

Article

EU Representations in Portuguese Media and Populism: Embodying Political Antipodes?

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Abstract

Mass media mediate different publics, thus being crucial in constructing political reality. By selecting which topics are covered (agenda), which voices are heard, or how social and political issues/actors/dynamics are represented (priming and framing), mass media impacts how political conversations and processes unfold. Acknowledging the increasing mediatisation of politics, this article zooms into media texts of the Portuguese media during a complex political period that included national elections to explore how populism as a term, label, or topic was used and/or co-opted to create and negotiate political EU representations. Building on a historical perspective and using critical thematic analysis, this article argues that populism was used in the media and by the media as a discursive mechanism of political positionality and/or delegitimisation or criticism of political actors, agendas, or moves, thus making populism and the EU co-constitutively used as embodying political antipodes and making the EU work as a discursive buffer concerning populism in the country.

Keywords

Covid-19; elections; European Union; media; mediatisation; populism; Portugal

Issue

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1. Introduction

The narratives that media select through agenda-setting, framing, and priming become crucial tools in constructing political reality (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007; Wolfsfeld, 2003). By shedding light on specific topics and perspectives, the media (re)produce (a selected) reality, rendering invisible all other realities that are not deemed worthy of sharing, making the selection a representation of the whole. In politics, it is not only the political agenda that matters, but also how it is presented. As such, what media tell about these dynamics and actors, in explicit and implicit terms (through the activation of imaginaries, connotations, and the creation of benchmarks), is critical in constructing how political conversations and, thus, politics unfold (McIlwain, 2007; Xenos & Becker, 2009). Political actors are aware of these dynamics and, thus,

model their narratives towards certain ends, competing for the ability to frame issues and for space in the media (Wolfsfeld, 2003). The EU is an example of how discourse and narratives may construct political reality and where media can perform a critical role (Radut-Gaghi, 2021). Although the EU’s existence is seldom questioned, what it means or embodies is often the subject of wider political discussions (Bulmer & Joseph, 2016; Fabbrini, 2019) focusing on the EU itself or on wider issues, where the meaning of the EU emerges through intertextuality logics or connotations.

This article turns to Portugal and explores how media representations of the EU and populism in a time of crisis worked to reinforce a positive and consensual understanding of the EU in the country. Portugal’s close alignment with the EU distinguishes the country’s political scenario from the polarisation of other European

countries between pro-EU and anti-EU stances, with a more nuanced debate over the advantages and disadvantages of integration. At the same time, populism has been traditionally absent from Portuguese politics until the 2000s (Quintas da Silva, 2018). Recently, however, populism seems to have emerged as a discursive mechanism of political positionality and/or delegitimation or criticism of political actors, agendas, or moves, thus enabling populism and the EU to be used as embodying political antipodes.

By grappling with these dynamics, this article presents an analysis of media texts conveyed by the Portuguese media during a complex political period. It explores how populism as a term, label, or topic was used to create and negotiate political representations of the EU. The analysis is grounded on the media effects tradition, which focuses on how media contribute to moulding audiences' perceptions and attitudes towards the world surrounding them and uses critical thematic analysis (Lawless & Chen, 2019) to articulate predominant frames concerning the EU and populism with wider structures of power and political disputes. Thus, it looks at how meanings are attributed and, above all, how the EU and populism directly or indirectly co-constitute themselves in mediated political debates in Portugal.

Section 2 explores the literature on media and political communication concerning the media's crucial role in interpreting and generating effects on the world. Section 3 covers debates on populism, the phenomenon's development in Portugal and its association with the EU in the context of conversations and policies concerning European integration. Section 4 presents our analysis of the Portuguese media and the discourses found in the juncture between democracy, populism and the EU between September 1, 2021, and January 31, 2022, a period marked by local and national elections and by multiple crises: a peak of the Covid-19 pandemic, a budget crisis leading to the dissolution of the parliament and early elections. This section also characterises the Portuguese media and our corpus of analysis and explains our sampling and coding methods. Next, it discusses the study's results and deploys critical thematic analysis to tackle the main framings and discursive mechanisms used in the media that compound three broad themes associating populism with representations of the EU. Finally, the conclusion reconnects these issues to wider discussions on populism, the Portuguese debate over democracy, and European integration, with a focus on the media's role in these processes.

