

From Providential to Populist Leadership? The Case of Portugal's Opposition Leader, Rui Rio

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Abstract

Rui Rio was elected leader of Portugal's centre-right PSD party in January 2018 and has been increasingly questioned since. This article, based on a both micro and macro analysis of four public statements by Rio between 2017 and 2021, attempts to assess his initial ambition to appear as a providential leader, following authors such as Girardet (1986), Dorna (2012) or Garrigues (2012). At the same time, through an essentially transdisciplinary approach, the objective is to analyse Rio's evolution throughout the period, including how the failure of the original intentions to appear as a providential leader has led to an increasing temptation to lean towards a style usually associated with populist leaders, as defined by authors like Mudde (2017), Laclau (2005) or Moffitt (2016). All in all, this article sets to identify and analyse the connection between providential leadership and populism and its implications in terms of commitment to democratic values. Its main conclusions tend to reveal that Rio's failure to impose his providential style inevitably leads to a growing proximity with populism, both in style and essence.

Keywords: charismatic leadership; providential leadership; populism; political discourse.

Introduction

Following his party's defeat in the October 2017 local elections,¹ Pedro Passos Coelho, former Portuguese Prime Minister, announces his decision to step down as leader of the centre-right and main opposition party, *Partido Social Democrata* (PSD). A few days later, Rui Rio, a former mayor of Oporto who has carefully kept away from the national political life since the late 1990s, announces his intention to run for the party's leadership in the upcoming party conference. Throughout the campaign, many questions are raised in the media about Rio's propensity for authoritarianism, his real aptitude for the job, or an alleged tendency towards

¹ With an overall 16.07% of the vote nationally, the party lost some of the country's biggest and most symbolic cities such as Lisbon, Oporto and Coimbra.

populism.² especially coming from supporters of Pedro Santana Lopes, long-time rival and main opponent in the election.

Indeed, since his election as party leader in February 2018, Rio's tenure as PSD leader can hardly be described as smooth sailing due to the number of critical voices both outside and within his own party. In particular, his unique style of leadership has led to a growing number of critical voices made louder by successive electoral results far below initial expectations. Common accusations of lack of charisma, of providential ambitions, or of populist temptations are at the heart of this study, which undertakes to understand the distinction between charismatic and providential styles of leadership and the possible implications of each in a context of growing populism. In this respect, and because he is at the head of one of Portugal's two major mainstream political parties, Rui Rio may be seen as a particularly suitable case study.

The main objectives of this article are to determine to what extent Rui Rio can be seen as a charismatic or providential politician and whether his discursive style can be considered populist. Besides, through the analysis of Rui Rio's case, it aims to distinguish the concepts of charismatic and providential leadership while assessing what each of them implies in terms of democratic commitment, thus determining their potentially populist consequences.

As political speeches constitute the first expression of the political discourse (Charaudeau 2014: 29), four public statements delivered by the leader of the main opposition party were chosen as objects of study: the announcement of his candidacy for the position of party leader (October 2017), a speech delivered in a political rally to support his party's candidate in regional elections in Madeira (January 2019), a press conference (with questions) to communicate the main results of a meeting with the Portuguese Confederation of Industry (November 2020) and another press conference (without questions) to comment on the judge's initial decision on the corruption trial involving the former socialist Prime Minister, José Sócrates (*Operação Marquês*, April 2021). The fact that these statements, considered in their written versions, were delivered at different times, in different political contexts and within different formats, which implies considerable variations in terms of preparation, spontaneity

² For example in articles such as "O pequeno ditador do PPD/PSD" in the *Sábado* magazine on 16th February 2018 or "Rui Rio é um estadista ou um populista?" in the *Eco* newspaper on 7th September 2018. In the *Diário de Notícias* newspaper of 12th January, Rui Rio, is accused of "adopting a moral and providential style".

and style, was deemed suitable to assess Rio's charismatic or providential style and potential populist features.

In its theoretical perspective, this article stems from the general theories of the Critical Discourse Analysis, developed by authors such as Fairclough and Fairclough (2012) or Wodak (2009, 2013), and relies more specifically on a discourse analysis that is based on a socio-historical rather than exclusively linguistic understanding (Angermüller, Maingueneau & Wodak 2014: 2). As far as charismatic and providential leaderships are concerned, beyond studies focused on the recent evolution of the charismatic leadership first defined in Weber's pioneer works, such as Eatwell (2006), Monod (2017) or Pappas (2016), special emphasis has been given to specialists of the French tradition of providential leadership such as Garrigues (2012), Girardet (1986) and Dorna (2012) in order to find possible similarities within the context of the Portuguese democratic regime. As for populism, in the absence of a consensual concept, priority has been given to a broad definition of its main features based on some of the most relevant observers of this phenomenon such as Judis (2016), Laclau (2005), Moffitt (2016), Mouffe (2018), Mudde & Kaltwasser (2017) or Müller (2016).

