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The (Non)Place of Migration? The European Pillar of Social Rights and the Representations of People with a Migration Background in Portugal

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Abstract

Recognising migration as a defining feature of contemporary society and politics, this article critically uses the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR) as an analytical framework and examines how it relates to migration. Although migration is intrinsically linked to every dimension of the EPSR, we argue that it is largely absent from this framework. Moreover, while existing literature has explored various factors shaping public attitudes toward people with a migration background (PMB) and migration policies, little is known about how PMB represent these issues. Based on 73 semi-structured interviews conducted in Porto, Portugal, this study fills that gap by analysing their perspectives on EPSR principles and on recent migration policy changes in the country, which have become less inclusive. Our findings show that framing migration as a crisis reinforces material and symbolic borders, which PMB simultaneously contest and internalise.

Keywords

European Pillar of Social Rights; European Union policy; migration; Portugal

1. Introduction

The European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR) is an initiative established by the European Union to reinforce its commitment to social justice and equality. It sets out twenty principles and rights that serve as a reference framework to guide member states in enhancing equal opportunities, labour market access to all, fair working

and living conditions, gender equality, and social protection and inclusion. This framework has faced significant challenges in the aftermath of a pandemic crisis, amid the war in Ukraine and other global conflicts, and as radical right movements, parties, and governments gain traction worldwide. Those at risk of being left behind face growing social, economic, and political marginalisation, deepening existing inequalities. Among these groups, people with a migration background (PMB) face specific challenges in accessing social rights.

Regulating migration from "third-country nationals" and their access to welfare has become a cornerstone of the policy discourses of the EU and its member states (Devitt, 2023; Natter et al., 2020; Scarpa & Schierup, 2018). This article discusses how the dimensions of the EPSR are tackled through migration policies, focusing on Portugal—a member state that has recently undergone significant changes in this domain.

As Portugal celebrates the half-century of the revolution that ended 48 years of dictatorship and established democracy, the country is undergoing significant political shifts, notably the rise of the far-right and the normalisation of extremist movements that had previously remained less visible in the public sphere (Carvalho, 2023). The new political landscape has led to divisive debates over migration and public demonstrations against PMB, marking a departure from Portugal's historically welcoming stance. The ongoing restructuring of migration policy has raised concerns among NGOs, signalling potential setbacks in measures aimed at the inclusion of PMB. This shift contrasts with previous approaches that viewed integration as a comprehensive and essential process, encompassing various sectors such as education, employment, and healthcare (Oliveira & Peixoto, 2022).

This article examines the representations of PMB regarding their migration expectations and lived experiences in Portugal, with particular attention to processes of social inclusion, within the broader context of ongoing social and political transformation and the guiding framework provided by the EPSR. The argument develops as follows. First, we provide an overview of theoretical perspectives on migration research, politics, and policies, with an emphasis on the EU and Portugal. Second, we outline the research methodology, based on qualitative interviews and employing the EPSR as an analytic lens for thematic analysis. We then present the collected data reflecting PMB accounts of their migration experiences and representations of ongoing policy changes. Finally, we conclude with key reflections on the findings, highlighting the need to reaffirm and concretise the social pillar of European policies in the sphere of migration.

2. A Brief State of Migration Research

2.1. The Politics of Migration

This section situates the present analysis within key debates on the politics of migration, focusing on how migration regimes and related discourses shape the lived experiences of PMB. It problematises how migration policies function not merely as administrative tools but as "constitutive" forces (Delitz, 2024) that produce social hierarchies, define who belongs, and construct and manage the figure of the migrant Other.

The notions of migration regime and border regime provide critical frameworks for understanding how migration and border control are intertwined with the dynamics of capitalism. These regimes function not only as systems of control but also as strategic instruments that shape capitalist economies, labour markets, and the class relations they produce, which are often racialised (Mezzadra, 2011).

Border regimes institutionalise, regulate, push back, or deter migratory movement through law, securitisation, and technologies (Everuss, 2023; Kukreja, 2023). Beyond border control and the decision of who to admit into the national territory, migration regimes entail the distinction between citizens and non-citizens and who does and does not have access to social rights. In recent years, rising xenophobia and anti-immigrant sentiment have intensified both the visibility and the normalisation of exclusionary practices. These regimes not only manage borders and legal categories but also enact forms of organised violence—both symbolic and material—on migrant bodies. This violence renders migrant lives permanently precarious, positioning them as simultaneously needed and unwanted, and reinforcing their status as racialised and disposable Others within the dominant political imaginary. The violence of Europe's borders further illustrates how such violations become tolerated, even expected, when racially coded borders function as constant reminders of the exceptionality built into Europe's proclaimed values of universal human rights and legal equality (Lindberg, 2024; Sajjad, 2022).

