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The Renewable Energy Transition and "the People" – Exploring the Intersections of Right-wing Populism and the Renewable Energy Transition in Portuguese Media Discourses

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ABSTRACT

Local contestation to the deployment of large-scale renewable energy infrastructures has been increasing. Right-wing populism has also been on the rise across the world. This article aims to explore the potential relations between these two socio-political issues, by analyzing Portuguese media discourses on the renewable energy transition and if and how those expose associations with right-wing populist rhetoric. 465 articles published by Portuguese newspapers were analyzed through Thematic Analysis, which revealed three main themes: Portugal at the forefront of the green transition; the dark side of the transition; and, less pervasively, energy justice as crucial for a green transition. These themes and how they are discursively organized resonate with far-right wing populist rhetoric, such as nationalist, anti-elitist and anti-establishment views. This might find echo in rural communities affected by the green energy transition feelings of marginalization.

Key policy highlights

- Portuguese media communication on the green transition and its injustices, uses similar devices and tropes to right-wing populist rhetoric, which might incentivize support to right-wing populist parties;
- The media have a key role in communicating about the green energy transition and related justice issues in a politicized and multivocal way;
- Policy-makers need to promote a more just transition and contest the commodification of renewable energy and the discourse of renewable energy infrastructures as inherently sustainable.

1. Introduction

One of the major issues faced by contemporary climate-changed and globalized societies is increasing land use pressure, with overpopulation and the ever-expanding production of everything that sustains current imperial modes of living (Brand & Wissen, 2021), as key contributors. These also increasingly include large-scale renewable energy infrastructures (RET) which, despite their deployment under the banner of the green energy transition to tackle climate change, have been facing

more and more local contestation. This is attested by the growing body of social sciences' research that has been trying to understand why people contest RET, mostly to overcome that opposition, within a "renewable energy is inherently good" ethos (Aitken, 2010; Batel, 2020a). However, recent critical approaches (Batel, 2020a) – or critical renewabilities (Silva & Sareen, 2021) – have begun to highlight that, on the one hand, increased local resistance to RET might be due to state-led renewable energy transitions and its territorial and infrastructural materialization entailing as many social and environmental justice issues as the non-renewable status quo. The renewable energy transition as we know it, based on the deployment of large-scale infrastructures – wind farms, solar plants, high voltage power lines – mostly in a top-down, centralized, and colonial-extractivist way, continue with the business-as-usual of the fossil economy (Batel, 2021; Dunlap, 2021; Siamanta, 2021). This type of transition does not recognize that it is not the change of energy sources *per se* that makes it renewable and sustainable, but also the questioning of the economic growth principles that go with it and the social inequalities that ensue (Daggett, 2018; Franquesa, 2018; Labussière & Nadaï, 2018). On the other hand, other lines of research within the social studies of energy and the environment, have also been demonstrating that support to RET and to other climate change related policies is not independent of socio-political contexts and communication. Right-wing parties and rhetoric often support the maintaining of the status quo associated with the fossil fuel industry and lifestyle, and related nationalist and anti-elitistnarratives (Fraune & Knodt, 2018; Huber, 2020), thus contributing to resistance to any green energy transition.

However, most research so far has not brought together these two lines of research to explore if and how the current socio-spatial materialization of the so-called renewable energy transition, might also be contributing to the adherence of communities to mass communicated right-wing populist framings, such as on anti-elitism and nationalism (Sager, 2020), which can, in turn, foster local resistance not only to renewable energy transitions, but also to social diversity and equality. In fact, the results of the most recent Portuguese presidential elections (2021) and of the legislative elections that followed (2022), have shown that rural areas (even if not only – see also Loftus & Gort, 2023), including where RET have been deployed and/or proposed in recent years, displayed a high support for the Portuguese right-wing populist party, *Chega*.[1] This suggests the relevance of exploring not only how RET are being socio-territorially and infrastructurally materialized, as has been increasingly analyzed by social sciences' research on the green energy transition (Avila, 2018; Batel & Küpers, 2022; Dunlap, 2021); but also of exploring how the media, a key disseminator of political parties' ideologies and messages, are portraying the green energy transition and if and how does that relate with right-wing populist parties' discourses and rhetoric.

Thus, the present paper aims to contribute to this area of research in two ways. First, by empirically exploring how national Portuguese newspapers represent the renewable energy transition and its consequences, as well as if and how discourses related with right-wing populist rhetoric are associated with those. Second, based on that analysis, by proposing a conceptual framework that can aid in systematizing which key dimensions to consider when investigating the relationship between political-ideological contexts and community responses to renewable energy infrastructures, including mediated discourses and communication.

