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CASE STUDY

# EUPopLink Country report - Portugal

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## Abstract

Portugal has long been regarded as a Euroenthusiastic country, with broad support for European integration among citizens, political elites, and organised interests since the 1980s. This permissive consensus has been politically sustained by the country's two mainstream pro-European parties, the Socialist Party (center-left) and the Social Democratic Party (center-right), which have alternated in government throughout the democratic period. However, this consensus has increasingly been challenged by parties at the ideological extremes, namely the Portuguese Communist Party (PCP), the Left Bloc (LB), and the populist radical right party Chega. While the PCP articulates a hard Eurosceptic position, the LB advances a soft Eurosceptic stance, and Chega combines conditional Euroscepticism with a pragmatic approach to the European Union (Kopecký & Mudde, 2002; Vasilopoulou, 2018). This report argues that, although Portugal's populist and Eurosceptic landscape remains contained, it is undergoing important change. So far, these parties have not fundamentally altered Portugal's overall relationship with the EU, which continues to be shaped by a strong pro-European tradition and resilient public support for integration. However, Chega's electoral rise and the weakening of the mainstream party system may create new conditions for a stronger politicisation of European issues in the years ahead.

## Keywords

Populism, Euroscepticism, Portugal

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## 1. Introduction

The present country report was prepared as part of the EUPopLink COST Action (Andreadis & Vasilopoulou, 2026) following the EUPopLink Theoretical Framework and guidelines (Lorimer et al., 2026).

Portugal has long been considered a Euroenthusiastic country (Costa Lobo, 2023). Since the 1980s, a broad majority of political elites, citizens, and interest groups have consistently supported the European Union (EU) (Costa Lobo, 2023; Seabra, 2003). In 2024, Portugal recorded the second-highest level of trust in the EU (Eurobarometer, 2024), and the Portuguese are the European citizens who "more frequently express a positive image of the EU": 68% (Eurobarometer, 2024: 5).

Despite this broadly supportive stance, Portugal's relationship with European integration has evolved through distinct phases. Between 1986 and 1992, accession to the European Economic Community was largely uncontroversial, illustrating a robust 'permissive consensus' around integration (Costa Lobo, 2023; Seabra, 2003; Best, 2005). From 1993 onwards, the 'post-Maastricht blues', together with concerns about fiscal austerity and insufficient economic harmonisation, contributed to politicise the EU issue in Portugal, triggering calls for a referendum that never materialised (Seabra, 2003; Eichenberg & Dalton, 2007; Oppermann, 2013). Politicisation further intensified during the 2007–2009 global financial crisis and persisted through the years of Portuguese economic adjustment (FFMS, 2024; Costa Lobo, 2023). The 2011–2014 bailout programme, in particular, had a profound impact: trust in the EU declined by 38% between 2009 and 2013 (Eurobarometer, 2009, 2013), underscoring how disruptions to the 'permissive consensus' can mobilise public contestation and activate broader public debate on European integration (Hutter & Kriesi, 2020).

From 2014 onwards, however, trust in the EU rebounded markedly, signalling the re-emergence of a 'permissive consensus' (Eurobarometer, 2024). By 2025, 74% of Portuguese citizens believed the country had benefited from EU membership, with 46% directly associating those benefits with economic growth (Eurobarometer, 2025). These trends suggest that Portuguese support for the EU remains instrumental, mainly pragmatic, and fundamentally grounded in perceptions of national advantage (Eurobarometer, 2005).

The 'permissive consensus' in Portugal regarding European integration has been politically sustained by the two mainstream pro-European parties, the Socialist Party (PS, centre-left) and the Social Democratic Party (PSD, centre-right), which have alternated in leading successive governments throughout the democratic period. However, it is important to note that this consensus has been increasingly challenged by parties at the ideological extremes, namely the Portuguese Communist Party (PCP), the Left Bloc (LB), and the populist radical right party (PRR) Chega (Costa Lobo, 2023; Seabra, 2003; Best, 2005). While the PCP adopts a position of hard Euroscepticism, the LB espouses soft Euroscepticism, and Chega expresses a conditional and pragmatic stance towards the EU (PCP, 2025b; BE, 2025; Chega, 2025; Vasilopoulou, 2018; Kopecký & Mudde, 2002).

## 2. Populist political actors

### Chega (Enough) party

Founded in 2019 and led by André Ventura, *Chega* has swiftly become Portugal's leading PRR party. From electing a single MP in 2019, it expanded to 12 seats in 2022, 50 in 2024, and by 2025 held 60 parliamentary seats (23% of the vote), establishing itself as the second-largest force in the Portuguese parliament. In 2024, it entered the European Parliament with two MEPs.

