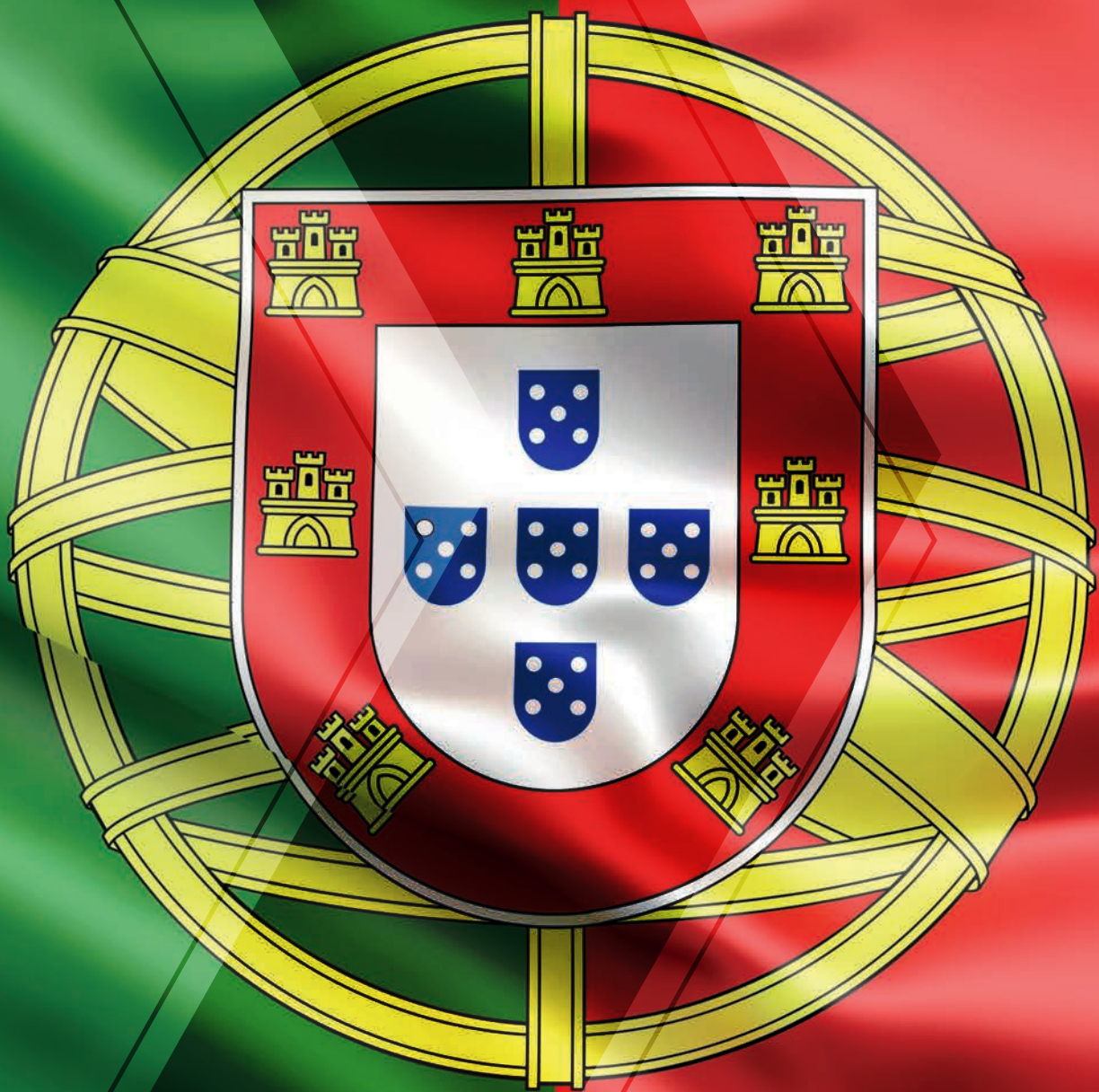


PORTUGAL



The Ukraine-Russia war and the Far Right in Portugal: Minimal impacts on the rising populist Chega party

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Abstract

The effects of the Russia-Ukraine war on Portuguese politics have been negligible, leading to only minor changes in political positions or the relative popularity of the parties. Chega was the first right-wing populist political party to achieve a parliamentary breakthrough in Portugal, emerging as the third-largest political force after elections in January 2022. It shares rhetorical features and positions with European counterparts but distinguishes itself by its flexibility. Unencumbered by association with the Russian regime, Chega has been free to take the more popular position among voters, supporting Ukraine. Furthermore, one of its foremost adversaries, the Portuguese Communist Party, took an ambiguous position regarding the invasion of Ukraine, making Chega's decision about positioning clearer. Nevertheless, Chega has used the war instrumentally in service of its established priorities—namely, nationalism, opposition to immigration, and militarism. Moreover, after temporarily setting aside welfare chauvinism, the party reverted to this staple as the war continued. We shed light on the rhetoric and positioning of Chega and its leader, André Ventura, by analysing 47 parliamentary commentaries by Chega MPs in 2021 and 2022 and 28 tweets mentioning Ukraine, Russia, nationals from both countries, or the war posted by Ventura during the same period.