Considering that textual analysis is, in itself, limited for our purpose (Fairclough 2010: 15), and that our aims go beyond communication (Maingueneau 2014: 28), it is essential to combine a micro analysis, based on the text itself, with a macro analysis meant to deconstruct the discursive representations embodied by the political power and its implications (Fairclough 2010: 15, 16). Thus, the most essential tool to achieve the objectives of this project is a transdisciplinary approach to provide a complete analysis of how political power, through the expression of its actors' ethos (Charaudeau 2014: 87), chooses to provide the Nation with an image of itself, and what the consequences are in terms of commitment to the rules of democratic regimes.

These issues make all the more sense nowadays as many doubts about types of leadership have accompanied the recent growth of populist movements around the world (Badie & Vidal, 2019). In other words, the emergence of new types of political leadership and the increasing personalisation of politics have revealed the lack of adequate terms to refer to various qualities that the leader embodies (Eatwell, 2006). Hence, the necessity to confront various perspectives, methods and areas of knowledge, such as political sciences, philosophy, history, sociology, and linguistics, among others.

Considering that the concepts of charismatic and providential leadership are often used to refer to politicians who allegedly share a set of features such as impressive oratorical abilities, a colourful personality and overall inspiring leadership skills (Moffitt 2016: 57-63), that the term populism often lacks a consensual definition (Müller 2016: 2) this article will first attempt to provide a theoretical framework in which the concepts of charismatic and providential leadership, as well as populism, are defined and interconnected, with special emphasis on the extent to which they may be considered compatible with democratic values and whether they may be apparent in political discourse. Having done that, the selected corpus will be analysed to determine to what extent Rui Rio may fit into one or another of these categories and, by doing so, to assess his unique style of leadership and real commitment to democratic values.

1. Theoretical framework

The usual confusion between the concepts of charismatic and providential leadership, and the need to articulate both with the question of populism, which has been the centre of attention in most European countries, including Portugal in recent years,³ make it important to start by bringing some clarification to the terms essential to this analysis.

1.1 Charismatic and providential leadership

Most definitions of charisma and charismatic leadership stem from Weber's pioneering works on the various forms of domination, in which the broad concept of domination is defined as the will of the leader to seek to influence the action of his subordinates, basing this obedience not on strength or threat but on the subordinate's interest in complying with the authority (Weber 1995: 285). The German sociologist distinguishes between three types of domination: traditional, which relies on "customs sanctified by their immemorial validity and by the habit, rooted in men, to respect them" (Weber 1963: 126); legal or rational, in which a hierarchic system of laws, rules and functions provides the leader with a clearly defined administrative authority (Weber 2015: 63-66); and charismatic, which can be defined as the combination of an exceptional gift and a sense of divine mission in times of crisis, be it physical, economic, ethical, religious or political, with the manner in which this quality is naturally accepted by those who willingly submit to it (*Ibid.*, 270).

³ While, until recently, "populism (had) paid less electoral dividends in Portugal than in other comparable countries", (Salgado 2018, p. 260), André Ventura's national populist *Chega* (Enough) party won its first MP at the Lisbon Parliament in the October 2019 general election.

Charismatic leadership has acquired a growing importance in modern times and relies on the individual quality of charisma, which is defined by Weber as “the extraordinary quality of a character who is gifted with supernatural or superhuman forces or features unreachable by common people, or who is considered to have been sent by God as an example, and is consequently treated as the chief (*fürher*)” (Weber 1995: 320). Because the concept of charismatic political leadership remains very much open, a list of potentially charismatic leaders throughout history would be endless, which may explain why some authors, feeling the need to distinguish between different forms of charisma, have proposed their own typology of charismatic leadership. Among other examples, one may quote Dorna (2012: 84-94) and his six categories of charisma (messianic, Caesarist, authoritarian, popular, republican and negative) or Charaudeau’s (2014: 7-13) five types (messianic, Caesarist, enigmatic, wise and *alma mater*). Overall, however, one cannot help but feel that, because of its very nature and of the vagueness of the term itself (Pappas 2016: 1), charisma remains a very loose concept within which very different types of leadership may fit. Above all, the very different commitment to democracy shown by some of these leaders makes it all the more necessary to distinguish between various types of political charisma.

At this stage, Monod provides a useful and essential distinction between two separate types of charisma and the implications of each in terms of democratic rule. According to Monod (2017, pp. 14-16), in societies where the selection of political leaders essentially relies on individual charisma, a clear-cut distinction must be made between a truly democratic charisma and another form of charisma, which he calls demagogic charisma, which only respects the rules of democracy insofar as they serve the leader’s search for legitimacy. As such, as Monod explains, while charisma may in itself be perfectly compatible with democracy, the very concept of providential leadership is by nature demagogic and, as such, potentially autocratic.