In Europe, these regimes are shaped by global power structures created over centuries of colonial and post-colonial relations, which differentiate between the following categories of PMB (Grosfoguel et al., 2015): (a) "colonial/racial subjects of Empire" who are domestic "minorities" that were historically colonised and now live within the coloniser country, remaining at the bottom of racial/ethnic hierarchies due to a long history of racialisation and subjugation (e.g., descendants of colonised populations); (b) "immigrants," typically of European descent, who are racialised as "white" and become part of the dominant population (e.g., Euro-Australians, Euro-Africans, Eastern Europeans); and (c) "colonial immigrants" from peripheral regions not directly colonised by the metropolitan country, but racialised similarly to colonial subjects, facing the extension of existing racist discourses onto them (e.g., nationals from Bangladesh or Nepal living in Portugal). Even when they achieve formal citizenship, colonial/racial subjects and colonial immigrants often remain subjugated, "policed in their communities, incarcerated in large numbers, discriminated against in housing and labour markets, etc." (Grosfoguel et al., 2015, p. 643). These categories illustrate how colonial legacies and racialisation enact "selective and differential inclusion" (Mezzadra, 2006), producing fragmented legal statutes for PMB and normalising structural violence.

2.2. Crises and Migration

Contemporary migration politics takes place in a context of multiple global crises: the crisis of global capitalism, global labour relations, global gender relations, global race relations, global ecology (Bieler, 2025). Crises are intrinsically linked to migration dynamics: They influence migration flows (Bermudez & Brey, 2017; Marques et al., 2021), shape the attitudes of host countries and their populations, and drive political responses (Devitt, 2023; Formenti et al., 2019; Mainwaring, 2014; Mezzadra, 2011), thus impacting the lives of PMB.

In terms of policies, the main determinants of the shifts toward more restrictive immigration policies are economic crises and rises in unemployment, the influence of public opinion, and the radical right (Devitt, 2023). Negative public attitudes toward immigration, which tend to increase at times of crisis, may prompt governments to signal control by promoting stricter policies to control "unwanted" forms of immigration—those whose contribution to the receiving state may be difficult to quantify (Wright, 2014).

The Covid-19 pandemic exposed the impacts of the crisis on PMB. They faced an elevated risk of infection due to a range of structural vulnerabilities, such as higher incidence of poverty, overcrowded housing conditions,

and high concentration in jobs where physical distancing is difficult. PMB also experienced disproportionately adverse effects on labour market participation due to generally less stable employment conditions and an overrepresentation in those sectors most affected by the pandemic (OECD, 2020).

The narrative of a "migration crisis" portraying immigration flows as beyond government control is often framed through discourses of exceptionalism, wherein unwanted PMB are cast as invaders, using familiar imagery of floods and unsecurable borders (Mainwaring, 2014, p. 114).

2.3. Migration Policies and the EPSR

The evolution of European migration policies illustrates a transition from labour-focused approaches in the 1960s towards a securitised and supranational governance framework (Costa, 2022). Key milestones include the Treaty of Amsterdam (1997), which reinforced EU-level migration governance, the Schengen Agreement (1985) for free movement, and the Lisbon Treaty (2007), which clarified shared competencies between the EU and the member states. The European Pact on Immigration and Asylum adopted in 2008 has sought to harmonise migration management, recognising its economic contributions while reinforcing mechanisms such as the Return Directive and the operations of the European Border and Coast Guard Agency (Frontex). Its successor, the New Pact on Migration and Asylum, risks undermining the fundamental rights of PMB, as stricter border controls, expanded detention, and externalised migration management raise concerns, and the focus on returns threatens asylum protections and procedural safeguards (Carrera & Cortinovis, 2019; FRA, 2022). These developments unfold in a context where national migration policies are increasingly shaped under the pressure of European directives (Mezzadra, 2006).

The EPSR, established in 2017, asserts the need to enhance social rights and strengthen the social dimension across all EU policies. Its twenty principles and rights are grouped into three main areas: more and better jobs; skills and equal opportunities; and social protection and inclusion (European Commission, 2021). Migration appears only laterally in this framework, as it is mentioned briefly and instrumentally in reference to retaining third-country nationals already in the EU, attracting skilled third-country workers to address Europe's ageing and shrinking population, and including PMB among under-represented groups to ensure they participate in the labour market to the maximum of their capacity. The place of PMB in the EPSR is, then, in tackling labour shortages, attracting talents, and enhancing employability.

2.3.1. Migration Policies in Portugal: Tensions Between Apparent Openness and Structural Challenges in Rights Implementation

Portugal has historically been a country of emigration, with immigration surpassing emigration only in recent years (Pires et al., 2023). As a recent destination country, the number of foreign residents grew from approximately 100,000 in the 1990s (about 1% of the total population) to around 400,000 by 2017, rising to above 1.6 million in 2024—representing 15% of the population (according to official data from SEF and AIMA).

The country's migration policies reflect a dual approach of openness and control, characteristic of Southern European migration regimes (Costa, 2022). Such an approach has been praised for its openness, tolerance, and "inclusionary path" (Oliveira & Peixoto, 2022), consistently ranking high on the Migration Integration

Policy Index (Solano & Huddleston, 2020) and low on the IESPI scores that measure for immigrant exclusion from social programmes (Koning, 2024). Notably, it shifted from being the second most exclusionary country in the 1990s to the second most inclusionary in 2015 and 2023 (Koning, 2024; Oliveira & Peixoto, 2022). According to Oliveira and Peixoto (2022), this inclusionary trajectory is largely explained by the predominantly post-colonial nature of immigration inflows, which involved relatively limited cultural, linguistic, and religious diversity—aligning with the notion of "colonial subjects" (Grosfoguel et al., 2015).

