

MAINSTREAMING REFUGEE INTEGRATION POLICIES IN HUMANITARIAN EMERGENCIES Afghan and Ukrainian arrivals in Portugal

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Abstract Portugal's first large-scale refugee response to the 2021–2022 Afghan evacuation and Ukrainian displacement crises is used to examine how migration governance adapts in emergencies. Using official documents and statistical data, the article identifies limited preparedness and fragmented inter-agency coordination, even within an established mainstreaming integration model. It shows how strengthened community sponsorship and innovative parallel fast-track documentation procedures became key governance adaptations, accelerating access to rights and improving local integration outcomes.

Keywords: integration policy, temporary protection, Afghan refugees, Ukrainian refugees.

Políticas de integração transversal de refugiados durante emergências humanitárias: chegada de afegãos e de ucranianos a Portugal

Resumo Este artigo analisa como a governação de migrações em Portugal se adaptou à sua primeira resposta de grande escala a refugiados, durante as crises de evacuação de afegãos e de deslocação forçada de ucranianos em 2021–2022. Com base em documentos oficiais e dados estatísticos, identifica limitações de preparação e fragmentação na coordenação interinstitucional, mesmo num modelo consolidado de integração transversal. Mostra ainda como o reforço do patrocínio comunitário e a introdução de procedimentos paralelos e acelerados de documentação se tornaram inovações centrais, acelerando o acesso a direitos e melhorando a integração local.

Palavras-chave: política de integração, proteção temporária, refugiados afegãos, refugiados ucranianos.

Politiques d'intégration transversale des réfugiés en situation d'urgence humanitaire : arrivée d'Afghans et d'Ukrainiens au Portugal

Résumé Cet article analyse comment la gouvernance des migrations au Portugal s'est adaptée à sa première réponse de grande ampleur à l'arrivée de réfugiés, lors des crises d'évacuation d'Afghans et de déplacement forcé d'Ukrainiens en 2021-2022. À partir de documents officiels et de données statistiques, il met en évidence des limites en matière de préparation et une coordination interinstitutionnelle fragmentée, y compris dans le cadre d'un modèle consolidé d'intégration transversale. Il montre également comment le renforcement des dispositifs de parrainage communautaire et l'introduction de procédures parallèles et accélérées de délivrance de documents se sont imposés comme des innovations clés, accélérant l'accès aux droits et améliorant l'intégration locale.

Mots-clés: politique d'intégration, protection temporaire, réfugiés afghans, réfugiés ukrainiens.

Políticas de integración transversal de refugiados en situación de emergencia humanitaria: llegada de afganos y ucranianos a Portugal

Resumen Este artículo analiza cómo la gobernanza de las migraciones en Portugal se adaptó a su primera respuesta a gran escala a refugiados, durante las crisis de evacuación de afganos y de desplazamiento forzado de ucranianos en 2021-2022. A partir de documentos oficiales y datos estadísticos, identifica limitaciones en la preparación y una coordinación interinstitucional fragmentada, incluso dentro de un modelo de integración transversal consolidado. Asimismo, muestra cómo el fortalecimiento del patrocinio comunitario y la introducción de procedimientos paralelos y acelerados de documentación se convirtieron en innovaciones clave, acelerando el acceso a derechos y mejorando la integración local.

Palabras-clave: política de integración, protección temporal, refugiados afganos, refugiados ucranianos.

Introduction: Portugal's first large-scale humanitarian emergencies

The sudden arrival of Afghan and Ukrainian refugees in 2021 and 2022 forced Portugal – and many other European countries – to confront their first large-scale refugee emergencies with limited preparation, presenting unprecedented humanitarian challenges. Unlike prior refugee flows, these arrivals were rapid and massive, overwhelming institutions unaccustomed to such scale. This article examines Portugal's policy responses and implementation strategies, highlighting both policy innovations and weaknesses, particularly in inter-agency coordination.

Findings reveal significant challenges in coordination and execution, with fragmented collaboration among government, central public administration, municipalities, and civil society. This paper contributes to the literature by documenting how Portugal developed innovative policy responses under emergency conditions. Through a comparative analysis of Afghan and Ukrainian arrivals, the article traces the evolution of Portugal's public policies, emphasizing the shift from sequential to parallel integration processes, the reinforcement of community sponsorship, and persistent coordination challenges. By documenting policy innovation in emergency contexts, the paper addresses a gap in migration research on Portugal, often overlooked due to its historically lower refugee numbers, and offers insights into how countries with limited experience in large-scale reception can adapt governance frameworks during crises.

The analysis is theoretically anchored in public policy models of immigrant integration, particularly the distinction between *alienation* and *mainstreaming* approaches (Scholten, 2020; Scholten et al., 2017). Whereas alienation signals a failure to cope with complexity, manifested in problem, institutional, political, and social estrangement that disconnects policymaking from evolving migration and diversity dynamics, mainstreaming represents the opposite pole and seeks to “capture complexity through a comprehensive approach that does not treat migration and diversity as isolated topics but as intersectoral, transversal challenges oriented towards the whole (diverse) population” (Scholten, 2020:1121). This framework is central to understanding Portugal's integration policies, which have historically sought to include refugees within the same welfare and service structures available to the general population, yet the Afghan and Ukrainian emergencies severely

tested this model, revealing institutional fragmentation and the limits of coordination under crisis conditions.

At the same time, these large-scale arrivals acted as a stress test for Portugal's mainstreaming vision, generating policy innovations that reflect an adaptive evolution of the model. The shift from a sequential to a parallel approach in accessing documentation, education, and healthcare demonstrates how, under exceptional pressure, mainstreaming can be reinterpreted to prioritise speed and inclusiveness, a pragmatic form of what Scholten et al. (2017:176) describe as a "no time to lose" integration logic. Empirically, the Portuguese case shows how mainstreaming, when operationalised in humanitarian emergencies, can move beyond its normative ideal to become a dynamic governance instrument capable of balancing equity with urgency.

Comparing the Ukrainian crisis with the Syrian displacement underscores the scale of contemporary forced migration. In 2022 alone, 5.7 million Ukrainians fled their homes, a rapid exodus that, in intensity, rivals the four-year trajectory of displacement in Syria. By contrast, global refugee numbers surged between 2021 and 2022, rising from approximately 27.1 million to between 34.6 and 35.3 million, an increase of about 7.5 to 8.2 million people, or roughly 30 per cent, driven largely by ongoing Afghan flows alongside renewed Ukrainian displacement (UNHCR, 2022, 2025).

In Portugal, most refugees and asylum seekers arriving between 2021 and 2022 originated from Afghanistan, Ukraine, and Syria. Children represented roughly one quarter to one third of all persons of concern, while women accounted for around one third to nearly half of the total. These proportions broadly reflect the inflows observed between 2015 and 2017, though the more recent movements from Afghanistan and Ukraine include a slightly higher share of accompanied minors. This demographic pattern, marked by comparatively high proportions of children and women, mirrors broader European trends and poses specific integration challenges in areas such as education, childcare, and support for single-parent households (UNHCR, 2025; Eurostat, 2023).

