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Immigration speeding social landscape transformations: the case of Portugal

Imigracja jako czynnik przyspieszający transformacje społeczne: przypadek Portugalii

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Abstract

This article presents the significant and rapid transformation that Portuguese society is currently undergoing. A high level of immigration has been registered over the last several years. This is a significant wave that has never been experienced in the country before and represents an opportunity to meet labour force needs in different economic sectors and a chance to improve demographic sustainability. Traditionally known as a welcoming society, with a favourable integration approach, this is a test moment to confirm this perception of Portugal. The article examines the main data and trends of this transformation, discusses citizens' perception of immigration compared with the situation of other European societies, and highlights difficulties that are already emerging. The article also discusses the role of public policies on the topic.

Keywords: Portugal, immigration, integration, public policies

Streszczenie

Artykuł prezentuje ważną i szybko zachodzącą transformację, której obecnie doświadcza portugalskie społeczeństwo. W ostatnich latach odnotowano wysoki poziom liczby migrantów, który wydaje się znaczącą falą w kraju, który wcześniej czegoś takiego nie doświadczył. Owa fala stanowi zarazem szansę w kontekście potrzeb siły roboczej w różnych

sektorach gospodarki oraz zrównoważenia demograficznego. Tradycyjnie uznawana za otwartą społeczność portugalska miała przychylne podejście do integracji. Jednak obecny moment jest kluczowy i testowy – potwierdzi bowiem (lub nie) taki profil rdzennych mieszkańców. Autor w artykule analizuje główne dane i trendy transformacji, omawia postrzeganie migracji przez obywateli Portugalii w porównaniu z sytuacją innych społeczeństw europejskich oraz wskazuje trudności, które już się pojawiają, a także wskazuje rolę polityk publicznych w tej materii.

Słowa kluczowe: Portugalia, migracja, integracja, polityki publiczne

Context and recent trends

In recent years a major transformation has occurred in Portugal's social landscape due to the increasing number of immigrants arriving in the country. This is a significant trend because Portugal has always been a country of emigration.

The different emigration waves from the beginning of the 20th Century resulted in a total of 2.1 million nationals living in different parts of the world in 2020,¹ one of the largest European diasporas considering the 10 million population of the country. For decades, Portuguese citizens went abroad to look for better life conditions. It is important to focus on two emigration waves: a first one running till the 50's of the last century, called the transatlantic or the American wave, with major relevance to Brazil; and a second one known as the European wave, after II World War and till the democratic revolution (1974), a period of less than three decades when more than one million citizens went to live mainly to France and Germany. Europe's reconstruction opportunities, poor life conditions in the country, the ongoing political regime, and Portuguese Colonial War (1961–1974), were the factors that promoted very high emigration rates.

In the last quarter of the 20th century Portugal transitioned to a modern democracy and joined the EU. This stable and prosperous period saw emigration fall and the beginning of an immigration tendency, with a significant number of new citizens arriving from former African colonies like Cabo Verde, Angola, Mozambique and Guinea-Bissau, but also from some Eastern European countries like Ukraine and Romania. This period saw industrialisation and significant public investments in new infrastructure, with associate workforce needs.

As we can observe from figure 1, during the last 15 years, many Portuguese citizens leaving the country each year, especially during the economic crisis between 2011 and 2015. From a low qualified emigration, applying for jobs with no specialization profiles, the country is now facing the departure of a highly qualified generation, applying for high level careers and better salaries in Central Europe countries.

¹ International Organisation for Migration (OIM), Migration Data Portal, n.d., www.migrationdataportal.org/ [access: 11.02.2024].

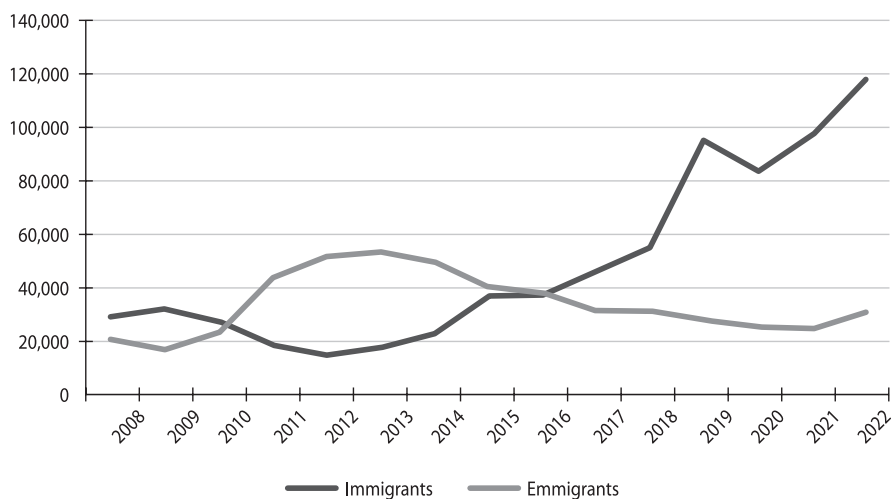


Figure 1. Portugal annual variation of permanent emigrants and immigrants (n.º)

