


Article

CHEGA!

A sceptre of the mainstream Portuguese parties' disaggregation or a spectre of fascism?

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Abstract

Over the past four decades, Portuguese voters have imprinted a solid resistance to the emergence of far-right parties in the political setting. However, this time ended in the 2019 legislative elections when the CHEGA, a self-located party on the far-right spectrum, with a posture assumed as anti-system and unconcerned with the accusations of racism and hate exhilaration, elected André Ventura to the national parliament. Moreover, in the 2021 presidential elections, he got 497,746 votes, a scant point to be the second most-voted candidate. The 2022 legislative elections placed CHEGA as the third most-voted party, and the number of members in parliament has climbed to twelve. This article critically examines the political constraints and opportunities for the rise of the CHEGA party in the Portuguese political setting. It argues that CHEGA emerges from the disintegration of centre-moderate right parties and the interruption of the emancipatory function of the leftist parties coupled with a ubiquitous traditional media landscape, which has proved favourable to the CHEGA propensity towards the Portuguese electorate and without scrutinise its narratives opposing the dominant ruling system. Beyond news media and cumulatively, social networks have also increased party exposure by recruiting affiliates and strengthening support bases.

Throughout history, economic and social distress have stimulated antagonisms and political discontent with ordinary party politics. This thick reading

explains why numerous radical far-right (RFR) parties became well-established following the Cold War period. For Wodak and Krzyżanowski (2017), the return of these parties is one of the main threats to democracy. On the other hand, few others suggested it might positively affect contemporary democracy (Fraser, 2017). Nevertheless, whatever different argument these scholars use, they all agree that the RFR¹ party's success has been appropriating "claims" about the negative impact of social-cultural globalisation (e.g. ethnicity, religion) or the migration influx (e.g. class) involving a Manichean worldview, which divides social space into two opposing camps: the "true people" and the "corrupt establishment" (Urbinati, 2019).

To a great extent, as Goldberg (2020) found, this blurry puzzle has affected electoral behaviour, increasing the number of de-aligned and disillusioned voters who either do not participate or become open to new and more radical alternatives. However, in the existing literature, little attention has been paid to opportunities left open in the political setting by the dislocation of mainstream parties when they smooth over their foundational ideological matrixes to increase their chances of securing a winning majority. Instead, mainstream literature has mainly focused on voter turnout based on socio-economic variables or the dynamics behind RFR parties' attitudes towards electoral campaigns. This article addresses this gap using the Portuguese CHEGA party's emergence as a case selection.

One attempt to explain the RFR² party's electoral success could be Rydgren's demand-side and supply-side conceptual approach. According to Rydgren (2007), the demand-side approach reflects changes affecting citizens' economic status and social-cultural identity – the base for RFR parties to go with criticism against those in power. In addition, the supply-side approach is twofold: the first focuses on the constraints and opportunities given by the political-institutional context that extend the prospect for their emergence; the second concentrates on parties themselves, e.g. the role of ideology and their organisational structures, including leadership. This article rests on the supply-side Rydgren's approach. So, naturally, I question: Is Portugal dangerously returning to the fascist path, or is CHEGA a sceptre of the mainstream Portuguese political parties' disaggregation?

To begin with is essential to remember that whatever ideological positioning a particular party uses, its manifestations will be contextual and dependent, among other things, on the country's political, social and religious culture. The CHEGA is not an extremist party and is not, using a Wittgensteinian metaphor, an incarnation of our recent past. Instead, I argue it is a populist radical far-right party that emerged from the disintegration of centre-moderate right parties and the interruption of the emancipatory function of the leftist

¹ The term "far right" embodies a broad range of parties and groups that differ significantly in agenda and policy. We distinguish between two sub-categories: extreme and radical. The *extreme* has clear ties to fascism and employ violence and aggressive tactics. The *radical* category uses the nativist narrative to justify and legitimate their policy positions. Generally they don't employ violence.

² These two approaches should be considered as complementary rather than competing.

parties. Regarding its rise, the Portuguese traditional and social media platforms have facilitated André Ventura wide-reaching communication and intensified levels of connection with “the people” daily. However, given the spatial constraints of this article, this line of research is an obvious challenge that I will not address.

To unpack my argument, I divided this article into three interrelated parts. The first briefly approaches the *Cinderella Complex* of populism since it is a rhetoric construction imbued in simplistic schemes of plug-and-play designs of fascism. Populism is a global phenomenon and is not new. What is a novel today is the intensity and pervasiveness of its manifestations. Therefore, I propose to treat populism as a process of representation suited to be a vehicle for rightist parties as for leftist ones to achieve power. The second part analyses the political opportunities for the rise of CHEGA in the Portuguese political setting, their organisational arguments, and the role of ideology and leadership. Portuguese contemporary scholarship is consensual about the increasing “disenchantment” with the political system. However, few of them found that since 1975 the number of voters has declined based on mistrust in political parties (Manuel, Costa and Cabral, 2021). Finally, the third part concludes with the implications of a hypothetical scenario, considering CHEGA as part of a government solution that is no more than an arbitrary expression of the centre-moderate right mainstream parties’ disaggregation and erosion of the ideological opposition in the leftist parties.

