



Rural communities' energy metabolisms in Portugal: Between territorial injustices and far-right populism

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ABSTRACT

In the last decades, rural areas have been centerstage of a critical energy social sciences' research agenda, as the local resistance to the injustices of the renewable energy transition has increased. At the same time, far-right populism and related rhetoric against migrants and minorities has been on the rise across the world, often making use of rural communities' concerns and deprivations. However, the relations between far-right populism, its nationalist and anti-migrant rhetoric, and the renewable energy transition as experienced by rural communities have not often been examined. This paper aims to contribute to this area of research by exploring how two rural communities in Portugal – Graciosa in the Azores islands and Castelo de Vide in mainland Portugal – where votes for the far-right populist Portuguese party have increased in the last elections and where large-scale renewable energy infrastructures have been deployed or are planned, experience and make sense of these issues and relations between them. Interviews and focus groups with community members and key local stakeholders were conducted (N = 16 and N = 3 respectively, in each case study). Results show some similarities between the two rural areas in how they represent themselves as economically sacrificed territories that allow a good life to be lived, as well as on positionings in relation to the far-right populist Portuguese party; and also some differences regarding the politization of the renewable energy transition and its relationship with social diversity issues. We conclude by discussing the implications of these findings to rural planning and policymaking on the green transition.

1. Introduction

Recent research has been increasingly discussing the dangerous repercussions of the rise and spread of far-right populism across Europe and the world. The focus of social sciences and humanities' research so far has been on the impact of the rise of support to far-right parties and associated new nationalisms (Halikiopoulou and Vlandas, 2019) on the loss of human rights and increase in discrimination and violence over immigrants, racialized and other oppressed groups (Norocel et al., 2022). The lack of appropriate public policies and other State measures within current ultraliberal democratic regimes to tackle socio-economic inequalities and poverty, has made immigration an easy scapegoat to be used by far-right parties in the public debate to explain people's socio-economic deprivations (Halikiopoulou and Vlandas, 2020).

However, another important area of potential impact of far-right populism is climate change skepticism and associated inaction and denial, namely through the continuation of fossil fuel-based societies as we know them. Several studies have reported a relation between more

conservative and far-right positions and climate change skepticism (Hornsey et al., 2018; Huber, 2020), while others more recently have begun to particularly examine and point out the relationship between far-right populism and opposition to renewable energy, such as with UKIP in the UK (Batel and Devine-Wright, 2018) and AfD in Germany (Hess and Renner, 2019; Forchtner et al., 2018). Still other studies have problematized the relationship between far-right populism and climate policies, highlighting that it is not clear or straightforward (Hess and Renner, 2019), and depends on the far-right populist party at stake and the socio-political and historical contexts where they are embedded (Forchtner, 2019).

However, this area of research is still incipient and has so far mostly explored the impact of far-right parties and discourses on social discrimination and on climate change related issues in a separate way. In this paper we aim to contribute to a relational and political approach to the study of these issues by arguing for and empirically illustrating how they are related and why it is relevant to consider them so. For that, we conducted fieldwork in two rural areas in Portugal, Castelo de Vide and

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Graciosa, regions where several large-scale renewable energy projects have been or are planned to be deployed, and where *Chega*, a Portuguese far-right populist party, has gained increased support in the last elections. We will first review the literature on the relations between far-right populism and the renewable energy transition for then presenting the method and analyses and discussing the main results.

2. Far-right populism and the renewable energy transition

The definition of populism has been intensively contested and discussed (Mudde, 2004; Norris, 2019), but a common approach to it is to conceive it as embedded in a vertical axis that opposes the people to a corrupt elite, and which often intersects with an horizontal axis embedding nationalism – us/the inside, as a nation, and them/the outside, as other nations and groups (Brubaker, 2020; see also Breeze, 2019). For far-right populism particularly, the populist vertical axis opposes *us* and *them* as reflecting the antagonism between the people as unprivileged and the corrupt elite often portrayed as a small and illegitimately powerful group composed of liberals and the democratic State as we know it, whose interests collide with those of the common people; through the horizontal axis of nationalism, the relationship is defined as a conflict between “the people” as a nation or culture, and outsiders, most commonly ethnic and racialized minorities and/or migrants. This horizontal axis often materializes in far-right political parties’ discourses and rhetoric that cherish nationalist ideas and emphasize one’s nation superiority in relation to others (Hatakka and Välimäki, 2019; see also Breeze, 2019). In Portugal, the far-right populist party *Chega*, shares with this more general description of far-right populism its ethno-nationalism linked to the need to defend Portugal as a prideful identity and its cultural and economic sovereignty, including against migrants and multiculturalism, and against other nations in general [nationalist component; horizontal axis]; and to defend ‘the common people’, the true Portuguese, against the corrupt elites, against the State as it were [populist component; vertical axis] (see Santos and Roque (2021); Madeira et al. (2021); Santana-Pereira and De Giorgi, 2022). There are nevertheless contextual specificities, such as *Chega*’s “targeting of the Roma community” (Mendes, 2021, p. 348) in Portugal. One of the main concrete causes of *Chega*’s campaign that materializes its far-right populist principles, has been the fight against “subsidy dependency”. This refers to the fact that in Portugal, people considered to be in extreme poverty can apply to receive a social subsidy from the State. Different people receive these subsidies, including people in the Roma community, but even if only a small minority (around 5%, based on the available data) of the beneficiaries of these subsidies are Roma people (Mendes et al., 2014), *Chega*, which has since its inception conducted an openly racist and xenophobic campaign, has been presenting Roma people as the main beneficiaries of these subsidies and as not part of the pure people.