Source: Pordata, www.pordata.pt, access: 6.01.2024.

It is relevant to mention the continuous and fast rising number of new immigrants arriving Portugal in the last decade, and particularly in the last two years, with more than 100,000 arrivals a year, numbers that the country has never experienced. In total, Portugal now has 700,000 residents from other countries – around 7% of its total population.

This new immigration movement includes people from the same origin countries that were already present in the past, plus some significant arrivals from European countries like UK, France or Italy. These are largely retired people taking advantage of the tax regime for non-habitual residents. There is also a fast growing community from Asia, mainly India, from Africa with Angola on the top, but with a large majority of new comers from Brazil, the biggest group, with almost 30% of all foreign residents in Portugal.²

Considering the Portuguese demographic context, this immigration wave is an opportunity to solve major demographic challenges: Portuguese population is one of the oldest in the world, birth rates are extremely low and the natural increase has been negative for several years; social and economic dynamics are not well balanced in the territory, and there are several sectors in need for workers that are not available, like agriculture and tourism. With low birth rates and a large number of young citizens going abroad, Portuguese population increase depends on new arrivals as we can see in figure 2.

² C.R. Oliveira, *Imigração em Números*, Observatório da Imigração, 2023, p. 15, https://www.om.acm.gov.pt/documents/58428/179573/Estat%C3%ADsticas+de+Bolso+da+Imigra%C3%A7%C3%A3o+2023-CRO_online.pdf/54dae394-0343-444b-809c-c1b6bd3a2433 [access: 11.02.2024].

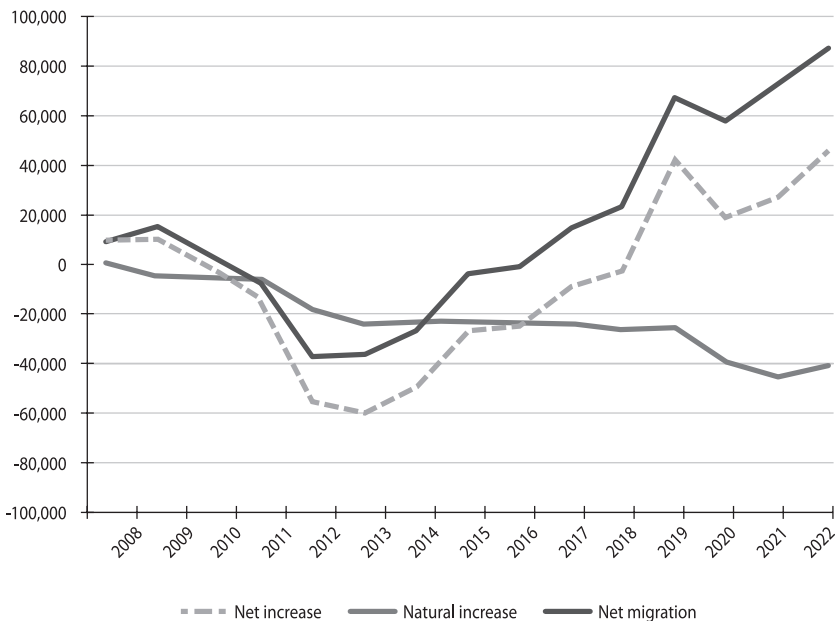


Figure 2. Annual population growth: total, natural and migratory

Source: Pordata, www.pordata.pt, consulted: 6.01.2024.

After a cycle of effective depopulation between 2011 and 2018, coinciding with the major economic crises period, in the recent years the net increase is very close to the net migration figure. Also, the natural increase started to recover in the last two years, and that is because of the increase of new births from immigrant mothers. In 2022 16.7% of the country total births were from foreign mothers, comparing with 12.3% in 2019, and 8.8% registered in 2016.³

Citizens' perceptions

Portuguese citizens' perception of immigration has stimulated public discussion on the topic. There are two main currents: one is that the multicultural context from the past and the colonial history produced a friendly environment for cultural exchange in a way that Portuguese people are generally open to the integration of immigrants, with no visible xenophobia or discrimination against different cultures; and the other one is that, as a society, Portugal has the same difficulties in welcoming and integrating citizens from other nationalities like any other European society. Rather than a sociological discussion this question often appears as a political and ideological debate.