The Cinderella Complex on populism

Before analysing the CHEGA party, it is essential to define populism and its differences and resemblances to fascism. Populism is ambiguous and challenging to define quickly and uncontestedly. However, perhaps shifting our focus from definition to description can help highlight its core characteristics. This shift is because politics is never neutral but intimately connected to structures of knowledge and power in society (Foucault, 2001). I follow this insightful view because political parties can never overcome demagoguery. When parties claim to speak in the name of universalist ideals, they use those ideas to aggregate some claims and drop others. They do it surreptitiously, what populism does openly. Like Mouffe (2018) heralded, populism runs in the free market of electoral democracy.

So rather than attempting a rhetorically proficient definition, Nadia Urbinatti (2019) describes populism as “[a] representative process through which a political party constructs a collective subject to achieve power” (p. 5). In other words, populism goes from political to holding power, where the core elements – the leader who embodies the people, the hostility to pluralism, the repudiation of mediating institutions – come together in a new and pervasiveness form of governing. Her reading coheres with Moffit (2016) opinion, who believes it to be a discursive frame or a communication style strategy to galvanise those who have lost faith in mainstream politics and its representatives. This perspective has several advantages because it is dynamic and open to changes over time.

Therefore, one consistent question arises, what *does* populism do? Urbinati (2019) says the core feature is to “construct a form of representation to govern, using the language of rights to claim the absolute power of the “majority” over the “established few” (p. 5). As Polyakova and Fligstein (2015) have noted, “this polarisation justifies their calls to force the existing political elite out of power, regional or national, or at a supranational level in Brussels” (p. 12). However, unlike fascism, populism does not suspend free and competitive elections nor deny them a legitimate role. On the contrary, electoral legitimacy is a crucial defining dimension of populism, and a strong leader should achieve this task (Pappas, 2019). Indeed, in its most democratic form, populism seeks to defend its interests through reform rather than violence. To paraphrase Urbinati (2019), “[t]he purpose is not to create a dictatorial regime but to disfigure democracy” (p. 5). It is interesting to observe that the debate about the meaning of democracy is a debate about the interpretation of democracy. In short, populism represents political disenchantment by embracing a hyperrealistic vision of politics as the construction and exercise of power by the strong. This exercise includes dwarfing the opposition and minorities by humiliating them and creating an overwhelming propaganda campaign that endlessly reinforces the power of majority opinion. Urbinati also argues that factionalism is the character of the politics that populism practices.

Nevertheless, scholars tend to identify and analyse populism as a spectre of fascism (Mudde, 2014). Others, such as Aslanis (2016), do not conceptualise populism as an ideology because it has not ascribed the same theoretical elaboration as other consolidated ideologies, notably liberalism or socialism. I know that academic endeavour is replete with conceptual analysis, and capturing the blurred edges populism shares with fascism is more challenging to discuss than making specific boundaries. However, I cannot ignore that there are some inter-merging resemblances between them. A problem in categorisation is that whilst populism and fascism differ notably ideologically, in practice, the latter has borrowed aspects of populist discourse and style, and populism can degenerate into leader-oriented authoritarian and exclusionary politics.

For example, Eatwell and Goodwin (2018) conceived fascism as “a view of politics and society that was radically hierarchical and holistic, one that was wholly opposite to democracy because it denies a universalist view of human beings” (p. 53). Moreover, it does not accept that legitimacy springs freely from competitive elections. The authors also defend fascism’s highest value is the nation (or sometimes the state or even the race), clearly posited over the individual. This assertion seems to confirm an ideological patina with populism since its picture of “the people” against the untrustworthy “corrupt elite” reflects an inner regressive utopia of a homogeneous community where these “others” are identified and ruled out to ensure the nation’s survival. Finchelstein (2019), on the other hand, shows us how and why fascism morphed into populism throughout history, stressing the differences between populism as a form of democracy and fascism as a dictatorship. For him, there are two main differences: First, the politics of hatred, racism, anti-semitism, and extreme demonisation of the other (not only metaphorically but ending up in

repression and elimination), is central to fascism. Contemporary populism left that behind. Second is how fascism changes reality to promote its propaganda associated with centralised dictatorship, social and economic regulation, and the violent suppression of any opposition, all of which are, in actuality, tools in the service of a worldview. At this point, Finchelstein considers populism an intricate “democratic reformulation engaged in democratic electoral processes” that “drew on residues of fascism” (p. 47).

