

# Populism and gender: Radical right-wing brings anti-feminism to Parliament

*Populismo e género: A direita radical leva  
o anti-feminismo ao Parlamento*

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**Abstract:** In the parliamentary election held on 30 January 2022 in Portugal, Chega, a populist and anti-establishment party of the radical-right wing won 7.18% of the votes and 12 seats in Parliament, becoming the third major political force of the 15th Legislature. Its 12 Members of Parliament (MPs) include only one woman, Rita Matias, who is also the youngest MP in the Chamber. During the election campaign, Rita Matias presented herself as an anti-feminist, a statement that gained public and media attention after her election into public office. In this chapter, our purpose is to understand the relevance and significance of this position within the broader framework of the connection between gender and populism and to understand the extent to which this orientation contributes to establishing the political-ideological project of Chega. To try to establish this relationship between gender and right-wing populism, we propose to explore two aspects that we assume are interconnected: gender performance structuring the populist style and ideology. Our investigation has a twofold focus: Rita Matias Parliamentary interventions, between March 29<sup>th</sup> and September 30<sup>th</sup>; and journalistic texts, concerning her declarations, published between February 1st and September 30th, 2022. As a conclusion, we point out that the declaration of anti-feminism made during the campaign brought, both to the media and to Parliament, a new angle that had not yet been explored and embodies the populist style and radical right-wing ideology of Chega for gender's issues.

**Keywords:** populism, feminism, gender, parliament, Chega, media

**Resumo:** Nas eleições legislativas portuguesas de 2022, em Portugal, o Chega, um partido da direita radical populista e antissistema, conquistou 7,18% dos votos e 12 mandatos, tornando-se a terceira maior força parlamentar da 15.<sup>a</sup> Legislatura. Uma única mulher, Rita Matias, faz parte do grupo parlamentar e é a mais jovem deputada do hemiciclo. Durante a campanha eleitoral, Rita Matias afirmou-se como antifeminista, declaração que lhe granjeou atenção pública e mediática após a eleição. Neste capítulo o propósito é compreender a relevância e o significado deste posicionamento no quadro mais amplo da ligação entre género e populismo e perceber em que medida esta orientação contribui para fixar o projeto político-ideológico do Chega. Para procurar estabelecer esta relação entre género e populismo de direita, propomo-nos explorar duas vertentes que pressupomos interligadas: a performance de género estruturando o estilo populista e a ideologia. A investigação tem um duplo foco: as intervenções parlamentares de Rita Matias entre 29 de março a 30 de setembro; as peças jornalísticas, publicadas entre 1 de fevereiro a 30 de setembro de 2022, centradas na figura da deputada. Como conclusão assinalamos que a declaração de antifeminismo feita durante a campanha trouxe, tanto para os media, como para o Parlamento, um novo ângulo que ainda não tinha sido explorado e dá corpo ao estilo populista e ideologia de direita radical do Chega para as questões de género.

**Palavras-chave:** populismo, feminismo, género, Chega, parlamento, media

## Introduction

In the parliamentary election held on 30 January 2022 in Portugal, Chega [TN: meaning “Enough”], a populist and anti-establishment party of the radical right, won 7.18% of the votes and 12 seats in Parliament, becoming the third major political force of the 15th Legislature, which began on 29 March of that year. Its 12 Members of Parliament (MPs) include only one woman, Rita Matias, who is also the youngest MP in the Chamber. During the election campaign, Rita Matias presented herself as an anti-feminist, a statement that gained public and media attention after her election into public office.

In a debate with Joana Amaral Dias<sup>1</sup> broadcasted on CNN Portugal on 1 February 2022, she was confronted by the news anchor with the question “What does it mean to be a woman and an anti-feminist?”. She clarified her point of view:

Feminism puts us in this position where men and women are in opposition to each other, and it holds us hostage of a narrative in which any complementarity that might exist between men and women is undervalued. There is a need for more women in the public space who defend women in a different way, from a more conservative perspective. (...) The greatest antagonism lies in it being a Marxist movement, a movement that divides society into «us» and «them». It is a movement that often puts women and men in opposition to each other.<sup>2</sup>

This statement was harshly commented on and problematized by her interlocutor, and it was reproduced in various media outlets and social media platforms.

In this chapter, we seek to understand the relevance and meaning of these statements within the broader context of the connection between gender and populism and the extent to which this stance contributes to the definition of the political and ideological project of Chega.

It is hypothesized that, in the case of Chega, a genderized populism has emerged in connection with a right-wing ideology that is expressed, precisely, in anti-gender and anti-feminist views. The controversial and disruptive statement of Rita Matias elicited opposition and journalistic scrutiny, which catapulted the young MP to the media stage.

Until recently, the connection between gender and populism in this political party was dominated by the aggressive and sexist male performance of its leader, André Ventura, expressing a model of hegemonic masculinity whose preferred target were emancipated and empowered left-wing female politicians (Martins, Cabrera and Cunha, 2021; 2022).

