

Strange Bedfellows: A Hyper-pragmatic Alliance between European Liberals and an Illiberal Czech Technocrat

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The article deals with the membership of the most important Czech political party, ANO (meaning “yes” in Czech), led by Andrej Babiš, in the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE). Our goals are to reconstruct how Babiš’s party joined ALDE and to discuss the ideological differences between ANO and ALDE. The paper shows that ALDE’s offer of membership in 2014 was motivated by a pragmatic need to bolster its own position in the European Parliament; ANO, meanwhile, needed to anchor itself in European politics. Andrej Babiš’s technocratic and illiberal view was not apparent at the beginning, but more importantly, this did not matter to ALDE. ALDE’s Czech “point of contact,” ANO’s foreign policy expert and the leader of its party group in the European Parliament, Pavel Telička, made ANO’s membership credible. However, as a Euro-optimist, Telička was not compatible with ANO’s flexible ideological character in the long term and the party group split up. A comparison of the parties’ European Parliament election manifestos and positions on crucial controversial European issues clearly reveals a deep division between ALDE and ANO—and their fundamentally opposed ideological positions. We describe the findings as a new hyper-pragmatic trend in the creation of Europarties, which weakens their ideological cohesion.

Keywords: *Andrej Babiš; the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE); ideology; Europarties; Czech Republic*

Introduction

In their seminal work on political parties at the level of the European Union (Europarties), Simon Hix and Christopher Lord used without many reservations the concept of *familles spirituelles* to cover diverse groupings in the European Parliament (EP) and beyond.¹ Together with the European People’s Party (EPP) and the European Socialists (PES), the liberal party family is among the longest existing of these “families.” Even though the liberals have always been internally diverse, they nevertheless used to be connected by a shared, coherent set of ideological beliefs. For pragmatic political reasons, the liberal group was always open to participation by some parties that did not strictly belong to the liberal tradition, such as some

originally agrarian Nordic parties—for example, the Finnish KESK—the Spanish Democratic and Social Centre (1989–1994), and the Italian Lega Nord (1994–1999).² Even these parties, however, exhibited a solid liberal “flavour” during their period of membership, or at least they were not in sharp conflict with liberal values. Clear limits of acceptability were shown in summer 1995 when Forza Italia’s membership application was rejected.³

More than two decades later, however, it seems that ideological cohesion is even less important, and that pragmatism has overruled policy and ideological proximities. One of the reasons, according to some observers, is the Eastern Enlargement of the EU causing the “further dilution of [the] ideological homogeneity” of the Europarties.⁴ Before we endorse this explanation, we shall examine an empirical example of a “strange marriage” between a liberal Europarty and a Central and Eastern European party that does not fit clearly into the liberal *famille spirituelle*. We selected the case of cooperation between the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE) and the Czech party ANO (the name means “yes” in Czech). This case allows us to test the theoretical assumptions about cooperation within the Europarties. Our research questions are, Why did ANO join ALDE in 2014 and why did it remain in ALDE despite the increasing ideological and political divergence between them? Answers to both questions help us to understand their motivations, and, at the same time, make it possible to identify the dynamics of the relationship. Without an analysis of these dynamics, it is not possible to explain the ongoing membership of ANO in ALDE.

Why study the relationship between a Czech party and a Europarty? The reason is that ANO is currently one of the most successful—perhaps the most successful—of a number of similar parties in Central and Eastern Europe, including the Slovenian Modern Centre Party and the Lithuanian Labour Party. These are entrepreneurial parties without a clear and solid ideology (a detailed explanation of this type of party is provided below). They use ALDE as a source of legitimacy and as a fast route to power, that is, to achieve a greater importance at the EU level. This article gives the reader a better grasp of how the Europarties’ views of who is (still) acceptable as a member has changed over time, and how much the former balance between a shared ideology and pragmatism has tipped in favour of the latter.

We first discuss the liberal party family and its ideology, and the theoretical literature on the relations between Europarties and political parties in EU member countries, with an emphasis on liberal parties. This is followed by an introduction to ANO, its origin and illiberal profile, and a comparison of ANO and ALDE positions. We ask whether there were ideological differences between ANO and ALDE, and what they consisted of. Related to this, we discuss the problems of the ANO leader, Andrej Babiš, linked with his business and his past and that have significantly influenced the party’s activities in Czech politics. We also analyse how these problems have affected the ALDE-ANO relationship.

In terms of method, the article is inspired by process tracing, specifically that variant that aims to explain the outcome of a unique process⁵—in our case, ALDE-ANO cooperation. The aim is not to find the generic variables that cause pragmatic cooperation between parties despite their ideological disagreements and contrasts, but to show those specific moments, actors, and decisions that led to the creation and maintenance of the partnership. In order to understand the ALDE-ANO relationship, we need a chronological analysis of the evolution of their cooperation—but we need to investigate their ideological and programmatic agreements and disagreements, too. For that reason, beyond primary data from the media, we also investigate programmatic documents and selected political positions as communicated by ANO and ALDE politicians.

Making a Match: Ideology or Pragmatism?

Thanks to its long history, reaching back to the birth of modern capitalist societies, liberal ideology is a very varied phenomenon, and this has influenced the character of liberal political parties. Despite this, as Gordon Smith emphasizes, liberal parties maintain “their connections with two original tenets of liberal ideology, the two freedoms: economic freedom and the liberties of the individual.”⁶ Precisely these two freedoms—one of them economic, the other cultural—were historically important for the identity of liberal parties, distinguishing them from other party families. Support for the free market and market economies moved liberals away from socialists on the left, and, conversely, individual freedom linked with anti-clericalism drove them away from conservatives and Christian democrats on the right wing of the political spectrum. As time passed and the contexts of individual countries varied, the understanding of these two freedoms was subject to change: for instance, in the cultural dimension, issues such as the rights of various minorities and same-sex marriage came to the fore, replacing anti-clericalism.