1.1. The territorial and infrastructural materialization of the green energy transition

Recent critical approaches to the green energy transition tend to identify the multiple points of socio-environmental injustice involved in "green infrastructures" as developed in our neoliberal capitalist societies (e.g. Anguelovski & Corbera, 2023; Jerez et al., 2021). In relation to large-scale renewable energy infrastructures (RET) specifically, it has been acknowledged that considering socio-environmental justice in their deployment involves much more than only involving affected communities in decision-making processes in a tokenistic way (Carvalho et al., 2019; Knudsen et al., 2015), or compensating them financially for their costs or burdens (Cass et al., 2010). Recognizing the symbolic and identity dimensions of (in)justice, and how these interact with more structural

processes and dynamics, such as historical inequalities between the Global North and the Global South and between urban and rural areas, in terms of energy consumption and energy production (Batel & Küpers, 2022; Murphy & Smith, 2013), has become center stage of a new critical energy research agenda. This agenda has brought to the forefront two interrelated axes that are crucial in better understanding communities' responses and specifically contestations to RET: the role of core–periphery dynamics in the green grabbing of rural territories (Hu, 2023; Murphy & Smith, 2013); and the infrastructural harm (Kallianos et al., 2022; Rodgers & O'neill, 2012; or care – Alam & Houston, 2020) that can be caused by RET in terms of the technologies used, their scale, how socio-environmental justice is taken into account and, linked to that, the local-ecological, community and psycho-social impacts they create (Batel & Küpers, 2022; Hu, 2023; Käkönen & Nygren, 2022).

In the Global North, RET are mostly being deployed in a large-scale, centralized, technocratic and top-down way, which implies that the State and large energy corporations decide on if and where large hydropower plants[1], wind and solar farms and high voltage power lines are constructed, and mostly within rural areas (Batel & Küpers, 2022; Carvalho et al., 2019; Dunlap, 2021). This contributes to reifying the discourse of rural territories as spacious and abundant in natural resources, and thus as empty and the "natural" spaces for the deployment of large-scale RET (Ashwood et al., 2019). In turn, it perpetuates longstanding core–periphery dynamics between urban and rural areas, with RET being more and more pointed out as enactors of rural dispossessions that impact not only on territorial inequalities in general and on the associated stigmatization and invisibilization of rural territories as agentic and sovereign (Lawrence, 2014; Siamanta, 2021), but also in very particular ways in the concrete places and communities where they are built as particular types of infrastructures. For instance, researchers have been increasingly denouncing the harms caused by large-scale dams that span from the deterioration of riverine ecosystems (Käkönen & Nygren, 2022), to the submersion of villages and communities' sense of being and of a future-to-be (Batel & Küpers, 2022). Similarly, wind farms, solar plants and high voltage power lines, have also been under scrutiny as generators of harms, that go from the "harsh labor conditions and highly toxic environments [are] instrumental to the production and operation of wind and solar 'parks'" (Dunlap, 2021, p. 5), to the impacts on socioecological wellbeing *in situ*, such as failed promises from the proponents – the State and large corporations – to create jobs and local socio-economic development (Hu, 2023; Silva & Sareen, 2021; Teff-Seker et al., 2022).

However, while these territorial and infrastructural impacts of RET have been increasingly recognized and examined, it is unclear whether the ways RET are represented are also shaped by media communication about RET, and its relations with the larger socio-political context. This neglect is especially relevant to address in the current political arena across Europe and the world, where the last years have seen the rise of right-wing populist parties and ideologies, which have often acted as a backlash to climate change related policies. In other words, it seems relevant to explore whether and how the way RET are being deployed territorially and infrastructurally might resonate and support specific socio-political and discursive frames, namely those arising from right-wing populist parties (Sager, 2020). These parties and their agendas are, as we will discuss next, often trying to get the support of "the people," equated frequently with the socio-economic disadvantaged and rural populations, where the pressure of RET and the green energy transition is also felt the most, as seen with Trump in the USA (Carley et al., 2018).

1.2. Right-wing populism, climate change and the renewable energy transition

What is "populism" has been intensively discussed in the last years and numerous definitions have been proposed, either considering it an intrinsic component of the political (Laclau, 2005) and a key characteristic to democratic societies (Canovan, 2002), as a thin ideology (Mudde, 2004), or as anti-democratic (Müller, 2017). Here we take populism as a discourse (Aslanidis, 2016; see also Norris, 2019), or a series of discursive resources, which can be put to very different uses (Laclau, 2005,

