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Deposited in *Repositório ISCTE-IUL*:

2025-05-29

Deposited version:

Accepted Version

Peer-review status of attached file:

Peer-reviewed

Citation for published item:

França, T. (2025). Transnational diffusion and far-right latent social movements: Unveiling the survival of anti-immigration mobilisation in Portugal. *Journal of Contemporary European Studies*. 33 (2), 687-700

Further information on publisher's website:

10.1080/14782804.2024.2389452

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Transnational diffusion and far-right latent social movements: Unveiling the survival of anti-immigration mobilisation in Portugal

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Abstract

Diffusion is key to understanding the transnational spread of social movements. Given its relevance, scholarship in the field of social movements has explored many different dimensions of the diffusion process. Most of these studies, however, focus on the diffusion process during movements' intense periods of visibility. In contrast, this paper explores an understudied facet of transnational diffusion: its links to the latency of social movements in the context of anti-immigration mobilisation. Using an original theoretical perspective, it investigates the role of transnational diffusion in feeding far-right mobilisation outside their peak, disclosing how submerged networks survive during their invisible phases. Drawing on novel empirical data collected from in-depth interviews with Portuguese far-right activists, we show how the lack of politicisation of migration in Portugal pushes anti-immigration mobilisation into a permanent state of latency, and how transnational diffusion emerges as a key mechanism for the maintenance of their frames. Moreover, our analysis illuminates the agency of Portuguese anti-immigration activists in the transnational diffusion process in adopting and adapting frames from successful movements elsewhere. Lastly, we offer an innovative contribution to far-right scholarship, by exploring the under-researched context in Portugal, offering valuable insights applicable to similar cases.

Key words: anti-immigration mobilisation; far right; repertoires; latency, transnational diffusion; Portugal

Introduction

In most cases, the emergence of similar forms of political contention in different countries or regions is neither coincidental nor a mere outcome of similar structural conditions and political opportunities (Chabot 2010). Taking into account the growing internationalisation of actors and the speed at which information spreads via the internet (Castells, 2015; della Porta & Kriesi, 1999, p. 6), these synchronous appearances of analogous mobilisation cannot be seen as isolated or independent from other similar events of collective action taking place in different locations.

Despite an increase in the number of investigations into diffusion in recent decades, Tarrow (2010, p.204) states that scholarship on the topic has primarily looked at the “fact” of diffusion; the social-spatial directions of diffusion, and how diffusion fosters new organisations and the dissemination of new frames for collective action. Most of these investigations, however, look at how diffusion takes place during the peak of movements’ visibility, leaving a gap about this process during movements’ latent phases. This is especially true in the case of far-right social movements, as scholars usually look at cases in which public protest occurs (Caiani et al. 2012; Berntzen and Weisskircher 2016; Castelli Gattinara et al. 2022), although public protest does not reflect the daily political life of such movements. As Ravndal (2021) shows, much of the activity of the far right nowadays takes place at the metapolitical level. In addition, it is important to look at the invisible mobilisation of far-right activists because, as social movement theory suggests, while social movements often never achieve outstanding gains, they also seldom really disappear (Elliott-Negri et al. 2021). Indeed, Melucci (1984; 1989) argues that the invisibility of social

movements in the public arena does not signal their inactivity and that activities which take place outside phases of ‘manifest mobilisation’ are key to the production of new questions, answers and strategies.

In this paper, we aim to contribute towards filling this gap and advancing the scholarship on diffusion by approaching this understudied dimension; namely, diffusion as a mechanism for the survival of submerged networks during latent phases of mobilisation. To do so, we look at the anti-immigration activism in Portugal. The lack of politicisation of immigration (Carvalho and Duarte 2020) and its civil society's weak mobilisation culture (Baumgarten 2013) foster a less favourable political environment for anti-immigration activism, hampering their presence in the public arena. Building on the debate around social movements’ latency (Melucci 1984; Taylor 1989) and transnational diffusion (Porta and Kriesi 1999; Tarrow 2005), zooming in on the Portuguese case, we examine if the transnational diffusion frames across Europe play a role in the mechanisms of survival of anti-immigration mobilisation in the country and if so, how it works. Our evidence is drawn from novel empirical data collected from 17 in-depth interviews with Portuguese anti-immigration activists.

The contribution of this paper to the literature is twofold. First, it offers an original theoretical perspective from which to analyse the role of transnational diffusion dynamics outside the peak of activity. Second, it contributes to advancing knowledge about far-right movements by analysing anti-immigration mobilisation in an understudied context – Portugal – which until recently was deemed immune to the far-right (Mudde 2019).

