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Racial and Ethnic Discrimination in Portugal in Times of Pandemic Crisis

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Abstract: During the last two years, the pandemic has dominated the public attention and debate around the world, centering on socio-economic aspects and having camouflaged other social, cultural and even environmental issues. This study sought to analyze ethno-racial discrimination processes, identifying significant events in Portugal during the period of the current global crisis. We utilized document analysis of national and international reports produced in the last five years, complementing with secondary statistical data and the analysis of online news and users' comments published in national media during the last two years. The results show that, although there has been a development in Portuguese legislation and in anti-discrimination measures, there has been an increase in racist and xenophobic phenomena in Portugal. Citizens' perceptions, indicators and reports from official bodies show evidence of discriminatory behavior. Additionally, within this framework, we see a greater political presence of extreme right-wing movements, as well as an increase in hate speech in online news comments. Thus, although there is an awareness of the seriousness of these phenomena, there is an urgent need for actions against racial and ethnic intolerance and greater effective measures for ideological crimes.

Keywords: anti-discrimination policies; crisis; discrimination; hate speech; intolerance; pandemic; online news; racism



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1. Introduction and Background

The consequences of the new coronavirus have led to a global health crisis, with an increase in the number of deaths caused by COVID-19, as well as impacting worldwide health systems (World Health Organization 2020) and economies (Grasso et al. 2021). The pandemic has dominated the public attention and debate around the world, heavily focused on socio-economic aspects while camouflaging other social, cultural and even environmental issues. However, matters of racial and ethnic discrimination, particularly in this period of crisis, are an ongoing issue of international relevance (Council of Europe's Anti-Racism Commission 2021; Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights 2021a; OECD 2021a).

Public debates about racial discrimination and violence against people or ethnic groups were an issue that marked this period. The emergence of the Sars-Cov-2 virus was first identified in the city of Wuhan, China. With the worldwide spread of the virus and consequent pandemic, the city and its population were intrinsically linked and led to racial stereotypes associated particularly with Chinese people and those of Asian descent (Tahmasbi et al. 2021). Several studies report that Asian people, mainly Chinese people, were discriminated against and attacked through race-based stigma, in different parts of the world (e.g., Schumann and Moore 2021; Viladrich 2021; Wang et al. 2021; Reny and Barreto 2022), including in online spaces (Wen-Ying and Gaysynsky 2021). Other events associated with racism that occurred during the pandemic, such as the murder of George

Floyd and the cases of police brutality against African Americans in the United States of America (Stinson et al. 2021; Dixon and Dundes 2020), triggered a wave of public outrage and protest in several parts of the world, namely in Portugal (Cristino 2020; Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights 2021b). Racism and xenophobia associated with the coronavirus pandemic exacerbated discrimination and inequity, impacting the most vulnerable and minority groups (Elias et al. 2021).

The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD 2021b) indicates that there are several factors in the relationship between well-being, race and ethnicity, which during the COVID-19 pandemic might be associated with deep forms of racism and discrimination, including living and working conditions. The President of the European Commission (European Commission 2020b) reinforced this topic as the necessity to talk about racism and ways to combat racism while highlighting the efforts of the European Union in this regard.

Racism is a problem that affects society in multiple ways, caused by discrimination based on personal characteristics such as skin color, language, religion, nationality or ethnicity (European Commission 2020a). During major crises, the rising unemployment and pressure on public finances may be associated with a worsening of opinion on immigration, especially among the low-skilled population, reflecting a more negative public opinion about immigrants (OECD 2020).

It is important to consider that, besides the traditional considerations of racism, new forms of racism exist towards people or groups from a minority culture, associated with the use of economic arguments, leading to racial and ethnic discrimination (Albuquerque 2001). The lifestyles of some minority groups bring to light an issue that involves different behaviors and cannot be merely reduced to physical differences, an almost taboo subject in modern societies (Ferreira 2003). Thus, we witness a type of ‘assertive racism’, camouflaged in socially acceptable arguments and legitimations, with an ideological categorization of anti-normative behaviors, such as social exclusion and criminality towards people with dark skin (Vala et al. 2015). This leads us to understand that discrimination and stigmatization do not focus on all minorities or foreigners, i.e., those who are considered by the conventional actors, to present risks to the rights and safety of the majority and who, for this reason, are not worthy of accessing full citizenship (Ferreira 2003).