2. Media as a Pivotal Player in Making Sense of the World

Most of what is known in the world is mediated through communication. Among the different social actors that represent realities, the media are understood as particularly acute in (re)producing and validating specific narratives impacting societies (e.g., Goffman, 1974; McCombs

& Shaw, 1972; Shrum, 2017; Wolfsfeld, 2003). It is important to highlight, however, that this modelling power is not just a single lucky shot in the dark or, as early media effects theory understood, an effect akin to a hypodermic needle (e.g., Lasswell, 1927/1938). In fact, the media effects tradition has explored the different processes through which the media (re)produce reality including "quite diverse notions about the strength of the effects of mass-media use" (Jensen & Rosengren, 1990, p. 209).

In trying to make sense of this tradition in a processual logic, agenda-setting should be considered. When selecting a particular set of events, among an almost infinite plethora of possibilities, the media tell us what event to think about, rendering all others invisible (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). However, since media texts are narratives, the media do not tell us only what to think about, but also how to think. When depicting a given reality, the media choose a particular frame to represent a given topic, actor, or event and exclude other ways of narrating them or reporting information, thus giving audiences one perception of that reality (Goffman, 1974). In the process, certain imaginaries are activated in the audience, as these dynamics are associated with broader contexts, memory, and previous experiences. This is done through *priming*, by establishing priorities and communication shortcuts, as media texts can foster associations between ideas or concepts, thus impacting the audience's perceptions and actions (Dillman Carpentier, 2017). Therefore, in politics, priming, labels, and "standards" are used to "make political evaluations" (Iyengar & Kinder, 1987, p. 63), which influence how conversations unfold, and the political reality is constructed.

The consistency of the media system, its articulation with larger hierarchies in society (e.g., race, class, gender, geography, epistemology), and the "mediatisation of politics" (Hjarvard, 2008) make this construction process to be cumulative, lengthy, and ultimately effective in modelling political debates and, hence, societies. Although the media are the loudspeaker, different actors and practices concur in this process, namely journalism and news stories, opinion editorials, and political actors themselves. Despite being highly questionable, objectivity is an established guideline in modern journalism that "render[s] representations produced through journalistic mediation to be seen by audiences as the closest to reality and, hence, most likely absorbed as such" (Santos et al., 2022, p. 300). In turn, although editorials do not have to comply with specific formal professional rules, conveying narratives that are usually embedded in one's ideological perspectives, they constitute "an institutionalised site (or sites) of citizen discourse" where participants coming "from all levels of the social hierarchy" debate (Nikolaev & Porpora, 2007, p. 8).

As awareness of political actors concerning the power of the media increases, so does the mediatisation of politics, i.e., the process through which politics assumes a media form (Hjarvard, 2008). This means that political actors will strategically use rhetoric that

activates imaginaries, denotation and connotation mechanisms (McIlwain, 2007), and intertextuality (Kristeva, 1980), to present and mobilise for their agenda and/or elections. Grasping the processes of mediatisation in all its ramifications is, therefore, of utmost relevance in attempts to understand which narratives and arguments have been most disseminated, by whom, and with which effects over political processes (Strömbäck & Esser, 2014).

3. Populism, EU Representations, and Portugal

Media representations of the EU reflect this actor as the result of political understandings, and of disputes and their mediation. This informs European integration as an ongoing process reflected in institutional procedures, policies, and narratives. Therefore, different understandings about what the EU is and what it means are built through distinct political agendas, activating varied imaginaries. The EU is usually represented positively in Portuguese media, especially in news stories, with a main focus on economic issues. This is clear in debates in the Portuguese parliament, which have “mainly focus[ed] on the discussion of whether the country should want ‘more Europe,’ ‘a better Europe’ or ‘another way for Europe’” (Cunha, 2016, p. 1). Amidst the public, and despite fluctuations, in 2020, 90% of the Portuguese shared the opinion that the country has benefitted from being in the EU (European Parliament, 2020). This overall positive perception reflects on EU representations and has been built over memories incarnating “good” developments (e.g., the democratic Carnation Revolution), “bad” experiences (e.g., the 2011–2014 austerity period), and prospects ahead (prosperity, democracy). The bottom line is that the EU is good for Portugal, and having it, even if imperfect, is better than having no EU. This means the EU is deemed a natural place for Portugal given the matching between the country’s and the institution’s political and axiological options and identity.

