Episode 3: “Populism and Information”

[mix of introductory sounds]

Pedro Portela [host] *Estados do Tempo* (The States of the Times). Because information about populism is a basic necessity.

[music]

Pedro Portela: Hello, welcome to episode three of *Estados do Tempo*, a podcast that today will focus on populism and information, featuring a conversation moderated by Luís António Santos.

Luís António Santos [moderator]: We knew how to convey that to successive generations of people born, for example, in Portugal, after the 25th of April.

Pedro Portela: Luís António Santos is a lecturer in the Department of Communication Sciences at the University of Minho, where he is also a member of the General Council, and he has a career connected to journalism. He will be leading the conversation with our guest today, Isabel Estrada Carvalhais.

Isabel Estrada Carvalhais [guest]: And what I fear a little is that now there may also be a push to send the message that we only defend European values if we arm ourselves to the teeth.

Pedro Portela: Let us get to know a little more about today’s guest through Luís António Santos’s introduction.

Luís António Santos: Isabel Estrada Carvalhais is an Associate Professor with aggregation at the University of Minho. She teaches in the areas of Political Science and International Relations at the School of Economics, Management and Political Science — a school

which recently changed its name — where she is the director of the Master's in International Relations and a researcher at the Research Centre in Political Science. Some people may also know her for her recent political activity. In 2019, she joined the Socialist Party lists to the European Parliament as an independent and was elected, serving a mandate as MEP until 2024, the same year in which she received the Silver Medal of Merit from the city of Braga.

Pedro Portela: So, everything is in place for what promises to be an excellent conversation. Let's listen.

Luís António Santos: Hello. We are in another episode of *Estados do Tempo*. Today we are joined by Isabel Estrada Carvalhais, and I would like to thank her for being here on this podcast. Welcome.

Isabel Estrada Carvalhais: Thank you very much.

Luís António Santos: We are here to talk about populism. And the first question I ask is perhaps provocative, even about the nature of this conversation… It has to do with the fact that some words, like populism, have now gained enormous presence among us, in our public life. Don't we run the risk that, at times, because the word is instrumentalised…

Isabel Estrada Carvalhais: Of banalising it?

Luís António Santos: Of it losing its meaning. This is the first question, which could just as well be the last, but let's go.

Isabel Estrada Carvalhais: Of course. First of all, thank you very much for the invitation — greetings to everyone listening. Indeed, populisms are a very broad and complex concept. Some see populism as a political ideology in itself. Others consider it merely a communication strategy that accompanies other ideologies. Either way, we can speak of left-wing and right-wing populisms. And the concern I always have with these terms

— and it is not only with populism, but also with extremism and those buzzwords and catchphrases — is that they become banalised. What I often notice, especially in political discourse… I wonder, do the people speaking on television, the politicians invited to debates, really understand that most people are utterly indifferent to the use of these buzzwords? In other words, when I hear a politician say: we must be cautious with the rise of populisms. Most 15-, 16-, 17-, and 18-year-olds hear that as just a word because they often lack the reference points or anything to fill in these words. For us — and when I say 'us', I mean, well, people who are a bit older, let's say around 40 or 50 — although it doesn't have to be just about age. For those who… For example, for those who read, who enjoy history, who follow a country's political reality over time, we don't always need to be living witnesses of what is happening. So, those who enjoy history can, in some way, fill in these concepts and understand what is meant by fascism or nationalism — they can make sense of these ideas. Most people don't know what they are supposed to put in there. So, for them, it's just words they hear on TV, on the radio.

Luís António Santos: Words being thrown around.

Isabel Estrada Carvalhais: Words, words. And people can't see… why should I be afraid of that? There's nothing tangible they can connect to their lives. That's the big fear: the banalisation of discourse, of these words, when people aren't actually explained what they mean. And this is becoming more and more pronounced, I'd say, because as time goes by — for instance, we're now marking the 50th anniversary of the 25th of April, and next year the 50th of the Constitution — but as the years pass, those with a living memory of these events naturally disappear, leaving us dependent on historical narratives, on what's written in books. And people who don't read, who don't really engage with history, who don't have the chance to understand it, end up becoming more and more disconnected from the links that are often drawn between these words and past experiences. Populism: beware of it, because it has happened before. Or when it comes to nationalism: remember the horrors of twentieth-century nationalism. Most of us no longer have that awareness, so only by studying, only by reading, and even so, an emotional and cognitive distance develops between people and these concepts.