Portugal's refugee intake has grown since 2016, driven by both international crises and national policies aligned with EU priorities. The country granted asylum to 768 Afghans in 2021 and received nearly 56,600 Ukrainians by the end of 2022, with over 23,800 arriving in just one month. These surges reflect Portugal's commitment to UNHCR resettlement and EU relocation mechanisms. Despite a limited tradition of hosting refugees, Portugal's numbers have risen substantially, especially with the recent Ukrainian influx.

Methodologically, the paper employs qualitative document analysis of government policies and official reports, complemented by statistical data (Bryman, 2012). Official documents are key sources for evaluating decision-making and policy impacts, while their potential biases are acknowledged.

Existing research has focused mainly on social perceptions of Afghan and Ukrainian refugees (Coninck, 2023; Iordache and Blanchard, 2024), with little policy analysis. The short interval between the two crises and their distinct contexts make comparative analysis essential for understanding European refugee

governance. This article aims to broaden the literature by analyzing Portugal's integration policies for both groups and their long-term implications, offering broader lessons for countries with limited prior experience in large-scale refugee reception.

Literature review: large-scale Afghan and Ukrainian arrivals and migration policy in Europe and Portugal

Despite the significance of recent humanitarian emergencies, few studies directly compare the reception of Afghan and Ukrainian refugees in Europe, limiting understanding of how countries have adapted migration policies for these distinct populations (Coninck, 2023; Iordache and Blanchard, 2024). Most research addresses these groups separately. For Afghans, studies focus on health vulnerabilities, migration governance, and policy coordination, highlighting barriers to healthcare, legal challenges, and gaps in responsibility-sharing (Matsangos et al., 2022; Mixed Migration Centre, 2023; Sayed, 2025). For Ukrainians, the literature is broader, analysing mobility patterns, governance, public attitudes, labour market integration, and socio-economic impacts (Adamus and GreLo, 2024; Näre, Abdelhady and Irastorza, 2022; Guild and Groenendijk, 2023; Sandvik, 2023; Wagner, 2023). Research highlights self-selection in settlement, multilevel governance challenges, and contrasts in public attitudes shaped by geopolitics (Tubergen et al., 2024; Moise, Dennison and Kriesi, 2024; Bansak, Hainmueller and Hangartner, 2023). Labour market studies identify skills mismatches, especially in Poland (Shelest-Szumilas, 2024), while economic analyses assess integration barriers and contributions (Dumitrescu and Constantin, 2022). Aid provision in frontline states reflects both institutional and community-driven responses (Ociepa-Kicinska and Gorzalczyńska-Koczkodaj, 2022), pointing to policy innovation and structural gaps in European migration governance.

In Portugal, research on Afghan and Ukrainian refugees is limited and largely distinct, focusing on policy responses, institutional support, and integration mechanisms. The Portuguese Red Cross Temporary Resettlement Centre is presented as a best-practice model for Afghan asylum seekers but also reveals major institutional challenges (Carolo et al., 2023). Analyses of Portugal's response to Ukrainians discuss the EU temporary protection framework and persistent difficulties in housing, service access, and social integration, underlining the need for stronger coordination between institutions and civil society (Gil, 2022; Angelis et al., 2023). The European Commission notes both progress and ongoing coordination challenges in Portugal's migration governance (European Commission, 2021).

Portugal's long history as a country of emigration and its relatively recent experience as a refugee-receiving state help explain why literature on refugee reception is still comparatively scarce (Pires et al., 2020; Santinho, 2013; Sousa and Costa, 2016). Existing work identifies key challenges in policy design and implementation, professional training, and inter-agency coordination (Ribeiro, 2017; ComParte, 2021; Constantino and Minas, 2022). Overall, there is limited research

on how Portugal, with little prior experience of large-scale refugee reception, navigated the Afghan and Ukrainian crises, underscoring the need for comparative policy analysis.

Forced displacement in Portugal: a statistical analysis of the increase from Syrians to Ukrainians

To understand the impact of Afghan and Ukrainian arrivals in Portugal in 2021 and 2022 – marking the country's first large-scale humanitarian emergency – it is essential to consider previous trends in refugee and asylum seeker reception. Portugal's intake of forcibly displaced persons has increased since 2016. Primarily, it was due to the arrival of Syrians, Afghans, and, most recently, Ukrainians. Yet, compared to other European countries, Portugal's numbers remain modest. Nearly one-third of global refugees in 2022 originated from Ukraine and Afghanistan, reflecting wider international trends, with the total forcibly displaced population rising from 89 million in 2021 to 108 million in 2022 (UNHCR, 2023).

The substantial rise in Portugal's refugee and asylum-seeking populations since 2016 reflects related but distinct dimensions of the same phenomenon, as shown in figures 1-3. Figure 1 depicts the overall growth in forcibly displaced residents, accelerating after the Syrian conflict and peaking with the Afghan and Ukrainian crises. This pattern aligns with figure 2, where refugee inflows under international protection programmes rose sharply in 2021, largely due to Afghan humanitarian admissions. Correspondingly, figure 3 indicates growth in asylum seeker inflows driven by both these programmes and spontaneous border applications, increasingly from sub-Saharan countries such as Gambia. Although each figure captures a distinct category – resident totals, UNHCR-recognised refugees, and asylum requests – they reveal convergent upward trajectories linked to Portugal's participation in EU and UN resettlement frameworks and evolving humanitarian policies.

In 2021-2022, most refugees arriving in Portugal were from Afghanistan, Ukraine, and Syria. Notably, 42% of Afghan arrivals and about one-third of Ukrainians were minors, mirroring global patterns and posing major integration challenges. The increase since 2016 stems from both global conflicts and national policies aligned with EU humanitarian priorities. While refugee and asylum seeker numbers remained low until 2016, arrivals rose sharply with the Syrian conflict and peaked again with the Afghan and Ukrainian crises. Accordingly, Portugal's refugee and asylum-seeking population has expanded markedly since 2016 (figure 1).

Portugal granted asylum to 768 Afghans in 2021, who arrived within three months (Oliveira, 2023). By end 2022, nearly 56,600 Ukrainians had arrived, over 23,800 in a single month. These surges reflect Portugal's commitment to UNHCR-led resettlement and EU relocation mechanisms, particularly for Syrian refugees. Refugees and beneficiaries of international protection arrive through diverse channels, so data are organized by program rather than year.

