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Technocratic Populism and Political Illiberalism in Central Europe

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Democratic backsliding, a term commonly used to describe the recent changes in politics in Central and Eastern Europe, is most profoundly related to the emergence and electoral success of populist political actors in the region. While the established literature has been focused almost exclusively on Hungary and Poland, which are the most visible examples of recent illiberal turns in Central and Eastern Europe driven by national-conservative populists, the main aim of this paper is to focus on the populism of ANO in the Czech Republic. Based on a mixed-method content analysis, the main argument of the paper is that the rise of centrist technocratic populism (perhaps less radical at first glance) ends the era of the Czech Republic's exceptionalism in Central Europe in terms of its resistance to populist illiberal challenges. In other words, the analysis shows that populism combined with technocracy (and not necessarily with more radical ideologies such as nativism) presents a vision of a regime alternative to the dominant liberal democratic paradigm. This alternative is based on a denial of political pluralism, anti-partyism, resistance to constitutionalism, and the embrace of majoritarianism.

INTRODUCTION

"Democratic backsliding," a term commonly used to describe the recent changes in politics in Central and Eastern Europe, is most profoundly related to the emergence and electoral success of populist political actors in the region (Krastev 2007; Rupnik 2007; Dawson and Hanley 2016). To date, scholars studying problems with the development of democracy in Central and Eastern Europe have mostly focused on the cases of Poland and Hungary (Stanley 2015; Enyedi 2016). The "Fourth Republic" projects pursued by Jarosław Kaczyński's Law and Justice party in Poland, and the vision of illiberal democracy promoted by Viktor Orbán in Hungary, have raised concerns about the quality of democracy in both countries. The seriousness of the threat, and the fact that both Kaczyński and Orbán have already had the opportunity to implement their visions and reforms of the political system, help to explain why interest in recent developments in the Czech Republic has remained overshadowed by concerns about its Hungarian and Polish neighbors.

There is another very good reason for this oversight. The Czech Republic has always been considered as a frontrunner of democratic transition and consolidation in post-communist Europe. Unlike Slovakia during the era of Mečiarism, the Czech Republic did not experience years of a hybrid regime in the 1990s (Hloušek and Kopeček 2003). Nor did it experience a populist coalition as Poland did in the 2000s (Jasiewicz 2008; Stanley 2015) or an illiberal shift such as Orbán put into practice in Hungary in the early 2010s (Pappas 2014). Rather, it maintained a stable polity, firmly rooted in liberal democracy, and was especially notable for the emergence and stability of its party democracy. Czech party politics more closely resembled the established party systems of Western Europe than the highly volatile party environments in other Central and Eastern European countries (Bértoa 2014; Powell and Tucker 2014).

Nevertheless, repeated corruption scandals, government instability, and the economic crisis created an opportunity for the emergence of new populist challengers in the Czech Republic. The populist surge culminated with the unprecedented electoral successes of the political party known as ANO 2011 (Action of Dissatisfied Citizens 2011; *ano* is the

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word for "yes" in Czech), which became the most successful new political party since the fall of communism (winning 18.7 percent of votes in the 2013 general election and a victory with 29.6 percent in the last general election in October 2017). Although ANO is ideologically unfocused and, at first glance, not as radical in its discourse as the governing parties in Poland and Hungary, this paper aims to show that the technocratic or managerial populism of ANO reflects the contemporary illiberal tendencies in Central and Eastern Europe. The main underlying argument of the paper is that the recent surge of populism and consequent political illiberalism in Central and Eastern Europe is in no way limited to nativist conservative (or far-right) populist discourses as in the cases of Poland and Hungary. I argue that the technocratic variant of "centrist" populism (Pop-Eleches 2010) poses a threat to the foundations of liberal democracy that is much like that posed by the more radical versions of populism. I also discuss the reasons behind the rise of ANO and compare it to similar cases in other Central and East European countries. I will demonstrate that anti-political technocratic discourse has become a common feature of Central and East European party systems and is not an exception stemming from the specific conditions of the Czech Republic, making this species of populism an important subject for future comparative research.

POPULISM AND DEMOCRACY

Let me start with a definition of *populism*. With the thousands of pages that have been written to define the "slippery concept" of populism, a consensus on the core elements of populism has emerged. To put it simply, populism can be best understood with reference to three fundamental and tightly connected characteristics: (1) a perception of the people and the elites as homogeneous groups (people-centrism); (2) construction of an antagonistic and essentially moralistic (Manichean) divide between the two groups; and (3) a view of the people as a moral sovereign and the need to restore the allegedly stolen sovereignty of the people (see Mudde 2004; Albertazzi and McDonnell 2008; Stanley 2008; Hawkins 2009; Rooduijn 2013). This perception is perhaps best summed up in Cas Mudde's "minimal" definition of populism:

> a thin-centred ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, "the pure people" and "the corrupt elite," and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people. (Mudde 2004, 562)

The majority of the authors agree that populism does not represent an antithesis of democracy as such (Mény and Surel 2002; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2012). However, the relationship between populism and democracy is complex, and the key here is a specification of *democracy*. More than twenty-five years have passed since the publication of Francis Fukuyama's famous book about the end of history—basically, the victory of political liberalism (Fukuyama 2006). Although the book did not garner unanimous acclaim, there were relatively few doubts about the prevailing "liberal democratic consensus" both in the Western world and in emerging democracies of Central and Eastern Europe. Therefore, for an understanding of the position of populism in relation to democracy, the adjective "liberal" is the key here.

It is not an easy task to define liberal democracy. Nevertheless, it is possible to find a basic agreement on the features that make a liberal democracy a distinctive type of political regime. Following John Rawls's approach to political liberalism, Takis S. Pappas stresses the idea of the existence of *political pluralism*, that is, contestation of concurrent but largely incompatible ideological doctrines (Pappas 2014). Even more than the objective existence of ideological competition, the acknowledgment thereof makes one a liberal democrat. If we use the terminology of comparative party-politics research, political pluralism translates into multiple cleavages dividing society into groups defined by different and mostly contradictory interests based on their socio-demography (class, religion, geography) or political attitudes. These interests are articulated, aggregated, and represented by political parties competing on the electoral market.

Nevertheless, despite the diversity of largely inconsistent ideologies, liberal democracy is based on an *overlapping consensus*. This means that there is a common ground on which the society and/or political actors can agree and, more importantly, they seek to find a consensus and prefer moderation and deliberation based on constitutionalism. *Constitutionalism* includes a set of institutional guarantees and principles against the unbalanced power of the people, with the aim of limiting the concentration of power and protecting minority rights. In this sense, liberal democracy stems from majority rule but, at the same time, embraces institutions that guard against the possible tyranny of the majority at the expense of minorities (Pappas 2014).

By contrast, the populist vision of democracy stems from what Margaret Canovan describes as two faces of democracy. The redemptive face refers to a vision that promises "salvation through politics" and a return to popular power, with the people as the only legitimate authority, and to the direct exercise of power without institutional constraints. The pragmatic face refers to a peaceful resolution of conflicts in society (as an alternative to violence or even civil war), and to preserving the government, institutions, and rules (Canovan 1999). Similarly, Chantal Mouffe distinguishes between two pillars of democracy: a liberal

(or constitutional) one that focuses on individual rights and the rule of law, and a democratic one that emphasizes participation and popular sovereignty (Mouffe 2000; see also Abts and Rummens 2007).

