



Country study

Public narratives and attitudes towards refugees and other migrants

Portugal country profile

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Key messages

Portugal has a history of pragmatic migration policies and exceptionally positive political narratives around migration. These reflect a long-standing agreement among mainstream parties not to politicise immigration, based largely on a recognition of migrants' key role in filling labour gaps, even more so in the context of an ageing and shrinking population.

Public attitudes towards immigration have been mixed. However, despite historic scepticism about the benefits of immigration overall, Portuguese citizens generally express openness to having immigrants as friends, neighbours and relatives, are positive about migrants' integration, and support refugee-hosting policies.

The rise of the far-right party Chega is a major concern. So far, immigration has not been a key focus, as the party has predominantly exploited anti-Roma prejudice. But there is evidence of broader xenophobia in Chega's rhetoric, and anti-migrant discrimination has increased since its emergence.

Reinforced support for the country's pro-migrant approach is needed – across mainstream parties, the media, the private sector and civil society – if Portugal is to achieve the government's vision of an open, inclusive society that maximises the social and economic benefits of immigration.

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About this publication

This briefing presents an overview of the key features of migration and asylum policy in Portugal, recent trends in migration patterns and public perceptions and political narratives on refugees and other migrants. It is part of a wider project supported by the IKEA Foundation aimed at supporting public and private stakeholders interested in engaging with migration and displacement.

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1 History of migration in Portugal

Portugal has historically been known as a country of emigration, dating back to the 15th century maritime explorations that led to the colonisation of parts of Africa and South America (Schwartz and Lockhart, 2002). Many Portuguese people settled in the colonies of Africa and in Brazil, while the forced migration of African slaves to Portugal made Lisbon the European capital with the largest proportion of African residents in the first half of the 16th century (around 10% of the city's 100,000 inhabitants) (Malheiros, 2002). Immigration was more limited in subsequent centuries, with the only significant flow coming from the neighbouring Spanish region of Galicia in the late 18th and 19th centuries (ibid.). After Brazil became independent in 1822, it continued to be the main destination of Portuguese emigrants, although substantial new emigration flows to the United States also emerged between the mid-19th century and the end of the First World War (Malheiros, 2002; Newitt, 2015).

Emigration was explicitly discouraged during the years of the *Estado Novo* dictatorship (1933–1974) (Pereira and Azevedo, 2019). Nevertheless, challenging economic and political circumstances in Portugal, alongside post-Second World War labour market demands in Northern and Central Europe, led to the emigration of over 1.8 million people in the last 25 years of the dictatorship, with 122,000 leaving per year during the peak in 1965–1974, mainly to France and Germany (Baganha et al., 2005; MPF, 2022). Between 1958 and 1962, there was also a sudden increase in the emigration of Portuguese people from the Azores islands to the US, thanks to US legislation facilitating additional visas for those affected by the 1957 volcanic eruption on the island of Faial (Anacleto, 2002).

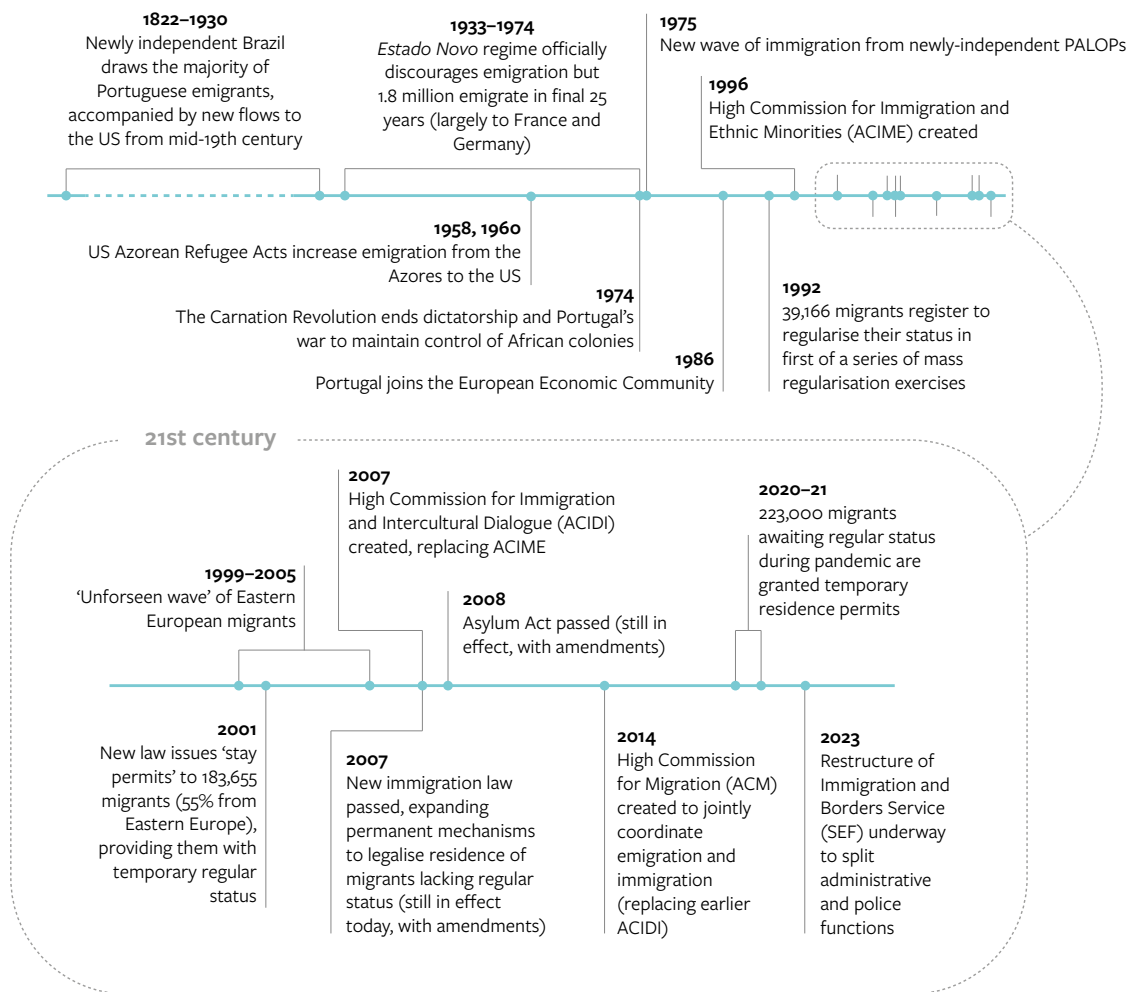
Immigration increased in the late 1960s, including notably the recruitment of Cape Verdeans for construction and manufacturing, following large-scale emigration of Portuguese men to work elsewhere in Europe and to fight in Portugal's wars to maintain control of its colonial territories in Africa (1961–1974) (Malheiros, 2002). However, it was only after the Carnation Revolution of 1974, which toppled the *Estado Novo* regime, that Portugal became a country of mass immigration (while never ceasing also to be a country of emigration) (Pereira and Azevedo, 2019).