Among Portugal's special migration mechanisms is the mobility agreement within the Community of Portuguese-Speaking Countries (CPLP), composed of formerly colonised territories. Approved in 2021, the agreement led to an amendment to Portugal's immigration law, integrating the commitments established under the CPLP Agreement into national legislation, enhancing mobility and freedom of movement within the CPLP.

At an institutional level, until 2023 the High Commission for Migration was the national agency responsible for promoting equal treatment based on racial or ethnic origin. Its mandate included collaborating in developing, implementing, and evaluating sectoral and cross-cutting policies related to the integration of PMB and ethnic minorities. Other instruments and measures for the integration of PMB are the municipal plans for migrant integration, Portuguese language courses, and employment support programmes like the Immigrant Professional Integration Offices.

Nevertheless, systemic challenges have persisted, as widely documented in scientific literature and highlighted by NGOs, reflecting gaps between the normative and legal framework and its practical application (Oliveira, 2023; Padilla & França, 2020; Topa, 2016). Key difficulties include procedural delays, limited institutional knowledge from local officials and health services, barriers in accessing housing, healthcare, and education, multiple forms of discrimination, particularly in employment, language acquisition issues, lack of childcare, and problems with recognition of qualifications and experience (Oliveira, 2023; Peixoto, 2019). Despite the inclusive migration policy, Portugal has struggled to implement legally defined rights, revealing discrepancies between policy ambition and practical enforcement—what may be described as a gap between rich policies and poor practices (D. Lopes & Vicente, 2024).

Additionally, the country tends to demonstrate a systemic tolerance toward informality and irregular migration (Costa, 2022; Formenti et al., 2019), as well as towards structural discrimination and stereotyping based on ethnic and racial origin (Almeida et al., 2023; D. Lopes & Vicente, 2024), while measures to combat discrimination and racism remain limited (Padilla & França, 2020). Kilomba (2022) states that Portugal is a country that denies or even glorifies its colonial history. Other authors argue that the structural nature of racism in the country has paved the way for the consolidation and normalisation of openly racist discourses in recent years (Almeida et al., 2023).

In line with the literature (Hutter & Kriesi, 2021), as the number and diversity of PMB in Portugal have grown substantially in recent years, migration has also become a highly politicised issue, particularly in light of a now notable presence of "colonial immigrants" from peripheral regions that were not directly colonised as a whole by the country (Grosfoguel et al., 2015) and are not Portuguese-speaking, such as the Indian subcontinent (for example, 6.6% of the total immigrant stock is from India and 4.3% from Nepal; see AIMA, 2024).

In 2023, a new Agency for Integration, Migration and Asylum (AIMA) was created, replacing the former High Commission for Migration and the Immigration and Borders Service (SEF), with the latter's policing functions reallocated to other national security and police entities. This institutional reform aimed at de-securitising the state's approach to international migration by distinctly separating migration management from internal security considerations (Sousa, 2024). However, AIMA's dual mandate of managing both border control and non-discrimination initiatives presents significant challenges, as these areas are often difficult to reconcile and resources are disproportionately allocated to border enforcement (D. Lopes & Vicente, 2024).

These changes have coincided with the election of a right-wing government in March 2024 and the rise of the far-right as Portugal's third largest political force—growing from a single seat in 2019 to 50 out of 230 in 2024—marking a significant shift in the country's political landscape and a move toward less inclusive migration policies. Recent policy changes suggest a tightening of migration governance, including increased bureaucratic barriers for legal residence, stricter criteria for family reunification, and growing political and institutional emphasis on border control and security. One of the immediate actions of the newly formed government was to revoke the "expression of interest" mechanism, a pathway to residence permit for non-EU citizens employed in Portugal (Decree-Law No. 37-A/2024). The decision ended a key regularisation tool for PMB, justified by claims that it triggered a knock-on effect attracting more immigrants (Costa, 2025). From 2010 to 2023, this mechanism allowed eligible individuals to initiate legalisation from within Portugal; under the new rules, applications must now be made from abroad prior to entry. Another ongoing policy change is restricting the access of non-resident foreigners to the National Health System. As in other European countries, Portugal has seen a reinforcement and proliferation of borders, reconfigured across diverse sites such as neighbourhoods, the labour market, healthcare, prisons, and state offices where membership and nationality are certified and reasserted (Formenti et al., 2019).

3. Methods

This exploratory study is developed within the framework of the MIGAP Project—MigrA(c)tion in Porto, aimed at understanding the experiences of PMB residing in Porto and examining their challenges in the migration and inclusion process. Porto was chosen due to its rapid demographic changes and growing migrant diversity. It recorded the highest percentage growth in migrant population among all municipalities, with a 52.8% increase compared to the previous year (AIMA, 2024). It is also marked by rising far-right demonstrations and attacks against PMB, highlighting tensions between national policies and local integration efforts—making it a key site to examine the gap between policy and practice.

The study is guided by the research paradigm of constructionism, which shapes the research design, data collection, and analysis. Rather than viewing participants' experiences as objective facts to be extracted, we seek to understand their narratives as socially and contextually constructed—emerging through language, interaction, and structural positioning (Parker, 1998). We also acknowledge the significance of our positionalities in the research process (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Yip, 2024). As Global North researchers, with varying proximity to migration experiences, we are not neutral observers. Our social locations influence field access, trust dynamics with participants, and narrative interpretation. To address this, we engage in continuous reflexivity through field notes, team discussions, and critical examination of power asymmetries in knowledge production.