We anticipate that the statement of anti-feminism of Rita Matias is strategic in nature, while also raising, at the political level, issues related to women and gender equality. The following questions will serve as guidelines for this research:

- Is Rita Matias seeking to polemicize with feminism as a communication strategy to ensure she obtains visibility in the media due to the value of conflict?
- Is the category of gender suitable for the pursuit of the political and ideological goals of Chega, helping to consolidate the party’s conservative background?
- To what extent is the strategic nature of an anti-feminist stance problematic when, at the same time, one claims to support women’s causes?
- Has there been an appropriation of women’s causes, by bringing them into the

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1 Joana Amaral Dias was intervening as a resident commentator on political and social issues at CNN Portugal.

2 Rita Matias on CNN Portugal with Joana Amaral Dias [https://m.facebook.com/watch/?v=333653425289342&\\_rdr](https://m.facebook.com/watch/?v=333653425289342&_rdr)

framework of anti-feminism and drawing a distinction between the defence of women and feminism?

Methodologically, we propose an exploratory study centred on the interventions of Rita Matias in these two different arenas, the Parliament and the media.

- On the one hand, we see parliamentary debates as permitting more complete and comprehensive argumentation, which makes it possible to observe populism as it manifests in the various dimensions identified in the literature (ideology, logic / discourse, communication style and mobilization strategy).
- On the other hand, we see the media as an essential dimension, assuming that contemporary populism is framed by an increasing mediatization of politics and an intensification of the performative nature of this sphere (Moffitt and Tormey 2013; Moffitt 2014; Moffitt 2016).

We identify the discursive elements in which Rita Matias develops her concept of anti-feminism, expresses her view of the social order with family at its core, describes the family model she advocates and proposes measures to fight a “demographic winter” and boost the birth rate.

Attention is paid to whether these discourses conform to the three key features of populism as a style: i) an appeal to the “people” versus the “elite”; ii), including “bad manners”; iii) constantly evoking the crisis and collapse of an era (Moffitt and Tormey 2013; Moffitt 2016).

### **Populism and gender**

Feeding on citizens’ discontent, populism has been spreading all across Europe and presenting several common features that contribute to its popularity (Mazzoleni, 2008, 2015). What populism shares with democracy is the people. The people are the object of desire, dispute and controversy. That is because, in a democracy, the people are the citizens who have rights and duties and are equal in the eyes of the law. Populists have a different view of the people, whom they equate with the nation and the sharing of the same territory, the same traditions and the same history (Pasquino, 2005) and see as a homogenous mass.

Populists do not represent the people — they see themselves as the people. They present charismatic political leaderships and media skills, which earn them high visibility in that realm. As argued by Mazzoleni (2008, p. 50), “personal charisma and media savvy have thus played a significant part in the origins and subsequent construction of populist movements”. As Helder Prior supposes (2022), the media have been essential for the omnipresence of populism in contemporary democracies. Populist politicians present themselves as speaking for the people, embodying their frustration, anger and outrage. This means they must be remarkable news makers, as argued by Rita Figueiras (2020).

However, the media sometimes interpret and offer a critical tone to the statements and attitudes of populists. This has happened particularly in election coverage or regarding the pandemic (Martins, Cabrera and Cunha, 2021, 2022). André Ventura and his party Chega escaped unscathed from this criticism because, as noted by Mazzoleni (2008) and Mazzoleni and Schulz (1999), the media are associated with elite structures and thus discredited by populists in anti-media and anti-journalist narratives, especially on social media, which are their communication platforms of choice.

The interplay between gender and populism, however, is complex and not always obvious, and it remains an understudied area in the research related to populism. For Mudde and Kaltwasser (2015, p. 17), conceptually, “populism has no specific relationship to gender; in fact, gender differences, like all other differences within ‘the people’, are considered secondary, if not irrelevant, to populist politics”. The fundamental difference is established between the “people” and the “elite”.

However, Dorit Geva (2020), in her research on Marine Le Pen, the leader of the Rassemblement Nationale (France), argues that contemporary populism is deeply gendered and that it is crucial to distinguish between populism and radical-right ideologies within the populist radical right. She contends that “the gendered symbolism and performances structuring contemporary populism help tie together nativist radical-right ideologies to populism” (Geva, 2020, p.2). According to Dietze and Roth, certain peculiarities of the populist right-wing discourse “stage gender as a central arena for polarizations” (2020, p. 10). They also assert that “the emergent field of research on right-wing populism and gender has a strong affinity with the already established research on masculinity related to the subject” (Dietze and Roth, 2020, p.13).

As argued by Geva (2020, pp. 7-8), “heightened hegemonic masculinity is essential to the performance of populism as a contrast to ‘effeminate’ political elites”.

It cannot be ignored that “populist actors do not operate in a cultural or ideological vacuum. So perhaps it is the national culture and broader ideology used by populists that determine their gender position”, contend Mudde and Kaltwasser (2015, p.17).