Our research on Portuguese representations of the EU finds that if Portugal’s integration into the EU is seldom questioned, what the EU means and the political horizons it fosters and embodies have been subject to ample political debates, with criticism that sometimes breaches the “consensus,” as it is portrayed in the media. No markedly “anti-EU” narrative is present in media representations of the EU, although there are critical propositions about the EU’s need to change in some key conjunctural and structural respects, such as regarding the adoption of coherent and coordinated policies in certain areas. Moreover, as mainly argued by leftist parties and actors in Portugal, the EU needs to strengthen its social role by promoting inclusive development, avoiding securitising migration flows, curtailing the impacts of neoliberalisation, or ending the repetition of austerity programmes. The main proposition associated with these criticisms, also seen as “soft-Euroscepticism” (Taggart & Szczerbiak, 2002), is not that Portugal should

leave, but instead that the country should contribute to EU transformation.

Yet, in Portugal, despite the linkages to issues such as immigration or economic inequality, the populist narrative has not gained wide public space, facing resistance in the mediatised and political contexts. When the pandemic hit Portugal, the country was just recovering from the financial crisis that had extended since 2010 and was met by a bailout programme by the International Monetary Fund (2011–2014). Thus, successive social and economic crises have pressured the political elite. Considering existing trends across Europe and literature on the topic, it would have been expected that Portugal would follow the populist trend. The political environment and its mediatised version did not leave much room for populist rhetoric, but the political debate is somewhat crisscrossed at times for what Bobba and Seddone (2019, p. 2) characterise as “soft populism” on the part of actors who “occasionally resort to some elements of populism”—in Portugal’s case, particularly in communicative aspects and not so much in ideological assertions, as explained ahead.

3.1. Portugal: A Populist Exception?

Portugal has long been perceived as immune to populism. Different authors identify three main reasons. On the demand side, though it has not been thoroughly studied (Santana-Pereira & Cancela, 2021, p. 210), there is a recent memory of the lengthy dictatorship under Estado Novo (1933–1974) causing a diffuse, enduring rejection of extreme right-wing ideas, parties and movements. Moreover, left-wing parties such as the Left Bloc (BE) and the Portuguese Communist Party (PCP) are key aggregators of social mobilisation, absorbing discontent and anti-austerity or anti-establishment social movements—which in other South European countries led to the emergence of new populist parties—without having become empty ideological shells or populist parties themselves (Salgado, 2019, p. 53). Although Portugal has historically had far-right parties, Santana-Pereira and Cancela (2021) argue that reasons on the supply side include the lack of strategy and charismatic leadership among extreme-right parties and populist actors.

In the 2019 national elections, Chega, an extreme-right party just established under the leadership of André Ventura, won 1.3% of the vote and secured one member in parliament (Taggart & Pirro, 2021, p. 301). In the January 2022 national elections, Chega got 12 seats in parliament, a considerable increase in its formal representation. Nevertheless, the party’s campaign did not manage to bring in the anti-EU populist narrative we see across Europe, following this “soft-Eurosceptic” approach instead (Lisi & Borghetto, 2018). Chega is ideologically “radical right” with an anti-bureaucracy and anti-tax agenda combined with nationalism and populism. Its leader, Ventura, gave an interview to *PÚBLICO* in 2019 where he claimed the party is “essentially a right-wing

[party] in the Portuguese style, very democratic and liberal in the economy” (Botelho, 2019). In its electoral programme, it pledged to defend traditional values, in line with those of the dictatorship period, highlighting the “family as a primary institution, the defence of the homeland from historical racial humiliation and stopping the danger of demographic substitution of the Portuguese” (As minhas eleições, 2021). On the EU, it remains selectively critical. In the 2019 interview with *PÚBLICO* mentioned above, Ventura said:

We are completely against leaving the EU, what we say is that we do not want federalism, which would mean, in practice, the countries’ annulment. We do not want to be a mere region. We have 800 years of history. We want a Europe of Nations, with strong diplomacy, even a strong military force, but which respects the national sovereignty of each state. Brexit, the Italian League, Poland, Vox, Chega, are people’s reactions to an idea never voted for. (Botelho, 2019)

This shows an attitude of caution on the party’s stance not to repeal support with extremist rhetoric while showcasing political ideas in line with the far-right.

Interestingly, in this context, there have been voices appealing for contention of criticism among the ruling elite regarding “winds of populism,” as this might constitute “a risk” of extremism or polarisation. On October 5, 2021, the day the Portuguese Republic is celebrated, the former mayor of Lisbon referred to the Chega party underlining “the need to oppose everything that might put the Republic at risk, in other words, populism” (Borges, 2021). A Portuguese humourist published an opinion piece comparing the rise of the extreme right with Covid-19: “The major challenges were dealing with the rise of an extreme right-wing party and the emergence of a virus on a global scale, i.e., with an opportunistic worm that spread and infected thousands of Portuguese and with SARS-CoV-2” (Domingues, 2022).