The revolution triggered the end of Portugal's colonial wars, after which Angola, Cape Verde, Guinea Bissau, Mozambique and São Tomé e Príncipe¹ all gained independence. In 1975, over half a million Portuguese citizens who had been residing in the African colonies migrated to Portugal – a large number relative to the 30,000 foreigners officially living in the country at the time (Baganha et al., 2009; MPF, 2022). The vast majority of new arrivals were white settlers from Angola and Mozambique (Kalter, 2020), but some were of mixed-heritage and there was a non-negligible

1 Brazil had become an independent country long before, in 1822, and in 1961 other overseas territories had been annexed to other countries, as in the case of Goa's annexation to India. Angola, Cape Verde, Guinea Bissau, Mozambique and São Tomé e Príncipe all became independent in 1974–1975.

number of African colonial officers. While these migrants were officially labelled *retornados* (returnees), many felt that they should be defined as ‘refugees’ since one in three had been born in Africa, and many identified as Angolan/Mozambican/African, and felt they had been uprooted against their will (ibid.). However, both UNHCR and the Portuguese government determined that they could not be granted refugee status since they had moved to their country of nationality.

Figure 1 Migration timeline, Portugal



From the late 1970s, immigration from the newly independent PALOPs (*Países Africanos de Língua Oficial Portuguesa*)² increased steadily. Immigration was further spurred by Portugal's entry into the European Economic Community in 1986, which opened up more funding to develop road and rail infrastructure, public buildings and urban centres (Baganha et al., 2009). The increased demand for labour triggered sizeable migration of low-paid workers from PALOPs, in particular Cape Verde. Workers from elsewhere in Europe and Brazil also moved to Portugal, predominantly for jobs in the service industry, banking, marketing, real estate and IT (ibid.). Even

2 African countries with Portuguese as their official language.

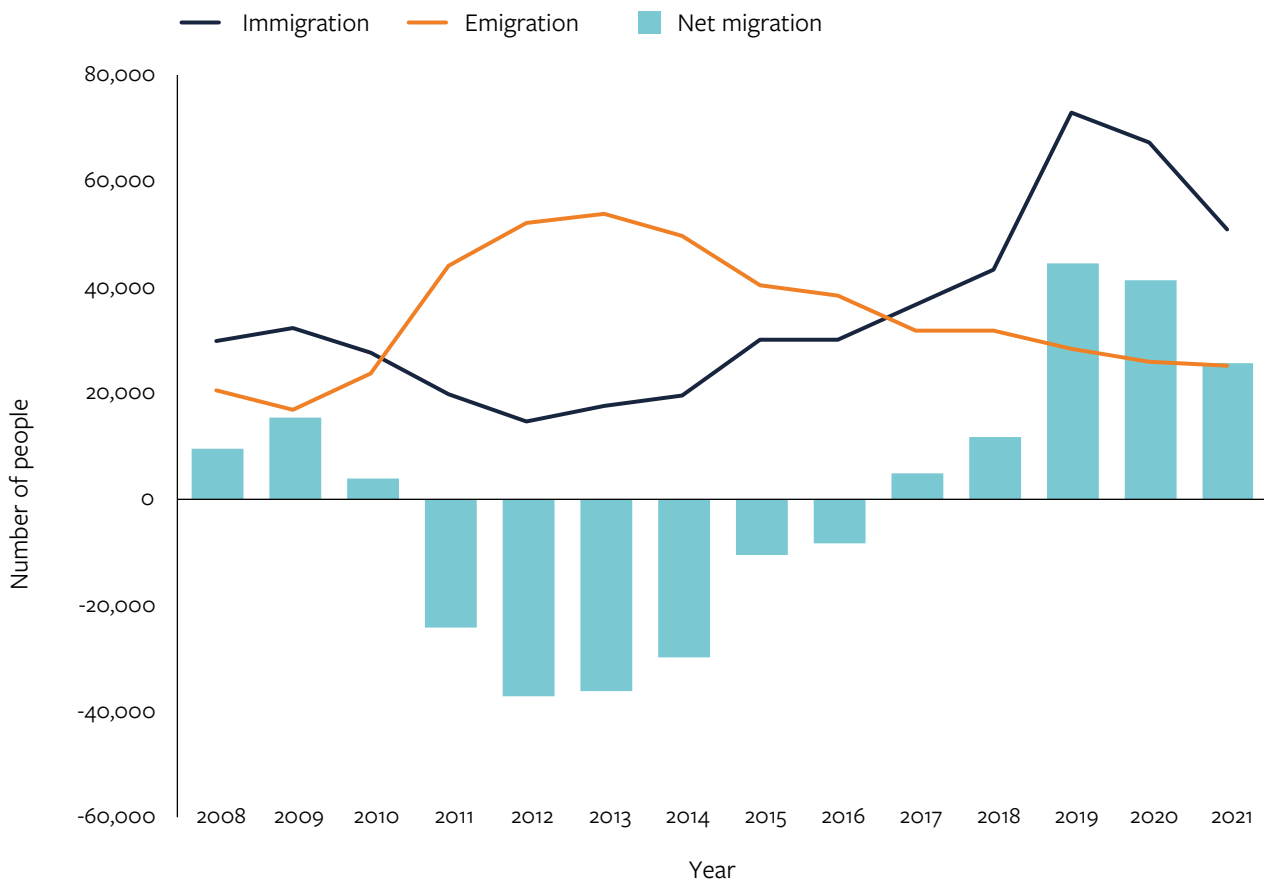
so, the number of migrants in Portugal remained quite low, with under 200,000 regular migrants living in Portugal in 1999, accounting for around 2% of the population. Just under half were from PALOPs (ibid.).

At the end of the 1990s and into the early 2000s, the country received an unexpected influx of migrants from Eastern Europe, particularly Ukraine, Romania and Moldova. The lack of previous connections with those countries of origin and the absence of recruitment campaigns aimed at attracting workers from Eastern Europe caused some scholars to define this as the ‘unforeseen wave’ (Baganha et al., 2004), which presented more substantial integration challenges (MPF, 2022). This immigration was primarily triggered by increased job opportunities in the construction sector, especially in Lisbon, where several large public works had been approved (Baganha et al., 2004; Carvalho, 2018). Immigration agencies³ in Eastern Europe offered convenient packages including ‘travel documents, transportation and job opportunities ... affordable to a large segment of the population’ (Baganha et al., 2004: 31).