At a time when, as emphasized, populism is spreading all across Europe, it is possible to observe an identitarian background that cuts across all populist parties and is reflected in their principles and political strategies. Anti-feminism and anti-gender are brandished as a significant part of their fight against liberalism and democracy. The aim is to establish an ultraconservative agenda under the guise of defence of a majority oppressed by a corrupt elite (Graff and Korolczuk, 2022).

Dietze and Roth (2020, p. 7) point out that “a common feature can be observed in all current versions of right-wing populism: an ‘obsession with gender’ and sexuality in different arenas. Populist actors conjure up the heteronormative nuclear family as the model of social organization, attack reproductive rights, question sex education, criticize a so-called ‘gender

ideology,' reject same-sex marriage and seek to re-install biologically understood binary gender differences”.

### **The conservative background of the Chega party**

Chega was founded in Portugal in April 2019. It is ideologically defined as a populist radical-right party, nationalist and anti-establishment. It is a member of the European alliance Identity and Democracy, a group of nationalist radical-right political parties represented in the European Parliament<sup>3</sup>.

In the parliamentary election of 30 January 2022, it obtained very favourable results. In the previous parliamentary election, in October 2019, the year of its foundation, it had won 1.29% of the votes and elected one MP<sup>4</sup>, its own leader. In 2022, although the Socialist Party (PS) achieved an absolute majority, followed by the social democrats (PSD), Chega went from being represented by only one MP to having a parliamentary group with 12 MPs and a representation of 7.18%.

Chega's results, and those of a new political force called the Liberal Initiative (IL), were both part of a reconfiguration of the Portuguese political party framework, as they contributed to bringing to an end the parliamentary representation of the People's Party (CDS-PP), a right-wing party with a Catholic affiliation that was traditionally part of the governance arch through an alliance with PSD. By becoming the third and fourth political forces in terms of parliamentary representation, those parties pushed the Left Bloc and the Communist Party, respectively, to fifth and sixth place in the Assembly of the Republic, with a very reduced parliamentary presence, of four (4.4%) and six MPs (4.3%), respectively.

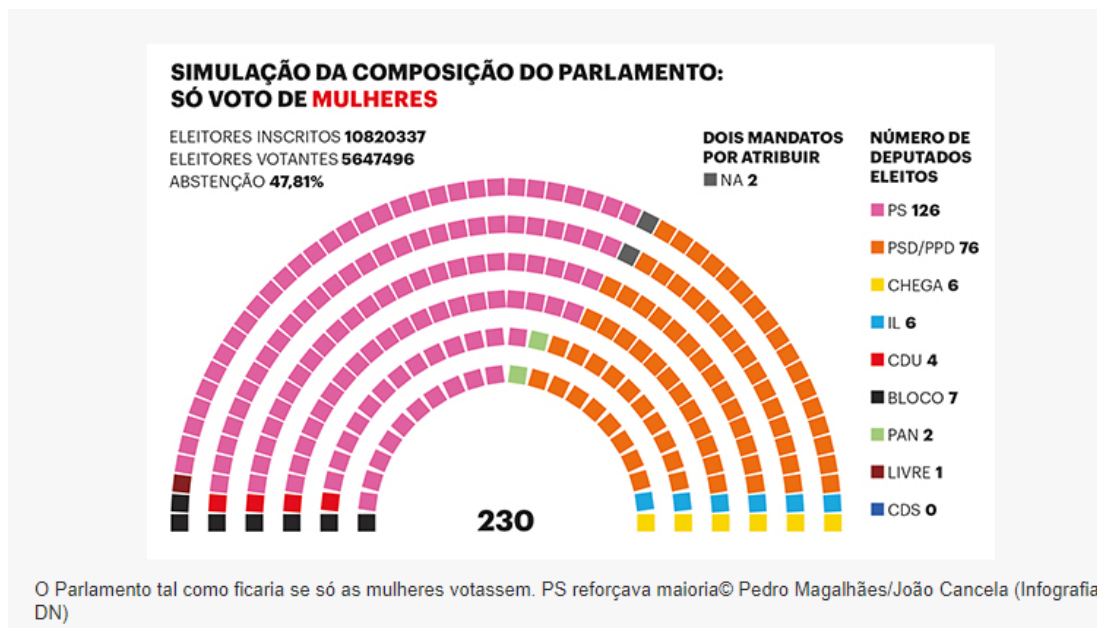
From the point of view of the electoral behaviour in the 2022 parliamentary election, the available data point, for the first time, to a gender gap — ‘a female vote more left-leaning than the male vote’, in the interpretation of Pedro Magalhães and João Cancela (João Pedro Henriques, DN, 20-2-2022). Chega was the most masculine of all the parties, with almost two in three voters being men (*Ibidem*).

