

PAULO MANUEL COSTA and LÚCIO SOUSA, "You are welcome in Portugal": conviction and convenience in framing today's Portuguese politics on European burden sharing of refugees

Historically-speaking, Portugal is a country that has received a very small number of applications from asylum seekers and resettled refugees. However, within the context of the current influx of refugees into Europe and the creation of a relocation system within the European Union, Portugal is ready to take 10,000 relocated refugees. As such, it is legitimate to ask whether we are witnessing a change in the country's policy regarding asylum and refugees. Although this is an ongoing process, the conviction prompting this humanitarian position regarding the taking of relocated refugees also includes a convenient political strategy that serves the national interest in two ways: by promoting the image of a supportive country in the current European refugee crisis, despite its internal socio-economic crisis, as well as a way of obtaining human resources to boost economic activity and combat the country's demographic deficit.

Introduction

Portugal is a relatively peripheral country in terms of the flow of asylum seekers. Over the last 40 years, between 1975 and 2015, it has only received 17,769 asylum applications (including families), granting 1,605 people refugee status and humanitarian protection (Costa 1994; Sousa 1999; Sousa and Costa 2016). The figures for resettled refugees were scarce when a 2007 national program accepted the arrival of thirty resettled refugees a year (CPR n.d.). Nevertheless, faced with the recent influx of refugees to Europe and efforts to create a European burden sharing system by Member States, named 'relocation process', Portugal has adopted a very receptive position, expressing a willingness to accept 10,000 refugees. In the words of Prime Minister António Costa, 'you are welcome in Portugal' (Santos 2016). Adding, 'We will welcome more refugees out of conviction, not out of convenience' (Kounalaki 2016).

This article aims to examine the recent policy shift in the Portuguese's government's handling of asylum seekers and refugees. It also seeks to understand how such a shift may have more to do with socio-economic convenience than a new-found state altruism. Our research is based on statistical data, document research on asylum law and analysis of the internal political debate. In order to examine current policies, we will provide a brief historical overview of asylum policies, reception practices and the figures of asylum seekers and refugees.

Historical Background

Portugal signed the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees in 1960, but only in 1976, two years after the reestablishment of a democratic regime did it sign the UN 1967 Protocol. Asylum was also one key article in the new democratic Constitution of 1976. Nevertheless, the first asylum law was incorporated into law only in 1982. It was considered to be both receptive and generous, reflecting the openness of Portuguese society at the time. The situation changed after the country's inclusion in the Schengen area (1993) and later the Common European Asylum System. Portugal adopted a stricter and more restrictive approach to granting international protection by limiting the right of asylum and establishing a subsidiary protection regime.

Portugal sparingly granted temporary protection to refugees from Bosnia in 1992 (200 refugees), Kosovo in 1998 (2,000 refugees) and Guinea-Bissau (4,000 refugees) in 1999 (GTAEM). Most of them returned or moved to third countries. The classic form of refugee resettlement was rarely employed until 2007, when a programme to take 30 refugees annually was established by the Resolution of the Council of Ministers no. 110/2007, 21st August, 2007.

Portugal, Europe and the relocation of refugees

The number of refugees coming to Europe in recent years, particularly in 2015, highlighted the limitations of the Common European Asylum System and demonstrated the problems associated with a large influx of refugees to a Member State. It is within this context that European institutions attempted to create a system for distributing refugees to the different Member States. Burden-sharing has now acquired a regional and European aspect, and has been renamed 'relocation'. Portugal initially took a cautious position with respect to relocation, arguing that national quotas should take into account domestic economic and financial conditions, particularly levels of unemployment (Jornal de Negócios 2015). Based on the European Commission's initial proposal (2015: 21-22) Portugal was to take approximately 2,000 people (relocation and resettlement combined); however, the country initially accepted 4,500, subsequently increasing its acceptance to 10,000 relocated refugees.

Within this context, and considering the previous restricted refugee policy, it is legitimate to ask whether we are witnessing a change in Portuguese policy regarding asylum and refugees, based on political and humanitarian convictions, or if we are looking at a convenient opportunity to demonstrate the validity of the principle of European solidarity at a time of economic and political crisis, while addressing Portugal's domestic economic and demographic problems.