I believe these absorbing “characteristics” identified by Eatwell, Goodwin, and Finchelstein propel us to see fascism as a dictatorship regime that uses power and violent repression to silence the opposition, abolish electoral competition and repress freedom of speech and association. Where populism is ambiguous, fascism is not. *Ceteris paribus*, I would prefer to address CHEGA as a populist party with a radical far-right agenda combining astute communicative tools with a favourable opportunistic agency, as seen in the following sections. Moreover, it resonates better to understand the implications and consequences of its electoral success

The rise of the CHEGA party in the Portuguese political setting

As mentioned, Rydgren’s supply-side approach conceptualises two sub-strands. The first is the strategic party positioning within the political-institutional structures. RFR parties scan for “vacant electoral space” left open by rightist mainstream parties when they move more to the centre in the lead-up to increase their chances of securing a winning majority. Once they fill that space, they position themselves strategically vis-à-vis competitors with their mainstream counterparts (De Lange, 2007). Further research conducted by Jensen and Lee (2021) on political space also concludes that some parties can use imaginative narratives to create a “new electoral space” in the political spectrum. A second strand concentrates on the parties, e.g. ideology, organisational structures and leadership. In other words, what RFR parties actively do to influence voters’ perceptions and preferences.

In other words, RFR parties position themselves by making strategic decisions on several vital indicators, such as influencing policy formulation, mainstreaming their issues on the political agenda, shifting social attitudes, and generating more coverage in the media. It is also clear that they will not hesitate to create or perpetuate fake news and conspiracy theories if they feel this might benefit them electorally. In some sense, many features of populism seem to conform to this strategy. Of course, leaders have an essential role in this process, but before discussing that point, I will explain the political opportunities for CHEGA’s emergence in more detail

Political opportunities: from the mainstream cheerleader’s decomposition to new parties

Transitioning from a dictatorial regime to a democracy has instilled resistance to far-right parties’ emergence in the Portuguese political setting³ (Carreira da

³ The National Renovation Party (PNR) a neo-Nazi party has an electoral performance invariably poor, mirroring its irrelevance in the Portuguese political setting.

Silva and Salgado, 2018). Until 2019, this exceptionality placed Portugal in an exclusive club of five European countries⁴ (Dennison and Mendes, 2020). Using Hegelian terminology, Portugal has lived in an antithesis time because it has been experiencing a progressive electoral decline with high abstention levels noticeably present (Pinto, 2022). Moreover, it is even more interesting to look at the 2011 legislative elections under the European Commission (EC), the European Central Bank (ECB) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) bailout programme. Portugal was facing its worst financial crisis, and the Portuguese government could not guarantee social-economic stability to face the impact of the 2008-2010 international financial crisis (Fernandes, 2011). To some Portuguese scholars and policymakers, the reasons for the absence of RFR parties in Portugal have less to do with socio-economic causes and more with the ability of traditional social-democratic and leftist parties to sustain social reforms. I would disagree because the visibility afforded to radical and extreme far-right rhetoric and associated parties was (and it is!), for the most part, limited since the Portuguese Constitution restrict freedom of association of all kinds of fascist and racist organisations.

Nevertheless, with the increased mediatisation of the financial crisis, the revolt narrative was supported by radical leftist and centre-moderate right parties and found fertile soil amongst those highly frustrated with the outcomes of existing political institutions. For all these reasons and after six years of the Socialist Party (PS) in power, the call for early elections appeared to be an opportunity for a centre-moderate right party turnout. And it was. As Fernandes (2011) noted, despite less than 60% of registered voters, the Social Democrat Party (PSD) and the Center and Social Democratic Party (CDS) got a clear mandate, winning more than 56% of the parliament seats. CDS got its best score since 1983, and the PSD exceeded the opinion polls and won the same number of deputies as it did in 2002. As a result, Portugal successfully ended its adjustment programme in May 2014⁵ and did not need a second bailout like Greece.

However, two elections occurred during the PSD-CDS government: the 2013 local and 2014 European elections. Not so surprisingly, the PS won both elections. Moreover, in the latter, the governing parties obtained an abysmal result of 27,7% less than their combined vote shares (50,4%) in the 2011 European Parliament (EP) elections. The political interpretation of these results predicted that the winning formula of the governing coalition would not happen in the 2015 legislative elections since governing parties were facing a popularity crisis all over Southern Europe. However, the PàF⁶ obtained a 38,4% vote share, and PS got in second place (32,3%) despite the negative impact of PS's popularity concerning the Troika's bailout programme (Garoupa, 2018). In addition, the leftist parties had the best results ever. Observing the

⁴ Portugal, UK, Ireland, Luxembourg and Malta.

⁵ The official economic accounts for 2014 showed that the economy displayed signs of recovery alongside with a downsisng unemployment rate.

⁶ In 2015 elections both parties PSD and CDS runned together for elections in a coalition named "Portugal à Frente" (PàF).

fact that the radical leftist party – Left Bloc (BE)⁷ – received two successive electoral defeats and a series of internal splits, it became the third most-voted party, electing nineteen parliamentary members and surpassing the Unitary Democratic Coalition (CDU)⁸ seventeen members. Interestingly, the People, Animals and Nature (PAN) party, a not-so-well-known party established in 2009, elected one representative to the national parliament. PAN’s success was primarily on online tools and its leader. Further, more new parties entered parliament after the 2019 legislative elections.