Keywords: Portugal; right-wing populism; Chega; André Ventura; Twitter; legislative proceedings

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Background: Votes, rhetoric, and ideology

Chega is currently Portugal's largest right-wing populist party and the third-largest political party overall. Established in 2019, Chega's parliamentary breakthrough came the same year when founder and leader André Ventura was elected as the party's lone MP. Then, in 2022, Ventura was joined by 11 new Chega MPs after the party took 7.18% of the vote in snap elections held in January. The Portuguese Far Right landscape includes two other noteworthy parties, Ergue-te! (Rise Up!) and ADN (Alternativa Democrática Nacional). However, they are electorally irrelevant (their combined vote share in the 2022 elections was 0.29%).

The rise of right-wing populism in Portugal came as something of a surprise. With the right-wing Estado Novo authoritarian regime still in living memory, the country had been considered resistant to Far Right mobilization, with news media coverage being consistently critical of populist or radical right-wing actors (Salgado & Zúquete, 2016; Salgado, 2019). Even though Ventura was the sole MP for Chega until 2022, the party began receiving disproportionate media coverage, as usually happens to smaller parties with seats in the national Parliament (Salgado, 2022). Nevertheless, despite the 11 new MPs who joined Ventura in 2022, Chega remains a "one-man show" (Halikiopoulou & Vlandas, 2022). Ventura is the uncontested leader and face of the party, with internal power so concentrated in his hands that Portugal's Constitutional Court deemed the party charter unconstitutional in late 2022 (Pinto de Mesquita & Rodrigues, 2022).

Furthermore, media resistance to right-wing populism should not be equated with the absence of demand for it. For example, intolerant cultural attitudes led nearly 54% of Portuguese respondents to the 2014 European Social Survey to agree with the statement, "Some cultural groups are clearly superior to others" (European Social Survey, 2014). Moreover, "the size of the Roma minority [and] percentage of social assistance recipients" in a given locality are "associated with higher radical-right vote shares", although, somewhat surprisingly, the "classic" factors seen as driving such voters (such as high unemployment and the presence of sizeable immigrant minority communities) do not (Afonso, 2021, p. 5).

Constants in Ventura's rhetoric include references to a homogeneous community of "righteous Portuguese" people (*Portugueses de bem*) sharing certain norms and values and anti-system positioning by constructing an agonistic dichotomy between Chega (which means "enough!") and the "establishment" parties and politicians,

but also the regime itself (Biscaia & Salgado, 2022; Pimenta et al., 2022). Chega also evinces vocal support for the police and enthusiastically deploys penal populism (i.e., exploiting public anxiety about crime for political gain) (Bottoms, 1995).

Chega and André Ventura's rhetoric and policy proposals bear similarities with other radical right-wing populist political actors across the European Conservatives and Reformists and Identity and Democracy groups in the European Parliament. Ideologically, Chega describes itself as "liberal-conservative" (Chega, 2021), and Ventura's rhetoric shares features with European counterparts, such as nativism and authoritarianism. But the party's primary feature is its *pliability*. Put differently, Chega and Ventura constantly seek to "read the room" (Albertazzi et al., 2022) to maximize visibility and media coverage. They are adept at adapting right-wing populist talking points to Portuguese political realities, adopting ambivalent rhetorical strategies, and frequently shifting positions. For instance, research has observed that European populist Radical Right movements do not usually prioritize economic issues (Morini, 2018). Chega follows this tendency, making exceptions for high-profile issues such as fiscal policy and tolls on roads serving economically deprived areas (Jornal de Notícias, 2022; Pires, 2022), but also by being quick to retract unpopular policy proposals, such as minimizing state intervention in the health and education sectors (Mendes, 2022).