3.1. Participants

A total of 73 interviews were conducted with PMB in Porto: 42 women (57.5%) and 31 men (42.5%), aged between 19 and 63, with an average age of 35, consistent with national data (AIMA, 2024). Most participants are from South America (34.3%) and Central America (30.1%), followed by Africa, North Africa, Asia, and Europe. Brazilian nationals constitute the largest group (31.5%). Accounting for nearly half the sample, 35 participants belong to CPLP countries. In terms of education, most participants ($n = 43$) had completed or were pursuing higher education, while 24 had completed secondary education and two had basic education. Regarding employment status, 48 participants are working (65.8%).

3.2. Procedures

Following ethical research and data protection principles, participants were recruited through convenience sampling via social media and partner organisations, based on a set of eligibility criteria: being a third-country national (non-EU); being a resident or former resident in Porto or surrounding municipalities; aged 18 or older; fluent in Portuguese, Spanish, English, or French; and living in Portugal for between three months and five years. These criteria were chosen to focus on newcomers and third-country nationals who are structurally positioned at the margins of the European citizenship regime, who often face heightened legal, bureaucratic, and symbolic exclusion and are especially impacted by migration policies in their access to rights, services, and social belonging. The criteria also ensure that participants had recent migration experiences within Portugal while reflecting the linguistic diversity and regional specificity of the Porto metropolitan area. Snowball sampling was used to expand the participant pool, as participants referred others who met the inclusion criteria, aiming for maximum sample diversity.

A semi-structured interview script was used, translated into Portuguese, English, French and Spanish. It was divided into two sections: the first addressing the research topics and the second focusing on the participant's biographical data. The script served as a flexible guide, allowing adaptation based on the interviewee's responses and context.

Interviews were conducted between May and July 2024, either in person or online, depending on participants' convenience. Each interview lasted approximately 40 minutes. To ensure anonymity, a coding system was used, combining the interview number, gender, and initials of the country of birth. For example, [P38hAng] refers to interview no. 38, with a male (*homem*) participant (h) from Angola.

3.3. Data Analysis

Each interview was fully transcribed and analysed following a reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) as developed by Braun and Clarke (2019, 2022, 2024). The analysis was primarily guided by theory, drawing on key concepts from the literature review and the main axes of the EPSR to interpret participants' narratives on social rights, integration, and policy implementation. At the same time, inductive insights emerging from the data were integrated into dialogue with prior knowledge, allowing for a dynamic and situated analytical process. This blend of deductive and inductive engagement is consistent with the flexible and iterative nature of RTA (Braun & Clarke, 2019). The researchers engaged deeply with the transcripts, following RTA's six-phase process: (a) familiarisation with the data; (b) generation of initial codes; (c) generating initial

themes; (d) developing and reviewing themes; (e) refining, defining and naming themes; and (f) writing up the analysis into a coherent narrative. Themes were actively produced through our reflexive engagement with the data, attending to the nuanced, contextual, and sometimes contradictory ways in which PMB experience social rights and belonging.

4. Findings: The Paradoxes Between the Spirit of the EPSR and Practice as Perceived Through Migration Policies in Portugal

The interviews capture diverse perspectives from PMB of various profiles concerning their migration experiences in Portugal. The RTA framed by the EPSR identified three main themes—(a) more and better jobs; (b) skills and equal opportunities; (c) social protection and inclusion—and a set of subthemes (cf. Table 1). While recognising participants' agency, the findings are analysed with an emphasis on macro-structural factors and a constructionist analytical lens.

Table 1. Themes and sub-themes.

Themes	Subthemes
More and better jobs	The expression of interest: a gateway to opportunity
	The expression of interest: collapse of a pathway
Skills and equal opportunities	The reputation of being a welcoming country
	Special statutes for attracting new talent
Social protection and inclusion	Perceived crisis and calls for restriction
	Bureaucratic borders and gatekeepers
	Colonial discourses and expectations of subservience

4.1. More and Better Jobs

This theme is composed of two subthemes. Overall, it reflects how access to employment and legal regularisation in Portugal are deeply shaped by policy mechanisms—most notably, the expression of interest procedure. Participants view access to work not only as a means of financial stability but also as a pathway to social inclusion and legal recognition. The first subtheme explores the central role of the expression of interest, which is widely perceived as a crucial entry point for migrants seeking to regularise their status and integrate into the labour market. The second subtheme examines the impact of the procedure's discontinuation, which introduces new layers of uncertainty and frustration. For many, the removal of this policy measure signifies a reversal of earlier inclusion efforts and raises concerns about future migrants' ability to access stable employment and legal status.

