

***From sending to host societies: how Portugal integrates its
minorities - the situation of Muslim immigrants***

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Abstract: The debate about how to best integrate its growing ethnic minorities, with origin in different parts of the world, is not new in Europe. This debate is closely linked to the rise of extreme-right and populist movements with a declared anti-immigration agenda seen across the continent during the 1990s. Nowadays, approximately 60% of the EU population believes that there are too many immigrants in their countries. This is valid also for Portugal, although until recently it had been a country of emigration. For many decades thousands of people left Portugal for the USA, Canada, Brazil and other developed European countries. Following significant transformations since the mid-1980s, Portugal became a host society for people arriving from a variety of places and with diverse cultural and religious backgrounds. Considering the lack of a common European immigrant integration model and the fact that the existent national models seem to be in crisis, this paper will discuss the strategy of Portugal towards the integration of its immigrants, with a special focus on its growing and heterogenic Muslim minority. In Portugal the Muslim community has its main origin in the decolonization process, but nowadays it is becoming increasingly plural in terms of nationalities, cultures and ethnic diversity. We will analyze the origin, structure and context of arrival of these immigrants. We will also discuss the attitude of the Portuguese society towards immigrants and the Muslim community, keeping in mind the weight of History and the Islamic roots of the country. Modern Muslim presence in this Iberian country is a recent phenomenon, and it is becoming increasingly visible due to various dynamics. At the same time, immigration and the increasing national, cultural, ethnic and religious diversity within Portugal contributes to the redefinition of national identity.

Departures to North America decreased considerably, and therefore the European character of Portuguese emigration has been confirmed.

Between 1985 and 1990 around 33,000 people left Portugal each year.⁴ During this migratory period, the growing importance of temporary emigration was particularly significant. While until that time most people leaving Portugal mainly consisted of unskilled workers or people without formal education, over the past few years the trend is for students and people holding university degrees to look for conditions to develop their activities in other countries. These days, common belief is that around four millions of Portuguese emigrants live around the world.

Nevertheless and to a certain extent, Portugal lost its character as an

particularly in Lisbon, Setúbal, Porto and Faro. Nevertheless, the trend is for immigrants to move across the territory depending on job offers. Men account for 55% of immigrant flows, although in the past few years this trend has been eased by family reunification.⁹

It should be noted that when Portugal started to receive a significant influx of immigrants it was not yet prepared for that new reality at institutional and social level (mentality, job offers, etc.). In less than thirty years, Portugal was transformed from a cultural, religious and ethnically homogeneous country into a plural society. The cultural and ethnic diversification within its main cities created the need to adapt its legislation, policies and institutions to this new reality. There was some real effort in order to adapt society and institutions, and in the early 2000s the situation had already changed somewhat. The perception of a debilitating demographic situation in Portugal and the need for these human groups – mainly consisting of working-age men and women – for its economic development, for thee

ethnic minorities".¹³ Its mission included the promotion of integration of immigrants and ethnic minorities into the Portuguese society; the co-operation with immigrants' associations and social institutions in the definition of policies aiming at promoting social integration and fighting social and economic exclusion; the supervision of the application of legal provisions seeking to prevent and forbid discriminatory and racist actions based on race, color, nationality and ethnic background; the promotion of knowledge and acceptance of the Portuguese language, legislation and cultural and moral values by immigrants as preconditions to a full integration into society, but always respecting its cultural and social identity; the improvement of living conditions of immigrants; the promotion of equal opportunities for all citizens allowed to stay in Portugal.

Last May, in the framework of a reform of the Administration and public services, the High Commission for Immigration and Intercultural Dialogue was created, i.e. an institute that will replace the High Commission for Immigration and Ethnic Minorities.¹⁴ This new institution results from the fusion of several organizations: the High Commission for Immigration and Ethnic Minorities, the Mission for Religious Dialogue, the structure of *Programa Escolhas* (Choices Program) and Secretariado Entreculturas (Intercultural Secretariat). This new structure centralizes in one single public institute the responsibilities and attributions of several bodies. The goal is to reduce bureaucracy and to more efficiently promote intercultural and religious dialogue.

Both institutions have played a very important role in helping immigrant communities integrate in a new environment and in bringing the State and Portuguese authorities closer to immigrants. Their creation clearly showed that authorities were aware of the transformations that society was going through and that the new social reality in Portugal demanded new measures by the State. This new situation brought upon the State the responsibility of both integrating these citizens, with particular emphasis on the reinforcement of social cohesion, and improving integration and cultural diversity.¹⁵

Despite the positive progress of integration policies for immigrants in recent years, until recently Portugal had not enforced an overall and integrated plan to systematize the aims and commitments of the State regarding the welcome and integration of immigrants. Therefore, last May a commitment was reached establishing the State as the main ally for immigrant integration. The *Plan for Immigration Integration* is the outcome of the collective work of all Ministries with the contribution of civil society organizations. It resulted in a document that mirrors

¹³ Decree-Law No 251/2002.

¹⁴ Decree-Law No 167/2007.

¹⁵ Presidência do Conselho de Ministros, *Plan for Immigration Integration*, p. 5.

more open attitude towards Otherness and to the emerging reality. Indeed, among Portuguese there is the general feeling that immigration contributes in a positive way to society. People are able to recognize its economic and cultural value, recognizing that Portuguese cultural life is enriched by the presence of other people and that immigrants are economically important as they perform the tasks that no one else is interested in.¹⁸

According to a 47-Nation Pew Global Attitudes Survey released last October 4, people around the world expressed concern about the level of immigration to their country.¹⁹ Moreover, people in 44 of the 47 countries surveyed agreed with tighter restrictions and control of entries of people into their country.