There is an identification of Chega with a populist narrative, but this is not recognised as sufficiently coherent in its message, falling short at the supply level.

4. Populist Discourses in Portugal: An Analysis of Media

Media may successfully emphasise selected conceptions of events like elections or trends like the rise of populism. Not surprisingly, being aware of this media power and the increasing mediatisation of politics, political actors tend to model their political narratives accordingly, as analysed next.

4.1. Methodology, Corpus of Analysis, and Coding

Considering the particularities of the Portuguese mediascape, the criteria used for selecting the six outlets we analysed—three newspapers and three TV evening news programmes—were popularity/audiences and circulation/frequencies, as shown in Table 1. All of them are privately owned by media groups, except for one public service TV channel, as in Portugal there is no publicly owned print press. The most-read daily newspapers are *Correio da Manhã*, *Jornal de Notícias*, and *PÚBLICO*. According to data from the Portuguese Association for the Monitoring of Printing and Circulation, in 2021, *Correio da Manhã* sold 204,116 copies; *Jornal de Notícias*, 95,697; and *PÚBLICO*, 47,375 copies (APCT, 2021). Notwithstanding, the latter’s digital version has the most subscribers among the dailies, with 45,648 paying readers in early 2022, compared to *Correio da Manhã*’s 2,834 and *Jornal de Notícias*’ 4,190 (Muscketat, 2022). Among these, *Jornal de Notícias* was the most trusted news brand for 78.8% of the readers, followed by *PÚBLICO* for 75.9%, whereas *Correio da Manhã* (51.5%) is the least trusted among 13 brands (Cardoso et al., 2021, p. 48).

Of the TV channels, in 2022, SIC had the highest audience ranking, with a share of 17.5%, followed by TVI in second (16.3%), and RTP1 in third (11.8%; Ferreira, 2023).

Table 1. Media ownership, frequency, format and rankings.

Outlets	Ownership	Frequency and format	Audiences
Newspaper			Paid circulation
<i>Correio da Manhã</i>	Private company, Cofina	Daily, tabloid	204,116 copies
<i>Jornal de Notícias</i>	Private group, Global Media Group	Daily, tabloid and broadsheet	95,697 copies
<i>PÚBLICO</i>	Private sub-holding, Sonaecom (Grupo Sonae)	Daily, broadsheet	47,375 copies
TV channel/show			Audience shares
SIC/ <i>Jornal da Noite</i>	Private, owned by the media group Impresa	Daily, evening news	19.9%
TVI/ <i>Jornal das 8</i>	Private, owned by the media conglomerate Media Capital	Daily, evening news	18.9%
RTP1/ <i>Telejornal</i>	Public service, Rádio e Televisão de Portugal (RTP)	Daily, evening news	11.8%

Sources: APCT (2021); Ferreira (2023); Grupo Marktest (2022).

In January 2022, RTP aired the most news reports, 2,529 in morning, afternoon, and evening shows, totalling over 87 hours; TVI aired 2,387, with over 76 hours; and SIC, with 1,784 and over 77 hours (Grupo Marktest, 2022). As for evening news programmes, in 2022, between 8 p.m. and midnight SIC's *Jornal da Noite* reached 19.9%, TVI's *Jornal das 8*, 18.9%; and RTP1's *Telejornal*, 11.8% (Ferreira, 2023). These news programmes last from 60 to 90 minutes, from 8 p.m. onwards.

The corpus of analysis was compounded with the help of two professional consultants, CISION and Marktest, based on desk research and selected keywords for the MEDIATIZED EU research project. The topics covered included the economy (including the common currency), regional and international partnerships, visa regime, fiscal policies, enlargement, human rights, democracy, immigration and asylum, national and European identity, disinformation, populism, the Covid-19 pandemic, and vaccination programmes. For this article, all items addressing these subjects published or aired from September 1, 2021, to January 31, 2022, were analysed. In total, the clipping resulted in a pool of 14,175 items made of 10,823 print news stories, editorials, interviews, readers' letters, and feature and opinion articles of the three selected newspapers and 3,352 news, reportages, interviews, political debates, comments, and analysis of the evening news of the three TV channels selected. Further sampling exercises narrowed the pool. This selection was made manually, with researchers reading or watching every item and then identifying what pieces were related to the research topics and keywords. The final corpus comprised 1,536 items—987 from print newspapers and 549 from TV.

