

Portugal's Openness to Refugees Makes Demographic and Economic Sense

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While some E.U. members have erected fences, Lisbon has made a stand for solidarity on refugees. It's been driven by political as well as economic strategy, argue Paulo Manuel Costa and Lúcio Sousa from Portugal's Open University.

The influx of refugees and migrants into the E.U. that peaked during 2015 exposed the limits of European solidarity. Among the countries that stepped up in support of front-line states overwhelmed by new arrivals was Portugal. While some members erected border fences and sought to sabotage a scheme to relocate refugees from Greece and Italy, Portugal volunteered to resettle up to 10,000 people.

This initiative came in spite of the country's debt crisis that necessitated a painful financial bailout. While many of its European partners faced a populist surge in reaction to media portrayals of the refugee crisis, Portugal's more welcoming stance has enjoyed considerable public support.

Historically speaking, Portugal has received a very small number of asylum seekers and resettled refugees. In the last century, its closest encounter with a refugee crisis came during World War II, when thousands of refugees passed through the country en route to the Americas. Lisbon's emotive role as a point of departure was immortalized in the final scenes of the movie "Casablanca."

The long period of authoritarian rule under António de Oliveira Salazar (1933–74) saw few refugees settle in Portugal. The end of Salazar's rule led to many Portuguese returning from former colonies in Africa. In the late 1990s, Portugal received more than 2,000 Kosovars, as well as several thousand people who fled the civil war in Guinea-Bissau. But Portugal received fewer than 18,000 asylum applications in the 40 years to 2015 and the number granted status was just 1,605.

The call from the European Commission in 2015 for member states to share the burden through a quota system essentially presented the country with a novel challenge. While member states such as Hungary, Slovakia, Poland and the Czech Republic – known collectively as the Visegrad Four – sought to wreck the responsibility-sharing scheme, Portugal offered to exceed its quota.

The commission's original call was for Lisbon to receive 1,642 refugees, a total that has since risen to 2,951. Portugal replied with an offer to take 4,000 refugees, which it later revised upward to 10,000.

This apparent shift in foreign and refugee policies has two aspects – a humanitarian and moral stand, but also a rational recognition of what Portugal stands to gain from this in the European political arena. First, it is important for Portugal to show its European partners that solidarity is key and that the E.U. is more than an economic and bureaucratic body that controls national budgets.

This comes after Portugal's severe debt crisis that saw it fall back on the support and solidarity of the E.U. Also the country needs to attract people to boost economic activity, counterbalancing a falling birthrate and aging population.

"It is in Portugal's interest to be proactive, because there are areas of the country losing population and we have a serious demographic problem," said António Costa, then in opposition and now Portugal's prime minister.

Support for the welcoming of refugees has not been confined to high politics. The current level of engagement from civil society groups has not been seen since the 1999 referendum on independence from Indonesia of the former Portuguese colony of East Timor.

The creation in 2015 of the Refugee Support Platform (Plataforma de Apoio aos Refugiados) has enabled the country to overcome its own limited refugee reception services. It brings together a wide range of national, regional and local public and private bodies. From nongovernmental organizations to universities and religious institutions throughout the country, it has helped to maintain calm around refugee issues and build support for their integration.

Portugal's influential Catholic Church has taken its lead from Pope Francis' pro-refugee stance, bolstering national support. The positive political environment was demonstrated when councils all over the country submitted local integration plans for the first time.

Resettled refugees receive support from local authorities for accommodation, vocational training and finding a job. Additionally, Portuguese language courses are offered and children have access to public schools and healthcare. Refugee families have been distributed throughout the country, avoiding geographical concentration, but also taking advantage of local support from councils.

Despite this openness, the number of refugees arriving in Portugal has been low so far. At the end of 2016, 720 refugees had arrived in the country. Much of the delay has been blamed on political conflict over the relocation scheme, as well as delays at refugee registration and screening centers in Greece and Italy.

There are strong reasons to increase the pace of resettlement which is in the national interest. Portugal's concrete support for sharing responsibility in the refugee crisis should reap political dividends at the European level as well as attracting human resources that can boost economic activity and combat the demographic deficit.

But the difficulties experienced in pursuing the relocation scheme highlight the limitations of the common European asylum system and the lack of strong European political leadership. The series of upcoming elections that will occur in the shadow of Brexit and the upsurge in related separatist currents in other member states, meanwhile threaten the very idea of a European union.

Unaccustomed to inward migration and located far from the main pathways into Europe, Portugal's bid to attract an unprecedented number refugees will mean an integration challenge both for newcomers and hosts. It remains to be seen where the country's new politics of welcome is sustained or whether they will be remembered as a timely measure to boost Portugal's standing in the E.U.