p. 176), depending on the ideologies they are serving (Mouffe, 2018), but that generally oppose the people or the popular will as the basis of democratic legitimacy, to the corrupt establishment elites (Norris, 2019). Some scholars have proposed that to analyze populism and the particular socio-political projects it is trying to advance as a discourse, it is important to consider it as embedded in a vertical axe that opposes the people to a corrupt elite, and which often intersects – but does not overlap (De Cleen & Stavrakakis, 2017; Rydgren, 2017) – with an horizontal axe embedding nationalism – us/the inside, as a nation, and them/the outside, as other nations and groups (Brubaker, 2017; see also Breeze, 2019). For right-wing populism particularly, the populist vertical axe opposes *us* and *them* as reflecting the antagonism between the people as unprivileged and the corrupt elite often portrayed as a small and illegitimately powerful group composed of cosmopolitan elites and the democratic State as we know it, whose interests collide with those of the common people; through the horizontal axe of nationalism, the relationship is defined as a conflict between "the people" as a nation or culture, and outsiders, most commonly ethnic minorities and/or migrants. This horizontal axis often materializes in right-wing political parties' discourses and rhetoric that cherish nationalist ideas and emphasize one's nation superiority in relation to others (Hatakka & Välimäki, 2019; see also Breeze, 2019). Specifically *Chega*, the Portuguese right-wing populist party, as clear in its manifesto (see Supplementary Material), defends the nation as a "community of blood, land, goods and destiny," "open to the world and to competition," and aims to "mobilize all the discontent people" to tackle "the very high and shameful corruption that exists" in Portugal, as well as "the competitive delay of the Portuguese economy"; *Chega* also presents itself has having as center stage policies areas such as competitiveness, innovation and de-bureaucratization' and the maintenance of "our identity and our attachment to roots" and "our pride" (see also Mendes, 2021 for more detailed analyses of *Chega*'s discourse). In its political program, and most relevant to our study, *Chega* presents itself as "the political party of the common people" (section 8), nationalist and an advocate for a sovereign state (section 17), defender of the Portuguese cultural identity and tradition (section 47) and of the rural world (section 8), making a priority to control migration (section 62) and corruption (section 84) – see also the Supplementary Material. As such, we can identify as the main components of *Chega*'s positioning its ethno-nationalism linked to the need to defend Portugal as a prideful identity and its cultural and economic sovereignty, including against migrants and multiculturalism, and against other nations in general [nationalist component; horizontal axe]; and to defend "the common people," the true Portuguese, against the corrupt elites, against the State as it were [populist component; vertical axe]. These charateristics of *Chega*'s agenda and discourses have also been diagnosed by other authors' analyses of *Chega*'s political programme and media appearance in Portugal – see Santos and Roque (2021); also Madeira et al. (2021); Santana-Pereira & De Giorgi, 2022.

However, academic research on right-wing populism has so far focused more extensively on how it reproduces racist and xenophobic discourses and with what consequence for migration policies (e.g. Beltrán, 2020; Mostov, 2021). Only more recently, and especially since Trumps's 2017 election, it increasingly focused on how right-wing populism relates with and impacts on (the lack of) climate change related policies and contributes to climate change skepticism (Huber, 2020; Kulin et al., 2021; Lockwood, 2018). The link between right-wing populism and climate change skepticism appears to stem from the complex combination between authoritarian, nationalist and anti-elitist viewpoints – that portray climate issues as key elements of a cosmopolitan agenda – with a suspicious approach to climate science and policy, and the role of climate scientists and environmentalists (Lockwood, 2018). In this sense, right-wing populism constructs and disseminates a world view in which "the people" are ruled by a corrupt and illegitimate cosmopolitan elite, which, in this case, sustains skepticism about climate change as an expression of hostility toward those elites, rather than an engagement with the issue of climate change itself. However, the degree of opposition and denial of the climate change agenda seems to vary significantly depending on contextual factors, such as the right-wing populist party and country (Marquardt et al., 2022; Selk & Kemmerzell, 2022). Lockwood (2018) in his review of the relations between right-wing populism, climate

skepticism and climate policy, highlights that the right wing populist parties already analyzed are mostly anti-environmental, with some being explicitly climate change sceptic or even silent or ambiguous on environmental issues; and that they also tend to be unsupportive of renewable energy (see also Otteni & Weisskircher, 2022), but that this also depends on the particular socio-political contexts, with parties like the *Front National* in France rejecting large-scale renewables but supporting smaller scale renewables (see also Förtner et al., 2021). In fact, we can see how the vertical axis of populism might contribute to right-wing populist parties' rejection of the renewable energy transition as it is being promoted currently and as discussed above; whereas the horizontal axis of nationalism might contribute to endorse the renewable energy transition as protecting the eco-heartland and pure nature (Tosun & Debus, 2022), as it relies on endogenous energy sources and contributes to national sovereignty (Breeze, 2019; Selk & Kemmerzell, 2022). This was also found by Forchtner (2019) that highlights how right-wing populists might also endorse renewables as they support the nation's strength, sovereignty, and economy – or autarky (see also Forchtner & Kølvraa, 2015) –, while emphasizing that right-wing populist discourses also tend to draw symbolic boundaries such as us vs. them on issues regarding climate change, specifically in the context of the nation's self-sufficiency. Otteni and Weisskircher (2022) also found that "in a setting where environmental politics is salient [such as with the green energy transition and deployment of related infrastructures], populist radical right parties may electorally benefit from opposing measures against global warming, such as renewable energy projects" due to their local negative socio-environmental impacts (p.1116).