In the open coding phase, by reading and watching each unit in the corpus, we identified certain issues and trends that were grouped under different categories and, within them, different codes. We have used the code "democracy," under the category "subject," to identify, among others, the issue of populism. This coding decision was made based on the literature review, which shows concerns for the direct link between the quality of liberal democratic regimes in the face of rising populism, in whatever conception of the term. It was also confirmed in the open coding phase, when the entire corpus was examined, to then refine the codebook and establish the interpretation parameters for each category through axial coding (see, e.g., Corbin & Strauss, 2014). This section shows the results for items coded with a combination of "democracy" as a subject and the EU or its leaders (e.g., European Commission's President von der Leyen) as an agent in the issues being covered/discussed.

On print press, out of the 987 items coded, *PÚBLICO* represented the biggest share (456 items), followed by *Jornal de Notícias* (315) and *Correio da Manhã* (217). These items' genres are mostly news reports (622) and opinion/feature articles (240), followed by editorials (47), guest contributions and readers' letters (33), interviews (30), reportages (23), and items akin to electoral

debates (10), in which candidates in the January elections answered questions on specific issues. Moreover, 10 items are special reports of series covering EU issues, appearing in *PÚBLICO*'s "State of the Union," supported by the European Parliament (6); "The Europe We Want," co-funded by the EU (3); and "Investigate Europe," produced by a multinational group of journalists (1). The EU is an agent in 638 items. Of those, 136 are coded for "democracy."

While the main narrative found in the whole corpus of the three newspapers was "Portugal must adapt to EU and world dynamics," in 120 items, when filtered for the code "democracy," the same narrative appears in 54 out of the 136 items. Two other key narratives emerging from that selection were "Portugal is peripheralised in the EU," appearing in 42 items, and "the EU is democratic and promotes democracy," in 36, which reflects our overall conclusion about the prominence of concerns over Portugal's rightful place in the EU and its need to adapt to move to "the centre," as well as the idea that the EU represents democracy.

On TV, the numbers were more balanced between the three analysed channels. Of the total of 549 coded items, 212 were broadcasted by SIC, 173 by RTP1, and 164 by TVI. Of these, 447 are news/reportages and 60 are commentaries/opinions. If we filter by EU as an actor we have 255 items. When we combine the pieces coded for the EU as an actor and democracy, there are 34 pieces, of which 32 are news reports and two are commentaries.

In the pieces focusing on the EU as an actor, the main narratives on TV were "Portugal is at the centre of the EU" (30), where the role that Portugal plays is seen as positive and active, and the "EU imposes norms and policies" (29), related to debates on the national budget, the Recovery and Resilience Plan (RRP), and the restructuring of the Portuguese national airline company. This EU "imposition" was not always portrayed as something negative, but often as necessary to overcome the economic crisis. Another narrative was that "the EU contributes to security and peace" (24), mostly in the context of conflict with Belarus due to the growing flow of migrants through its border and the escalation of the conflict between Russia and Ukraine. Finally, the fourth most present narrative on TV was the "EU is democratic and promotes democracy" (23), showing how this co-constitutive nature of the EU and democracy are represented in Portuguese media. On TV, among the 34 pieces that combined the codes EU as an actor and democracy, only one special reportage on TVI called *Destination: Europe* used the word populism/populist. This could indicate that TV is less available to label issues, parties, and attitudes as populist.

We then conducted a critical thematic analysis to explore what populism means in the Portuguese media and the concept's relation to the EU in this context, through unearthing the framing and priming processes created through or embodied in the analysed media texts. Following Lawless and Chen (2019, p. 7), in the open

coding phase, “guided by repetition, recurrence, and/or forcefulness,” we identified “discursive patterns” and, afterwards, we moved to closed coding where we articulated “discourses with larger societal ideologies” and political positions, identifying, thus, key themes revolving and, hence, building discourses on EU and populism.

4.2. Results and Discussion

By analysing selected media texts conveyed by the Portuguese media during the identified period, we defined three broad themes through which populism as a term, label, or topic was used to create and negotiate political representations of the EU: EU and populism as antipodes; between political communication and “soft” populism; and declarations and perceptions of risks to democracy.