In turn, the results of the most recent Portuguese presidential elections (2021) and of the legislative elections that followed (2022), have shown that certain rural areas displayed a relatively high support for the Portuguese far-right populist party *Chega*. These are also rural areas that have been characterized in the last decades by increased social desertification and lack of socio-economic development, and thus increased reliance on social subsidies. This has created ‘resentment geographies’, as these are normally poor or declining areas neglected in socio-economic development by public policies and State measures (Madeira et al., 2021). More recently, these have often also been the same territories where large-scale renewable energy infrastructures have been or are planned to be deployed, with these infrastructures being increasingly denounced as further contributing to the inequalities and dispositions that rural territories already live (Mamonova and Franquesa, 2020; Batel and Küpers, 2023).

In fact, the so called green transition has been sparking contestations and opened up a crucial area of study in the social studies of energy in Portugal and around the world over the past few decades (Frolova et al.,

2015; Batel, 2020). The green transition, as enacted by the European Green Deal and similar policy initiatives, has been primarily perpetuating the neoliberal capitalist model of our fossil fuel societies and its co-products, with economic growth for the benefit of large corporations and financial institutions, as the main goal, regardless of social and environmental impacts (Silva and Sareen, 2021; Levenda et al., 2021). For instance, researchers have been increasingly denouncing the harms caused by large-scale dams where they are built, that span from the deterioration of riverine ecosystems (Käkönen and Nygren, 2022), to the submersion of villages and communities’ sense of being and of a future-to-be (Batel and Küpers, 2023). Similarly, wind farms, solar plants and high voltage power lines, have also been under scrutiny as generators of local harms, such as failed promises from the proponents – the State and large corporations - to create jobs and local socio-economic development (Hu, 2023; Silva and Sareen, 2021), and even the disenfranchisement of local communities from their own livelihoods and violations of their rights (Tornel, 2023). However, while these territorial and infrastructural impacts of the green transition and their embeddedness in the structural inequalities created by neoliberal capitalist political economies have been increasingly recognized and examined, they have not often been explored in relation to discourses and lived experiences regarding other socio-political issues, such as urban-rural dynamics and the disenfranchisement of rural areas (Mamonova and Franquesa, 2020), the role and relevance of the (welfare) State (Dunlap, 2023), immigration and migrant rights (Batel and Devine-Wright, 2018), among others. For instance, Batel and colleagues (Batel and Devine-Wright, 2018) discuss how UKIP, a British far-right populist party that had a relevant role towards Brexit, has consistently displayed in its campaign rhetoric against wind farms in the British countryside in the same way as used by it against more immigrants in the UK. Both wind farms and immigrants were contested by UKIP to defend the essence of British identity and its whiteness, of which the British countryside and its preservation – both against wind farms and multiculturalism - is seen as paramount (see also Neal, 2002; Holloway, 2007).

Support to the green transition and to other climate change related policies is not independent of other socio-political issues, with far right parties and rhetoric often supporting the maintaining of the status quo associated with the fossil fuel industry and lifestyle, and related authoritarian, nationalist and anti-migrant narratives (Fraune and Knodt, 2018; Huber, 2020). This echoes with Cara Daggett’s (2018) thesis on petromasculinity, or ‘the historic role of fossil fuel systems in buttressing white patriarchal rule’ and “how the anxieties aroused by the Anthropocene can augment desires for authoritarianism” (p.25; see also Santos and Roque, 2021).

However, Lockwood (2018) in his review of the relations between far-right populism, climate skepticism and climate policy, highlights that despite the far right populist parties already analysed being mostly anti-environmental, with some being explicitly climate change sceptic, silent or ambiguous on environmental issues, and unsupportive of renewable energy (see also Otteni and Weisskircher, 2022); this also depends on the particular socio-political contexts, with parties like the *Front National* in France, for instance, rejecting large-scale renewables but supporting smaller scale renewables (see also Forchtner, 2019). In fact, we can see how nationalism might contribute either to right-wing populist parties’ rejection of the renewable energy transition due to wanting to maintain national identities and traditions linked to industrialization and petromasculinity (Daggett, 2018; Batel and Küpers, 2023), or to far-right populist parties’ support of renewables as they can also be seen as protecting the eco-heartland and pure nature (Tosun and Debus, 2022), and as contributing to national energy sovereignty based on endogenous energy sources (Selk and Kemmerzell, 2022; Breeze, 2019). Otteni and Weisskircher (2022) also found that “in a setting where environmental politics is salient [such as with the green energy transition and deployment of related large-scale infrastructures], populist radical right parties may electorally benefit from opposing measures against global warming, such as renewable energy projects”



Fig. 1. – View of the wind farm in Graciosa, Azores.



Fig. 2. – View of the solar plant in Graciosa.

due to their local negative socio-environmental impacts (p.1116), which can then be strategically used by far-right populist parties to pretend to give voice to local, and specifically rural, discontent.

In sum, research on the links between far-right populism and the renewable energy transition is still incipient, and both this research and research on far-right populism in general have so far been mostly sectoral, either focusing on migration issues and policies, or on climate change related ones, but not on both and on their relations. In this paper, we aim to contribute to this growing area of research while also contributing a relational perspective to it, this is, a dialectical perspective that acknowledges that socio-political issues are co-constitutive and co-developing (Moore, 2011), both through the everyday lived experiences of individuals and communities, and in institutional discourse and (far-right populist) parties' rhetoric. This relational perspective also allows alternative positions, solutions, and relations to be recognized and discussed, and is vital for democratic debate and progressive social change (Carvalho et al., 2017; Batel, 2018).

3. Context and method

Two case studies of rural communities were selected, where votes for *Chega* had increased in the last elections and also where large-scale

renewable energy infrastructures had been or were planning to be deployed: Graciosa and Castelo de Vide. Something important to contextualize these two areas in the Portuguese socio-political and economic contexts, is that they are both peripheralized areas, Graciosa being in Azores, an archipelago in the Macaronesia region of the North Atlantic Ocean, about 1600 kms to the west of Lisbon, the capital of Portugal in the mainland's coast. Castelo de Vide is located near the border with Spain, in the center-east of the mainland, at around 160 kms from Lisbon. The largest urban centers in Portugal, including the capital and Oporto, are in the mainland Atlantic coast.