Methodology

To explore the links between the transnational diffusion process and the dynamics of latency, we zoom in on the particular case of Portugal. Despite the establishment of a far-right

party in parliament in 2019 and its staggering growth in the last 5 years, the landscape of far-right protests, including anti-immigration mobilisation, remains remarkably subdued (Marchi and Guimarães 2021). Our analysis of the main parties' electoral programs for the legislative election in 2024, however, underscores that while the far-right party distinctly advocated for enhanced policing measures to regulate access to nationality and proposed the criminalization of irregular migration, comparable positions regarding policies centred on control and securitization regarding migrants were also articulated by the centre-right coalition. Considering the significant correlation between the rise of far-right parties and the mobilisation against immigration, the Portuguese case stands out as distinctive. Despite the increasing prominence of immigration within the electoral agenda, anti-immigrant mobilisation remains comparatively negligible. Thus, we justify our selection of the Portuguese case based on the assertion put forth by Seawright and Gerring (1997) that deviant cases possess the capacity to enrich theoretical understanding within a given field.

We substantiate our argument with empirical evidence derived from our original dataset, consisting of in-depth interviews conducted with 17 anti-immigration activists, including political party members, from different regions of the country, spanning large urban centres such as Lisbon, Coimbra, and Porto, as well as rural areas in Alentejo and Minho. Interviews were conducted by the author, both in person and remotely, according to each participant's preference, between January 2022 and March 2023, lasting between 30 and 120 minutes. Given the small size of this community, the interviewees could be easily identifiable. To protect their anonymity, no pseudonyms have been used, thus preventing separate quotes from the same interviewee from being linked. Likewise, identifiable information that is not directly relevant to the analysis – e.g. membership of a particular political party or association – has been omitted. Following a snowball principle, participants were asked to share the author's e-mail address with contacts who might be

interested in joining the study. In such cases, these individuals voluntarily contacted us and expressed their willingness to give an interview. Before commencing the interviews, the purpose of the study was explained to all participants, who were assured of their confidentiality and anonymity. All participants provided oral consent, indicating their willingness to take part in the study and to allow their sessions to be recorded.

The interviews were structured around inquiries about participants' perceptions of immigration as a problem and their proposed solutions, both in Portugal and in Europe; their strategies to draw attention to their migration-related concerns; their relationships with local and international actors; and their use of social networks to press their anti-immigration demands. Participants were identified through their public participation in protests against immigration, posts on openly accessible social media groups, and the researcher's network. Social media profiles were examined exclusively to identify potential participants, with no data collection or analysis conducted regarding their interactions within the virtual space. Consequently, this article relies solely on data obtained from interviews. Our analysis begins by exploring the relationship between the lack of politicisation of migration in the Portuguese public debate and the invisibility of anti-immigration mobilisation in the country. Next, we analyse if and how transnational diffusion feeds anti-immigration activists' mobilisation and supports them to persevere.

Interviews were audio recorded, and later fully transcribed. The qualitative software NVivo was used to organise, archive and code the data. Using the principle of thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2021), inductive procedures were followed, and coding, findings and interpretations were derived from the transcripts. On re-reading the transcriptions to become familiarised with the content, an initial list of thematic codes emerged from the data content. After initial data analysis was conducted, all of the collected material was reviewed through reading and discussion.

Subsequently, coding and analysis followed a two-step process to search for possible themes (e.g. submerged activities; European problem). The final steps involved reviewing these themes, and defining and naming the final themes (e.g. latent mobilisation, frames and theories).

The study was approved by the Ethical Commission of our institution, and assessed by its GDPR representative.

Transnational diffusion during latent phases of mobilisation

Through direct or indirect channels, activists become aware of certain actions that have proven successful in other places, enabling them to grasp effective tactics or frames employed elsewhere that could be used to articulate their grievances, mobilise support or press their claims (McAdam 1982; Givan et al. 2010). This diffusion of ideas, tactics, repertoires of action and organisational structure plays a key role in the way movements advance, grow and engage in the political arena, by offering inspiration for innovative forms of organisation and action (Givan et al. 2010; Baumgarten and Díez García 2017).

Diffusion refers to the socially mediated spread of an innovation from an initiator to an adopter (Strang and Meyer 1993; Strang and Soule 1998), the former being the actor that starts the innovation, and the latter the one that follows it (Tarrow 2005). Initiators and adopters can be connected through “personal contacts, organisational linkages, or associational networking”, through channels of information that do not involve direct interpersonal contact (internet, mass media), or both (McAdam and Rucht 1993; Givan et al. 2010). In the contemporary context, the low cost of flights, the intensification of global communication via the internet, the popularisation of the English language, and actors’ growing internationalisation have propelled a shift in the scale of the diffusion process, boosting its transnational reach (Tarrow 2005). For diffusion to occur,

however, adopters must take an active role in the process. Activists have to perform laborious interpretation work to creatively adapt, translate or modify innovations according to their own resources and political opportunities (Soule 2018). Hence, in the diffusion process, their agency is key – which attests to its distance from the classical notion of simple contagion (Snow and Benford 1999; Rydgren 2005).