Luís António Santos: Have we, as a community, namely through schools, through public schools, communicated this… Have we been able to convey this clearly to successive generations of people born, for example, in Portugal after the 25th of April? Have we done this well through public schools? Have we succeeded in drawing attention to the historical dimension of certain concepts — what they connect to, which historical events, which moments, which political ideas — over the last, say, three decades?

Isabel Estrada Carvalhais: It's a bit harsh, I would say, to claim simply that we haven't managed to do it. It's harsh because I think that, especially within public education, over the years, there has been a real effort. Now, teaching itself tends to focus on the acquisition of knowledge — the more cognitive dimension — on delivering the syllabus. As we know, there is a genuine concern about covering the programme and getting through the content… For example, this can't be addressed solely in the subject of citizenship and development. These are issues that should be transversal, worked on across all subjects that children study — Portuguese, and even mathematics. They need to be constantly present because, in the end, what's at stake here is our citizenship. And very often these themes are pushed into one corner — either into citizenship classes or into history lessons. And I would say that, in general, teachers make a considerable effort. I'm also from a time—and I already sound like an old lady, but it's true — when we never talked about the 25th of April. It was left until the very end of the history syllabus, and there was never enough time to get to it. But it wasn't only that. There was also a powerful ideological and emotional charge, and teachers themselves were afraid to address those topics. First, because many of them had been actors in those events — people who had lived through them first-hand and had their own memories — and so perhaps found it difficult to convey a more distanced account. And then, because they were also subject to a particular kind of censorship, I remember that well. Censorship in the sense of parents saying, "why do they have to be talking about these things now? About the PREC [Revolutionary Process in Progress], about Gonçalves? My children don't need to know about this — it's not relevant." Only now, in some way, I think, has there been space to show these things in schools. And I do believe that a genuine effort is being made to show new generations the meaning of those moments in our history — a vibrant history. There are very few countries, very few nations — and even the term

‘nation’ itself opens up a whole discussion — but very few peoples, let’s say, who have had the opportunity, over the course of a century — and in this case it wasn’t even a century, it was just a few decades — to reinvent themselves. We go on living our daily lives, managing the everyday, and we are very old at being Portuguese. And then suddenly, by the late 1970s and early 1980s, Portugal enters a phase of almost personal introspection: who are we? But it’s a collective introspection — who are we? That period of Portuguese totality, as José Mattoso called it, had come to an end. And so we are all still heirs to a period of reconstruction of our own identity. Being able to convey this in classrooms, to talk about these issues in a more open, relaxed, unburdened way, to engage young people… it’s not easy. But I can also assure you — from what I’ve seen, whenever I have the opportunity to go into schools — and I really enjoy going into schools, both lower and upper secondary — the students want to know. They are the first to show a tremendous desire to exercise their citizenship, which involves understanding these issues. They need more opportunities. And public education is structured in such a way that it dramatically limits the time, space, and opportunities teachers themselves have to address these topics, work on them in the classroom, and avoid reinforcing stereotypes. Because that’s another risk: producing a stereotyped reading of the 25th of April, of the 25th of November — which is now also being discussed — and then the Constitution that followed the 25th of April. Things are put into little boxes, short texts, as if to say, “this represents that year,” without going deeper, without trying to uncover the memories associated with these defining moments of our society and of us as a people.

Luís António Santos: In any case, what is happening in Portugal is naturally connected to the passage of half a century, so generations are disappearing, and part of that knowledge is being lost. But with this question, I’d now like to broaden the scope a little, to the European level. This is happening in a European — and even global — context of a resurgence of specific political proposals that echo the populism of the early twentieth century. So, although we have our own particular circumstances, those circumstances seem, in some respects, to overlap with what is happening in other countries. And in that context, my question is this: whatever the response may be — and there will not be just one — does it also have to be thought through at a European level?