Santa Cruz da Graciosa [or Graciosa for short] is the only municipality in an island with around 4000 inhabitants (INE, 2021), where the local government has the aim of becoming self-sustainable and is in the first Portuguese (regional/Azorean) government to elect a coalition with *Chega* in October 2020. A wind farm and other energy infrastructures have been built there in 2019 as part of the Graciólca project, composed of a wind farm (4,5 MW) (see Fig. 1) and a solar plant (1 MW) (see Fig. 2), combined with energy storage facilities and a medium voltage power line to connect these facilities to the wind farm. This project was initiated by a German company that aimed to test a small network including renewable energy and storage.

Castelo de Vide is a municipality in the center east of Portugal's



Fig. 3. – View of the existent, Tendeiros, solar plant in Castelo de Vide.

mainland, with around 3100 inhabitants (INE, 2021). A solar plant (24 MW), Tendeiros, was built there in 2019 by Exus, a multinational company (see Fig. 3), and another solar plant is planned to be constructed, being currently in its licensing stage, to occupy around 400 ha and become one of the biggest solar power plants in Europe. Castelo de Vide is located within one of the Portuguese districts (Portalegre) that gave more votes to the Chega presidential candidate in January 2021.

16 individual interviews and 3 focus groups were conducted with each case study. The individual interviews were conducted with key local stakeholders, such as the mayor, representatives of local farming and school associations, and of the energy companies responsible for the construction of the energy infrastructures, among other local politicians and representatives of environmental and energy organisations of relevance for the local areas. The focus groups were conducted with inhabitants of these municipalities, and participants were recruited for each focus group to have socio-demographic heterogeneity in terms of age, gender (Scharnigg and Martin, 2024), and professional status and activity. All ethical issues and permissions were guaranteed and approved by the Ethical Committee of ISCTE – University Institute of Lisbon (Reference: 4/2023). The guidelines for the interviews and focus groups were relatively similar, apart from the very first questions which focused on understanding the professional role and activity of the individual stakeholders in the territory, for the individual interviews. Other questions for both individual interviews and focus groups included questions on people's relations with the place where they live, their opinions on how these places had changed or not in the last years, what should change in these places, and then particularly some questions about the energy transition and the renewable energy projects that had been or were planned to be deployed, followed by participants' opinions on the relation between the energy transition and the general socio-political context in Portugal. Each individual interview was, in average, 45 min long, and each focus group took in average 1h15 min, with the number of participants varying between 5 and 8. The individual interviews and focus groups were conducted in a room in the place where interviewees live or in a village hall during November–December 2022 in Castelo de Vide, and January–February 2023 in Graciosa. The individual interviews were all conducted by the second author of this paper and the focus groups moderated either by the first or second

authors. The data, which was audiorecorded and then fully transcribed, was then analysed based on a thematic discursive analysis (Peel and Newman, 2023). This means that a social constructionist approach was adopted, which examines language not as a neutral 'container' of meanings but instead as an active means of constructing reality (Castree, 2013). In terms of steps, we first identified patterns of meanings in the data, following a 'traditional' thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006), in order to start defining themes in each and across case studies; and then analysed each identified theme in more depth in terms of the 'discursive' part of the thematic discursive analysis, this is, with analytical work focused both on the rhetorical functions of what is said and how, and their ideological background and implications.

4. Analyses

The analysis of the individual interviews and focus groups conducted with key stakeholders and community members in the two case studies – Graciosa and Castelo de Vide – indicated that while there were some overlapping or similar themes between the two contexts, as expected, there were also differences and, as such, the analyses below are presented by case study.

4.1. Graciosa

4.1.1. The quality of life vs. the costs of living in Graciosa

A key theme identified across participants' narratives in Graciosa simultaneously described and emphasized the quality of life that living in Graciosa allows, based on its calm, tranquility, nature and landscapes, safety and sense of community; while also describing and emphasizing how that necessarily seems to come at a cost, here materialized in higher prices for basic products, lack of health infrastructures and assistance, lack of employment for the youth and, relatedly, the difficulties with transport. These are illustrated in the extracts below:

Extracts #1:

- a) P5¹: *I feel good here, we, as a small island, have several limitations, mainly regarding the access to the outside, of course, some issues in access to healthcare as well, but apart from that, our life here, I consider it to*

¹ In the extracts: 'P' = Participant; 'I' = Interviewer; 'FG' = Focus Group.

- have quality (...) despite the cost of living being a bit higher here, due to our insularity (...) we do not live under a great pressure, no, we do not live in cities, we do not have noise, no. Life is calm.
- b) FG2/P2: the island, despite being a tiny little island, is an island with a lot of culture, a lot of traditions.
- c) FG1/P4: we are harmed at the level of employment, because for instance in a big place there are several options for searching for and here in small areas, we have only a few options (...) another negative aspect is health, due to our size, our characteristics, for sure it is difficult to do that management, but we do not have an hospital with a maternity, for instance, we only have 2 or 3 ward beds for some emergencies (...) this is inherently a tiny island, isn't it, so ...
- d) P9: The biggest concern of Graciosa is the aging population and it has been losing population, the youth go to study abroad and stay... a big problem is the lack of jobs for young people, it is almost a paradox, there is a lack of employment for young undergraduates, but there is also a lack of labor for farming, food and hospitality services, for workshops, ...