The Special Eurobarometer 493 (European Commission 2019) exposed the views of Portuguese people on different types of racial-ethnic discrimination. Respondents consider discrimination based on ethnic origin (67%), skin color (61%) and Roma origin (62%) to be common. There is thus a record of awareness that ethnic and racial prejudice exists in Portugal. Furthermore, the Report on Racism, Xenophobia and Ethnic-Racial Discrimination in Portugal produced by the Subcommittee For Equality And Non-Discrimination of the Commission For Constitutional Affairs, Rights, Freedoms and Guarantees of the Assembly of the Republic mentioned the attention these phenomena have in the national political agenda referring to a set of events between 2017 and 2018, identifying the Roma communities, the Afro-descendant communities and the Brazilian community as the groups most affected by racism and xenophobia in Portugal (C. Marcelino 2019).

According to the Migrant Integration Policy Index (MIPEX), Portugal stands out positively for having relatively recent policies when compared to other traditional destination countries. However, Portugal’s strong anti-discrimination laws and enforcement mechanisms are slowly raising levels of public awareness and discrimination complaints (Solano and Huddleston 2020). Based on this assessment, we have highlighted some changes in the Portuguese legal framework that were implemented before the pandemic crisis.

Firstly, the relevance of the approval of Protocol No. 12 to the Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, in which we highlight Article No. 1 of the protocol, which affirms a Prohibition of Discrimination. “1—The enjoyment of any rights provided by law shall be safeguarded without discrimination on any ground such as sex, race, colour, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, membership of a national minority, fortune, birth or other status” and that “2—No

one shall be discriminated by a public authority on any ground whatsoever, including the grounds referred to above in paragraph 1" (Resolution of the Assembly of the Republic No. 232/2016). This protocol was ratified by the President of the Portuguese Republic, two months after its approval (Decree of the President of the Republic No. 102/2016).

In 2017, the legislation against hate crimes was significantly strengthened with the new anti-discrimination law in Portugal (Law No. 93/2017), as it revokes the previous legal framework of laws No. 134/99 and No. 18/2004 of 11 May, as well as Decree-Law No. 86/2005. Law No. 93/2017 establishes the legal framework for preventing, prohibiting and combating discrimination on the grounds of racial and ethnic origin, skin color, nationality, descent and territory of origin—also known as the new law against racial discrimination. It is important to highlight that the scope of this law includes an implementation regarding: (a) Social protection, including social security and health care; (b) Social benefits; (c) Education; (d) Access to and supply of goods and services made available to the public, including housing; (e) Culture. In this legislation, different forms of discrimination are listed (direct, indirect, multiple, etc, including harassment as discrimination) that broaden and clarify the definitions of what constitutes discrimination, and refer to its prohibition in different spheres such as those mentioned in Article 4: (Law No. 93/2017), thus allowing greater clarification on its application. Additionally highlighted is Law No. 94/2017, which contributes to the advancement of anti-discriminatory measures, such as the amendment of Article 240 of the Portuguese Criminal Code that now "(a) punishes those who "develop organized propaganda activities that incite discrimination, hatred or violence against a person or group of people because of their race, color, ethnic or national origin, ancestry, religion, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity or physical or psychic disability". In 2018, the strengthening of hate crime legislation and the new anti-discrimination law were praised by the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI 2018).

Among the targets for achieving sustainable development goals, we highlight as commitments the promotion of appropriate legislation, policies and actions to reduce inequalities and promoting and enforcing non-discriminatory laws and policies for sustainable development (United Nations 2015). Thus, the study aimed to describe the Portuguese scenario regarding racial and ethnic discrimination during pandemic times in Portugal, within the framework of the measures implemented to combat racism and hate speech. We elaborated the following research questions to guide our analysis: (1) How do anti-discrimination policies work in combating racism during the pandemic context of COVID-19? (2) How did racial and ethnic discrimination evolve in the Portuguese context during the pandemic crisis?

This research contributes to providing literature about racial-ethnic discrimination effects in the pandemic period, considering the increase of racial-ethnic discrimination and hate speech in online and offline spaces in Portuguese society. In this sense, this study seeks to identify and describe processes of racial-ethnic discrimination, identifying significant events in Portugal during the period of the current global crisis. In the next section, we present the research process which was conducted through a document analysis supported by national and international reports, the news reported in the media, and secondary statistical data. A portrait of various occurrences in recent years and reactions to online news regarding this topic are presented in the Results section, as well as the evolution of denunciation of discriminatory practices in Portugal. Finally, we discuss these findings and present conclusions about anti-discrimination policies and the racial and ethnic discrimination in Portugal during the pandemic.

