

## Polarization Surpassed: Perspectives of Portuguese Gatekeepers on Immigration and Cultural Relativism Across the Political Spectrum

João Ferreira Dias<sup>a1</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Researcher, Center for International Studies (ISCTE), European Center for Populism Studies

### Abstract

This qualitative study investigates how Portuguese societal gatekeepers from across the political spectrum address and mitigate polarization surrounding immigration and cultural relativism. Drawing on in-depth interviews with 20 influential figures in politics, media, and civil society, the research uncovers how these gatekeepers foster inclusive narratives that emphasize human rights and social cohesion, distinguishing Portugal from other European contexts marked by highly polarized immigration debates. Despite diverse ideological positions, the findings reveal a shared commitment to tempering extreme views through dialogue, mutual understanding, and strategic framing of immigration as an opportunity for cultural enrichment rather than a societal threat.

The study demonstrates how this consensus-driven approach counteracts divisive rhetoric and populist exploitation of immigration issues, enabling Portugal to maintain societal cohesion in the face of growing multiculturalism. Unlike many European countries where populist movements fuel polarization, Portuguese gatekeepers strategically leverage integration policies to reinforce belonging and universal human rights. This model not only reduces alienation but also minimizes the risk of radicalization, emphasizing the importance of balancing cultural diversity with adherence to shared democratic values.

The findings underscore the critical role of local actors in counter-radicalization (P/CVE) efforts by promoting inclusive, human-rights-centered approaches that safeguard vulnerable groups while fostering resilience against extremism. By offering actionable insights for policymakers and practitioners, this research provides a framework for other nations grappling with similar challenges. The Portuguese experience illustrates how context-sensitive strategies rooted in inclusivity and dialogue can build cohesive, multicultural societies that uphold universal freedoms while celebrating diversity.

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### Introduction

Migration and cultural relativism have become pivotal topics in modern political debates, particularly across European nations facing increased migratory pressures and demographic shifts (Castles & Miller, 2009; Geddes & Scholten, 2016). The refugee crisis of the 2010s brought these issues to the forefront, triggering heightened concerns about national identity,

<sup>1</sup> Corresponding Author Contact: João Ferreira Dias, Email: [jbfds@iscte-iul.pt](mailto:jbfds@iscte-iul.pt), ORCID iD  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9056-8510>, Center for International Studies, ISCTE CEI-Iscte (Building 4), Room B1.131, Av.<sup>a</sup> das Forças Armadas, 1649-026 Lisboa, Portugal.

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cultural cohesion, and security (v.g. Cohen & Jonsson, 2011; da Costa, 2015; Krastev, 2017; Olteanu, 2019). In response, political discourse has polarized, with some viewing immigration as a threat to national stability, while others frame it as a moral responsibility tied to fundamental human rights (Winter, 1994; Badse & Swank, 1997; Mounk, 2019; Mudde, 2019). This polarization extends beyond politics, shaping media narratives and public opinion, profoundly influencing how immigration is addressed (Hogan & Haltinner, 2018; Clayton et al., 2021; Piazza, 2023).

Portugal stands out as a counter-example to this trend. While many European countries have seen a rise in political polarization over immigration, Portugal has exhibited comparatively less polarization over these issues. Its political and media landscape fosters consensus, even as populist and anti-immigrant movements gained traction across Europe. As a country with a long history of emigration, large-scale immigration is a relatively recent phenomenon, emerging predominantly in the late 20th and early 21st centuries (Peixoto, 2002). Unlike many European countries, where populist and far-right movements capitalize on anti-immigrant sentiment (Zaslove, 2004; Mudde, 2014, 2015; Rooduijn, 2015; Brubaker, 2017; Froio & Ganesh, 2019; Müller & Schwarz, 2017), Portugal has maintained a strong political and social consensus around immigration policy, largely due to its historical identity as a nation of emigration. This distinction is supported by data from the European Social Survey (ESS Round 7, 2014), which found that 68% of Portuguese respondents agreed that immigrants enrich Portuguese culture. In contrast, countries like Hungary and Italy show significantly lower levels of positive perceptions, highlighting Portugal's exceptional societal approach to immigration.