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3 This group includes Lega (Italy), Rassemblement National (France), Alternative für Deutschland, Dansk Folkeparti (Germany), Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs (Austria), Vlaams Belang (Flanders), Svoboda a přímá demokracie (Czech Republic), Eesti Konservatiivne Rahvaerakond (Estonia), Perussuomalaiset (Finland) and Partij voor de Vrijheid (Netherlands).

4 It participated in the 2019 European elections as part of the Basta! coalition [TN: also meaning “Enough”].

**Figure 1**  
Simulation of the composition of the Parliament — Only with the votes from women Socialist Party would strengthen its absolute majority



Source: João Pedro Henriques, Raio X eleitoral. Quem fez a maioria absoluta do PS?, *Diário de Notícias*, 20-2-2022

These analyses align with the patterns already identified in the research. According to the analysis of Geva (2020), voters' sex is considered important in predicting support for radical-right wing parties, which are more likely to garner support among males.

Chega is characterized by a conservative ideological background that is expressed in the values it supports. Looking at its political programme<sup>5</sup>, one of the principles affirmed in it is “the inviolability of human life in all its stages and dimensions, with all the legal consequences resulting therefrom”.

The family is placed “at the core of its view of society”; it is “the basic structure of Society”; the “meaning of social life depends, first and foremost, on the Family”. One of the limits for the State is the “Limit deriving from the recognition of the core role of the family as the primary instance of Power”, where “the essential part of the autonomy in the relations between Society and the State should be concentrated, meaning that only what cannot be decided nor executed within the family shall fall within the scope of the successively broader higher levels”.

<sup>5</sup> See [https://partidochega.pt/index.php/programa\\_politico/](https://partidochega.pt/index.php/programa_politico/) Accessed on 1 November 2022.

“Family and Births” is one of the chapters of the programme, containing a proposal for the creation of a “Ministry of Family”, with the aim of “restoring the family, as well as its role in the education of children, to the central position that belongs to it”.

The concept of family that is defended is the “natural” one, “based on an intimate relationship between a man and a woman, a psychosociological and socioeconomic reality that predates the State and is historically stable and humanly irreplaceable. In it, life and a host of affective, emotional and behavioural balances, as well as knowledge, tradition and heritage, that support the dignity and prosperity of individuals and of the peoples are transmitted”.

The birth policies are based on nativism, in the sense that they are exclusive to “cases where both parents are Portuguese nationals born in Portugal and officially residing in Portugal”.

This orientation of their programme denotes permeability to the formal positions of the Catholic Church concerning “gender ideology”. In the Vatican’s 2019 document “Male and Female He Created Them”<sup>6</sup>, about ideology of gender in education, the central nature of the biological difference between men and women is highlighted. In it, it is argued:

The disorientation regarding anthropology which is a widespread feature of our cultural landscape has undoubtedly helped to destabilise the family as an institution, bringing with it a tendency to cancel out the differences between men and women (...). The context in which the mission of education is carried out is characterized by challenges emerging from varying forms of an ideology that is given the general name ‘gender theory’, which denies the difference and reciprocity in nature of a man and a woman and envisages a society without sexual differences, thereby eliminating the anthropological basis of the family.

In a study about the Portuguese case, Alberta Giorgi (2020) notes that, even though the majority of the population is Catholic, very progressive legislation about gender equality has been adopted. In Portugal, there is a strict separation between matters of the State and matters of the Church (Cabrera, 2021). Matters pertaining to sexuality, procreation and women’s rights have become horizontal and mainstream. However, Giorgi wonders how gender equality has transformed into “gender ideology” in Portugal. The main point of contention relates to the provision of sex education in schools and, specifically, to the subject of Citizenship Education, which is seen as a way of indoctrinating young people. The parallel drawn between the positions of the Vatican and those of the Episcopal Conference of Portugal is quite pertinent. On November 2013, the Episcopal Conference of Portugal (CEP) published a pastoral letter on the subject, stating that gender ideology, a term that the hierarchy of the

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6 See [https://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/ccatheduc/documents/rc\\_con\\_ccatheduc\\_doc\\_20190202\\_maschio-e-femmina\\_po.pdf](https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccatheduc/documents/rc_con_ccatheduc_doc_20190202_maschio-e-femmina_po.pdf)

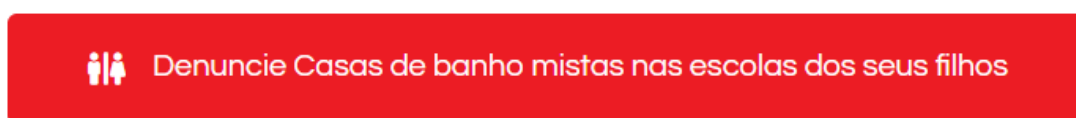


Catholic Church adopted that year, aims to cause an “anthropological revolution”, relegating sexual identity as a “natural and biological condition” to a secondary place. Alberta Giorgi (2020) traces the course of the events that were most debated in the Portuguese Parliament and shows how, at the same time, the Church, which until then had refrained from any direct intervention on the matter, made a move through the CEP and raised support among various conservative Catholic groups, especially after the election of cardinal Manuel Clemente as Cardinal-Patriarch of Lisbon. These civil society groups, stemming from different Catholic trends, were the ones that led the process, contesting the measures related to gender equality.