2. Materials and Methods

We started this study by collecting data through a qualitative analysis of different reports and statements from official entities about this topic. This allowed systematizing various perspectives on the current situation in Portugal regarding the institutional and political fight against ethnic and racial discrimination.

The first document analyzed was the latest report of the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI) (ECRI 2018). Although this report covers a pre-pandemic context, it permitted us to have a starting point for further data collection as it monitors within the human rights framework. We also followed one of the methodological approaches of this entity that does not resort to surveys but to document analysis on relevant national and international written sources. Focusing on the points pointed out by the ERCI, we proceeded with the data collection specialized in ethnic and racial discrimination issues in Portugal, starting with the collection of current information on the identified problems.

We considered as sources of analysis: the memorandum on combating racism and violence against women in Portugal prepared on the basis of the regular monitoring work developed by the Commissioner for Human Rights of the Council of Europe (Council of Europe: Commissioner for Human Rights 2021); the reports of the Commission for Equality and Against Racial Discrimination (CICDR) which is the specialized body in the fight against racial discrimination, with the aim of preventing and prohibiting racial discrimination and sanctioning the practice of acts that result in the violation or conditioning of fundamental rights associated with racial and ethnic discrimination (CICDR 2017, 2018, 2019, 2020); and the report 'State of Hate: Far right extremism in Europe 2021' coordinated by Hope not Hate and the Amadeu Antonio Foundation regarding Portuguese context (Fernandes and Teles 2021). To support the document analysis, we collected quantitative data from the CICDR reports and the European Social Survey Round 9 Data (2018). The data from the European Social Survey Data dates to the last edition, in which it presents questions linked with opinions on racial and ethnic issues in the questionnaire applied to Portugal ($n = 1009$).

Finally, we also proceeded with the analysis of news published in the digital media in Portugal regarding events linked to issues such as racism and xenophobia. In the selection of the media used in this study, we applied the following criteria: (a) national media; (b) media legalized by the Portuguese Press Law (Law No. 78/2015); and (c) media with digital platforms. Based on these criteria, we excluded regional or local media, selecting those with greater public reach. From this selection, we gave preference to those which had news about the theme under study, as a source of data collection (e.g., Diário de Notícias; Jornal de Notícias; Observador; Público). The selected online news and comments seek to illustrate the statements we found in the different official documents, describing factual situations of ethno-racial discrimination that happened in Portugal in the last two years (2020–2021) and during the period of the pandemic crisis. Every source used in this analysis is mentioned in the references section.

From a total of 40 Portuguese news, present on digital media outlets, we selected comments made by users that would allow bringing a greater richness of information. We chose to perform the analysis without resorting to computing methods since it was a complementary method and aimed at a more descriptive content analysis (Berger 2011). Following the identification of the scope and data sources, we started to distinguish key themes and code them. After this initial step, we combined and ordered the elements of the analysis (Hodgetts and Chamberlain 2014). The definition of the categories of analysis for this qualitative data (i.e., news and user comments) was based on the national and international sources previously mentioned in this section. Each piece of news and comments were analyzed by the research team members to reach a consensus on the results presented. From the 899 analyzed comments, we excluded those in which the content was not understandable or that were not adequate for the subject. As the online news comments were written in Portuguese, we translated the selected comments into English. All the information collected was analyzed and validated by two researchers in the field of social sciences and one in the field of cultural studies and linguistics, in order to ensure greater consistency in the data processing.

3. Results

In this section, we have structured and organized the results into subsections to enhance the understanding. Thus, we present the following points: (1) the lack of recognition of racism as a problem in Portuguese society; (2) violent attacks on foreign people; (3) police brutality against African descendants; (4) the rise of the right-wing extremism and neo-Nazi movements; and (5) denunciation of discriminatory practices in Portugal.