This consensus is particularly evident in bipartisan immigration policies supported by the Socialist Party (PS) and the Social Democratic Party (PSD), which emphasize multiculturalism and integration (Sabino et al., 2010; Piçarra & Gil, 2010). Such policies set Portugal apart from the rising anti-immigrant rhetoric across Europe, showcasing inclusivity amid polarization. However, recent challenges, such as the rise of the far-right party Chega (Mendes, 2021; Marchi, 2023), instances of hate crimes, and anti-immigration protests with limited public participation, suggest that tensions are beginning to emerge. For instance, in September 2024, Chega organized a protest in Lisbon that attracted thousands of participants

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expressing concerns about 'uncontrolled immigration' and its perceived consequences for national security and the economy (VOA News, 2024). However, a similar protest in Porto in November 2024, also led by Chega, saw a much smaller turnout, with only a few hundred attendees (Euronews, 2024). Contrastingly, larger pro-immigration demonstrations in Lisbon and Porto organized by social movements gathered broader support, emphasizing public advocacy for an inclusive society and the recognition of immigrants' contributions to Portugal's cultural and economic fabric (VOA News, 2024; Euronews, 2024).

At the same time, this consensus poses questions relevant to counter-violent extremism (CVE) efforts, particularly regarding how inclusive narratives can mitigate societal fragmentation. Portugal's experience highlights the critical role of political elites and societal actors in resisting divisive rhetoric (Whittaker & Elsayed, 2019; Briggs & Feve, 2013).

The media plays a complex role in shaping the immigration narrative. While political leaders often emphasize the positive aspects of immigration, the press has sometimes reinforced stereotypes, particularly regarding immigrant groups from the PALOP (Portuguese-speaking African countries) and Eastern Europe. Sílvia Gomes (2018), along with other scholars (Gomes & Machado, 2011; Cunha, 2008; Baptista & da Silva, 2017), highlights that immigrants from these regions, along with Roma communities, are frequently associated with criminality in Portuguese media coverage. Such portrayals threaten the political consensus on immigration, underscoring the need for strategic communication to counter these narratives—a core theme in CVE literature (Carthy et al., 2020; Braddock & Morrison, 2018).

Furthermore, the role of political gatekeepers, including leaders across the ideological spectrum, has been instrumental in maintaining this consensus. For instance, both center-right and center-left governments in Portugal have supported pro-immigration measures, including the 2006 Nationality Law, which eased the process for second-generation immigrants to gain Portuguese citizenship (Sabino, Abreu, & Peixoto, 2010; Piçarra & Gil, 2010). Despite the rise of populist rhetoric elsewhere, Portuguese elites have resisted framing immigration as a threat, reflected in the country's relatively stable political climate (Dennison & Geddes, 2019; Fortunato et al., 2022).

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This distinctive balance of inclusivity and cohesion positions Portugal as a valuable model for counter-radicalization strategies. While broader European contexts have experienced increased polarization and radicalization fueled by divisive narratives, Portugal's approach demonstrates the stabilizing potential of consensus-driven immigration policies. Nevertheless, recent challenges, such as the rise of far-right rhetoric and hate crimes, underscore the need for ongoing vigilance and adaptability in maintaining societal cohesion. This study contributes to ongoing CVE debates by exploring how Portuguese gatekeepers navigate cultural relativism and integration challenges without succumbing to divisive narratives.

By examining Portugal's distinctive case, this article seeks to shed light on how strategic dialogue and inclusive policies mitigate polarization risks and foster cohesive multicultural societies. It highlights the critical role of balanced policymaking that aligns with universal human rights principles, particularly in contexts of growing sociopolitical tensions. It also underscores how insights from Portugal can inform broader European and global CVE frameworks, particularly in developing counter-narrative campaigns and fostering resilience against radicalization. The subsequent literature review delves into theoretical and empirical contributions on populism, multiculturalism, and the role of gatekeepers, providing the foundation for this study's exploration of Portugal's immigration policies.

### *Research Problem and Objectives*

The key research question for this article is: How do Portuguese gatekeepers across the political spectrum perceive and navigate issues of immigration and cultural relativism, particularly in relation to political polarization? The study aims to understand whether and how political consensus in Portugal influences societal attitudes toward immigration and whether such strategies could be replicated elsewhere. Despite ideological differences, we hypothesize that there is a shared commitment to addressing immigration in ways that respect cultural diversity while upholding core human rights principles (Donnelly, 2007). Specifically, this article seeks to analyze how gatekeepers frame immigration and relativism in the Portuguese context.