4.1.1. The Expression of Interest: A Gateway to Opportunity

The expression of interest procedure is a key instrument enabling access to employment and legal residency. Participants describe this mechanism as accessible, efficient, and emblematic of Portugal's welcoming stance and willingness to attract and integrate migrant labour:

> There was something called an expression of interest, and people could come if they wanted to work. And then he said: "This is what I'm going to do." [P60mVen]

Participants who entered through the expression of interest describe the mechanism as central to their ability to regularise their status and build a life in Portugal:

> Here in Portugal, you enter, you can submit an expression of interest and look for a job. I've already done this, and now I have everything in order. [P27hCol]

The mechanism is framed as part of a broader narrative of opportunity, aligning with the EPSR's framing of migrants as contributors to economic development.

> Honestly, we are the ones paying taxes. [P69mEqu-Por]

However, this inclusion is also described as conditional—tied closely to one's productivity, employability, and bureaucratic navigation skills.

4.1.2. The Expression of Interest: Collapse of a Pathway

This sense of opportunity, however, is also shaped by urgency and fragility. The recent discontinuation of the measure is perceived as a betrayal of the initial openness that had defined their migration experience, generating feelings of uncertainty, frustration, and concern for others hoping to follow the same path.

Many view its removal as a rupture in the promise of legal and economic integration. For those who had successfully regularised their status through the mechanism, there is a sense of having "just made it"—but also concern for future arrivals:

> The removal of the expression of interest law has harmed many immigrants. People like me arrived here and, thanks to this law, I was able to submit my application, legalise my status quickly, and integrate into society. I found work, secured my own place, studied Portuguese, and handled essential tasks like opening a bank account—everything depended on that document. For future immigrants who want to build a life here, it won't be as easy. It's going to be much, much harder. I think I'd be one of the lucky ones. [P55hVen]

While the expression of interest initially supported the EPSR goals, its collapse reflects how labour market access and regularisation mechanisms remain vulnerable to political and economic shifts, often leaving PMB in a vulnerable situation.

4.2. Skills and Equal Opportunities

The second theme explores how participants interpret the EU's commitment to "building a Union of Equality" considering their expectations and lived experiences in Portugal. Although this commitment is embedded in the EPSR and broader EU policy discourse, participants' accounts reveal a growing mismatch between these ideals and their everyday realities—particularly in the context of recent political and administrative shifts in Portugal.

Two subthemes emerge from participants' discourses, expressing a contrast between the EPSR's discourse of opportunity and equality and the lived experiences marked by systemic inconsistencies, bureaucratic barriers, and growing disillusionment. The first subtheme examines the gap between participants' expectations of Portugal as an "open door" and the various challenges they encountered. The second subtheme focuses on mechanisms that function as pull factors, related to "attracting new talent," such as the international student status.

4.2.1. The Reputation of Being a Welcoming Country

This theme describes how participants engage with the EPSR's promise of "new opportunities for all" and reflect on Portugal's perceived openness as a migration destination. The perception of Portugal as "the friendliest country in Europe" [P24hCRi] appears to play a significant role in migration decisions. Participants often describe Portugal as more welcoming than other European countries, citing its simplified regularisation procedures, positive international reputation, and the relative ease of accessing documentation:

> Portugal makes it easier to obtain proper documentation. [P65mCol]

> We knew that Portugal is one of the friendliest countries in terms of migration. And I always thought that it was better to do everything correctly. They told me: "If you go to Spain, you can work in the black economy and eventually obtain papers, but the process takes about three to four years." [P27hCol]

From the perspective of PMB, the decision to migrate is influenced by both rational and emotional factors, shaped by a combination of migrant-centred and structural factors (Oliveira et al., 2017), as well as favourable economic dynamics (Costa, 2025) and the migration policies (Dervin et al., 2011) of the host country. A migration policy perceived as more accessible and welcoming appears to be a key factor in PMB selecting Portugal as a destination:

> I've heard a lot of people talk about Portugal as a country that has opened its doors to all nationalities. So that's what prompted me to plan the trip directly to Portugal. [29hArg]

The country's reputation of openness has both a relational dimension—where the Portuguese are seen as welcoming—and a practical one—as Portugal facilitates legal documentation. However, amid ongoing policy and administrative changes, many participants reflect on how Portugal, once perceived as an "open door," is shifting toward more restrictive and exclusionary approaches. Their accounts of increasingly bureaucratic, opaque, and unequal processes challenge the notion of a union grounded in equality and fairness.

One participant expressed concern about the consequences of these changes, particularly regarding housing conditions and undocumented migrants:

> Now that immigration has been restricted, some people are living here legally, while others remain undocumented. There are houses rented legally with proper contracts, but inside, many people without legal status are staying—some might even be involved in criminal activities, though we don't really know. This situation should be investigated. In some cases, 20 to 21 people are living in a single house. The owner rents it legally, but in an unofficial way, there might be as many as 50 people staying there. [P61hInd]

These experiences are not merely logistical barriers but also *symbolic borderings*, where migrants are made to feel contingent, undeserving, or invisible within the very system that claims to protect equality. These patterns are not anomalies but expressions of a system that produces differentiated access to rights based on race, class, origin, and legal status (Kukreja, 2023; Mezzadra, 2011).

Finally, the theme reveals a deeper tension: While the EPSR projects an inclusive, rights-based vision for Europe, participants' lived experiences highlight the limitations of that vision as it is mediated by national policies shaped by austerity, administrative bottlenecks, and shifting political priorities. The idea of a "Union of Equality," in this sense, emerges less as an experienced reality and more as an aspirational discourse—one that many migrants find increasingly difficult to reconcile with their daily encounters with exclusion, delay, and uncertainty. The interviews suggest a growing perception that Portugal's migration policies have become increasingly restrictive.