Something that these narratives seem to share is that there is a shared imaginary of small places and islands that assumes that smallness and 'islandness' must imply deprivation in several dimensions – we, as a small island, have several limitations -, which in turn seems to feed into a discourse of acceptance of those deprivations – this is inherently a little small island, isn't it, so Anything on the contrary is thus seen as an exception, as pointed out in extract 1.b – *despite it being a tiny little island, it is an island with a lot of culture* – and in extract 2.a below. This echoes EU's definition of outermost regions (which institutionally includes the Azores – [European Parliament, 2023](#)) - small islands within the EU, which are distant and isolated from the continent and usually with low-density territories, typically with small, sparse and aging populations, which are economically excluded from significant national and international commercial flows ([Bettencourt et al., 2023](#), p. 1). These territories reflect then the effects of economies of scale, urbanization and deagrarianization that have characterized the last decades of globalized neoliberal capitalism ([Mamonova and Franquesa, 2020](#); [Murphy and Smith, 2013](#)). In turn, this shared imaginary of 'islandness' seems to also assume that it is because those deprivations exist that the positive aspects of smallness and peripheralization can exist as well – calm, tranquility, safety, nature and beautiful pristine landscapes, a healthy environment. This brings to the fore how the social construction of the 'island paradise' and 'rural idyll' can contribute to disguise associated deprivations ([Baldacchino and Clark, 2013](#); [Cloeke and Milbourne, 1992](#)) and, with it, contribute to their depoliticization, as they are seen as natural, as *inherent*, an inevitable tradeoff for social and environmental quality of life (see also [Batel and Küpers, 2023](#)) - or what we can call a 'sacrifice for rurality'. This is also present under the second theme identified in the individual interviews and focus groups conducted, and described below.

4.1.2. Gracióllica as putting Graciosa in the world against island peripheralization

Another main theme present in participants' narratives was a positive assessment of the Gracióllica project due to its impact in putting Graciosa in the map, this is, projecting it and its value not only to the world but also within the Azorean archipelago. This is illustrated in the extracts below:

Extracts #2:

- a. P3: it made the island known... Because generally here in Azores bigger islands are more talked about. (...) and Graciosa, Santa Maria and other smaller islands always stay in the margin. So, Gracióllica will project us to the outside.
- b. FG2/P4: Here you have it, I think here we have a case in which it is good to be small and to have those characteristics that allowed to bring here a huge investment in terms of funding. (...) It gave us here a projection at a

regional and European level as well, even at a world level, on how you do it and do it well... and here our smallness has helped us.

- c. P5: Those projects were always very well received and they continue to be, as we have pride in being the model island of Azores (...) Now they [Graciosa's inhabitants] thought they would take a financial compensation [from Gracióllica] and they didn't, but we have the environmental impacts, which is already good.

The project Gracióllica is mostly seen as a sign of pride for Graciosa and its inhabitants – *we have pride in being the model island of Azores* (Extract 2.c) – that reveals shadows of values tied to modernity and progress typical of an eco-modernity narrative ([Alkhalili et al., 2023](#)). This same type of narrative was found to be widespread in national newspapers' coverage of the renewable energy transition in Portugal which presented it as something inherently positive for the nation ([Valqueresma et al., 2024](#); also [Carvalho et al., 2019](#)). But the narratives presented in Extracts #2 also reflect narratives of local hope ([Papazu, 2016](#)) associated with what these projects can bring to the island and its communities (see also extracts 3 below). The support for the project comes closely associated with narratives of living in Graciosa that identified and discussed several problems and deprivations related with living in an outermost region, as discussed in extracts 1 above, and which justify supporting this project as a potential solution against some of those problems and deprivations, such as creating more jobs in the island, attracting more tourists and even inhabitants and other type of economic investment. In fact, again in extracts 2, the territorial embeddedness of a lack of economic development is clearly expressed – *here our smallness has helped us* (Extract 2.b) -, highlighting that whereas normally being a small island is represented as naturally implying a small and even deprived economy, culture and future (as also seen in extracts 1 above), in this case being small allowed Graciosa to be chosen for the deployment of this renewable energies' project that aims towards self-sustainability. This emphasizes then how island imaginaries and island geographies can both constrain and support a just energy transition ([Harrison and Popke, 2018](#)), and also, as problematized by [Grydehoj and Kelman \(2017\)](#), that islands around the world are being increasingly used as hotspots for sustainability initiatives, but that these are often greenwashing, materialized with projects that make minimal environmental and/or social impact where they are located.

This 'greenwashing' was also sometimes raised during the interviews and focus groups conducted in Graciosa, eventually brought to the fore because of the discussions had during the focus groups as 'hyper-reflexive' ([Archer, 2000](#)) moments – namely, the disappointment of the population with the lack of tradeoff in their electricity bills for hosting this renewable energies' project. This is highlighted in extract 2.c and further illustrated below:

Extracts #3:

- a. P1: because also we know that the equipment [of Gracióllica] is expensive and the maintenance and all that, but for the people properly... the renewable energies have not yet brought them what they had hoped for, which is a reduction, a reduction in the electricity bill (...) we really need to lower the price of energy a lot.
- b. P5: this project created a lot of expectations. It created a lot of expectation and people became a bit disappointed in the sense that... it is not regarding the benefits of the project in itself for nature, because on that they agree perfectly (...) what did the population expect? Clean energy is very good, very important. But it had the expectation that it also would reduce the price for the consumer and that did not happen, and I think will never happen.
- c. FG1/P1: It does not bring much benefit to the population. It is a very good thing, but to the population it did not bring anything. Like lowering the price for consumption, the bill. Well, we can understand that at the level of Azores the prices have to be similar to everyone. But after such a huge investment here, more than 25 million, and here we do not have any benefit ...