Based on important characters at crucial times in French history, French authors such as Girardet (1986), Fischer (2009), Garrigues (2012) and Dorna (2012) have introduced and developed the concept of providential leader (*l’homme providentiel*), which seems applicable in other political, social and cultural contexts (Garrigues 2012: 13). From Napoleon to de Gaulle, from Pétain to Macron, France seems to have always provided a fertile ground for the emergence of providential men, particularly since the beginning of the Fifth Republic in 1958 (Winock 2019: 118, 119; Garrigues 2020: 148-150).

Raoul Girardet (1986: 63-95), identifies six necessary conditions for the providential figure to emerge:

- a. A situation of crisis, be it real, exaggerated or imaginary, which will allow the leader to appear as a potential saviour;
- b. The leader's unambiguous empathy with the people as a whole from whom he/she will receive his motivation for action;
- c. The leader's demonstration of exceptional qualities of leadership that will allow him/her to stand out and distinguish himself/herself from potential rivals;
- d. The leader's emphasis on his/her willingness to sacrifice personal interests and to focus exclusively on the country's highest interest and common good;
- e. The leader's success in restoring order and the success of the mission for which he/she was initially appointed;
- f. As a direct result of this success, the leader's integration in the collective memory.

While the last two of these characteristics can be seen as the consequences of the actions of both charismatic and providential leaders, either directly, with the immediate success or failure of their action, or indirectly, with their place in the nation's collective memory, it is important to distinguish the other four. Girardet's steps b. and c. may also apply to either type of leadership insofar as they fit into the general concept of charisma defined by Weber and based on the people's willing submission to the leader's authority. The other two characteristics (a. and d. above) may be seen as referring more strictly to the providential leader insofar as they are entirely dependent on the fact that he/she ambitions, or has already reached, a position of power, therefore converting himself/herself into a providential solution to the nation's crisis.

Girardet, followed by Garrigues and Fischer, also proposes a typology of the providential leader based on four distinct profiles which he illustrates with references to famous historical characters.

Table 1: The four types of providential man (*homme providentiel*) according to Girardet (1986), Garrigues (2012) and Fischer (2009)

Name	Characteristics	Examples
Cincinnatus ⁴	Model of wisdom, firmness, dedication, experience, common sense and moderation; sacrifice of his/her own well-being, comfort and interest for the sake of the nation's higher interests.	Pétain in 1940, de Gaulle in 1958 ⁵
Alexandre (Caesar) ⁶	Symbol of the young, strong, impetuous, courageous and messiah-like military conqueror; legitimacy based on immediate action, not on past glory; extraordinary strength and courage to overtake every obstacle; unique capacity to submit people by appearing as the only opportunity to achieve their common expectations; symbol of strong executive power.	Napoleon I in 1797, de Gaulle in 1940 ⁷
Solon ⁸	Archetype of bureaucratic administration and legislation; sole ambition to establish the legal and constitutional bases of a new order; a reformer who uses his/her large political experience to break with the past and lead his/her nation towards its destiny; legitimacy and authority based on justice and political negotiation; symbol of legislative over executive power.	Pétain in 1940, de Gaulle from 1958 onwards
Moses (Pericles)	The archetype of the nation's prophet; inexorable link between own personal destiny and that of the nation; unique gift of foresight and anticipation to lead the people to its promised land.	Napoleon I and de Gaulle at the end of their lives ⁹

⁴ Roman statesman who abdicated from his well-deserved retirement in 458 AD to come back to power in order to save the country from foreign invasions before returning to his farmer's life.

⁵ Girardet presents General Pétain as an example of this profile at the time when he was called by the French government following the May 1940 debacle. In 1958, General de Gaulle took the opportunity of an attempted coup by the supporters of French Algeria to come back to power as the only politician able to restore order (Winock 2019: 78-82, Garrigues 2020: pp. 93-97).

⁶ Named after the Macedonian conqueror of the 4th century BC.

⁷ The most obvious illustration of this profile is that of Napoleon Bonaparte at the time of his return to Paris from Egypt in 1797 to take power first as one of the three consuls and then through the coup of 18th Brumaire 1799. In 1940, de Gaulle called for resistance to the Vichy State from London and soon led the free French troops alongside the Allies.

⁸ Greek statesman of the 7th and 6th centuries BC.

⁹ Both Napoleon, who is widely regarded as the architect of the French administrative system, and de Gaulle, through his promulgation of the Fifth French Republic, which concentrates most executive powers in the hands of the president, have remained major figures in the French collective imagination.