In the eyes of populists, democracy is a one-sided phenomenon: it refers only to the power of the people (Mény and Surel 2002); populists "have little patience with liberalism's emphasis on procedural niceties and protections for individual rights" (Plattner 2010, 88). For Pappas, illiberalism is the key defining feature of populism (Pappas 2014). To put it simply, populism is a threat to contemporary democracies not because it is fundamentally undemocratic but because it is illiberal. Populism is democratic only in a majoritarian sense (Plattner 2010); it contravenes the principles of constitutional and/or liberal democracy (Abts and Rummens 2007).

Since populism is based on the principle of homogeneity of the people, when populists adhere to a redemptive form of democracy, there is an underlying presumption that the will of the people is unified and there is a universal idea of good that is expressed by the people and is recognized and pursued by the populist leader (Stanley 2008; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2012; Pappas 2014). Consequently, there is very little space for political pluralism. Instead, the populist perception of politics relies on one single divide: the moral conflict between the good people and the bad elite. As stated by Peter Mair:

> Populist democracy […] assumes no fundamental clash of interests between different sectors of the electorate: voters are citizens first, and only later, if at all, are they workers, employers, farmers, women, immigrants, or whatever. […] It [the government] serves as an administrator, seeking the best solutions available on the basis of objective criteria. (Mair 2002, 520)

In a similar fashion, Daniele Caramani draws a contrast between populism and party democracy that also applies to political pluralism. In the populist view,

> there are things that are either good or bad for the whole of society and political action can be either good or bad for society in its entirety. There is a homogenous and organic vision of the people and the nation. It is furthermore possible to "discover" this common or general interest. (Caramani 2017, 60)

The stress on the proclaimed existence of the universal good also stems from the emphasis that populist narratives often place on common-sense or other seemingly "apolitical" solutions, which is more clearly evident in the case of less ideologically embedded populist parties (Canovan 1981; Pauwels 2010). As the empirical part of this article shows, the apolitical technocratic populist narrative of ANO can well serve as a basis for illiberal anti-pluralism.

The morality of the conflict (Hawkins 2009) also means that populism, unlike other forms of democratic politics, is far more *adversarial* and has little need for compromise. In turn, there is a paradox in the essence of populism. On the one hand, it presumes the existence of a recognizable (and implicitly consensual) universal good, and on the other hand, it claims for itself the ability to identify and defend the good (monopoly on truth). There is something exclusive in the relationship between the people and the populist actor. The other political actors are not perceived as competing rivals. Their presence is at most tolerated but more often denigrated. More importantly, this denigration is not based on policy disagreements but is outright rejection. The problem is not *what* policy is but *who* proposes it. Therefore, there is no space for policy debates, or for compromise, since the other actors are not considered as legitimate rivals: they are the enemies of the people. I will demonstrate below that technocratic populism as represented by ANO can contribute to the construction of this highly adversarial and essentially hierarchical conflict between apolitical or anti-party technocratic rule and the world of fundamentally political or ideological conflicts embodied in political parties and party politicians.

Last, but not least, *majoritarian rule*, which disregards (because it does not recognize) minority interests and the need for the protection thereof, is applied. This point is closely related to the first one. Populism equates the general interest or the common good with the will of the people, which means the will of the majority of voters. In turn, the majority is equated to society as a whole. Consequently, it leaves only a little space for the protection of minorities, separation of powers, checks-and-balances, and other forms of constitutional constraints (Pappas 2014; see also Plattner 2010 and Caramani 2017; see Table 1). In this kind of technocratic populism, as represented by ANO, the stress on majoritarianism and the need to establish a majoritarian polity is framed in terms of effectiveness and competency.

Although the illiberal nature of populism stems from its general features, its specific content varies depending on the "species" of populism or the host ideology to which populism is attached. Populist ideology rarely stands alone (it has an "empty heart"—Taggart 2000). In other words, how the people are portrayed, who is presented as the enemy, and what the solution is for the political malaise differ in time and place. As Ben Stanley states, the "thin nature [of populist ideology] means that it […] lacks the capacity to put forward a wide-ranging and coherent programme for the solution to crucial political ques-

TABLE 1
Elements of Liberal and Populist Democracy

Liberal democracy	*Populist democracy*
Plurality of interests	Universal good
Overlapping consensus	Adversarial politics
Constitutionalism	Majoritarianism

Source: Based on Pappas 2014, updated by the author.

tions" (Stanley 2008, 95). Consequently, the illiberal populist narrative is partly dependent on the content of the host ideology. While the exclusionist nativism of the populist radical right elicits disrespect for the rights of ethnic or religious minorities, the populist radical left is more focused on economic questions and the "capitalist enemy," and is more prone to violate ownership rights. Therefore, to fully understand the illiberal nature and consequences of a populist actor, it is necessary to focus both on the type of populist appeal (its host ideology) and the specific illiberal discourse, its reasoning, proposals, and implemented policies. In turn, the empirical section of the paper will combine two interrelated perspectives. First, I will analyze the populist discourse of ANO using the three interrelated elements of populism described above: the people, the anti-elite appeal, and restoration of the sovereignty of the people. Second, I will focus on the illiberalism of ANO using the three elements introduced above: the existence of the universal good, adversarial politics, and majoritarianism. However, it would not be possible or useful to separate the two concepts. I also provide a brief introduction to the history of ANO.

METHODS AND DATA

Qualitative Analysis

I use both qualitative and quantitative approaches here. As for the qualitative part of the analysis, different sources of data were used with "purposive sampling" as a data selection technique. As stated by Satu Elo and coauthors, "purposive sampling is suitable for qualitative studies where the researcher is interested in informants who have the best knowledge concerning the research topic" (Elo et al. 2014). In other words, I chose data that are expected to be valuable sources of positions and policy platforms of ANO, such as election manifestoes presented before the general elections in 2013 and 2017. In addition to the election manifestoes, Andrej Babiš's blog (https://andrejBabiš.blog.idnes.cz/) was included as well as all interviews with representatives of ANO presented on the party's website (www.anobudelip.cz). Other sources used to create as accurate a picture of ANO's discourse as possible were Andrej Babiš's 2017 book *What I Dream About When I Happen to Be Sleeping* and the founding ANO 2011 Declaration (ANO 2011), published in November 2011. The full list of sources incorporated in the data corpus is available from the author upon request.

The method of analysis can be best described as a qualitative content analysis (Schreier 2012; Elo et al. 2014). More precisely, I opted for a combination of "directed content analysis" and "summative content analysis." Directed content analysis is typified by a more structured process than a conventional inductive qualitative content analysis. This approach is based on a priori knowledge of the core concepts and/or categories (in this case, elements of both populism and illiberalism). The summative content analysis uses a latent content approach that is aimed at discovering the underlying meaning of the content. I proceeded as follows. After the collection of the data, based on the directed content analysis approach I identified content (it could be a sentence, a number of sentences, or a paragraph) that referred to elements of populism and/or illiberalism. The summative part of the content analysis was based on the following set of questions: How does ANO talk about the people? What are the characteristics of the people attached to them by the political parties? Who is the enemy of the people? What are the characteristics of the enemy? What is the relationship of the enemy to the people? What is the solution provided by the party? How should the people's sovereignty be restored? What is the attitude of ANO toward political pluralism? What is its relationship to deliberation and compromise? What kind of polity and settings of decision making does it prefer?