Immigration stances encapsulate the party's rhetorical pliability. For instance, despite its low salience among voters (Reis de Oliveira, 2022), Chega's 2021 electoral programme contained several proposals aimed at reducing immigration flows, including rescinding the UN's Global Compact for Migration and rejecting naturalization paths for asylum seekers, using conspiracist discourse (the "Great Replacement") and describing immigrants as "a threat to the survival of the Portuguese as a people with its own identity" (Chega, 2021). At the same time, Ventura seldom mentions immigration in public, and when he has, it has usually been to defend Portugal's border police, the Serviço de Estrangeiros e Fronteiras (SEF), from accusations of misconduct and brutality. In sum, Ventura uses migration instrumentally as a pretext to engage in welfare chauvinism and defend the state authorities.

In line with its European party family's rejection of "any policy designed to create a supra-state or supra-national model" (Identity and Democracy Party, 2019), Chega claims to stand for a "Europe of nations", working toward "integration, not dilution" (Chega, n.d. a). However, the EU and European integration are not



prominent features of its rhetoric, nor does it advance hard Eurosceptic proposals such as reversing European integration or demanding Portugal's exit from the Eurozone (much less the Union itself). In Chega's 2021 manifesto, sovereigntist claims are used only in connection with immigration and administrative issues (Chega, n.d. b). In Portugal, it is parties of the Left, especially the PCP, that monopolize sovereigntist anti-EU, anti-Euro, and anti-NATO discourses. The PCP proposed to "staunchly stand up against submission to the Euro and the EU's impositions and conditionalities, taking back the tools Portugal needs for its sovereign development" as part of its platform for the last European Parliament elections (Partido Comunista Português, 2019).

Taking the same position as the communists would be untenable for Chega since it claims to unreservedly oppose them. Thus, while Chega makes no explicit reference to NATO in its official campaign materials, it often voices its support for Portugal's participation in the alliance, coherent with its general militarism (See, e.g., Assembleia da República, 2022p; Assembleia da República, 2022q). Furthermore, while the party is ideologically close to the Putin regime—for instance, in its opposition to the expansion of LGBTQ rights articulated through "opposition to gender ideology" and the politicization of religion—it does not have the same kind of ties to Moscow as other European right-wing populist parties (Weiss, 2020). For example, it stops short of expressing admiration for Vladimir Putin and has managed to avoid credible accusations of financial ties with the Kremlin.

Interpreting the Russia-Ukraine war

When Russia invaded Ukraine in February 2022, Chega backed Kyiv. However, the decision was apparently more informed by political expediency than principle. Unlike many other Far Right parties in Europe, such as Matteo Salvini's Lega or Marine Le Pen's Front National, Chega had few established commitments or vulnerabilities vis-à-vis Russia, so it was free to take the more popular position of supporting Ukraine without concerns about being accused of "flip-flopping". A 2022 survey found 78% of Portuguese respondents favour "EU-coordinated defence", and 38% endorse direct NATO military intervention in the conflict (Public Opinion Monitoring Unit, 2022).

In fact, in early 2021, Ventura called for harsher sanctions on the Russian "enemy" in light of ongoing Russian provocation in the Donbas and the annexation of Crimea, demanding they be applied to the entire economy rather than individual

Russians (Assembleia da República, 2021). On the day of the 2022 invasion, Ventura “unreservedly” denounced Putin’s aggression in Parliament, urging Portugal to do “everything in its power, militarily and sanctions-wise [against Russia]” (Assembleia da República, 2022a, p. 18), and used Twitter to warn followers of the “danger” posed by “Putin’s and China’s friends in the Portuguese Parliament” (Ventura, 2022a).

Nevertheless, the Chega leader’s position was not supported unanimously within his party (at least not initially). On February 24, António Tânger Corrêa, one of Chega’s vice presidents, posted on Facebook characterizing the invasion as a legitimate reaction to “NATO encirclement of Russia” and accusing Ukraine’s president, Volodymyr Zelenskyy, of “siding with avowed Nazis”, echoing official Russian justification of the invasion (Malhado, 2022). Tânger Corrêa was backed by high-profile party members, including the famous actress Maria Vieira, a municipal deputy in Cascais near Lisbon, who voted against a local resolution condemning him and used Facebook to deride President Zelenskyy as a “puppet” (Malhado, 2022). These internal tensions were quickly resolved due to Ventura’s centrality within the party structure and a strong exogenous incentive provided by parties on the Left, particularly the PCP.