Isabel Estrada Carvalhais: Yes, absolutely. While I was speaking, I was thinking: we are a country that has often gone against the grain, and sometimes in very positive ways, in relation to European dynamics… I'm thinking, for example, of our approach to nationality issues since 2006, which went against the prevailing trend, against what was already visible and felt across the rest of Europe. We were used to doing that. Now, however, we are entirely in sync, aligned with what is happening in Europe and in the world. And circumstances do, in fact, encourage this… Because these populist approaches — and within populism, if we want to go there, for example, ultranationalist discourse, protectionism, this fear of the other, this return to the idea — curiously, and almost against nature, so to speak — that identities — national identities — are fixed. I say "against nature" because, in this sense, what defines an identity, whether personal or national, is precisely its capacity to evolve. We are very old at being Portuguese because we have had this ability to incorporate many others and many faces, for better or worse, but this happens with all peoples. And so this idea, for example, of a reified identity — "we are what we are, and this is already fully defined" — this protectionism… Of course, this has always existed in societies; it's not something invented now. When circumstances come together — and this always brings us back to Ortega y Gasset's maxim, "I am myself and my circumstances" — when circumstances are favourable, as they are now — and indeed the war in Ukraine, provoked by Russia, has been a major driver of this renewed concern with defence in Europe — when circumstances align, all of this resurfaces.

And so, we see the return of these nativist discourses, even discourses about purity, about blood, things like that. And these are not new. They are always there, waiting for an opportunity. It's a bit like mushrooms — like in nature: when the conditions are right, they either flourish or they don't. Now, all of us, as a society, have… I believe, first of all, that we must not panic. I think there will be a growing sense of panic among people — a silent panic. People feel caught up in this language and may feel they can no longer counter it. Sometimes it is this language that is taken as "correct", and people go along with it a bit. So that is the path we have to follow, and thus "we protect ourselves". But this has to be thought through, as far as possible, calmly and with composure. And it has to involve responses that are not national in scope. They cannot be merely local — they

have to be thought through at a European level as well. And that is precisely where the problem lies. Because when we now look at Europe — and this has happened very recently — Europe is very committed, and I understand this concern, to developing a defence policy. It has been announced, for example, that by the end of 2027, we will all have something like a military Schengen area to facilitate the movement of military forces. And I understand this, and so do we all. There is nothing malicious or strange about it. There is a real need. Because we are, in fact, right next to Russia. We tend to forget, but it's true. And next to other powers as well, because the world is full of individuals and powers with bizarre behaviour. That's it. And yes, we are concerned about this.

But how are we going to reverse this way of thinking in Europe, for example, at this moment? It's challenging. Anyone who says right now, 'let's not think only about defence'… Because what truly defines the identity of the European project is its social dimension. If we remove that social dimension, it makes no sense at all. Europe — the European project — has no identity. It falls apart. It becomes something else. I sometimes say this, even in conversations with my students: we may be able to accept this, but we have to be aware that it implies a change in the very identity of the European project. In other words, we can't want to continue presenting ourselves to the world as a soft power, within that logic of social constructivism — and I'll just make a brief aside here, sorry for this… well, as someone might say, this doesn't really matter — but this idea that through good practices and through discourse, through words, we can encourage different behaviours in others and lead them… which is a bit the logic behind, for example, environmental issues. We do certain things in the expectation that other countries will then follow suit, because one thing leads to another, and they also have to join in on environmental matters.

But we can't want to be that and, at the same time, be a bloc that, for the 2028–2034 budget, for example, is going to allocate ten times more funding to military issues. If we want to do that — and I say this very clearly — then it has to be done openly. Very well, then do it.

Luís António Santos: We change our identity.

Isabel Estrada Carvalhais: Yes — but with an awareness of where we're heading, with an understanding that this changes us. And so, at this stage, trying to push back — there it is again, going against the grain of these dynamics — when we have a war on our doorstep, and so on, is in fact very difficult. What an academic, a thinker, a teacher can do is to try to clarify, to try to inform, to try to help students navigate the literature they can find and that can support them. But obviously, neither we alone, nor anyone else, can counter what is, at this moment, a paradigm that seems to be the prevailing one. And in the end, only history will tell us whether it was the right one.

Luís António Santos: At the same time — and I apologise for interrupting — but at the same time that Europe is perhaps making this shift towards a more militarised Europe, isn't it… And Europe is very much like this, with movements that sometimes seem contradictory — and perhaps that's how Europe has moved forward — it also approved, towards the end of this year, a set of strategies. One of them is called the European Democracy Shield, and the other is the European Civil Society Strategy. So, a shield for democracy and a strategy for civil society. So, we have a Europe that, on the one hand, is moving in this more militarised direction, but, on the other hand, is also aware that doing so may put other things at risk, as we were saying earlier, right? There is talk, namely, of safeguarding the integrity of information spaces — just nice words — strengthening democratic institutions and independent media, and promoting European values. So, my question is this: will Europe be able to continue playing on these two fronts? Will it be able to keep doing this?