Yet these two freedoms are an important feature of the heterogeneity of liberals, dividing them into two groups according to the key element of their identity. The first group is made up primarily of economic pro-market parties, which want to minimize state intervention. The cultural dimension is not that important for them and they might be ambivalent towards it. The second group comprises social-liberal parties that are oriented more on the cultural dimension and, by contrast, are not as focused on the economy (they often advocate a moderate, rather than strong, pro-free-market position). This division may exist within a single country: for instance, in the Netherlands there are the classic economic liberals, the People’s Party for Freedom and Democracy (VVD) as well as the social liberals, Democrats 66. The terminology used to describe these two groups is not universally applied; in addition to the common expressions “classic liberals” and “social liberals,” scholars such as Klaus von Beyme and Gordon Smith

use the terms “conservative liberals” and “radical liberals,” reflecting the latter group’s historical links with political radicalism.⁷

Recent studies show that the role of the cultural dimension as a cleavage in European politics is on the increase.⁸ But here a problem arises for ALDE, which is primarily known for including several Central and Eastern European parties. Caroline Close argues that in addition to the economic and social liberals, there is a third group, “characterised by a centrist position on the economic axis combined with a more centre-right position on the cultural axis.”⁹ Yet most of the Central and Eastern European parties classified into this group, such as the Lithuanian Labour Party and Czech ANO, are ambiguous or populist in their economic policies as well as on cultural issues, where their degree of intolerance and nationalism occasionally reach levels commonly witnessed on the far right. What is crucial for these parties is not ideology, but hyper-pragmatism; often they are entrepreneurial parties who approach voters as consumers of politics, and offer what is in demand at any given moment.¹⁰

The formation of supranational links by liberals is often seen as similar to what happened with other earlier party families. According to Stefano Bartolini, despite all the diverging attitudes, it was ideological beliefs, shared “genetics,” and generally the structure of cleavages that shaped the formation of Europarties.¹¹ The Eastern Enlargement of the EU brought in parties that originated in a specific post-communist context, which, by their integration into European structures, might have weakened the ideological and political coherence of the existing Europarties.¹² The argument that the Eastern Enlargement caused the “further dilution of [the] ideological homogeneity” of the Europarties has to be analysed further, however, before we embark on an empirical analysis.¹³ The argument has been contradicted by other researchers, who confirmed the persistent importance and presence of ideological coherence within the main Europarties. Edoardo Bressanelli showed that even in the then EU-27, “ideology or policy compatibility is the main factor behind group membership.”¹⁴ This applies mainly to the biggest Europarties, EPP and PES, but to a lesser extent ALDE as well. Studies of political groups’ cohesion during voting in the EP also show that, together with the EPP and PES, the Liberals are among the “genuine” Europarties, demonstrating in the long-term perspective a higher level of cohesion than other Europarties.¹⁵ Yet this voting cohesion is not necessarily a product of ideological coherence—it could be a demonstration of pragmatic behaviour in the EP—and hence we need to compare the ANO and ALDE programmes as well.

The Liberal Europarty functioned as one of the safest and most open international sanctuaries for parties from the post-communist countries. In 1997, ELDR (the predecessor of ALDE) was the first Europarty to offer full membership status to the Central and Eastern European parties before the official start of the “big bang” enlargement. Some liberal parties, such as the Polish Freedom Union, decided to join the bigger—and from the point of view of power and influence, more attractive—EPP, but for the vast majority of Central and Eastern European

liberals before and after 2004, ELDR/ALDE was the natural option. This confirmed a general observation: ideology as well as party families' proximities matter in Central and Eastern Europe too. Erol Kūlahci mentioned that despite the relative internal ideological diversity of the liberals compared to some other parties, ideology (with a strong pro-integration position) remains the crucial criterion even within this party family.¹⁶ In general, even after 2004, that is, in the first years after the Eastern Enlargement, "ideological location" and the "genetic model" have remained stronger than pragmatic strategic reasons if one seeks an explanation as to why the national parties choose Europarties and vice versa.

We argue that the "marriage" between ANO and ALDE contradicts this prevailing assumption of the dominance of ideological proximity within the liberal *famille spirituelle*. We will demonstrate that these parties "matched" each other for purely practical reasons, that there was a great deal of personal diplomacy involved in this process, and that there is decreasing policy coherence between the Czech ANO and the Liberal Europarty. We will propose that this cooperation goes beyond the typical "marriage of convenience" and that it shows a trend towards hyper-pragmatism. Before we demonstrate this in detail, we will introduce the ANO party.

A Technocrat with an Illiberal Vision

In 2011, Andrej Babiš, a billionaire of Slovak origin, first established the civic association "Action of Dissatisfied Citizens" (*Akce nespokojených občanů* [ANO]), and then started a political party using the acronym as its name. A window of opportunity was opened for ANO by the collapse of public trust in existing party politics in Czechia, to which was added the economic recession and many affairs, climaxing in the fall of a centre-right government in scandal.¹⁷ Babiš's party then polled nearly 19 per cent of the vote in the early elections in 2013, placing second. After the elections, ANO governed with the Social Democrats—the winner of the elections—with the Christian Democrats as junior partner in the coalition. Babiš became deputy prime minister and minister of finance. ANO went on to win the next elections in 2017, taking about 30 per cent of the vote. Babiš became the prime minister, first of a minority single-party government that failed to win the parliament's confidence and then an ANO-Social Democrat minority coalition.