Given these election results, several governing scenarios were possible since the PàF coalition did not have an absolute majority in parliament. Moreover, an agreement between PàF and the PS to support its minority government led by Passos Coelho was unlikely. In this post-electoral scenario, the PS formed a minority government supported by a bilateral policy agreement with BE and CDU parties. Some scholars considered this opportunistic parliamentary alliance controversial, given the BE and CDU’s strong anti-austerity positions, particularly against Eurozone’s Stability and Economic Growth Pact (De Giorgi and Cancela, 2019). Other critics of this solution affirmed that Portugal would risk a new bailout programme if it diverted from the European Union’s financial budget (Fernandes, Magalhães and Santana-Pereira, 2018).

Nonetheless, during the *Gerigonça*⁹ mandate, the centre-moderate right opposition was in convulsion since it was the first time in Portuguese democratic history that an election’s winner did not govern. Some additional observations are needed to explain why this somewhat romantic view of *Gerigonça* and the rightist parties’ polarisation. Since the first legislative election in 1976, the core of the Portuguese party system was mainly constituted by the PS, PSD, CDS and CDU. The radical leftist party, BE, entered parliament in 1999. The PS and the PSD have alternated in the roles of the governing party for almost fourteen years. Despite having considerable parliamentary representation, the CDU and the BE were out of any government solution.

After four years in power and going into the 2019 elections, the essentials – inflation declining and a low unemployment rate – seemed to point to the *Gerigonça* “automatic” mandate renewal. However, this electoral campaign did not mimic the 2015 legislative elections: first, by the emergence of new parties with multiple salient campaign issues mixed with centre-moderate right voters’ dissatisfaction with their party leaders, and second, by the conundrum of leftist parties (BE and CDU) either claiming credit for the successes of the policy agreement or going to a ground zero of its ideological and socio-economic populist gene. In interpreting the electoral results, one could argue

⁷This party is a catch-all of former radical and extremist left-wing parties and movements – the Trotskyite Revolutionary Socialist Party (PSR), the Maoist Popular Democratic Union (UDP) and the reformative communist movement *Política XXI*.

⁸The Portuguese Communist Party often participates in elections through an electoral front called CDU (Unitarian Democratic Centre), with the Ecological and Green Party (PEV) as an independent. Throughout the years the party has had a very stable electorate of around 10%.

⁹*Gerigonça* is the nickname given to that governing solution. Literally, it means a complex mechanism with a fragile structure and precarious functioning.

that the government formation process would be quick since the PS had a voting majority (36,34%) against their direct centre-moderate right opponents (PSD 27,76% and CDS 4,22%) (Fernandes and Magalhães, 2020). Furthermore, the symptom of political discontent with ordinary government politics exposed signs of *Geringonça* fragmentation (Inácio, 2021). Moreover, due to their major electoral defeat (6,33%), the CDU clearly stated they would be an opposition party, notwithstanding the policy agreement. By contrast, the BE had a more open position (9,52%), whereby the party agreed on a potential formal coalition with the PS to form a leftist majority in the parliament¹⁰. The voter turnout grew, compared with the previous election, with 48,57% of registered voters casting a ballot (Fernandes and Magalhães, 2020).

Nevertheless, three other new parties gained strong visibility during the electoral campaign and their first parliamentary representation. The Liberal Initiative (IL), an economically libertarian party with an agenda to privatise inefficient publicly-owned companies and a deregulated labour market, elected one representative. The CHEGA party, a self-located party on the far-right spectrum, with a posture assumed as anti-system and unconcerned with the accusations of racism and hate exhilaration, elected André Ventura. Both represent the empowerment of the radicalised fringes of PSD (Marchi, 2020). It is no coincidence that IL and CHEGA leaders frequently recalled Passos Coelho's leadership legacy. Finally, the LIVRE party, a pro-European left-libertarian diffusive movement capable of integrating social and particularly gender and racial/ethnic equality issues with the need for a Green New Deal, also elected one representative. The formula *pars pro toto* in the Portuguese political setting was replaced by the facticity of the *pars pro parte*.

In sum, the 2019 legislative elections marked the breakdown of centre-moderate rightist parties and the erosion of BE and CDU, leaving an "empty" space in the Portuguese political setting. Considering the above, the following section explores the rise of CHEGA and its influence on voters' perceptions and preferences.