From the available data on people's perception of immigration it's important to mention the results from the study carried on by the European Commission in 2022, in the Special

³ *Live births of mothers resident in Portugal: total and by mother's nationality*, Pordata, www.pordata.pt [access: 26.02.2024].

Eurobarometer 519.⁴ If as a general result Europeans seem to overestimate the real share of immigrants in the population, this is a fact that crosses all EU-27 countries and with no major differences in the Portuguese case, as we can see from table 3.

Tabela 3. Foreigners as resident population vs perception of the proportion of immigrants 2021

Countries	To your knowledge, what is the % of immigrants in the total population in our country?					Foreigners as a % of resident population
	0 < 9	9 < 20	20 < 35	35+	NA	
RO – Romania	54	14	4	2	26	0.3
HR – Croatia	57	19	8	5	11	0.9
SK – Slovakia	51	19	6	3	21	1.1
PL – Poland	52	31	5	0	12	1.2
LT – Lithuania	58	22	4	2	14	1.2
BG – Bulgaria	38	17	5	3	37	1.8
HU – Hungary	60	22	6	2	10	2.1
CZ – Czech Republic	53	33	9	2	3	5.1
FI – Finland	62	27	4	1	6	5.3
PT – Portugal	12	36	10	2	40	6.8
NL – Netherlands	46	35	13	4	2	7.0
EL – Greece	24	49	13	3	11	7.1
FR – France	24	37	15	11	13	7.8
SI – Slovenia	25	35	23	13	4	8.2
SE – Sweden	27	52	16	2	3	8.3
EU-27	30	35	16	6	13	8.3
IT – Italy	21	37	22	10	10	8.5
DK – Denmark	43	45	8	2	2	9.6
ES – Spain	12	34	19	8	27	11.4
BE – Belgium	19	39	29	10	3	12.8
DE – Germany	26	40	19	6	9	13.1
LV – Latvia	70	18	8	4	0	13.1
IE – Ireland	29	37	23	5	6	13.3
EE – Estonia	53	21	8	2	16	15.2
AT – Austria	14	40	30	9	7	17.5
CY – Cyprus	18	37	24	7	14	18.8
MT – Malta	24	34	17	9	16	20.6
LU – Luxembourg	21	28	14	28	9	47.1

Source: Special Eurobarometer 519, consulted 15.01.2024, author's treatment.

⁴ *Special Eurobarometer 519: integration of immigrants in the European Union*, European Commission, Directorate-General for Migration and Home Affairs, 2022, <https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/2276> [access: 10.01.2024].

Although, we have to mention that when answering the question “to your knowledge, what is the proportion of immigrants in the total population in your country?” Portugal is the member state with the lowest number of answers pointing the first group (0–9%), which it would be the nearest to the real proportion of foreigners in the total population (7%). This apparent lack of knowledge of the country’s reality is corroborated by the proportion of participants not answering this particular question, 40%, the highest between all the 27 EU countries.

When asked about the level of success of immigrants’ integration, Portuguese citizens feel very optimistic in comparison with citizens of other countries, as showed by figure 3. A large majority consider that there is a *totally successful* situation (73%). Only Ireland recorded a higher figure. The number of those believing that integration is *totally not successful* is the lowest in Europe.