ANO can be considered an entrepreneurial party, that is, "a project of a political entrepreneur who connects his economic and political interests, who commands and organizes the party in a hierarchical and centralized way using business logic and approaches both in organisation and in political campaigning."¹⁸ ANO is close to the classic example, Silvio Berlusconi's Forza Italia; however, this party species is quite diverse and the party leaders sometimes lack substantial business resources (e.g., Geert Wilders's Party for Freedom in the Netherlands and Carl Hagen's Progress Party in Norway).¹⁹

In building his party, Babiš relied on his virtually unlimited finances, as well as the personnel and assets of his agricultural and chemical business empire, Agrofert. External electoral and marketing experts, initially hired on a temporary basis, became a permanent electoral-professional staff, running ANO election campaigns. The party's political communications were supported by the Agrofert media empire, even though it was not formally part of the party organization.²⁰ The organizational structure was strictly centralized, with the leader and the inner circle around him as the focal point.²¹ ANO's relatively high level of homogeneity was further supported by the common managerial and business origins of most of the party elite.²²

Cadre loyalty to the leader was important because of the conflict of interests that came from combining government office with his ownership of Agrofert, economic interests, and substantial media power. Babiš was forced by an amendment to the Conflict of Interests Act to relinquish his ownership of Agrofert, which he transferred to a trust funds in 2017. Despite this, the ANO leader has continued to control Agrofert indirectly, and discussion of his conflict of interests has continued in Czechia and at the EU level. Babiš's older financial "sins" also remain politically explosive.

Babiš's anti-corruption and anti-party rhetoric secured ANO's initial success. He branded older parties corrupt and incompetent, and perpetrators of state dysfunction.²³ At the same time, Babiš offered a purely technocratic, managerial vision, in which the state would be managed in a competent manner. This vision became the permanent core of ANO's identity.

Babiš's technocratism is best expressed in a key slogan that he has used since the very beginnings of ANO: "To manage the state like a firm" (*Řídit stát jako firmu*). He argued that a technocratic management style carried over from the private sector would allow the state to function efficiently, especially by allowing for simpler and quicker expert decision making, without "unnecessary" oversight mechanisms. This technocratism, adroitly combined with populism, became the main source of political legitimacy for Babiš's ANO.²⁴

But by its very nature, technocratism is in latent conflict with liberal democracy, not least because of its anti-plural scepticism, its idea of depoliticization policies without clashes of interests, and its allegedly neutral non-ideological pragmatism.²⁵ A liberal (constitutional) democracy is usually understood as a combination of democracy based on elections with liberal elements. For instance, Fareed Zakaria defines a liberal democracy as "a political system marked not only by free and fair elections, but also by the rule of law, a separation of powers, and the protection of [the] basic liberties of speech, assembly, religion and property."²⁶ Babiš's ANO presented notions that in many respects tended towards what Zakaria describes as an illiberal democracy—one that is divested of liberal elements—because Babiš was focused on the maximum concentration of power for the sake of efficiency.

Illiberal ideas have not been present in ANO manifestos, which have been conceived as something like "shopping lists" for voters. Contrariwise, illiberal elements

have been typical of the leader's rhetoric and positions, for example, Babiš's understanding of the relationship between the executive and the legislature. He dismissed parliament as a "blather house" (*žvaněnína*) and his ideal was a one-party majority government on which minimal limits would be imposed.²⁷ Babiš outlines his notion of changing the country's political regime most comprehensively in the book *What I Dream about When I Happen to Fall Asleep*, used by ANO as one of its lures in the 2017 election campaign. The book points out the lengthy legislative process and the instability and inefficiency of governance, and then suggests measures that would improve the situation. These would be extensive, including the abolition of "harmful" institutions such as regional governments and the upper chamber of parliament, halving the number of MPs and making changes to parliamentary procedure aimed at curtailing debate.²⁸

ANO cannot be placed in any party family, and certainly not among liberals. Political scientists who have analysed ANO's profile differ somewhat in their terminology, but there is consensus that Babiš has a technocratic vision of illiberal democracy.²⁹ Vlastimil Havlík and Věra Stojarová aptly note: "Babiš presented the idea of politics as a business with a strong leader (the owner of a company) surrounded by loyal supporters and (unlimited) concentrated executive power as an alternative to a liberal democratic parliamentarism."³⁰ When analysing ANO's positions on the migration crisis, we will see that the idea of human rights is likewise far from being taken seriously by Babiš's party. The illiberal essence of ANO is in no way altered by the fact that because of the system of coalition governance in Czechia, it does not have many options for putting these ideas into practice.

An Expedient Choice: Contacts Matter!

During the ANO foundational period, Pavel Telička was Andrej Babiš's key link with the European Union and his main adviser on EU matters. Telička had many years' experience with European affairs: during the 1990s, he was in the Czech Foreign Affairs Ministry's permanent mission in the EU; later, as State Secretary for European Affairs, he led the Czech team during accession negotiations; immediately after the Czech accession to the EU in 2004 he served as European Commissioner for several months. He then moved into business and co-owned a lobbying firm in Brussels.

Telička started to work closely with Babiš in 2012 and was even offered the job of ANO formal leader, which he declined.³¹ Here it needs noting that in the early days of his party, Andrej Babiš considered his personal profile too controversial (not least because he was suspected of having collaborated with the communist secret police before 1989) and for some time he was looking for a publicly more acceptable figure to head ANO. Testifying to Babiš's trust in Telička is the fact that in autumn 2013 he made him the leader of the candidate list for the European elections and gave him a

free hand in drafting the party's manifesto and selecting other candidates.³² The bizarre side effect of this was that none of the four ANO MEPs elected in May 2014, including Telička, was formally a member of the party. In Babiš's technocratic thinking, this posed no problem. ANO won the 2014 EP elections, but only took 16 per cent of the vote.