The economic decline caused by the 2008 global financial crisis considerably reduced immigration to Portugal while re-igniting emigration (see Figure 2). Hundreds of thousands of Portuguese citizens – mostly young and highly educated – emigrated to other EU countries and North America, particularly from 2011 to 2015, due to high unemployment and harsh austerity measures (Pereira and Azevedo, 2019; MPF, 2022). Immigration to Portugal picked up again from 2016, but return migration of Portuguese citizens abroad remained limited, especially compared to the government’s hopes (Waldersee, 2019). Such trends were to some extent reversed during the Covid-19 pandemic, with many fewer foreigners arriving in the country (12,500 in 2021 against 46,300 in 2019) and many more Portuguese citizens returning after a period overseas (38,200 in 2021 compared to 26,400 in 2019) (INE, 2022). Even so, there are serious concerns about Portugal’s demographic crisis, with one of the fastest declining populations in Europe, a historically low birth rate and an old-age dependency ratio that is set to top the EU by 2050 – all of which have increased the need to promote immigration while reducing emigration (European Commission, 2015; TPN/Lusa, 2022; Wise, 2022).

3 Alongside reputable agencies, there were substantial concerns about trafficking networks’ involvement in facilitating the migration of Eastern Europeans to Portugal during this period (Malheiros, 2002).

Figure 2 Recent migration trends in Portugal, 2008–2021



Note: ‘Immigrants’ refers to people permanently migrating to Portugal, whether as foreign citizens or as Portuguese citizens returning from a period of residence abroad.

Source: Instituto Nacional de Estatística (INE)

According to the latest Portuguese statistics, the number of foreign citizens residing in Portugal increased to 669,000 in 2021, around 7% of the population (Oliveira, 2022). When comparing the latest figures across the OECD (from 2019), 10.8% of the total population in Portugal was born overseas, a large increase from 5% in 2000 but still relatively low compared to many other European countries including Greece (12.5%), France (12.8%), Spain (14%) and Germany (16.1%) (OECD, 2023). Portugal’s asylum-seeking population is also low compared to its neighbours; it has not ranked higher than 20th out of 27 EU countries for the number of asylum applicants in the past decade, and was not visibly impacted by the relatively large 2015–2016 influx from Syria and other countries into Europe⁴ (Carvalho and Duarte, 2020; Eurostat, 2023). Even after receiving

4 In contrast to the numerous arrivals by sea to Spain, Italy and Greece, sea arrivals to Portugal have been extremely rare, although there have been cases (Mazzilli, 2022).

the sixth-highest total of refugees through the 2015–2018 EU resettlement scheme, as well as entries from various other relocation programmes, the country hosted only 2,651 refugees in 2021, or 0.1% of total refugees in the EU (European Commission, 2021; World Bank, 2022).

More recently, however, Portugal – like many other European countries – has seen a sharp increase in refugee arrivals following Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022. In the 12 subsequent days, Portugal received more than twice the number of asylum requests than in the whole of 2021 (3,179 in February and March 2022 against 1,537 in 2021) (Lusa, 2022, in MPF, 2022; CPR and ECRE, 2022). As of February 2023, 58,242 Ukrainian refugees were residing in Portugal under the provisions of the EU-wide Temporary Protection Directive, invoked in early March 2022 (UNHCR, 2023).

2 Current Portuguese immigration system and approach

The end of the *Estado Novo* dictatorship and the independence of Portugal's former colonies resulted in extensive changes to Portugal's citizenship and migration laws. New citizenship laws in 1975, 1981 and 1994 saw an increasing shift towards the principle of *jus sanguinis* (citizenship 'by right of blood') (Baganha and de Sousa, 2006; Peralta, 2019). This effectively restricted Portuguese citizenship for those born or residing in the former African colonies to those who could prove European descent, and also made it more difficult in general to acquire citizenship through marriage or through birth in Portugal to foreign parents (ibid.). It was only in 2006, under a centre-left government, that major changes were introduced to strengthen the principle of *jus solis* (citizenship 'by right of birth' in a country), as well as to reduce the period of legal residence to apply for citizenship (Carvalho and Duarte, 2020; European Commission, 2023). Recent laws have broadened the scope for naturalisation and extended access to citizenship (ibid.) (see Box 1).

Box 1 Overview of Portuguese immigration and asylum policies

Portuguese naturalisation policy

Migrants can obtain Portuguese citizenship after five years of regular residence. Alongside other required documents, applicants must show sufficient knowledge of the Portuguese language (A2 level). A person marrying (or in a long-term civil partnership with) a Portuguese citizen can obtain citizenship after three years. Citizenship is not automatically granted to children born in Portugal, but can be obtained if children have at least one parent who has been regularly residing in the country for at least a year at the time of the child's birth. A recent change in the law in April 2022 introduced an option for parents whose child has Portuguese citizenship to apply for citizenship themselves after five years of living in Portugal with the child (Eurodicas, 2022). There is also a fast-track route to citizenship for migrants benefiting from the 'Golden Visa' scheme, introduced in 2012 to provide simplified pathways for residence and citizenship to non-EU nationals who make and maintain a significant investment in Portugal (Schengenvisa.info, n.d.).⁵

5 Since 2012, over 11,000 main applicants – principally from China, followed by Brazil – have been granted Golden Visas, accompanied by over 18,000 dependent family members (Get Golden Visa, 2022). The future of the scheme is uncertain; while it attracted €6.5 billion in investment (Silva, 2022), it has been criticised for increasing house prices and rents and security risks, leading to possible plans to terminate it (ibid.).

Overall, Portugal's naturalisation rules are noticeably less restrictive in comparison to other EU – and especially Southern European – Member States, with Portugal recording the second-highest naturalisation rate in the EU after Sweden (5.2%) (European Commission, 2023).

Portuguese asylum policy

Asylum seekers can apply for asylum with the Immigration and Borders Service (*Serviço de Estrangeiros e Fronteiras* or SEF), which conducts asylum interviews (the SEF is in the process of being restructured – see below). While the application procedure should take six to nine months, cases have been reported where asylum seekers have waited up to three years (Mazzilli, 2022). Asylum seekers have the right to work, education and healthcare, and to receive basic assistance while their claim is processed if they do not have sufficient financial means. Refugees have the right to work, education, social welfare and healthcare on the same terms as Portuguese citizens (UNHCR, n.d.).