4.2.1. EU and Populism as Antipodes

Our study identified an underlying discourse, crosscutting most analysed narratives, that frames the construction of the EU and populism in a particular way so that they result to the audience as antipodes. Most of these discursive constructions occur by interlinking meanings with previous (and still pervasive) texts and activating specific ingrained imaginaries with clear political connotations to good/bad, regressive/modern, forward/backwards. The representation of the EU—in both news pieces and opinion articles—is usually constructed as embodying democracy and democratic values (to which “we” adhere or must comply), a fundamental good regime that fosters progress and embodies modernity. In turn, populism and the populists are commonly depicted (and commonly cornered) as the “others” (anti-democratic/nationalist/illiberal/authoritarian actors/means/goals) that hold an agenda contrary to European values, therefore, challenging the EU normative framework, or imperilling the inherently democratic European project. These representations appear both in isolation, leaving the articulation between their meanings to the audience, or articulated, co-constituting themselves in the text of the news or opinion articles. These discourses crosscut media texts (news and opinion) across disparate issues such as what can be perceived as more obvious topics like the overall quality of democratic regimes within the EU, and topics not so intuitively related like the health measures adopted during the Covid-19 pandemic. Concerning the different newspapers, discourses on the EU as fundamentally democratic appear especially in *Correio da Manhã*, whereas *PÚBLICO*, for instance, focuses more on the populism/democracy frame.

In a news in-depth story on “The Europe We Want” (*PÚBLICO*), different voices are given the floor sharing what they think about the EU, most times arguing with the imaginaries the EU activates on their political beliefs. One of the topics covered is a survey of the EU citizens’

views on democracy showing that values like gender equality and racial non-discrimination are perceived as the most important to preserve against “populist threats” (Paiva, 2022). Stating that the European project structuring the EU was formed with the values of democracy, the report quotes the Portuguese MEP of the centre-right PSD Lídia Pereira saying that “‘freedom,’ ‘the rule of law,’ and ‘humanism’ must be ‘common’ to all member-states” (Paiva, 2022) activating the humanist imaginary that the EU represents in its founding rhetoric and pointing to boundary lines concerning what defines the EU. It then asks whether they are indeed “common to all,” to then quote Pereira charging: “There are national governments of member-states that are jeopardising the democratic governments of the EU,” the “most serious cases” being Hungary, Poland, and Slovenia. She argues the global trend of “regression of democracies” rests on populist movements, whereas “the EU still is the bloc that most preserves these democratic values,” pointing to a red flag when facing populism within the EU.

Still in *PÚBLICO*, one prolific columnist on EU and domestic political affairs has several pieces from which examples of the opposing contrast between populism and democracy are drawn, especially with an argument for moderation and a cherishing centrist political environment. She ponders the quality of electoral debates and the parties’ performance, which she contends were overrun by their leaders’ personal representations, and criticises the lack of attention to topics like “peace in Europe” (de Sousa, 2022), indicating as a subtext that greater political projects and identity risk being dismissed when facing current politics where short-term political gains tend to be privileged. In this light, she writes:

This campaign, more than any other, almost liquidated the parties’ role as institutions, as absolute primacy was given to the bosses and their personal organisation....The parties’ arguments were often derisory. Key issues were left out, such as justice, defence, and investments. Peace in Europe was ignored. Notwithstanding, abstention decreased, which illustrates the interest raised. What was at stake was too serious....There are no excuses for the loss of moderate traditional parties to the left and right, the growing fragmentation of the party landscape, and the entrance of populist and extreme-right parties with the capacity to influence political debate. (de Sousa, 2022)

In other pieces, the same prominent columnist clearly frames the EU as democratic while making a clear connection between democracy and the EU:

To hear Michel Barnier defend this thesis [on national sovereignty taking precedence over European law] after having led the “Brexit” negotiations by denouncing the British, in every step, for wanting to “revert” control over its sovereignty to Westminster is not

only pathetic, it is another proof that the European centre-right is barely resisting the “siren songs” of the populist and nationalist right, allowing itself to be dragged by some of its identitarian and anti-European banners, instead of fighting them. (de Sousa, 2021)

In *Correio da Manhã*, a university professor links populism with authoritarianism by claiming that Portugal is moving closer to “authoritarian populism” with the government’s decision to impose and repeatedly extend confinement during the Covid-19 pandemic, thus intensifying a “pandemic panic,” which translates into unpredictability, generalised fear, and a propensity towards extremism (Amaral, 2022). The author relates that to an imminent increase in Chega’s representation in the parliament, and argues these trends are a “threat” to liberal democracy like that seen in other European countries and the US.