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This question is particularly relevant to counter-violent extremism (CVE) strategies, as inclusive narratives and a commitment to human rights are critical for mitigating radicalization risks (Braddock & Horgan, 2015; Briggs & Feve, 2013). By examining how Portuguese societal actors frame immigration and cultural relativism within a cohesive sociopolitical context, this study explores how these frames resist polarization and foster societal resilience against extremist ideologies (Carthy et al., 2020; Whittaker & Elsayed, 2019). Additionally, it considers the practical implications of these findings for other nations, particularly those grappling with similar challenges of migration-driven diversity and political extremism.

By focusing on Portugal, this study offers a unique case within the European landscape, challenging the assumption that polarization must dominate immigration debates. Through the lens of key societal actors, it highlights a potential model for navigating sensitive issues. The findings contribute to broader CVE frameworks by offering practical insights into how inclusive, human-rights-oriented approaches can shape public discourse and prevent extremist exploitation of cultural divides (Fortunato et al., 2022; Piazza, 2023).

### *Structure of the Article*

Following this introduction, the article presents a literature review situating the Portuguese case within broader academic debates on immigration, political polarization, cultural relativism, and CVE frameworks. This review provides critical context for understanding how Portugal's consensus-based approach differs from other European models, emphasizing the interplay between political narratives and public perception. The review incorporates theoretical contributions on counter-narratives, radicalization, and integration, drawing connections to key works (Clayton et al., 2021; Carthy & Sarma, 2023; Piazza, 2023).

The methodology section outlines the qualitative approach of this study, emphasizing its anthropological orientation. It describes the interview process with key gatekeepers and critically reflects on limitations and potential biases, particularly regarding purposive sampling. This section also addresses reviewer suggestions by including statistical context,

such as immigration trends, crime rates, and political outcomes in Portugal (INE, 2023; Eurostat, 2024).

The results section highlights commonalities and differences in perspectives across the political spectrum, incorporating quantitative data (e.g., immigration rates and public attitudes) to contextualize the qualitative analysis.

The discussion situates the findings within broader European debates on immigration, exploring how Portugal's consensus-driven approach offers actionable lessons for CVE practitioners. Particular attention is given to designing counter-narrative campaigns that emphasize inclusivity and universal human rights (Whittaker & Elsayed, 2019; Briggs & Feve, 2013).

Finally, the conclusion synthesizes key insights and suggests directions for future research. It highlights practical implications for policymakers, emphasizing how Portugal's model could be adapted to other national contexts to build resilience against radicalization and polarization.

## Literature Review

The relationship between immigration and the rise of populist movements has been widely discussed, particularly in Europe. Scholars such as Mudde (2019), Rooduijn (2015), and Brubaker (2017) highlight how populist leaders have leveraged immigration to fuel nationalist rhetoric, framing it as a threat to identity and security (Froio & Ganesh, 2019; Krastev, 2017). Countries like Hungary, Poland, and the Netherlands exemplify this trend, where Islamophobia and the refugee crisis have intensified polarization (Peker, 2022; Müller & Schwarz, 2017). In contrast, Portugal remains an exception, maintaining a political consensus on immigration-friendly policies (Dennison & Geddes, 2019). This divergence invites deeper exploration of how gatekeepers and public discourse shield the country from populist waves (Carvalho, 2023).

Cultural relativism and multiculturalism are central to these debates. Scholars like Kymlicka (2010) and Modood (2013) emphasize the need to respect diversity while upholding democratic principles such as human rights. However, Nyamu (2000) and others

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caution against cultural relativism when it undermines fundamental rights, such as gender equality. In the Portuguese context, these tensions are especially relevant given increasing immigration from PALOP and Islamic-majority countries (Jackson, 2016). The emphasis on universal rights within Portuguese discourse aligns with effective counter-radicalization frameworks that balance cultural sensitivity and societal cohesion (Carthy et al., 2020).

Portuguese gatekeepers, including political and societal actors, navigate these debates by fostering inclusivity while rejecting divisive rhetoric. Policies such as the 2006 Nationality Law reflect this balance, promoting integration without assimilation (Sabino et al., 2010). Gatekeepers play a pivotal role in mitigating polarization, as highlighted by Pratt and Hogue (2020), who argue that consensus-building around fundamental rights fosters resilience against extremism.

Media representation also impacts public attitudes. While supportive political discourse in Portugal contrasts with other European countries, sensationalist media coverage has occasionally perpetuated stereotypes, particularly regarding immigrants from the PALOP and Eastern Europe (Gomes, 2018; Baptista & da Silva, 2017). This dual role of the media underscores its significance in fostering or undermining societal cohesion, a critical element in CVE efforts.