Telička was the contact through which ALDE politicians, and especially the chair of its parliamentary group and former Belgian prime minister, Guy Verhofstadt, started to probe ANO. ALDE was interested in involving Babiš's party immediately after the latter's success in Czech parliamentary elections in October 2013. Telička was previously an official in cabinets led by the Social Democrats in particular, but he had no strong links with that party. A rapprochement with ALDE made sense for ANO. It was a mainstream Europarty, with the third-strongest parliamentary group after the European People's Party and the European Socialists, of which some Czech parties were already members. ALDE was liberal and reform-oriented, which, in the early days of ANO, corresponded with the rhetoric employed by Babiš and other ANO representatives, at least to a certain extent.

Similarly, from the viewpoint of ALDE and its EP group, it made sense for ANO to become a member, because ALDE had no Czech party. In the past, several Czech parties had been members of ALDE or its predecessor, the ELDR, but they either had no political relevance or lost it. The most recent Czech ALDE member, LIDEM, founded in 2012 by seceding from another party, was virtually inactive at the time of ANO's rise. Verhofstadt visited Prague in March 2014 and Babiš was appreciative: "We found many common topics," he would say; they had "many shared opinions."³³ Babiš and Verhofstadt agreed in particular on the need to fight corruption—a crucial issue for the ANO leader at the time. During the negotiations, Verhofstadt revealed his somewhat pragmatic motivation by admitting to journalists: "I've never met anyone from the [LIDEM] party" and "they are no longer ALDE members because they failed to pay their dues."³⁴

Similarly, Telička confessed his pragmatism in an interview: "I admit that it was something of a calculation on our side. If I emphasize that we want to be active in the European Parliament and want to change something, then in a larger parliamentary group, we would not have such an influence as in a smaller group. But of course the premise must continue to hold that ALDE will be the third strongest group in the European Parliament after the elections."³⁵ Telička also admitted that ALDE was the only group to approach ANO.

Verhofstadt's response to the question of whether he considered Babiš an oligarch is also worthy of quotation. "An oligarch is someone who owes his economic empire to political links, which is the very opposite of Mr Babiš, who had built his position from the ground up. He certainly is no Berlusconi. The main characteristics of a good politician are honesty and a will to change things and . . . Mr Babiš has both."³⁶ Several days later, Verhofstadt stood up for Babiš, in the context of the debate about Babiš's conflict of interests, which was just beginning. At the EU level, the debate

was started by Ingeborg Grässle (EPP), a member of the EP's Committee on Budgetary Control, who criticized Agrofert firms for drawing money from European funds, while Babiš, as Minister of Finance, guaranteed that this drawdown was proper. According to Verhofstadt's proclamation on the matter, no "politically biased and unfounded accusations" should be disseminated.³⁷ These very accommodating positions of the ALDE leader were evidently influenced by the looming European elections and Verhofstadt's efforts to woo a new partner in Czechia. Verhofstadt's attempts to relativize or diminish the problems linked with Babiš were completely unchanged for several more years.

Babiš's understanding of the EU was very narrow. In addition to its aid in fighting tax fraud—a major domestic priority for Babiš—he most often emphasized the contributions made by European funds. In one of his not very frequent mentions of ALDE, shortly after the ANO party congress in 2015, he put it simply:

I am for the EU for pragmatic reasons. . . . Thanks to it, the Czech Republic is more than 89 billion crowns (more than €3 billion) in credit from European funds. We, ANO, have four members of European Parliament, each of them speaks many languages, and Telička's contacts in Brussels are perfect. What is more, we are in the ALDE liberal group, which is chaired by the former Belgian Prime Minister, Verhofstadt. He for his part knows many people.³⁸

Thus, ALDE was for Babiš only one useful tool for promoting his interests in the EU, and one that did not tie his hands in any significant way.

The negotiations for the accession of future ANO MEPs to the ALDE group in the EP were completed even before the 2014 European elections, and were smoothly approved by the group after the elections. ANO formally applied for ALDE membership on 2 June 2014 and was approved at the Europarty's congress on 21 November. The involvement in ALDE has had tangible benefits for ANO in terms of positions: for example, in January 2017, Telička was elected an EP vice president.

A Comparison of ANO and ALDE Manifestoes

Wouter Wolfs and Steven van Hecke note in their analysis of ALDE that over time the Europarty has faced "growing difficulties to adopt a common electoral platform for the elections for the EP, particularly as the number of member parties increases."³⁹ The clashes between classic and social liberals have been strong. The ALDE manifesto for the 2014 EP elections had a pro-market orientation, which tended to accentuate the ideas of classic liberals.⁴⁰ Further, a very strong emphasis was put on "building a stronger Europe to defend our common interests and values."⁴¹ This corresponds to the long-established pro-European orientation of ALDE and of nearly all liberal parties.

The 2014 ANO manifesto for EP elections was also written in a pro-European and reform-minded spirit:

From the historical, contemporary and future viewpoints, it is therefore difficult to find a national interest more important for our Central European country than a stable and economically successful EU. History teaches us that stability and prosperity do not come as a matter of course, but that we must always struggle for them. Elections to the EP, like the elections to the [Czech] Chamber of Deputies before, are an opportunity to bring a new impulse, strength and ability to influence the character of the Union and the position of our country in it. . . . A stable and economically successful EU is therefore the foremost Czech geopolitical and economic interest.⁴²

In the manifesto's particular points, however, rhetoric prevailed of defending Czech national interests and of how the EU could or could not help the Czech economy develop. The document's very extensive introduction was a critique of preceding Czech governments, not a programme oriented towards the future.