Portugal's first legislation regulating the entrance, stay and exit of foreign residents was introduced in 1981, amidst extensive immigration from newly independent former colonies and ahead of Portugal's request to join the European Economic Community (EEC) (Padilla and França, 2016). After joining the EEC in 1986, further legislation was passed in 1992 and 1993, to conform to Schengen requirements and other EU directives, resulting in the establishment of separate immigration regimes for foreigners from within and outside the EU (SEF, 2010). Subsequent legislation introduced between 1998 and 2003 incorporated further EU developments and experimented with different mechanisms for meeting labour market needs through migration, including changing the typology of entry visas; requiring EU citizens and residents to be considered for employment before non-EU citizens' work visas could be authorised; putting in place family reunification rights and; in 1998, the introduction of a new more liberal asylum law (SEF, 2010; Padilla and França, 2016).

As this immigration framework emerged, concerns about the number of immigrants living and working in Portugal without regular status were also growing, leading to various efforts from 1992 onwards to legalise their residence (SEF, 2010; Padilla and França, 2016) (see Box 2). The first ad hoc regularisation exercise was conducted in 1992, and a 1993 law gave the state the power to grant residence permits on an exceptional basis to foreign citizens who had not met standard permit requirements (SEF, 2010). Portugal has since deployed numerous regularisation processes to meet labour market demands by providing permits to workers already in the country, similar to other Southern European countries such as Spain, Greece and Italy (Kraler, 2009).

Box 2 In focus: Portugal's recurrent regularisation processes

In the early 1990s, Portugal's growing economy (especially the heavily deregulated construction sector) demanded an injection of labour, but immigration laws across Europe were becoming more stringent. The result was a noticeable growth in irregular migration, which the Portuguese government sought to manage through a regularisation exercise in 1992. In all, 39,166 migrants were registered, but only 16,000 were granted regular status, creating a need for a second regularisation a few years later, in 1996. This time, 35,082 migrants (two-thirds from PALOPs) applied, of whom 95% (30,000) gained regular status (Baganha, 1998; Peixoto, 2002; SEF, 2010; Finotelli and Arango, 2011).

The issue of labour demand and irregular migration resurfaced in the late 1990s with the unexpected influx of migrants from Eastern Europe. A 2001 law created a new 'stay permits' (*autorizações de permanência*) mechanism of work visas, which lasted for one year and could be renewed four more times – allowing the labour market to dictate annually the duration of labour migrants' residence (SEF, 2010). The government issued 183,655 'stay permits' to immigrants working in Portugal in an irregular situation (55% to Eastern Europeans), before shifting to an entry quota system from 2003 (*ibid.*).

Two further ad hoc regularisation processes were undertaken in 2003 and 2004 before a reformed immigration law in 2007 introduced new provisions for regularising irregular migrants on an ongoing basis. This largely put an end to ad hoc mass regularisation programmes, but has led to a large backlog of applications from migrants seeking to regularise their residence. Since the process of issuing work permits in Portuguese embassies abroad is cumbersome, most labour migrants enter the country as tourists and then use in-country regularisation arrangements after being offered a work contract (MPF, 2022).

During Covid-19 the Portuguese government conducted a mass temporary regularisation process to automatically grant residence to all migrants whose applications were pending or whose residence permits were due to expire, for the duration of the state of emergency. This decision drew international praise (Ramiro, 2020) as an example of fast and broad action to protect migrants during the pandemic, providing 223,000 with temporary residence permits that allowed them access to public services including healthcare and social protection (Miranda, 2021). However, the policy only provided a temporary change in status, was restricted to those who had already submitted an application to SEF before 18 March 2020, and all procedures had to be completed online, effectively excluding many vulnerable migrants (Mazzilli, 2022).

The primary laws now regulating immigration and asylum in Portugal were published in 2007 and 2008 respectively. While the asylum law incorporated new EU directives on qualifying for international protection and asylum reception conditions (Sousa and Costa, 2018), the immigration law promoted specific arrangements for temporary stay, facilitated improved entry for highly qualified migrants and offered further regularisation opportunities, among other facets (Padilla and França, 2016). The law also strengthened provisions for penalising illegal migration and human trafficking, in line with the general European trend (Padilla and França, 2016). However, as noted in Box 2, regularising migration in Portugal relates principally to the problem of processing applications for regular work and residence status from migrants who originally entered the country on tourist or other visas (MPF, 2022; Góis, 2023). It is hoped that the March 2023 restructuring of the SEF to split its administration and police/border management functions will help ensure better migration management (Góis, 2023).⁶ Improvements may also be made as a result of recent policies to expand access to work visas. For example, a new Job Seeker Visa⁷ coincides with the planned end of the quota-based system for those seeking to work in Portugal (D7Visa, 2022; Ministry of Foreign Affairs, n.d.). There have also been substantial recent efforts to streamline visas and facilitate residence permits for citizens of Portuguese-speaking countries (Government of Portugal, 2022; TPN/Lusa, 2023).

In relation to migrant integration, Portugal is renowned for its progressive policies, consistently ranking in the top four in the Migrant Integration Policy Index (which now covers 56 countries) (MIPEX, 2022). High-profile, cross-government efforts to promote migrant integration date back to the creation of the Inter-departmental Commission for the Integration of Immigrants and Ethnic Minorities in 1993 and subsequently the High Commissioner for Immigration and Ethnic Minorities in 1996 (now the High Commissioner for Migration/ACM for its acronym in Portuguese, which jointly oversees both immigration and emigration issues) (Padilla and França, 2016). Successive frameworks have promoted migrant integration, including the 2007 and 2010 Plans for the Integration of Immigrants, the Strategic Plan for Migration 2015–2020 and the recent National Implementation Plan of the Global Compact for Migration (which Portugal adopted in 2019, making it the first country to do so) (MPF, 2022). Portugal is a ‘champion country’ for the implementation of the Global Compact, and many of its migration policies (including during the pandemic response) have been internationally praised (UN Network on Migration, 2020).

Despite its celebrated policies, integration continues to be challenging in practice. The country has one of the highest migrant pay gaps among OECD countries (with migrants earning on average 29% less than Portuguese citizens in similar positions, compared to the EU average of 9%)

6 SEF’s mandate will be split into two separate bodies, one dealing with administrative tasks and migrants’ integration (Portuguese Agency for Migration and Asylum) and the other with police matters to be part of the Portuguese Criminal Police. Border surveillance will be part of the national police force’s functions.