These extracts highlight how despite communities acknowledging the ecological benefits of this project, the fact that it generates energy based on the island's own ecological system also created expectations that this would entail a reduction on electricity prices. This highlights then, first, that making sense of these territories as commons seems to be absent from the 'green energy transition' as it is being fostered in Portugal. Second, that even within a liberal perspective (Temper, 2019), there is a lack of distributive energy justice in the deployment of this renewable energy project, similarly to other cases in Portugal (e.g., Silva and Sareen, 2021; Batel and Küpers, 2023) and elsewhere (Tornel, 2023). Thirdly, it highlights how the discussion around the project seems to have been depoliticized since the beginning, given that there were also no mentions of communities being involved and having their say in the project's planning, deployment, location and impacts, thus also revealing a lack of procedural justice, also often diagnosed in Portugal (Carvalho et al., 2019; Silva and Sareen, 2021).

Together, these injustices might lead to feelings of further marginalization and peripheralization for the communities of these rural territories, especially when in combination with other structural inequalities and socio-territorial injustices, as discussed above. Feelings of deprivation have been shown to be related with support to far-right populist parties which tend to identify scapegoats in the proximal, less powerful, Other –already poor, racialized, and other oppressed groups (Obradovic, Power & Sheehy-Skeffington, 2020) - instead of in the distant, bureaucratized and powerful Other –energy companies and the State. The socialist Portuguese government (2015–2024 at national level, and regionally, in Azores, from 1996 to 2020) is, moreover, often presented by *Chega* as favoring the subsidy-dependent, but not 'us', the native 'good Portuguese', who did not benefit from Gracióllica. This relation between the injustices created by Gracióllica and the endorsement of far-right populist rhetoric, is further explored below.

4.1.3. Nobody votes in *Chega* here, we vote against subsidies' dependence and the system

Another common issue discussed by the participants in Graciosa was their distancing from the idea of *Chega* as a party that has local or even regional support – claims that nobody in Graciosa or even Azores votes for *Chega* were commonly reinforced. At the same time, it was transversally highlighted that what people voted for was against subsidies' dependence and 'the system'. This is illustrated in the extracts below:

Extracts #4:

- a. P4: *Look, here in Azores I think that Chega does not have much future, I am sorry for saying it like this (...) now in the mainland, that's a problem. And then, that also comes from there to here, isn't it? (...) some people, some from here, others that came from other islands to this island, live based on the social subsidy of integration, and they do not have skills for anything, nor do they want to have, which is the worst...*
- b. P2: [Talking about *Chega*'s presence in Graciosa] *No, it is not even represented here. Iniciativa Liberal² yes, in the last elections they did not have representation here, but now they do, but in *Chega* nobody wants ... [to vote] because it is that party...*
- c. FG2/P5: *But this is a problem that has always existed, a problem at the level of the country. How do you say it? People receive some subsidies, isn't it? They are not going to work ...*

FG2/P4: *It's subsidies dependency...*

FG2/P5: *If they already have subsidies, my domestic cleaner, for instance, she says she gets up at 7am to come to work, but then she sees others sitting having a coffee or their breakfast, I mean, people also need to have some... I mean... if someone shows up that comes up with a job offer, the person, in principle, should accept it, and this is such a calm*

island that there is a lot of people from outside coming here just because of these subsidies, isn't it? (...) So I am not saying that people do not need it, now, what I am saying is that if there is work people shouldn't refuse it, isn't it?

- d. FG3/P2: *Jobs ... Only who does not want to work, doesn't have a job.*

FG3/I: *That is, there are jobs available.*

FG3/P2: *There are jobs, there are jobs. Now, what happens is that a lot of people are waiting for what is given.*

FG3/I: *You mean that they don't want to work.*

FG3/P2: *The subsidies allow you to live without working...*

Something common in the participants' narratives is that they avoid being seen as supporting or having voted for *Chega* and its ideas, as put in Extracts 4.a and 4.b. However, throughout the interviews, often certain issues would be discussed – like the lack of jobs in these territories – that would bring to the fore certain ways of justifying those problems akin to some of the rhetoric used by *Chega*. This is shown in how these extracts reveal that the idea of 'subsidy dependency' is known and shared across participants and a resource easily used to readily justify discriminating against the group of people who receive subsidies. In other words, it is used as a proxy to talk about what far-right populists have often called the 'parasites of the system' (Hosang and Lowndes, 2019), an easy scapegoat to put the blame for social inequalities and injustices on the poorer, often also racialized and from other oppressed groups. It becomes evident then that this is a discursive repertoire that is widely circulating particularly by the media while giving voice to *Chega* (Madeira et al., 2021), if we consider that, as seen in Extracts 1, participants during other parts of the discussions, pointed out the lack of jobs, and especially for the youth, as a key problem – see particularly extract 1.d. -, whereas in extracts 4.c and 4.d it is reiterated instead that jobs do exist, but that a certain group of people – a lot of people from outside - just don't want to work (also extract 4.a.) and want to live instead on these subsidies.

These three themes highlight then that lack of jobs and existent socio-economic difficulties in Graciosa are some of this territory's biggest challenges, and that the Gracióllica project, despite involving a huge investment and the deployment of several large-scale infrastructures in Graciosa, did not help with addressing those challenges, either by creating local jobs or reducing electricity bills, despite local expectations on the contrary. In turn, this continued deprivation opens space for more proximal and available explanations about those socio-economic hardships that have been widely circulating in traditional and social media, such as subsidy dependency, to be used to make sense of such deprivations. These connections between injustices created by the green transition and far-right populist socially discriminatory rethoric are even clearer in the extracts below, from Castelo de Vide's case study.