In fact, the existent research on the relations between the rise of right wing populism and low carbon energy policies has departed from the assumption that RET, as they are being deployed within a business as usual technocratic way in rural areas, contribute to reproduce inequalities between urban and rural areas, with the latter being even further stigmatized and disempowered, following processes of deindustrialization, de-agrarianization and infrastructural abandonment by the State (Batel & Küpers, 2022; Mamonova & Franquesa, 2020). In turn, this invisibilization can find an echo in right-wing populist discourses (Dechézelles & Scotti, 2022; Förtner et al., 2021). As put by Mamonova and Franquesa (2020), "populist leaders and parties have been tapping into widespread feelings of victimisation and disenfranchisement among rural Europeans and exploiting their resentment against urban elites, the political establishment, migrants and ethnic minorities" (p.702). Dechézelles and Scotti (2022) have specifically explored if and how "local opposition against green facilities in rural areas and right-populist political forces seem to converge in a common discursive frame" (p. 1). Based mostly in interviews conducted in two different regions in France and Italy, they conclude that "the link between local opposition to renewables and populist organizations is weak and instrumental" (p. 1). However, research on the links between right-wing populism and the renewable transition is still incipient. Moreover, and as highlighted above, right-wing populism comes in many forms, depending on countries' different historical trajectories, cultural and political systems. As such, we aim to contribute to this growing area of research by exploring the communicative construction and relations between right-wing populism and unjust rural energy transitions in Portugal, by focusing on an analysis of national media discourses around the renewable energy transition.

1.3. Renewable energy transitions and media communication

The media is a key actor in communicating both public policies and their associated measures for citizens and communities, as well as political parties' agendas and voices. Media communication studies have extensively shown that the media have an important impact on how relevant contemporary issues are framed and considered by publics (Kundzewicz et al., 2019; Parks, 2020), and through that, shape their ideas and practices, such as in relation to the reality of climate change (Boykoff & Boykoff, 2004). That impact can happen in direct or indirect ways – for instance, Krämer (2021) reviews and discusses research on how the media can indirectly support right-wing populist discourses, due to traditionally framing "a large part of their coverage [about societal

issues] with regard to the opposition between politicians or elites and the people" (p.443), even if, directly, they do not endorse or give much voice to right-wing populist politicians and agendas (see also Waisbord, 2019). In other words, if the media uses similar tropes and discourses on the renewable energy transition than a given political party or ideology in relation to that and/or other issues, then it might be, even if indirectly, supporting that party or ideology.

However, research examining media discourses about the renewables' energy transition and about specific renewable energy technologies is still incipient (but see Stephens et al., 2009; for a review: Batel, 2020b), even if it has already been shown that the media can have an important impact on publics' responses to those infrastructures (for an example, see Holstead et al., 2017). Therefore, to better understand if and how local communities and opposition engage with right-wing populist frames and rhetoric in relation to renewable energy infrastructures, it is relevant to first understand which contents and discursive devices are used in the public sphere and specifically by mainstream media to discuss the renewable energy transition. As such, we propose here that it is as important to consider that responses of communities to RET and other "green" infrastructures are fostered by their socio-spatial organization, as the recent research discussed above has been pointing out, as it is to consider how they are shaped by societal – media, institutional – discourses on RET and related political issues.

Next, we present the procedures we followed to conduct an analysis of Portuguese national newspapers' discourses about the renewable energy transition to explore if and how these discourses might relate with and feed into right-wing populist rhetoric. We will then present the analyses and discuss how these might contribute to a better understanding of people's responses to RET as the result of discursive-communicative practices.

2. Method and context

Three Portuguese national newspapers with large readerships were selected for the media analysis, to cover both more left-wing and right-wing newspapers, and both reference and tabloid newspapers. Following these criteria, the selected newspapers were "Público" (reference, more left-wing; paid circulation, print and online, 2023: 58580 – APCT, 2023), "Observador" (reference, liberal right-wing; paid circulation, online, 2023: no data available – APCT, 2023), and "Correio da Manhã" (tabloid, right-wing; paid circulation, print and online, 2023; 44703 – APCT, 2023)[2] (see Graça, 2017).

As a first criterion for selecting the data from the newspapers, we used the time range 01.01.2020–31.12.2021, because this period encompasses the latest Portuguese presidential elections when the Portuguese right-wing populist party *Chega* started to gain some prominence. *Chega's* candidate garnered 12% of the votes and achieved third place in the presidential run (Mendes, 2021; Serra-Silva & Santos, 2023), and especially with the support of voters from certain rural areas where large-scale renewable energy infrastructures have also been or are planned to be deployed (Madeira et al., 2021). Then, based on the literature review and discussions with the research team, we defined several search terms, namely, renewables; windfarms; energy transition; rural + renewable; solar plants; decarbonization. We also tried to identify media articles within this period that would explicitly link the *Chega* party with the renewable energy transition, by using search terms such as "Chega + renewables" and other related combinations (with the keywords above), but no articles were found, which highlights again the uncertain status of the relationship between right-wing populist discourses and discourses about renewable energy transitions, especially in such young right-wing party formations, who tend to privilege other social issues. As such, the focus was on analyzing how was the renewable energy transition being presented and discussed in the media articles to identify if any of the key characteristics of right-wing populist discourses and particularly of *Chega*, would resonate with those discourses, given that previous research has demonstrated, as highlighted above, that *Chega* "shares with this party family a

populist, nativist, and authoritarian ideological outlook. This holds true even if there are natural contextual specificities, such as its targeting of the Roma community" (Mendes, 2021, p. 348).