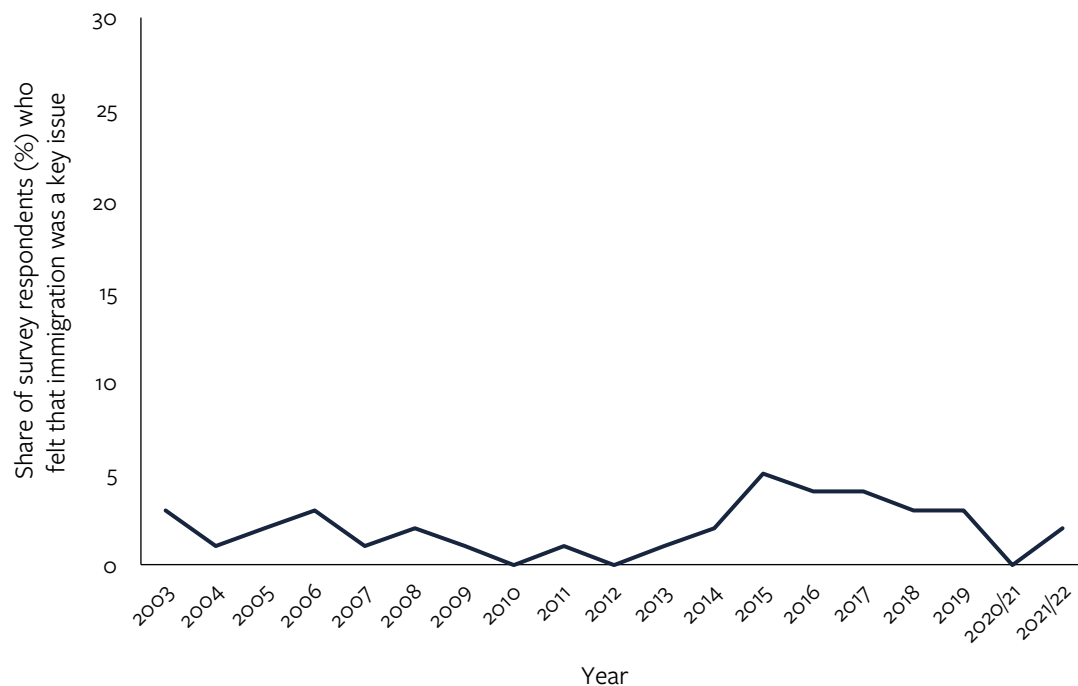
7 Introduced in June 2022, the job seeker visa entitles its holder to enter and remain in Portugal only for the purpose of looking for job; and authorizes him/her to carry out a subordinated work activity, until the visa expires or until the residence permit is granted (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, n.d.).

(MPF, 2022). Since migrant workers often lack formal employment and regular residence, they are vulnerable to wage exploitation and precarious housing conditions, restricting their access to education and health (Góis, 2023). Reports of poor worker conditions and overstretched public services have been particularly prevalent in agricultural areas with a high concentration of seasonal labour migration, such as the Alentejo region (Cabral and Swerts, 2021). A recent fire in an immigrant neighbourhood in Lisbon, which killed two people, has sparked further debate about the shortfall between Portugal's stated policies and implementation in practice, and about the extent to which greater regulation is needed to improve oversight of immigrant arrivals and conditions (West Observer, 2023). More generally, there are concerns that inequitable or even abusive treatment of migrants by state officials and institutions has not always been properly acknowledged due to the general portrayal of the country as a 'model of good practice' (Araújo, 2013; Casquilo-Martins et al., 2022).

3 Public attitudes towards refugees and other migrants: what do we know?

Compared to other countries in Europe, immigration has not been a particularly salient issue for the Portuguese public in the past two decades (Carvalho and Duarte, 2020). Whereas Italy, Spain, Greece, France, Germany, the UK and even Sweden have all seen years where over 40% of the public considered immigration to be a top issue facing their country in regular Eurobarometer surveys, the equivalent in Portugal has never passed 5% (ODI, n.d.; Bailey-Morley and Lowe, 2023) (see Figure 3).

Figure 3 Salience of immigration as a key issue in Portugal



Note: This graphic shows the percentage of people answering ‘immigration’ to the question ‘What do you see as the two most important issues facing Portugal today?’ Annual data is presented, taken mainly from autumn surveys, though the Eurobarometer surveys were delayed due to Covid-19, with the autumn 2020 and 2021 surveys shifting to winter 2020–2021 and 2021–2022.

Source: Eurobarometer (n.d.)

Various factors likely explain this low level of salience. First, and as reported in the Eurobarometer surveys, the public believes other concerns to be more pressing, notably the country’s economic circumstances and more recently the Covid-19 pandemic. A second factor may be the lower level of politicisation of immigration than in other contexts (as discussed further in the next

section). Even in 2019, when the far-right political party Chega first gained a seat in parliament, the salience of immigration was still only 3%, while the latest data from 2022 shows it at 2%. In general, immigration is perceived to have generated few grievances about foreigners taking jobs compared to some countries, since migrants have largely plugged gaps in low-wage positions that citizens did not wish to fill (Carvalho and Duarte, 2020).

The comparatively limited numbers of migrants and particularly of asylum seekers in Portugal may also have made the topic less salient compared to other countries hosting larger foreign populations. However, it should be noted that Portuguese people do not think of their rate of immigration as particularly low. In the 2017 Eurobarometer survey, Portuguese respondents – like many others in Europe – significantly overestimated the percentage of migrants (third-country nationals) in the overall national population, assuming the proportion to be around 21%, when at the time it was just over 6% (Eurobarometer, 2018). When specifically asked whether they are concerned about immigration, a substantial proportion of the public have at times expressed quite notable concern; for example, in a 2013 Transatlantic Trends survey of 13 mostly EU countries,⁸ Portuguese respondents were the most concerned about illegal immigration (88%) and a high number (41%) said there were too many immigrants in the country (GMF, 2013). In the same study the following year, Portuguese respondents were the most concerned about intra-EU immigration of any of the countries surveyed (62%), and 39% felt that there were too many immigrants in the country (GMF, 2015). Immigration should therefore not be considered unimportant to the Portuguese, but it has never been one of the top two public concerns.