4.2. Castelo de vide

4.2.1. Quality of life vs. the costs of living in Castelo de Vide

In similar ways to how living in Graciosa was presented and discussed by the participants in the interviews there, also in Castelo de Vide the theme of an undiscussable quality of life linked to the territory's natural landscapes, the healthy environment, the safety and communal lives, is transversally present, along with the highlighting of the costs that come with that, as analysed below:

Extracts #5:

- a) P2: *in these territories we have some quality of life, we have nature, we are in a very beautiful village with tourism, we are in the natural park of São Mamede mountain, which gives us this [pure] air... (...) but then there are some bottlenecks here... the lack of cultural offer (...) the lack of*

² Another new right-wing small party that gained national visibility around the same period as *Chega*.

transports (...) the lack of professional opportunities. But well, you can't have everything ...

- b) P8: because comparing the quality of life we have here with the territories by the coast, it is very different, here it is much more peaceful, but as with everything it has its pros and cons, it has quality of life, it has the people's hospitality, knowing everyone around, it's a small community. (...) However, we always have the same issue of lack of jobs which is our main problem in the municipality.
- c) FG2/P5: effectively it is good to live here, it's the truth, it is true that there is safety, there is this, there is that, but then you discuss some issues with your children... if they want to go to the cinema, they have to go somewhere else, because here there is nothing... and then we as parents, we have to sacrifice for our children, and go with them to the cinema, or to a music gig, otherwise the children stultify here... (...)

FG2/P4: a lot of sacrifice ...

FG2/P5: a lot of sacrifice from our side, and from their side ...

(...)

FG2/P7: at this moment the main issue we have here... our region does not have a lack of jobs, there are a lot of jobs to provide, what we do not have is employment. There is a big difference between jobs and employment. Jobs is to work as a construction worker, in farming, and nobody wants to do that...(...)

In Castelo de Vide, in one of the focus groups (extract 5.c.), the idea of 'sacrifice' for a certain type of rurality and quality of life is explicitly brought to the fore to convey its inhabitants' lived experiences, who simultaneously want to live in a healthy environment while having access to basic services and opportunities. Also in Castelo de Vide, the existent Tendeiros solar plant and the plan for a new mega solar plant – Diogo Cão - were generally seen as something positive due to their contribution to tackle climate change and not affecting too much the quality of the landscape in the region (e.g., P4 – *it's a necessary renewable energy that does not generate impact in the landscape, I don't see any problem with it*). However, and differently to what we identified in Graciosa, in Castelo de Vide these infrastructures were also often explicitly brought to the discussion by some participants tied to the questions about the quality and costs of life in Castelo de Vide, often to be criticized due to their lack of impact in the local socioeconomic development and in the associated structural inequalities lived by these territories, as detailed below.

4.2.2. Impacts of the energy transition on the quality of life in Castelo de Vide – the absence of local socioeconomic development and job creation

In the extracts presented below, participants recognize that there are several aspects to criticize in the way these solar plants are being proposed and deployed in Castelo de Vide. Transversal to all of them seems to be the lack of transparency, information and involvement of local communities in the decision-making processes related with these infrastructures, together with the acknowledgment of a lack of recognition and distributive justice (Walker, 2009; Silva and Sareen, 2021).

Extracts #6.

- a) P3: We have been feeding the cities near the coast during years and the possibility to invest here based on these [energy] projects has always escaped us, so these fields, and this is the sentence I have been using and continue to use, I prefer technological landscapes to poverty landscapes, but we have to agree on what we are talking about, because otherwise we make this a sea of photovoltaic panels... (...) The discussion around energy in Portugal is being very badly conducted and we are giving huge jumps... this side of the community has been completely set aside, it's a pure abstraction (...) [the solar plant of Tendeiros] has been sold to us as creating many jobs [but it hasn't created any] (...) We have sun, we have land, and we do not have protesting people, this is great for any large corporation".

- b) P8: direct benefits to us as neighbours to those panels [Tendeiros solar plant], we do not have much benefit. We do not even have one job generated by it that we can say that this boy [person] or that family has someone who works there and earns a wage (...) and the energy produced goes where? At my home I pay exactly the same.
- c) P11: What is going to happen to those fields, to the neighbouring populations? Who is going to win with that? [the new Diogo Cão solar plant] Where are they getting the minerals needed to construct these panels? Isn't it lithium as well? What is going to happen in these areas of the country [where lithium is extracted]? What are they going to destroy in other places to allow them to build there in those 400 ha those panels? (...) I really feel that a lot of this is just a business.
- d) FG3/P4: now they will authorize that solar plant [Diogo Cão] which is owned by 6 people or so, apart from 1 who is from here, the rest is not from here but we are the ones that have to deal with that grotesque infrastructure. (...) the ideal would be, Castelo de Vide has an electric station, ok, it produces this many MW, the population consumes this many, here are 1%/2% for the local population – and I would even kiss the station, the grotesque infrastructure! You see? Because there is no concern with the common good, when we are accepting that they build a grotesque building here but no solution is given to us... (...)

In some of the extracts 6 just presented there is also an awareness that this lack of justice is not only to be found in the planning and deployment of these energy infrastructures, but tied to more structural, historical and national/global processes and inequalities, such as the urbanization of coastal regions in Portugal and associated resource-extractivist dynamics in relation to rural, inland, areas, that affect this and other rural territories, such as with lithium extractivism (Dunlap and Riquito, 2023), as clear in extracts 6.a. and 6.c. Again, the idea of sacrifice resurfaces here and is very poignantly put in extract 6.a. when the participant makes it as a choice between a *technological landscape*, referring to what it will become with the mega solar plant to be built there, and a *poverty landscape*, what it tends to be now, with the social desertification and economic disinvestment that has characterized territorial planning and public policies for rural areas in Portugal in the last decades. This idea also frames well the third theme that we identified as relevant in structuring the narratives of the interviewees in Castelo de Vide, illustrated below.