In *Jornal de Notícias*, a report consults several specialists to analyse how “populism has reached more supporters” and affected the voters’ polarisation in Europe (Moura, 2022). The report focuses on political contests in France, which held the EU presidency. Whereas right-wing contenders lashed out at President Emmanuel Macron’s government for hanging an EU flag over the Arc de Triomphe in Paris, causing him to backtrack from the symbolic move, Macron and France would benefit from holding the EU presidency, using the opportunity to regain the country’s centrality in the Union. By activating ideas and texts of France’s leading place in modern Europe aligned with Enlightenment (European) values, Macron’s government is associated with the EU, though still preserving French identity, and on the opposite side, populism is associated with polarisation and right-wing nationalism (Moura, 2022).

On TV, the word “populism” appeared in a 25-minute reportage linking it to disinformation, fake news, denialist movements, and as an antipode of democracy:

Fake news and disinformation that have been trained in public discourse are today a political tool that feeds populism and threatens the stability of some of the most advanced democracies. With the rise of denialist movements, they are just confirmation of how reality has surpassed fiction. (Andrade, 2021a)

However, political meanings and agendas do not always occur in explicit terms, but rather through subtexts, connotations, and articulations. Indirect references to populism on TV were mostly related to fundamental values, such as respect for democracy, the rule of law, and freedom of expression. The mention of countries such as Poland was made along the lines that the Polish government “questioned one of the fundamental principles of European integration and decided not to recognise the primacy of European laws” (Costa, 2021b). Also, the same idea is put forth by stating that “the recent decision

of the Polish Constitutional Court...calls into question the principles of the European project” (Costa, 2021a). Similarly, the evening news by RTP used judicial stability and EU values to approach the subject: “Poland challenges the European legal order and the values of the Union, but the Polish prime minister came to Strasbourg to reaffirm that Poland will not leave the European Union” (Teixeira, 2021). The last part indicates the fear of a new Brexit, which could weaken the Union, also present in other news pieces. A commentator with TVI, Paulo Portas, stated:

It is not possible to have the best of both worlds: Either you want to be in Europe or you don’t want to be in Europe. And if they want to be in Europe, they have to accept what the other 26 accept, otherwise, this would break any possibility of the system working well. (Andrade, 2021b)

These examples further illustrate populist narratives in countries such as Poland, that affect the EU at the core of its fundamental principles, overruling democratic practices in favour of a particular populist political agenda.

4.2.2. Ranging Between Political Communication and “Soft” Populism as Political and Rhetoric Options

Another discursive trend revolving around the EU and populism points to the usage of both terms as pieces of political and rhetoric options to be more persuasive concerning political audiences. Also, some of the discourses on the EU can be understood as “soft populism,” as they grasp the “we the people vs. them” rationale in populist references or style of communication. The debates and media coverage of the RRP were illustrative of this trend. Negotiations for the state budget between the PS government, other political parties, trade unions, and employers’ associations prompted statements, opinion articles, or commentaries featuring concerns with the implementation of the RRP endorsed by the European Commission in June 2021, and with the political and economic implications on a systemic level, such as socioeconomic instability and political polarisation.

In this context, there was an emphasis on the need to seize the opportunity of the “abundant” European funds available through the RRP to make the Portuguese economy more efficient and competitive, stressing Portugal’s relative disadvantage or even “backwardness” (articulated with underdevelopment texts) in some sectors and thus the need to catch up, in the European context, especially considering that the pandemic could widen regional disparities. With the rejection of the state budget, part of these voices criticised the leftist parties for being “spenders” or for their position on the social issues mentioned, deeming them intransigent and accountable for the “political crisis” added to the health and looming economic crisis, and for the risks of casting doubts over the country’s commitments associated with the RRP.

Moreover, some call the plan, in caricature or not, “the European bazooka,” or “the bazooka,” often charging the prime minister and his party with instrumentalising it for self-promotion. This becomes clear in comments like “there is a country that might be suspended by a prime minister that looks at power as a time-circumstance and not as service duty,” and that using the RRP is part of unethical campaigning practices (Guedes, 2021, p. 2). This way, charges of instrumentalisation of public resources—or, for some, EU resources—for achieving electoral goals link to charges of populism, often replacing the notion of demagoguery and other misconducts, seen ahead.

