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LOCAL GOVERNMENT AND CITIZEN INITIATIVES: POLITICAL MESSAGES AND ATTRACTION STRATEGIES FOR THE PORTUGUESE RURAL WORLD

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The Portuguese rural world no longer resembles the one described in literature, particularly in the twentieth century neorealist works of Alves Redol, Fernando Namora and even José Saramago (Almeida, 2012). Mostly because people no longer live nor work there. Farmers became brand managers and tour hosts, workers were replaced by machines and the agrarian landscape has been transformed into leisure space (Almeida, Melo, 2007, Brandão et al, 2013) or into places of nature conservation (Figueiredo, 2008). What remains and how is it being addressed by the few who still believe in life outside the big cities? According to Hedberg and Carmo, present day rural areas can be dynamic and interconnected by flows and mobilities which are affecting rural space. Migration, commuting, everyday life activities, business networks and information technology have changed spaces which were often viewed as isolated and stagnating areas into dynamic places connected to the rest of the world (Hedberg and Carmo, 2012). However, the tension between marginalization and urbanization is still a huge problem, particularly for remote areas with demographic and desertification problems.

During one of the worst economic and political crisis Portugal has faced in the last decades, with a huge debt to deal with, there was a general election for local government in 2013. A new law restricted mandates to three and, as a result, over half of the Portuguese mayors were replaced. In this paper there is an analysis of the new elected mayors and their electoral

programs and political messages, compared to the earlier group of mayors (Almeida, 2013, 2014).

All over the country, and particularly in rural areas, there is an urgent need to attract people and investment to fight depopulation and unemployment. Political and economic strategies are analysed and compared in order to create a pattern and verify the most viable ones. With this study, my goal is to launch a new research for the next three years which aims to answer the following questions: What is the role of local government and its elites in the sustainable development of the territory and its dynamic? What are the differences between projects for urban and rural municipalities? Which interests are more frequently considered and what kind of language and speech are being used concerning big cities and small villages? What is the role of local entrepreneurs and civic associations in local development? Are the new mayors capable of delivering their promises? And will there be visible results?

The analysis of political programs and messages has been conducted in Europe since 1979 by the Manifesto Research Group (MRG), directed by Ian Budge (Budge, 2001; Klingemann, 2006; Volkens, 2013). And Robert Thomson has been answering the question “To what extent do elected politicians keep the promises they made to voters during election campaigns?” Regardless of the fact that “subjective factors often cause citizens’ evaluations to be more negative than actual policy performance suggests they should be” (Thomson, 2001, 2011), the evaluation of politicians’ promises and results is an important part of the decision process for informed citizens. My aim is to collect election programs and political messages of the Portuguese Mayors elected in 2013 and build a database which is to be available to voters in the next elections, so that all of us can make a conscious choice based on promises made and the work actually done. Simultaneously, in each municipality or in each region, I’ll study local civic initiatives and observe their work. For example, the Aldeias do Xisto project (Capela et al) and others such as Projeto Acolher, in Aveloso do Sul, who have worked to promote rural areas and attract investment.

In the last five decades several trends and changes were enforced in the United Kingdom and the United States of America to promote community sustainability, quality of life and the environment. In these countries, both highly urbanized, “rural people and communities continue to contribute to national identity, economic development and social solidarity, as well as to environmental quality” (Shucksmith et al, 2012). Can these approaches to rural policy be compared and applied to the Portuguese reality?

In this paper I shall discuss the main problems and present the initial results of this ambitious research project. As an example of this research's early conclusions, there is the mayors' claim for government decentralization and the attribution of larger self-government powers to the municipalities. Autonomy, social cohesion, sustained development, resources, patrimony, opportunities and accountability: these are the main terms used in most of the political programs presented by the leaders of the Portuguese municipalities. Regarding differences, one cannot forget that there are huge demographic and size discrepancies in Portuguese municipalities: there are only twenty three municipalities with over 100.000 residents. The other 285 are much smaller, some of them with only a few hundred residents. For urban mayors, the big issues are networks, internationalization, jobs, urban reconstruction, social cohesion, economy and culture. As for rural municipalities, the main problems are attraction strategies for people and companies. Emigrants are never forgotten as potential sources of income. Summer festivals and local products are always present in the speech, as well as the education of their youth.

Concerning local development associations, these are new forms of civic participation, which have yet to prove their worth in most cases. One common ground: most of them try to implement direct democracy and to attract people to present and solve their own problems. Others originate in local government or in municipalities' associations. Networks are important to coordinate and establish regional interests, which can prove to be more effective than each municipality individually.

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