The analysis of the party's official documents (Chega, 2019a, 2019b, 2019c, 2022a, 2022b, 2024a, 2024b, 2025) reveals that its ideology rests on three main pillars: populism, nativism, and authoritarianism, commonly associated with the populist radical right (PRR) parties (PRR) (Betz, 2017, 2018; Mudde, 2007, 2017; Rydgren, 2007, 2018).

*Chega*'s populism manifests in its stark moral dichotomy between a virtuous, homogeneous people and a corrupt elite, typically represented by the long-dominant Socialist (PS) and Social Democratic (PSD) parties. Claiming sole legitimacy to represent the *volonté générale* and adopting a strongly anti-elitist rhetoric, the party denounces the current regime as morally bankrupt and calls for a new political order (Chega, 2025: 3, 19, 144). Chega's rhetoric seeks to position the party as the only morally legitimate voice of the ordinary citizen (Marchi, 2023b, 2023a; Marchi & Lisi, 2021; Mendes, 2021; Mendes & Dennison, 2021).

Its nativist agenda supports calls for more restrictive immigration and nationality policies, while accusing national governing elites and European institutions of eroding Portuguese and European heritage through permissive immigration policies (Amado, 2024; Chega, 2025: 54–64; Kelly, 2024; Mendes, 2021; Zúquete & Pimenta, 2024). Additionally, the party's rhetoric features prominent authoritarian themes, advocating punitive justice, law and order, and a return to

traditional values, which the party claims have been undermined by the mainstream political elite (Chega, 2025: 42–53; 64–75).

At the European level, Chega is part of the Patriots for Europe Group, alongside other PRR parties. André Ventura has participated in several international initiatives within this network, including the summit of European radical right leaders held in Madrid in February 2025 under the slogan "Make Europe Great Again", sharing a platform with Orbán, Le Pen, Salvini, Wilders, and Abascal (Soler, 2025).

**Left-wing populist parties in portugal?**

Founded in 1921, the Portuguese Communist Party (PCP) is the oldest party currently in existence in Portugal and one of Western Europe's most enduring orthodox communist parties. With a long history of opposition to the Estado Novo dictatorship, it remained a relevant parliamentary force throughout much of the post-1974 democratic period. However, its representation has declined markedly in recent years, falling from 13 MPs in 2009 to 6 in 2022, 4 in 2024, and 3 in 2025, the party's lowest parliamentary representation in the democratic period since 1974. Its representation in the European Parliament has also weakened: after electing two MEPs in 2009, three in 2014, and two in 2019, it returned only one representative in the 2024 European elections.

Officially rooted in Marxist–Leninist principles (Lisi & Freire, 2023), the Portuguese Communist Party (PCP) endorses a vanguardist conception of politics, presenting itself as the leading force of the working class. In the case of Marxist–Leninist communist parties more generally, their ideological outlook, typically characterised by the absence of a moral dichotomy between a "pure people" and a "corrupt elite", has led some authors to argue that they are structurally incompatible with populism (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017: 33; Rooduijn & Akkerman, 2017: 196). However, in the PCP's case, it is important to consider not only its official ideology but also its discursive practices, as expressed in electoral manifestos and political programmes. In this regard, earlier research has identified the emergence of certain populist elements in the party's discourse and political action during the austerity period (2011–2014) (Lisi & Borghetto, 2018).

Across the PCP's electoral programmes between 2009 and 2025 (CDU, 2022, 2024; PCP, 2009, 2011, 2014, 2015, 2019, 2024, 2025a), the party not only affirms itself as the representative of the working class within a capitalist system marked by class struggle, but also, often in parallel, claims to represent the Portuguese people as a unified sovereign entity. This latter formulation aligns with the conceptualisation of populism adopted in this study. Notably, within these programmes, references to the "working class" and the "people" concepts recur in close association, suggesting an overlapping construction of collective political subjects rather than a strict separation between class-based and people-centred appeals.

Consistent with the core features commonly associated with left-wing populism (Albertazzi & McDonnell, 2015: 4–5; Mudde, 2007: 19), the PCP frames political conflict primarily in terms of socio-economic inequality. It portrays workers and the Portuguese people as subject to exploitation and impoverishment by a national and international financial elite, which is represented as exerting decisive influence over the mainstream parties that have governed Portugal throughout the democratic period, as well as over the European Union itself.