The scholarship on the far right has stressed the importance of diffusion to the spread of radical right-wing mobilisation (Caiani 2019), including the development of far-right political parties (Rydgren 2005; Van Hauwaert 2019). Just as with progressive mobilisation, however, scholars of the far right have focused mainly on how diffusion takes place during cycles of visible political contention (Tarrow 2005; Givan et al. 2010). Therefore, a gap exists in the literature concerning the role of diffusion processes in the far-right mobilisation when such movements are virtually invisible to the public eye (Flesher Fominaya 2015).

Tarrow's (2011) concept of "cycle of protests" or "cycles of contention" unveils how mobilisation follows different intensities and organisations over time. Despite variations in duration, strategies, and outcomes, three common features can be identified in most cycles of contention. Upon the emergence of new political opportunities – defined by Tarrow (2011) as the convergence of various dimensions within the political environment that prompt the impulse for collective action – the mobilisation phase of a cycle of protest begins, which then is followed by the expansion of contention across social groups and sectors, often transcending national borders. Throughout its duration, as protests inevitably broaden, they will change strategies, alliance structures, and identities. Lastly, although there is no typical pattern for how contentions contract, they will inevitably demobilise (Koopmans 2004; Tarrow 2011).

Melucci (1984; 1985; 1994) further develops these concepts by introducing the notion of “cycles of activity” to delineate two distinct phases within social movements: “latency” and “manifest mobilisation”. For him (1994), the latency phase is as crucial as a movement’s peak phase, as it enables the construction of its cultural framework, ensures its eventual visibility, and enhances solidarity among members while attracting new participants. Instead of experiencing a disappearance following a strong increase in the level of contention and subsequent re-emergence, Melucci (1984) posits that movements undergo a latent phase in which activities take place within more submerged networks, typically composed of small, dispersed groups that constantly exchange experiences.

Social movement scholars have increasingly recognized the significance of Melucci’s concept in analysing progressive mobilisation outside its pinnacle (Flesher Fominaya 2015; Yates 2015; Beaumont et al. 2020). However, little research has been conducted on far-right mobilisation during its latent stage. The present study on the case of Portugal furnishes us with rich evidence that contributes to filling this gap. Despite the impressive expansion of far-right votes in the country since the 2019 national elections, the presence of anti-immigration mobilisation in the public arena in Portugal remains virtually invisible (Carvalho 2022). However, as Melucci (1994) argues, latency and visibility are mutually correlated and have different functions in social movements’ cycles of activities. In his analysis (1994, p.107), when “a movement publicly confronts the political apparatus on specific issues, it does so in the name of new cultural models created at a less noisy and less easily measurable level of hidden action”.

According to Melucci (1984), these periods of latency are extremely important in the daily production of meanings, the construction of codes, the maintenance of collective identity and culture, safeguarding the continuity of mobilisation over time between different cycles of

contention, and strengthening their networking potential. Transnational diffusion, however, entails a laborious process to ensure that the disseminated content is accurately translated and culturally assimilated in a new geographical area (Strang and Soule 1998; Gerbaudo 2013). Hence, considering latency as a phase during which movements engage in intensive 'behind-the-scenes' work to re/construct themselves and lay the groundwork for future public mobilisation and innovation (Melucci 1985), the decision to embrace transnational action frames and repertoires by adopters could prove counterproductive, as it would necessitate significant resources for “translation and domestication” to ensure resonance with the local cultural context and avoid transmission failure (Gerbaudo 2013). Conversely, in less favourable contexts, actors may only draw inspiration for implementing innovative collective actions from events occurring in other countries. Hence, the dynamics of transnational diffusion during a movement’s latency stage might be less straightforward than anticipated.

The context of anti-immigration mobilisation in Portugal

Until the legislative elections of March 2024, immigration had never attained high levels of politicization in Portugal (Carvalho 2022) and the dissemination of anti-immigration fake news during electoral campaigns was not as common as in other contexts (Baptista and Gradim 2022). The rationale lies in the mainstream parties' widespread political consensus, historically low levels of political participation, and the relatively recent emergence of a far-right party as a political force since the end of the dictatorship in 1974 (Accornero and Ramos Pinto 2015; Carvalho and Duarte 2020; Reis and Peixoto 2022).

