

Eastern European Migration to Portugal: similarities and differences between immigrants from Ukraine, Russia and Moldavia

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Abstract (Long version)

Overall, the presence of immigrants in Portugal was, until 2000, relatively low and the main migratory movements occurring were clearly rooted in the country colonial past, its historical and cultural links, as well as its main economic connections.

Since 1996 when there was a special regularisation period and Portugal entered the Schengen space, the number of illegal immigrants in the country had been growing. This was particularly so after 1998 when the possibility of obtaining a permit of residence for those with an illegal status in the country was introduced in a bill on immigration.

The marked growth in demand during the second half of the 90's caused by a boom in the construction and building sector was met in large part, not by the traditional supply sources, the former Portuguese colonies in Africa, but by entirely new supply sources, namely immigrants coming from Eastern European countries, and particularly from the Ukraine, Moldavia and Russia. This was a most unexpected change in the Portuguese migratory patterns of the 1980's and 1990's. Particularly because Portugal had not adopted any pro-active policy to recruit Eastern European workers nor had any privileged economic, historical or cultural links with that region that could explain the sudden and massive inflow of immigrant workers.

Furthermore, the number of Eastern Europeans that established themselves in Portugal during the 1990's was very small, reaching 2.373 persons in 1999, and, what is more relevant, there was no sizeable group from any specific nationality upon which a strong migratory network could be based to sustain a sudden and above all extremely intense migratory inflow.

The fact is that under the dispositions of article 55 of Law 4/2001 of January 10 the number of permits of stay granted to illegal immigrant workers during 2001 was 126.901. More than half of these permits of stay were given to Eastern European immigrants. In just one year, the number of immigrants residing legally in the country jumped from 208.198 in 2000 to 350.503 in 2001, i.e. in a single year, the immigrant population in Portugal registered a growth of 68 percent. By 2002 the ranking of nationalities of the immigrant population from third countries had drastically changed. The immigrants from the Ukraine, Moldavia and Russia appear to figure among the largest immigrant group, and the Ukraine became even the largest immigrant group in the country.

It is this sudden and intense inflow from Eastern Europe and particularly from the Ukraine, Moldavia and Russia that we intend to explain and describe in this communication. Based on a national survey of immigrants from these three countries we intend to describe the main social and demographic characteristics of these migratory groups, the migratory process they followed, and their main modes of economic insertion.

The fact that the main determinants usually referred to in the literature - post-colonial relations, direct recruitment, state sponsored migration, bilateral agreements, strong historical, cultural or economic links, existent migratory networks - are all absent in this case makes it a particularly interesting case.