Important to mention here is that the Portuguese government is currently and during the period under analysis, ruled by a PS (socialist party, traditionally center-left) majority, with the second most represented party in Parliament being PSD (social-democrat party, traditionally center-right). As such, media discourses on the renewable energy transition in Portugal during this period mostly reflect PS's agenda and measures.

We then made a first analysis of the articles to remove any duplicates, and to guarantee its relevance (i.e. eliminating any articles that were not at all related with the aim of the analysis). This resulted in a final sample of 465 articles of variable size, that were analyzed using NVivo to conduct a thematic analysis, seeking to identify patterns of meaning in the media discourses (Braun & Clarke, 2012) and which used the article as a unit of analysis. The main themes and subthemes found were discussed between authors several times throughout the analysis process. The most relevant themes are presented below, in section 3, and the quotations presented adhere to best practices in discursive analysis (Antaki et al., 2003).

3. Results

3.1. Theme 1: Portugal at the forefront of the low-carbon energy transition – or fostering the identity and the pride of the nation?

The key theme that was identified in the media articles' discourses about the renewable energy transition in Portugal presents Portugal as the perfect place for implementing RET and even a pioneer in the run towards carbon neutrality through renewable energy generation. This is illustrated in the extracts below:

(a) "[…] **the entire** Iberian Peninsula has exceptional conditions of solar irradiation, so **all region**s of Portugal and Spain represent excellent potential locations for photovoltaic development." [Observador, P94]
(b) "Portuguese-Spanish company wants to build one of the largest solar panel plants in the world in Alentejo [in Portugal]. We are talking about what could become one of the biggest green projects in the world." [Correio da Manhã, P67]
(c) "Another good news is that Europe has decided to be neutral in its contribution to GHG by 2050, and that Portugal is probably the country that is further ahead in this run […] The other good news is that there exists a significative consensus between the political parties represented in the Parliament about the importance of this challenge" [Público, P21]

These discourses accentuate the modernist capitalist imaginary of renewable energy generation embedded in the agenda towards carbon neutrality in Portugal (Batel & Küpers, 2022; Carvalho et al., 2022), through which renewable energy projects are presented as symbols of national progress, and a way to compete with and "win" in relation to other nations *in this run* [Extract 1.c]. These media discourses give voice then to this imaginary in a way that supports nationalist positions of national excellence– similarly to *Chega*'s manifesto – grounded in renewable energy infrastructural prowess and dimension, for nation-building and for ascertaining Portugal's distinctiveness and superiority compared to other nations and groups – *one of the largest solar panel plants in the world* (…) *we are talking about what could become one of the biggest green projects in the world* [Extract 1.b]. These discourses have been pervasive in national governments' and local authorities' policies and speeches about energy (mega-)projects and infrastructures across the decades, including on hydropower plants and wind farms or solar power plants (Batel & Küpers, 2022; Carvalho et al., 2019; Silva & Sareen, 2021), and in our analysis they also seem transversal to the different newspapers, even if slightly more prominent and univocal in *Correio da Manhã* and *Observador*.

Importantly, and as clearly illustrated by extracts 1.(a) and 1.(b) above, the national progress imaginary is built not only upon the planned infrastructural occupation of rural regions in Portugal (and Spain), like Alentejo, for renewable energy generation, but also on their discursive "emptying out," with *all regions of Portugal and Spain* presented as filled with sun and ideal for any type of photovoltaic development. Under this theme, transversal to most discourses, is that there is no politization of renewable energy related policies and infrastructures: their deployment is "delocalized" and no discussion of their impact on particular communities, territories and places made, with just their role as symbols of the nation being promoted. In other words, the infrastructures are presented as unequivocally positive and as materializing how the order of things is, with it dismissing any different, conflicting, positions and perspectives on the issue at hand (Carvalho et al., 2017). This applies not only to the discourses across the different analyzed newspapers, but is also highlighted in extract 1.(c) as happening across the Portuguese political parties, which consensually see Portugal being Greenhouse Gas (GHG) emissions neutral (mainly through renewables) by 2050 as positive – and while, in itself, this consensus is to be seen as positive when compared with Trump's and others' climate change skepticism, it has also been showed to be detrimental to democratically discussing how becoming GHG neutral should happen, and which consequences different courses of action might have (Boager & Castro, 2022; Carvalho et al., 2017). However, and as discussed above, what these discourses also highlight is that these climate policies and related infrastructures are often being presented to defend and enhance the nation – which is also typical of right-wing populist principles and discourses (Hatakka & Välimäki, 2019) – but while at the same time not articulating any considerations about "the people" in it. In other words, these policies and related infrastructures are presented in a way that ignores the voices of rural communities and territories that are the most affected by the green transition.