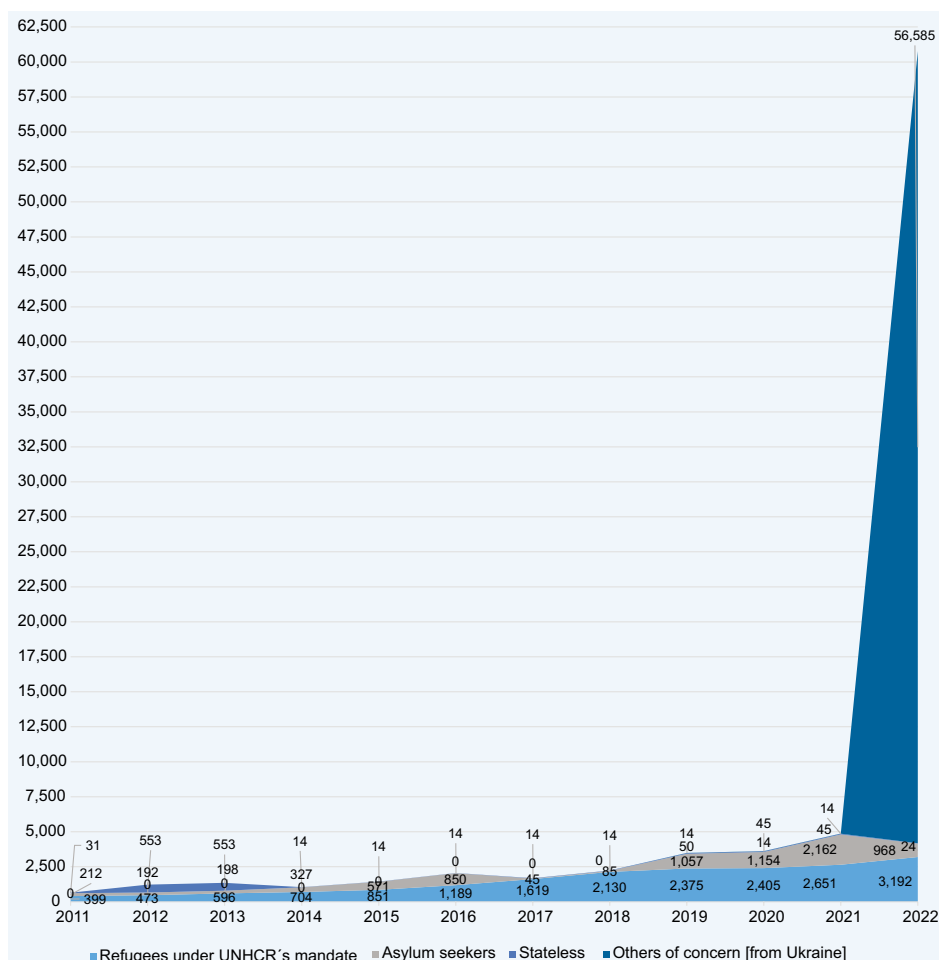


Figure 1 Total Number of Forcibly Displaced Residents in Portugal, 2011-2022

Notes: The data refers to all residents regardless of their year of arrival in Portugal.

Source: figures drawn up by the authors, based on data on refugee residents, asylum seekers, stateless persons and others of concern obtained from the UNHCR (2025).

This paper addresses a gap by providing, for the first time, an annual breakdown of refugee inflows to Portugal (figure 2), which increased steadily and peaked in 2021.

Asylum seeker inflows have also risen since 2015, driven by international protection programs and spontaneous border applications (figure 3). While past applicants came mainly from Angola and Guinea-Bissau, recent years show more from Gambia (Oliveira 2023). Afghan refugees admitted under humanitarian admission schemes were central to the 2021 peak.

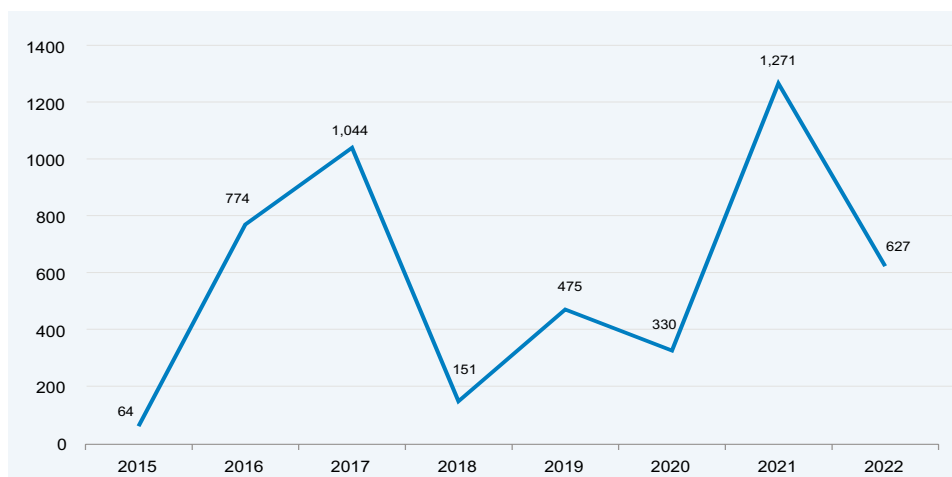


Figure 2 Inflow of Refugees to Portugal, 2015-2022

Notes: Methodologically, the figures for 2015 to 2022 represent the sum of annual inflows across the various programmes. These data reflect the inflow of refugees to Portugal recognised by the UNHCR under international protection programmes and granted refugee status during this period.

Source: figures drawn up by the authors based on data on refugee arrivals from the Immigration and Borders Service (SEF) and the High Commissioner for Migration, obtained from Oliveira (2023: 65, 70, 85) and SEF (2022: 71-73, 2023: 48); and the Secretary of State for Integration and Migration, on 30 March 2022.

Although Portugal has limited experience hosting refugees, numbers have grown sharply since 2016, fuelled by Syrian and Afghan resettlement and, most recently, by large-scale Ukrainian arrivals, now the largest group.

Migration policy context: shifts in national approaches to refugee integration since 2016

Portugal operates three main reception channels for refugees (spontaneous arrivals, UNHCR resettlement, and EU relocation), and since 2016 its approach to integration has undergone significant change, shaped by both recent and pre-existing policy frameworks and international protection mechanisms (Horta and Oliveira, 2014). Before 2015, most refugees in Portugal were spontaneous asylum seekers, but the Syrian crisis prompted the European Commission to establish new protection and funding mechanisms, leading Portugal to receive refugees under seven distinct programmes between 2015 and 2022. These included EU relocation schemes, UNHCR-led resettlement, and, later, humanitarian admission for urgent cases such as Afghans in 2021.