Simply put, while ALDE placed emphasis on "more Europe," ANO was equivocal in order to allow the major part of the Czech population, which had long been Eurosceptic, to identify with its manifesto. Yet the two manifestos were not in obvious collision. This could also be seen in the sections on the economy, where ANO agreed with ALDE in supporting economic liberalism as well as in other points, such as the need to reform the Common Agricultural Policy. This was evidently due in part to the fact that ALDE presented its manifesto at a party congress in November 2013, while the ANO manifesto was only unveiled in February 2014. Thus, Telička, who had been the electoral leader since the autumn, could refer to the ALDE manifesto when preparing the ANO strategy.

ALDE presented its manifesto for the 2019 EP elections as early as its congress in November 2018, whereas ANO did so only in early May 2019, that is, shortly before the elections. A comparison immediately reveals much less correspondence than five years previously. Let us first look at the ALDE manifesto, which was much more emotive than its predecessor, stating that "the liberal vision is one built around a free, democratic, entrepreneurial, prosperous, sustainable and united Europe open to the world."⁴³ The manifesto appealed to liberal values, protection of minority rights and human rights generally, non-discrimination, and the need actively to fight non-liberal political forces. Even economic liberalism was framed as the protection of economic freedoms against harmful protectionism. The hot-button issue of migration and refugees was now an important point in the manifesto in terms of emphasizing protection of "all those that are fleeing the horrors of war or the pain of political repression."⁴⁴

While ALDE emphasized strengthening the EU and the need to defend and disseminate liberal values, ANO tended to take the opposite approach in its manifesto. According to ANO's 2019 manifesto, it was not liberal values, but Czechs that needed defending:

It is clear that the EU is a great project. It has brought peace, security and prosperity to our continent. . . . But as you must have noticed recently, the Union occasionally loses steam and the European Commission sometimes behaves incomprehensibly and illogically. Yes, some of the things that come from the EU are lacking in common sense. Yes, these are things that are not right and advantageous for us. We will therefore do everything to protect our country and our people from the threats of our times, from everything that is not fair and that might complicate our lives. And our dreams. We will do everything so that we are not second-category Europeans.⁴⁵

When we compare ANO manifestos for the 2014 and the 2019 EP elections, we can see a clear shift in the framing in the direction of soft Euroscepticism. The headline of the 2019 manifesto was telling: “We will protect Czechia. Strictly and without compromise.” The preamble used suggestive language of global threats endangering the “splendid country” of the Czech Republic. The EU needs “profound reform”: less power but greater efficiency, reinforcing intergovernmental institutions at the expense of supranational ones.

Comparing the ANO and ALDE positions as outlined in their 2019 manifestos, we see very important differences and, in some points, opposing preferences. This can be shown by their approaches to migration policy. Concerning the mandatory quotas for allocating refugees, which were exceptionally unpopular in a Czechia not affected by an influx of refugees, ANO emphasized: “Thanks to us they were rejected in June 2018, and so it shall remain. We also insist that national authorities must decide about legal economic migration, for instance in connection with the needs of the domestic economy.”⁴⁶ To sum up, ANO has fundamentally split from the European liberals on issues of values, society and culture.

Integration, Brexit and the Refugee Crisis

Let us now look at some major European topics of the 2014–2019 period, where the views of ALDE and ANO conflicted, and how ANO MEPs, sometimes with great difficulty, navigated these issues. Babiš’s position on Greece was visibly disruptive. During the mid-2010s, the country was still dealing with a deep economic and financial crisis, and this was linked with a debate on the functioning of the Eurozone. ALDE officially advocated keeping Greece in the Eurozone, and Verhofstadt spoke about a radical liberal treatment, including slimming down the public sector. Babiš was no less radical, but in an entirely different way. He claimed in the Czech public debate that Greece should leave the Eurozone and “finally go bankrupt . . . so that space is cleared.”⁴⁷

Babiš resisted Czechia adopting the euro currency. In this, he fully agreed with the long-standing prevailing opinion of his compatriots. For instance, an April 2015 CVVM poll revealed that nearly 70 per cent of Czechs were against adopting the euro, and four years later the number was even slightly higher.⁴⁸ In ANO’s strategy,

which understands voters as consumers to whom the party is selling a product, the negative position on euro adoption made sense. It is worth noting, though, that MEP Telička has been involved in various debates about the euro and described himself as its advocate, even if he proposed not to hurry into adoption.⁴⁹

Brexit has been another important European issue. For ALDE, the UK's departure was an opportunity to strengthen federalist tendencies in the EU and the role of the EP. It is unsurprising that in September 2016 Guy Verhofstadt was elected the chair of the EP's Brexit Steering Group and on assuming the office proclaimed that the EP should play a major role in the negotiations between the UK and EU, because as a directly elected institution it had much greater legitimacy to defend the interests of EU citizens as a whole than the individual member states did.⁵⁰ This position directly contradicted Babiš's permanent emphasis on the role of intergovernmental institutions and member states.