Despite this stability, gaps remain in understanding how narratives by gatekeepers intersect with CVE strategies. This study addresses these gaps by examining how Portuguese gatekeepers balance cultural diversity with universal rights, offering lessons for fostering resilience in diverse societies.

## Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, anthropological research design to explore the perspectives of Portuguese gatekeepers on immigration and cultural relativism. This approach prioritizes the subjective and contextual interpretations of influential actors, seeking to illuminate how political leaders frame immigration debates within Portugal's sociopolitical landscape.

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### *Participants and Data Collection*

The study engaged 20 influential gatekeepers, primarily current and former Members of Parliament (MPs), many of whom also serve as political commentators. These participants were selected through purposive sampling based on their public relevance and political influence.

The sample included individuals with the following characteristics:

- **Age range:** 35 to 70 years old.
- **Gender distribution:** 12 men and 8 women.
- **Political affiliations:** Participants represented a broad spectrum of political ideologies, including left-wing parties such as Bloco de Esquerda, center-left parties like the Socialist Party (PS), and right-wing parties such as the Social Democratic Party (PSD) and CDS.

Efforts were made to ensure diversity, with participants representing a broad spectrum of political ideologies, from the left to the right.

The interviews were conducted primarily in person, with an average duration of 40 minutes. Open-ended questions were used to encourage participants to elaborate freely on themes such as multiculturalism, cultural relativism, and immigration policies, allowing for the emergence of rich, nuanced insights. Citations within the findings include participant identifiers (e.g., age, gender, and political affiliation) to contextualize the perspectives presented.

### *Data Analysis*

Interviews were recorded and transcribed for in-depth analysis. Following the anthropological tradition, the analysis focused on the selection of significant excerpts that clearly articulated participants' perspectives and contributed meaningfully to the research problem. This method avoids fragmenting the data into predefined categories, instead emphasizing the coherence and depth of the participants' narratives. The qualitative findings

were supplemented with quantitative data from secondary sources, such as reports from INE and SEF, to provide statistical context on immigration trends and public attitudes in Portugal.

### *Ethical Considerations*

Participants' identities were anonymized to protect their confidentiality. The study adhered to ethical guidelines ensuring transparency and respect for all contributors. Informed consent was obtained, and participants were made aware of their right to withdraw from the study at any time.

### *Reflexivity and Limitations*

As a researcher trained in anthropological methods, I approached the data with an intentional effort to set aside personal opinions, prioritizing the perspectives of the participants as the core focus of the analysis. While the study successfully captured a diverse range of political ideologies, it is limited in scope to political actors, excluding other stakeholders such as immigrant communities, civil society organizations, and journalists. These groups often hold critical perspectives on integration policies and societal narratives, which could complement the findings presented here. Additionally, the relatively small sample size of 20 participants limits the generalizability of the findings, which should be interpreted as context-specific insights rather than universally applicable conclusions. Future research should aim to incorporate these voices to provide a more holistic understanding of immigration discourse in Portugal.

Nevertheless, this focus aligns with the article's objective of analyzing political decision-makers' roles in shaping immigration discourse. This methodological approach aligns with Kuschnir's (2007) framework in Political Anthropology, emphasizing the significance of understanding how political actors navigate sociopolitical dynamics.

## **Results**

Aligned with the research question, participants reflected on how host communities should address cultural differences resulting from migratory flows. This open-ended approach

facilitated nuanced perspectives on the limits of multiculturalism, the centrality of human rights, and the role of integration in fostering societal cohesion.

A recurring theme was the necessity of clear boundaries defined by law and human rights frameworks. A former leader, a 81-year-old male, of the CDS (the democratic Christian right-wing party), now a mayor affiliated with the Socialist Party, succinctly articulated: *“Multiculturalism enriches societies; but there is a limit. What is that? Law and order.”* Similarly, Socialist MP, a 51-year-old female law professor, emphasized: *“If a Portuguese man hits his wife, we call it domestic violence, but if a Muslim man does the same, we call it culture. That is unacceptable.”* This sentiment highlights the rejection of cultural relativism when it justifies harmful practices, aligning with Okin’s (1998) critique of relativism as perpetuating inequalities, especially against women and children. The literature supports this perspective, identifying gender equality and child protection as inviolable principles (Merry, 2006; Cumper, 2014).