A quick glance at the table above reveals that the leaders chosen to illustrate each type of providential figures in the preceding table are hardly known for their democratic commitment although de Gaulle, despite common accusations of dictatorial ambitions, always left power whenever defeated in elections (Winock 2019: 11). This characteristic illustrates the controversial commitment to democratic rules sometimes shown by providential leaders, a phenomenon that can also be observed in other characters such as Eamon de Valera in Ireland and, to a lesser extent, Churchill in Great Britain.

In this process, it is the crisis, be it real or invented, but always made as dramatic as possible (Moffitt 2016: 127, 128), that will provide the providential leader with the necessary means to achieve his/her ends. Thus, while charismatic leaders may not go beyond the mere aspiration to power through a set of symbolic or discursive representations, it is action and the exercise of power that may allow charismatic leaders to become providential. Whereas charisma refers to a leader's exceptional personal characteristics recognised by the people as such, the providential nature of the leader stems from the combination of the leader's personal achievement and his/her contribution to the country's success. These essential differences between charismatic and providential leadership explain why the two notions cannot be taken as synonyms: charismatic leadership works from the bottom to the top, or from the outside to the inside, while providential leaders seek to impose their power top down, or from the inside to the outside.

The French authors listed above have, in a way, attempted to provide a different concept of providential leadership, albeit somehow complementary, from the one of charismatic leadership, possibly somewhere between Weber's charismatic and Arendt's (2007: 605-606) totalitarian concepts of leadership. Above all, their typology as well as the examples provided help raise this essential question: do providential leaders, unlike charismatic ones, inevitably lean towards autocracy and authoritarianism? Even when acting within a democratic and constitutional setting, providential leaders strive to create a narrative in which they embody the historic meeting between critical historical circumstance and exceptional personal qualities. This narrative will be imposed whenever necessary, which makes these leaders different from charismatic ones, whose legitimacy is naturally and willingly accepted by the people. As such, charismatic and providential leaderships may coincide, although not necessarily at the same

time.¹⁰ In other words, a political leader may be charismatic without becoming providential by choosing to encourage people to walk alongside him/her instead of urging, or even forcing, them to march behind him/her.

Some authors have attempted to connect charisma and populism. Pappas, in particular, has questioned the common association between charismatic and populist leadership, having reached the conclusion that, on one the hand, “the hitherto presumed linkage between populism broadly defined and charismatic leadership is, at best, a weak one” and, on the other, that there is “an extremely high correlation between charismatic and successful¹¹ populism” (Pappas 2016: 9).

In an article in *The Guardian* on 10th January 2019, Mudde explains that populism “evokes the long-simmering resentments of the everyman, brought to a boil by charismatic politicians hawking impossible promises” (Mudde 2019). Accordingly, many authors refer to a so-called populist style of doing politics, often focusing on the alleged charismatic qualities of their leaders. Still, while most populist leaders can indeed clearly fit within the broad category of charismatic leaders, particularly in terms of impressive oratorical capacities or inspiring leadership skills, not all populist leaders may be considered charismatic. Moffitt, for instance, insists on the fact that “charisma may be useful for attracting popular support for populists, but it is not a necessary characteristic of populism” (2016: 62). As for Dorna, he defends not only that “contemporary neopopulism is mostly a mediatic effect” (2012: 67), but also that, if charismatic leadership inevitably leads to populism, the latter, unlike its more radical expressions such as fascism, does not in itself systematically lead to dictatorship (*Ibid.*, 167-170).

1.2 Populism

With the general growth of populist parties, movements and individuals around the world, populism has been at the heart of political debate in recent years to become, as Mudde and Kaltwasser put it, one of the main political buzzwords of the 21st century (2017: 1). Still, the terms “populist” or “populism” are often used in the media without any well-defined criteria,

¹⁰ Conversely, some leaders may be considered providential without displaying any of the personal characteristics usually associated with charisma. This is the case, for example, of António Salazar in Portugal, Francisco Franco in Spain, or Eamon de Valera in Ireland.

¹¹ Pappas determines the success of political movements according to 4 criteria: “party longevity, electoral muscle, rise to and duration in office, and ideological sway” (2016, p. 9).

with an unambiguous negative connotation and always about personalities, parties or movements that usually refute this label for themselves.

Most authors among those who have looked for the historical roots of populist movements seem to agree on their origins in the late 19th century, be it in the United States with the People's Party in the 1890s (Judis 2016: 21-28), in Russia and the Narodniki movement in the 1870s (Hermet 2018: 24, 25) or with General Boulanger's threat to the French 3rd Republic in the 1880s (Fischer 2009: 43-51; Garrigues 2012: 56-65). As such, more than a recent invention, populism could be seen as a recurrent phenomenon that keeps coming back throughout history in times of crisis (Badie 2018: 9). More than a traditional political movement with its historical commitments and ideological views, populism should then be seen more, as Laclau puts it, a "political logic", or "a way of constructing the political". As for Mouffe, she defines:

(...) populism as a discursive strategy of constructing a political frontier dividing society into two camps and calling for the mobilization of the 'underdog' against 'those in power'. It is not an ideology and cannot be attributed a specific programmatic content. Nor is it a political regime. It is a way of doing politics that can take various ideological forms according to both time and place, and is compatible with a variety of institutional frameworks. (2018: 10, 11).