In a later comment, Verhofstadt described Brexit as part of the populist wave in Europe and even went on to recommend to British politicians "[a] cultural shift toward an EU-style 'co-decision' process," because "if British political leaders are to have any hope of uniting their bitterly divided country, they will have to lead by example."⁵¹ ALDE's official position on Brexit was expressed in a December 2017 resolution. It supported the EU's united stance and the efforts of the British Liberal Democrats to call for a second referendum that would include the option of rejecting Brexit. However, the resolution also argued that there was "the need for the EU institutions and for politicians at all levels to communicate better the positive impact that EU membership has had and continues to have on member states and its citizens."⁵²

Babiš's temperament, by contrast, manifested itself clearly and symptomatically shortly after the British referendum on leaving the EU. At a conference organized by his party's think-tank, he said that if he were in the position of the British, he would "perhaps vote for exit."⁵³ He justified this by references to the following: Brussels bureaucracy; his favourite argument—money, that is—and what he saw as excessive British contributions to the EU budget; and the EU's inability to resolve the refugee crisis. Curiously enough, one of the speakers was Verhofstadt, while Telička, who moderated the conference, sought to dampen Babiš's words by saying that it was only his personal opinion. The position of ANO MEPs, by contrast, largely conformed to that of ALDE from the very beginning.⁵⁴

As far as the refugee crisis, which climaxed in 2015, was concerned: in May 2014 an ALDE resolution called for much stronger support for Syrian refugees.⁵⁵ At the peak of the crisis, ALDE appealed to the "[m]ember states and the EU to replace the Dublin system by a EU distribution system that would allocate refugees between member states."⁵⁶ ALDE also continued to see the refugee crisis as a humanitarian problem and an opportunity.⁵⁷ ALDE's position was directly contradicted by ANO's heightened securitization rhetoric and rejection of any (compulsory or voluntary) allocation of refugees.⁵⁸ Initially, the ANO leader declared that refugees could help resolve the Czech problem of worker shortages in jobs that the Czechs did not want

due to low salaries.⁵⁹ But this was soon overshadowed by a much harsher rhetoric, which brought Babiš closer to the anti-immigration and anti-refugee views that prevailed among the Czech population. In September 2015, he suggested that NATO forces be deployed and the “empty boats of human traffickers be scuttled.”⁶⁰ A year later in government, he opposed the plan to accept several dozen Syrian refugees from camps in Turkey, because he “disagrees with accepting any refugees, because this is an enormous risk, when you see the atrocities committed by some people who failed to receive asylum in Germany.”⁶¹ A pronounced anti-refugee and anti-immigration position has become an ANO staple and continued even as Babiš became prime minister at the turn of 2017 and 2018.

This mobilization sometimes attacked the EU, described by the ANO leader as unable to resolve the refugee crisis. In the context of ANO’s membership of ALDE, Babiš’s claim that “Czechs do not want to accept boundless multiculturalism dictated from Brussels” sounded a strange contrast.⁶²

ANO’s MEPs were more restrained in their positions on the refugee crisis, and this was evidently linked with the environment in which they worked. This was not initially apparent as far as the refugee quotas were concerned. All four ANO MEPs voted against the European parliament resolution of 10 September 2015 on migration and refugees in Europe. One of them, Martina Dlabajová, explained their position: “Together with my MEP colleagues Dita Charanzová, Petr Ježek and Pavel Telička, we understand the complex situation of refugees and the necessity of a common European response to the migration crisis in the Mediterranean. But we do not believe that national quotas are a suitable solution to this problem.”⁶³

This position on migration was very different from that officially adopted by ALDE. However, Charanzová and Dlabajová were among the more moderate voices in ANO, aware of the humanitarian aspects of the conflict in the Middle East as well as the EU and Czech human rights obligations. Telička became even more remote from ANO’s domestic rhetoric. Though he rejected mandatory refugee quotas, he otherwise sought to present ALDE’s position as reasonable and essentially compatible with Czech demands.⁶⁴ He was one of the few ANO politicians indirectly to appreciate the humanistic position of Chancellor Merkel on resolving the refugee crisis.⁶⁵ After Telička’s rupture with Babiš (which we will get to shortly), his opinions shifted even closer to the ALDE position, and he became more critical of the Czech political mainstream. He described the Czech government’s resolution that strictly rejected any quotas as an irresponsible mistake and a weakening of the Czech position in the EU.⁶⁶

This evident disagreement between the party leader and the EP group, shown here from materials related to the refugee crisis, had its consequences. In May 2017, Telička gave up the position of ANO foreign policy expert, and in October 2017 announced the “end of his cooperation” with the party.⁶⁷ Another MEP, Petr Ježek, soon followed him. Telička blamed his departure on differences of opinion with Babiš on many programmatic aspects as well as particular cases:

Unlike Mr Babiš, I am convinced that in many areas we cannot do without stronger European cooperation. . . . To put it simply: if ANO now rejects any further European integration, but three years ago we said something else in our manifesto—that is a very strong statement. Under such a divergence of opinion, I do not see the space for further collaboration.⁶⁸

Beyond his disagreement with Babiš's view of the EU, Telička noted ANO's decision not to field a candidate to challenge President Miloš Zeman in the presidential election in early 2018. In many of their opinions on the EU and the refugee crisis, Babiš and Zeman sang from the same hymn sheet.

Testifying to the rupture between Telička and Babiš was the vote in the EP in September 2018 on a resolution to launch proceedings against Viktor Orbán's Hungary for its serious breach of EU values. All four MEPs originally elected on ANO's ticket voted for the resolution. Babiš subsequently branded Telička and Ježek traitors, while Charanzová and Dlabajová were only asked to explain why they voted "against" Hungary. According to Babiš, the EU should return to its "original values"; because "we have these values, and if someone is saying something about Poland and Hungary and claims that I endanger democracy, then I must laugh about that."⁶⁹ However, Charanzová and Dlabajová did not defect from ANO, and the two were at the top of the party's candidate list for the 2019 European elections. Given their experience and contacts, Babiš did not want to lose them.