The mainstream political parties, rather than other social groups, have dominated the public discussion of immigration in Portugal (Carvalho and Duarte 2020). According to the authors, the dearth of politicization surrounding immigration primarily stems from a deliberate political

strategy rather than socio-economic factors. PS (Socialist Party) and PSD (Social Democratic Party) maintain a consensus around immigration, fostering a pro-immigration agenda and preventing the politicization of the issue (Carvalho 2022). Reis and Peixoto (2022) contend that a significant and favourable consensus regarding immigration and integration has emerged among the dominant political parties since the 1990s. According to their analysis, public opinion has largely recognized immigration as essential for the welfare, demographics, and economy of the country. Consequently, policy decisions concerning immigrants have predominantly embraced inclusionary approaches, promoting a positive perception of immigrants.

Following the 1974 re-democratization revolution, social mobilisation in the country remained relatively subdued, largely under the leadership of trade unions (Baumgarten 2013). It was not until the austerity years (2010-2013) that Portugal experienced a resurgence of robust mobilisation orchestrated by civil society. Nevertheless, as observed by Accornero and Ramos Pinto (2015, p.508) their ability to mobilise extensively has been sporadic and discontinuous. The authors contend that the frailty of Portuguese civil society, characterized by the absence of a longstanding autonomous infrastructure, imposes constraints on activist groups. These groups encounter limitations in accessing support, expertise, and membership due to their relatively circumscribed network. Moreover, they exhibit a deficiency in fostering a culture of trust and cultivating strong alliances among their ranks (Baumgarten 2013; Accornero and Ramos Pinto 2015). These societal dynamics pose serious challenges for civil society organisations, thus, “groups remain small, and activists report a lack of support, particularly in smaller cities” (Baumgarten 2013, p.467).

Despite a more positive framing of immigration in the partisan political debate and the lack of a solid social movement tradition at the civil society level, the outburst of anti-immigration

actors, discourses, and mobilisation within Portugal's political arena has not been entirely inexistent. In 2019, following years of far-right organisational decline since the end of the Portuguese authoritarian regime that lasted from 1933 to 1974, Chega, a populist far-right party, elected its first member of parliament, and one year after the party became a member of the far-right European group Identity & Democracy (I&D). Prompted by the crisis of the centre-right (Carvalho 2022; Marchi and Azevedo Alves 2022), Chega's electoral breakthrough ended the country's exceptionalism of being immune to far-right expansion in Europe (Mudde 2019; Carvalho 2022), disrupted the apparent stability of the mainstream centre parties (PSD and PS) and revealed the legacy of conservative values of the authoritarian regime (Mendes 2021; Marchi and Azevedo Alves 2022). The outcome of the 2024 election marked the end of bipartisanship in the Portuguese arena, solidifying Chega as the third major political force, securing 48 parliamentary seats, representing 21.24% of the total seats in the parliament (Parlamento 2024).

Chega's growing political force cannot be detached from the support of anti-immigration activists. Overall, the party reproduces cultural xenophobia that advocates for "immigrants' assimilation of Portuguese culture and the rejection of multiculturalism" (Carvalho 2022, p.12). Although the party's main target is the Portuguese Roma community, accusing them of dependency on state benefits, its discourse on cultural heterogeneity, its links between immigration and rising crime, and its dissemination of beliefs that some national and ethnic groups are inferior to others cannot be overlooked (Mendes 2021; Marchi 2024).

Furthermore, even before Chega's ascension, despite its limited visibility and the decline occurring almost overnight, certain isolated instances of anti-immigration mobilisation can be discerned within the Portuguese public sphere. Over decades, the far-right nationalist party, the National Renovator Party (PNR, Partido Nacional Renovator, currently Ergue-te/ stand up), has

ensured some discursive mobilisation against immigration at the political party level (Zúquete 2007; Marchi and Guimarães 2021). Additionally, despite their ephemeral and fragile nature, ethnonationalist organisations (e.g. Escudo Identitário [Identitarian Shield], Associação Cívica Portugueses Primeiros (P1) [Portuguese People First Civic Association] in the first two decades of the 21st century launched several "micro-initiatives" that managed to keep nationalist ideas alive in the country (Marchi and Guimarães 2021). Likewise, amidst the 2015 refugee crisis and the global advancement of a right-wing wave, the Portuguese faded identitarian movements regained vigour (Marchi and Guimarães 2021, p.202). Since 2020, many schools, universities, and refugee centres have been constantly vandalised with racist and xenophobic insults (Fernandes and Teles 2021), and the upsurge of online hate speech in Portugal against migrants has been remarkable (Dantas et al. 2022). In March 2024, a skinhead group organized an anti-Islam street protest, which gathered just over 50 activists (JN 2024).