This debate served as a great source of inspiration for populist right-wing political parties, which took these ideals as their own, defending them in polarized speeches around feminism and gender.

Chega and its militants reject the concept of gender and all it contains in terms of diversity, characterizing it as an ideology, emptying it of all the scientific *repertoire* in which it is grounded, disregarding international institutions such as the United Nations, the World Health Organization and the European Union, contesting human rights and opposing the fundamental freedoms of choice and bodily autonomy. Florence Rochefort (2020, p.10) notes that this attitude cannot be dissociated from the Catholic fundamentalist identitarian reactions that oppose sexual freedoms and fuel forms of populism looking to restore what is considered a legitimate hegemony. Adversaries of the concept of gender “interpret it as ‘totalitarian theory’ that promotes the erosion of fundamental values like those of the family and the natural social order”.

Within the scope of the Portuguese law of 2019 that lays down “the right to self-determination of gender identity and gender expression and the right to the protection of each person’s sexual characteristics”, the parliamentary groups of PS and BE, in September and October 2022, respectively, submitted draft legislation to regulate the implementation of this legal act in school settings. On Chega’s *website* the following invitation is permanently available:



**Figure 2**

Message posted on Chega’s website: “Report mixed bathrooms in your children’s schools”

Some of Chega's legislative initiatives during the legislature that began in 2022 focus on matters of education and teaching. As an example:

- Draft law 101/XV/1: New legal rules on teaching and on the organization of the subject and curricular area of Citizenship and Development (CD) in basic and secondary schools (1-6-2022)
- Draft Resolution 72/XV/1: Recommends to the Government that the name Ministry of Education (*Ministério da Educação*) be changed to Ministry of Schooling (*Ministério do Ensino*) (1-6-2022)
- Draft Resolution 96/XV/1: For the immediate suspension of the use of Caderno PRESSE 3º ciclo [TN: teacher's handbook] in all public and private schools (9-6-2022)

### **Empirical study**

As mentioned above, the 12 MPs elected by Chega include only one woman, Rita Matias. During the election campaign, the youngest MP in the Chamber presented herself as an anti-feminist, labelling feminism as a “Marxist movement” that puts men and women in opposition to each other.

Our aim is to understand the relevance and meaning of these statements within the broader context of the connection between gender and populism and the extent to which this stance contributes to the definition of Chega's political and ideological project. In order to establish this connection between gender and right-wing populism, we propose to explore two aspects that we assume to be intertwined:

- a) The gender performance that structures the populist style;
- b) The ideology

To implement this approach, we conduct, still at an exploratory level, an empirical analysis centred on Rita Matias, MP, and based on two axes:

1. Selection of extracts from parliamentary speeches delivered since the start of the current legislature (15th), on 29 March 2022, until 30 September of the same year, on the subject of women, women's rights, education, gender ideology and family. An attempt is made to take note, within the political discussion of specific themes and draft legislation, of the elements that characterize the political programme of Chega regarding these matters.
2. Analysis of news items focused on the person, ideas and parliamentary speeches of Rita Matias (1 February to 30 September 2022). In analysing these items, the

thematic focus is on matters related to the concept of feminism, women's rights, gender ideology and family.

### **Analysis of parliamentary speeches (29 March to 30 September 2022)**

The analysis of the parliamentary speeches given by Rita Matias focused on the plenary sittings of the Parliament; the selection of speeches was carried out by consulting the issues of the Official Journal of the Assembly of the Republic (*Diários da Assembleia da República* [TN: hereinafter, "DAR"]).

Considering the research question, six main themes were identified in these speeches: Violence against women (13-4-2022); Proposal for a menstrual leave (24-5-2022); "Demographic winter" (25-5-2022); Prostitution (1-6-2022); Gender ideology (8-4-2022; 7-7-2022); Female political leadership (24-9-2022).

#### Sexual violence against women

In the sitting of 13 April 2022, Chega takes part in the debate about the harassment of women, raised by a case reported at the School of Law of the University of Lisbon and stemming from an initiative of the party Nature (PAN). Chega notes that it is the first time there is a discussion on "women" in the current legislature.

Allow me to strengthen the confidence of the Portuguese people and say that if they could count on André Ventura before, now they will be able to count on 11 more MPs, who will not treat women as mere objects, unlike other political forces seated here (...) that claim to advocate for women but look at them only when it is convenient and through their limiting and sometimes perverse ideological lenses (DAR no. 5, 14-4-2022, p. 43).

#### Proposal for a menstrual leave

In the debate of 24 May 2022, Chega rejects PAN's proposal to create a 3-day menstrual leave.

