

JOURNEY TO PORTUGAL

- In a political context -

Journey to Portugal is a political film that seeks to foster debate on the workings of the police and civil society.

Numbers

In Portugal, as in the whole of the European Union, the number of people subjected to immediate or almost immediate expulsion in airports is striking. (**see table below**) Every year, the number goes unnoticed because the thousands of stories behind each of the figures remain untold.

The way things stand today, what does it matter how many are expelled at airports? The images of African corpses in the seas around fortress Europe have become so commonplace that the daily interrogations and expulsions appear to be a minor matter.

Nevertheless, thanks to our indifference, everyday thousands of individuals are interrogated straight off the aeroplane, in Europe. Hundreds are sent back to their country of origin. They are not criminals, they are not traffickers; most have their papers in order and valid entrance visas. These are people who have paid their airfare, a sum that often represents several months salary, yet are sometimes treated with hostility.

Interrogations

The aim of the police interrogations is to get these travellers, armed with their tourist visas, to admit they have come to the country with the idea of finding work in mind. In Portugal, for instance, it was for many years common practice to throw out lines such as: “you know there’s a new law in force that means a foreigner like you can work here now. Would that interest you at all?” The interrogator would pose almost as a friend or counsellor. Innocent Angolans and Brazilians, who didn’t think to strongly deny any possible interest in working in Europe, were immediately put on a return flight with the instruction that they would first have to get a work visa back home. More often than not, there was not even any need for lengthy interrogations or false confessions. Police prejudice or presumption of intent was enough. Little did it matter that their families were waiting at the airport for them. Little did it matter that they had valid tourist visas. Little did it matter that they had worked for years to save enough money for the trip.

Silence

Journey to Portugal throws light on a tiny tip of the iceberg: the fact that these everyday police practices are consigned to the silence of statistics. There is a total lack of transparency regarding police procedures in very many situations. In Portugal, civil society has no way of knowing what really happens in the majority of cases the police handle.

Lawyers, Immigrant Protection Associations and journalists are forbidden access to police controlled areas in Portuguese airports (with few exceptions). In other EU countries, like France, this police impunity no longer exists. The regular presence of associations at interrogations is authorised and abuses do not go unreported.

Examples

The film *Journey to Portugal* has deliberately chosen to tell a story that is not particularly serious – a drop in the ocean compared to the drama of people with far more difficult lives, and for whom the experience of interrogation and expulsion is much more traumatic. Nor does it focus on the people who are killed or injured by the police at airports in the first world (Belgium, France, Canada, the United States, etc.) Nor does it focus on the poor conditions of airport cells (this was dealt with by the Portuguese press in 2005). The aim is to show that even in a relatively minor case, the whole process is riddled with

preconceptions about race, appearance, type, and sexuality. And that even the mildest cases are nevertheless bitter.

Governamental Strategies

15 years on from the start of the wave of migration to Portugal (the theme of my film *Lisboetas*), it is clear today that our political leaders did not know how to manage the situation intelligently or how to find a way for the country to make the most of the inadvertent “brain gain*” that fell into their laps. In a short period of time, Portugal received thousands of highly educated people, well trained in specific areas, and yet they wasted most of this valuable human capital by putting senseless obstacles in their paths. The case of medicine is particularly striking. Portugal is a country that has been so poorly governed over the last two decades that it has not trained doctors in sufficient numbers. Currently, there are not enough doctors to meet the needs of today’s population, so demand is met by importing doctors from Latin America. And yet nothing was done in the mid-nineties to facilitate matters for the hundreds of Eastern European doctors who would have welcomed the chance to practice medicine in Portugal.

Hiddens Truths

When I was making my documentary *Lisboetas*, it took weeks of difficult negotiations with SEF (Customs and Border Protection Service), to get permission to film at an immigrant-processing centre in Lisbon. The rule *sine qua non* was that we were absolutely forbidden to film any of the SEF staff. In the event, filming at that location, which had been scheduled to take two days, was shut down by SEF’s communications’ department after just three hours. We were kindly expelled... “because the presence of the camera interfered with the provision of good service”.

When *Lisboetas* opened, the board of SEF invited me to a meeting. The aim of the meeting was to explain to me that SEF was a transparent institution. So I suggested that they gave me permission to shoot a film in an airport’s interrogation rooms. They said they would look into it. Naturally, I never did receive an answer.

There are hidden truths. In Portugal, the powers that be (governmental, judicial, the police) are panicked by the thought of exposure. Despite the limited resources available to them, they manage their public image down to the minutest detail. What they most fear being revealed is not just their abuses of power but their incompetence. That is the thread that runs through this *Viagem a Portugal* a freely adapted fictionalised account of a true story.

TRAVELLERS DENIED ENTRY IN SOME EUROPEAN COUNTRIES

SOURCE: ANNUAL REPORTS OF THE EUROPEAN MIGRATION NETWORK (EMN) AND EUROPE PRESS

	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009
France	33.232	35.921	34.127	26.593		16.524
Spain *				17.408	12.000	9.215
Italy	24.528	19.336	20.267	9.394		
UK	39.020	30.010	29.945	28.140	32.365	29.160
Portugal	4.327	4.146	3.598	3.963	3.598	2.564

* Only at Barajas airport, Madrid.

Countries more represented

SOURCE: SEF ANNUAL REPORTS

1998	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009
Angola	Brazil	Brazil	Brazil	Brazil	Brazil	Brazil	Brazil	Brazil	Brazil	Brazil

286	1394	1348	2175	2339	2910	2161	1749	2068	2333	1668
Brasil 257	Angola 164	Angola 528	Angola 927	Angola 254	Venezuela 216	Bolivia 617	Venezuela 435	Venezuela 624	Senegal 431	Senegal 162
G-Bissau 117	G-Bissau 95	G-Bissau 104	Senegal 165	Senegal 127	Bolivia 214	Venezuela 329	Bolivia 329	Senegal 407	Venezuela 157	Angola 145
Senegal 72	Senegal 67	Senegal 83	G-Bissau 102	Bolivia 121	Angola 128	Senegal 120	Senegal 273	Angola 113	Angola 103	G-Bissau 123
	Equador 66	Ukraine 41	Roménia 75	G-Bissau 107	G-Bissau 115	G-Bissau 105	G-Bissau 104	G-Bissau 97	G-Bissau 87	Venezuela 91
	Nigéria 65		Ukraine 71		Senegal 99	Paraguai 105				
	Ukraine 36		Bolivia 65		Colombia 69	Bulgaria 75				
	G-Conacri 35		G-Conacri 64		Paraguai 42	Colômbia 71				
Total 1497	Total 2474 (95,2% at Lisbon airport)	Total 2637 (89,7% at Lisbon airport)	Total 4196 (92,2% at Lisbon airport)	Total 3700 (95,9% at Lisbon airport)	Total 4335 (94,1% at Lisbon airport)	Total 4146 (92,7% at Lisbon airport)	Total 3598 (93% at Lisbon airport)	Total 3963 (91% at Lisbon airport)	Total 3598 (94,2% at Lisbon airport)	Total 2564 (94,9% at Lisbon airport)