Following Mouffe, it would then be more difficult to provide a Manichean division of politicians in any given context between populist and non-populist, as is often done in the public sphere. Indeed, as for what populism actually is, it is hard to find some kind of consensus between academics, who all recognise the difficulty in providing a clear-cut definition of the term. As Boaventura de Sousa Santos puts it, "defining populism is not an easy task considering the diversity of contexts and political phenomena that this concept has come to characterize" (2018: 235). Judis sums up this problem:

there is no set of features that exclusively defines movements, parties and people that are called populist. [...] As with ordinary language, even more so with ordinary political language, the different people and parties called 'populist' enjoy family resemblances of one to the other, but not a set of traits can be found exclusively in all of them. (2016: 13, 14).

Still, a careful analysis of all the characteristics displayed by leaders unanimously defined as populist, which Badie calls "common denominator" (2018: 9-20), may contribute to the drafting of a minimal definition.

The first and probably most obvious features common to various types of populisms are anti-elitism and anti-pluralism, as Mudde and Kaltwasser put it:

There are at least two direct opposites of populism: elitism and pluralism. [...] Pluralism is the direct opposite of the dualist perspective of both populism and elitism, instead holding that society is divided into a broad variety of partly overlapping social groups with different ideas and interests. [...] Diversity is seen as a strength rather than a weakness. Pluralists believe that a society should have many centres of power and that politics, through compromise and consensus, should reflect the interests and values of as many different groups as possible. (2017: 7-8).

Populism therefore relies on the systematic, albeit artificial, division of society into two homogeneous and antagonistic camps, “the pure people” versus “the corrupt elite” (Mudde & Kaltwasser 2017: 6). In other words, populist leaders often refer, on one side, to the “ordinary folks” (Müller 2016: 2), the “silent majority” (Judis 2016: 62) or the “masses” (Laclau 2005: 2), to which they supposedly belong and whose interest they claim to represent, against the so-called system, the “establishment” (Judis 2016: 15) or “those in power” (Mouffe 2018: 10) which they constantly denounce and systematically blame. In the fact that neither of these groups is clearly defined lies the real ambiguity of populism, as Anton Pelinka explains.

The conceptual weakness and political impetus of populism are responsible for significant contradictions. Populism starts from an understanding of ‘the people’ as a given factor. The weakness is the lack of clear understanding of ‘the people’: who is part of it – and who is not? [...] The principally radical consequences of populist democracy are based on an extremely ambiguous precondition – the self-evidence of ‘the people’” (2013: 3).

The same goes for the ambiguous umbrella group referred to as elite which can, in theory, include many different groups of society, not exclusively political but also intellectual, mediatic, economic. These are systematically presented as the people’s enemy, which is why populists are often described as being anti-elitist. This artificially homogeneous people, whoever it may be, should obviously find its rightful spokesperson in the populist leader who claims the exclusive moral right to represent it (Muller 2016: 3). According to the populists’ discourse, whoever does not support them has no right to any claim of belonging to the people, since they alone can represent the people. In a sort of metonymy in which a portion of the

people stands for the whole of the people, populists limit their view of the people to their own supporters and all those who do not follow are presented as belonging to the opposite side.

Another feature which is common to most populist movements is, as Pelinka puts it, “a general protest against the checks and balances” of democratic regimes and on the understanding that the people should be allowed to govern themselves and that “intermediary actors like parliaments and political parties are secondary instruments at best and potential obstacles for ‘true democracy’ at worst” (2013: 3). Movements demanding a supposedly more direct democracy, such as the Boston Tea Party and the Occupy Wall Street in the United States, the Five Star movement in Italy, the yellow vests in France or, more recently, anti-vaccine movements all around Europe,¹² have been claiming to represent what they see as the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people (Mudde & Kaltwasser 2017: 6) against the decisions of politicians whose legitimacy, although based on democratic rule, they increasingly question.

Finally, many observers point out ideological variations, or even contradictions, in the positions defended by populist leaders. Laclau, for instance, explains that the language of populist discourse is, by essence, imprecise, fluctuating and vague (Laclau 2005: 118).¹³ These fluctuations, which Mudde & Kaltwasser refer to as “thin-centered ideology” (2017: 6), may be explained by the fact that populist arguments are often based on emotion rather than reason. Llogier refers to this discourse as liquid populism, because it fluctuates both in its values and in its form (Llogier 2018: 40).

