



Something new on the Western front: the European meaning of political change in Portugal

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I will admit this: it is not easy writing about the new political situation in Portugal when it is your country and you're very much involved with what is at stake. As an example, I could start by telling you how the question of a left-wing supported government has been a deeply felt one, even at the personal and family level: if you're around forty-years old, as I am, it's quite probable that the rift between Portuguese communists and socialists was one of the main conversation topics at the dinner table when you were a child. This is no exaggeration: in the seventies, in Portugal, everybody spoke about politics all the time. Since then, the possibility of an agreement between left-wing parties (or 'convergence of the Left', as we call it) has been anxiously awaited by progressives and dismissed by conservatives of all generations. It had never happened at the national level, until now.

Secondly, I have to disclose that I was a participant in the last election, a top candidate even at one of the competing lists. LIVRE, the progressive-green-libertarian party to which I belong, joined forces with other organisations and people from the independent Left to form a 'citizen's candidacy' called LIVRE/Tempo de Avançar (literal translation would be FREE/Time to Move Forward). Short in time and money and with no access to the main TV debates, we had 0,72% of the vote and did not get anyone elected. Still, our main point, which was precisely the need for an agreement between anti-austerity forces, ended up being debated and partially appropriated by the bigger parties. All this shows you that I am not a neutral observer of politics in my country, so be aware.

Last but not least, it is not easy writing about what happened in Portugal because it took so long — and was so needlessly complicated — for the new government to be formed. Foreign readers may have seen a news article here and there about how the President of the Republic was opposed to the left-wing agreement and was even inclined to leave a caretaker government in power for how long it would take for a new election to be held (about nine months, per constitutional requirement). Or you may have caught a glimpse of the interim right-wing government that we had for eleven days, which was as long as it took before it was rejected by the majority of the Parliament. I could go on.

What's new for Europe?

Now we have that out of the way, let's try to explain how the new Portuguese government matters in European terms.

Technically, what we have in Portugal is a minority socialist government, led by Prime-minister Antonio Costa and supported in Parliament by his Socialist Party (PES – Party of European Socialists) and also by the Left Bloc (PEL – Party of the European Left), the Portuguese Communist Party (with no European party affiliation but whose MEPs sit on the GUE/NGL bench) and the PEV ecological party “Os Verdes” (which runs in elections allied to the Communist Party but is affiliated to the EGP, European Green Party). People will discuss if it is a run-of-the-mill centre-left government or an anti-austerity Syriza-like government. I will argue that it is neither, and that is part of what makes it interesting.

The current Portuguese government is not the kind of minority government that we are used to, both in Portugal and in Europe. It won't get its parliamentary approval on a case-by-case basis, but is instead supported by (and bound to) a set of agreements signed by the socialists with each of the other left-wing parties in government. These agreements cover many particular compromises on anti-austerity measures, such as the reversal of cuts in salaries and pensions, freezing or reversing privatisation of public transport companies, phasing-out extra ‘austerity taxes’, and so on. There is a shared agreement between these parties as to the priority of public investment in science, education and renewable energy. And the new progressive majority in the Assembleia da República has already voted in favour of some key legislative initiatives on equality and civil rights (for instance, giving equal adoption rights to same-sex couples, who can legally marry in Portugal).

On the other hand, not only will this government be supported by the left half of the Parliament; it will also emphatically not count on the support from right-wing parties. As a result of the frustration and the fractiousness of the post-electoral debate and the fall of the right-wing government, the pro-austerity electoral coalition PAF (Portugal à Frente, or Portugal Ahead), which is composed of two parties (PSD and CDS, both EPP – European Popular Party), got the point of announcing that their MPs will vote against any proposal made by the new government. The point is to show that the current governmental (and parliamentary) arrangement cannot last and ensure that it fails the first time a key but contentious vote lands in parliament. The right-wing parties have backtracked a little on those intentions, but it could lead to the absurdity of the right-wing voting, for instance, against NATO proposals that they support just to see the government fail to collect the necessary votes among the leftist and communist MPs who are in longstanding opposition to NATO.

The divorce between centre right and centre-left

So, the fact that this is a government that hails from the centre-left — different from, say, the radical-left (and nationalist right) coalition in Greece — does not properly account for the novelty that the Portuguese government represents in Europe. For the first time in decades, this is a government where the centre-left socialists have detached themselves from their usual coalition with the centre-right EPP and instead opted for a left-left coalition.

In my view, this is more than just a Portuguese phenomenon. The centre-right has moved so much to the right in Europe that, in fact, the alliance between social democrats and Christian democrats that is at the core of the European project is now suffering as a result of the political role that austerity has played in the last years. Portugal may be just the beginning.

The consequences of such a split between moderate progressives and moderate conservatives in Europe (to the extent that moderate conservatives still exist) are far-reaching. I'll try to summarise some of them.

First of all there is the emergence of a regular progressive-vs-conservative divide in European politics. It will become easier to form anti-austerity coalitions between moderate and radical progressives.

Secondly, this will weaken the grip of the EPP on core European institutions. Already with the change of government in Portugal, the EPP has ceased to be the most numerous group in the European Council, although it still is the most numerous group in the Eurogroup.

Yet even in the Eurogroup, things do not look so good for the main right-wing pan-European party. The EPP has eight finance ministers; the socialists now have five, already counting in the Portuguese government (plus one independent, appointed by the progressive Italian government). But there is also a seventh minister, Euclid Tsakalotos from Greece, who hails from the anti-austerity Syriza and the Party of European Left. If the Spanish election on 20 December, produces an anti-austerity government, the EPP will lose its majority also in the Eurogroup.

Reasons to be hopeful

the next point concerns precisely Spain. The result of the election in Portugal and the belated formation of a left-wing supported government may have an important influence on the neighbouring country. Not only in the sense that the Spanish vote may tilt more to the left, but mainly because reaching agreements between progressive forces (in this case, the socialist PSOE, the communist-led Izquierda Unida running under the Popular Unity moniker, and the anti-austerity Podemos) may also become easier in Spain, now that the taboo has been broken in Portugal.

And, last but not least, with the addition of Portugal, the list of countries now favouring more flexibility — including a more malleable treatment of Greece — now covers almost all the southern band of the Eurozone, from Cyprus to Italy, France and Portugal. Again, pending electoral change in Spain, all the southern Eurozone countries — with the possible exception of Malta — may cease to be hard-core supporters of Wolfgang Schäuble's policies (as was the case with Portugal just a few months ago).

In conclusion: as complicated, unnoticed and long-awaited as the changes in Portugal were, they are more consequential than most people think. As a Portuguese and a European, I have good reasons to be hopeful.