The Scylla and the Charybdis

Sarah De Lange (2007), in her work on the French Front National, the Flemish Vlaams Blok and the Dutch Lijst Pim Fortuyn, found that declining voters' preferences across the electorate due to mainstream party dislocation have facilitated the emergence of radical fringes like these RFR parties in their national political context. Other research also indicated that centre-left parties' convergence or softening of ideological matrixes could have similar effects (Abou-Chadi and Hix, 2021). Notwithstanding, Portuguese scholars recently suggested that the dislocation by the mainstream centre-right parties should be evaluated according to the positions on the economic-distributive dimension rather than approaching the left-right ideological spectrum or cultural issues (De Giorgi and Cancela, 2019; Dennison and Mendes, 2020). Disagreeing with those scholars, I will show that it was precisely: a) the disaggregation of the centre-moderate right parties after the 2015 legislative elections and

¹⁰ PS, BE and the LIVRE party.

the dislocation to the left side of the political spectrum during Rui Rio leadership and the CDS internal convulsions after Paulo Portas resigned from parties' leadership (the *Scylla*) and; b) the leftist parties interruption of their emancipatory function when they stopped of thinking and acting in terms of new strategies of inclusion and become a gatekeeper of the part that was already included in their agendas during the *Geringonça* (the *Charybdis*), both have created mistrust in those parties by voters who either do not participate or became open to other more radical alternatives. Therefore, I support my argument on the works of De Lange (2007) and Abou-Chadi and Hix (2021) and content analysis of documents of the PSD, PS, CDS, CDU and BE parties from the 2010 to 2022 electoral campaigns.

The first argumentation is scarcely consensual among Portuguese scholars when they agree that the aggressive four-year austerity program opened up a gap in the mainstream moderate right parties and moved the Portuguese electorate to cherish policy programs like the ones offered by more centrist leftist competitors. One of the consistent justifications for the PSD disaggregation is the first internal elections after the Passos Coelho electoral disaster in the 2017 local elections. Rui Rio jumped to the PSD's leadership with just *circa* 3000 more votes than his opponent Luis Montenegro. Moreover, Rio soon discarded the implemented preceding neoliberal programme, favouring a centrist-leftist economic approach opposing the free-market approach led by Passos Coelho. Rio has presented this shift towards the left, publicly claiming that the PSD was a centrist party with ideological inspiration in social democracy, discarding the more conservative electorate (Fernandes and Magalhães, 2020).

Consequently, the PSD's convergence towards the left centre allowed new competitors to emerge, contrary to the intense stability observed in the past fourteen years of party existence (Garoupa, 2018). This PSD convergence confirms Rydgren's supply-side approach concerning the strategic party positioning and the theory of "vacant electoral space" left open when Rio moved to the centre in the lead-up to increase their chances of securing a winning majority in the 2019 legislative elections. In opposition until today, the PSD remains divided between two groups, one heir to the conservative Passos Coelho style and the other seeking to reposition the party in the centre. Notwithstanding, the 2019 legislative elections were also characterised by the CDS spiral fall in voters' intentions. Since Paulo Portas resigned from CDS leadership, Assunção Cristas won only five seats, against nineteen in the previous election. However, the party's 4,2% result in the 2020 local elections contributed to her resignation and opened the door for a new neoconservative leader, Rodrigues dos Santos. Under his leadership in the 2022 legislative elections, CDS lost its entire parliamentary representation (1,6%) (ATREVIA, 2022). This crisis of representation boosted CHEGA to reclaim popular voluntarism over PSD and CDS's more conservative fringes.

The second argument pertains to the populist gene of Portuguese radical leftist parties. The BE and CDU have performed this role, namely BE because since its inception, it has sailed in the waters of Syriza (Greece) or Podemos (Spain) populist radical left parties (Garoupa, 2018). On the other hand, Fernandes, Magalhães and Santana-Pereira (2018) suggest a "holist approach",

arguing that the leftist parties channel the electorate's sentiments of protest and discontent without losing ground to the new forms of political action. So I can then assume that disappointed but politically engaged citizens will choose challenger parties that give voice to their protest instead of choosing not to turn out to vote? Nevertheless, their lurch in 2015 toward the governing solution to permanently drive the Pàf coalition away from parliament had significant consequences on their electorate because BE was committed to a position that did not challenge the current economic system or Europe. The same applies to the CDU since it lost 25% of its shared votes and five parliamentary seats¹¹. After all, BE and CDU, have colluded with neoliberal policies justifying their shift with the restrictions imposed by the EU. This unfulfilled promise is one of the critical factors that cost significant losses in areas that were their traditional strongholds and where, perhaps not by chance, turnout has decreased the most compared to previous elections. In short, my argument suggests that the theories focused on supply-side factors seem to hold greater strength to help to understand CHEGA's emergence into national politics than demand-side explanations.

The orphaning of the mainstream parties and the anti-system confrontation

The decreased voter loyalty mentioned above and discursive frames about fracturing issues such as immigration, corruption, and law and order that PSD and CDS do not address or, when they do, often unsuccessfully, also have contributed to CHEGA electoral support. Consequently, the party centred its strategic electorate on three segments: the mainstream PSD and CDS rural and the conservative elite, areas of the country's interior, and Lisbon and Porto suburban areas. However, we cannot reduce CHEGA's success only to passive political-institutional opportunities. This party is also responsible for its fortunes. I distinguish three factors: the role of ideology, organisational structures, and André Ventura.