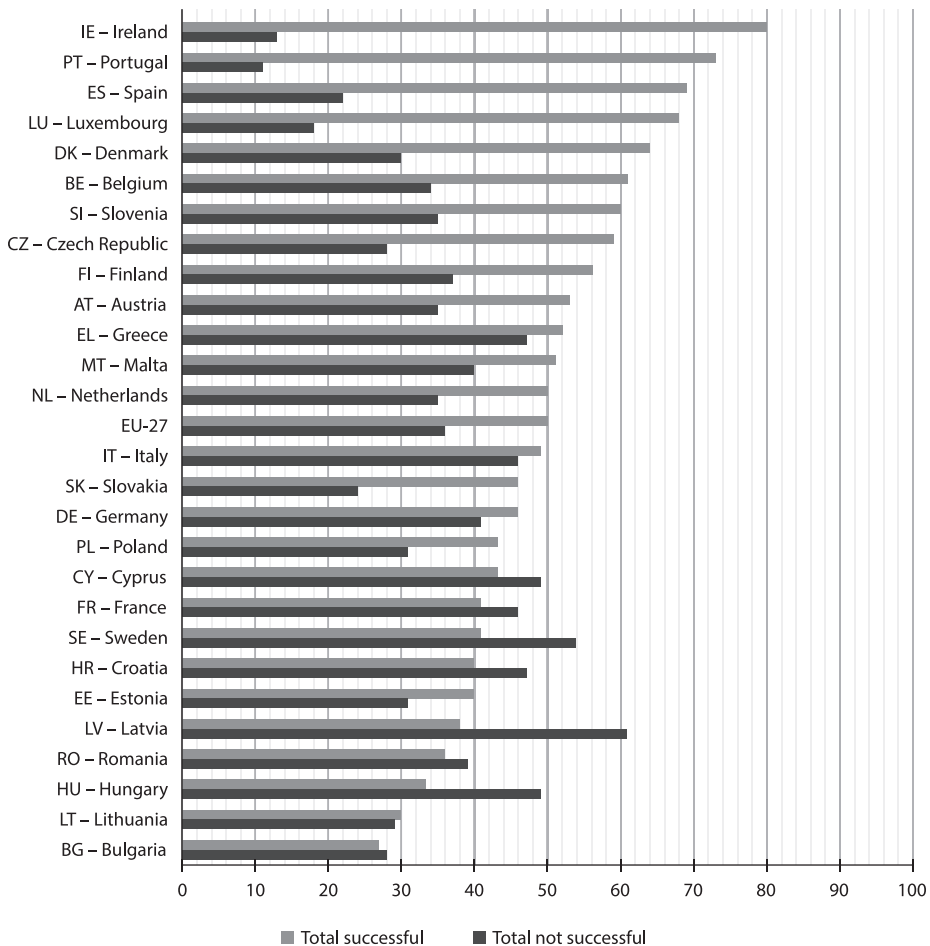


Figure 3. How successful or not is the integration of most immigrants living in the city or area where you live

Source: Special Eurobarometer 519, consulted: 15.01.2024, author’s treatment.

Considering the feelings about immigration from outside EU and the question about if it is *more of a problem* or *is more of an opportunity*, showed in figure 4, we can conclude that this optimistic Portuguese approach is still significant, with more than 50% of the respondents considering it *more of an opportunity*, and the fourth lowest level of answers considering it is *more of a problem*, just higher than Ireland, Luxembourg and Spain. Nevertheless, looking to the same figure and considering the proportion of respondents answering that immigration from outside EU is *equally a problem and an opportunity*, Portugal is on the top of the list, representing that Portuguese respondents have no strong feelings about the question, or, again, a relative indifference or lack of knowledge on the topic.

