

Peer Pressure: The Forces Steering Portugal Down a Greener Path

Article by Inês de Sousa Real

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Emerging out of a devastating economic crisis in 2008, Portugal recovered its confidence under a progressive government and the economic success of its expanding tourism sector. But the public health crisis exposed the cracks underlying this recovery. Ahead of Portuguese elections, Ines de Sousa Real of the People, Animals and Nature party explains how unemployment, corruption, and short-sighted policies that consistently overlook the environment are holding the country back from a greener future.

Green European Journal: What issues are driving Portuguese politics? The pandemic remains salient across the world but what is particular to Portugal?

Inês de Sousa Real: Like other countries, Portugal faces a public health crisis as well as social and economic issues. As a result of Covid-19 measures, unemployment affects over 400,000 people in Portugal. The health crisis came when we were already at a point of no return of climate change, so it is important for us to act. The International Labour Organization estimates that you can create 18 million jobs worldwide by 2030 by implementing the Paris Agreement. We cannot waste the opportunity to invest in and create green jobs.

Portugal's economic recovery plan was recently approved by the European Commission. We might expect this bill to be a turning point in securing a sustainable economy and tackling social issues. However, according to a preliminary analysis by the Bruegel Institute, Portugal is one of the countries where the environment is considered least in the choices of projects to be carried out with money from the European Recovery Fund. Green investment only makes up around one quarter of the overall plan worth 16.6 billion euros, far less than countries like Belgium with 60 per cent or Denmark with an overwhelming 91 per cent. Within this trend, Portugal maintains investments in polluting industries, intensive agriculture, and an expanding tourism sector that continues to damage ecosystems and habitats. The development of lithium exploration also poses further threats to the environment.

Many green parties have sought to explain the pandemic by connecting it to zoonosis, deforestation, and shrinking green spaces in cities. Have these topics been introduced into the public debate in Portugal?

The People-Animals-Nature party (PAN) has tried to put that on the political agenda but we're still far from having more conscious and sustainable policies. Some politicians in Portugal still support cutting down trees in urban areas and building industries in areas that should be protected. For example the Montijo airport project, a new development planned

north of Lisbon, risks destroying important habitats of migratory birds.

Despite PAN's awareness-raising efforts, the other parties don't vote in favour of our policy proposals. Though a national climate bill similar to the EU climate law, proposed initially by PAN, was finally approved, the final text was less ambitious than we wanted. A general lack of political will means that Portugal is likely to fail to deliver on its commitments despite signing onto Agenda 2030 and the Paris Agreement. Corruption and the lack of transparency make the work of Green parties more difficult. I believe Green parties all over Europe are the future of politics, but it will take a few years for people to be won over by them.

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Is green politics starting to influence parties across the spectrum in Portugal?

On the one hand, there's a lot of talk and greenwashing by politicians. Around election season especially, there's talk about the importance of green spaces in cities and protecting the climate. But once these political milestones are passed, everything goes back to the way it was. Such politicians come from parties who care more about the market and the interests of large companies than the climate. The price tag that comes with quality of life and protecting ecosystems is more important than the price of a dead planet for them.

On the other hand, young politicians are increasingly aware of the necessity to change and realising that the planet needs to be at the top of the list of priorities in parliament. Before the pandemic, student climate strikes happened every week in Portugal and young people protested what they saw as an indifference towards changing the way politics is conducted. Unfortunately, the pandemic put a stop to these street actions.

In general, people in Portugal maintain the divide between the Left and Right and they don't understand when we argue that all parties should embrace environmental protection. At the same time, and like in other countries, Portugal now has anti-democratic parties that are extremist, racist, chauvinist, and unashamedly against human rights. The risk with the pandemic and economic crisis is that people will look to such parties for answers. So it is with some concern that we look forward to the future of democracy in Portugal. However, we are hopeful that the green wave that is spreading across Europe will reach Portugal.

PAN achieved great results in the 2019 general election. Has that helped the party gain greater influence on national legislation?

Mathematically, parties cannot pass a bill without us voting in favour or abstaining. This position has enabled us to advance some of our causes. For instance, we managed to increase the budget for animal protection from 1 to 10 million euros in the past year. We have also secured funding streams for habitat protection in agriculture. But this leveraging power has its limits. We need to be a larger group of deputies to have greater negotiating

capacity. With the non-approval of the national budget for 2022, we are now on the eve of early legislative elections (set to take place on January 30) and I believe that will be a decisive moment for Green parties like PAN.

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Mining is known to disrupt ecosystems and communities. However, lithium is key to green technologies that are necessary to fight climate change and Portugal has deposits of it. How is PAN approaching the issue of lithium mining in Portugal?