The relocation programme brought asylum seekers from Greece, Italy, and Malta, while the resettlement programme transferred recognized refugees from

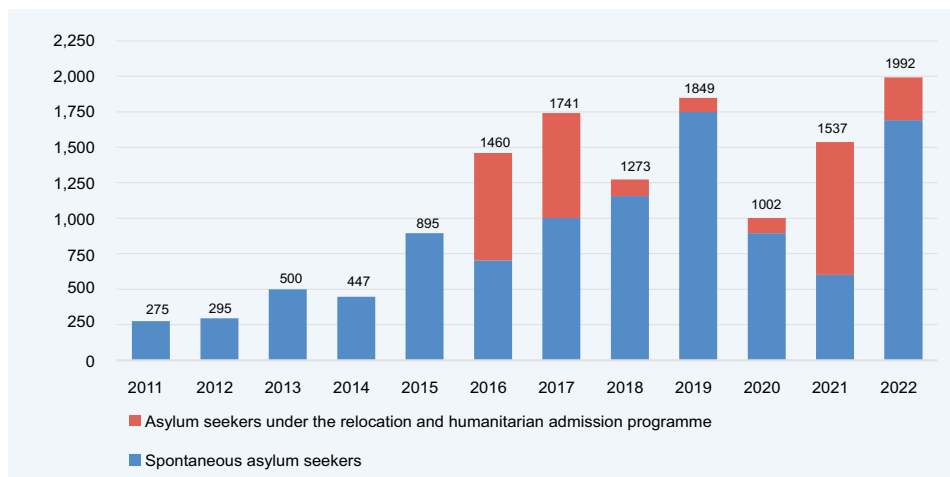


Figure 3 Inflow of asylum seekers in Portugal, 2011-2022

Notes: This counts citizens who have applied to the Portuguese government for refugee status and are waiting authorisation or rejection.

Source: figures drawn up by the authors, based on data on asylum seeker entries from the Immigration and Borders Service and the High Commissioner for Migration, obtained from the Secretary of State for Integration and Migration on 30 March 2022, Oliveira (2023: 101) and SEF (2022: 68; 2023: 46).

countries like Egypt and Turkey. Between 2015 and 2022, Portugal received 1,550 people via standard transfers, 325 unaccompanied minors, 100 through the Portugal-Greece Agreement, and 298 from humanitarian boat arrivals (Oliveira, 2023). The resettlement programme included 142 refugees under the EU-Turkey Agreement and 930 through subsequent transfers, with 908 Afghans admitted under humanitarian admission in 2021.

Spontaneous asylum seekers could apply for refugee status or subsidiary protection at Portugal's borders, and in 2022, the EU's Temporary Protection Directive was activated for Ukrainians, marking its first use since 2001. This provided immediate, collective protection for Ukrainians, while Afghans relied on resettlement and humanitarian admission. The decentralized model for refugee reception, adopted in 2016, expanded the role of organizations serving Portuguese nationals to include refugees and asylum seekers (Ribeiro, 2017; ACM, 2018; Oliveira, 2023). While this fostered local engagement, it also required rapid adaptation by organizations with limited experience.

Portugal's mainstreaming integration policies contributed to its high ranking in the Migrant Integration Policy Index (Mipex), although Mipex measures policy design rather than implementation effectiveness (Solano and Coninck, 2023). In 2021 and 2022, Portugal maintained a mainstreaming approach, supporting Afghan and Ukrainian refugees in employment, housing, and education, and implemented a tripartite governance model to enhance coordination among ministries and public administration. The Single Operating Group ("Grupo

Operativo Único” GOU), established in 2020, became central to this coordination (PCM, 2020).

Reception and initial accommodation were managed by the Ministry of Internal Affairs and the High Commissioner for Migration (ACM), with first-line reception provided by the Portuguese Council for Refugees. Integration responsibilities were decentralised to municipalities and civil society, funded for 18 months, while social support for vulnerable refugees was provided by the Ministry of Labour and the Holy House of Mercy of Lisbon (Santa Casa da Misericórdia de Lisboa, SCML).¹ Overall, Portugal’s predominantly mainstreaming model facilitated inclusive refugee integration during these emergencies, but decentralisation revealed challenges due to limited experience among local organisations and municipalities.

The Group (GOU) was established by Resolution of the Council of Ministers to create and operate a unified reception and integration system for applicants and beneficiaries of international protection (PCM, 2020). The new coordination mechanism, Single Operating Group, stems from commitments made by the government following the 2019 UNHCR Global Refugee Forum (UNHCR, 2021). It was designed to overcome fragmented inter-agency responses by bringing together key public and non-governmental actors on a single coordination platform. Participants include the Agency for Integration, Migration and Asylum (AIMA), responsible for migration, asylum procedures, and integration policies, the Portuguese Council for Refugees (CPR), the Social Security Institute (ISS), the Holy House of Mercy of Lisbon, and other relevant ministries and agencies. Each ensures that sectoral measures (housing, social protection, education, health, legal status) align with the unified system and that information flows effectively across institutions.

Political innovation in evacuation and hosting: documentation

To better grasp the humanitarian emergency and integration policies for Afghan and Ukrainian refugees, we need to examine how the process was operationally implemented – a perspective currently absent in the literature – and the relationship with public policy theory.

The Portuguese government faced its first humanitarian emergency in 2021 when it had to immediately respond to the Taliban’s takeover of Afghanistan. This crisis required the urgent evacuation of Afghans to European countries, including Portugal, as many faced the risk of later being unable to leave and feared reprisals for their cooperation with the previous regime. A coordinated response was developed in collaboration with the European Union, NATO, and the United Nations, leading to the evacuation of approximately 125,000 individuals in August,

1 An organisation that combines the features of a non-governmental organisation and a public administration body, in Portuguese, “Santa Casa da Misericórdia de Lisboa”.

primarily those who had worked for military and international organizations, activists, and other at-risk groups.

Unlike previous refugee arrivals – such as those from Syria – where Portugal had months of prior notice to plan and prepare, this evacuation was marked by extreme urgency. There was little to no advance information, and arrivals were confirmed only a few days beforehand. As a result, the structured planning and predictability that had characterized earlier relocation and resettlement programs were not feasible in this case.

Six months later, at the end of February 2022, the Portuguese government faced its second humanitarian emergency following the invasion of Ukraine. Approximately three million people had fled the country by March but, unlike the Afghan evacuation, most arrived without prior coordination or government oversight. This lack of advanced notice posed new challenges to Portugal's reception and integration policies, requiring their rapid adaptation to an unstructured and large-scale displacement. Furthermore, the emergency context was the only common factor between these two cases as the evacuation, reception, and integration processes differed significantly.

Humanitarian responses to forced migrations must balance the urgent needs of the displaced populations with the existing regulations and political objectives. In these two cases, the Portuguese government for the first time faced the need to actively intervene in the evacuation process.

In the case of Afghanistan, multiple government sectors and public services had to coordinate their efforts. This coordinated effort typically took around four days between the moment Afghans managed to escape – whether on foot or by bus – and reach Pakistan until their arrival in Portugal. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), through its consular network – primarily the consulate in Islamabad, Pakistan – processed and forwarded evacuation requests to Portugal. The Ministry of National Defence and the Ministry of Internal Administration managed air transport and documentation, while the Presidency of the Council of Ministers oversaw the reception and integration conditions, leading the joint Task Force. This Task Force was later expanded to include the Ministry of Labour, Solidarity and Social Security, the Ministry of Health, and the Ministry of Education.