Furthermore, I identified and systematized the main meanings of the elements of the concepts and reconstructed the nature of the populism (and more general platforms) and illiberalism of ANO. I listed the meanings of the people, the nature of the enemy and the labels attached to it, including its (alleged) characteristics in the specific context of the statements analyzed, the problems stemming from the behavior of the enemy, and also solutions provided by the party. In sum, the analysis combined both a deductive (the existence of predefined concepts) and an inductive approach (expressed in finding the specific characteristics of the predefined concepts). The analysis is not strictly structured by elements of populism or illiberalism, since—as the theory expects and as it turned out—the populism and illiberalism of the party are intertwined.

Quantitative Analysis

In addition, a quantitative approach that draws from two different kinds of data was employed. First, Chapel Hill Expert survey data from 2014 (Bakker et al. 2014) were employed to plot the positions of parliamentary political parties in political space. Political space was defined by the two dimensions generally considered to be most important to capture politics in Europe in general and in the Czech Republic in particular. Two scales were used: the economic left–right scale defined mainly by the role of the state in the economy; and the scale defined by green politics, alternative politics, and libertarianism on the one hand and by traditionalism, authoritarianism and nationalism on the other hand (GAL/TAN) (see, for example, Hloušek and Kopeček 2008; Chytilek and Eibl 2011). The left–right economic divide is operationalized using the 11-point lrecon variable; the GAL/TAN divide is operationalized using the 11-point galtan variable. The 2014 dataset also offers two new measures of salience pertinent to my analysis: antielite_sal, an 11-point

measure of the salience of anti-elite sentiment in party appeals, and corrupt_sal, an 11-point measure of the salience of corruption in party appeals. The basic unit of analysis is a mean expert coder judgment per party.

Last but not least, original data from the Campaign Dynamics project were used to present the nature of the appeal of ANO. The data draw from quantitative manual coding of statements of representatives of political parties during the month before the general elections in 2010 and 2013 (only the data from 2013 are relevant for this work; unfortunately, the data for the 2017 election have not been gathered yet). Each country team selected two daily newspapers (in the case of the Czech Republic, the right-leaning *Mladá fronta* and left-leaning *Právo*). Newspaper articles related to national elections from four weeks prior to the election day were collected and analyzed by each country team, composed of a country expert and three graduate research assistants as coders. All front-page articles were coded as well as a 5 percent random sample of the rest of the election-related articles until at least 60 articles per newspaper/election had been coded. Three different types of statements were coded: policy statements, valence statements, and issue-related valence statements. Policy statements released by a political party referred to its positions in pre-defined policy areas (such as taxation, social policy, or immigration). Valence statements referred to specific qualities of a political party including its honesty, integrity, competence, performance, or internal unity. The last type of statement is a combination of the two previous ones; that is, it refers to valence characteristics of a political party within a specific issue area. Coding was checked for inter-coder reliability (see detailed information about coding in Baumann and Gross 2016 and the full dataset at Debus et al. 2018). Based on the lack of a host ideology and its suggested replacement by competence as a defining feature of centrist populism (at least in the Czech case), I present an overview of the importance of different kinds of statements for the parliamentary parties to capture the nature of appeal of the parties. In particular, I compare the share of policy and valence issues, because the prevalence of valence statements and a lack of (clear) policy statement should be typical for populist parties such as ANO.

HISTORY AND ELECTORAL SUCCESS OF ANO IN A COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE

In November 2011, Andrej Babiš, a billionaire of Slovak origin and the owner of the biggest agro-chemical company in the Czech Republic, released a declaration titled "Action of Dissatisfied Citizens" (Akce nespokojených občanů; hence the initials ANO). He criticized the existing situation in Czech politics and Czech politicians, calling on citizens to take part in an initiative for "a more just society, and a functional state with the rule of law" (ANO 2011). Babiš was not an unknown name in Czech politics and business. Before 1989, he graduated from the University of Economics in Prague and was sent to Morocco as a representative of Petrimex, a state-controlled international trading company. After 1989, he became the managing director of Agrofert, a company that focused on agricultural and fertilizer production. Babiš managed to develop Agrofert into one of the largest companies in the Czech Republic, in the face of rumors suggesting that he had taken over the company illegally. He can hardly be seen as an outsider (as he has consistently claimed), for he allegedly had very good relationships with top Czech politicians and his business profited from privatization and state agricultural subsidies (Kaiser 2013; Pergler 2014).

Eventually, the ANO initiative became the basis for the ANO party, which was registered by the Ministry of Interior on May 11, 2012. ANO took part in the 2012 Senate elections, but none of the candidates supported by ANO made it into the second round of voting (a two-round runoff electoral system is used). This election disaster turned out to be one of the most important drivers of ANO's later success. The party (or, more precisely, its leader Andrej Babiš and his companies) decided to invest extensively into political marketing: the party logo was changed (Jankajová 2013) and it became a fully professional electoral party (Paleček 2015, for the concept see Panebianco 1988 or Lees-Marshment 2001), employing one of the country's best experts on political marketing.

Furthermore, Agrofert bought two of the country's most important dailies (including their digital versions), two weeklies, and a radio station just before or shortly after the 2013 election. Consequently, ANO rolled out a very intensive election campaign before the 2013 early election. It finished with 18.65 percent of the vote and 47 out of 200 seats and became the most successful genuinely new political party in the Czech Republic since the first free election after the fall of communism.

ANO 2011 eventually became a part of the new government alongside the Social Democrats (ČSSD) and the Christian Democrats (KDU-ČSL). Unlike other populist parties in government, ANO decided not to abandon its populist narrative (it only slightly changed its content and put more emphasis on presenting the results of its ministerial work), nor did it embrace a clearer ideological profile. After very good results in local, regional, and European elections (ANO won the latter two by a small margin), ANO won the 2017 general election with 29.6 percent of the vote and 74 seats out of 200 in the lower chamber of the parliament. After the single-party minority government led by Babiš lost a vote of confidence, a cabinet of

ANO and ČSSD supported by the Communist Party was formed.

Although the institutional context is often considered one of the most important factors determining the rise of new political parties (Willey 1998; Tavits 2006; Hino 2012), the setting of the political system cannot be solely accountable for the electoral breakthrough of ANO, for neither the party law, nor the electoral system, nor public funding of political parties underwent significant changes before the 2013 or 2017 general election (see, for example, Havlík and Haughton 2017).

The electoral success of ANO, much like that of the Public Affairs party in 2010 (Havlík and Hloušek 2014), can be best understood as a result of the deepened crisis of political trust in political parties, and party democracy in general, that was exacerbated by the economic difficulties of the country. Between the second half of 2008 and the electoral campaign of 2013, the Czech Republic experienced decline and stagnation of GDP growth, relatively high unemployment, and growing public debt. Moreover, more than two-thirds of the population perceived the economic situation as bad shortly before the 2013 election, which was twice the level in June 2008 (Červenka 2013)

The enduring economic crisis was accompanied by a decline in political trust fed by government crises (Hloušek and Kopeček 2014; Brunclík 2016), repeated corruption scandals, and the systemic symbiosis between political parties on the one hand and "well-connected" private businesses on the other, which was increasingly reported in the media (Klíma 2013; Kupka and Mocht'ak 2015). As shown in the national election studies, declared attachment to political parties decreased from 56 percent to 31 percent of the public in 2013 (CVVM 2002, 2013); while only 23 percent of voters made up their minds during the last weeks before the 2006 election, this number increased to more than 40 percent in 2013. The increased availability of voters on the electoral market rose in the context of high disapproval of party democracy and the performance of political parties.