If we compare Telička's views with the priorities of the two parties' manifestos as outlined above, we see that he distanced himself from ANO but remained conformant with ALDE. Telička's departure can be interpreted as part of a broader exodus of several more politicians from ANO in 2017 and 2018, who had founded the party alongside Babiš and whose profiles inclined towards liberalism as it is variously understood. This was a consequence of the positions taken by the party boss; the growing controversies surrounding his business empire; and the bizarre political alliances into which he was pushed by these circumstances. In the Chamber of Deputies elected in 2017, ANO cooperated with the Communists and the far-right Freedom and Direct Democracy party. Since summer 2018, Babiš's minority coalition government has been dependent on the support of the Communists, which is seen by many Czechs in strongly negative terms, for historical reasons.

The European Liberals' Reserve Towards Babiš's Controversies

As time went by, the topic of Andrej Babiš and his positions and problems gradually became less and less pleasant to the ALDE group, because it was being transferred into the European institutions, albeit not very visibly—until the 2019 European elections. In early June 2017, an EP session discussed media abuse in Czechia in connection with Babiš—but only a few MEPs were present. This was in part due to the fact that immediately before, following a government crisis, Andrej

Babiš ceased to be a member of government for some time, and his main conflict of interests thus disappeared. Similarly, the (officially unpublished) 2018 report of the European Anti-Fraud Office (OLAF) noted the misuse of a subsidy awarded to Stork Nest Farm—a matter over which Babiš was concurrently being criminally prosecuted in Czechia.

More explosive were the consequences in May 2019 of a preliminary audit by the European Commission (EC), which noted that Babiš had infringed the new financial regulation of the EU and his conflict of interests.⁷⁰ In essence, this was about abusing political power to obtain European subsidies for his Agrofert firms; the EC demanded a refund of the subsidies. Although not public, the document was leaked. Another preliminary EC audit concerned with other European subsidies soon followed.

During the campaigning ahead of the spring 2019 European elections, ALDE found itself in an unpleasant situation. Using its electoral leader (*the Spitzenkandidat*), Verhofstadt, as its mouthpiece, the party criticized Hungary's Viktor Orbán and his FIDESZ party, and Sebastian Kurz and his Austrian People's Party—members of ALDE's competitor, the EPP—as anti-European and anti-migration. But such an argument had a flaw that ALDE's political opponents were quick to point out: ALDE had a similar problem with Babiš; indeed, because of his conflict of interests, ALDE's problem was worse.

Before the 2019 election, it was not impossible that the liberal group in the EP would do without Babiš's ANO. This possibility was signalled by the fact that ANO representatives were not invited for the mid-May 2019 meeting in Strasbourg of parties that were preparing to launch the new EP group with the participation of Emmanuel Macron's La République En Marche!⁷¹ The only Czech to be invited was Telička, who stood for election to the EP with his own party, called Voice (*Hlas*). Another signal was the distance from Babiš shown during campaigning by the previously accommodating Verhofstadt. Responding to the preliminary EC audit on subsidy misuse, Verhofstadt said: "If Andrej Babiš wants to remain in the new group that we are forming with . . . Emmanuel Macron, he will have to abide fully by the European Commission's assessment."⁷²

However, after the election, ANO was not ostracized from the new liberal group, called "Renew Europe." Supported by the group, ANO obtained several important posts, including a vice-presidency of the EP for Dita Charanzová. ANO scored worse than it expected in the elections. Still, it took 21 per cent of the vote, which was sufficient for victory, including six of the twenty-one Czech MEPs. Telička's Voice, by contrast, failed to win a seat. The European Liberals showed no interest in negotiating with the Czech Pirate Party, which is very liberal especially in cultural matters and was successful in the EP elections (three MEPs) and was interested in joining Renew Europe. Renew Europe's position was probably influenced by the fact that Babiš was the Czech prime minister, which, obviously, is a bonus for a Europarty in European politics.

The decision of the new liberal EP group was not influenced by the massive wave of anti-Babiš rallies in Czechia in spring and summer 2019, the country's largest since the 1989 toppling of communism. Likewise, Babiš's questioning of the European Commission audits—calling the first of them “an attack against the Czech Republic”⁷³—did not threaten ANO's membership of Renew Europe. Yet Babiš's words confirmed his long-held views of European institutions.

Conclusion

Our research questions asked why ANO joined ALDE and why it remained in the liberal group despite increasing ideological and political divergences. We explained the key role of Telička, who as a kind of political broker connected ANO with ALDE, helped to select mostly pro-integration or neutral candidates to the EP, and helped to give the 2014 electoral manifesto at least a partly liberal profile. There was pragmatism on both sides, of course. ANO was strong enough to increase the size and potential of the ALDE parliamentary group and its chances of obtaining significant positions in the EP (chairs of key committees, rapporteur positions, etc.). ALDE was also the only one of three mainstream political groups without any relevant Czech member and welcomed that the emerging ANO seemed to take moderate positions. Bressanelli added a set of good other reasons for “marriages of convenience”: national parties might better advance their interests in the European political arena within a strong and respected team.⁷⁴ The positions held by ANO MEPs (e.g., Telička as an EP vice president) confirm this benefit. Technically, member parties of larger groups have larger administrative resources since the EP rules reward larger groups and penalize smaller ones. Membership can also provide a source of legitimacy for national parties. Tim Haughton and Marek Rybář used the fitting expression “badge of approval”; this means enhanced domestic status gained through membership in a transnational grouping.⁷⁵ However, using examples from Slovak parties, they showed mostly very limited influence of this external approval on internal party development—and exactly the same can be said about Babiš's ANO.