In comparison to other European states, Portugal's internal political conditions are also particularly favourable to this more receptive stance. Civil society has been very sensitive to the dramatic events that have unfolded in the Mediterranean and mobilised to help welcome refugees, facilitated by a support structure involving civil society and local authorities²², which made it possible to overcome the limitations of the official refugee reception system. This favourable climate is facilitated further by the absence of far-right and anti-immigration movements with any real visibility or political weight; although some right-wing groups are xenophobic, anti-immigrant and anti-refugee, their activities are limited. They boast little electoral success and are likely to remain on the periphery in the coming years (March 2013: 153).

In recent years, Portugal has endured major economic and financial problems, due to a combination of budgetary and public debt crises, which has seen the country subjected to a tough austerity programme that has seriously affected the standard of living. The implementation of this programme made the Portuguese State highly dependent on European 'good will' regarding the country's overspending and need for external funding. If the previous right-wing government was a meek follower of European dictates, the new socialist government, which took office in late 2015, sought to change the direction of austerity. It called for a greater understanding from the European authorities and underlining the need for European solidarity in relation to

22 The creation of the Plataforma de Apoio aos Refugiados was key to the success of this work: <http://www.refugiados.pt/home-en/>

governments facing problems. From this perspective, the willingness shown to take (more) refugees seeks to show a country that understands what it means to be supportive, not only to refugees, but also to European states currently facing difficulties due to the greater pressure of these migratory flows. The link between these two issues - the economic crisis and austerity, on the one hand, and the flow of refugees, on the other - is particularly clear in the Joint Declaration of the Prime Ministers of Greece and Portugal, 11 April 2016.²³ The refugee crisis is also used by the Portuguese Prime Minister to respond to threats of European sanctions for non-fulfilment of budget deficit rules:

Faced with the dramatic situation of the UK's departure, the refugee crisis, terrorism threat, it is ridiculous that we are discussing 0.2 percent of the previous government's budgetary execution (de Beer 2016).

Since 2009, Portugal has lost 65,460 foreign nationals (SEF 2016: 64) and in 2013, with the economic crisis glooming, 50,835 Portuguese citizens emigrated (Observatório da Emigração 2016). According to the Portuguese Strategic Plan for Migration:

Portugal faces a demographic deficit problem that is now a social, economic and national political emergency. Recent demographic trends in Portugal are characterised by a continued increase in life expectancy, reduced infant mortality, increased emigration, negative net migration, sharp and persistent decline in fertility and the consequent ageing of the population (ACM 2015: 14).

The Strategic Plan for Migration wanted to adopt a more active role in attracting highly qualified migrants within an international and political context that is not particularly favourable to the country:

... Portugal can take advantage of this migration mobility space to attract qualified talent and entrepreneurs, as migrations enable new investments, activities, services and economic flows. ...Migrants have knowledge, networks and work skills. Portugal can increase the benefits resulting from this environment, which generate wealth and create jobs (ACM 2015: 19-20).

So far this political strategy did not achieve the results it was intended to obtain. Despite its acceptance of migrants, it has in fact been too low to signal changes in the economy. The head of the Economic and Social Council has affirmed that Portugal needs 900,000 immigrants to achieve a GDP growth of 3% (Dinheiro Digital 2016). The relative low current numbers of migrants have not resulted in entrepreneurs boosting job creation or addressing the economic shortfalls in the Portuguese economy.

Conclusion

Although it is still early to draw concrete conclusions, Portugal's new approach aims to achieve objectives of national interest, such as political dividends at the European level by transmitting

23 Joint Declaration of the Prime Ministers of Greece and Portugal, 11th April, 2016: <http://www.statewatch.org/news/2016/apr/gr-pl-joint-statement-refugees-eurozone-war.pdf>

an image of a supportive country, as well as attracting human resources that can boost economic activity and combat the demographic deficit.

Faced with this situation, hosting refugees is of major strategic importance to Portugal. While not disregarding the humanitarian conviction involved in the decision to host a large number of refugees, it is still a convenient political measure, both internally and externally, particularly in the current European political arena.

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