In contrast to the migratory historical experience, available data show that 53% of people support a decrease of immigration to Portugal.²⁰ This means that not only they do not accept the arrival of more immigrants but also they sustain that some of the existing immigrants should leave the country. Immigrants coming from Africa (the first group to arrive and settle in Portugal) face the greatest opposition, followed by the remaining immigrants with economic motivations.²¹ Perhaps because they are able to understand the inherent obstacles in the process of adaptation to a new reality, former emigrants show a more open-minded position towards immigration than the remaining society.

In general, explicit racist acts are not so common, as they are a social censured behavior. However, racism does exist in certain social segments, usually in a 'disguised' or paternalistic form. According to a recent study, approximately one quarter of the Portuguese population express racism in their attitudes, beliefs and stereotypes.

This is even more marked when we look at the perception of cultural difference, especially concerning African and Eastern Europe immigrants.²² The perception of cultural difference regarding other human groups is also an expression of prejudice, but it is not exposed to the same social condemnation. The Other/foreigner is seen as different, but this difference is related, to a greater extent, to cultural aspects and less with skin color. Thus, the intolerant person

If it is true that most Portuguese say they accept immigrants – which is predictable -, one third refuse closer links to them.²³ Prejudices against African immigrants are the highest, followed by Eastern European. This is valid both for racist attitudes and for the perception of cultural difference.²⁴

On another note, among immigrants there is also the feeling that the most discriminated group comprises African immigrants, while Brazilians are well accepted.²⁵

This kind of attitude towards African immigrants clashes with five centuries of history and culture. The historical, cultural and linguistic links with several African countries, as well as the long presence of African people among us, are not enough to prevent Portuguese from harboring prejudice against them. Many Portuguese, in particular the older generations, are still influenced by ideas formulated when Portugal was a colonizer country, and so they continue to see African people as inferior and Portugal as a country of white people. Portuguese people like to see themselves as non-racist and good hosts, but evidence and our daily experience show a very different reality.

Immigrant populations can suffer from professional, social, economic,

Muslim communities in Portugal

After examining the policies undertaken by Portugal in the field of immigration and integration, it is important to assess the influence of those policies on Muslims and to understand the status of Muslims in Portugal.

The increasing visibility of Muslim communities in the main cities of Europe is the result not only of their demographic expansion, but also of their growing social and cultural affirmation. The formulation of social, educational and urban policies by the government and local authorities must take into account these minority groups, in such a way that their integration is ensured and that their rights are respected.

Portugal's links to the Muslim world are ancient. The eight centuries of Islamic

Nevertheless, Muslims represent the largest religious minority in the country. Approximately 70% of Muslims living in Portugal are Portuguese citizens.

The contemporary Muslim presence in Portugal is essentially a post-colonial phenomenon and a consequence of immigration. Before 1974, there was only a small community of twenty or thirty people, who arrived from Mozambique and were from Indian origin. They belonged to

had to face some obstacles in order to obtain Portuguese nationality.

The arrival of these new human groups is creating the current diversification in terms of nationality, ethnicity, socioeconomic conditions and culture in the Islamic presence in Portugal. This is reflected in the variety of religious practices

In a few other European countries, th

new Commission for Religious Freedom and with the Law of Religious Freedom³⁶ approved in 2001, and more recently with the Plan for Immigration Integration.

The Commission for Religious Freedom is an independent institution for the government and parliament consultation. The new Plan for Immigration Integration also includes some policy measures concerning religious freedom.

Usually Muslims tend to consider Portugal a welcoming country, saying they can freely practice their religion. Despite some cases of negative remarks that some had to hear when walking in the streets – the majority of times related to Muslim garments -, no cases of vandalism, violence or discrimination against Muslims were reported. Mosques and community centers are well integrated into their areas and Muslims are said to have good relations with neighbors. In contrast to many European countries, in Portugal there were no problems regarding the construction of new Mosques or opening of prayer rooms and religious symbols were never under discussion. Also, Muslims are not affected by major social problems that frequently affect other minorities in the country.

As for social attitudes towards Muslims it is interesting to notice the discrepancies of discourses between Muslim families and Portuguese who converted to Islam.³⁷ The latter group is more critical towards Portuguese society, declaring that it is complicated to be a Muslim in Portugal. Converted peoTD-0.00

national level. When existent, prejudices are more often related to the national origins of the individual – the majority is from African and North African countries - than to the fact that he or she is a Muslim. A person from Morocco will always be seen as a Moroccan first and only afterwards as a Muslim.

Although Muslims have become more visible in the past few years, their contribution as an integral part of the economic and cultural fabric of society is still largely ignored.

Conclusion

In the phenomenon of immigration, the movement of individuals or groups is a process of dialogue and confrontation.³⁸ These days, the discussion about immigration is often linked to two other topics: security and culture. More than ever before in Europe, migrations are viewed as a security issue, when they probably should be seen as a labor and human rights subject. Moreover, as the recent Pew Global Attitudes Survey showed, opinions about immigration are closely linked to perceptions of threats to a country's culture.³⁹ People who favor stricter immigration controls are more likely to believe their way of life needs to be protected against foreign influence. The discussion regarding western values in Europe is essentially a defensive device to stop these perceivable threats and to advance the project of a "fortress Europe". In this sense, Muslim inhabitants are viewed through the lens of security questions and cultural threats more often than other communities.

Integration can be seen as a process resulting from a continuous adjustment between the different populations in the same territory and the policies adopted by

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an intercultural model, which is deduced from multicultural policies.

process, with the creation of a new identity, which is simultaneously a challenge and an opportunity. This identity should comprise all citizens and be open to include the 'Other'.

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