Is there an anti-immigration mobilisation in Portugal?

In this section of the paper, we discuss the state of anti-immigration mobilisation in Portugal, focusing on its scarce visibility in the public arena. We do so by looking at invisible networks and activities of Portuguese anti-immigration activists. As Melucci (1989, p.71) highlights, “[l]atency does not mean inactivity”; rather, it is the complementary face of visible collective mobilisation. We then go on to explore how Portuguese anti-immigration activists’ transnational connections with other anti-immigration groups in Europe sustain their survival throughout this stage of contraction.

Our interviewees' accounts pinpoint how anti-immigration groups continue to maintain their activities by exchanging experiences and producing new ideas as submerged networks. One founder member of an anti-immigration association affirmed that despite most of its activities being suspended, the organisation maintains minimum levels of activity on social media networks.

I am still the president of the association "X", although our activities are on hold. We still have our Facebook, where we post a few things now and then. (...) So, it does not mean that we cannot bring it back again soon (...).

Founder and active member of an anti-immigrant association and full member of local right-wing party branch in the rural area, man

However, as our next interviewee alludes to, the presence on social media networks of anti-immigration groups in Portugal is, like their offline mobilisation, somewhat muted. As the online domain becomes a crucial space for far-right organisations' mobilisation and transnational connections with like-minded activists (Froio and Ganesh 2019), the limited use of such resources by Portuguese anti-immigration groups is quite a surprising finding.

I was part of a group called "Y", which is now a little more stagnant, (...) because recent times have not been good for activism either, left-wing forces are too strong and they don't want to talk about immigration (...) ... there is a core of about 10 people who maintain the rhythm of activities online, but at this moment, even this (online activities) is extremely paralysed.

Active member of an anti-immigrant association and sympathiser of a local right-wing party branch in an urban centre, man

Our interviewee explains, however, that the limited engagement of his association with the public arena is directly linked to an unresponsive political or cultural environment in Portugal. Indeed, the scholarship argues that activist groups tend to retrain their public presence when the social and political climate is not receptive to mobilisation, thus remaining in a state of latency (Taylor 1989; Melucci 1994).

The nature of these submerged activities, however, reflects certain nuances. The mere occasional presence of the associations on social networks provides evidence of their weak mobilising power, but it still allows for some level of exchange of ideas in a public space, and for keeping activists connected. Hence, it illustrates Melucci's (1989) point on the critical role of "submerged networks" in constructing alternative collective meanings and preparing the groundwork for future mobilisation.

Overall, our interviewees acknowledge the concealed characteristic of their groups' activities, but they also underline the further potential for future mobilisation, suggesting that their groups are not entirely disengaged. To a certain extent, this viewpoint mirrors the analysis by Ravndal (2021) of right-wing revolutionaries who engage in a strategy of metapolitics as a "pre-stage", while waiting for better times before materialising their actual revolution. Although Portuguese anti-immigration activists' influence over the nation's cultural, intellectual and public domains is almost negligible, the dormant potential of their submerged networking activities to thrive when the "right time" comes cannot be entirely dismissed, given the advance of the far right in the national political arena. The increased visibility of immigration in public debates during the 2024 parliamentary elections illustrates that, although it is not yet a central topic on the agenda, immigration is gaining greater relevance compared to prior years.

What keeps anti-immigration mobilisation alive in Portugal?

The growing success of anti-immigration claims across Europe has promoted international collaboration between networks of activists (van Spanje 2010). Soule (2018) argues that activists are very mindful of other movements; hence, when they come across innovations that are deemed successful elsewhere, they tend to borrow them. As public debate on migration increases and anti-immigration ideas expand across Europe, and as activists have become more internationalised, Portuguese anti-immigration networks enjoy greater opportunities to learn from mobilisation in other countries, either through direct or indirect channels.

For instance, the diffusion of the frame that presents Islam as a threat to Western values across Europe (Druxes 2020) bolsters the claims of Portuguese anti-immigration activists advocating for more restrictive policies in the country. Our next interviewee reproduced this anti-Islam rhetoric based on it posing a risk to women's rights and gender equality.

Knowing that Islam is a religion that does not defend women at all and that ostracises women, kills women for... or condemns them to death for stupid things that make no sense in an evolved society. So, Islam is something to worry about. (...) I have a daughter. So, it's something that worries me to see such a big growth... not in Portugal, but if we go to France, maybe, I think that 20 or so per cent of the French population is already Muslim.

One of the founder members of a right-wing political party and the party's local MP in a rural district, man.