Upon arrival at the airport, evacuees were transferred to temporary shared accommodation provided by the Red Cross and Lisbon City Hall, where they underwent interviews, and their profiles were matched with available hosting facilities. Unlike previous cases, where arrivals were planned through structured programmes, this was the first time Portugal had to manage an unplanned, emergency reception process.

Hosting Afghan refugees presented three key challenges. First, the existing Afghan population in Portugal was minimal with only a handful of asylum seekers since 2011 (figure 4) and only 73 permanent residents in 2020 (SEF, 2022), resulting in limited social and support networks. Second, a significant number of Afghans arrived within a short period, with 665 people resettled in just four months. Third, language barriers complicated integration, as most arrivals spoke Dari and Farsi, languages largely unfamiliar in Portugal, while only a minority spoke English.

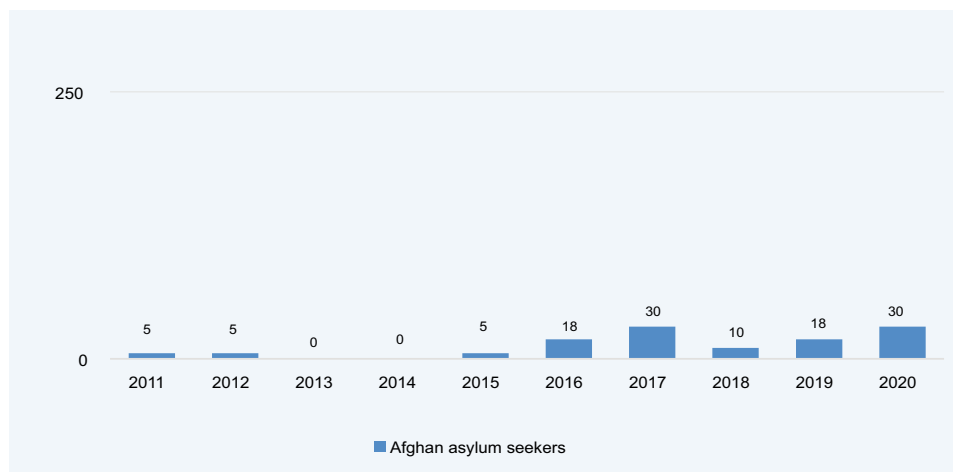


Figure 4 Inflow of Afghan Asylum Seekers to Portugal, 2011-2020

Source: figures drawn up by the authors according to statistics from the UNHCR (2025).

Nearly half (42%) of the arrivals were children, creating additional challenges for schools, while 55% of the working-age population faced difficulties entering the labor market. The European Commission granted them humanitarian admission status, with an almost equal gender distribution: women (49%) and men (51%).

In the case of Ukraine, the Portuguese government acted ahead of the European Commission by immediately granting temporary protection status. Unlike the Afghan case, the Ukrainian response differed in several ways. First, the influx was significantly larger, with 100 to 200 people arriving daily. Second, applications could be submitted digitally, both from within and outside the country. Third, temporary protection status automatically provided identification numbers granting access to healthcare, the tax and social security systems (PCM, 2022).

This process was innovative because, unlike previous asylum procedures in which refugees had to navigate multiple services and long waiting periods to obtain a tax number (NIF), social security number (NISS), the temporary protection regime for Ukrainians created a single, streamlined procedure that automatically generated these identifiers and granted access to work, health care, education and social services. In practice, the possibility of interconnection of public administration databases made the experience of Ukrainian refugees resemble that of Portuguese nationals holding a citizen card, who have their core identification numbers integrated and can access key services without additional bureaucratic hurdles.

These hosting and integration procedures required close coordination between the government and the public administration, building on the Afghanistan Task Force. To strengthen the response, the Justice and Economy and Digital Transition ministries joined the inter-ministerial committee overseeing operations,

while multidisciplinary emergency teams were established to monitor arrivals from the moment they entered the country.

Almost daily, reports emerged of buses and planes arriving in Portugal with hundreds of people – organized by municipalities, civil society organizations, or individual citizens – often without prior notice or concrete information. This unstructured and decentralized process occurred nationwide, posing significant challenges, as public administration and local municipalities were unprepared to provide adequate support for such a large influx. In this context, the inter-ministerial committee played a crucial role in managing operations at both the national and the local levels. At a later stage, the government also participated in evacuation efforts through Transportes Aéreos Portugueses (TAP), further supporting the humanitarian response.

The government launched the Portugal for Ukraine online platform (<https://portugalforukraine.gov.pt/>) to centralize information and assistance for Ukrainian citizens. This platform provided access to the consular network in Ukraine's neighbouring countries, enabling individuals to request travel permits and obtain essential information on housing, evacuation, social support, healthcare, education, higher education, and employment. By filling out an online form detailing their needs, applicants thereby facilitated intervention by the relevant authorities. Evacuation requests and arrival notifications submitted via the platform, managed by the High Commissioner for Migration (ACM), were forwarded to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The Ministry then relayed this information to the consular network, ensuring that the respective individuals could obtain the necessary documentation at the nearest consulate and travel to Portugal.

This hosting arrangement leveraged two key advantages. Firstly, Portugal already had a sizable Ukrainian population, with 21,795 residents in 2021, making it the country's seventh-largest foreign nationality (SEF, 2022). Additionally, a previous wave of Ukrainian asylum seekers beginning in 2014 (157 applicants)² and extending through the following years (figure 15). Coupled with the Ukrainian population already residing in the country, had established social networks capable of facilitating the integration of the 23,813 Ukrainians who arrived in March 2022 alone. By July 27, this number had risen to 48,000, making Ukrainians the second-largest foreign nationality in Portugal, after Brazilians, within a total foreign population of nearly 700,000 (SEF, 2022). Secondly, most arrivals found accommodation with family and friends, easing the initial resettlement process. While only a temporary solution, this allowed the government to reserve spaces in shared emergency shelters – run by municipalities and civil society organizations – for those without such personal networks. These individuals were subsequently referred to the available housing solutions.

Indeed, this constituted the largest national inflow of people in the 21st century not only within such a short period but also with minors accounting for around a third

2 This increase is related to the political-military crisis that erupted in the country that year, with the annexation of Crimea by Russia and the outbreak of armed conflict in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions, resulting in significant population displacement.