3.1. The Lack of Recognition of Racism as a Problem in Portuguese Society

The memorandum on combating racism and violence against women in Portugal (Council of Europe: Commissioner for Human Rights 2021) points out the growth of racism and the persistence of ethnic discrimination in Portugal. It also mentions that there are deep-rooted stereotypes, discrimination and aggressions against Afro-descendants, Gypsies and other people perceived as foreigners. One of the examples we found to illustrate these statements is the reactions to the news presenting the results of the European Social Survey (Gomes 2020; Sábado 2020; Rádio Renascença 2020).

The data from the European Social Survey indicate that 76.8% of the participants considered that some cultures are, by nature, more civilized than others, that some races are inherently less intelligent than others (29.9%) and instinctively more hard-working (56.2%). Furthermore, 30.1% consider that for a society to function well, certain groups need to be above others and that certain groups deserve more than others (26.5%). However, 90.8% state that we should ensure that all groups have equal chances of opportunity to succeed (European Social Survey Round 9 Data 2018).

From the 202 comments on this news item (Gomes 2020), the opposition of most users to the content of the news is quite expressive, questioning the validity of the study and disagreeing with its conclusion. In some comments, we observe the need some people feel to counter the arguments of racism against black people or against people of different ethnicities:

“First of all, nobody knows what Floyd felt. Those are the facts; nobody knows if he felt he was experiencing a racist act. But they assume he did. No one knows what the police officer was thinking, but they assume it was racism. The “anti-racists” are so certain of everything that it only shows their intellectual limitation.”

“I have already written here in the comments of the Observador[media name], several times, that the fact of a white person exercising violence against a black person (or vice versa, or between any pair of ethnic groups) is only racism if the cause is that the other is black, white or whatever color. Otherwise, skin color is incidental and not the reason.”

Several comments were deleted and users were removed from the system. These refer to situations where the norms were violated, including comments of an offensive or derogative nature. Among the various comments that were made, only one comment stands out in the opposite direction to the previous ones: *“The comments on this article only prove the results of the survey”*. However, the anti-racist comments are the minority.

Another news item introduces a different study that validates these data. In this study, there are 68.1% positive answers regarding the question about the existence of racism in Portugal (Jornal de Negócios 2020). Once again, from the 23 comments analyzed, there is a very present racist discourse that marginalizes and stereotypes people of African descent:

“Of course there is racism, but it’s not as they say. The racist is the black man (don’t give me that black man bullshit). There are no white “turras” [a derogatory slang term for African guerrilla fighters during colonial war]. Look at what they’ve been doing on the beaches and the robberies that have taken place. Of course it’s not just the blacks, it’s just that they are more noticeable, hence the reference to the blacks.”

3.2. Violent Attacks on Foreign People

During the pandemic period, a certain number of aggressions against Afro-descendants and other people perceived as foreigners, as well as anti-racist and other Portuguese civil

society activists, were registered (Council of Europe: Commissioner for Human Rights 2021). Among the events that marked 2020, two homicides supported by racist or xenophobic issues are to be mentioned. The first case refers to the death of a Ukrainian immigrant who died under the guard of the Portuguese Immigration and Border Service (SEF) at Lisbon airport in March 2020 (Marcelino and Cândia 2020; Cruz and Martins 2020). The victim, Ihor Homeniuk was physically assaulted and beaten for at least 20 min by three police officers of this security service. Afterward, he was in excruciating pain for 10 h and was denied assistance by the detaining officers, dying a few days later of asphyxiation due to injuries.

The 40 comments on this news (Marcelino and Cândia 2020) express widespread indignation against this barbaric act of police brutality:

“For these cases there should be the death penalty and these 3 killers would be perfect candidates. But the most terrible thing is that there is a judge who just sends them home, but what is this???? Is he conniving with the situation? I hope that the courts reverse this decision and send them immediately to jail and keep them without any means of communication, because murderers of this kind are a danger on the loose. I only hope that in the trial, they get convicted for the maximum years by law, 25 years and without parole.”

“We have the security forces infiltrated by the far right! Now they’re hiring skinheads for the SEF. Where has it come to!”

In another news article about this fatal episode (Duarte 2021), among the 5 comments analyzed, one of them tries to cast doubt on the legitimacy of the police officers’ actions: “This story of the Ukrainian and the SEF seems to me badly told and subject to other interests. Why the hell would a group of police officers, stronger and better equipped, be interested in killing a poor devil, possibly poorly educated?”

