

# A Portuguese miracle - The politics of the first phase of COVID-19 in Portugal

Patrícia Silva<sup>1</sup>, João Moniz<sup>1</sup>, Edna Costa<sup>2</sup>

Facing the pandemic with exceptionally low casualties, Portugal has been internationally praised as an outstanding example, particularly when compared to other European countries. During the first phase, the Portuguese case was acclaimed as a miracle, a reflection of the appraisal that the country acted fastest and adopted more stringent measures, variables that would have been most successful. This research argues that politics mattered in dealing with the pandemic. First, the pandemic hit Portugal at a time of political stability, exceptional in the context of southern Europe. Second, lower levels of political polarisation on the government's handling of the sanitary and a climate of cross-party collaboration are key factors in understanding the Portuguese case. With the onset of the pandemic crisis, Portugal witnessed a rallying effect around the country leadership, that was translated into a unified message that enabled the government to enact stringent confinement measures quickly.

The third argument pertains the organizational level, particularly the centralization of power and decision-making that enabled a cohesive policy response. The centralized (vertical) structures and instruments reinforced some control over local governments to minimize the potential risks of fragmented policy responses, while also allowing considerable room of manoeuvre and additional powers to subnational governments.

Country unity eroded as the lockdown dragged on. The rampant growth in cases during the deconfinement stages exposed social inequalities, with the virus disproportionately affecting the most fragile groups. The combination of a new spike in cases, public disagreement with health experts and decreasing support from opposition parties are liable to strain relations between government and citizens, who become increasingly frustrated with government management of the pandemic.

<sup>1</sup> – Department of Social, Political and Territorial Sciences & GOVCOPP, University of Aveiro  
<sup>2</sup> – University of Minho

**FIGURE 1**

Performance evaluation of Government, Prime Minister and the President of the Republic.

Sources: The Portuguese Regulatory Authority for the Media (ERC). Notes: percentages report to percentages of respondents who evaluate the performance as positive and very positive.