Accordingly, the PCP may be understood as a borderline case of populism within the typological framework adopted here. Although it is not classified as a populist party in the *PopuList* database, the discursive and rhetorical evidence reviewed above supports, albeit with some caution, its classification as a case of left-wing populism. Moreover, the party has long maintained a hard Eurosceptic stance and has consistently opposed European integration, while remaining affiliated with the European United Left/Nordic Green Left (GUE/NGL) group in the European Parliament.

The Left Bloc (LB), formed in 1999 through the merger of Trotskyist, Maoist, and broader anti-capitalist movements (Lisi & Freire, 2023: 451), is a Radical Left Party (March, 2011: 18). Following its peak of 19 MPs in 2015, it declined to a single seat in 2025. Its representation in the European Parliament similarly decreased, from three MEPs in 2009 to just one in 2024.

Although not classified as a populist party in the *PopuList* database, academic analyses identify sustained populist traits in LB's rhetoric (Lisi & Borghetto, 2018; Zúquete, 2022). Consistent with left-wing populism (Albertazzi & McDonnell, 2015: 4–5; Mudde, 2007: 19), LB frames political conflict around socio-economic inequality, portraying national and international neoliberal elites as responsible for exploiting an economically disadvantaged majority of the people. Across its electoral programmes from 2009 to 2025 (BE, 2009, 2011, 2014, 2015, 2019a, 2019b, 2022, 2024a, 2024b, 2025), the

LB consistently constructs political conflict through the lens of economic injustice and elite domination, identifying economic, financial (its primary targets), and political elites, both domestic and international, as collectively responsible for the sustained oppression of the people.

Notably, during the period of austerity and the Troika's intervention in Portugal (2011–2014), the party centred its agenda on opposing the economic adjustment programme imposed by the International Monetary Fund, the European Commission, and the European Central Bank. Domestic elites, specifically the PS and PSD parties, were portrayed as complicit and active proponents of this arrangement. The austerity measures were denounced as external domination and oppression imposed upon the Portuguese people (BE, 2011: 2–5; 2014: 3–8).

Although this narrative softened between 2015 and 2019 due to LB parliamentary support for the PS government (BE, 2019b), populist rhetoric re-emerged strongly from 2019 onward. The party portrays "the people" as a politically active subject confronting entrenched elite power, denouncing both Portuguese politics and the European project as captured by private economic interests and dominated by neoliberal and financial elites. This dynamic, it argues, undermines democracy and the welfare state, leading to widespread inequality and the impoverishment of the working population (BE, 2019a: 2–6, 2024b: 6, 2024a: 5–7, 2025: 2–8). LB calls for restoring *popular sovereignty* at both national and European levels, challenging liberal hegemony and the dominance of economic elites (BE, 2019b: 122–124, 2024a: 14). It advocates public control of strategic sectors in service of *the people* (BE, 2024b: 116–128), alongside enhanced democratic oversight, referenda, institutional reform, and popular mobilisation (BE, 2022: 204, 212–214, 2024b: 219–220). Thus, the party articulates a consistent left-wing populism, defined by elite critique, redistributive justice, democratic renewal, and the centrality of the people as the legitimate source of authority.

Like the PCP, the LB is part of the GUE/NGL group in the European Parliament. After refusing to join DiEM25 (Guimarães, 2018), LB launched the transnational platform *Now, the People* in 2018, alongside Podemos (Spain), led by Pablo Iglesias, and La France Insoumise (France), led by Jean-Luc Mélenchon (Lopes, 2018). This initiative, demonstrating the LB's proactive role in fostering transnational collaboration within the European radical left, led to the European Left Alliance (ELA) creation in 2024. The alliance promotes a progressive and anti-capitalist vision for Europe and held its first congress in June 2025 in Porto, Portugal (ELA, 2025).

## 3. Positions on 'Europe' and the populism-Euroscepticism nexus

### Chega (Enough) party

Chega's Euroscepticism is complex and resists straightforward classification. In its 2025 electoral programme, the party expresses scepticism towards multilateral organisations that, in its view, act contrary to the interests of their member states and seek to usurp national decision-making authority (Chega, 2025: 118). Such a positioning could configure hard scepticism. However, Chega's domestic discourse does not mirror hard Eurosceptic attitudes despite its affiliation with the Patriots for Europe Group in the European Parliament (Begonha, 2023).

