

Portugal's position on resettlement: a view from the periphery of the EU

Lúcio Sousa and Paulo Manuel Costa

The evolution of European policy in recent years has shown how policy can be used to actively restrict the movement of people and as a mechanism for choosing what kind of refugee a particular country receives, with the interests of states prevailing over humanitarian needs.

A process called regional relocation aims to distribute recent refugees among the various Member States of the European Union (EU), according to national quotas that take into account a variety of factors such as each state's GDP, population size and unemployment rate. Given Europe's recent tendency to externalise its response to migration, it is no surprise that the European Commission is prepared to use resettlement as a migration management tool, taking advantage of recent events in Europe to submit a series of reforms that aim to consolidate a common European asylum policy. To some extent, these proposals have a federalist bent, seeking to eliminate specific national legal and procedural aspects – whether by establishing national refugee quotas, by strengthening the role of European agencies (such as the European Asylum Support Office) or by creating new agencies (such as the European Border and Coast Guard to control the common external borders).

Portugal has previously seen relatively few refugees settle in the country. Most asylum applications came during the first decades of the post-colonial period (after 1974) and were made mainly by Africans, in particular those from former Portuguese colonies. Only in the last decade has there been a consistent, albeit small, number of applicants from other places, including Ukraine, Guinea, Pakistan, Mali and Syria. Portugal's first asylum law was drawn up within the context of its post-revolution democracy and was relatively open and inclusive. When Portugal joined the European Community (now the EU), the asylum law was amended to bring national practices into

line with those of the EU, bringing in more restrictive European policies on these issues.

Within the context of Portuguese asylum policy, the resettlement of refugees, though rare, has always been of specific individuals or families. However, in 2006 Portugal established a resettlement programme that envisaged an annual quota of 30 refugees. Although there have been variations in the flow of arrivals, the resettlement of refugees (the majority from Africa) has been steady. In light of recent European proposals for refugee relocation, the Portuguese government stated its willingness to accept 10,000 refugees, unlike several Member States which refused to accept refugees and closed their borders. Portugal's willingness is rather unusual, especially considering the numbers involved and its previous experience. In contrast to similar events in the past (particularly with refugee flows from Kosovo in 1998 and Guinea-Bissau in 1999), Portuguese public opinion was mobilised and people organised to welcome refugees, with new private bodies taking on the role of interlocutor to deal with the state and those local organisations willing to host refugees.

That said, this is also an example of how pragmatic concerns and self-interest – managing migration flows, attracting human resources, offsetting demographic deficits – seem to take precedence over the humanitarian criteria normally associated with the process of resettlement and protection of refugees. Portugal's decision to host large numbers of refugees serves, first and foremost, Portugal's political, economic and demographic needs, particularly those associated with poor economic growth and net emigration. These are the obvious

February 2017

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reasons for the break with the country's more restrictive policy and the modest numbers of refugees taken in the past.

More broadly, there is political pragmatism at play in the search for solutions that serve Europe's own interests and, as part of Europe's asylum and resettlement policy, this will allow the EU to strengthen the walls of fortress Europe,

making it even more difficult for refugees to reach its borders to claim asylum.

Lúcio Sousa lucio.sousa@uab.pt

Paulo Manuel Costa pmcosta@uab.pt

Assistant Professors, Centre of Studies on Migrations and Intercultural Relations (CEMRI), Universidade Aberta, Portugal
<http://cemri.uab.pt/index.php/english/>