The oldest active Portuguese political party, the PCP was founded in 1921 and was the pivotal player in the resistance against the Estado Novo regime. It developed in a close, clandestine relationship with the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) and Eastern Bloc states, which it perceived as natural allies (Cunhal, 1997). After democratization in 1974, the PCP resisted the trend toward autonomization from the CPSU and the adoption of “Eurocommunism” exemplified by its Italian, French and Spanish counterparts (Cunhal, 1977). The PCP continues to advocate “progressive patriotic Left policies,” which it believes will lead to a “sorely needed anti-monopolist, anti-imperialist rupture”, and argues for the dissolution of NATO as a “crucial objective towards national sovereignty and world peace” (Partido Comunista Português, 2010), although the party, like Chega, has rejected identification with the Putin regime (Partido Comunista Português, n.d.).

During the February 24 parliamentary debate following Russia’s attack on Ukraine, João Oliveira, a PCP MP, read the situation from this perspective and diagnosed the issue in Ukraine as part of



[T]he same problem we've seen in Yugoslavia, Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya, and Syria. The problem is the use of siege tactics, confrontation, and war to impose economic relations that engender injustice, inequality, and appropriation [prescribing] an end to escalating political, economic, and military confrontation by NATO, the USA, and the EU towards Russia and relying on its contribution towards a negotiated political, peaceful, resolution". (Assembleia da República, 2022a, p. 10)

Thus, Chega's choice of Ventura's pro-Ukrainian positioning was made easier by the PCP's position. The party could observe how unpopular the communists' ambivalent positioning was with voters and — since the PCP was the only party to consistently reject condemning the invasion — readily isolate the communists politically.

Exploiting the Russia-Ukraine war

In the weeks after the invasion, Chega's efforts were directed at quelling doubts about its position, loudly proclaiming support for Ukraine. An early example concerned a protest scheduled for February 27 in front of the Russian embassy in Lisbon, organized by the youth wings of all the major political parties. Chega was the only party not invited to participate, part of an orchestrated strategy to establish a *cordon sanitaire* around it (Ribeiro, 2022). In response, Ventura tweeted his condemnation of other parties' "low politics" (Ventura, 2022b). On the same day, Chega organized its own demonstration in front of the Ukrainian embassy, where Ventura was formally introduced to Ina Ohnivets, the Ukrainian ambassador to Portugal. Although Chega's protest turned out to be smaller than the other parties', it did allow Ventura to draw significant media coverage, be photographed standing side-by-side with the ambassador and play to the cameras in the role of party leader-cum-statesman (Rato, 2022). Ventura also suggested an ideological similitude between his party and Ukrainian resistance to invasion, equating its members' "love for country" with "positive nationalism leading Ukrainians to defend themselves fearlessly from Russian aggression" (Assembleia da República, 2022b, p. 16).

The invasion was also used as ammunition against the Left. In a tweet soon after Russia's invasion, Ventura prophesized that the war would be "lethal to Putin and Russian development, but also to the old Portuguese Communist Party, which is absolutely anachronistic in the 21st century. And one has to say 'good riddance!'"

(Ventura, 2022c). When PCP MPs were absent from President Zelensky's address to the Portuguese Parliament (Lopes, 2022), Ventura accused the communists of having "[Ukrainian] women's, children's and senior citizens' blood on [their] hands" (Assembleia da República, 2022e, p. 8). Simultaneously, when the Left attempted to highlight Chega's ideological proximity with the Kremlin, such as when Pedro Filipe Soares of the Left Bloc (Bloco de Esquerda, BE) accused Ventura of "walking hand-in-hand with Marine Le Pen, who walks hand-in-hand with Putin" (Assembleia da República, 2022d, p. 59), Ventura reversed the accusations. Specifically, he pointed to the ambiguous positions of some members of The Left in the European Parliament - GUE/NGL European party group, such as Spain's Podemos, which, according to the Chega leader, "criticized sanctions on Russia and military support to Ukraine" (ibid., p. 60-61). Similarly, in September 2022, when Jerónimo de Sousa, the PCP leader at the time, tried to dispel the perception of proximity between his party and Russia by equating Putin's authoritarianism with Chega's, Ventura sneered in a tweet that "commies are funny: they're incapable of condemning the war in Ukraine, blame the West for the inflation crisis, and reject sanctions on Russia, yet they say the President of Chega is like "Putin"" (Ventura, 2022f).

The ongoing war also presented an opportunity for Chega to display its militarism. The party repeatedly called for increased spending on armed forces with the aim, in MP Diogo Pacheco de Amorim's words, of confronting the "unforeseen hazards of an extremely geostrategically volatile world" (Assembleia da República, 2022e, p. 9) and fulfilling Portugal's obligations towards NATO, as MP Pedro Pessanha stressed more than once (Assembleia da República, 2021, p. 73 , 2022 p. 32).