Human rights emerged as the principal framework through which participants evaluated cultural practices. The same Socialist MP explained: *“The limit of relativism is not based on my personal views but on what our legal frameworks define as fundamental rights.”* This reflects a shared normative foundation across the ideological spectrum, consistent with Kymlicka’s (2012) concept of multicultural citizenship, where diversity must coexist with universal democratic values.

Participants highlighted a nuanced understanding of cultural practices. A professor of international relations and former MP from Bloco de Esquerda, a 65-year-old male, critiqued a *“multiculturalist orientation”* that leads to atomized, self-regulating units isolated from broader society. He noted: *“Practices like female genital mutilation (FGM) constitute clear human rights violations, while cultural expressions like the hijab can be contextualized as personal choices when voluntarily adopted,”* reinforcing autonomy and personal agency (Joppke, 2009). Despite his association with Critical Theory and post-modernism<sup>2</sup>, he advocates for clear boundaries respected by all residents, emphasizing that fundamental human rights must remain uncompromised alongside intercultural dialogue.

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<sup>2</sup> For those theoretical frameworks, see the discussion of Pluckrose and Lindsay (2020).

A former leader of the CDS party, a 70-years-old male, appears to have transcended any ‘culture war’<sup>3</sup> or polarization surrounding immigration and cultural relativism, highlighting that debates on polarization can sometimes be a media and political construct, particularly in contexts like Portugal, where social tensions are relatively low (Tománková, 2007; Meneses et al., 2018; Pereira, 2022). For him:

*"I believe it is necessary to respect immigrant communities and their identities. They have their own way of dressing, their own food, their own gastronomy, and they also have their folkloric traditions, which may perhaps one day disappear. However, I think they need to understand Portuguese culture and act in accordance with it. If there are things that are contrary to our culture and completely rejected, we will reject them. This includes, for example, female genital mutilation, which for us is an absolutely unacceptable issue—a human rights obligation, with no multicultural justification. Generally speaking, anything that involves the subjugation or subordination of the female condition, or the role of women, poses significant problems. It can also raise cultural issues related to child labor. Otherwise, the presence of these communities enriches the cultural mosaic of the city."*

This perspective is significant for multiple reasons. Firstly, as Zúquete (2022) demonstrates, the CDS party had previously imported discourses on immigration throughout the 1990s and early 2000s, often echoing the rhetoric of figures like Jean-Marie Le Pen. Secondly, this statement reflects how gatekeeper discourses in Portugal have evolved beyond polarized views, emphasizing fundamental cultural and legal issues, particularly in relation to gender equality and children’s rights. This shift aligns with relevant literature (Nussbaum, 2000; Kymlicka, 2012; Cumper, 2014; Torbisco-Casals, 2016; Nagle, 2016).

A leader from LIVRE (an ecological and euro-enthusiastic leftist party), a 30-years-old female, offered a similar stance, emphasizing that diversity must operate within ethical

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<sup>3</sup> The term ‘culture wars’ (“Kulturkampf”) was coined by the German physician and politician Rudolf Virchow in 1873 to describe the conflict between the Chancellor of the German Empire, Otto von Bismarck, and the Catholic Church. This conflict involved a series of measures introduced by Bismarck, such as the prohibition of religious orders and the secularization of education, aimed at centralizing power within the unified German state, thereby reducing the Catholic Church’s influence. The concept later spread to various countries and has been used, for example, in the United States to describe divisions between conservatives and liberals on issues such as abortion, same-sex marriage, and gun ownership (Hunter, 1991, 1993, 1994; Hartman, 2019). According to Hunter (1991, 1993, 1994) and Wuthnow (1996), who has extensively studied the phenomenon, the term refers to conflicts over non-negotiable issues related to values, beliefs, and cultural identities. These issues may include topics such as morality, religion, sexuality, gender, race, and nationalism, among others.

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and legal boundaries. She stated: *“When people accustomed to different ways of living must coexist, friction is inevitable. But certain practices, such as restricting women’s freedom, are intolerable, regardless of culture or religion.”* This reflects a pragmatic approach to multiculturalism that acknowledges tensions while advocating for policies that transform diversity into a societal asset (Berry, 2011).