The party does not object to Portugal's EU membership. In line with other parties in the Patriots for Europe group, André Ventura has made it clear that Chega does not advocate for the country's withdrawal from the European Union, but rather for a reform of its institutions and policies, particularly in the areas of immigration and border control (Begonha, 2023). Furthermore, Ventura adopts an openly adversarial stance towards Chega's left-wing competitors, accusing them, particularly the PCP, of advocating for Portugal's withdrawal from the European Union (SIC, 2024). Chega rejects supranationalism in favour of intergovernmental cooperation between sovereign states. Its vision is that of a "Europe of sovereign nations", united by "profound ties of commercial collaboration and political friendship" (Chega, 2025: 119). In an explicit rejection of federalism and supranational institutions, the party's electoral program states that the "only true Europe is that of the people, not that of bureaucracy, the Commission and von der Leyen" (Chega, 2025:121). Such a passage demonstrates the populist opposition between the 'pure people' and the bureaucratic elite.

Regarding specific policies, Chega (2025) advocates a significant reduction of the EU's competences and the devolution of powers to the member states, particularly in external trade. According to the party's vision, the EU should limit its role to the common agricultural policy, the single market, and the customs union (Chega, 2025: 119). It portrays initiatives such as the digital euro and the European Media Freedom Act as authoritarian threats to individual freedoms. It explicitly rejects transnational lists for European Parliament elections and the Common Foreign and Security Policy (Chega, 2025: 119–123).

Despite its critical stance, Chega's Euroscepticism appears tempered by the national context, specifically, a broadly Euroenthusiastic public and Portugal's structural dependence on EU cohesion funds (Costa Lobo, 2023). This context likely contributes to Ventura's strategic ambiguity, allowing the party to adjust its rhetoric in response to public

sentiment, a dynamic aligned with the populist logic of balancing supply and demand (Kende & Krekó, 2020; Rovny, 2013). In this light, the distinction between soft and hard Euroscepticism proves insufficient to capture the nuances of Chega's position. The party more accurately reflects what Vasilopoulou (2018:2001) terms *conditional Euroscepticism*: it does not reject European cooperation per se, but remains sceptical of multilateralism, opposes further integration, and challenges specific EU policies and institutional arrangements. Furthermore, Chega exhibits characteristics of what Kopecký and Mudde (2002: 303) define as *Europragmatism*, as it refrains from articulating a coherent ideological critique of European integration and instead adopts a pragmatic and utilitarian approach to the EU.

Given the relevance of EU issue voting for both populist and mainstream electorates (Costa Lobo, 2023), Chega has thus far avoided politicising European integration explicitly, arguably to avoid alienating voters.

### The Portuguese communist party (PCP)

As previously noted, PCP is classified as a borderline case of populism in this report. Nevertheless, its stance towards the EU reflects a hard Eurosceptic position. The PCP articulates a principled opposition to the EU as currently constituted, rejecting its institutional framework and underlying neoliberal orientation (Szczerbiak & Taggart, 2008). While the party does not explicitly advocate for Portugal's withdrawal from the EU, its 2025 electoral programme firmly condemns the "alienation in favour of the EU of the economic, social and political functions of the state" (PCP, 2025b: 88). Furthermore, the PCP calls for Portugal's exit from the Eurozone, viewing the single currency as incompatible with national sovereignty and social development (PCP, 2025b: 103). This position embodies a form of ideologically grounded hard Euroscepticism.

### The left bloc (LB)

The LB adopts a soft Eurosceptic stance, characterised by acceptance of the EU as a political project and of Portugal's membership, while consistently opposing specific policies, particularly in the fields of economic and environmental governance (Szczerbiak & Taggart, 2008; BE, 2024a). This position aligns with what Mair (2007) conceptualises as 'policy Euroscepticism'. Rooted in a radical left ideological framework, the party's critique centres on opposition to neoliberalism and market dominance within the EU, emphasising social justice and redistribution. The LB envisions Europe as a "place of peace," committed to social and environmental responsibility and capable of addressing the "climate emergency" (BE, 2024a: 2).

Consistent with the political agenda of the European United Left/Nordic Green Left, the party opposes liberal austerity, free trade agreements, particularly with Latin American countries, and what it denounces as the "European liberal hegemony" dismantling the post-war social contract (BE, 2024a: 5). Its discourse frames the economic elite as the "tyranny of the markets" and identifies *the people* with popular sovereignty (BE, 2024a: 14).