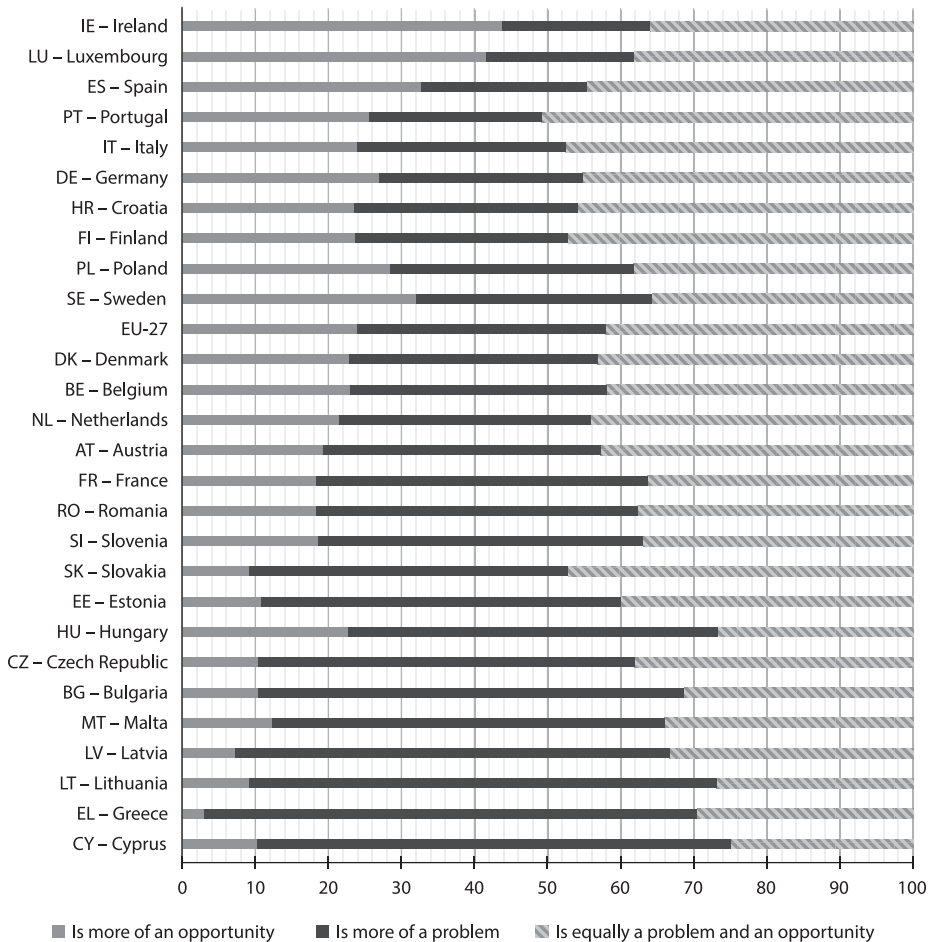


Figure 4. Immigration from outside the EU is more of a problem or more of an opportunity for our country today?

Source: Special Eurobarometer 519, consulted: 15.01.2024, author's treatment.

Some analyses are also being developed at a national scale, with some interesting conclusions on citizens' perceptions about the actual immigration wave. The investigation project on "Sustainable Immigration in a Social State of Law",⁵ presented in December of 2023 from a large survey conducted at the end of September 2023, is an example, and with some differing results: 68.7% saying that receiving immigrants from Europe and third countries is important for Portugal, and 71.1% believing that immigrants have been well received and integrated; but in another direction, 55.2% feeling that immigration is under control, and 48.7% believe that should be fixed immigration quotas.

With this general overview is fair to conclude that, in general, immigration seems to be positively perceived in Portugal. This deduction is aligned with the optimist point of view that affirms the general openness of Portuguese society to the integration of other cultures. However, we must consider that the country had very low immigration rates until few years ago – the rapid increase of immigrants has occurred only in the last couple of years. As other countries have experienced, Portuguese society just might be facing the same process of adjusting to a more multicultural landscape. This seems to be corroborated by other studies that are being carried out, and by some signs becoming more visible in the recent times.

What's going on

Forty year old Ukrainian citizen Ihor Homenyuk died on the 12th of March of 2020, two days after arriving at Lisbon Airport with a tourist visa, and being detained at the temporary installation centre managed by the Foreigners and Borders Police. During the night of 29th of March, all the country got to know by TV news that he has been violently beaten and killed by three inspectors. The next day those inspectors were arrested, the top directors of the special police for borders inspection were fired, and some weeks after it was announced that this police branch would be closed and its functions would be transferred to a new public agency dedicated to migration and inclusion. That new agency was created in 2024.

We have to say that a couple of racist and violent episodes also took place during the first immigration wave in the last decade of 20th century, and that some very segregated neighbourhoods around Lisbon metropolitan region still exist, with immigrants from the former African colonies. But at the present, the case of Ihor Homenyuk is the most dramatic and well known in a context where other occasional episodes of violence against immigrants in Portugal are also being noticed. Some of them are even related to a visible presence of some racist and xenophobic movements among the police - small groups that are far from representing the majority of this professional group, but clearly inspired by fake news about insecurity and other hate speech messages that quickly spread on social networks and other digital channels.

⁵ C.B. de Morais, A.R. Gil, *Relatório final do projeto de investigação: Imigração Sustentável num Estado Social de Direito*, Lisbon Public Law Research Centre, Lisboa 2023: <https://lisbonpubliclaw.pt/publicacoes/imigracao-sustentavel-num-estado-social-de-direito/> [access: 7.03.2024].

It's also important to mention that in 2019 a new populist political party, defined as conservative, nationalist and right-wing, was founded and which has achieved success in all elections occurred so far. It won one seat to the Portuguese Parliament in 2019, 12 in the 2022 elections, and 50 in the 2024 elections. Like in other European democracies, this challenging context is happening now in Portugal, with populist forces using the rapid increase of immigrant communities to gather supporters to a new discourse based on fear and against immigration.