The level of public anti-partyism became critical shortly before the 2013 election, with less than 50 percent of people agreeing with the statement that political parties are necessary for democracy, and only 25 percent believing in 2012 that becoming a member of a political party can change anything. The feeling that there are no differences between political parties was shared by 75 percent of people (a historic high), while 87 percent thought that political parties were corrupt (Čadová 2013).

Widespread dissatisfaction with political parties and party democracy went hand in hand with rising disrespect toward politicians; just a couple of months before the general election, being a member of parliament (MP) became the least prestigious occupation (MPs scored only 25 points on a 0–99 scale, 15 points less than in 2004; Tuček 2013).

As will be shown, the populist-technocratic anti-party discourse of ANO and Babiš fitted perfectly in the atmosphere of declining political trust, critical evaluation of political parties, and negative attitudes toward politicians and politics in general, and was reflected in the electoral base of ANO. Neither ideology nor policy attitudes nor a specific social class predicted support for ANO, unlike for the established parties. Instead, positive assessment of competency to deal with the most important policy issues increased the chances of voting for ANO in 2013 (Maškarinec 2017; Havlík and Voda 2018). As the data from the 2017 Czech National Election Study show, the socio-demographics and policy preferences of ANO's voters are still not very clear (although ANO was supported more by older voters). Rather, the best predictor was the country's economic position: even after several years of economic recovery, ANO was perceived as competent to resolve economic issues (Czech National Election Study 2017).

Rather than being a unique case, the emergence of ANO should be approached in the context of a broader wave of recently successful Central and East European political parties using anti-political, anti-party narratives. In Slovenia, these include Positive Slovenia, the Citizen List of Gregor Virant, the Party of Miro Cerar, and the List of Marjan Šarec; in Slovakia, the Party of Ordinary Citizens and Independent Personalities, and We are the Family—Boris Kollár; and in Lithuania, the Labor Party and the National Resurrection Party. To some extent, a forerunner of ANO in the Czech Republic, Public Affairs, could be added to the list as well.

All these parties share several commonalities. Their leaders proclaimed themselves to be outsiders with non-political backgrounds. Zoran Jankovič (Positive Slovenia), Igor Matovič (Ordinary Citizens), Boris Kollár (Boris Kollár—We are the Family), Viktor Uspaskich (Labor Party), and Arūnas Valinskas (National Resurrection Party) were successful businessmen before their entry into politics; Gregor Virant and Miro Cerar were university professors; Marjan Šarec became well-known for his career as a professional comedian and political satirist; and the leader of Public Affairs, Radek John, was a former investigative journalist. In all cases, the curricula vitae of the party leaders were skillfully employed in broader anti-establishment, anti-ideological, or even anti-political narratives. Moreover, all of these parties avoided using traditional labels to describe their political direction and presented themselves as standing above outdated ideological conflicts (see Havlík and Hloušek 2014; Aleknonis and Matkevičienė 2016; Krašovec 2017; Marušiak 2017).

The conditions that preceded the emergence of these new populist parties strongly resemble the context for the rise of ANO. Corruption scandals, government crises, economic difficulties, and a subsequent erosion of trust in political parties and party democracy created fertile ground for the emergence of this type of political entrepreneurs. Despite the fact that not all Central and East European countries have experienced

a rise of technocratic non-political populism (detailed comparative research of the reasons for this goes beyond the scope of this article), the cases of ANO and other political parties in the region show that, if the context is favorable enough, the resentment against the governing elites is not necessarily transformed into support for the established opposition parties or for ideologically extreme variants of populism. In a context of low trust in political parties and party democracy, voting for a populist with a non-political background seems to be a viable alternative.

TECHNOCRATIC POPULISM AND POLITICAL ILLIBERALISM OF ANO

Figure 1 shows the positions of political parties in the political space defined by two elements related to the nature of populism: salience of anti-elitism and salience of anti-corruption appeals. The figure shows a very clear distinction between the two populist parties (ANO, and the radical-right Dawn) that exhibit high salience of anti-corruption and high salience of anti-elitism, and the rest of the political parties with a moderate level of salience of corruption (referring to the quite high general importance of the issue in the Czech context) and a low level of anti-elitism. The exception here is the radical-left Communist Party (KSČM), which shows a moderate level of anti-elitism. In other words, the data clearly show the importance of anti-elitism and anti-corruption rhetoric for the profile of ANO; that is, they show the highly present issues defining populist discourse. The question remains, what is the nature of ANO's populism?

Not surprisingly, the core of the party's populist appeal was the construction of the divide between the people and the political elite. Unlike populist radical-right parties, ANO did not define the people strictly in terms of a nation, ethnic group, or religion. Nor did it adopt the class approach usually employed by the radical left. Instead, ANO's people-centrism used the traditional notion of "Czech golden hands," which refers to an alleged high level of craftsmanship and the popularity of a do-it-yourself approach in the Czech Republic (Hradecká 2013). This glorification of the Czech people did not stand alone, but was a part of the key element of any populist discourse—the proclaimed division between the people and the politicians. It was clearly expressed in one of ANO's main slogans before the 2013 general election: "We are a talented nation, but we are governed by the inept." This notion was later elaborated by Babiš in his 2017 book:

> Bohemians, Moravians, and Silesians are an extremely inventive and creative nation. Although our country is not as big as Germany, Italy, or Poland, we are a great nation because of our talent to learn things and to be inventive. Even fifty years of suppression of freedom and creativity was not able to knock out the heritage of Bat'a [the famous entrepreneur in the shoe business in interwar Czechoslovakia]; we have the talent in our genes. Inventiveness, creativity, and extraordinary skills. And the Czech resilience. The power to get up again. (Babiš 2017)

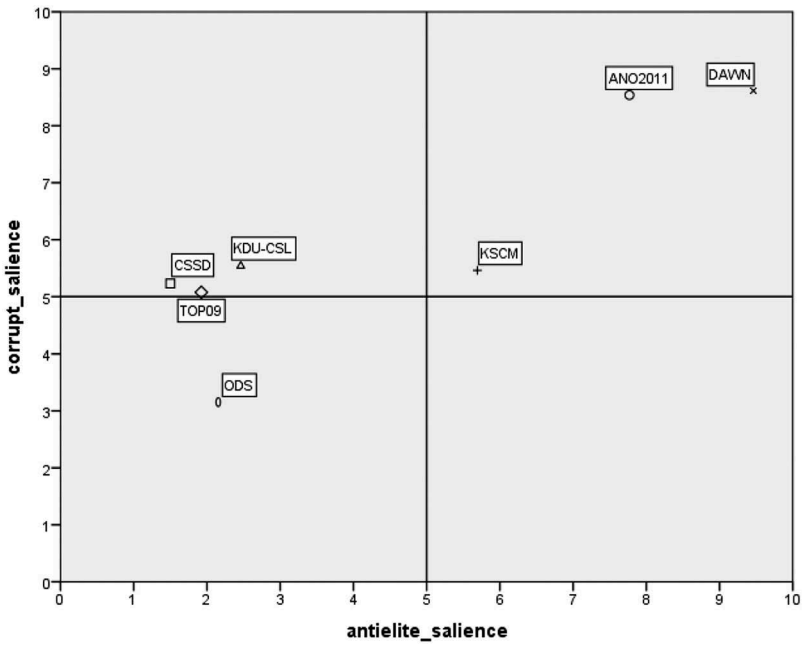

FIGURE 1 Position of political parties in political space (anti-elitism salience and corruption salience). *Data source*: Bakker et al. 2014. The position refers to mean expert coder judgments per party. antielite_salience: the salience of anti-elite sentiment in party appeals where 0 = not important at all, 10 = extremely important.; corrupt_salience: salience of corruption in party appeals where 0 = not important at all, 10 = extremely important.