A Bloco de Esquerda MP, a 38-years-old female, expanded on the nuances of cultural relativism, acknowledging the complex intersections between cultural expression and human rights. She remarked: *“It will always be an open discussion... the question of cultural relativism. Obviously, I can’t put female genital mutilation and the hijab in the same camp. Practices like FGM clearly violate human rights, but the hijab, as Islamic feminism shows, can be a form of resistance against Islamophobia. In these cases, we must ensure that limits are defined by universal human rights, not cultural bias.”* This perspective underscores the importance of distinguishing between harmful practices and those that represent self-determined expressions of identity, particularly within the framework of Islamic feminism, which reclaims the hijab as a counter-narrative to systemic discrimination.

Quantitative data contextualize these insights. Quantitative data contextualize these insights. In 2023, Portugal hosted over 1 million foreign residents, comprising 9.8% of the population (INE, 2023). Immigration trends have steadily increased, with the net migration rate rising from 0.515 per 1,000 in 2022 to 0.832 in 2024 (Eurostat, 2024). Despite this growth, Portugal has maintained relatively low levels of polarization, contrasting with trends in other European countries (Dennison & Geddes, 2019; Fortunato et al., 2022). Quantitative data further contextualize these findings. According to the ESS Round 7 (2014), public attitudes in Portugal remain predominantly positive toward immigration, with 68% of respondents acknowledging the cultural enrichment brought by immigrants. This contrasts starkly with countries such as Hungary, where immigration attitudes are markedly more negative, underscoring Portugal’s unique societal model.

Integration emerged as another key focus of the discussions. A former CDS, a 71-years-old male, leader noted: *“Immigrant communities enrich our cultural mosaic, but they need to understand Portuguese culture and act in accordance with it. Practices like female genital mutilation or child labor are absolutely unacceptable. These are human rights*

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*obligations, with no multicultural justification.*” This reflects a shift toward rights-based integration, promoting mutual respect over forced assimilation. Studies on counter-radicalization suggest that such approaches reduce the risks of alienation and radicalization by emphasizing shared values (Carthy et al., 2020; Briggs & Feve, 2013).

A PSD MP, a 37-years old male, added complexity to this discussion by addressing cultural proximity: *“Integrating Brazilian or Cape Verdean communities is relatively straightforward because of shared language and values. But integrating communities from Somalia or Afghanistan presents entirely different challenges.”* This highlights the importance of shared cultural matrices (Berry, 1997) and potential biases in integration policies.

Finally, a political commentator and former MP, a conservative right-wing 44-years-old male, encapsulated the overarching challenge: *“The issue is incredibly complex. If we allow everyone to live as if they were still in their country of origin, we risk creating fragmented islands of society. On the other hand, if we impose forced assimilation, we risk losing the richness of diversity. The balance lies in integration—rooted in shared values and mutual adaptation.”* These reflections emphasize the need for integration policies that uphold freedoms and opportunities, ensuring newcomers contribute to societal cohesion.

Recent studies caution that while reducing polarization is essential, it does not automatically translate to improved democratic attitudes (Voelkel et al., 2022). Portugal’s model of emphasizing inclusivity within clear boundaries offers a pathway for fostering resilience without compromising democratic norms or human rights.

These findings reveal the critical role of gatekeepers in framing immigration as a societal opportunity rather than a threat, highlighting the delicate balance between cultural adaptation and human rights. This contextual foundation informs the subsequent discussion on broader implications for counter-radicalization and societal cohesion.

## Discussion

The relevance of this study is clear. It examines the unique case of Portuguese gatekeepers—ranging from the progressive left to the conservative right—who transcend polarization

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around immigration and cultural relativism in an era marked by moral struggle over post-material issues (Fukuyama, 2018). This period of ideological division, or the “*great divide*,” as Ferreira Dias (2022) describes it, provides a compelling backdrop for understanding Portugal's distinctive approach to managing cultural diversity.

The findings reveal that Portuguese gatekeepers do not perceive immigration as a threat but as an opportunity to enrich society. This stands in stark contrast to the polarized debates dominating much of Europe, where immigration often becomes a focal point for populist and exclusionary narratives. For example, one participant from left-wing Bloco, 38-years-old female, emphasized the importance of the 2006 Nationality Law, stating: “By giving immigrants a clear path to citizenship, we reduce alienation and build bridges.” This sentiment reflects a common view among gatekeepers that integration policies promoting belonging are essential for societal cohesion. These policies promote belonging and reduce alienation—key factors exploited by extremist groups to recruit and radicalize (Clayton et al., 2021; Piazza, 2023). These qualitative insights are further supported by quantitative data from the ESS Round 7 (2014), which revealed that 68% of Portuguese respondents acknowledged the cultural enrichment brought by immigrants. This sharply contrasts with countries like Hungary, where positive perceptions of immigration are significantly lower. These findings emphasize Portugal's unique societal model, rooted in inclusive integration policies and a broader societal consensus on immigration.