It should be noted that all the SEF police officers involved were sentenced to 9 years in prison (Agência Lusa 2021a; Marcelino 2021; Alexandre 2020), and this case was not formally classified as a hate crime. In these news reports, we identified that comments reinforce the condemnation of these actions by the police officers, even considering it a light sentence given the inhumane nature and cruelty of the crime committed.

Another high-profile event of this type of event was the murder of the actor Bruno Candé on 25 July 2020 by a 76-year-old man who committed the crime while uttering racist insults. The crime was considered by the judge to have a “futile motive” and motivated by “racial hatred”, resulting in a sentence of 22 years and nine months of effective imprisonment (DN/Lusa 2021; Agência Lusa 2021b). The murderer’s hate speech, who had already threatened to kill the actor several times, stands out as he expressed the will to slaughter the actor with extreme physical brutality on racial grounds (Marcelino and Cândia 2021a). We identified several comments about these news reports in which, even in the face of such a serious crime, some people minimize the crime of homicide:

“The physical disproportion was such that only with a gun. He could report it to the police, but the Portuguese justice system and the media would always say no, that the black man is right and we have to let the blacks humiliate us, so the white man has to lower his head if the black man wants to rape him. In this case, justice didn’t work, mercy was necessary.”

“He didn’t have to kill for futile reasons . . . but Mr Candé should have known better than to pick on and talk to an old man . . . ”

“Racial hate crime? Are the Courts intoxicated by political correctness or are they afraid of the left-wing and Black Lives Matter . . . It was a crime of murder, punishable, but for repeated disagreements between neighbours over a dog . . . the rest of the racism is bullshit talk. What has it come to . . . ”

However, there are those who feel that the crime should be punished, albeit in smaller numbers. One of the comments calls for the newspaper to censor these comments stating:

“I see a lot of racist comments here, defending the killer and blaming the victim. I thank the DN for deleting them. Racism is not an opinion, it’s a crime. And I think these bastards who make these comments here should be reported to the Public Prosecutor’s Office and be prosecuted as the criminals they are. And don’t give me freedom of speech. Spreading hate is a crime!”

Public opinion differed for these two homicides, being the first one more denounced than the second, with the legitimacy of the action and even of the punishment of the killer being questioned in the latter.

3.3. Police Brutality against African Descendants

Portugal is beginning to be highlighted as a country with a high level of police violence for racist reasons, highlighting the practice of ill-treatment and violation of rights against African descendants and foreign citizens, namely by the authorities ([Council of Europe: Commissioner for Human Rights 2021](#)). These situations occur mainly in social or illegal housing neighborhoods, where most of the Afro-descendant or Roma communities reside ([Marcelino 2020a](#); [Henriques and Gaudêncio 2021](#); [Marcelino and Cândia 2021b](#)). This news has not been very popularized in the media, although they have been the subject of the assessment of the Council of Europe’s Commissioner for Human Rights ([Council of Europe: Commissioner for Human Rights 2021](#)).

Already in 2018, [ECRI \(2018\)](#) expressed concern at reports of human rights abuses by police officers and a lack of adequate measures to prevent and combat situations of this nature. From the news reports analyzed, we observe that a large proportion of the accusations resulted in the acquittal of the police officers involved ([V. Marcelino 2019](#); [Henriques 2020](#)).

A more recent news statement ([Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights 2021c](#)) indicated that United Nations (UN) Experts were surprised by reports of police brutality against African people in Portugal ([Agência Lusa 2021c](#)). Of the 38 comments to this news, most question the statements of the UN group, including their credibility or political alignment. Once again, the accusatory line of argumentation that black people are considered victims and are given a highly protected status is followed, i.e., there is a certain ridiculing of racism as a problem present in society.

“(. . .) (1) If a black person is assaulted by a white person he was a victim of racism, full stop. If the white man is very white and blonde, it is neo-Nazism, full stop. (2) If a white man is assaulted by a black man this is an ethnic issue, a cultural manifestation that we should respect and accept benevolently, without sticking to that Eurocentric and reductionist view . . . It is, let’s say, a form of expression . . . Alternatively, we may argue that the black man did not attack the white man, but merely reflected, mirrored, spontaneously, the trauma of colonial exploitation, although with a 50-year lag . . . ”

One of the comments that challenges the statements of the UN Experts takes a different position but assumes that there is racism and discriminatory practices that are naturalized and reproduced.