Isabel Estrada Carvalhais: Europe is good at playing on several fronts, in that sense. It will continue to do so. But this actually brings us back to the initial question of banalisation, because when people read those words or hear them on television… We should be required — we should be accustomed — from a very young age to exercising critical thinking. And that is very difficult to do. When we talk about critical thinking, what do we mean by that? Does it mean constantly questioning everything around us? No. But, for example, when we talk about "European values", we should ask: what exactly are we referring to?

Luís António Santos: Which ones?

Isabel Estrada Carvalhais: What are European values? Values of solidarity, values of liberal democracy, respect for freedoms, for minorities, well. Because this isn't actually clear either. We say this has been the European project from the very beginning, but it wasn't all that clear from the outset. The social dimension, yes, I would say so. But people need to be encouraged not to accept these words passively. The defence of the rule of law. Most people have a general idea of what the rule of law is, what it means, essentially, the existence of an understanding of political power that does not operate arbitrarily, but rather according to laws, applied universally and abstractly, and which safeguards people's rights. A state governed by the rule of law is what distinguishes it from an arbitrary state. For example, when we hear Donald Trump — and this even in relation to issues of press freedom — when he says: your company… your television company should shut down, things like that.

Luís António Santos: Fake news. Another expression.

Isabel Estrada Carvalhais: Fake news, fake news. Everything that doesn't please is fake news. And these are apparent ideological positions. It's the age of post-truth, isn't it? And so, I don't like… I have alternative facts, I have alternative narratives, but this stance he takes — shut up, you have nothing to say, you're terrible, you're a lousy journalist, your television station should shut down. This is an arbitrary position. This is what a despot, let's say, in the seventeenth century, or even still in the eighteenth century, would say: I do this, this is my understanding of power. A state governed by the rule of law is a state in which power is not confused with the person who exercises it. Because there are solid, consolidated democratic institutions that ensure that, regardless of who happens to be exercising power, things hold. People are not led to think about these concepts. And so they hear this and think: well, these must be good intentions on the part of the European Union, but then how does this — put simply — translate? And what impact does this have on my day-to-day life? And that is Europe's big problem. Everything Europe has been saying… For example, what you've just mentioned is extremely important. Freedom of the press, the quality of information, being protected

from attacks on information, on the quality of the news we receive — all of that is fundamental. But then there is a difficulty in connecting this to people's everyday lives, which are very much shaped by pragmatic concerns. Job insecurity — and this is very much back on the agenda now, as we know — along with the wear and tear of people's cities, where there is so much talk, there it is again, about quality of mobility, and so on. People don't actually experience this in their day-to-day lives, and so they think: what does this mean for me, in my life, from the moment I wake up in the morning, take my children to school, and go to a job I don't like, that pays me poorly — why should I care about this? And that emotional connection is always the great difficulty and the great challenge facing the European Union. And that is why one of the programmes that has always been the apple of its eye, ever since it was created — the apple of the European Union's eye — is precisely Erasmus. Because it is one of the few programmes through which Europe can demonstrate all of this: the values of solidarity, acceptance of the other, understanding of the other — well, in short, it is really only through lived, everyday experience that this can be achieved. And it is one of the best programmes that exists. All the others are significant in people's lives and are often present in our lives without us even realising it. Still, we fail to make that emotional connection and therefore do not understand, in practical terms, what effects they actually have on our lives.

Luís António Santos: And the easy messages…

Isabel Estrada Carvalhais: Populism takes advantage of that.

Luís António Santos: Easy messages build that bridge more easily. Simple, concrete messages — like "this is how it's solved" — make that connection faster.

Isabel Estrada Carvalhais: There is a risk, because simplification can easily lead to distortion. Simplifying is, in a way, a half-step toward sometimes not telling the truth correctly. Therefore, one must be very careful in managing that language. But those who master communication and work in these areas understand that it is indeed possible — yes, it can be done. Simplification should be done. The European Union's language, for

example, remains heavy, complex, and bureaucratic, even though I believe it has been somewhat simplified. And so, it does not attract young people, it does not draw people in to understand, in their daily lives, the importance of defending these values. And then, there it is. Is the defence of values achieved solely by strengthening the military, defensive aspect, or should we continue, precisely, to invest in young people, in new generations who know our history, who are encouraged towards critical thinking, respect for others, and interculturality — in a sense that would need to be explained — but towards this relationship with the other, understanding that the other is merely a reflection of oneself, and that is what it means to live European values And what I fear a little is that now there may also be a push to send the message that we only defend European values if we arm ourselves to the teeth. But that is the spirit of the times.