3.2. Theme 2: RET dominated by powerful economic lobbies – or the need to dethrone the corrupt elite?

Another key significant theme that was present in the analyzed media discourses but not concurrently with the previous theme, relates instead with how the "green" energy transition is being materialized in Portugal, and the social and territorial injustices therein involved, as illustrated by the extracts below:

Extracts #2:

(a) "The multiplication of this type of business [RET exploitation], with guaranteed income to the private sector, will transform citizens into mere serfs. Servants condemned to pay, to the owners of these businesses, through taxes or service fees, tributes of a feudal type." [Correio da Manhã, P106]

(b) "And so, traditionally rural places that value contact with Nature will not be spared [by RET] […] so that the big cities and the large industries, far away, can claim to be "green" with full chest […]. In the name of this, rivers and aquifers are dried up, forests are cut down, mountains are gutted, natural habitats are destroyed and communities are persecuted." [Público, P 63]

These two extracts highlight that the deployment of concrete renewable energy infrastructures is being performed in a business-as-usual privatized and commodified way, that, as Extract 1.a mentions, *transforms citizens into mere serfs*, with it equating the capitalist system through which renewable energy is being exploited, to the feudal system. In Extract 2.b that injustice between who owns and makes money with RET businesses and who pays and works for them – citizens – is expanded to include territorial injustices, given that RET are deployed mostly in rural places *so that the big cities and large industries, far away, can claim to be "green" with full chest* [Extract 2.b]. Again, the mismatch between who benefits from RET and who must take the burden of its costs is highlighted, here to accentuate the spatial-territorial colonialism (Batel & Küpers, 2022), including not

only of territories as made of communities, but also as ecological systems. In turn, businesses, the private sector, big cities and large industries, while being named as the agents of these injustices, are also mentioned and identified in connection to the larger political and economic systems where they are embedded, including the State and government, which allow and even incentivize those injustices. There is then within these discourses an open discussion of how renewable energy is also a business like any other that reproduces the unequal societies where we live in and particularly the relations between the elite who owns the means of production and who must work to produce, key traits of capitalist fossil fuel societies (Daggett, 2018; Malm, 2016).

This connection between the State and specifically the national government and the injustices that surround RET, including lack of transparency and even corruption, is clearly illustrated in the extracts that are next presented. These focus a key event that happened in the analyzed period, and that is used to discuss these issues and illustrate the "dark side" of RET, namely, how despite it being an issue of common, public, interest, it is dominated by powerful economic and political lobbies. This event was the Quinta da Torre Bela mass hunting (see extracts 2.a and 3.b), which refers to the recreational slaughter of 540 deer and wild boars that happened in just a few days in a private property called Quinta da Torre Bela, located in Azambuja, Portugal, in December, 2020. In turn, Quinta da Torre Bela is also the site where the construction of a mega solar plant was being planned for and which was, at that time, under the public consultation process demanded by law.

Extracts #3:

(a) "But strangely (or maybe not), behind it all may not just be the recreational activity of a few "hunters" but a big business in the energy area … This is because the Portuguese Hunting Federation and the PSD of Azambuja said that the hunt would have taken place to *'clear the ground'* so that a mega photovoltaic power plant could be built on the site [of Quinta da Torre Bela] that has more than 750 hectares, and which is [the power plant] currently in the process of public consultation." [Observador, P72]
(b) "But it is clear, in this case [Quinta da Torre Bela mass hunting], the causal link with another business that is also *intense and with opportunistic* traits: the very extensive colonization of the territory for energy purposes. The massive collection of solar energy in the wind and photovoltaic lines, obligatorily dispersed in the territory and replicated in thousands of sites in the most varied natural conditions, *is an energy monster sustained by taxpayers and consumers sacrificed on the altar of Saint Carbon*." [Público, P20]

This specific case was mediatized and highly covered by the analyzed newspapers, clearly not only due to the mass slaughter and how it was performed, but also because it was done to *clear the ground* [Extract 3.a] for a mega solar plant to be built there, and the fact that it is *currently under the process of public consultation* [Extract 3.a] highlights that the Government and associated agencies were aware of this situation. The media discourses also transversally give voice to the "very extensive colonization of the territory for energy purposes," and namely for renewables, which is being enacted under the "green" energy transition at all costs – and the focus on the Quinta da Torre Bela mass hunting allows for a quite clear and powerful illustration of that.