Immigration was also brought to the fore in connection with the situation in Ukraine. Party whip Pedro Pinto condemned a proposed reorganization of the SEF, saying it would make it easier for "criminals to blend with people who are actually running from a war [...] as is already happening, especially in the Algarve, with migrants coming from Morocco carrying iPhones" (Assembleia da República, 2022g, p. 59). Ventura employed xenophobic rhetoric in his parliamentary speeches outlining Chega's concerns with non-Ukrainian migration to Europe. He asserted that it was "a disservice to Europe" to compare Ukrainians to other migrants coming to Europe, claiming that in the latter case was tantamount to "substitution of the European population by people from North Africa or the Middle East [...] who] treat women as objects, think women should wear the burka to Parliament and believe our Western values should be discarded" (Assembleia da República, 2022k, p. 8).



As the war dragged on and attention moved back to domestic politics, Chega's defence of Ukraine progressively became less solid as it reverted to welfare chauvinist discourse. For example, in early March, André Ventura tweeted about "doing everything we can to stand up for the Ukrainian people" (Ventura, 2022d), only to question Portuguese financial support for Ukraine two months later, tweeting that the money should be spent on pensioners (Ventura, 2022e) and assailing the government's priorities in a parliamentary speech as "upside-down" (Assembleia da República, 2022j, p. 11).

The Russia-Ukraine war also provided avenues for Chega to pursue previous agenda priorities. For instance, Ventura had blasted the government on Twitter for rising gas and energy prices already in 2021 (e.g., Ventura, 2021a, Ventura, 2021b) and continued to do so in 2022, with Ventura demanding government intervention to control gas prices in his first parliamentary intervention after the invasion, and alleging voters prioritized gas prices over the war (Assembleia da República 2022a, p. 18, 2022g, p.18). Other Chega MPs mentioned energy prices in connection to the war in ten further separate parliamentary proceedings (Assembleia da República, 2022c, p. 36; 2022f, p. 13; 2022h, p. 37; 2022j, p. 27; 2021, p. 71; 2022m, p. 22; 2022n, p. 39; 2022o, p. 23-24; 2022q, p. 25; 2022r, p.16). Other issues touched upon by Chega MPs using war framing included a proposal to lower municipal real estate tax due to an alleged increase in demand due to the conflict (Assembleia da República 2022h, p. 37) and criticism of the National Health Service (SNS) for "killing more people than the war" (2022p, p. 51).

Discussion

Chega and André Ventura's discourses on Ukraine were deployed instrumentally, allowing Chega to continue to trail a path toward normalization as a player in the political system. Initially, it allowed the party to side with the majority opinion, both in Parliament and among voters, and, conversely, take advantage of the fact that one of its main political adversaries did not, and could thus be isolated and portrayed as anachronistic, radical, and out-of-touch, in contrast with Chega's sensible position. Then, when the weight of war waned in voters' minds, Ventura and Chega MPs began to use it as a pretext to articulate pre-existing political priorities, such as militarism, opposition to immigration, and welfare chauvinism.

Chega's strategy was moderately successful. Since the January 2022 election predates the invasion, there were no concrete, immediate electoral gains to be had,

but the party hovered around the 9% mark in opinion polls taken in late 2022 and early 2023 (e.g., ICS–ISCTE Surveys, 2022; Rodrigues, 2023), meaning a slight upward trend. Other parties were hard-pressed to paint Chega’s position as unreasonable or out of bounds, and the attempt to isolate PCP was not carried out by Chega alone, as other parties also used PCP’s refusal to explicitly concede Russian blame for the war against it. The Communists were steadily losing electoral support. At the 2015 election, they obtained 8.25% of the vote (17 MPs), and by the 2022 election, this had fallen to 4.3% (6 MPs). Still, the PCP seems rather unaffected by developments, as neither the party’s overall unpopular positions on Ukraine nor the replacement of former leader Jerónimo de Sousa by the younger, largely unknown Paulo Raimundo has significantly altered its popularity in the polls (e.g., Rodrigues, 2023).

At the time of writing (February 2023), the war in Ukraine seems to have caused few changes to the Portuguese political landscape, even if inflation caused by the ongoing war is a factor in the slightly eroding popularity of the current Socialist Party (PS) government, in office since 2015. This is also the case when looking at Chega as the leading right-wing populist party in the country. The conflict is unlikely to cause deep rifts, as the relative success of Ventura’s strategy and his undisputed internal power ensure that doubts and disagreements about the matter will most likely not be voiced. Party positioning regarding key issues is also unchanged and has not impeded Chega’s transformation of the Portuguese political system by carving space for and normalizing right-wing populist actors.



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