The role of ideology

Scholars have observed that the ideological *ethos* directly affects parties' fortunes and interacts with other demand and supply-side factors. For example, Golder (2016), in his study on far-right parties in Europe, found that increasing unemployment and high levels of immigration only generate more electoral success for radical parties but not those labelled as "extremists". Perhaps for this reason, some RFR parties have abandoned nationalist attitudes and protectionism and adopted welfare chauvinism in their discursive framing to get a stable electorate. However, I could argue that those explanatory factors could not fit nicely on CHEGA's ideologic gene because it combines elements of Salazarism with current global trends of authoritarian neoliberalism. In this sense, CHEGA is a Portuguese product. Nevertheless, it bears similarities with other RFR parties and populist political actors across the European Conservatives and Reformists and Identity and Democracy groups

¹¹ These parties stated that they would continue to resist any continued forms of austerity, namely the European fiscal rules and an end to the austerity policies.

in the European Parliament. Donald Trump's discourses and policies also have served as an inspiration, and, in many ways, the party is very similar to Jair Bolsonaro's Alliance for Brazil, which has a strong influence amongst religious, socially conservative, wealthier voters.

In its manifesto, CHEGA assumes to be a "national, conservative, liberal and personalist" party that defends a robust judicial system and a lower level of state intervention in the economic sector. In other words, it has left the protectionist and state intervention approaches characteristic of authoritarianism in many other European RFR parties. Another defining feature includes references to the political system that cannot "carry out the fundamental reforms to which the Portuguese aspire and are entitled" (MPF, 2019). As Marchi (2020) argues, the purpose is to mobilise resentment against the political establishment, specifically, to reduce the "establishment's predatory practices". In a populist attempt to take advantage of the widespread public perception that corruption is endemic, CHEGA created a scenario that "socialism and corruption are killing our nation" and, therefore, the need for a radical system change – an "IV Republic" – including a new constitution, a presidential political system and a reduction in the number of parliament seats (Mendes, 2021). By framing corruption this way and portraying the political system as it is, CHEGA can frame "ordinary hardworking families who pay taxes to support the establishment" (MPF, 2019).

Furthermore, its manifesto also pictures a socially disordered country with "a glaring inability to deal with growing insecurity", a "sense of impunity", and "extensive social inequality" (MPF, 2019). Consequently, its discourse focuses on police forces and criminality issues, supporting life imprisonment and chemical castration for sex offenders and paedophiles. In addition, some members support the death penalty for terrorism or child abuse. Comparatively, the outward-oriented communication practices of extremists far-right parties and the CHEGA manifesto on this point display important traits of similarity. I can encounter another resemblance when CHEGA demands a zero-tolerance policy on illegal immigration and the deportation of migrants with criminal records or economically inactive. These fall cleverly into the authoritarian and nativist appeals typical of the extremist far-right. Moreover, the party supports integration measures for immigrants. It states that all immigrants and foreign residents should be "obliged to respect our rules, rites, customs and traditions" (Carvalho, 2019). Paradoxically, it supports bilateral agreements on migration with former Portuguese colonies such as Brazil, all Portuguese-speaking African countries, Macau and East Timor. The framing is different, but the mechanisms are the same: a mix of xenophobia and nationalism. In other words, the synecdoche of an RFR populist leader being xenophobic and, at the same time, rejecting accusations of xenophobia based on the argument that defends cultural differences rather than racial ones. This argument is striking and alarming. Another consistent manifestation is homophobia. CHEGA opposes gender ideology as a silhouette for opposing the expansion of LGBTQ rights because the so-called gender ideology is anchored in the belief that this "ideology" "betrays" what is considered to be an essential role of women (maternity).

The CHEGA manifesto also includes a soft eurosceptic posture regarding European Union, unlike other far-right parties in Europe, such as UKIP in Britain or the Party for Freedom in the Netherlands. This position can be primarily explained by Portugal being one of the most pro-EU countries¹². Therefore, the party supports the original principle of free movement of goods, capital, services and people among member states but only if a “Europe of sovereign nations is united by shared Greco-Roman and Judeo-Christian principles” (MPF, 2019). It rejects compulsory EU migrant and refugee quotas. Furthermore, CHEGA strongly opposes the EU’s interference in national political decision-making within member states. In addition, the party states that Portugal should exit the EU if it becomes a federal state (MPF, 2019). This statement is because Europe is not the “good” representative of national citizens’ interests.

In conclusion, CHEGA’s strategy to consolidate its electoral support mimics a long list of established European RFR parties. The formula is the neoliberal economic agenda. On the other hand, however, I could argue that the party is intensely increasing the salience of other issues to persuade the “true people” to tune into its polemic representations of the “corrupt and traitorous elites”, “the sense of impunity of Roma community”, “the social assistance recipients” and the “leftist oppressor political system”. Moreover, André Ventura perspicaciously uses critical external issues in the Portuguese political context, adopts ambivalent rhetorical strategies, and frequently shifts positions¹³. Put differently, he constantly seeks to “read the room”.