Most of our interviewees stated that the diffusion of successful anti-immigration mobilisation taking place in other countries furnishes them with examples of frames and repertoires of action that could be reproduced in the Portuguese context. In these frames from other relevant actors across Europe, they encounter strategies to articulate their own claims and to mobilise support locally.

at lower levels, for example, CasaPound Italy, French identitarians or PEGIDA, and... and these experiences, let's say, end up serving, as inspiration here in Portugal to somehow replicate in Portugal what they do abroad.

Active member of an identitarian association located in an urban centre, man.

Such strategies allow activists to bypass Portugal's unfavourable political context with regard to anti-immigration mobilisation. As the previous excerpt illustrates, for anti-immigration activists, such examples from abroad offer valuable experiences that are worth embracing. In the current, latent stage of Portuguese anti-immigration mobilisation, movements are mainly struggling to survive and working to construct their own collective identities. The adoption of successful innovations therefore serves as an efficient blueprint to keep their activities in motion, as it saves them the time and resources needed to build new strategies that might not be as efficacious. Hence, by not initiating any innovations in the anti-immigration public arena, Portuguese mobilisation against immigration emerges mainly as adopters in the diffusion process. This role has contributed to the late spread of anti-immigration mobilisation in Portugal compared with other European countries, which has led many scholars to view the country as a "European exception" concerning far-right mobilisation (Carvalho and Duarte 2020; Heyne and Manucci

2021). However, given the recent growth of the far right in the country, we would suggest that rather than being an exception, such mobilisation were simply in a latent stage.

Our interviewees referred to resorting to different channels to learn about the anti-immigration frames that are in place in other European contexts. Established lines of communication are one of the key channels for the diffusion into the Portuguese context of new frames opposing migration that have existed elsewhere.

We also took part in a conference with some members of CasaPound, and this is key for the nationalists to understand that the problem is above all social, that immigration (...) is a social problem and that nationalism is not only a way to fight immigration (...), it's a way to fight moral degeneration, it's a way to fight society's social problems, economic problems, environmental problems (...) CasaPound emerges from people's problem that they can't send their kids to school and they don't have money to eat or to save. CasaPound was very important in bringing this idea.

Active member of an identarian association located in an urban centre, man.

As one interviewee stated, “being on the periphery, things take longer to arrive” – referring to Portugal’s semi-peripheral geographical and political position within the EU to explain the late development of far-right mobilisation in the country. However, as activists have become more internationalised (see Caiani & Kröll, 2015), Portuguese anti-immigration activists have more opportunities to learn from mobilisation in other countries through direct channels. As our interviewees stated, physically meeting a member of CasaPound was important in bringing new ideas to their understanding of nationalism. Face-to-face meetings, such as the one described

above, are very important, as they allow the establishment of direct ties, boosting the exchange of information between groups and facilitating diffusion (Strang and Meyer 1993).

Diffusion, however, can also take place without being mediated by direct social ties. Mass media have always played an important role in this non-relationship-based diffusion process (Myers 2000). Scholarship has highlighted the role of the internet in the diffusion of far-right movements, as it reduces the cost of communication between a large number of activists and increases their potential to attract new members (see Caiani & Kröll, 2015; Froio & Ganesh, 2019).

Some groups tried to stop NGO boats that were bringing immigrants to force them to go back to the African or Turkish coast (...) we follow these groups, but from afar, via social networks. It is through social networks that we observe what they do (...) they inspire us (...) they allow us to think “Why can’t we do something like this in Portugal”?

One of the founder members and leader of an identarian association located in the periphery of an urban centre, man.

For some Portuguese activists, the mere encounter with successful mobilisation in other European countries via non-relationship-based channels, like social media, inspires them with hope for the possibility of change (Castells 2015, p.254). These online channels, accessible via smartphones and the internet, have enhanced this process by facilitating the spread of innovations and the exchange of interpretive frames and repertoires of action over long geographical distances and avoiding certain national rules (Tarrow 2005).

In a classic fashion, some of the participants also referred to reading books authored by international scholars to deepen their understanding of discussions beyond Portugal and to better

substantiate their claims. This variety of channels illustrates what Rone (2020, p.35) sees as “the interplay between traditional and digital media in protest diffusion”.

I've delved into numerous works by foreign authors as the discourse on this topic isn't sufficiently developed within Portugal. I read these books to understand what's being discussed outside Portugal and to bolster my arguments with strong evidence.

Occasional collaborator of an anti-immigration association and sympathiser of a right-wing political party, man.