We showed that in the five years after 2014, circumstances changed dramatically. ANO's original ideological congruence with the economic and, to some extent, the cultural-societal positions of ALDE was replaced by the core ANO populist strategy based on technocracy. Already during the refugee crisis and even more so around the time of the 2017 Czech parliamentary elections, this strategy led to a reinforcement of illiberal party elements. When we look at the positions of Babiš's ANO on the most important political issues such as migration and Brexit, the illiberal and Eurosceptic party agenda becomes clear. A comparison of manifestos and positions on the crucial conflicting European issues, such as the crises of Greek debt and the Eurozone, Brexit, and refugees, clearly reveals little ideological closeness between ALDE and ANO. Despite internal clashes between Babiš and some of ANO's MEPs,

and despite increasing ideological and political divergence, the ANO-ALDE alliance survived.

In the first years, the skills of ALDE's main "point of contact" in Czechia, Telička, whose image made ANO's membership credible, helped to bridge the distance. However, Telička the indomitable Euro-optimist was not compatible with ANO's flexible character in the long term. Babiš's party has no qualms about accommodating the prevailing moods of the electorate, even if these turn out to be Eurosceptic and entirely opposed to ALDE positions. We might explain Babiš's extension of his technocratic-populist illiberal discourse by adding Eurosceptic and nationalistic elements from the mid-2010s as a tactical step, intended to attract the attention of Czech voters. This biting discourse also dominated ANO's campaign for the 2019 EP elections. Despite this fact, except for some tepid verbal warnings, the position of ANO within Renew Europe, the EP group formed by ALDE and Emmanuel Macron, was never questioned. The chance that ALDE/Renew Europe will return ANO to a liberal track is therefore as slim as the probability that EPP will influence Orbán's FIDESZ. Moreover, so far, despite the crushing conclusions of the EC audits, neither the ANO leader's conflict of interests nor accusations of subsidy fraud have proved fatal for ANO and ALDE cooperation. To sum up, ALDE simply acted as a hyper-pragmatic actor seeking to expand its number of seats in the EP at almost any cost.

An interesting question is why soft Eurosceptic ANO insisted on cooperation with a party presenting a federalist view of European integration. We can divide the reasons between those of "conjuncture" and those that are "structural." Among the conjuncture reasons, there is the path dependency of the decision taken by Telička prior to the 2014 EP elections as well as the personal commitment of pro-integration MEPs (Charanzová and Dlabajová), and the absence of any anti-EU voice among ANO's representation in the EP. Among structural reasons, we stress the specific position of EU-related issues in general and MEPs in particular in Czech politics. There is a historical trend of a clear detachment of European from Czech politics. The MEPs are neither very visible nor very important for the Czech political debate. European obligations and issues, save for some with high symbolic value and contentious potential such as migration, do not matter in the domestic debate.⁷⁶ Participation in federalist Renew Europe thus does not affect or compromise the image of ANO as a soft Eurosceptic party "protecting Czechia strictly and without compromise." To sum up, ANO "can afford" a pragmatic European alliance that is inconsistent with its position at home on European integration and enjoy the pragmatic advantage of that alliance within the EP.

The story of the relationship between ANO and ALDE might at first glance seem merely an amusing anecdote, of which there have been many throughout the history of integration into Europarties of parties from EU-candidate and member states. We have shown some very peculiar nuances of this pragmatic alliance. At the beginning of this strange affair was ALDE's offer, motivated by the need to bolster its own position. The new Czech party, meanwhile, needed to anchor itself in European politics.

The fact that ANO was built on its leader's technocratic view of the world, one that was hostile to liberalism, was not obvious initially; more importantly, it didn't matter to the Europarty. The example of ANO shows that the contemporary dynamics of the relations between Europarties and national parties are determined much more by the arithmetic of the Europarties' EP seats than by ideological congruence. That being said, the relationship between ANO and ALDE is in a certain sense very peculiar. In many respects, ANO no longer has a weak or indeterminate position towards the Europarty's ideology, but is *fundamentally opposed* to it.

Bressanelli assumes that the number of "marriages of convenience" has increased because of parties coming from Central and Eastern European member states. We showed that, despite the fact that ANO is a Czech political party, the reason for this "strange bedfellowship" lies not in the geopolitics of old and new members but in the specific nature of the centralizing structure and marketing techniques of communication of the entrepreneurial party.

Returning to the theoretical debate on the reasons why national parties join certain Europarties, we can describe the alliance between ANO and ALDE as a kind of hyper-pragmatic cooperation. The project of EU reform inspired primarily by President Macron⁷⁷ of France goes well with ALDE's long-term political priorities. At the same time, it clearly contradicts the European discourse of Andrej Babiš and ANO, as well as their political discourse in general. It seems that ALDE no longer demands even modest policy convergence or ideological proximity when accepting new members and when maintaining relations with existing ones. Purely pragmatic political strategic reasoning apparently has taken the lead. The reason for this lies not in some sort of "peculiar" Central and Eastern European liberalism of ANO. ANO contradicts ALDE mainly because it is a quite different type of political party from the traditional members of the liberal *famille spirituelle*. ANO is a typical example of an entrepreneurial party,⁷⁸ a type that does not treat ideology in any serious way and that changes its programme according to the most recent opinion polls and observations of the electoral market.

For the political entrepreneur—the focal point of an entrepreneurial party—the most important thing is to surf the waves of the topical and volatile moods of the electorate, and certainly not ideological consistency and continuity. With ALDE being the most open Europarty—and, compared to EPP and PES, the most member-seeking one—a trend is revealed of an increasing number of entrepreneurial parties from various countries across Europe coming to join it.

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