We are not your sponsors”, protesters massed in Wenceslas Square, cheering and clapping as speakers called for the departure of the billionaire prime minister, who is under mounting pressure over his business interests. Organisers said that 120,000 people had taken part.

The protest is the latest in a series of expressions of public anger that began in April after police recommended [charging](#) Mr Babis with fraud and damaging the EU’s financial interests following a long-running investigation into the alleged misuse of a subsidy.

Mr Babis has repeatedly denied any wrongdoing, and dismissed the affair as a plot by his political enemies.

The day after the police recommendation, the then justice minister — who holds wide-ranging powers over the prosecution service — resigned, sparking protests by citizens worried that a change at the ministry could pave the way for political interference in the Babis case. Protests have taken place every week since then.



Czech prime minister Andrej Babis (right) at a press conference on Tuesday with Myanmar leader Aung San Suu Kyi

Mr Babis's troubles were compounded last week, after the leak of a separate, preliminary audit for the European Commission, which [found](#) that he had a conflict of interest while in government due to continuing ties to his former business, Agrofert.

Mr Babis put the business, which he built before going into politics, into trust in 2017. However the audit — whose conclusions can still be changed — found he still had a direct economic interest in the group's success, as well as being actively involved in the implementation of the EU budget in the Czech Republic in his role in government.

Mr Babis strongly rejected the opinion, and insisted he had not violated either Czech or EU rules on conflict of interest. He added on Tuesday that the report was “dubious” and an “attack on the Czech Republic” and insisted that no EU funds would have to be returned.

Jiri Pehe, director of the New York University in Prague, said the EU audit was “the most serious threat Babis has faced since he entered politics”, since it came out of Brussels and not from the politician's domestic opponents.

“For him there's no easy way out. I don't think there's a form of blind trust that would satisfy the EU as long as he is prime minister . . . He could sell Agrofert, but . . . it is not one company, but hundreds of companies, so it could not be sold in a few months, even if he wanted,” Mr Pehe said.

“So I think he is going to challenge [the EU audit] . . . But in the meantime the Czech Republic may not receive subsidies, and that could effect the economy — and so far Babis has been supported . . . because the economy keeps growing. If there is a hitch, he may not be so successful any more.”

However others remain sceptical that the furore will undermine Mr Babis's hold on power. His Ano party emerged as the biggest grouping from last month's [European elections](#), and Mr Babis remains the country's most popular politician.

On top of this, the Social Democrats, the junior partner in Mr Babis's minority government, have little incentive to abandon him now, and he also has support from the communists and Tomio Okamura's far-right SPD, according to Milan Nic from the German Council on Foreign Relations.

“The Social Democrats' support collapsed in the European elections, and therefore they have an interest to try and hang on to power, because snap elections could finish them. Then Babis has the communists or Okamura to provide the crucial vote. So in terms of parliamentary arithmetic, I don't see how Babis can be forced out for now,” said Mr Nic, adding that the latest controversy was also unlikely to sever Czech president Milos Zeman's support for Mr Babis.