This array of channels highlights pertinent aspects of how Portuguese anti-immigration activities benefit from the transnational diffusion of anti-immigration frames. On one hand, it confirms what has been largely demonstrated in the literature regarding the key role of social networks in the dissemination of ideas, particularly within the far-right context (Froio and Ganesh 2019), and how it introduces a new dimension to the relational-non-relation diffusion categories, as social networks are not static exogenous actors, but rather directly interact with activities (Rone 2020). On the other hand, however, it also shows what some authors (Gerbaudo 2013; Romanos 2013) have also drawn attention to the fact that despite the relevance of cyberspace for diffusion, personal contact and traditional media are still considered valid channels for transnational diffusion among social activists, including in the far right.

Diffusion also involves active interpretive work that aligns initiators and adopters (Snow and Benford 1999), occurring only if adopters perceive some level of similarity between themselves and the initiators, before deciding to transpose innovations into their own contexts

(Bunce and Wolchik 2010). Thus, classifying Portuguese anti-immigration activists as adopters does not mean that they are simply passive receivers of these innovations.

We are part of a European family (...) [that] includes Marine Le Pen's Rassemblement National, Salvini's Lega... we've had good relations with Vox. I, for example, don't see myself as related to the kind of politics that Lega does, but to Giorgia Meloni's Fratelli and to Vox. Neither do I see myself in Marine Le Pen, nor in the AFD in Germany. (...) In terms of immigration policies (...), I like Viktor Orbán. There are many things about him that I identify with, and one of them has been the measures they have taken to support the birth rate (...) I also identify myself with Vox and Fratelli, because of these cultural questions, I believe that the questions of belonging to a culture are very important (...) they defend their people and their traditions, and that's what we stand for.

Full member of a right-wing political party and one of its national delegates, man.

From the excerpt above, it is possible to grasp how Portuguese anti-immigration activists perform a strategic framing effort to construct a narrative of strong similarities between themselves and the European anti-immigration initiator groups. In the vocabulary of Tarrow (2005), this identification mechanism is called the “attribution of similarity”. It allows Portuguese anti-immigration activists to see their claims falling into the same categories as those of other European groups. Strang and Meyer (1993) argue that perceived cultural similarities among actors help to speed up the diffusion of their reference groups' ideas. The active construction of categories of similarities with other European groups performed by Portuguese activists facilitates the diffusion of anti-immigration frames and symbols into their local context, despite the unreceptive climate

for such claims in Portugal. At the same time, it attests to the agency of these activists in choosing how to adopt a given innovation.

Furthermore, given the unfavourable environment in Portugal towards anti-immigration mobilisation, as anti-immigration frames and symbols successfully spread in Europe, Portuguese activists reached out to other European contexts to mobilise their political claims. Although most of our interviewees affirm that immigration is not currently the main societal problem in Portugal, they refer constantly to other European countries to justify their concerns over the matter. The next interviewee acknowledges that migration is not as challenging in Portugal as in other European contexts, as migrants do not settle permanently in the country. For him, however, this does not mean, however, that such a reality could not happen in Portugal.

The Portuguese case is not as bad as in other countries, although we have one of the most flexible migration laws in Europe, because we are a jumping platform to other countries (...) they come and spend one or two years, and after they go to another country like Germany or Austria. (...) [Portugal] still doesn't know the problems that have happened for the last 20 years in Europe (...) in European countries like Sweden, Germany and the UK, you have real problems; you have ghetto 'no-go' zones where native people cannot go at all (...) We haven't got there yet.

Active member of an anti-immigrant association located in the periphery of the urban centre and a full member of local right-wing party branch in an urban centre, man

Portuguese anti-immigration activists project their claims onto the European level to legitimise their grievances. By defining immigration as a shared European problem, they create a frame that also includes Portugal, despite the low salience of migration in the country. This simplistic version of immigration as a potential problem in Portugal, by assuming a cause-and-

effect relationship between what supposedly occurs in a given European country and what *could* happen in Portugal, resembles the theorisation mechanism proposed by Tarrow (2005, p.122). According to him, theorisation “permits the generalization or abstraction of a core causal idea from a particular reality into a general frame that can be applied to other realities”. By reducing their contentions concerning immigrants to a form of “folk wisdom” (Tarrow 2005, p.118), removed from the complexities of existing social dynamics, Portuguese anti-immigration activists mould their claims into a more acceptable narrative to fit the national context. Furthermore, these theorised narratives render transnational diffusion more rapid, even if activists themselves are not directly linked.

Moreover, all preceding testimonies underscore the meticulous “translation and domestication” (Gerbaudo 2013) efforts of our interviewees to ensure that their grievances resonate within the Portuguese local context. The subsequent example also serves as an illustration of such endeavours.

