

# The Portuguese 'contraption' that kept the right out of power in 2014-19

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**To keep the right out of power, between 2015 and 2019 the Portuguese Bloco de Esquerda (Left Block) and Communist Party (PCP) gave conditional support to the centre-left Socialist Party (PS) government that controlled a minority of votes. The "Geringonça" (contraption) was a new experience in left parliamentary politics. In this article, former Left Bloc leader, now MEP Catarina Martins looks back at 'four years of a decade'.**

While we were discussing the agreement that would give rise to the "Geringonça", the [governing right wing] PSD and CDS were offering the national airline TAP to David Neelman and preparing to sell the national train company CP and Lisbon and Porto's mass transport systems, after having already privatised almost everything that remained. Even before the elections, they had created new legal obstacles to accessing abortion. Limitations to the right to strike were on the agenda.

During the 'troika' [EU imposed conditional financial support to Portugal], unemployment soared, wages retreated twenty years and GDP fifteen. The right wing pointed to pensioners and civil servants as problems and did everything to cut labour income [1]. The European Union refused any change of course and in political debate, the existence of an "arc of governance" that would coincide with European alignment was asserted. Those who refused this alignment would not count for anything [2].

Meanwhile, the "To hell with the troika" demonstrations brought together crowds, and broad sectors of the left met at Aula Magna, in trade union struggles and in new activism by pensioners or debt auditing groups. Against all predictions, in the 2015 elections, the left had almost 20% of votes [3]. Suddenly, hope became strength in votes and opened up a new possibility in the Portuguese landscape. The coalition right won the elections, but PS and the left have a majority and give substance to the popular demand for change. The right had to leave.

The Geringonça was a product of that time. Of the urgency that ran through the life of each person and also of trade unions, local authorities, small businesses, NGOs. When the possibility of change opened up, the whole country embraced it. It was like coming up for air and finally being able to breathe.

But the Geringonça was also the context of European Union and capital pressures, of impossibilities self-imposed by PS, of impasses. Whoever thought one day that it would have been good to have left-wing ministers in government, instead of just a parliamentary agreement, should know that such a government would have fallen in little more than a month, with the resolution of Banif [4].

The left conquered what had never been done before, but ended up in the thankless position of handing over government to PS. And we knew the risks.

Some remember the obstacles imposed by Cavaco Silva, who demanded a written agreement to recognise the new majority in parliament. In truth, it was an enormous help. Unlike Bloco, the PCP

preferred to have nothing in writing. As quickly became clear, PS agreed with the right on everything that wasn't explicitly agreed upon.

Between 2015 and 2019, there was a period of recovery of rights, of labour income and, no less importantly, of defeating austerity as a hegemonic idea. The annual update of the minimum wage and pensions, free textbooks or transport passes are now taken for granted. Almost a decade later, it might be difficult to think there was a time when all this was considered irresponsible and provoked Brussels' wrath.

Simultaneously, PS postponed planned public investment and relied on the right for decisions about the financial system, energy or real estate market. Changes to labour legislation were postponed until the end of the mandate and ended up being voted on with PSD's support.

By the 2019 elections, popular support for these 5 years' achievements would give victory to PS. The costs of what was postponed would only become visible later. Bloco, unlike PCP, opted for public and permanent confrontation throughout the legislature [5]. In the elections, we withstood the pressure and maintained the same number of MPs. PCP lost almost a third of its parliamentary group. PS won without a majority and the new legislature requires negotiation.

After the elections, Bloco proposed a new written agreement. PS refused and had PCP's comfort; everything would be seen measure by measure. This opened the field for PS to govern by blackmail [6]. In public debate, the left would always bear the burden of sectarianism when refusing what PS wanted to impose. Forces like PAN or Livre helped this narrative. Meanwhile, through the combination of the crystallisation of some traditional trade unionism and the ongoing reconfiguration on the right, a new agenda determined by the far-right emerges. All political debate became murkier.

Bloco considered it had no conditions to reject the legislature's first budget, at a time when PS was still reaping the fruits of the geringonça. We were at the beginning of 2020. A pandemic would follow and an enormous sense of insecurity throughout society. António Costa bets on fear and wins. Unlike Bloco, PCP still approves the State Budget for 2021. The following budget doesn't pass and, with the crisis provoked this provoked, in 2022, PS achieves the absolute majority it had been preparing since 2019. It would end up losing it again a little more than a year later, flinging open the doors to the right and far-right.

It's certain that no one could predict the pandemic's impact, but we must recognise that it only accelerated what was already happening and with errors that favoured the right. On the left, there was the dazzlement of some sectors (including in Bloco's sphere) by institutional negotiation instead of public confrontation and social movement. In the PS, there was an absolute refusal to make changes to the economy's structure.

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**P.S.**

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## Footnotes

[1] “Including laws that would later be considered unconstitutional.” This footnote refers to some of the austerity measures implemented by the right-wing government during the troika period. Several of these laws, particularly those cutting labour income, were later challenged and ruled unconstitutional by Portugal’s Constitutional Court, highlighting the extreme nature of the austerity programme.

[2] In 2015, even on the left, there were those who defended this doctrine. Livre - Time to Advance, which failed to elect anyone, explained that questioning the Fiscal Compact was preventing understandings on the left. PS presented its most right-wing electoral programme ever and didn’t question the need for austerity, only its intensity. In 2019, PS would vote against the Fiscal Compact in the European Parliament. But, by then, it was easy. This footnote illustrates the political climate of 2015, where even some left-wing parties (like Livre) accepted the EU’s fiscal restrictions as unchangeable. It points out the irony that the Socialist Party (PS) initially presented its most right-wing programme ever, accepting austerity in principle, only to later vote against the Fiscal Compact in 2019 when it had become politically safer to do so.

[3] Bloco doubles compared to 2011 and exceeds 10%, CDU rises slightly and stays above 8%. This footnote provides specific electoral data showing the significant growth of left-wing parties, particularly the Left Bloc (Bloco), which doubled its support to over 10%, while the Communist-led coalition (CDU) maintained its position above 8%.

[4] A resolution inherited from Maria Luís Albuquerque and postponed until December 2015, in which PS fully accepted the European Commission’s demands and which passed in parliament only with the right’s support. This refers to the Banif bank resolution, a critical moment inherited from the previous right-wing government. The Socialist Party accepted all European Commission demands, and the resolution only passed with right-wing support. This footnote explains why a government including left-wing ministers would have been unstable.

[5] During the 4 years, we took budget negotiations to public sessions and gave accounts of the agreement’s execution. This footnote describes the Left Bloc’s strategy of maintaining transparency in its negotiations with the government, holding public sessions about budget negotiations and regularly reporting on the implementation of their agreement.

[6] The balance of power became different. PS only needed the vote of either PCP or Bloco. This final footnote explains the changed political dynamics after the 2019 elections, where the Socialist Party only needed support from either the Communist Party (PCP) or the Left Bloc to pass legislation, giving them more leverage in negotiations. These footnotes provide crucial context for understanding the complexities of Portuguese politics during the “Geringonça” period, particularly regarding the relationship between left-wing parties and the Socialist Party, and the broader context of European austerity policies.