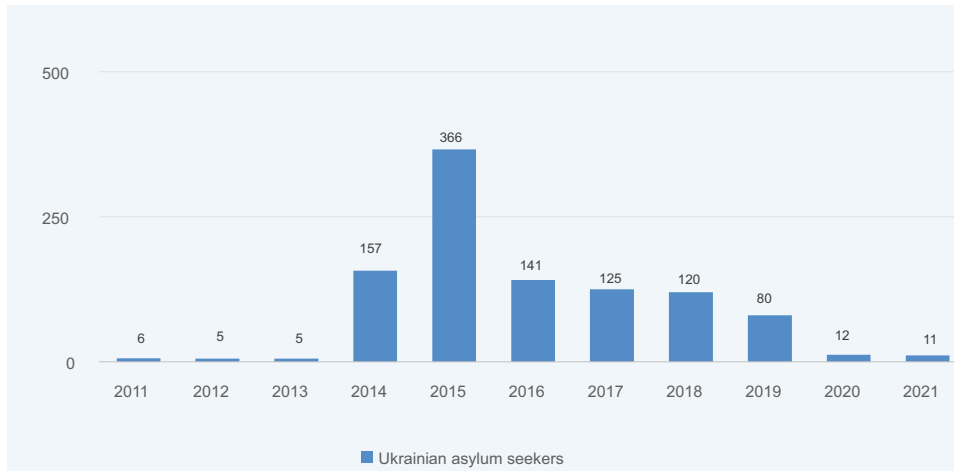


Figure 5 Inflow of Ukrainian Asylum Seekers to Portugal, 2011-2021

Source: figures drawn up by the authors according to statistics from the UNHCR (2025).

of these arrivals. This produced challenges (i) for schools, equivalent to the situation with Afghan arrivals, and (ii) for housing. More than two-thirds were women, as most men remained in the war, contrasting with the more balanced gender distribution of the Afghan arrivals. Furthermore, social support and job opportunities were widely publicized on various social networks to help Ukrainians apply.

Both cases benefited from recent policy measures, including the establishment of the Single Operating Group and the introduction of simplified documentation procedures. Firstly, the GOU convened, on a structured and regular basis, representatives from governmental and partner institutions, enabling discussion of case transfers, identification of operational and regulatory bottlenecks, and joint construction of solutions, thereby addressing inter-agency fragmentation. One of the main innovations of this arrangement was the clarification and streamlining of communication channels, ensuring that information flowed in a more predictable and traceable way across sectors (asylum, social security, health, education, housing), which became particularly visible in the implementation of the Temporary Protection Directive for Ukrainian nationals following the Russian invasion in 2022. Secondly, simplifying documentation procedures meant that applications could be submitted electronically while individuals were still outside Portuguese territory and that they obtained essential identification numbers (social security, tax, and national health user numbers) almost immediately. These identifiers were consolidated in a single document, functionally analogous to the citizen card, which significantly reduced bureaucratic barriers to employment, education, health care, and housing. The description of these procedures draws on governmental legal acts and direct observation in the course of technical duties in the Office of the Secretary of State for Integration and Migration.

These two innovations were designed to facilitate and accelerate the integration of those seeking refuge and protection in Portugal by creating a more rapid, centralised process in which different actors could communicate and share information efficiently, easing beneficiaries' navigation of multiple services. Taken together, they show how, under intense time pressure, Portugal sought to channel Afghan and Ukrainian arrivals through the same core documentation, welfare, education, and health infrastructures serving the resident population, rather than constructing a separate reception regime. The mainstreaming model thus operated less as a rigid blueprint than as a flexible governance tool, consistent with Scholten's conception of mainstreaming as a cross-sectoral, whole-of-society approach encompassing the entire population (Scholten, 2020). Meanwhile, the emergency instruments deployed, from accelerated documentation procedures to activation of the GOU, embody the "no time to lose" integration logic discussed by Scholten et al. (2017), showing how equity-oriented mainstreaming can adapt to humanitarian urgency.

Mainstreaming policy and innovation in integration: the role of municipalities and civil society

In addition to the coordination facilitated by the Single Operating Group (GOU), the integration of individuals from Afghanistan and Ukraine was expedited through three key mechanisms: (i) the mainstreaming policies that apply to both nationals and foreigners, as discussed in the previous section; (ii) short-term measures introduced during the Covid-19 pandemic, which are increasingly becoming structural; and (iii) ad-hoc and targeted initiatives, including the accelerated implementation of the community sponsorship project.

Building on this, the Afghan evacuation revealed how these existing vulnerabilities in coordination were exacerbated under emergency conditions. Unlike earlier resettlement and relocation operations – such as the arrival of Syrian refugees, where Portugal received detailed information and several months of advance notice – the Afghan evacuation unfolded as a sudden crisis, with evacuee lists confirmed only days before arrival and key profile data often incomplete or unavailable. This rupture in the usual planning cycle meant that established coordination routines between central administration, municipalities, and NGOs could not be activated in a predictable, stepwise manner, exposing and intensifying a pattern of fragmented inter-agency cooperation. Despite a broadly favourable policy framework, empirical studies point to limited professional training among some of the frontline professionals who work with refugees, reflecting the relatively recent nature of large-scale refugee reception in Portugal. They also highlight weak language-learning provision and fragmented inter-agency cooperation, characterised by insufficient coordination, diffuse accountability, and uneven service delivery across territories (Ribeiro, 2017; ComParte, 2021; Constantino and Minas, 2022; Muniz, 2023). Subsequent reforms linked to the Afghan and Ukrainian responses sought, at least in part, to mitigate these shortcomings through reinforced coordination and targeted support measures.

Portugal's mainstreaming policies ensured that refugees from Afghanistan and Ukraine accessed the same core systems as the wider resident population, particularly in healthcare, documentation, education, housing, and employment. These sectoral measures, which are detailed below, demonstrate how general welfare and service infrastructures were adapted to accommodate newly arrived protection seekers within existing institutional circuits. Universal and free access to the national health system, Covid-19 vaccination and treatment, and "Portuguese as a Host Language" courses was progressively opened or adapted to those awaiting documentation, while documentation measures introduced during the pandemic granted broader access to social support and the labour market. In parallel, coordinated school placement, streamlined recognition of qualifications, targeted housing support, and community sponsorship initiatives extended this mainstreaming logic across sectors, even if constrained by structural bottlenecks such as limited rental housing.

Healthcare. Since 2001, immigrants and refugees awaiting the completion of their documentation have been entitled to free and nearly universal access to the national health system (Ministério da Saúde, 2001). However, a key barrier to effective access has been the lack of awareness of relevant legislation among both the immigrant populations and healthcare professionals. This has occasionally resulted in the denial of services at hospitals and health centers. The Covid-19 pandemic prompted enhanced coordination between the government and the public administration, fostering greater awareness among healthcare personnel regarding the health and documentation needs of refugee populations. As a result, access to healthcare services has been progressively streamlined, particularly benefiting Afghan and Ukrainian refugees, ensuring broader implementation of this universal healthcare measure.

