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## **PRAGUE CROWDS DEMAND PM ANDREJ BABIS STEP DOWN**

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Czech Prime Minister Andrej Babis is fending off corruption charges, trouble in parliament, and a countrywide protest movement against his government. Hundreds of thousands have rallied against him in Prague.

Hundreds of thousands of anti-Babis activists flooded the center of Prague on Sunday in the culmination of anti-government protests.

"Judging from the aerial photos, it looks like we're about 250,000," said Mikulas Minar, head of Million Moments for Democracy, the NGO organizing the protest, as crowds were filling Prague's central Letna square earlier on Sunday.

Carolina, a flight attendant from the south of the country, told DW she had traveled to Prague to take part in the protests because it "has simply become too much."

"That's why people from all across the country came here today, to show that it isn't simply the people in the capital that are angry."

Hannah, 31, a saleswoman, said she no longer agrees with the government: "Even in his own party (ANO), there are people against Babis who didn't want him as a prime minister ... now I think it is our turn to show that we disagree with how things are done."

Previously, some 400,000 people signed a petition calling on billionaire Prime Minister Andrej Babis to step down amid allegations of fraud. The rallies were triggered after Babis appointed a close ally as the country's new justice minister at a time prosecutors are deciding on a potential indictment against him.

Many Babis opponents also claim the 64-year-old politician had collaborated with the communist secret police before the 1989 Velvet Revolution.

### **Corruption and anti-corruption**

Babis has built his reputation as the founder and head of his business empire Agrofert, which started in the early 1990s and grew to become the Czech Republic's biggest private employer encompassing over 250 companies.

The billionaire entered politics in 2011 by founding the ANO (YES) party on an anti-corruption

platform, becoming finance minister and deputy prime minister in 2014. He was forced out of the cabinet in 2017 over allegations of tax fraud and suspicious business dealings. However, the crisis brought down the government and triggered a parliamentary election, which saw Babis' ANO place far ahead of its rivals.

### **Czech Republic: The PM and fraud**

During the campaign, Babis was hounded by charges of defrauding the EU for around 2.28 million (\$2.28 million) in 2007. He has denied any wrongdoing.

In April this year, police said Babis should stand trial over the alleged fraud. Babis rejected the move as a political plot against him. When Justice Minister Jan Knezinek resigned over the probe, Babis replaced him with his own longtime adviser Marie Benesova.

Last month, Babis found himself fending off another crisis when preliminary results of a European Commission audit were leaked to the public. According to the draft document, Babis has a conflict of interest as his companies benefit from EU funding. Specifically, it found that Agrofert should not have received 1.1 billion million in EU subsidies. The prime minister dismissed it as "an attack on the Czech Republic."

He also pledged not to resign.

### **Risky vote of no confidence**

The opposition has called a no-confidence vote for next week. To oust Babis, the opposition would need to have his coalition partners, the Social Democrats, side against him, or have the Communist party revoke their parliamentary support for the government.

However, some observers believe Babis could also turn to the far-right Freedom and Direct Democracy party to stay in power.

A state attorney is set to decide whether Babis will go on trial over subsidies later this year.

*DW's Emmanuelle Chaze contributed reporting from Prague.*

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