We are aware that we cannot have the “not in my backyard” attitude because countries are trying to make the transition to more sustainable energy production. But it cannot happen at any cost. We have a unique natural heritage and a beautiful landscape that is internationally renowned and attracts many visitors. Sadly, this landscape is being taken over by mines.

PAN is in favour of strong regulation of mining including limits on where you can mine. It doesn't make any sense to explore and have lithium mines in areas that must be protected. We also believe that the population needs to be heard. However, such projects often don't have participatory processes. They are also rife with conflicts of interest and corruption, which undermines democracy.

We need to be very aware and cautious about who is behind the negotiations of mining projects and who is benefitting from the destruction of our environment and ecosystems. Portugal cannot be for sale. Nature tourism can contribute to growing our economy but it has to be done well and it cannot be held hostage by big market interests.

The EU has taken progressive steps in the last few years such as the European Green Deal and now the Recovery Fund. How important are European policies such as these in influencing Portuguese politics?

When the first draft of the now approved plan for economic recovery was discussed, it was the European Commission that argued it did not provide enough green investment. Portugal was planning investments that were contrary to the principle of “no harm”, so the European Commission insisted the Portuguese government adapt its plan. The plan was debated and amended again to make it compliant with EU funding rules. If the Commission had not intervened, I believe it would have been very difficult to bring about change on this issue. The EU has been a strong influence, it's our parties that need to be more ambitious when it comes to national climate and environmental bills.

Every time there is a foreign election, in France or Germany, we notice that people take us more seriously.

What about Portugal's place in Europe? It's a country that's stood out for having a centre-left government throughout the years of austerity and recovery. How do you see Portugal's place in the EU?

The economic crisis cast Portugal in a bad light but, with the help of the EU, the country recovered. For the first time in years, it had a balanced budget and became a reference point for the tourism industry. However, a few problems persisted. EU policies incentivised heavy dependence on tourism and the industries of other countries. From our perspective, this failed to make the country resilient, and the impact of the health crisis only proves this.

More generally, the Portuguese Secretary-General of the UN António Guterres has done a great amount to elevate the image of Portugal internationally. His role gave us another perspective on our country and the values we bring to the European Union. Unfortunately, Portugal failed to show up for these values during its recent presidency of the European Council. When Hungary passed an anti-LGBTQI+ law, it failed to condemn Hungary in the name of neutrality. We cannot be a state that shows neutrality in the face of human rights abuse; neutrality only privileges the oppressor.

Green issues are transnational, global, and European. Does PAN work with European partners and other Green parties?

Creating bridges with parties in Europe and around the world is very important to us but has been more challenging in the past year. In the past, we've hosted a few conferences bringing together Green and Animal parties and we're connected with the Networks of Sustainability of Brazil too. For us, having a permanent dialogue is very important. As we approach a post-pandemic period, it will be easier to be physically present at these debates.

At the European level, we had one member elected in the 2019 election to the European Parliament. Unfortunately, we had internal issues and our MEP became independent, but I strongly believe we will recover that seat at the next election. It is very important for us to be represented in the European Parliament and make our mark.

Do elections in neighbouring countries or other EU states have an influence on Portuguese politics? Did the "green wave" affect the political dynamics in Portugal?

Very much so. Every time there is a foreign election, in France or Germany, we notice that people take us more seriously. When PAN was founded and recognised by our constitutional court in 2011, people didn't take our agenda and messages on animals and the environment seriously. Nowadays, I believe they're starting to see people in Europe are preoccupied with these issues; people are becoming more aware of the need for policies regarding environmental issues and animal and human rights. As a result, people in Portugal are also realising the need for change. They now see us as the future of politics.

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Debates on global issues, whether it's about climate change or the pandemic, have taken centre stage. There are also unprecedented global tensions, with the US and China acting as the main rivals. How does PAN see Europe's role in the world?

We have been very critical of the European and Portuguese relationships with China not only for environmental reasons but also because of the persecution of the Uyghur people. It is always alarming to see European politicians shaking hands with counterparts in China, Brazil, and other states that violate human rights, pollute recklessly, and make no commitment to stop the destruction of habitats that created the conditions for the pandemic we're living through.

Unfortunately, international policy or diplomacy doesn't always end these actions. I believe we must be more demanding of other states and EU member states when it comes to the environment and human rights. We need to change the way we trade and stop subjecting nature and animals to the will of states and the economy.

There were local elections in autumn 2020 and national elections are coming up. How would you like to develop as a party?

In local elections, PAN has gained representation in new city councils and maintained its presence in others where we had already representatives. In these new mandates, we'll be working to advance the implementation of more green policies locally. At the national level, four deputies were elected to parliament in the last elections. We would like to see this number grow, to gain more influence. PAN offers a strong alternative to the traditional and conservative parties, and we will work to put the planet at the centre of the government's work, to deliver change.



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