Documentation. The Afghan applicant population benefited from an unprecedented policy implemented by the Portuguese government during the Covid-19 pandemic, which facilitated the documentation of immigrants and asylum seekers. This measure, which has been successively extended, has provided access to essential services, including social support and employment (PCM et al., 2020). The International Migration Outlook by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) highlighted this initiative, recognizing its significance in terms of human rights (Raposo and Violante, 2021; OECD, 2021: 86, 188).

Vaccination. Afghan and Ukrainian migrants, like all residents of the host country – including undocumented individuals – were granted universal and free access to Covid-19 vaccination and treatment. This inclusive policy was acknowledged by the Platform for International Cooperation on Undocumented Migrants (PICUM, 2021).

Portuguese language learning. The 2020 reforms to the "Portuguese as a Host Language" ("Português Língua de Acolhimento") courses significantly improved access and learning outcomes for Afghan and Ukrainian refugees. Notably, these changes allowed refugees to begin language learning while still awaiting documentation, reduced the number of students per class, and introduced a specialized

training unit for non-Latin script speakers – particularly beneficial for Afghans speaking only Dari or Farsi (PCM, ME and MTSSS, 2020). These modifications were informed by scientific research highlighting the need for pedagogical adaptations to enhance course effectiveness (Matias, Oliveira and Ortiz, 2016).

Education. Due to the large number of children arriving from Afghanistan and Ukraine, the inter-ministerial commission collaborated closely with the Ministry of Education and its affiliated services in conjunction with the Single Operating Group (GOU). This produced a comprehensive assessment of the needs and available school placements, thereby ensuring continuous coordination with host organizations from north to south and across the country. This effort facilitated the integration of these children into schools providing courses of Portuguese Non-Mother Tongue (PLNM).

Professional skills and employment. For individuals arriving from Ukraine, procedures for the recognition of professional qualifications were streamlined to facilitate faster job placement (IEFP, 2022). Additionally, a comprehensive list of job opportunities was compiled, leading to approximately 4,200 individuals securing employment contracts between March and June 2022.

Housing. For Afghan refugees, financial support for housing – provided by municipalities and civil society organizations within the decentralized refugee integration model – was initially dependent on funding from the European Commission’s humanitarian admission program. To address immediate needs, the Portuguese government secured the first funding installment, after a three-month delay, in December 2021 (PCM, 2021).³ For Ukrainian refugees, an exceptional provision was introduced under the “Housing Access” programme (“Porta de Entrada”), covering rental costs for up to 18 months (PCM, 2022). However, the only limited availability of rental housing has posed significant challenges to the effective implementation of this policy.

Community sponsorship. The majority of Ukrainian refugees were temporarily accommodated by acquaintances. Municipalities and civil society organizations also played proactive roles in their reception and integration, enabling the swift arrival and support for a large number of individuals within three months. Furthermore, this coordinated effort facilitated the development of *community sponsorship* initiatives, once again aligning with the commitments Portugal made at the 2019 UNHCR Global Refugee Forum.⁴

Overall, these sectoral measures and local practices illustrate how Portugal’s mainstreaming model was extended in practice, by embedding refugees’ access to healthcare, documentation, education, housing, and employment within the same institutional circuits that serve the wider resident population. At the same time, recent Covid-19 measures, temporary protection arrangements, and community sponsorship schemes illustrate how mainstreaming can evolve through layered, context-specific innovations that respond to crisis pressures while retaining a whole-of-society orientation, in line with the mainstreaming logic theorised by Scholten (2020).

3 The amount was 6,400,000 euros.

4 <https://globalcompactrefugees.org/multi-stakeholder-pledge-community-sponsorship>

The rapid and substantial influx of refugees from Afghanistan and Ukraine over approximately ten months placed significant pressure on host organisations, resulting in constraints and delays, particularly in allocating housing and job placements. At local level, municipalities such as Leiria and Fundão exemplified how mainstreaming and integration innovation were operationalised in practice. Leiria swiftly converted boxes at the Municipal Stadium into temporary rooms, ensuring safe, dignified emergency accommodation before longer-term housing solutions were secured, in coordination with central services and civil society (Município de Leiria, 2022). Fundão, drawing on the experience of its Migration Centre, organised an integrated municipal reception centre that combined dignified housing from the outset with access to employment, vocational training, Portuguese language courses and other services, functioning as a local one-stop shop (Município do Fundão, 2022).

The reinforced role of municipalities and civil society in these responses echoes broader calls for greater bottom-up involvement in integration policymaking and implementation. At the same time, the Portuguese experience shows that such locally driven innovation is most effective when supported by strong coordination efforts from central government and public administration, as seen in the health, documentation, education, and housing measures described above. However, the pressures and delays encountered in areas such as housing and employment also reveal that, without an equally robust framework for multilevel coordination between central administration, municipalities, and civil society, expanded local responsibilities risk translating into fragmented governance rather than a coherent, system-wide integration strategy.

Discussion and conclusion

This paper's findings on Portugal's mainstreaming approach to refugee integration during humanitarian emergencies contribute to ongoing debates about the efficacy and limitations of generic versus targeted policies in current societies. While the mainstreaming model aims for inclusivity by integrating refugees into existing social systems, the Portuguese case reveals that, under crisis conditions, such models may expose or exacerbate coordination challenges and resource constraints. This supports arguments in the literature that successful integration requires both systemic flexibility and robust inter-agency coordination (Scholten, 2020). Moreover, the reinforced role of municipalities and civil society in Portugal echoes calls for greater bottom-up involvement in integration policy yet also highlights the risks of fragmented governance if not embedded in a coherent national strategy. By situating Portugal's experience within these broader theoretical debates, this article advances understanding of how migration governance adapts under emergency conditions and the trade-offs inherent in mainstreaming approaches.

The research on recent humanitarian emergencies has largely overlooked direct comparisons of European policies toward Afghan and Ukrainian refugees. Given the short temporal gap between these two refugee movements and their

distinct geopolitical and legal contexts, comparative policy analysis would thus make a major contribution towards better understanding European refugee governance.

Hence, our paper fills this critical gap by providing country-specific analysis of the Portuguese government's response to Afghan and Ukrainian refugee arrivals through a comparative assessment of its policies. Portugal's limited representation in cross-national studies of migration and asylum frameworks (e.g., Finotelli and Kolb, 2017; Scholten et al., 2017) underscores the significance of examining its approach. Such analysis offers critical insights into the varied strategies European nations employ to address immigration and refugee challenges.

This paper employed a document analysis methodology to examine Portugal's government response to Afghan and Ukrainian refugee arrivals, drawing on official state-issued reports and complementary studies to assess policy implementation. While official documents provide valuable insights into decision-making and governance, they may also reflect institutional biases (Bryman, 2012), thus requiring a critical approach that incorporates multiple sources. Our analysis underscores the significance of interministerial coordination in shaping refugee policies, particularly through Task Force groups comprising government and central public administration, as well as the Single Operating Group. We identify both governance improvements and ongoing challenges within these structures.