Notably, the populist heartland (Taggart 2000) constructed by ANO, the almost mythical notion of the Czechs, was not defined in ethnic, racial, religious, or class terms. Instead, it depicted a land of ordinary people who are exceptional for their diligence, extraordinary manual skills, brightness, and wit. Importantly, the party refused to portray itself as an advocate of the interests of a narrow part of society. It claimed that it is a political party for everyone, effectively crosscutting all of the existing political cleavages and replacing them with a new and supposedly dominant populist divide, and more or less explicitly denying the existence of political pluralism.

The "other side" of the divide was defined by a very strong anti-establishment appeal. Its main feature was a general denigration of the established political parties regardless of their ideology. ANO employed the terms "traditional political parties" and later, partly as a reaction to criticism of the party's undemocratic nature, "so-called democratic parties," thus resembling the discourse used by the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia before and during communist rule. These terms referred to all the older political parties,[1] and were used to construct an image of the existence of a homogeneous political class (Schedler 1996). The corruption, incompetency, inexperience, and low morals of politicians were presented by Babiš as the main reasons behind the malaise in Czech politics and also as the main reason why Babiš decided to establish his political party:

> My name is Andrej Babiš. I employ thousands of people in my companies in the Czech Republic, I pay hundreds of millions of crowns in taxes, and I'm angry, just like you. I'm angry because since the [Velvet] revolution [in November 1989], politicians of our country not only have failed to lead, but they have watched over the embezzlement of the country. I'm angry that we live in a dysfunctional state. (ANO 2011)

> The main problems of the Czech Republic are incompetent and unprofessional politicians and primarily the rule-breaking that is the result of this incompetence of our so-called elites. (Babiš 2013a)

The anti-establishment appeal of ANO 2011 was built upon a set of negative characterizations of the current political elites and the alleged consequences they had for the state of affairs in the Czech Republic. The image of the elites constructed by ANO was quite simple: the elites (representatives of the established parties) were seen as corrupt, power-seeking, pursuing their own (business) interests in politics, and generally incompetent to take decisions shaping citizen's everyday lives and running the state.

> Politicians do not work to make things better for everybody, but for their hunger for power and the interests of the influential groups that placed them in office and at the top of their candidate lists. (Babiš 2013b)

What is important is that the movement's anti-establishment appeal did not focus on one or more specific parties but against practically every relevant political party, which it blamed for the bad situation in the Czech Republic and characterized as a homogeneous entity, often labeled simply as "politicians," "parliamentary political parties," or "traditional political parties." Consequently, it would be false to understand ANO as a regular opposition party aiming its criticism at the government, or as just a part of the political spectrum (the "left" or the "right"). The "enemy" is defined more broadly and in language that goes beyond the standard categories of government–opposition dynamics.

The fierce criticism of the established political parties served as a basis for a more general mixture of anti-political and anti-party sentiment. It consisted of two important interrelated elements: a moral dichotomy between (partisan) politics and the sphere of "hard work" embodied both by Babiš himself and by the ordinary Czech people (see above), and challenging the ideological perception of political conflicts. The negative picture of politics was not seemingly presented as skepticism about politics as such, but rather about how politics is conducted by political elites who have transformed it into a corrupt system: "traditional parties [the pejorative word *partaje* was used in the original] privatized politics for themselves and their pals" (Babiš 2017, 6). The core of the solution proposed by Babiš was not fundamentally political but rather a mixture of anti-politics and anti-partyism built on the implementation of business practices strictly based on competence and expertise instead of ideology, party affiliation, or the deliberative competition of political parties. Eventually, this led to the construction of the two contrasting environments: the dirty world of party democracy and the effective, allegedly morally cleaner, world of business, the world Babiš comes from.

> I was not spoiled by politics, I jumped straight into it with my colleagues, and we did not have time for looking around. It was a completely different world for me. The world full of hypocrisy, animosity, lies, and manipulation. A promise or a handshake did not mean anything, one thing is said in private and something completely different in front of the cameras. For a man from business, it was difficult to imagine something like that. […] Instead, I met completely incompetent people, or on the contrary all-powerful people, buck-passers, and scammers. (Babiš 2017, 7–8)

An important element of this part of the discourse was the portrayal of representatives of the established political parties as career politicians without experience from "ordinary life," as (probably intentionally using Weber's typology) people living *from* politics. The description of former prime minister Bohuslav Sobotka as a man "who has not been able to build a dog house [although an

ordinary Czech man can do it]" illustrates nicely both the anti-political narrative of ANO and the divide between the ordinary people and politicians. When talking about "politicians who have never worked, who only know parties' secretariats" (Babiš 2013d), Babiš did not refer to a particular party, nor to the established parties in general. Instead, politicians are seen through a set of negative characteristics, as almost a specific, useless, human species, and consequently politics is seen as a realm full of scams, corruption, and incompetency. One representative of ANO did admit that there are "decent people" in the political parties; however, they are the exception in the generally rotten world of politics and political parties.

An important part of ANO's populist anti-political narrative was de-ideologization, or even depoliticization, and its resistance to being presented in terms of traditional party families or a left–right ideological orientation. Although the party initially leaned to the right (Babiš himself admitted that he had voted for the center-right Civic Democratic Party [ODS] in the past), it soon decided to sidestep a clear ideological profile and sought to target all groups of voters with a non-ideological appeal (Paleček 2015). Both the objective and the subjective lack of a clear host ideology could be identified.

Using the data from the 2014 Chapel Hill expert survey, Figure 2 depicts the positions of political parties in the political space defined by the economic left–right dimension and by the GAL/TAN dimension. The most important finding is related to the centrist position of ANO. Although it was located slightly to the right on the economic left–right dimension, it significantly differed from the rest of the parliamentary parties. All the other parties can be characterized quite clearly (the distance from the center is at least +2 on a 10-point scale) either regarding their attitudes toward the economy or regarding their position on the socio-culturally defined GAL/TAN dimension.

This objective ideological emptiness can also be illustrated by the high proportion of valence issues (as opposed to positional issues) in ANO 2011's election platform before the 2013 general election. The share of valence issues exceeded all other parties' space in their respective platforms (Eibl 2014). Table 2 shows shares of different types of statements for each political party before the 2013

TABLE 2
Type of Statements Made by Political Parties (2010–2013)

Party	*Issue*	*Issue - valence*	*Valence*	*N*
ČSSD	67.80%	9.60%	22.60%	208
ODS	54.40%	4.40%	41.10%	90
KSČM	78.60%	5.70%	15.70%	70
KDU-ČSL	75.80%	6.50%	17.70%	62
TOP 09	63.90%	15.50%	20.60%	97
ANO 2011	50.80%	8.30%	40.80%	120
Dawn	57.10%	14.30%	28.60%	28
Total	63.90%	9.00%	27.10%	675

Data source: Comparative Campaign Dynamics Project (2016), N = 1154. Party acronyms: ČSSD–Česká strana sociálně demokratická; ODS–Občanská demokratická strana, KSČM = Komunistická strana Čech a Moravy; KDU–ČSL–Křesťanská a demokratická unie–Československá strana lidová; Dawn=Úsvit přímé demokracie Tomia Okamury.