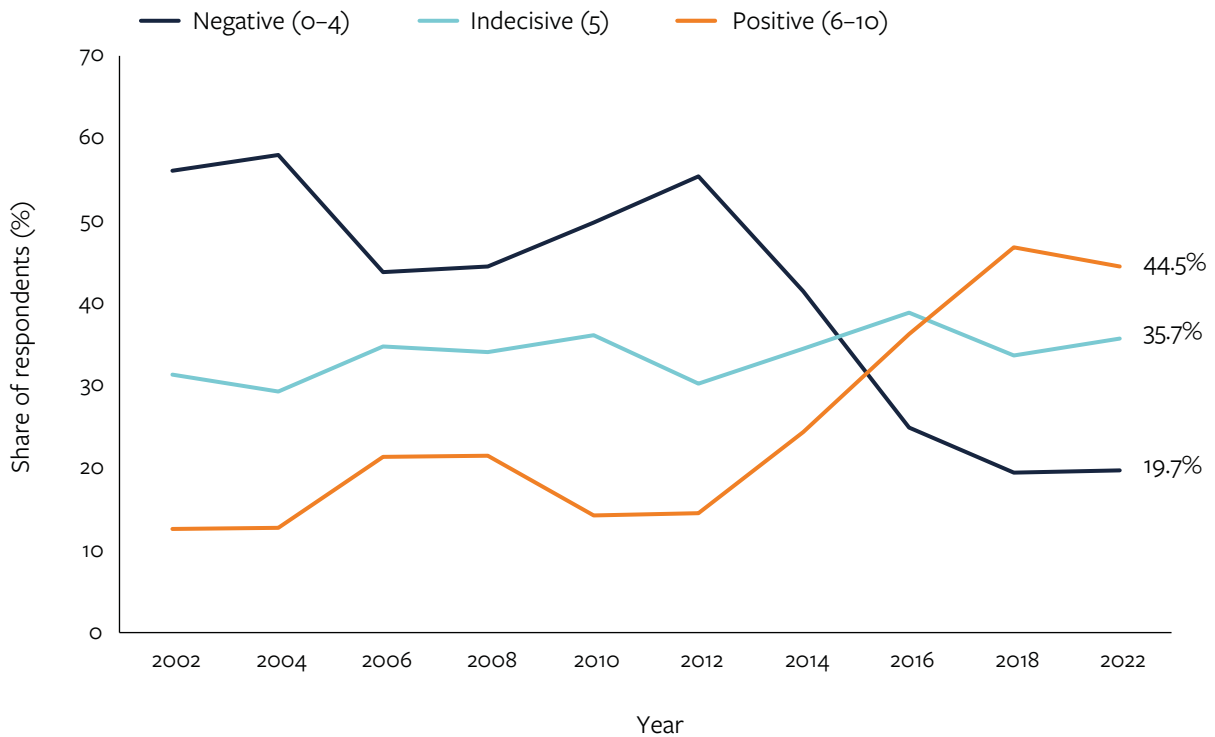
When considering Portuguese citizens' attitudes towards immigration more broadly the picture is mixed, depending on both the timeframe and the specific aspect being considered.

In relation to the overall impact of immigration, public attitudes in the past were notably negative. From 2002–2014, the proportion of Portuguese respondents to the European Social Survey (ESS) who felt that immigrants made Portugal a worse place to live was consistently far higher than those reporting that the country was better off with immigrants (between 40–54% of respondents with negative views, compared to 12–19% with positive views) (see Figure 4). Somewhat surprisingly, these rates were more negative than in many other countries in Western Europe – including countries commonly associated with hostile attitudes towards migrants, such as France and the UK.⁹

8 The 2013 survey covered France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland, the UK, Portugal, Turkey, Slovakia, Spain, Romania, Sweden and the US. The 2014 survey covered the same countries, except that Russia was included instead of Romania.

9 In France negative attitudes in the ESS ranged from 35–40%, and positive attitudes between 20–30% between 2002–2012, while in the UK, negative attitudes were around 40–45%, and positive attitudes hovered around 30% during the same period.

Figure 4 Attitudes towards immigrants: do immigrants make Portugal a worse or a better place to live?



Note: The survey scores respondents from 0–10 only and records ‘don’t know’ answers. We have classified survey respondents who scored 0–4 in their answers to the question ‘Do immigrants make Portugal a worse or better place to live?’ as holding ‘negative’ views, those scoring 5 as being ‘indecisive’ and those scoring 6–10 as holding ‘positive’ views. ‘Don’t know’ responses have been excluded from the analysis shown here. Wave 10 of the ESS should have taken place in 2020 but was delayed due to the Covid-19 pandemic. The most recent data available is from fieldwork conducted between August 2021 and March 2022, published in December 2022. Source: European Social Survey, n.d.

From 2012, Portuguese views on the net impact of immigration started to improve in ESSs, and by 2016 more Portuguese residents felt that immigrants made the country a better than a worse place to live. This remains the case today, albeit with a slight decrease from the 2018 peak (and still with around one-third consistently holding a neutral view, as has been the case for all survey rounds) (European Social Survey, n.d.).

A host of other surveys exploring public opinion on immigration impacts in the past five years support the generally positive recent findings above. In the 2017 and 2021 Special Eurobarometer surveys, Portugal ranked seventh and fourth respectively (out of 27 EU Member States) for having the lowest proportion of people declaring that immigration is more of a problem than an

opportunity (Eurobarometer, 2018; 2022).¹⁰ Similarly, in the European Values Survey 2020, 49% of respondents saw immigration as a positive factor for the country's development, compared to only 14% with a negative view; the positive rate was the fourth highest in Europe (after the UK, Iceland and Albania) (Ramos and Magalhães, 2021).

When looking at willingness to accept migrants into the country, there is also some evidence of more positive attitudes over time, but from a low starting point. Several studies have explored this topic using a section of the ESS that asks respondents about their willingness to allow migrants with particular profiles into the country (for example, migrants of a particular ethnicity/religion/region of origin). Comparing early ESS data from 2002 with later rounds in 2014 and 2016, Hatton (2016), Heath et al. (2016) and Messing and Sagvari (2019) show that the Portuguese public became more open to hosting migrants in some respects, after a temporary increase in hostility after the 2008 financial crisis (Vogt Isaksen, 2019). Portugal was one of only a handful of European countries that appears to have become markedly more accepting of migrants from poor countries outside Europe following the so-called migration 'crisis' in Europe in 2015 – which may in part relate to wider circumstances that improved public confidence in the government and the economy (Messing and Sagvari, 2019). That said, the starting levels of willingness to accept migrants prior to the crisis were often low, typically reaching only average rates at best by 2016.

There does, however, appear to be a key distinction in public attitudes between willingness to accept migrants generally versus refugees specifically – with attitudes to the latter being much more positive. For example, of the 18 countries studied by Hatton (2016), Portuguese respondents to the ESS were the least likely to disagree with generous refugee hosting in 2002; in the same survey in 2014, Portuguese respondents were the most likely of any country to support generous policies towards refugees (68%) (ibid.).