One participant articulates a strong and empowered stance against the tendency to border restrictions, asserting that migration will persist despite such measures:

> To understand people, you have to listen to them. You can't just close the doors, remain silent, and walk away. The process of globalisation that began…is not going to stop. Authorities may try to limit it, control it, or even suppress it, but the desire for change, the aspiration to seek something better, will continue to exist in people. So, the real question is whether we choose to approach it with humanity or not. And that is why it is a political issue, in my opinion. [P15mBra]

4.2.2. Special Statutes for Attracting New Talent

The discursive alignment between the EPSR's goal of "attracting new talent" and national policy mechanisms, such as the expression of interest, reflects the instrumental framing of PMB as tied to labour market utility and economic performance. While this framing may facilitate access to residency, it simultaneously constrains full social and political belonging by linking rights to productivity. It is often dependent on employability, legal literacy, and timing.

Education-based entry routes, particularly through scholarships and international student statutes, are framed as pathways to legal stability. In higher education, the special competition for international students applies to non-Portuguese nationals holding either a qualification granting access to higher education in the country of origin or a Portuguese secondary diploma (or equivalent). Several interviewees report entering Portugal through this international student statute, often benefiting from scholarships.

This pathway appears to have facilitated both the arrival and legalisation of international students, particularly due to the support provided by the Embassy during the pre-migration phase:

> You apply for a student visa, submit all the required documentation to the Embassy, and they issue the student visa. I entered Portugal with a student visa—no work visa, no CPLP visa, just a student visa. They give you a deadline—six months, if I recall correctly—to go to SEF, now AIMA, and apply for a residence visa, making the transition. [P58mBra]

Yet these routes often benefit individuals with higher cultural capital or stronger institutional support, and participants frequently contrast their relatively smooth processes with the challenges faced by their family members, particularly spouses, who, not benefiting from this special status, face significantly greater challenges in obtaining legal residency.

4.3. Social Protection and Inclusion

The EPSR promotes an ideal of universal social protection and inclusion, aligning with Portugal's traditionally inclusive approach to migration policy. However, there is a persistent gap between rich policy frameworks and their implementation (D. Lopes & Vicente, 2024). Against the backdrop of recent political and institutional shifts in Portugal, participants' experiences reveal that access to rights is less straightforward than expected, with the EPSR principles appearing increasingly as a blurred mirage. This final theme reveals how social integration and inclusion remain partial, fragmented and unequal, as evidenced across three subthemes. The first emphasises the migration crisis narrative, based on perceptions of overload and rising calls to restrict PMB access, indicating a rupture in the political and social consensus on immigration. The second subtheme expresses how bureaucratic borders and gatekeeping undermine inclusion. The third reflects on internalised colonial discourses and their influence on processes of symbolic self-assimilation.

4.3.1. Perceived Crisis and Calls for Restriction

A complex tension emerges in participants' narratives: while they recount personal and systemic challenges, they also echo dominant public discourses portraying Portugal as facing a "migration crisis" and calling for stricter border controls. This internalisation of mainstream rhetoric contrasts with moments in the interviews where strong support for openness and inclusive policies is expressed. Consistent with data on Portuguese nationals—42% of whom overestimate the number of PMB in the country (R. C. Lopes et al., 2024)—participants also tend to overestimate the size of the PMB population:

> Portugal is a small country, isn't it? I think we're already a bit overwhelmed....Portugal kept its doors open to everyone, and a lot of people came in. But we don't have the capacity to support everyone. I mean, we're a population of 10 million, right? And I don't know how many immigrants there are— maybe more than 2 or 3 million. [P52hVen]

Some participants reproduce dominant narratives about migration "overload" and the need for stronger border controls. This ambivalence illustrates how internalised discourses of "deservingness" operate even among those who are structurally marginalised. For instance, many participants, from diverse backgrounds, reproduce the dichotomy between the "good migrants" who come to work and integrate, and "bad migrants" who allegedly contribute to insecurity or strain public systems. These distinctions align with broader societal tendencies to individualise structural problems and reinforce racialised hierarchies, even within migrant communities.

Participants also express their agreement with the fact that the Portuguese system is ill-equipped to handle the current level of immigration: "The country itself has a lot of immigrants and cannot cope with all the immigrants it has" [P59hBra]. This view is frequently accompanied by the belief that it is essential to regularise the status of migrants already residing in Portugal and potentially tighten immigration policies for future arrivals:

I would legalise those already here....I would close the door, as it was before...and then I would legalise...those who are already here...offering them...qualifications...and then I would reassess the issue of entry. That's how I think today, because...Portugal has become very...overloaded. [P46mBra]

This is in line with a populist rhetoric disseminated over recent years that frames the previous migration approach as a policy of "wide-open doors." As Costa (2025) shows, the rise of openly anti-immigration discourse has reshaped Portugal's political landscape, eroding the historical consensus on immigration policy while fuelling social tensions and the polarisation of public debate. This shift appears to influence how both nationals and PMB perceive migration, as reflected in several participants' narratives and emotional responses.