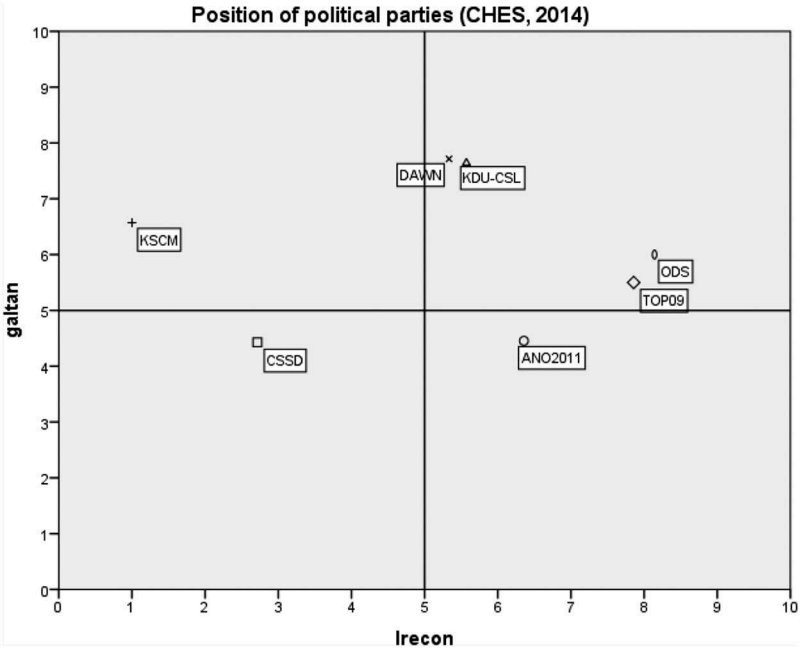

FIGURE 2 Position of political parties in political space (lrecon and galtan). *Data source*: Bakker et al. 2014. The position refers to mean expert coder judgments per party. lrecon: the economic left-right scale defined mainly by the role of the state in the economy where left = 0; right = 10; galtan: the scale defined by green politics, alternative politics and libertarianism (GAL) on the one hand and traditionalism, authoritarianism and nationalism (TAN) on the other hand where GAL = 0; TAN = 10.

election, using the data from Comparative Campaign Dynamics Project. On average, approximately two-thirds of all statements were related to a position of a political party on a political issue, while slightly more than one-quarter of the statements referred to a valence characteristic of a party. The rest of the statements contained valence statements linked to a political issue. However, the share of issue statements made by ANO is well below the average, with only one-half of the statements introducing a party policy position. On the contrary, two-fifths of the statements were about the valence characteristics of ANO. ODS is the only other political party to have an overall profile of the statements made in one year being similar to ANO's. This can be explained by the change of in party leadership after the corruption scandal of Prime Minister Petr Nečas shortly before the 2013 general election. The party tried to persuade voters that the new leadership represented a new, "better" ODS.

ANO was intentionally ideologically vague and this is shown in its objectively measurable lack of a clear left–right ideological leaning. The categories traditionally used to describe (party) politics (right or left ideologies, for example) were presented as part of the world of the "traditional political parties" that needed to be replaced by a completely new approach embodied in Babiš and his party. This populist division was presented as by far the most important conflict within the society, making other political and societal divides irrelevant.

> It was not so long ago when all politicians and political scientists freaked out when we said that ANO is neither a clear rightist, nor leftist subject. I would always state that the so-called left and so-called right strung us along before the elections, but they make deals with each other in the end. […] I might repeat myself, but it is really neither left nor right, what is going on in the Czech politics. What is going on in politics now is that the established parties want to remain in office. There is no such thing as right and left. In the Czech Republic, we have a completely different division. On one side are the current parties and current politicians, and on the other side are the voters, that is, we, who can cast our ballots for one of the current parties […]. Now, it is time for voters to say which of the parties from the "other side" is as close as possible to them. Or they can choose a movement that is not on the "other side," and it never will be. (Babiš 2013e)

ANO tried to emphasize the alleged convergence between the established political parties, thus strengthening the already mentioned notion of the political class and adding another dimension. This new dimension, as part of its anti-establishment appeal, stressed the harmfulness of ideological politics and explicitly denied the relevance of ideologically different policy proposals. According to ANO, the differences are pretend; the only conflict that matters is the divide between the corrupt political class and the non-ideological or non-political solution proposed by Babiš and his party.

> The division between the left and the right has not mattered for a long time; any ideology has evaporated from the traditional ossified political parties over the years. There are still some people who have been prospering from political loot for more than twenty years. Although they use different slogans, they are united in their sole aim: To remain in politics, and if this is not possible then to find another way to milk the state. They know very well that they could not have such a good living in normal life. If any. They live from politics. Functions and money from it, this is their ideology. (Babiš 2017)

At first glance, the established political parties are being held to account for the failure of the standard ideological politics, but Babiš and his party have not offered a revival of ideological politics but rather a completely different solution. Based on Paul Lucardie's terminology (Lucardie 2000), the party is not a "purifier" (like the Union of Freedom in 1998 or TOP 09 in 2010; Hanley 2012) but a "project of newness" that has been built around a different set of claims that are intended to sound non-political and non-ideological; that is, different from the way politics as such (not a specific rightist or leftist political program) has been approached by the established political parties. The claimed otherness of ANO was also underlined by the fact that ANO was registered as a political movement, not a political party, because, as stated by one of Babiš's marketing advisors, "people hate new political parties" (Jankajová 2013). The statement emphasizing that ANO is not a political party but a movement has become a recurrent theme in the narrative of the party. For instance, Babiš claimed that he had founded ANO 2011 as a "Civic Forum for the Future" (Česká televize 2013). He referred to the broad movement that emerged at the time communism fell and that was also based on a strong anti-partyism best expressed in the well-known slogan "Political parties are for partisans, the Civic Forum is for everyone" (the expressions "political party" or "partisanship" had strong negative associations with the ruling Communist Party and the prominent position of members and cadres of the Communist Party in the society). Nevertheless, in reality, the organization of ANO 2011 can be best characterized as a business-firm political party. The real operation of the party has been extremely leader-dependent and autocratic, not growing out of the grass-root activities that are generally considered to be the essence of movement-type organizations (Kopeček 2016).

In other words, denial of political pluralism was present at two levels: in the definition of the people and in the presentation of political rivals and political competition. ANO's main narrative was not about a conflict of competing "goods" on the left–right ideological spectrum. Instead, according to ANO, there is only one universal good—to listen to and serve the people.