2. Rui Rio: from providential to populist?

Having attempted to sum up the main implications of charismatic and providential leadership on the one hand and of populism on the other, it is now essential to analyse the discursive characteristics displayed by Rui Rio in the selected corpus in order to determine what type of leadership he strives to embody and to what extent he may be considered populist.

2.1. The providential ambition

Most political leaders in opposition to the party or parties in power start by basing their legitimacy on the need to solve a current political, economic, or social crisis, be it real or

¹² About recent anti-vaccine movements that have grown since the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic, see, for example, <https://www.qmul.ac.uk/hub/global-health-hub/populism-and-vaccines/>

¹³ Although, for Laclau, populism may not be negative in itself “because it tries to operate performatively within a social reality which is to a large extent heterogeneous and fluctuating”.

invented. In the case of Rui Rio, this attempt manifests itself in all four of the statements studied, with special emphasis on the declaration of candidacy to the PSD leadership in October 2017. On that occasion, Rio insists on the political crisis both in general terms (“the separation between politics and the Portuguese is huge”) and in the specific case of the PSD party which, according to him, finds itself “in a particularly difficult situation”, making it all the more necessary to be saved by a new leader: “today is the time for me to dedicate myself to serving the PSD in one of the most difficult moments of its history”.

This dramatisation of the crisis, as a discursive strategy meant to reinforce the need for change and, in a way, to create conditions for the saviour to emerge, is then limited to the political sphere although, according to Rio, the economic crisis is looming: “We can’t let ourselves be hypnotised by the economic situation which, although positively contrasting with the economic crisis that we have recently gone through, tends to deceive us about the future”. Other speeches delivered by the leader of PSD confirm this tendency, with particular emphasis on the social sphere and the use of rhetorical strategies such as accumulation, anaphora, and hyperbole, all meant to exaggerate the impression of crisis. To judge from Rio’s speeches, fortunately for Portugal, one man has the necessary qualities to save the country from all types of crises and restore order: a “serious, able and competent political actor” such as himself.

As mentioned above, the first quality supposedly possessed by providential leaders is their knowledge of what goes in the people’s mind and soul. In October 2017, for example, Rio, while justifying not running earlier for the leadership of the party with the fact that he was then mayor of Oporto and, as such, could not “fail those who had deposited their trust in [him]”, declares himself confident that people will understand, like no-one else, the importance of a man’s word, unlike many politicians “who disagreed with the choice made at the time”. By doing so, he positions himself on the people’s side, by praising their integrity, in contrast with the politicians’ cynicism. Besides, by referring that “the anonymous people is, above everything and everyone, the most genuine interpreter of the way to be Portuguese”, Rio claims to understand the people’s feelings, for instance when, following the initial decision on the *Operação Marquês*, he declares that “people do not understand that decision” and that “decisions of justice must be understood by the people; whenever they are not, justice is not working”.

Beside this connection with the so-called real people, Rio insists on others of his supposedly exceptional qualities that allow him to stand out among other human beings in general and

politicians in particular. This characteristic is particularly obvious as far as moral values go, when Rio insists that Portugal needs a strong improvement of its ethics and implies that only he can cause such a transformation. He also states that politicians should show principles and values, as he demonstrates by emphasising some of his alleged qualities: the refusal to use demagogy (“As you know, I never use demagogy”, November 2020), wisdom of speech (“I am always very careful with words. [...] I do not exaggerate things”, January 2019) and pragmatism (“What I do is an analysis of costs and benefits”, November 2020).

Economic issues, in particular, allow Rio to appear as particularly competent, based on his own area of academic education and his reputation as the tight-fisted mayor of Oporto for twelve years, which is prone to give him special legitimacy on this ground. For this reason, he assesses, using pseudo-technical terms, the government’s decision on issues such as the national health service, social measures, and support to SMEs. All in all, the personality Rio wants to put forward is that of a serious, reliable, competent, honest, frank, and brave leader, both close to the people and gifted with the best skills to lead them.

Above all, the most providential feature displayed by Rio when referring to his personal qualities can probably be seen when he praises his own spirit of sacrifice, for example when running for the party leadership: “it would be far more convenient for me, from a personal or professional point of view, not to answer favourably to the appeals that are being made to me”. He therefore clearly strives to appear as willing to sacrifice his own well-being to help his party become “the PSD that Portugal needs so much”, and to guarantee a brighter future for the country.