4.3.2. Bureaucratic Borders and Gatekeepers

Through a reflexive reading of participants' narratives, a recurring concern emerges around recent structural shifts in migration policy, which are widely perceived as amplifying conditions for precariousness and irregularity. Participants frequently describe experiences of administrative inaccessibility, long delays, uncertainty, and complexity of the regularisation process. These accounts reveal how institutional failures undermine migrants' sense of security, dignity, and trust. Such narratives suggest that structural inefficiencies not only actively sustain vulnerability, fuelling informal economies and increasing the risk of exploitation:

> We were calling and calling because the only way you can get an appointment is through a call. So we were calling all day. I remember that I made more than 1000 calls in just one day, 1000, and it was unbelievable. I made more than 1000 attempts...that day and I didn't get any [reply]. So it was really frustrating because we were looking for that, but we didn't get it. We also saw people that work for that and say they get [an] appointment for you. [P08mHon]

Participants also express frustration over the inefficiency and lack of clear communication from AIMA:

> Some changes were implemented recently, and they were communicated effectively. However, I wish they were more transparent about their intentions instead of creating uncertainty and doubt about what will happen. Additionally, there needs to be a greater capacity to address inquiries. You can call AIMA and send emails all day yet never receive a response. They should increase the capacity of their staff and improve their system because, given the number of people arriving in the country, the current setup is simply not sustainable. [P02hHon]

Another participant discourse draws attention to perceived systemic inconsistencies, particularly regarding disparities in how applications are processed:

> I see that the problem is not on my hand—it's with AIMA. They always say the system isn't working. Sometimes they tell you that your case is still being processed, while others have already received their residence permits. And you just wonder: What exactly is going on? [P19hMar]

The sense of institutional arbitrariness leads participants to rely on paid services from lawyers or unofficial intermediaries to navigate the system, in the face of the closing of the system and bureaucratic complexity:

> With the transition from SEF to AIMA, things became much more difficult. It caused me a lot of anxiety because I never imagined I would find myself in a situation where I was undocumented. And yet, I remained in that situation for a year....After several failed attempts, three months passed, then six months, and eventually, I decided to hire a lawyer—something that many people do. Since SEF was no longer assisting me, I had no other choice but to pay for legal help. [P06hBra]

Other participants describe the necessity of informal payments to obtain essential documents:

> To get my NISS and NIF, I had to pay. If you don't pay, they simply won't issue them. So, we had to do it as well. [P19hMar]

> To get an appointment, I had to pay someone. [P58mBra]

Regarding another policy measure—the special status granted to individuals from the CPLP—participants' narratives generally portrayed the initiative as a positive step. However, this feeling was often accompanied by frustration stemming from the practical challenges associated with its implementation. Several participants' narratives seem to question the policy's actual impact on integration, arguing that the legal status it confers offers limited tangible benefits. Instead, they highlighted how it reveals the persistence of bureaucratic barriers that continue to hinder full social inclusion:

> If they grant you the right to migrate, why is it so difficult to legalise your status? And why was the CPLP created if, with CPLP status, you can't do much? It's a right that isn't fully guaranteed. My sister-in-law had to return to Brazil without being able to legalise herself or her children. So, this right isn't truly ensured. [P06hBra]

Some participants also noted a lack of awareness and knowledge among officials in public services, private companies, and other institutions:

> The CPLP residence permit is an official document, a valid one, right? But when you present it, you sometimes face challenges. Some institutions are well-informed, while others are not. [P47hAng]

> I really noticed a lack of information....Many people, including companies and public organisations, didn't know what CPLP status was when it was presented to them. [P01mBra]

One of the consequences of the shift from a policy described as an "inclusionary path" (Oliveira & Peixoto, 2022) to a more restrictive one appears to be a diminished possibility of realising the inclusion envisioned in the EPSR. In fact, and in line with the literature on border regimes, there are increasing indications that restrictive migration and integration policies not only limit access to rights but also actively reproduce exclusionary dynamics, reinforcing social and spatial boundaries. In addition to borders functioning as mechanisms for regulating the movement of goods and people—particularly those whose mobility can be commodified (Monteiro, 2022)—new forms of commodification are emerging, especially through the role of

intermediaries. The reliance on intermediaries to navigate these complex systems further exacerbates inequalities among PMB, as not all individuals possess the financial means to afford such services, thereby deepening hierarchies within migrant populations. Thus, the border seems to be a mechanism that perpetuates the ongoing precarity of people in transit (Monteiro, 2022).

4.3.3. Colonial Discourses and Expectations of Subservience

The concept of the Other and the process of othering are widespread and deeply embedded in social relations. Participants describe difficulties integrating beyond work environments and express feeling socially excluded from the broader Portuguese community:

> It's very difficult to connect with Portuguese people outside of work contexts. [P68mCol]

This division between "us" and "them" is also incorporated by PMB, helping to explain how they may come to view newcomers as "them," thereby positioning themselves as part of the "us." Such a shift can function as a strategy for aligning with the mainstream group, sometimes resulting in cautious or ambivalent discourses that distance them from more recent migrants. However, while some participants express apprehension about new arrivals, others view migration as an ordinary aspect of life—so commonplace that it warrants no special attention.