What solution did ANO propose? The very basis of the host ideology of ANO's populism was a contrast between (positive) practices typical for running companies and a supposedly dysfunctional, spendthrift, and corruption-

ridden state run by the current set of politicians, along with the presented life story of the self-made, successful businessman, Andrej Babiš. The pre-election slogan from 2013 ("We're not like the politicians—we work!") clearly illustrates the first element, the dichotomy constructed in the ANO 2011 discourse between the "incompetent" politicians of the established parties that were detached from and/or unsuccessful in "real life," and the ANO 2011 representatives' (particularly Babiš's) experience in running big companies, employing people, and paying taxes:

> After twenty years of experience with governance by our political parties, I do not much trust the flowery claims. What I believe in […] is that a state can be run like a private company, not like a chaotic juggernaut [Moloch], where the godfather's right-hand does not know what the left one is doing. (Babiš 2013c)

> None of the current parties, none of the politicians who stated that they would solve the most burning problems facing the Czech Republic have been successful. We're voting for the same people who, because of their interests, only make promises and lie […]. Isn't it about time that someone goes into Czech politics whom you can trust? Isn't it time that people enter politics who have some experience behind them and know what real work looks like? Isn't it time that we all have it a little better?" (Babiš 2013b)

Indeed, an important part of the populist narrative of the party was the story of Andrej Babiš as a hard-working self-made businessman who "had started his business from scratch and who had been working from morning till evening and who was sleeping in an office at Vaclav Square [in the center of Prague]" (Babiš 2017, 8). Creating an efficient, private-sector-style approach as the main solution for politics and public administration was reflected in the slogan "I will run the state like a business," which ANO took into the election campaign, and was later changed to "run the state like a family business" (Babiš 2017). Effectiveness has been a recurring theme in ANO's discourse. As an alternative to the politics of intrigue and pointless conflict (see above), ANO promised to "run the state simply, effectively—using common sense." The party promised to make tax collection as well as public spending and state bureaucracy more effective. The slogans "Things will be better off" (which became a part of the logo before the 2013 election campaign) and "[we will run the state more effectively] so that our children want to live here" (Paleček 2015) illustrate the emphasis put on the proclaimed competence of the party. They also show that the discourse of the party was not solely based on negative campaigning against the established political parties.

On the contrary, there was a positive message of the party's populist narrative, based on promises related to better governance guaranteed by Babiš and his party fellows with experience from private business. Yet, this technocratic managerial approach was combined with populism. Babiš's alleged managerial skills would be applied to listening carefully to the people and their common sense. Almost daily meetings with people on the streets (or at least an effort to create this image using social networks such as Facebook), and, before the regional election in 2016, the creation of the project "We Want a Better Czechia" (Chceme lepší Česko) a website where people were asked to tell Babiš "what they dream about and what they are afraid of" (www.chcemelepsicesko.cz), constructed the image of the party leader as someone whose decisions are based on the will of the people.

Babiš's managerial approach, concentrated around the notion of effectiveness, included proposals for how to reform different elements of the Czech constitutional system. Instead of the ideologically framed changes that have been advanced by Kaczyński in Poland or Orbán in Hungary, ANO's (mostly Babiš's) proposals were directed toward supposedly simpler and faster decision-making. The already mentioned contrast between the worlds of business and politics was used again, this time stressing the effectiveness of the former and slowness of the latter. According to ANO, this slowness stems from both the institutional settings of the Czech political system and from pointless and ultimately unnecessary discussions. As for the first, the ideal situation for Babiš would be the existence of one-party majority governments with very few restraints on the implementation of cabinet policies, for "first of all, coalition quarrels complicate everything" (Babiš 2017, 125). As Babiš said in one interview, he "appreciate[s] the majoritarian system in the USA. When Trump came to power, he went into the office at once and made a decision. He did not have coalition meetings, commissions, councils" (Perknerová 2017). Or on another occasion, "There are a lot of things we can learn in Slovakia, unfortunately. It may be the case because there was the single party government of Robert Fico. It decided on something, called the parliament; they made the law; there was drive" (Kašpárek 2017).

The existence of political conflicts and deliberation is contrasted with a managerial style of efficiency; at the same time, the managerial narrative leads to a strong preference for the executive branch of power over the legislative one. As Babiš once said, the parliament is a "blatherhouse" (*žvanírna*), and so he would not join the opposition if he lost an election: I will not sit in the blatherhouse where people like Kalousek [the chairman of right-center TOP 09] pretend democracy" (IDnes.cz 2016). The picture of an ineffective lower chamber (where MPs talked, but did not work) became the main rationale behind ANO's proposal to limit the time for parliamentary discussion according to the size of parliamentary factions (Perknerová 2017). It would again restrict the parliamentary control of the government.

ANO used the argument of supposedly best practices from other countries (regardless of the context of the respective political systems) when formulating how to change the Czech

political system. The proposed reforms (as expressed in different interviews, election manifestoes, and Babiš's book) include lowering the number of MPs in the lower chamber to 101 (instead of 200); introducing a first-past-the-post electoral system for elections to both chambers of the parliament; eventually abolishing the Senate (the upper parliamentary chamber); limiting parliamentary discussion; reducing the number of ministries; introducing referenda; abolishing regional administration; directly electing mayors; possibly abolishing local councils; and also strengthening the influence of the state on the public media.

In a similar vein, Babiš criticized[2] the existence of the Senate (the upper parliamentary chamber) because "it hinders the legislation process" (Kašpárek 2017). In practice, although the Senate has only limited powers in the ordinary legislative process (its legislative veto can be overridden by a majority vote of the lower chamber), and the government is not responsible to the Senate, it has important competencies when it comes to voting on constitutional law, election law, impeachment of the president, or appointment of judges of the Constitutional Court. Nevertheless, Babiš has repeatedly downplayed the role of the Senate, pointing to low electoral turnouts and suggesting, in a populist way, to delegate its powers to the people or to the president (because of his legitimacy stemming from direct election).

> What about the Senate? It is claimed to be a safeguard of democracy. I think that voters have repeatedly given their answer comprehensively. […] there is no interest in Senate elections. […] Voters do not want the Senate. Abolishment of the Senate would not be a wild experiment. (Babiš 2017, 131)

> Of course, the Senate has some powers, too, for instance how to prevent anarchy [*bezvladi*] or violent constitutional changes. So these powers should be delegated to the president when he is elected directly. The most important changes, the constitutional changes or international treaties, should be decided in referenda by everyone. (Babiš 2017, 131)

The narrative of a centralized management that would increase the efficiency of the state is also reflected in ANO's vision of the sub-state level of governance. First, there was the proposal to abolish the regional level of administration, which was depicted as a set of institutions that was corrupt and too expensive. The current powers of the regions would be moved to the state and to bigger municipalities. The second step was that mayors would be elected directly, and they would be endowed with stronger competencies "supported by the service of the effective state" (Babiš 2017, 128). So the state would have more powers to influence decision making on the local level, and consequently, the vertical division of power would be weakened. Moreover, it is not clear whether the local councils would remain. If not, the level of centralization and concentration of power would be even higher; if so, the new system would generate competing centers of power on the local level, similar, for instance, to the situation at the regional level in Slovakia or the eventually unsuccessful experiment with direct election of the prime minister in Israel in the 1990s.

Although each proposal taken separately might sound reasonable to many, when all of them are taken together, the result is a specific, highly centralized, strongly majoritarian version of a democratic polity with little regard for either horizontal or vertical separations of power, and a weakened system of checks and balances, including the media. In the event that the current proportional representation electoral system for the lower parliamentary chamber remained in place (introduction of first-past-the-post was not a part of the election manifesto for the 2017 general election), the lower number of MPs and consequently smaller electoral districts and the d'Hondt divisor would significantly strengthen the disproportionality of the electoral results, thus favoring the position of the winner of the election.