"As the Honourable Member [Inês Sousa Real, of PAN] well knows, women are already discriminated against for getting pregnant and becoming mothers, and now we are adding another factor of discrimination due to the fact that they menstruate (...). Therefore, all I want to say is that Chega is available to support any type of measure that is not indiscriminate and does not result in wage

loss. Can I tell you something, Honourable Member [Inês Sousa Real]? We do not need your foolish feminism that harms women to be the party that presented, under this State Budget, the highest number of proposals about women. Shame!” (DAR no. 15, of 25 May, pp. 13-14).

### “Demographic winter”

In the session of 27 April 2022, on the occasion of the 25th of April celebrations, she declares:

The “demographic winter”, “which is spreading like a pandemic and compromising, at an alarming rate, the pillars of our society, which are the family, the Homeland, Europe. (...) The decline of births in Portuguese maternity hospitals is the real structural challenge to the sustainability of our Country, to the preservation of our people, to the preservation of our culture and of our national identity”.

“(...) People try to muddle up concepts such as total, natural and migratory demographic change”.

She proposes different types of assistance to families, for example, for young people buying a house and exemptions from Social Security contributions for companies that hire women with children up to the age of 3 (only the mothers are mentioned). “It is urgent to adopt policies that favour life and family” (DAR no. 16, of 26 May, p. 59).

### Prostitution

In the session of 1 June 2022, she speaks about a petition to legalize prostitution in Portugal and/or decriminalize pandering, provided it does not involve coercion:

“I cannot but stress the incoherence of some of the people in this Chamber, who claim to fight against the objectification of women but turn a blind eye to a system in which women are categorized and valued either more or less based on their age, their race, their appearance and their physical characteristics. Let it be very clear that what we are pointing our finger at is this incoherent political class and, above all, a class that, over the last decades, was only able to hand out misery” (DAR no. 19, 2-6-2022, pp. 60-61).

## Gender ideology

In her very first parliamentary speech, on 8 April 2022, about the situation of young people, Rita Matias, MP, states the following: “Young Portuguese people do not need money to be wasted on schools subjects of an ideological nature” (DAR, no. 4, 9-4-2022, p. 55). And months later, when referring to the case of the Mesquita Guimarães family, in which the parents did not allow their two children to attend Citizenship and Development classes:

“Freedom of education does not exist in Portugal, at least not for everyone. Indeed, while we accept that some ethnicities and communities watch their young people abandon school in the name of tradition, the fact is that the Public Prosecution Service is following in line with the Ministry of Education, a line of bullying and persecution to a family whose only request is for their children not to be exposed to indoctrination in Portuguese schools” (DAR no. 31 7-7-2022, pp. 55-56).

## Female political leadership

Regarding the results of the parliamentary election in Italy on 25 September 2022, which brought a victory to the Fratelli d’Italia party, led by Giorgia Meloni, the MP criticizes PAN for not having a word to say about the election of

female leaders — which is ironic, coming from someone who calls herself a feminist —, claiming that these results, which, I stress again, stem from the will of the people, have brought gloomy times for democracy. (...) Hypocrisy also exists when the Honourable Member calls herself a «feminist» but is incapable of celebrating the historic achievement of Italy having, for the first time, a woman in the office of Prime Minister. (DAR no. 43, 29-9-2022 — p. 65; p. 69).

## Summary of the analysis of the parliamentary speeches

A thematic analysis of the parliamentary speeches of Rita Matias reveals a discourse that is built on opposition, on an aggressive and contentious style, framed by ideas of structural crisis and disruption. Chega brings solutions to restore order and stability.

The substantive and symbolic elements of the genderized performance that were identified could almost be outlined, like in our exercise in the table below, as a representation of a “civilizational clash”.

**Figure 3**  
Polarized gendered performance

“We” (Anti-feminists)	“They” (Feminists)
Confidence	Contribute to the objectification of women, turn women into mere objects
Protection of victims of sexual crimes	Other political forces claim to be advocates for women, but use them as means to an end Limiting and perverse ideological lenses
Legislative initiatives against domestic violence	Proposals for legislation (such as the 3-day menstrual leave) worsen discrimination and inequality against women
Party that presents the most proposals concerning women	Foolish and hypocritical feminism
Policies favourable to life and family	Incoherent political class, hands out misery
Births — key to preserving the people, culture and national identity Core: “natural” family, native, rejection of the immigration-based demographic change	Elites who are permissive with certain “ethnicities and communities” in the name of tradition, but impede freedom of education for native families
Companies should receive benefits for hiring mothers with children up to 3 years of age	Anti-democratic left (does not accept election results that it does not like)

### Analysis of the news coverage (1 February to 30 September 2022)

For the analysis of the journalistic representations of Rita Matias and her ideas, only interviews and news reports were considered; opinion pieces were excluded. In total, in the period between 1 February, the day after the parliamentary election, and 28 September 2022, 12 news items (9 news reports and 3 interviews) were found for the purposes of this analysis.