Luís António Santos: Speaking of the spirit of the times, and since we're almost at the end, I saw a recent study from a place called Nieman Lab, and the study was a bit disturbing. And because we spoke earlier about Erasmus and young people… It basically said — I'll summarise — that many young people are clearly aware that when they navigate the internet and access information, the flows are pre-determined, that there are logics behind those flows, the so-called algorithmic logics. Yet, knowing all this, many young people display what the researcher called *algorithmic cynicism.* In other words, they are fully aware of how things work, but they feel powerless to act. And so, they just stay put. The question here might be: how do we restore some hope to the younger generations who find themselves in a world where there is increasing talk of weapons, a more fragmented world — even at the social level, within families and communities — because of issues like precarious work? How do we renew the hope of these young people, who have such a huge future ahead of them? How can this be done?

Isabel Estrada Carvalhais: Well, I… I'm sure psychology could explain this much better. But how many people do we know who, from a rational point of view, perfectly understand that smoking is bad for them and yet continue to smoke? And they say, "Oh, no, I just don't stop because I don't want to; if I wanted, I could quit tomorrow." I'd compare it a bit to that. So, young people know when they're scrolling… especially since social media itself is now full of short videos warning: "Be careful, watching too many

videos is bad; don't get hooked on TikTok, it turns your brain to mush." But they keep watching. And they keep watching because it's an escape. An easy escape. It's almost like an e-cigarette. It's like a… a little pill, let's say, that someone takes in those few seconds and feels good, detached from a world that looks pretty uninteresting around them. And this is happening with various phenomena. In fact, in Japan, after the pandemic, several studies found that some young people began to prefer… an alternative lifestyle of complete isolation. Always with headphones on. And virtual reality can also be much more appealing, beautiful, bright, colourful.

Luís António Santos: And controllable.

Isabel Estrada Carvalhais: And controllable. I'm a hero, I'm a heroine. I'm beautiful and successful in this fantasy world. Well, Zygmunt Bauman had already warned us about these little bubbles, where I choose who likes me, who doesn't. And so, it's challenging. Especially when this happens behind closed doors and the parents themselves don't notice. And even when they do, it's hard to control it and say, "Don't be glued to it." The school can't do everything either, I would say. So, it may seem like I'm hopeless here, because, in reality, the answer isn't easy. But I believe that young people themselves will create other alternatives. I believe this is a phase, a cycle. Just like now, for example, smoking is less cool. In our time, kids of 13 or 14 already wanted to smoke because it was cool. It was a way to show independence, to show that you were becoming an adult. Now, they don't really see it that way… quite the opposite. There are other addictions. And I believe, especially because this movement is already starting, that it's called the movement of the privileged, those who disconnect from social media. They can opt out because they have that possibility, as I said. Because they have a social, family, and financial context that gives them other alternatives: to go into nature, have adventures, travel the world, whatever it may be. But I believe that, generally, this starts with the elites and then spreads more widely — that's the good thing about it — and eventually our young people will get tired of social media themselves. They will be the ones to create this disconnect. I believe that. Because we also have this paternalistic attitude: "How do we save our young people?" We don't trust that they're capable of freeing

themselves. And I think they are, and in the process, they may even bring us along in that freedom.

Luís António Santos: Historically, that's always what has happened.

Isabel Estrada Carvalhais: Ah, that's true. It's never the older generations who make revolutions.

Luís António Santos: Exactly. A note of optimism to end this conversation. I want to sincerely thank Isabel Estrada Carvalhais for joining us. This was another episode of *Estados do Tempo.* Thank you.

Isabel Estrada Carvalhais: Thank you.

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Pedro Portela: And that concludes the third episode of *Estados do Tempo*, the third in the series. An initiative by BIP and Communitas, featuring Isabel Estrada Carvalhais as our guest. We discussed populism. The conversation was moderated by Luís António Santos and produced by Raquel Batista and Pedro Portela. Recording, presentation, editing, and post-production were handled by Pedro Portela, with additional collaboration from Luís Pinto. We say goodbye here, and we look forward to seeing you in the next episode of *Estados do Tempo*. Thank you for being with us.

[closing music]

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