4.2.3. When you compete for poverty, "this is a great place for far-right populism"

Similarly to Graciosa, in Castelo de Vide participants tended to distance themselves from *Chega* as in highlighting that they don't vote for *Chega* and that any votes from others in the region are just votes of protest given the absence of solutions proposed by current and recent governments to the structural problems faced by these territories, namely the lack of jobs, transport and other basic services, as referred to in extracts 5. Also, the acknowledgment that corruption and injustices are practiced within current governments (see also Valqueresma et al., 2024), including with the deployment of large-scale renewable energy infrastructures suggested in extracts 6 above – *this is just a business; who is going to win with that?; there is no concern with the common good* -, is also identified as one of the main reasons for other people to make this vote of protest in *Chega*, as a party that presents a strong anti-system and anti-State corruption rhetoric. In Castelo de Vide then, the links between the injustices created by these 'green infrastructures' and the vertical axe of far right populist rhetoric, were quite often discussed, but also coupled with, as in Graciosa, a discussion of those injustices and associated structural inequalities in connection to the horizontal axis of far right populism, like the subsidy dependent, migrants and Roma people. Also in the narratives in Castelo de Vide these groups were often presented as unfairly benefitting from and using the system without contributing to it as 'the good Portuguese', the hardworkers, taxpayers, do – ideas strongly present in *Chega*'s rhetoric in the media. This is exemplified in the extracts below:

Extracts #7:

a) FG3/P4: *The good Portuguese doesn't exist anymore. What is the good Portuguese? It's the Portuguese that used to work as our parents and grandparents did, from sunrise to sunset, they worked and they would build something, it was them that would feed the family, and now it is different (...) when we start to offer things [referring to the social subsidies]... it's an injustice.*

b) FG2/P2: *they [the Roma people] have all the benefits without doing anything.*

FG2/P4: *the Roma people have a lot of skills [to find their way in the system] (...) in the social subsidies' agency a Roma person goes there and earns a 1000€ cashier check, how? He earns 180€ for him, 180€ for his wife, and then he calculates to have a lot of children so that he can get 1000€, 180€ x 5 or 6 children, there you are... he then earns more than we do, he has a BMW car, he has... and that enrages the community, all the Roma people have BMWs, Mercedes, ...*

c) FG1/P7: *I do not have any issue, nor stigmas or anything [in relation to Roma people] ...*

FG1/P1: *as long as they do not create problems.*

FG1/P4: *my problem is, for instance, I work as all of us do, probably we all work, and we pay our taxes and fulfill our rights and duties, isn't it? I don't know who said it here, that they know Roma people that work, that's great, if they are integrated within the community, as long as they do exactly what I do. (...) give their contribution and do not hoard social subsidies only because they have lots of children as it happens with Roma people, because it's really like this, we know it is like this. They have a traditional culture, a different culture... and then we all see them with big BMWs and AUDIs... Now, if you work and fulfill your rights and duties, it does not matter if you are Roma, from Morocco or from anywhere else ...*

d) P3: *we must have migration, in a controlled and selective way (...) this is a great place for [far-right] populism. Democracy is not offering concrete responses to concrete problems. In this territory we have the situation of the Roma community... When we had that swarm of people from the East of Europe, we did not want the type of jobs they would take. And those people came to Portugal through these inland territories, but when the socioeconomic crisis began to hit the country, people from here immediately started to say: here they come to steal our jobs!''.*

In Castelo de Vide the idea of 'subsidy dependency' is also shared and very present as an easily available discursive repertoire (Potter and Wetherell, 1998) to explain the existent and structural social injustices and inequalities in Portugal and particularly affecting rural territories. Here however, and contrary to Graciosa, there is a close connection being established between subsidy dependence and Roma people. There is a set of characteristics of the livelihoods of Roma people that are recurrently pointed out in participants' narratives – such as having more children to have more subsidies for owning expensive cars (extracts 7.b. and 7.c.) –, aimed at highlighting how they 'unfairly use' the system. These are also recurrently part of *Chega's* rhetoric in the media and, as discussed before, provide an easy, if misinformed, way to explain social injustice and structural problems, such as the lack of dignified employment opportunities for everyone, by positing these social groups as 'parasites of the system' that benefit from it without contributing to it, therefore overburdening others, namely 'the good Portuguese'. This discourse and associated subjectivity – 'the good Portuguese' – still reflects the authoritarianism of the Portuguese Fascist State and its remaining impacts (Batel and Küpers, 2023), that are now largely reproduced by *Chega's* "punitive approach to those considered to

damage society's moral fabric" (Mendes, 2021, p.343), here regarding those that don't follow a patriarchal work morality that implies men working from sunrise to sunset to feed the (heteronormative) family and pay their taxes, thus maintaining the petromasculine social order (Daggett, 2018).

In fact, on one hand, and as discussed in extracts 5, it is recognized that there are some types of work that people from current and new generations do not want to do – such as on farming and construction, and which, as extract 7.f. points out, are normally accepted mainly by migrants; while, on the other hand, migrants and 'outsiders' are also seen as 'stealing our jobs' (extract 7.d.) and 'hoarding social subsidies' (extract 7.c.). As such, what seems to be transversal to the interviews and focus groups in Castelo de Vide is the idea that voting for *Chega* and supporting far-right rhetoric only happens because everyone is 'competing for poverty', this is, for scarce resources, for lives that are 'necessarily' unjust and unfair as they have to fight for the right to good employment, transport, healthcare, housing and education, especially if one lives in these rural territories. This brings to the fore then the rifted metabolisms of these rural communities, filled with paradoxes and contradictions created by neoliberal capitalism (Foster, 1999), and which are exploited by *Chega* to gain supporters while advancing its xenophobic and racist agenda.