Several participants express the belief that some people "come with a desire to work, I am one of them, and to try to grow, to make the country they are in grow. Others, supposedly, come with these negative behaviours" [P44mAng]. They argue that the latter negatively impact those who have come to Portugal with the intention of contributing positively and seeking legitimate opportunities for a better life. One participant expresses disapproval of an incident involving compatriots in a Portuguese city:

> The Timorese unfortunately brought a bad name to our country, doing....I don't know, what they did is a disgrace, they went to fight there in Fátima, at midnight. I don't know if you saw it on the news. [P41mTim]

Another participant voiced concern that not all PMB arrive with constructive intentions, emphasising that such behaviour negatively affects the entire PMB community:

> Not all people come looking for a better future. Not all people come to work, to take their families forward. Not all. They come looking to do other things. The bad. It's already happening in many parts of Porto....They steal. I've already heard that on August 24th, the Moroccans were stealing a lot. So, it's complicated. And it affects everyone. We—who came to work to look for a better future. [P37hCol]

Some participants demonstrate internalised perceptions of assimilation, a phenomenon widely discussed in the literature. Often linked to the American "melting pot" ideal, assimilation policies seek to create a unified nation and integrate PMB by erasing cultural differences and promoting cultural homogenisation. However, such approaches are widely criticised for reinforcing segregation and marginalisation rather than genuine inclusion (Rocha-Trindade, 2015). European migration policies have been characterised as aligned with an intercultural model that values cultural diversity not as a threat but as a source of mutual enrichment and

social cohesion (Rocha-Trindade, 2015). While the EPSR reflects this model principles, it does not explicitly address interculturality in the relations between nationals and PMB.

However, discourses of subservience or voluntary assimilation, as described by Monteiro (2022), continue to shape the experiences and identities of PMB. These discourses reinforce the symbolic function of borders as dividing lines—not only geographically, but also culturally and racially. A key example of this is the persistent division between the white majority and the racialised Other, echoing Fanon's reflections on how colonial subjects internalise whiteness as a condition for social acceptance. In contemporary migration and integration contexts, this dynamic is reflected in the expectation that PMB must conform to dominant cultural norms and behaviours to be granted recognition and access to rights—thereby reproducing hierarchies under the guise of inclusion. This internalisation is evident in the words of a participant who expresses the need for migrants to strictly adhere to host country norms:

> You must arrange the migrants together. You must tell them. They must not be like that. They must respect the rules and regulations of Portugal. You must respect the Portuguese. You must respect their laws....So, it shouldn't be like that....You shouldn't keep a knife in your bag....And I'm in Portugal, do you understand? I must be a part of the Portuguese citizens, I must support the laws and rules and regulations....I don't want to cause any problem which gives a bad name to migrants. [P72hBan]

This is a common sentiment expressed throughout history towards refugees or migrants:

> The "developed" host countries expect the refugee to play his role well: to show gratitude for the hospitality, to make vows of eternal love for the host country, and to be willing to go and live in one of the deserted villages in an equally deserted interior, from where the nationals have already fled, and to declare on television that everything is better than his homeland. (Justo, 2021, p. 10)

PMB often internalise the need to adopt the hegemonic discourse of conformity, positioning respect for host country laws and norms as a moral duty, while implicitly distancing themselves from others perceived as non-compliant.

5. Final Remarks

Although migration is a secular and universal phenomenon, it remains marginal in the EPSR, where it is addressed primarily through the lens of labour market utility and economic value. This non-place is particularly troubling, given that the EPSR represents a pivotal moment in reintroducing social issues to the European agenda. Our study highlights how Portugal is consolidating a trend, already visible in recent years, toward a more restrictive and controlled migration policy, reflecting a broader pattern observed across several member states. The persistent framing of migration as a crisis is contributing to the reinforcement of both material and symbolic borders.

This study contributes to national and international debates by shedding light on how the principles of the EPSR are perceived and experienced by PMB living in Porto. It fills a gap in Portuguese research by focusing on migrants' perspectives on EU rights frameworks and ongoing shifts toward less inclusive policies and brings a Southern European voice into critical discussions about the exclusions embedded in EU social policy.

Our findings are context-specific and interpretative, providing a situated understanding of how broader policy frameworks are experienced, negotiated, and contested in the everyday lives of PMB. The findings align with the literature on border regimes, illustrating how closure policies reinforce precariousness, exclusion, and reliance on paid intermediaries. As such, this analysis provides important insights for future research and the development of more inclusive migration policies. The representations discussed stem from PMB, who reflect on Portugal's evolving political approach to migration. Although scientific research on migration is often sidelined in policymaking (Natter & Welfens, 2024), we argue that an informed and evidence-based approach is essential to shaping future migration policies. In an era of polycrisis, marked by multiple, intensified, and interdependent global challenges, it is crucial to question the prevailing societal models. It is particularly urgent to reaffirm and concretise the social dimension of European policies.

This study has some limitations, considering its non-representative sample, which did not capture the full diversity of PMB in Porto. Convenience sampling, primarily through social media and community contacts, may have introduced bias and limited the range of perspectives. Future research should consider more systematic sampling methods to improve diversity and strengthen the robustness of findings.

Acknowledgments

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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