The collaborative ethos behind this approach is encapsulated in statements like: “*Integration isn't just about adapting to us; it's about us adapting together*,” noted a 52-year-old former female MP of a left-wing party. This reflects a model of societal cohesion that prioritizes mutual adaptation over assimilation (Sabino et al., 2010).

Despite this consensus, participants also acknowledged the challenges posed by cultural practices that may conflict with Portuguese norms or human rights standards. For example, cultural misunderstandings were identified as potential sources of tension, particularly in cases where practices contravene established legal frameworks. However, such tensions were widely regarded as manageable within Portugal's established framework of dialogue and human rights protections (Chadwick, 2013). By establishing human rights as the “non-negotiable” boundary of cultural practices, gatekeepers ensure that respect for

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diversity does not extend to practices like gender-based violence or child labor (Torbisco-Casals, 2016; Cumper, 2014). This position is captured in a former MP 52-years-old female left-wing assertion that these principles are about “*protecting people, not limiting culture,*” illustrating how Portugal pragmatically navigates cultural relativism.

A consistent theme across the interviews was the centrality of human rights as a foundational principle for managing cultural diversity. Regardless of political orientation, participants emphasized the primacy of human dignity (Novais, 2004; Botelho, 2017) and universal freedoms over cultural relativism. As Okin (1998) and Merry (2006) argue, this approach effectively rejects practices that undermine gender equality or children’s rights, creating a societal framework that simultaneously respects individual freedoms and safeguards against radicalization. This emphasis on universal human rights reflects Voelkel et al.’s (2022) findings, which caution that reducing polarization alone is insufficient without safeguarding democratic norms.

This emphasis on universal human rights is evident in the way debates are framed. Unlike in other European contexts, issues such as the burqa or hijab, which are divisive elsewhere, do not emerge as focal points in Portuguese discourse. Instead, gatekeepers prioritize addressing clear human rights violations, such as female genital mutilation (FGM), which is unequivocally condemned. As a 43 PSD-year-old male participant stated: “*Respecting culture stops where harm begins.*” This pragmatic approach aligns with the WHO’s (2020) framework for combating harmful practices and underscores Portugal’s resilience against narratives that exploit cultural divisions (Müller & Schwarz, 2017).

Moreover, the role of media in shaping immigration narratives was identified as a potential area for improvement. While the media in Portugal generally avoids the inflammatory rhetoric seen in other countries, sensationalist coverage of specific migrant communities, such as those from the PALOP (Portuguese-speaking African countries), can perpetuate stereotypes and undermine broader societal consensus (Gomes & Machado, 2011). Examples of positive narratives include reports highlighting the contributions of immigrant communities to Portugal’s cultural and economic fabric, such as their role in revitalizing rural areas and addressing labor shortages (INE, 2023). Conversely, negative narratives, often sensationalist, tend to focus disproportionately on crime or social tensions associated with

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specific migrant groups, particularly from PALOP countries. This duality underscores the importance of fostering counter-narratives that not only challenge stereotypes but also amplify stories of successful integration, as suggested by Carthy et al. (2020).

The unified stance of Portuguese gatekeepers offers valuable lessons for preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE). By rooting integration policies in universal human rights, Portugal demonstrates that it is possible to respect cultural identities while decisively rejecting practices that contravene fundamental rights. This model underscores that inclusivity and adherence to core societal values are not mutually exclusive but complementary strategies for resilience. As Kymlicka (2012) suggests, fostering inclusivity within clear ethical and legal boundaries can mitigate polarization and reduce susceptibility to radical ideologies.

Portugal's experience also challenges the broader European narrative that immigration inevitably leads to societal division. By emphasizing dialogue, mutual adaptation, and human rights as non-negotiable principles, Portuguese gatekeepers model an approach that strengthens societal cohesion while celebrating diversity. Their shared commitment to universal values across ideological lines provides a powerful countermeasure against populist and exclusionary discourses (Briggs & Feve, 2013; Whittaker & Elsayed, 2019), offering a pathway for other nations grappling with similar challenges.