Important to note as well is that, first, the ostracization and alienation of communities and citizens with the "green" energy transition is clearly recognized and presented by the media as going beyond the closing down of the fossil fuel and related industries – or the just transition (Carvalho et al., 2022) – and very much focused on the need for a transition that is just in all of its dimensions and repercussions. Second, that these discourses all point to a key transversal culprit, which is the installed government or the State and large corporations, an elite that is protecting their own interests that do not intersect with the interests of the public, of citizens, of the people. In turn, this is in tune with *Chega*'s political program and rhetoric in the public sphere (Mendes, 2021), which, similarly to other far-right populist parties, "questions elite policies that did not cater to the well-being of ordinary working citizens" (Hatakka & Välimäki, 2019, p. 143) and, with it, helps to fight against corruption in

Portugal, here materialized in the energy lobby and in State-energy corporations close relations that have now just extended to the renewable energy domain. These discourses highlight then, following Franquesa (2018), how what is being performed is only a "green" *transaction* between power elites and not really a green *transition* that entails the structural transformation of energy-political-economic systems (see also Batel & Küpers, 2022). These discourses in the media resonate with the anti-elitism and anti-establishment rhetoric present in far-right wing populist discourses (Brubaker, 2017). Accordingly, we identified that this theme and type of rhetoric was more pervasive in the newspaper *Correio da Manhã* (a right-wing leaning tabloid), followed by *Observador* (right-wing reference newspaper) and only then *Público* (traditionally left-wing reference newspaper).

3.3. Theme 3: beyond nationalism and populism – energy justice is crucial for the green energy transition but not much is done for that

The third key theme identified is less pervasive than the other two, but indicates that the media is also attempting to identify alternatives and solutions to address the issues uncovered within the discourses on the dark side of RET. This theme is built around two main subthemes – energy poverty, and decentralization or the incommensurability between energy justice and the current energy system.

The first subtheme includes discourses that make the link between RET and energy poverty, namely by pointing out the contradiction between the amount of energy that is being produced or planned to be produced through these RET megaprojects, while Portugal continues to be one of the countries in the EU with a higher rate of energy poverty (Horta et al., 2019).

(a) "If the Government launches programs that co-finance," "for example, 70% investment in windows or electric cars, it will be reaching the middle, upper middle class." If so, "we're going to have a part of the population with photovoltaic solar power and an electric car and who maybe even managed to insulate their home, but the rest are even more vulnerable, because instead of using renewables to lower the price of energy, maybe, as there are fewer consumers [paying the fixed costs of the network] the price can still go up" [P28].

Another subtheme includes discourses that already try to identify and discuss potential alternatives to the current unjust centralized energy system, and namely through decentralization (Siamanta, 2021), as illustrated in the extract below:

(a) "In this sense, […] the installation of photovoltaic plants, must be implemented in a decentralized way, from the outset, naturally, supervised by parliament as it should be, but also participated and supervised by the citizens, by the municipalities, so that there is a monitoring commission, an entity that can monitor this exercise of dissemination of this type of infrastructure." [Correio da Manhã P104]

Discourses like this are very relevant to be present in the media, precisely because they politicize with alternative positions and solutions the discussion around the energy transition, which is key for real democratic debate and for social change (Carvalho et al., 2017; Santos et al., 2020). Additionally, this subtheme questions if energy justice might even be possible within the current centralized capitalist system (Temper, 2019), where people do not feel collective ownership of these commons – energy, land – that are being privatized and commodified by the green energy transition, and where they are constantly left voiceless and marginalized from all decision-making processes, as highlighted in the next extract:

(a) "People do not feel heard, informed and, above all, they do not feel that the project [wind farm] is theirs." [Público, P77]

4. Conclusions and discussion

By analyzing Portuguese newspapers' media discourses in the period of the last presidential elections when *Chega* received an unexpected percentage of the votes, with high incidence in certain rural areas, we aimed to explore the potential relationship between the increasing support for right wing populist discourses and rhetoric in Portugal and the way in which the "green" energy transition is being promoted in the country. Thematic analysis showed that media discourses on the green energy transition are presented in an ambivalent and even contradictory way – issues related with the energy transition are either discussed within a positive nationalist, modernist view, that puts us (Portugal) vs. other nations against each other in the run to be "greener," but without considering "the pure people" and namely the impacts of the transition on them, which resonates with right-wing populist discourses and rhetoric. Or the green transition is discussed in a negative way, that uncovers the lobbying and corruption of the political, economic and territorial (urban) elite ruling the country and the transition, and which is detrimental to "the people" as taxpayers and rural local communities in the areas affected by the construction of RET, again resonating with far-right wing populist discourses of anti-elitism and accusing the installed powers of corruption. Not unexpectedly, this latter discourse and related rhetoric was even more pervasive in the more right-wing leaning newspapers analyzed here, namely *Correio da Manhã* and *Observador*.

Within that ambivalence, media discourses, albeit cautiously, sometimes go beyond those two types of discourses to highlight the contradictions of the energy political-economic system itself, by discussing decentralization and the incommensurability of energy justice and liberal centralized capitalist systems (Siamanta, 2021; Temper, 2019). At the same time, they emphasize energy poverty and vulnerability as a key problem in Portugal that, paradoxically, is not being tackled by the green energy transition. In turn, the content of these media discourses and the way in which they are organized, may resonate with rural communities' growing feelings of exploitation and disempowerment (Dechézelles & Scotti, 2022) particularly in light of the renewable energy transition, and increase their availability to support parties like *Chega*, which focus their rhetoric on "dethroning" those elites and restoring more power to the people who are now marginalized.