Furthermore, while attitudes towards immigration as a concept have historically been quite negative, Portuguese attitudes towards immigrants themselves appear notably more positive. Early data from the 1990, 1999 and 2008 European Values Survey shows 10% or less of Portuguese respondents reporting that they would not want an immigrant as a neighbour – fairly low levels by Western European standards (and the lowest of the countries surveyed in 1999) (Rubin et al., 2014). In 2016 and 2019, Portugal ranked twelfth and tenth respectively in Europe in the Migrant Acceptance Index, which combines responses to three questions about openness to migrants residing in the country, as a neighbour, and marrying into one's family (Gallup, 2022). In the 2021 Eurobarometer survey, Portugal topped the EU (along with Ireland) for the proportion

10 The proportion feeling immigration was more of a problem fell from 26% in 2017 to 22% in 2021; however, as in the case of the ESS, the proportion expressing positive views also fell in the most recent round (from 36% to 24%), with more people feeling it was equally a problem and an opportunity (47% in 2021, up from 32% in 2017).

of people who feel comfortable having an immigrant as a neighbour, colleague, doctor, friend or family member (89%) – an increase from 79% (and fourth place in the EU) in the previous 2017 survey (Eurobarometer, 2018; 2022).

Another area where Portuguese attitudes are more positive than many other countries is in the characterisation of immigrants' integration into the country. For example, in the 2014 Transatlantic Trends survey Portugal had the highest proportion of respondents reporting that both first-generation immigrants and their children were integrating well in the country (83% and 86% respectively) (GMF, 2015). In both the 2017 and 2021 Eurobarometer surveys, Portugal ranked second in the EU for the proportion of the public who feel the integration of immigrants in their local area has been successful, as well as the proportion who feel their government is doing enough to actively promote immigrants' integration (Eurobarometer, 2018; 2022). The past five years have also consistently seen the Portuguese public come first or second in EU surveys asking whether they feel their local area is a good place for immigrants from other countries to live (Gallup, 2022).

These positive results may in part reflect social values and norms which strongly discourage overt expressions of prejudice and prize openness and harmonious relations between different cultures (Vala et al., 2008; Valentim and Heleno, 2018). As discussed further in the next section, these values are linked to 'lusio-tropicalism', or the idea that the Portuguese people's history of overseas exploration reveals 'a special skill ... for harmonious relations with other peoples, their adaptability to the tropics and their inherent lack of prejudice' – an idea disseminated during the *Estado Novo* regime, particularly after the Second World War, but that some argue still holds strong in Portuguese society today (Valentim and Heleno, 2018: 34). However, studies that have delved into this topic have generally found that citizens who strongly identify with 'lusio-tropicalist' beliefs often hold *greater* prejudice towards immigrants, and tend to attribute successful integration of migrants to citizens' own efforts, while blaming migrants when their integration is unsuccessful (ibid.).

When looking more broadly at the factors determining how attitudes to migration differ among the Portuguese population, various factors have been identified. In the ESS survey data mentioned above, rejection rates of migrants from poor countries outside Europe are notably higher among people who are older, less educated and on lower incomes, and who feel they are struggling to make ends meet – in line with trends in many other countries (Messing and Sagvari, 2019). Pinto et al. (2020) show that respondents with a strong European identity displayed more positive attitudes towards immigrants, although holding a strong national identity did not necessarily mean more negative attitudes – a finding also illustrated two decades ago by Vala et al. (1999).

Research on the impact of political affiliation on attitudes towards migrants suggests a less polarised picture than in many countries. A study using 2013 data found little evidence of attitudes to immigrants being determined by party allegiance, with mainstream right-wing party voters sometimes having more positive attitudes than left-wing voters (Indelicato et al., 2023). However, data from 2019 found that attitudes towards immigrants *do* depend on political allegiance among respondents with a strong Portuguese national identity; while left-leaning respondents

in this category present a more positive attitude motivated by humanitarian concerns, right-wing individuals display more negative attitudes (Pinto et al., 2020). Yet even among far-right voters, perceptions of immigrants appear to be much less negative than in many other contexts (although the relatively small number of far-right voters to date makes it hard to draw significant conclusions) (Magalhães, 2020). In exploratory research comparing a sample of Chega voters with other voters, the majority in both cases considered immigrants beneficial for the economy and were not concerned about their impact on Portuguese culture or crime rates (ibid.).

4 Exceptionally positive political narratives

Whereas public attitudes have been mixed, political narratives around migration in Portugal have been exceptionally hospitable relative to the wider European landscape (Wise, 2019). While many countries have seen increasing populist rhetoric portraying migrants as a threat to European identities and values, successive Portuguese governments have maintained positive policies and dialogue on immigration (Visintin et al., 2018).

In its policies, Portugal stands out among its European counterparts for developing a high-profile institutional response (through the ACM) that works across government to treat migration as an opportunity instead of a problem, and to promote the hospitable reception of migrants of all skill levels. This includes running campaigns to foster pro-immigrant narratives, dating back to the ‘Immigrant Portugal. Tolerant Portugal’ campaign in 2005 that followed the first large labour-related immigration wave from Eastern Europe (OECD, 2019). Immigration is also championed in the overall national development strategy (Strategy Portugal 2030), which highlights the importance of immigration for the labour market and social security in an ageing society (MPF, 2022).

Key political figures have also spoken out debunking negative stereotypes about immigration and promoting positive discourse (Visintin et al., 2018). For example, Minister of the Presidency Mariana Vieira da Silva has noted that ‘the main issue that influences public perceptions [about immigration] is the discourse that we all, including policymakers, make about these factors’. She underlined the importance of politicians and policy-makers emphasising the contribution that migrants make to the economy, especially to counter the narratives coming from the far-right within the country and internationally (Lusa, 2020). President Marcelo Rebelo de Sousa has repeatedly highlighted how migrants’ contribution to the welfare system exceeds Portuguese citizens’ (MPF, 2022) – a key message given the Portuguese public’s strong belief in the importance of immigrants contributing to the welfare system by paying taxes (joint highest with Greece out of all EU countries surveyed in the latest Eurobarometer, 2022). De Sousa has also emphasised that Portugal’s economy needs immigrants, including to do jobs that citizens won’t, even when unemployed (MPF, 2022). Prime Minister António Costa has also championed immigration on the basis that ‘Europe undoubtedly needs more human resources’ (Donn, 2023), and that Portugal needs immigrants ‘to combat its demographic problem’ of a shrinking and ageing population (DW, 2018).

As these examples show, inclusive political narratives have often been linked to the benefits of immigration in meeting labour market and other societal demands. This dates back to the immigration influx of the early 2000s, which was triggered by the labour needs of government construction projects, and which was accompanied by an implicit agreement among mainstream

political parties not to politicise immigration, so as to ensure a sufficient labour supply for these projects and for broader national growth (Carvalho, 2018; Carvalho and Duarte, 2020). Similarly, various stakeholders, including employers and trade unions, have adopted a positive approach to immigration (Carvalho, 2022).