Similarly, first-past-the-post favors the strongest political party and, indeed, can help to gain a legislative majority. The existence of single-party majority governments is not problematic per se; the problem is the main framing that ANO used to justify it, namely the stress on effectiveness and speed of decision-making instead of deliberation. Following the constructed, anti-political divide between the "people who have done something in ordinary life" and "politicians who do not work," Babiš also proposed limiting to three the number of successive electoral terms an MP could be elected to (the populist Five Star Movement in Italy made a similar claim in its election manifesto). Similarly, weakening and eventual abolition of the Senate and the local councils would lead to a significant increase in centralized power and would strengthen the majority position in the lower parliamentary chamber.

CONCLUSION

This article aimed to analyze the discourse of the political party ANO to examine the nature of its populism and the illiberal consequences thereof. ANO can hardly be described using standard labels based on traditional party families or ideologies. Moreover, the data showed high salience of anti-corruption and anti-elitism as the defining feature of ANO. The data from the Comparative Campaign Dynamics Project indicate that the lack of a coherent host ideology made way for an emphasis on valence characteristics. To put it differently, instead of ideology, parties such as ANO try to "sell" their qualities related to leadership or competence. All the same, these characteristics make ANO

different from the established political parties. The most important discursive characteristic of the party was its populism characterized by fierce criticism of the established political parties based on the alleged corrupt behavior of party representatives. Corruption was presented as a major problem in politics in the Czech Republic.

Moreover, the accusations expressed by ANO were not selective but instead targeted all parliamentary political parties. Another alleged characteristic of the political elites was their incompetence. Being a (career) politician was seen as something disqualifying, having been contrasted with both the *virtú* of the Czech people, depicted as a talented nation, and with a party leader experienced in managing successful private companies (ANO 2011).

The key element of the populist discourse was the constructed contrast between "standard" politics and business practices, with a preference for the latter. ANO combined populism with anti-party and anti-political discourse that suppressed what may be called standard ideological politics. The divide between the technocratic populism of ANO and politics as it is conducted by the established political parties is moral in its essence: it describes the former as a clear good and the latter as essentially bad. Therefore, the first one should be preferred and the second one strongly rejected, with no place for compromise. In other words, the political debate—as seen by ANO—shifted from a substantive one that focused on the differences between proposed policies (in terms of standard cleavages) to one that focused on how politics is conducted.

The populism of ANO has, similarly to other populisms elsewhere, its consequences for the perception of democracy. The construction of both the people and the political establishment as homogeneous groups puts into doubt the idea of political pluralism as an essential element of politics. Indeed, ANO rejected policy-based differences (the differences between the left and the right) as irrelevant and claimed the dominance of the populist divide. Conflicts between the left and the right do not matter. What matters is a proper representation of the people as the universal good. According to ANO, the good is not only recognizable but also achievable through the idea of technocratic or expert governance guaranteed by a non-party, non-political, competent administration. It cannot be put into practice by career politicians. According to ANO, good governance by career politicians, who are curtailed by the party apparatus, ideology, and senseless bickering, is an oxymoron. What people need, ANO claimed, is an experienced manager who can run the state effectively. According to ANO, its leader, Andrej Babiš, a successful businessman, was a guarantee of proper administration of the state. This is not to say that ANO's discourse lacks policy statements, but that valence statements dominated over issue statements and, consequently, undermined the idea of the pluralistic, deliberative political environment.

The stress placed on technocratic, supposedly effective governance, denying the existence of political pluralism, was translated into a preference for a strongly majoritarian vision of democracy undisturbed by political quarrels and unhindered by an extensive system of checks and balances or separation of powers. This vision incorporates strengthening the position of the executive, and weakening the legislature in terms of its important control function within both the horizontal and the vertical separations of power. According to ANO, the best system is a system with a single-party majority government with only minor functional constraints. In other words, although based on a different type of reasoning (anti-political, anti-party technocratic populism), the discourse of the currently most popular political party in the Czech Republic fits into the pattern of the recent backsliding of liberal democracies in Central and Eastern Europe that has been happening in Poland and Hungary.

Unlike Hungary and Poland, however, it is on the discursive level, for now. ANO was not able to secure a majority in the last general election, nor has it yet been able to form a majority coalition government. All the same, the Czech constitutional system is typified by a more complex set of checks and balances, and therefore it seems to be more resilient to constitutional changes. There is also a more liberal part of ANO (represented, for example, by the minister of justice, Robert Pelikán), which means that a systematic effort to change the regime would probably be challenged by internal opposition in the party. Nevertheless, that fact is that ANO, a party with an illiberal political platform, won the election, while political parties sticking to principles of liberal democracy lost most of their electoral support. Second, principles of liberal democracy can be weakened without implementation of constitutional reforms, sometimes even without passing ordinary laws, by using executive orders (moreover, there is an illiberal majority in the parliament including the communists and the radical right). As for internal opposition, it would not be the first time that members of the party have opposed ANO politics; in all cases, however, the opposition would be forced to leave the party or would voluntarily leave the party or distance themselves from it (as was the case with European Parliament members Pavel Telička and Petr Ježek).

Moreover, there is a lot of literature showing the power of elite framing and cueing—that is, the fact that the public is socialized and eventually tends to adopt stances presented by political elites (Hooghe 2007; Chong and Druckman 2007). This means that the presence of an illiberal discourse may delegitimize the practice of liberal democracy in the eyes of the public. Although it has not yet tried to change the character of the regime, the recent electoral success of ANO shows that the Czech Republic has not been spared from the emergence and governance of illiberal populist actors.

The unprecedented success of ANO also contributes to the literature on the decline of political parties (Daalder 1992; Dalton and Weldon 2005). As has been shown, anti-partyism,

not limited to rejecting established political parties but also targeting practices typical for modern representative politics, was an important part of ANO's technocratic populist discourse. And even more importantly, ANO combined two positions dangerous to party democracy: a populist acknowledgment of the universal common good of the people and the technocratic ability to recognize the best solution based on the demands of the citizens. Although seemingly incompatible, ANO was able to merge these two approaches and reflected the widespread dissatisfaction with politics as represented by (the established) political parties. Indeed, the party offered up a story of an outsider with the ability to restore popular sovereignty by listening to the people, mingling with them almost on a daily basis, and at the same time providing the necessary expertise stemming from business experience. Although not very common, this discursive formula is not unique. Former Italian prime minister Silvio Berlusconi (Bickerton and Accetti 2014) and Raffael Correa in Ecuador (De la Torre 2014) have shown that technocratic populism can be highly successful. The recent developments of party politics in other Central and Eastern European countries show that this kind of populism is by no means a rare but instead a quite common expression of dissatisfaction with political parties and party democracy in the region. It also shows that the rise of this kind of populism is not just a sign of normal political dissatisfaction; it is part of the decline and transformation of party politics as such.

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NOTES

1. Quite interestingly, when it comes to aiming at individual parties, both the Communists and the far-right Dawn (later Freedom and Direct Democracy, or SPD) were far less targeted by ANO. To some extent, this is logical, given the fact that neither the Communists nor the SPD have participated in the government and both parties share an anti-establishment or anti-system approach. Nevertheless, a more precise examination is needed.
2. During the 2016 Senate election campaign, however, Babiš claimed that the Senate is an important democratic institution.

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