4.2.3. Mixed-Up Declarations and Perceptions of Risks to Democracy

Prevailing narratives that use populism and the EU tend to show a general confusion or a conceptual conflation of “populism,” “electoralism,” demagoguery, and “strategic political communication” in parties’ declarations, the government’s statements, media reports, and political opinion pieces. Accusations about the instrumentalisation of the RRP funds for electoral purposes came out quickly and vocally, especially related to the campaign promises made by both the government and the main opposition party, PSD, for the use of European funds to catalyse economic recovery and improve the Portuguese people’s socioeconomic situation out of the pandemic. They included comments on the expectations of the prime minister that voters would be impressed, though people understood that the money does not belong to the prime minister or his party, in *Jornal de Notícias* (Guedes, 2021, p. 2); reports on the prime minister’s contender Rui Rio (PSD) charging Costa with weaponising the RRP as if he was “shooting with a machine gun,” and sometimes missing the target, in *Correio da Manhã* (Pereira, 2021, p. 24); or that the “RRP will be used as other financial support packages in the past to avoid structural homework to overcome Portuguese peripheralisation in important sectors,” in a *PÚBLICO* editorial (Carvalho, 2021, p. 4). Costa himself is cited in *Jornal de Notícias* on the need to “heal the wound of lack of social and territorial cohesion for a positive, effective and structural fight against the virus of populism” (Soares, 2021, p. 17), linking populist discourse to economic performance.

In this contested context, the role of the media in ensuring democratic and rigorous coverage was emphasised. For instance, during the electoral campaign, amid heated debate, the president of the republic, Rebelo de Sousa, underlined the need for independent journalism, quoted as saying that “a weak media weakens democracies and that this risk is enhanced at this time of radicalisms” (Lusa, 2021), thus considering journalism as a weapon to fight populism. Opinion-wise, one analyst argued that, in the face of political change in governments’ colours in EU countries:

If things go well, a space for an alternative at the centre might open up—between the centre-right and centre-left—keeping in common the democratic and liberal values that are the mainstay of democracies. Maybe this is the best recipe to fight the extremes. (Carvalho da Silva, 2021, p. 32)

The perceived risk to democracy is also evident, for example, when one columnist and former MP of PSD writing for *PÚBLICO* charged both PS and PSD for prompting the “destruction of the centre and the crisis of democracy” that translates into “populism” considering “the degeneration of the democratic parties has a lot to do with this situation” (Pacheco Pereira, 2021). A journalist writes that candidates in the local elections from both the governing and opposition parties had crossed the threshold of democratic and legitimate speeches involving the RRP by “abusing the use of national issues to achieve private and electoral goals,” making promises to their constituencies for particular benefits (Almeida, 2021, p. 12).

Therefore, the imaginaries revolving around the EU’s fundamental values feed the concept of populism as opposed to what the EU is and should stand for. In this sense, the term “populism” is used for criticising opponents. Moreover, while evoking the “degeneration of democratic parties,” the selected discourse sticks to the phenomenon and the concept(s) of populism as an antipode of Europe.

5. Conclusion

This study analysed Portuguese media texts circulating during a complex political period to explore how populism was used and/or co-opted to create and negotiate political EU representations. The study points to two main conclusions. Firstly, the normalisation of the EU discourse in Portuguese media, with factors such as European values, democracy, and human rights being completely absorbed by the narrative supporting the EU, and an emphasis on economic elements. Given that issues such as the economy are generally more visible than those concerning identity in media representations of the EU, the apparent consensus over the benefits of integration is the main idea standing out in this context, with critical views pushed to the back.

Secondly, the media depicts the EU and populism as co-constitutively embodying political antipodes, making the EU function as a discursive buffer limiting populism in the country. This is constructed through explicit text and comparison, but also by activating specific imaginaries, subtexts, and connotations that point to this contrast and opposition between the EU and populism, with the latter posing an existential threat to the former as if the EU vanishes or risks vanishing once populism enters the political debate. Indeed, although the term and label “populism” in the analysed discourse on the EU is largely limited, it is projected frequently to represent the antipodes of what the EU’s fundamental values

mean, hence being implicitly used in the construction of EU imaginaries—what it means, implies, and provides. Within this framework, this article also pointed to the fact that populism was used in the media and by the media as a discursive mechanism of political positionality and/or delegitimation or criticism of political actors, agendas, or moves.

As these factors are associated with the EU and democratic values, populism has found little space in practice, being in several instances conceptually conflated with the rhetoric of the opposition, demagoguery, or electoralist discourse. Possibly, the perception of Portugal being in a semi-peripheral position within the EU, but looking towards the centre, has contributed to preventing the populist logic from taking hold of the political debate among the political elite and in the media, and the EU is thus deemed an aggregating element barring polarization.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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