The party strongly criticises the EU's failure to advance redistributive economic policies, accusing institutions such as the European Central Bank of privileging transnational corporations over citizens' social and economic rights (BE, 2024a). Since 2023, shifts in the party's National Coordination and the war in Ukraine have reinforced its opposition to what it describes as the EU's militarisation and subordination to NATO and U.S. interests (BE, 2025).

## 4. Responses to euroscepticism and consequences

In Portugal, mainstream parties such as the Socialist Party (PS) and the Social Democratic Party (PSD) have traditionally marginalised the Eurosceptic positions of fringe actors (Meguid, 2005). This strategic neglect, combined with the country's historically strong 'permissive consensus' on EU matters, may have contributed to the decreasing electoral relevance of the radical left. Between 2015 and 2019, the PCP and the LB participated in an informal parliamentary agreement with the pro-European PS, choosing not to politicise EU-related issues during this period (Costa Lobo, 2023).

As previously noted, Chega's rapid electoral growth warrants particular attention. The 2025 legislative elections marked a decisive turning point in the Portuguese party system, triggering a structural reconfiguration of the political landscape. Chega significantly increased its parliamentary representation, becoming the second-largest party and surpassing the historically dominant PS, which lost approximately 400,000 votes. This outcome signalled the collapse of traditional bipartisanship and a dramatic decline of the radical left (Teixeira, 2025; Cancela & Magalhães, 2025).

Despite Chega's electoral rise, the Eurosceptic impact of the 2025 elections appears, for now, relatively contained. The party continues to espouse a conditional and pragmatic form of Euroscepticism (Chega, 2025; Vasilopoulou, 2018; Kopecký & Mudde, 2002), while the sharp decline of the PCP (hard Euroscepticism) and LB (soft Euroscepticism) suggests that Eurosceptic sentiment has not been broadly empowered at the electoral level. Moreover, none of these positions has translated into concrete policy outcomes thus far.

Nevertheless, the historical role of mainstream parties, particularly the PS, in defending European integration raises essential questions about the potential long-term consequences of their electoral weakening, especially considering Chega's ascent. While the radical left's poor electoral performance may lead these parties to moderate or rethink their Eurosceptic stances to avoid further marginalisation, the evolution of Chega's position on the EU and the future trajectory of its Euroscepticism warrants close attention in the coming years.

Recent evidence suggests that higher levels of populist attitudes in Portugal are associated with more negative perceptions of the EU and lower levels of trust in its institutions (FFMS, 2024: 32). On this basis, Chega's Euroscepticism, though not yet central to its political agenda, remains highly responsive to changes in public opinion. As a PRR party responsive to voter sentiment, Chega may opportunistically amplify its Eurosceptic discourse if attitudinal shifts occur in Portugal, echoing the dynamics observed during the 2009–2013 period of declining trust in the EU. Now operating well beyond its former niche status, Chega may begin to assign greater salience to European issues, particularly those related to migration, and, in doing so, compel mainstream parties to adopt either adversarial or accommodative strategies (Meguid, 2005). Such developments could significantly intensify the politicisation of EU affairs in Portugal and ultimately undermine the resilience of the country's long-standing 'permissive consensus' (Meguid, 2005: 350). As of now, it is impossible to pinpoint shifts in the stance of mainstream parties toward the EU that could be directly linked to Chega's ascent in Portuguese politics.

## Conclusion

The landscape of populism and Euroscepticism in Portugal is comparatively restrained but evolving. As this report has shown, while different forms of Euroscepticism are present across the political spectrum, ranging from the hard Euroscepticism of the PCP to the soft Euroscepticism of the LB, and the conditional and pragmatic stance of Chega, none of these positions have yet significantly altered Portugal's broader relationship with the EU. The strong Euro-enthusiastic tradition of mainstream parties and the enduring 'permissive consensus' among the electorate have so far limited the politicisation of EU affairs. However, the 2025 elections marked a shift in the party system, with Chega becoming the second-largest party. Given its populist profile and responsiveness to public opinion, a future hardening of its Eurosceptic discourse, similar to trends observed in other populist radical right parties across Europe, could have important implications for EU politicisation in Portugal.

## Ethics and consent

Ethical approval and consent were not required.

## Data availability statement

The data used in this article consist of the political and electoral manifestos of the parties examined in the study – the Portuguese Communist Party (PCP), Chega, and the Left Bloc (BE) – as well as open-access public opinion survey data from the Eurobarometer and the Francisco Manuel dos Santos Foundation (FFMS). These materials are publicly available online, as indicated in the References section.

Data are available under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International license (CC-BY 4.0).

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