Organisational and leadership structure

Like other European RFR parties, CHEGA’s militant base and leadership structure amalgamates militants from far-right ideologically motivated groups and dissidents from the radical fringes of PSD and CDS but also from PNR, PAN and BE. Their ideologue and former first vice-president, Diogo Pacheco de Amorim, has a long experience in the far-right ideology. He was a militant of a fascist student movement during the *Estado Novo* dictatorship. After the fall of the Salazar regime, he joined a proscribed right-wing terrorist group, the Democratic Movement for Portugal Liberation (MDLP), as part of the Independent Movement for Right-wing and National Reconstruction (MIRN-PDP). In addition, he was a Portuguese representative in the French neo-fascist

¹² For example, a Eurobarometer survey from 2019 indicates that about three-quarters of Portuguese believe their country has benefited from EU membership, and if there were a referendum, about the same percentage would vote to remain. This dominant sentiment is based on the widespread perception that EU membership has modernised the country’s economy and helped to solidify its democracy.

¹³ For instance, research has observed that European RFR parties do not usually prioritise economic issues. CHEGA follows this tendency, making exceptions for high-profile issues such as fiscal policy and tolls on roads serving economically deprived areas, but also by being quick to retract unpopular policy proposals, such as minimising state intervention in the health and education sectors.

magazine *Nouvelle École* and translator of Alain de Benoist's manuscripts¹⁴. In the early eighties, he became militant of the CDS at the hand of Manuel Monteiro. During the governing right-wing coalition Democratic Alliance (AD) from 1995 to 1997, he was the Chief of Staff at the Parliamentary Group of the CDS-PP. He left CPS-PP in June 2003 with Manuel Monteiro at the founding of the New Alliance Party (PND). He is also a member of a traditional Catholic movement, Communion and Liberation (Coelho, 2019).

Nuno Pinto Afonso spent his entire career in the PSD and was also a CHEGA founding member. However, in 2021 he resigned as vice president due to an internal rumour of militant signature falsification. The party leadership also includes José Dias, the police union's former president, and Pedro Frazão, a member of *Opus Dei*. The party's National Convention Bureau seems to have been the place chosen by the Portuguese ultra-nationalist wing. Luís Filipe Graça was a member of several neo-Nazi groups, such as the New Social Order (NOS), the National Opposition Movement (MON), and the PNR. Nelson Dias da Silva, a former PNR militant, was the spokesman for that Portuguese neo-fascist organisation (Carvalho 2020). These two members had been excluded from CHEGA leadership structures when their links with those groups got media attention. CHEGA is also a growing influence in the security forces, as the Zero Movement (a copycat of the American Blue Lives Matter movement) clearly shows.

In sum, CHEGA militant base is divided into two groups: the most politicised due to political correctness, imposed by the leftist parties in the confrontation for cultural hegemony, as well as by mainstream parties to avoid stigmatisation, and the less politicised, prone to promote media salience in specific issues such as crime, social and financial dependency, impunity of criminals and corruption. Besides having a weak organisational identity and deficient institutionalisation, CHEGA is well on its way to becoming a political actor with systemic importance, with the potential to mainstream its issues on the political agenda and shift social attitudes.

André Ventura and its quest for power

CHEGA is André Ventura, and André Ventura, as its creator, is both a catalyst and mobiliser of an electorate with diverse socio-political backgrounds (Marchi, 2020). However, André Ventura faces a trade-off between being somewhat unusual and provocative to guarantee prominence and being taken seriously as a part of a government solution. Nevertheless, who is he?

André Ventura was born in a suburban locality in Lisbon metropolitan area. Unlike his close family, he was not baptised because his parents wanted him to choose his religion. However, André Ventura became an enthusiastic catholic at forty, was baptised, and made his first communion. Still, he attended a minor seminary at Lisbon Patriarchate but did not continue his religious formation. He graduated in law from the Law Faculty (NOVA University

¹⁴ He theorized the notion of ethnopluralism, a concept which relies on preserving and mutually respecting individual and bordered ethno-cultural regions. His work has been influential with the alt-right movement in the United States.

Lisbon) with a 19 out of 20 grade. In 2013, he finished his PhD in public law at the University College Cork, Ireland, in which he specialised in “criminal populism” and “stigmatisation of minorities”, revealing concern about the “expansion of police powers” (Santos 2019). He published several academic law manuscripts and two novels: *Montenegro* in 2008, and *A Última Madrugada do Islão* (“The Last Dawn of Islam”) in 2009, a novel about Yasser Arafat’s death. The latter was suspended for its “incendiary potential” (Alves 2020). He taught at the Autonomous University of Lisbon, from 2013 to 2019, and at NOVA, from 2016 to 2018. In addition, he had a column in the *Correio da Manhã*, the most widely read daily newspaper and participation as a sports commentator on the CMTV channel from 2014 to 2020. Simultaneously, from 2011 to 2014, he worked as a jurist-consultant at the Portuguese tax authority (Marchi, 2020).