**Figure 4**  
News coverage of Rita Matias (1 February to 30 September 2022)

Journalistic medium	News report	Interview	Themes	Journalist’s tone
<i>Diário de Notícias</i>	3	1	Parliamentary debate: menstrual leave	Neutral
<i>Expresso</i>	1		Brief profile of the new MPs	Neutral
<i>Notícia ao Minuto</i>	2	1	The anti-feminism of Rita Matias	Neutral
<i>Observador</i>		1	Criticism of the PSD government; anti-abortion stance; pro-life under any circumstance	Cynical and provocative
<i>Público</i>	2		1. The central theme is higher education; the Minister concludes with criticism of the radicalism of students’ parents regarding the classes on citizenship and development, the radicalism of Rita Matias 2. Parliamentary debate: amendments to the sentencing range for crimes against animals. Rita Matias criticizes the radicalism of PAN’s proposal, claiming they have more concern for animals than for older persons	Neutral
<i>Visão</i>	1		Describes the interview that Rita Matias gave to <i>Observador</i> and to <i>Diário de Notícias</i> and the difference of opinion between her and Inês Sousa Real	Neutral
<b>Total</b>	9	3		

Three main thematic areas were identified in the news coverage: Anti-feminism; Voluntary termination of pregnancy; Conservative Catholic background.

### Anti-feminism

The question “What is your anti-feminism?” is asked by *Diário de Notícias* in an interview:

It is recognizing that feminism is a movement that has brought women certain social achievements — and I have no desire to go back on those achievements — while also recognizing that society was moving in that direction and therefore those achievements do not belong exclusively to these movements. The greatest antagonism lies in it being a Marxist movement, a movement that divides society into «us» and «them». It is a movement that often puts women and men in opposition to each other. First of all, because it compares them, and we must recognize that a man and a woman have different natures.

**Since you don't feel anti-feminist, if I were to call you a feminist what would I have to add?**

You would have to add without having any sense of inferiority in relation to men and without wishing for an equal role, but rather for an equitable role. There are rights that men have that I don't want to have. And there are still steps that need to be taken for women to enjoy greater recognition in society. Saying that we don't identify with the movement does not make us anti-women, like people often say to me. I could not wish for others what I don't wish for myself; a woman's place is wherever she wants it to be.

*Diário de Notícias*, Rita Matias: “There are rights that men have that I don't want to have”, 11-7-2022

### **Voluntary termination of pregnancy**

In an interview, the newspaper *Observador* confronts Rita Matias with extreme cases related to the voluntary termination of pregnancy:

**“What if a 10-year-old child becomes pregnant as a result of a rape, should she have an abortion?”**

I am deeply sorry and find it is absolutely regrettable and reprehensible that a child must face such a situation, and that makes me think of the work that we must still do to promote human dignity. What I do really want to emphasize is that often people try to push Chega into this image of a backwards party that is against women, but through our work in the Assembly of the Republic we have presented alternatives”.

*Observador*, Should a 10-year-old child who was the victim of a rape carry on with the pregnancy?  
“I am pro-life and feel sorry if a child is not allowed to be born”, 8-7-2022

### Conservative Catholic background

In the aforementioned interview she gave to *Diário de Notícias*, the MP acknowledges this conservative Catholic background:

I grew up in a Christian family that continues to profess faith in God and to live a life based, as much as possible, on the values that were passed on to me. A right-wing conservative, yes, without foolish nostalgia (*saudosismo*), a word often used here, without any longing for the past nor any attachment to old regimes, but indeed with respect for traditions and a willingness to acknowledge that society has known other ways of organizing itself, where respect was also present, where women also had a role to play.

*Diário de Notícias*, Rita Matias: “There are rights that men have that I don’t want”, 11-7-2022



**Figure 5**  
Interview of Rita Matias to *Diário de Notícias*:  
“There are rights that men have that I don’t want to have”  
Source: *Diário de Notícias*, 11-7-2022

### **Discussion**

Based on the analysis of the parliamentary speeches and of the news coverage in which Rita Matias appears as the protagonist, it is possible to outline this candidate’s profile. Her statement of anti-feminism still during the campaign prompted a debate about this issue in the media and in Parliament and the development of an angle that the Chega party had not yet explored. More specifically, the analysis makes it possible to identify, on the one hand, a political performance that embodies a substantive representation as a woman and, on the other, the strategic appropriation of female, feminist and gender identity issues within the framework of an anti-feminist stance.

Populism is present in the discourse of Rita Matias, in which there is a “we” (the people) versus the “elite”. The elite that she attacks or clashes with is also seen from a gender



perspective — the elite represents a “hypocritical, foolish” feminism. It is in polarized positions regarding gender that anti-feminism is associated with gender ideology, the defence of the heteronormative family and nativism.

Therefore, the anti-feminism of Rita Matias was strategic in that it raised the subject and then took small steps back that consolidated her arguments: the need for other voices that defend women from a conservative perspective; making an abusive generalization of the reality of feminism, it pushed feminists into the realm of Marxist theories and practices, to which it is clearly opposed.