The findings of this paper demonstrate that Portugal's response to Afghan and Ukrainian refugees represented its first large-scale experience with humanitarian emergencies needing both immediate and large-scale integration efforts. Unlike previous refugee arrivals, which were smaller in scale and accompanied by data facilitating labour market matching and broader integration efforts, these emergencies demanded government institutions, municipalities, and civil society organizations undertake swift adaptation processes. Public policies played a decisive role in shaping integration outcomes, highlighting both innovative strategies and structural weaknesses.

The literature on Portuguese refugee policies has identified challenges related to policy design, inter-agency coordination, and the lack of trained personnel (Ribeiro, 2017; ComParte, 2021; Constantino and Minas, 2022; Muniz, 2023). These challenges attain particular relevance in the case of Afghan and Ukrainian refugees as the national response had to rapidly scale up in a hitherto unprecedented manner. Existing studies emphasize the need for structural integration mechanisms but they have not yet examined how Portugal's response to these two crises reflects broader shifts in European refugee policy. This paper contributes to the literature by placing Portugal's refugee governance within a comparative European framework and assessing both innovations and limitations.

The findings of this paper demonstrate that Portugal's response to Afghan and Ukrainian refugees aligns with the evolution of progressive refugee integration policies, shifting from a sequential to a parallel approach to documentation and essential services. This transition streamlines refugee access to rights and benefits in a manner similar to nationals, reflecting the "no time to lose" integration

model (Scholten et al., 2017: 76), which prioritizes immediate and inclusive policy measures. Portugal has pursued a mainstreaming approach to integration, initially structuring refugee access to health, education and employment sequentially, complemented by targeted support during the first 18 months of resettlement. However, in response to the Ukrainian crisis, the country adopted a more immediate approach, granting temporary residence permits, social security, health, and tax numbers upon arrival while simplifying procedures for recognition of professional qualifications. This shift towards parallel access to documentation and services represents a political innovation that combines with other progressive policy models to reinforce the urgency of swift and inclusive refugee integration.

Portugal's rapid inclusion of Afghan and Ukrainian refugee children in the education system and adults in the labour market, healthcare, and documentation processes illustrates a structural integration model in which reception was not handled separately but incorporated into existing social policies. As Peter Scholten explains, mainstreaming policies adopt a comprehensive governance lens that conceives migration and diversity not as separate policy areas but as interconnected, cross-cutting challenges spanning multiple sectors of public policy (Scholten, 2020: 1121).

Establishing the Single Operating Group reflects this institutionalization of interministerial coordination, reinforcing governance structures that enable collaboration between government agencies, municipalities and civil society organizations. This model, although innovative, also displayed challenges in terms of coordination, bureaucratic complexity and resource allocation, highlighting both the strengths and limitations of Portugal's mainstreaming approach.

By situating Portugal's refugee policies within this comparative theoretical framework, this paper produces insights into how migration governance is evolving in Europe. The Portuguese case illustrates both progressive policy shifts and persistent structural challenges.

Despite these advances, challenges to policy implementation and sustainability remain. The unprecedented influx of more than 40,000 Ukrainian refugees in three months tested institutional capacities, revealing difficulties in coordinating the various actors involved. Bureaucratic complexities, delays in funding for civil society organizations and a lack of trained personnel for humanitarian action were all key obstacles. Addressing these gaps is essential for strengthening Portugal's long-term capacity to respond to future migration crises.

A key finding of this paper encapsulates the differential treatment of Afghan and Ukrainian refugees, reflecting broader European trends. The visa-free entry and Temporary Protection status granted to Ukrainians facilitated a smoother reception process while Afghan evacuees faced more bureaucratic hurdles. This disparity underscores the central role of political will and institutional flexibility in shaping migration policy responses.

Portugal, like other EU member states, has adopted the general directives and was among the first to operationalise the Temporary Protection Directive, participating in the initial implementation wave. This early implementation demonstrates a strong commitment to reducing bureaucratic barriers and expanding refugee rights.

The country has simultaneously sought to govern its public policies in accordance with two main principles: ensuring the inclusion of all refugee groups and eliminating barriers to accessing public services and support measures. However, institutionalizing these progressive policies for all refugees remains essential to achieving long-term fairness and inclusivity.

By jointly analyzing these two cases, this paper puts forward a critical comparative perspective on how Portugal adapted its migration policies in response to different crises. The findings suggest that while Portugal has made notable progress in refugee governance, sustained improvements in inter-agency coordination, funding mechanisms and structural policy development are all necessary for long-term integration success. The paper's contributions extend beyond the national context, returning insightful lessons for European migration governance and the future of refugee integration frameworks in the European Union.

This paper makes a significant contribution to migration governance research by providing one of the first comparative analyses of Portugal's refugee policies for Afghans and Ukrainians in 2021-2022. While previous studies have focused on public perceptions of refugee reception (e.g. Coninck, 2023; Iordache and Blanchard, 2024), this research sets out an internal policy perspective, analyzing decision-making and implementation processes through a document analysis methodology. Portugal's case illustrates an evolving approach to refugee governance, transitioning from a reactive to a proactive model in which access to documentation and essential services increasingly aligns with the processes available to nationals.

The consensus among various authors (Elinder, Erixson and Hammar, 2023, Beine et al., 2022, Parusel and Varfolomieieva, 2022) highlights the importance of capitalizing on the momentum generated by the humanitarian crisis in Ukraine to make the positive measures adopted for Ukrainian refugees – such as removing barriers to public services, education, healthcare, and employment – more structural and comprehensive. Parusel and Varfolomieieva (2022) emphasize how visa-free entry and temporary protection have been instrumental in preventing bottlenecks in national asylum systems, demonstrating that with political will and coordination, the European Union can effectively manage large-scale refugee situations. Building on this, our paper underscores the need to extend these inclusive approaches to all refugee groups, ensuring equitable access to services and long-term support. By leveraging this momentum, policymakers are able to enhance the implementation of fair and sustainable refugee policies, reinforcing the existing New Pact on Migration and Asylum framework while promoting more flexible and effective models of responsibility-sharing among EU member states. While European debates on refugee reception during the arrivals of Afghans and Ukrainians oscillated between openness and securitization, Portugal positioned itself among the nations prioritizing humanist principles and solidarity. Rather than framing refugees solely as a challenge or crisis, its policies recognize them as contributors, enriching the social and labour markets. Despite challenges and limited institutional experience, innovative public policy measures have strengthened Portugal's decentralized integration model. However, to ensure the sustainability of this approach, further improvements in inter-agency

coordination, funding mechanisms and structural reforms remain essential. Future research should further examine the long-term impacts of these policies, particularly in terms of labour market integration and the resilience of institutional frameworks for managing future migration flows. Additionally, comparative analysis of national policies for Afghan and Ukrainian refugees would provide valuable insights into the effectiveness and adaptability of the different approaches.

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