André Ventura started his political career at fifty (after he left the seminary) in the Social Democrat Youth (JSD) at hand Artur Afonso, father of Nuno Afonso (mentioned above). He became a member of the JSD political committee for the Lisbon district in 2001. An activist in all local electoral campaigns in Sintra’s region, in 2015, he climbed to PSD’s national council. In the 2017 local elections, the PSD presented André Ventura as its candidate for Loures, the country’s sixth-largest municipality. During his electoral campaign, he has chosen the Roma community, the death penalty, life imprisonment and police surveillance as electoral campaign banners to persuade his potential electorate. This populist message has brought him third place, behind PS and CDU. However, its xenophobic discourse created unease among other political parties and public opinion. This gesture can be read today as the first *cordon sanitaire* between the Portuguese mainstream parties and André Ventura. Notwithstanding, Passos Coelho supported him in the electoral campaign. In 2018, after Passos Coelho resigned from the PSD presidency, André Ventura left the PSD and Loures municipal council and announced the creation of CHEGA (Marchi 2020).

In May 2019, CHEGA ran for the European elections under the aegis of the coalition Basta!, composed of the Popular Monarchist Party (PPM), the Pro-Life Catholic Traditionalists movement (PPV) and the liberal *Democracia XXI* movement. The coalition obtained circa 50,000 votes (1,49%) without electing any EP representative. However, the same year, the legislative elections took place. Again, CHEGA ran with PPV in its lists and received 67,826 votes (1,29%). As a result, André Ventura was elected to the Portuguese parliament (Dennison and Mendes, 2020). After this timid start, the presidential election of January 2021 was a breakthrough in the history of an RFR in a Portuguese political setting. Ventura obtained 11,9% of the vote, the third most-voted presidential candidate and only one point behind the centre-left candidate Ana Gomes (Gomes, 2021). In addition, the party made significant electoral gains in the country’s interior in the local elections in the same year. Most significantly, André Ventura gathered more votes than many of the parties long established in the Portuguese political system, such as PCP, BE and CDS (Santana-Pereira and Cancela, 2020). Finally, on 30th January 2022, in the early legislative elections, CHEGA finished in third place (7,2%), electing twelve representatives to the national parliament (Antunes, 2022). However,

CHEGA received less than 100,000 votes than André Ventura in the 2021 presidential elections.

To conclude, André Ventura found fertile soil in the Portuguese political setting because of the mistrust of mainstream parties and politics. He behaves depending on his purposes and the political circumstances. Either André Ventura echoes the charismatic figure with his rhetorical ability to involve the electorate, describing himself as honest, patriotic and hardworking, representing the aspirations of the “good Portuguese”, or the Machiavelli’s prince who could transform the system by creating an IV Republic by his forces and virtues. The main conclusion is that Ventura is the *incarnatus* of a slight and unpredictable populist RFR leader who nourishes an imaginary construction of Portuguese society to achieve power.

Conclusions

This article critically discussed the supply-side explanations for CHEGA’s surge into Portuguese politics, confirming Finchelstein’s assertion that no country is immune to populist appeals. Therefore, we consider CHEGA a populist party, much better suited to characterise its xenophobic and nationalist gene and radical far-right agenda. Furthermore, its opportunistic agency uses strategic salience issue framing to persuade audiences to tune into its representation of reality, echoing our understanding of populism as a “flexible mode of persuasion” to infringe fundamental rights.

Notwithstanding the research on voter decline since 1975 and mistrust in political parties and politics, CHEGA’s electoral breakthrough in the 2019 European and legislative elections was most likely related to the interaction between PSD and parties disaggregation and the interruption of the emancipatory function of the CDU and BE parties, as illustrated during the *Geringonça* mandate. In this sense, I argue that CHEGA is both the *Scylla* and the *Charybdis*, narrowing the strait of democracy in the “new” Portuguese party system sailing waters. In addition, traditional Portuguese media also have contributed to its rise, giving disproportionate media coverage because of André Ventura’s controversial and provocative tabloid-style language.

Hence, CHEGA has been the third most popular party among Portuguese voters since the 2022 legislative elections. According to a recent poll from Portuguese Catholic University (CESOP), it would be voted for by 15% of the Portuguese electorate, twice the votes the party received a year ago in the legislative elections. One thing is clear: CHEGA is preparing to govern, and as André Ventura stated, that will not happen under any circumstances because he only accepts governing as an equal partner to make the structural changes and dismiss the “leftist oppressor political system”. To conclude and answer the initial question, I could argue that Portugal is dangerously entering a neo-fascist path because it will be difficult for a hypothetical future centre-moderate right parties coalition (PSD, CDS or IL) to government not to depend on CHEGA, discriminatory and authoritarian agenda with the consequences we have seen in some European countries such as Hungary.

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