There is a very obvious strategy aimed at breaking the indissociable link between feminist movements and women’s causes, by politically appropriating certain claims pertaining to the female universe, which are recontextualized within the framework of anti-feminism. Rita Matias seeks to represent a certain modernity, but one that is conservative. It does not antagonize the achievements of equality (social and cultural context), “a woman’s place is where she wants it to be”, but it restricts that progress to a view of the family that is conservative and based on traditional gender roles. The binary view of gender reasserts the biological difference between men and women as a foundation, revealing the influence of the formal positions of the Catholic Church in Chega’s ideological background.

In Parliament, Rita Matias speaks on behalf of women who are vulnerable, for instance, in situations in which they are victims of domestic abuse, guaranteeing that Chega will not treat them as mere objects, unlike other political forces that are limited by their ideological views cleverly associated with feminism. As an example, Rita Matias opposed the proposal of PAN’s MP, Inês Sousa Real, to create a menstrual leave. With truculent language, she emphasizes the worsening of the wage gap and of other instances of discrimination and affirms that Chega is available to adopt any measures that will undo situations of inequality. It is on subject of the low birth rate in Portugal and in the European countries that she introduces the subjects of Education and Schooling. This MP, much like her party, contends that Education should be separated from Schooling. While the latter should be the State’s responsibility, the former should lie exclusively with the family, viewed as a core social institution. This is the ground for the fierce opposition to the subject of Citizenship Education taught in basic and secondary education, which is perceived as a process of indoctrination based on what she categorizes as “gender ideology”. Thus, she expresses solidarity regarding the court case involving the Mesquita Guimarães family, using gender as “symbolic glue” (Kováts/Põim 2015). The “demographic winter” also serves as a pretext for suggesting links to the “great replacement” theories and supporting the nativist ideals reflected in the party’s programme.

Thus, presenting herself as a woman (and a young person) and as a representative of this group, Rita Matias embodies the connection between a clearly defined gender perspective, the populist style and the radical-right ideology of Chega. The emergence of a genderized populism under these specific circumstances is instrumental in supporting the foundational

aspects of Chega's political programme, which has obtained visibility in the media due to the values of conflict and controversy. This argumentative logic is repeated whenever she speaks in the Chamber.

Dietze and Roth (2020, p. 13) argue that almost all formations of the populist right claim to stand for a "new" and "other" modernity. Traditional values are rearranged into a new narrative — and Bauman's concept of "retrotopia" (2017) is applicable, expressing the visions of the future anchored in an idealized past. Simon Schleusener (2020, p. 185) explores the notion of "retrotopian desire", prominently articulated in the arena of gender, where it resonates with antifeminist impulses, the idealization of old-school masculinity, and calls for a return to traditional gender norms.

We also bear in mind what Dietze and Roth anticipated, that an important dimension of the research on right-wing populism is the observation that populism is not only concerned with gender as an issue itself but also with gender "as a meta-language for negotiating different conditions of inequality and power in the context of current struggles over hegemony, and over resources forged by neoliberalism" (2020, p. 8).

The main driver of the visibility of Rita Matias in the media was her statement of anti-feminism still during the election campaign, and the fact that she was elected shone a spotlight on this statement. Nevertheless, the news coverage is sporadic and essentially focused on her anti-feminism, more than on the parliamentary debates. She is not a central figure in the party, unlike the leader himself, who usually concentrates all the protagonism in the media. Most of the news items that focus on Rita Matias come from other sources, such as a news agency, replicating what is on the agenda, except for the interviews. In the items included in the corpus of news reports, the journalists' tone is generally neutral; this trend is broken only in interviews, where there is a direct interaction with the protagonist. In fact, only one interview, in which the goal was to know more about the person and her ideas, exhibits a more confrontational style.

It is possible that the news coverage around Rita Matias is inconsistent and, on a more substantive level, with little scrutiny of anti-feminist statements, of pro-life stances and views opposed to gender diversity that are made absolute, and that thus potentially attack well-established fundamental values related to human dignity and human rights, liberties and guarantees.

In our opinion, it would be relevant to extend the empirical analysis to hybrid media environments and even unmediated communication contexts, in online platforms such as social media, where radical-right wing parties communicate directly with their supporters and obtain strong engagement.

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- DAR no. 5, 14-4-2022, 1.ª Série, p. 43 (XV Legislature)
- DAR no. 15, 25-5-2022, 1.ª Série, pp. 13-14 (XV Legislature)
- DAR no. 16, 26-5-2022, 1.ª Série, p. 59 (XV Legislature)
- DAR no. 19, 2-6-2022, 1.ª Série, pp. 60-61 (XV Legislature)
- DAR, no. 4, 9-4-2022, 1.ª Série, p. 55 (XV Legislature)
- DAR no. 31 7-7-2022, 1.ª Série, p. 55-56 (XV Legislature)
- DAR no. 43, 29-9-2022, 1.ª Série, p. 65; p. 69 (XV Legislature)