And we see, for example, in France there are already Muslim parties, which are mostly Muslims, but are Muslim-French because they have a role to say they are French, so they have all that right, and by having all that... they can, in some way, influence national politics. And if we look at the issue of Muslims growing in France and Germany and, for example, in Spain, something that is... also happening in Portugal, if we look at the growth that (...) they have three, four and five children, this also has a lot to do with social benefits.

Occasional collaborator of an identarian association located in an urban centre and a full member of a right-wing party branch in the periphery of an urban centre, man

While the presence of efficient diffusion channels is key to successful transnational diffusion, the activities' ability to creatively engage in “adapting” the frames used elsewhere into frames that focus on their local context (Rone 2020). Indeed, Portuguese activists undertake the vital task of translating the French “Muslim question” (Mansouri et al. 2015) into the context of the growing Muslim community in Portugal. They adapt frames regarding anti-Muslim political rights into frames that emphasize the burden on the welfare state.

Conclusion

This article shows how transnational diffusion works as a key mechanism for far-right mobilisation during latent stages. The case of Portugal is paramount in this regard. Traditionally, the Portuguese political and social environment has not provided incentives for anti-immigration activists to mobilise, due to the stability of political alignments, a lack of political allies and low levels of political conflict concerning migration (Carvalho and Duarte 2020). Hence, movements opposing immigration in the country have been almost negligible. However, the advance of Chega in the party-political realm, and the presence – albeit limited and fragmented – of ethnonationalist groups in the public sphere, support our argument that anti-immigration mobilisation in the country is latent rather than absent. Furthermore, because such mobilisation in Portugal has never actually achieved a moment of peak before its current dormant status, we maintain that latency better describes this mobilisation than abeyance (Taylor 1989).

Our research demonstrates that, despite the laborious nature of successful transnational diffusion, which requires vigorous and creative work to translate the discourses and struggles to a local context, during the latent and invisible stages of mobilisation and within a less favourable environment, this process plays a central role in the work of individuals and social groups. Given

the lack of political support and opportunities in their local contexts, as these activists become aware of booming movements abroad, they gain inspiration to maintain their activities. Our findings strengthen arguments that as activists became aware of thriving mobilisation in other contexts, their hope for the possibility of change increases (Castells 2015, p.254).

In the context of latent mobilisation, transnational diffusion can play a crucial role in allowing activists to learn about frames that are deemed to be effective elsewhere, making them believe that they have an opportunity to foster social change, and therefore keeping mobilisation alive. While operating at a low visibility level, Portuguese anti-immigration activists not only continue to exchange ideas and interact among themselves but also with activists from other countries through relationships and non-relationship-based mechanisms. This less visible work ensures the maintenance of meaningfully productive activities, as well as the development of new tactics.

In this transnational diffusion dynamic, during latent stages, movements emerge mainly as adopters, aligning their frames with those offered by innovators. Key to this process, however, is the political agency of their activists, who need to make an engaged effort to adapt the grievances of other movements to their local contexts. In the case of Portugal, although activists have not created any innovations in anti-immigration mobilisation, they engage in various strategies to adapt frames from elsewhere to their local context. The construction of immigration as a European problem – therefore also a Portuguese problem – based on the oversimplified analysis of the social configurations of other European countries, attests to their creativity and agency in bolstering their anti-immigration standpoints. Moreover, it also enables them to bypass unfertile social and political contexts for such mobilisation, given the low levels of salience and politicisation of migration in Portugal.

In using the Portuguese context to explore the link between transnational diffusion and mobilisation during a latent stage, we have also faced certain limitations. While we have been able to demonstrate the agency of Portuguese activists in transnational diffusion, we have been unable to ascertain how activists from other countries act within this dynamic. Are they also interested in boosting the transnational diffusion of their frames and repertoires of action, with the aim of inspiring other movements and fostering solidarity between mobilisation? Or conversely, do they play a passive role in this process, and the adoption of their innovations by other groups elsewhere is just an unexpected spill-over of their mobilisation? In addition, because this study takes place during a moment of great visibility of anti-immigration mobilisation in Europe, we are unable to apprehend, given the unfavourable political context for anti-immigration mobilisation in Portugal, how these submerged networks have been able to survive during the years in which such grievances were almost unnoticeable in other contexts.

Lastly, as it is the ambition of this study to link concepts that are, in general, not used together in the analysis of social movements, it opens up avenues for further research into social movements, both on the far right and more broadly. Future studies should investigate how transnational diffusion operates within anti-immigration movements during their visible phases. Methodologically, comparative research designs should also be sought as the particularities of the European context, its geographical proximity and political and economic integration, add special nuances to transnational diffusion.

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