As such, we can say that the present findings do suggest that, even if indirectly and implicitly (Krämer, 2021), some elements of newspapers' media discourses in Portugal seem to support some of *Chega*'s rhetoric and give it strength, through the combination of both the populist and nationalist uptakes of far right-wing populist parties often used to mobilize voters (Otteni & Weisskircher, 2022). In this vein, and retaking the main aims of this paper, we can say that for a more thorough understanding of people's positionings in relation to RET and the "green" energy transition we need to not only consider how the transition is being enacted territorially and infrastructurally, but also communicatively, namely through media, institutional and collectivized discourse, and communication (see Figure 1). Furthermore, in contexts of political ideological change, such as the recent pervasiveness of right-wing populist rhetoric in the Portuguese public sphere, media discourses might also impact on positionings in relation not only to any type of energy transition, but also to other social issues and inequalities. In sum, and while the analyzed Portuguese newspapers are raising and discussing important injustices reproduced or created anew with the green energy transition and even discussing some potential solutions for them, this is not being performed in a consistent, clear and politicized way, given that these are discussed separately from the majority of discourses which, on the contrary, support the green energy transition as a symbol and a pride for the nation.

Regarding what could be done in terms of media energy and environmental communication to unlink their discourses on these issues from right wing populist rhetoric, and to even make them potentially contribute to actively contest this rhetoric, a first step would be to consistently discuss the green energy transition in a politicized way, this is, without sometimes univocally presenting it as positive and tied to nationalistic views. Discussing the green energy transition always through a politicized lens, by discussing its dark side in contrast to any potential positive impacts as presented
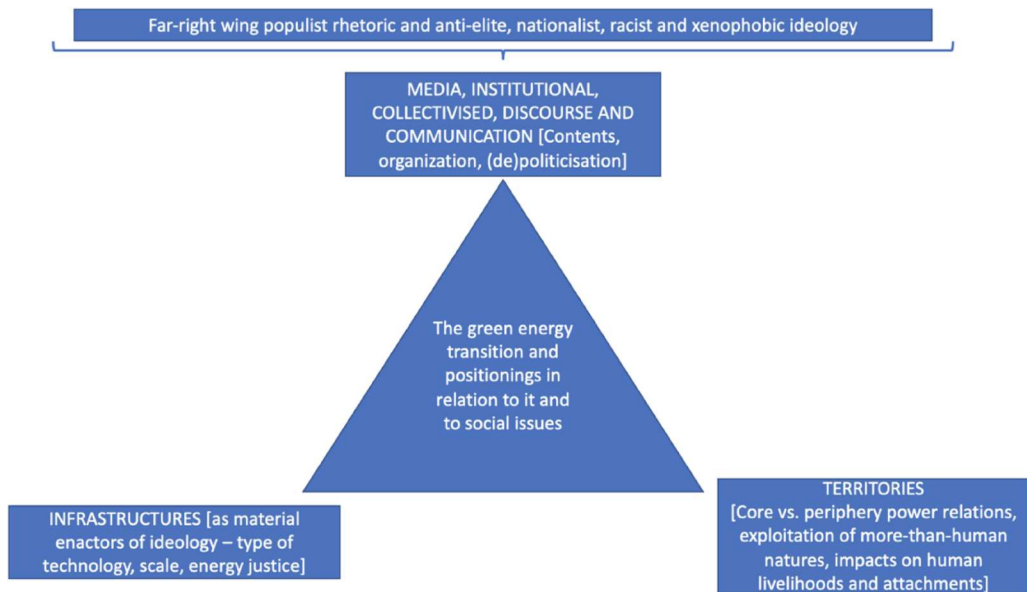
Figure 1. Integrative conceptual framework for understanding positionings in relation to the "green" energy transition within given political-ideological contexts.

by the State and large corporations,would help to expand and potentiate the collective debate about the transition and, in turn, contribute to a fairer and more just transition. It would also be important to articulate more clearly the idea that the dark side of RET does not necessarily has to do only with the specific government in power but with the state, capitalist relations through which energy is being produced and used, and which completely ignores it as commons (Siamanta, 2021). This idea was also present, albeit less frequently, in several media discourses, but it is crucial to promote the discussion in order to question whether energy and social justice are possible within the current centralized, colonialist capitalist system, and to search for other, decentralized and commoning alternatives for the (energy) future.

Notes

1. We consider right-wing populism to include far-right and radical-right parties and, as such, follow the existent literature and analyses of *Chega* as a political party and of its discourse (e.g., Madeira et al., 2021; Santos & Roque, 2021; Santana-Pereira & De Giorgi, 2022).
2. There is no left-wing tabloid in Portugal with wide circulation.

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