Other problematic situations that immigrants face in the country are becoming known. Economic exploitation due to illegal schemes, unscrupulous intermediaries and extremely bad working and living conditions that some arriving workers are forced to endure, are some of the most current situations reported so far. These are taking place both in an urban context, which is associated with a lack of housing and high prices of those houses available, and also in less urbanised and rural areas, where immigrants find work opportunities related to agriculture, agro-food industry or other industrial sectors.

In April 2021, during the COVID-19 pandemic, the country got to know of a large infection area in the municipality of Odemira, Alentejo Region, mainly among the large immigrant community working in the agriculture sector. With all the media focused on the situation it was not possible to hide the fact that many immigrants were living in very poor conditions. Public institutions set up an emergency plan to relocate a large number to public and even tourist accommodation.

In February 2023, a fire in the centre of Lisbon, showed another face of the same housing problem. In an overcrowded flat, where twenty-two immigrants lived, mainly from India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Nepal, two people died and fourteen were injured. Both episodes made the problem visible and put public authorities under major pressure from public opinion, but there is no evidence that an effective change has taken place.

Another point of analyse is that no specific data of aggression or discrimination against immigrants are available from Portugal's official statistical bodies. However, the new *Commission for Equality and Against Racial Discrimination*, a public organisation working in association with the National Parliament and the Government reports a rising number of complaints on racial and ethnic basis, that is correlated with the increase of immigrants in the country.

This doesn't necessarily mean that citizens' feelings about welcoming new communities are changing, but exposes the need to reinforce public policies about immigrants' integration, something that is particular clear from the adoption of the *National Plan to Combat Racism and Discrimination 2021–2025*⁶ by the Portuguese Government.

This plan has defined important initiatives in ten intervention areas: *Governance, information and knowledge for a non-discriminatory society; Education and Culture; Higher Education; Labour and Employment; Housing; Health and Social Welfare; Justice,*

⁶ Secretary of State for Citizenship and Equality, Portuguese Government National Plan to Combat Racism and Discrimination 2021–2025. Full English version available at: *Commission for Equality and Against Racial Discrimination*, 2021, <https://www.cicdr.pt/documents/57891/1531801/National+Plan+to+Combat+Racism+and+Discrimination+2021-2025.pdf/29f311d2-ac06-44b3-830e-fca9460edb3b> [access: 2.03.2024].

Security and Rights; Participation and Representation; Sport; and Means of Communication and the Digital. But even considering that the designed actions are being successfully executed, we have to mention that the plan is not well known by the majority of society. The mid-term evaluation of implementation (to the first quarter of 2023), if already done, is still available to the public.

Generally speaking, Portugal ranks well on key areas of integration policies already in the field, as we can conclude from, for example, the 2020 Migrant Integration Policy Index (MIPEX).⁷ Although, facing this immigration wave, it would be important to know what's happening in different areas; what is being done in order to improve public services facilities, centralised and decentralised ones, regarding education, health, justice or responsible services to promote the legalization and regularization of immigrants and their families; or, for example, if public providers are being prepared with language or inclusive competences in order to avoid discrimination and to facilitate a favourable integration environment.

Conclusion

Arriving late to a more multicultural society compared with other European member states, Portugal is now welcoming a major wave of immigration, a significant transformation that is changing the country's social landscape in many aspects. From Brazil, Angola, India, Pakistan or other origins, new communities are arriving to different regions, not only to Lisbon and Porto metropolitan areas, and are supporting economic activities with a lack of labour force. This transformation is occurring in a fast-forward mode, and special attention to integration policies is required to avoid discrimination or anti immigrants' feelings.

Portugal is usually considered as an open society, with no problems integrating citizens from other cultures. The available data reflects a general positive perception about immigration, but at the end, this seems more of a later adjustment to a multicultural society, rather than an effective national trait. Positive effects to the economy coming from immigration, the opportunity of demographic renovation, or even immigrants' contribution to the sustainability of the national social insurance system, are sensible topics supporting the idea of a good welcoming environment.

However, some problematic situations are already being reported. Monitoring and opening new reporting or complaint channels, or defining action plans, are relevant measures to fight against all possible abuse situations that immigrants can face in Portugal nowadays. But this fast change and new social context in the country definitely demands a holistic approach to effective public policies that can grant equal rights and a friendly context to all citizens.

⁷ The 2020 Migrant Integration Policy Index available at: <https://www.mipex.eu/> and the Portugal figures at <https://www.mipex.eu/portugal> [access: 10.12.2023].

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