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

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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
Pre-resettlement experiences: Iranians in Vienna

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Refugees’ resettlement experiences may be shaped in the stages leading up to their arrival.

For refugees going to the United States (US), resettlement begins long before they step off the airplane in their final destination. Those selected for resettlement must first undergo pre-departure processing, which typically includes cultural orientation, official government interviews and long periods of waiting.

For many refugees destined for the US, this preparation and processing may take place in the country of asylum where they have been residing. However, for one refugee group in particular, it requires an additional temporary migration solely for the purpose of resettlement processing. The Lautenberg Amendment allows members of religious minorities in Iran to apply for resettlement to the US; since the US government cannot conduct the processing of these cases in Iran, the US has established an agreement with the Austrian government to host these refugees while they undergo the necessary procedures to apply for resettlement.

Following an initial application process from Iran that may take as long as three to five years, those who have successfully passed the requisite documentation review receive a short-term visa for Austria. They then travel to Vienna about one month later to begin the pre-resettlement stage that lasts from approximately three to six months.

At first glance these seem to be the ideal conditions for a resettlement programme, as these refugees avoid physical endangerment and risky passage, and are in the country of asylum for less than one year. Some of the refugees also embrace their temporary stay in Vienna, seeing it as moment of respite between the stresses of leaving family and friends behind in Iran and the challenges that await them in the US.

Cultural Orientation (CO) is the most obvious way that refugees’ resettlement experiences are shaped by the pre-departure phase. The CO classes in Vienna form the first part of what is called the ‘orientation continuum’ and are followed by post-arrival orientation in the refugee’s community of resettlement in the US. For Iranian refugees coming through Vienna, CO consists of five days of discussion, activities and the occasional game that cover an array of topics ranging from employment to housing to cultural adjustment – and what will be expected of them in the US.

Most importantly, the instructors focus on preparation for the challenges that await the refugees in the US. One instructor talked of setting refugees’ expectations low so that they would not be disappointed once they arrive in the US. Another instructor explained on the first day of class, “If you go to the US thinking life will be like the movies, you’ll be disappointed. … [The US] is a great place, but it’s not easy.” Many of the young refugees have their sights set on pursuing higher education in the US, and they are disheartened when they leave...