Like most leaders, Rui Rio wants to show the way towards a more prosperous future for his countrymen, and insists on his capacity to lead them on that path. As such, he criticises the government’s policies in most areas, “not for the sake of criticising” but to “improve the quality of life of all of us”. All in all, Rio provides his audience with very few of his own recipes for success and limits himself to a series of general goals for the country: politicians “must ensure its competitiveness in the global space”, “comply with the Constitution of the Portuguese republic” or “provide the citizens with the best possible public service”. In other words, while systematically rejecting alternatives proposed by the parties in power, he strongly defends his own version of the truth while carefully abstaining from presenting it clearly, sticking to general truths such as “more than regret the past or manage the present, [we must] prepare the

country for the future”. In the same manner, the recurrent use of emotions (indignation, gratefulness, shame...) contributes to give somewhat populist echoes to Rio’s discourse.

2.2. The populist temptation

The complex use of the first-person plural pronoun “we” is often taken as an indicator of the type of society defined by politicians and of where he/she positions himself/herself. Thus, based on Wodak’s typology (Wodak *et al.* 2009: 45-47), the following table identifies the main uses of the “we” in Rui Rio’s rhetoric.

Table 2: the use of the “we” pronoun in Rui Rio’s discourse

Use of We	Who does “we” include	Examples
I + you (plural) + they (addressee-inclusive)	Speaker + audience + the whole of the Portuguese citizens Speaker + audience + the Portuguese imagined community (“historical we”)	- We are all Portuguese and we all have the right to the same opportunities, social solidarity, tolerance and, above all, freedom (October 2017); - The greatest time in Portugal’s history was when we had the capacity and greatness to sail against winds and tides (October 2017);
I + you (plural) (addressee-inclusive)	Speaker + audience (viewers, listeners, readers...)	- This is our task, (...) this is what we will achieve (January 2019);
I + they (addressee-exclusive)	Speaker + political decision-makers Speaker + other PSD members	- How are we going to create jobs, to recover the economy? (November 2020); - We must mobilise more for the country to understand the importance of European elections (January 2019);
I (addressee-exclusive)	Speaker (<i>pluralis modestiae</i>) Speaker (<i>pluralis maiestatis</i>)	- We can be wrong, but we can’t be inactive (October 2017); - Our style is not to respond to structural problems according to the current state of affairs (April 2021);

You (addressee-inclusive)	Audience (without speaker)	- In a party with myself as president, we are all important (October 2017);
They (addressee-exclusive)	Government and supporting parties (without speaker)	- We want restaurants to open and, at the same time, we want restaurants to close down (November 2020).

The “we” used by Rio therefore involves, in turn, all the possible combinations between the audience and the speaker: I + you (including both speaker and audience), I + you + they (including the speaker, the audience and others) and I + they (including the speaker and others). It is even used, for rhetorical reasons, to replace other personal pronouns: I (the speaker), you (the audience) or even they (neither the speaker nor the audience). This confusion, which emphasises neither a preferred speaker/people connection, nor an attempt to reinforce the position of the leader at the head of the people, does not directly contribute to creating the illusion of a Manichean division of society “between homogeneous good and homogeneous evil” (Mudde & Kaltwasser 2017: 7). Still, it clearly places Rio either on the right side of this divide, or out of it.

To reinforce this impression, the pronoun “they” is often used to refer to the government in power at the time and its political allies, therefore contributing to a division that is made more obvious by the use of impersonal structures and the reference to unidentified “some people” or “many people” as if to give the impression of a general conspiracy manoeuvring against him, a strategy often used by populist leaders. On top of that, Rio does not clearly assume his position as part of the country’s elite. This constant ambiguity regarding the social group to which the “we” refers to goes beyond a mere stylistic choice and can be seen as contributing to some sort of confusion concerning not only the leader’s position within the system but also the ideological values he stands for.

A party such as PSD, which has been alternately in power since the beginning of the current democratic regime in 1974, can hardly be seen as not belonging to the much-debated system. Still, while not openly attacking the existing political structure, Rui Rio observes that “the regime is very ill”, regrets “the system’s absolutely unacceptable lack of efficiency”, “the regime’s incapacity to respond to the evolution of society” and the politicians’ “reluctance to bring changes to the system” and actions that “maintain the status quo”. For all these flaws, Rio unequivocally blames “the most powerful” and the “privileged minorities” while placing

himself deliberately on the side of “the Portuguese people” and “the common citizens” who are, in his own words, “rightfully distrustful of this regime”. Furthermore, Rio paints himself as the only political actor to speak the truth, vowing to stick to it in all circumstances and despite any type of pressure, wherever it may come from: the system, the authorities, the social media. By doing so he insists on portraying himself as the only viable alternative to what he perceives as the government’s continuous deception of the Portuguese people thanks to a skilful use of political marketing, its incompetence in solving the country’s problems and the untrustworthiness of the left-wing parties that support it.

In order to improve the system and to guarantee that all Portuguese people may enjoy “the same opportunities, social solidarity, tolerance and, above all, freedom”, the opposition leader advocates more power for the people in order to put an end to the status quo and to ensure that things do not continue as they are. Falling short of calling for a revolution (“We don’t need to revolutionise or destroy everything. Extremism and exaggerations are not needed”), he advocates that “what we need is to reform, with courage and earnestness”, which are precisely the qualities that he is supposed to embody, among others.