Alongside this practical rationale, positive political narratives on migration have also been grounded on value-based arguments. These include a sense of moral obligation, as during the pandemic when Interior Minister Eduardo Cabrita argued that: ‘Ensuring migrant citizens’ access to health, social security, and job and housing stability is a duty of a sympathetic society in times of crisis’ (Gorjão Henriques, 2020: 1). There is also pride in the idea of Portugal as an open, tolerant and multicultural society, as well as itself a country of migrants (Negrao, 2022; Portugal Resident, 2022).

Such positive narratives are in many ways refreshing compared to the increasingly negative political rhetoric in many other parts of Europe. However, there are also risks that an excessively positive self-image can mask genuine issues or emerging concerns. First, as Araújo (2013) cautions, the celebration of openness and multiculturalism by many Portuguese politicians and scholars can be problematic not only where it is rooted in the former regime’s luso-tropicalist ideology, but also where it leads to an under-acknowledgment of the structural inequalities and racism still present in Portugal today. In addition, the dominant national narrative of Portugal as a model of integration has left some policy-makers and citizens in areas with a high concentration of immigrants (notably seasonal agricultural workers) feeling that the challenging local impacts are being ignored (Cabral and Swerts, 2021). There are also some signs of potential fracturing in mainstream parties’ agreement not to politicise immigration. After the fatal fire in immigrant housing in Lisbon, the opposition party (the Social Democratic Party, or PSD) accused the governing Socialist Party (PS) of being ‘two-faced’ in its commitment to implementing migrant integration policies, ‘saying one thing in Portugal and another abroad’ (West Observer, 2023). Challenges were also posed regarding the need for greater regulation and limits on immigration (ibid.).

Another major concern is the clear recent growth in the prevalence and popularity of hostile political narratives at the far-right of the spectrum. In 2019 Chega gained 1.3% of the vote, with one MP elected, marking the first time a far-right party had secured a seat in parliament since the end of the dictatorship in 1974, and putting an end to Portugal’s ‘perceived immunity to the far-right’ (Demony, 2022; Mendes, 2022). Chega’s leader, André Ventura, came third in the presidential elections in January 2021, and the party became the third-largest in the National Assembly following the January 2022 elections with 12 seats – albeit with only 7.2% of the vote (MPF, 2022). Chega’s manifesto includes proposals to strengthen border controls and calls for a decrease in ‘mass and illegal immigration’ through a zero-tolerance policy (Partido Chega, n.d.), although it is quite open on migration from former Portuguese colonies. Ventura himself has argued that ‘only Chega understands the risks of uncontrolled Islamic immigration’ (TPN/Lusa, 2022b).

That said, although Chega has adopted clear anti-migrant rhetoric, this has not been the primary narrative accompanying its political rise. Compared to far-right parties in other European countries (including Spain), Chega has placed less emphasis on nativism and more on an anti-establishment message, feeding on widespread anti-elite sentiment and concerns about corruption (Mendes and Dennison, 2020). This is a strategic decision given the general lack of public concern regarding immigration (ibid.).

Where Chega has adopted xenophobic and racist rhetoric, the principal target has thus far been the Roma community, riding on long-standing anti-Roma prejudice among the public" (Araújo, 2016; Heyne and Manucci, 2021). This raises questions around who is considered a 'foreigner', since the Roma community has long been considered a migrant 'other' despite most being Portuguese citizens for centuries. Chega's anti-Roma narrative has tapped into wider public concerns about the functioning of the welfare system by portraying Roma people as 'living almost exclusively on state benefits', as well as posing a crime and security threat (Bugalho, 2017; Heyne and Manucci, 2021).

While stigmatising narratives have so far focused primarily on the Roma population, the rise of the extreme right has the potential to influence general attitudes towards immigrants (Heyne and Manucci, 2021). Chega's prominent crime and security agenda has often been interwoven with xenophobia and racism, portraying minorities in general as 'feeling above the law' (Bugalho, 2017). There is evidence that Chega's growth has fuelled racism and xenophobia more broadly. Reports of ethnic and nationality-based discrimination have sharply increased since 2019, as have reports of fringe neo-Nazi movements gaining traction in Portugal (as elsewhere in Europe) (CICDR, 2018; 2021; 2022; Europol, 2019; 2020). While Portuguese civil society and grassroots associations have advocated to protect the rights of minorities (including migrants), they have increasingly come under threat from extreme right groups. In 2020, members of the extreme right group *Resistência Nacional* demonstrated outside the offices of the well-known civil society organisation SOS Racismo wearing white masks and holding torches. Threats were also reported against the personal security of the organisation's members and against politicians from the left-wing party *Bloco de Esquerda* (The Portugal News, 2020).

11 For example, in the 2014/15 ESS data on willingness to host different types of migrants, the Portuguese public's openness to Roma migrants was lower than for any of the migrant groups (27%, compared to 35% for the next most opposed group – Muslims) (Heath et al., 2016). Chega's vote shares have been highest in areas with more concentrated Roma (but not immigrant) populations (Afonso, 2021; Mendes, 2022).

5 Conclusion

Due to relatively low past levels of immigration, and a long-standing agreement across mainstream parties not to politicise immigration for pragmatic reasons, immigration has *not* historically been a salient issue for the Portuguese public. Although citizens have not always been convinced of the net benefits of immigration, they express support for hosting refugees, openness to living alongside immigrants and satisfaction with their integration into Portuguese life.

Unlike many European countries, where political rhetoric about migrants has been more hostile than public sentiment, in Portugal, political narratives and policies have been more positive than public opinion, actively championing the social and economic benefits of immigration, regularising the status of migrants and promoting migrants' integration. While migrants still face many challenges in practice, these positive narratives are a welcome breath of fresh air amid decades of increasing hostility across much of Europe.

The rise of the far-right Chega party since 2019, however, signals a worrying development. Thus far, immigration concerns have been of relatively limited importance to Chega voters, and the party's racist discourse has more prominently tapped into prejudice against the Roma community – particularly related to threat narratives around welfare dependency and criminality. However, broader xenophobia is also evident in far-right narratives and practices, likely contributing to notable increases in racial and ethnic discrimination.

Portugal's progressive approach to migration policies and narratives is therefore no longer so assured. While levels of support for the far-right in Portugal are still low, their emergence is undoubtedly a rupture to Portugal's recent political tradition. A major shift either in the country's migration picture or in the far right's political tactics risks propelling Portugal down the path of many of its European neighbours – where fringe movements have managed to shift the central migration narrative, fuelling xenophobic public policies and attitudes.

Yet this could also be a moment of opportunity for Portugal to showcase the depth of its beliefs and values. Now more than ever, Portugal needs unified support for a pro-migrant approach – across mainstream parties, the media, the private sector and civil society – if the country is to achieve its vision of an open, inclusive society that maximises the benefits of immigration, and in doing so buck the broader European anti-migrant trend.

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