5. Discussion and conclusions

This study had the main aim of exploring the relations between how the renewable energy transition is being materialized in rural territories and an increased support for far-right populist rhetoric and associated social issues, such as on migration and social diversity, in Portugal. For that we conducted and analysed individual interviews and focus groups with key stakeholders and community members in two local case studies in Portugal, both rural peripheralized areas: Graciosa in Azores, where a wind farm, solar plant and energy storage facilities have recently been deployed; and Castelo de Vide, in Portalegre in mainland Portugal, where a solar plant already exists and a mega solar plant is being planned.

Something transversal to the analyses of the two case studies is that there is a shared representation that to live in this rurality, which is, on one hand, idyllic – with beautiful landscapes, pure air, safety and tranquility, a sense of community – implies, on the other hand, to live as well in sacrifice – sacrificing access to healthcare, mobility, education, good employment opportunities. This idea of a *sacrifice rurality* is seen as almost inherent, natural to rural territories, given that it is already such a structural and long-lasting reality of these regions (Batel and Küpers, 2023). This helps understanding that when new projects and infrastructures, such as those deployed in these territories as part of the renewable energy transition, are proposed or constructed, there tends to be a kind of *greenwashed acceptance*, seen here especially in Graciosa, that even has hope that these projects might make these territories more visible, or existent geographies (Madeira et al., 2021). Still, what also became clear through the analyses is that also due to the socio-territorial inequalities and deprivations suffered in these regions being long-lasting and accumulating, the material deployment of large-scale energy infrastructures has also somewhat stirred the local communities to think about their contexts and livelihoods and how these come to be affected by those infrastructures. In both cases, there was no active and participated engagement of the local communities in the decision-making processes for the deployment of the renewable energy infrastructures promoted by the developers or the government, nor were there any concrete benefits given to the communities hosting these infrastructures, despite their local impacts on the landscape and socio-economic activities, such as farming and tourism. This leads local communities to start seeing renewable energy infrastructures as just 'business as usual' in which who profits from them, with or without corruption, are always the same elites – the government, large corporations, large landowners. In turn, this echoes in the rhetoric that has been used by far-right populist

parties and specifically by *Chega* in Portugal, which not only blame the elites and the established system for the deprivations of the common people, but also tend to tie that together to the established system allowing certain social groups to be ‘parasites of the system’ and only benefit from it, namely through social subsidies, while the common people work hard to sustain that. This rhetoric from *Chega*, very present in the media, was reflected in participants’ narratives as an easily available discursive repertoire (Potter and Wetherell, 1998) to use to justify their disappointment with a system that has been unfair and unequal to rural territories and communities for a long time and continues to be, namely, if not only, in the deployment of renewable energy infrastructures. As such, current governments’ lack of appropriate and integrated policies and planning for a just and inclusive energy transition is, even if indirectly, fostering also social discrimination and exclusion, given that far-right populist rhetoric uses migrants and other ethnic and racialized groups as ‘easy’ scapegoats (Obradović et al., 2020) for the structural problems tied with the neoliberal capitalist societies we live in, and that particularly affect the rural territories that are now being further dispossessed by the green transition.

This study has then given several contributions to rural studies and to the social studies of the energy transition and of far-right populism alike. First, it highlights how a relational approach to the study of these issues is crucial, as it allows the understanding of the social issues we study as fully socio-political issues, this is, as linked and interrelated as part of the same socio-political-economic contexts and processes. It also sheds lights on how the rifted metabolisms of rural communities in contemporary neoliberal capitalist societies, are experienced in the everyday of these communities that have to make sense of the ambivalences and paradoxes of the in betweenness of announced ‘green’ energy transitions for more sustainable societies, in tandem with energy poverty and other types of basic needs’ deprivations (see also Harrison and Popke, 2018). Second, it highlights that the way the renewable energy transition is further affecting and reproducing core-periphery dynamics and inequalities between urban and rural territories needs to be urgently addressed, as it runs the risk of creating a backlash against any renewable energy transition if it becomes a generalized idea that its materialisation necessarily entails further accentuating local deprivations, while the economic, environmental and other possibilities-for-living go elsewhere. Finally, it was also relevant to note that in most narratives there was never a ‘true’ support to *Chega* or to associated positionings, but instead a coalescing around common structural issues – social injustice, lack of basic services and rights – that somewhat reflect *Chega*’s rhetoric, as this party is precisely trying to manipulate and present these issues as a result of migrants’ and ethnic and racialized groups presence and practices in Portugal (Madeira et al., 2021), in order to fulfill its authoritarian, nationalist, racist and xenophobic program. The analyses point out that the stereotypical and discriminatory narratives present in the interviews and focus groups in relation to the ‘subsidy dependent’, were mostly based on misinformation and reiterating simplistic ideas about those issues that are widely circulating in the media, as an easily available repertoire that can be used as a ‘ready-made’ explanation and solution to make sense of the much more complex, long term and difficult to tackle structural problems and injustices that rural territories face and that were transversally identified as the main issue to be solved.

As such, these results suggest as well important policy and planning recommendations, namely that there needs to be clear and stringent directives for transparency and participatory inclusion of local communities in all phases of planning, implementation, maintenance and decommissioning of energy transition projects, as well as implementation of strategies to give co-ownership/stewardship of those projects to the territories and communities where major energy transition infrastructures are implemented – including the right to say no to those infrastructures. There is also a need to better inform local political representatives and communities about the energy transition at global, national and local levels and its ecological, economic, social, and infrastructural implications at those levels, as well as presenting the

energy transition as linked to and interrelated with climate justice, socio-economic crises, warfare and other socio-political events, in a way that co-constructs with publics and all stakeholders more critical thinking on global/local issues that have local/global and concrete impacts and relations with all territories.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Susana Batel: Writing – original draft, Validation, Supervision, Methodology, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Conceptualization. **Andreia Valquesma:** Methodology, Investigation, Data curation. **Maria Alba:** Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation.

Declaration of competing interest

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Data availability

The authors do not have permission to share data.

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