One of the most surprising of Rui Rio’s statements may well be the one about his party’s position on the national political spectrum: “PSD has never been, and will never be, a right-wing party”, in apparent contradiction with systematic attacks on all left-wing forces. This assessment may appear more contradictory after Rio was accused of opening the door to a possible agreement with André Ventura’s national populist party, Chega,¹⁴ after declaring: “If Chega moderates itself, there may naturally be a chance of a dialogue. If it doesn’t, there isn’t”. These fluctuations make it even more difficult to define a clear ideological line in Rio’s discourse. Indeed, while defending values traditionally associated to the centre right in Portugal (the protection of SMEs or the reduction of public investment), Rio also advocates other values usually associated to the centre left (a just redistribution of wealth) or even extreme left (higher salaries for everyone). More than real changes in the ideological positions traditionally defended by Rio’s party, these frequent variations may be attributed to a constant effort to resonate with the audience’s concerns (Fairclough & Fairclough 2012: 132) according to the situation.

¹⁴ The regional coalition between PSD, Chega and other parties to form a government in Azores following the regional election in October 2020 led to growing speculations about the possibility of a similar agreement for a national government in the future.

Conclusion

Since he announced his intention to run for the leadership of the PSD party in October 2017, Rui Rio has never been seen as a charismatic leader within his own party, let alone by the population at large, and has not been in a position to reach power, as was his initial ambition. This failure, at least in terms of electoral results, combined with the peculiar political, social, and economic circumstances that Portugal has gone through since Rio took office, may partly explain the evolution of his discourse during the four-year period covered by this analysis.

Rio's intention to appear as the providential leader of a nation in crisis is evident from the beginning, particularly in his speech delivered in October 2017, in which he announced his intention to run for his party's leadership. But be it due to the specific conditions over the period, the growth of populist parties, the party's lack of unanimous support or his own shortcomings, he never seems to have succeeded in imposing this providential style of leadership. Despite the attempts to intertwine his personal destiny with the country's and to appear as some sort of nation's pedagogue (Fischer 2009: 38), Rio struggles to find his own style of leadership, and seems to fluctuate between the four types of legitimate authority defined by Kojève - the master, the judge, the father and the chief (Kojève 2004: 139-154; Monod 2017: 71-74) - eventually ending up embodying none.

Consequently, as elections results did not match the expectations, and amidst growing opposition within his own party, Rio appears to have progressively drifted towards a more populist tone. In other words, as a result of the failure of the providential style initially affirmed, Rio seems to rely increasingly on a set of characteristics that may be considered populist such as the division of society between good people and evil elite, the claim to be the "true" people's legitimate voice, the questioning of the current regime and, above all, growing fluctuations in the values and positions defended.

As Mudde and Kaltwasser point out, populism is always ascribed to others (Mudde & Kaltwasser 2017: 1,2), including by politicians who sometimes accuse each other of being populist for lack of better arguments (Dorna 2002: 6), as Rio himself does on several occasions, both by accusing other politicians of populism or by denying using it himself. Although never displaying the bad manners, loud voice, or shocking statements of other colourful politicians often associated with populists (Moffitt 2016: 60), Rio does seem, in his discourse, to yield more and more to the populist temptation not so much in his rhetoric but in the discourse increasingly meant to gain electoral dividends when other arguments have failed.

As a case study, and because of his own characteristics that make it more difficult to make him fit into some already-made category, Rio has allowed for a clarification of the key concepts of charismatic and providential leadership on the one hand, and of populism on the other. More importantly, the analysis of Rio's discursive strategies has provided the material for a more general analysis of the connection between providential leadership and populism, by emphasising how the former, when it doesn't lead to electoral success and to its recognition by the people, may lead to the latter.

This does not necessarily mean that Rio may be included in a potential list of populist leaders who threaten the very existence of the system and, as such, inevitably lean towards authoritarian regimes, therefore representing a danger to democracy itself. Still, what this study has attempted to underline is that providential authority, as distinct from charismatic, depends more on the leader's intention than on his/her supporters' voluntary submission to it and that, in case of failure, may easily lead to irresistible temptations of populism, both in style and in essence.

Representing one case study within a general project aimed at analysing the discursive representation of power by the main political protagonists of the Portuguese regime since the restoration of democracy in 1974, with special emphasis on how the concept of providential leadership can be applied to the Portuguese reality, and on its implications in terms of commitment to democratic values, this analysis of Rui Rio's evolution and characteristics may be seen as the first step in a process meant, in the long run, to tackle wider dimensions and to apply possible conclusions to other political, cultural and linguistic contexts.

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