In conclusion, this study highlights that Portugal's approach to cultural diversity is deeply rooted in a shared commitment to human rights that transcends political affiliations. By anchoring integration efforts in human dignity and universal freedoms, gatekeepers demonstrate how diverse communities can coexist without compromising fundamental principles. In the context of rising polarization in Europe, particularly in countries like Italy and France, Portugal offers a compelling example of how societal cohesion can be achieved through strategic engagement with gatekeepers. Further research should explore how this model might be adapted to other national contexts, while also investigating the role of media in shaping public perceptions of immigration and multiculturalism (Barry, 2001; Gomes & Machado, 2011).

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## Conclusion

This study provides a unique perspective on how Portuguese gatekeepers across the political spectrum have maintained a consensus on immigration and cultural relativism, anchored in a firm commitment to human rights. Amid broader European trends of polarization and rising populist, anti-immigrant sentiment, Portugal stands out by fostering a balanced discourse that values inclusivity, societal cohesion, and respect for diversity. The findings demonstrate that this consensus is not without challenges, particularly as tensions over cultural practices and political rhetoric emerge. However, Portugal's emphasis on human rights and strategic dialogue continues to mitigate polarization.

For policymakers and counter-radicalization practitioners, Portugal's approach demonstrates the critical role of strategic dialogue and inclusive policy-making in fostering societal resilience. By reinforcing a commitment to universal human rights, nations can resist radical ideologies that exploit cultural divides. This study highlights the importance of establishing a cross-societal consensus on non-negotiable principles, such as gender equality and children's rights, as a foundation for addressing the challenges posed by cultural diversity. These principles not only establish clear boundaries but also build trust and cooperation between immigrant communities and host societies. Such a framework protects vulnerable groups and fosters a collective sense of belonging, which is essential for preventing alienation and marginalization—key factors in the radicalization process (Carthy et al., 2020; Briggs & Feve, 2013).

A defining element of Portugal's strategy is its nuanced stance on cultural practices, delineating clear boundaries between those that enrich cultural diversity and those that violate fundamental rights. Practices like female genital mutilation (FGM) are unequivocally rejected, while expressions like the hijab are contextualized as personal or cultural choices, provided they are freely adopted. This approach aligns with Islamic feminist perspectives that frame the hijab as a symbol of autonomy and resistance against discrimination (Joppke, 2009; Merry, 2006). By rejecting harmful practices while safeguarding individual freedoms, Portuguese gatekeepers cultivate a societal framework inherently resistant to radicalization.

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For example, participants consistently emphasized that integration policies rooted in human rights prevent the erosion of democratic norms, reinforcing Portugal's societal cohesion.

The Portuguese model offers significant implications for broader P/CVE strategies. By centering integration policies on human rights, Portugal demonstrates that inclusivity and adherence to universal principles are mutually reinforcing strategies for integration. By creating a normative environment where harmful practices lack legitimacy, Portugal minimizes the space for extremist ideologies to thrive. This aligns with the findings of Kymlicka (2012) and Whittaker & Elsayed (2019), which emphasize that balancing diversity with core democratic values is crucial for resilience against radicalization and polarization.

However, the study also highlights areas requiring further investigation. Future research should explore how Portugal's approach might be adapted to other polarized societies and investigate the role of media discourse in shaping public perceptions of immigration. While the Portuguese media generally avoids inflammatory rhetoric, instances of sensationalist coverage of migrant communities, particularly from the PALOP, highlight the need for vigilance in narrative construction. Research into how media intersects with societal attitudes could further enhance integration efforts and inform counter-narrative campaigns (Clayton et al., 2021; Müller & Schwarz, 2017). Additionally, future studies could address the perspectives of other stakeholders, such as immigrant communities and civil society actors, to complement the focus on political decision-makers in this research.

Ultimately, Portugal's experience illustrates the transformative potential of strategic dialogue and inclusivity in building resilient, cohesive communities. By placing human dignity at the center of its multicultural policies, Portugal exemplifies how societies can thrive by embracing cultural differences while upholding the rights and freedoms that unify all citizens. This study contributes to ongoing debates on immigration, cultural relativism, and human rights, offering a model of integration rooted in respect, resilience, and shared values. While challenges remain, the Portuguese case provides a compelling roadmap for nations navigating the complexities of multiculturalism in an increasingly polarized world.

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