“There are racist individuals in Portugal. Just a few days ago I saw and heard a woman more than was old enough to know better (. . .) shouting at a waitress, in a decent pastry shop in Almirante Reis, “go back to your land, you daughter of @€€, go to your land”. (. . .). The waitress was Brazilian. And this is an example from last week because I have seen and heard other similar ones during the many years of my life in this country. Have I seen and heard racism in reverse? Yes, I have. I have been seriously harassed on a Lisbon-Oporto train by a group of blockheads of African descent who were completely drunk or on drugs. I have been threatened by gypsies. For me a racist, whatever his skin color, is stupid. I’m a firm believer in the liberal thesis that every individual should be valued according to their merits. I can’t stand freaks who think they are superior to others by randomness of birth. Having said that, Portugal is not a race-neutral country. There are people like me and then there are people of all ages, all colors, all creeds and all

educations who are unrepentant racists. Something certainly needs to be done. But a stupid visit to Cova da Moura [a run-down urban area] and a superficial report will solve nothing."

The report 'State of Hate: Far Right Extremism in Europe 2021' also mentioned an association between acts of police brutality against young blacks and foreigners and far-right infiltration in the Portuguese security forces and military (Fernandes and Teles 2021). Besides the physical assaults against Afro-descendants, there were also reports of aggression and attack against recently arrived immigrants in Portugal by police officers of the Immigration and Border Service (Porto 2020; Botelho and Henriques 2020), which, as previously mentioned, resulted in the death of a Ukrainian immigrant.

Recently there have also been reports of aggression against immigrants by soldiers of the National Republican Guard, including barbaric acts of torture (CNN Portugal MJC 2021), which were only covered in the media because the aggressors filmed the acts of violence. Another case of discrimination and marginalization took place during the pandemic confinement, when a group of citizens residing in a resort in the middle of a bankruptcy process, opposed and mobilized against the temporary rehousing of a group of immigrants living in degrading conditions to that same resort (Schreck 2021; Neves 2021; Mairós 2021). Although with only 5 comments and little discussion, with no comments from users that support this type of prejudice, the reports of local citizens reveal xenophobia: "they feel bad around them, they tell us to stay away, especially in supermarket queues, they think that they are the ones with the virus"; "The best would be for these communities to disappear. To have 500 people from abroad is fine, but this is too much, this land is getting destroyed" (Matos 2021). This news also brought to public debate the situation of thousands of immigrants who come to work in Portugal and are living in inhumane conditions and are suspected victims of human trafficking (RTP 2021; Correia 2021b).

3.4. The Rise of the Right-Wing Extremism and Neo-Nazi Movements

Regarding the hate and racist discourse against the Roma population, who see that these communities are confronted with discriminatory practices, namely by political proposals and speeches of a racist and xenophobic nature. According to the report 'State of Hate: Far Right Extremism in Europe 2021' there is exploitation by the extreme right in the face of discontent, resentment and frustration caused by the restrictive measures to freedom during the pandemic, that carry on to the protests for better living conditions. It also refers to the increase in media coverage around racist, xenophobic and discriminatory political statements among citizens and the intense dissemination of propaganda and disinformation on social networks, driving anti-radicalization and recruitment of young people (men and white) and violence (Fernandes and Teles 2021). In Portugal, groups such as Blood and Honour and Portugal Hammer Skins and the newly emerged neo-Nazi political party Nova Ordem Social (a party already suspended) were active at the national and international levels (Europol 2019). There was also a record of activities and meetings of neo-Nazi groups in Portugal linked to organizations of the European Identity Movement. One of the most active groups is the Identity Shield. (Europol 2020). There were news reports of the activity of these groups during the pandemic (. Marcelino 2020b; Moreira 2020), yet user comments made to both news items downplayed these events.

Two other events that were highlighted by the media during the pandemic, concerned the discrimination of Roma communities, namely a special confinement plan for Roma communities by the leader of the "Chega!" party during the first lockdown in May 2020 (Council of Europe: Commissioner for Human Rights 2021).

The sole elected member of the far-right party "Chega!" put forward a proposal for a specific plan of approach and confinement for Roma communities (Lusa 2020; TSF 2020). In the 170 comments to this news (TSF 2020), the opinions of the users vary. On one hand, it is clear the opposition to this politically encouraged segregation and complicity of the other right-wing parties:

“Shameful proposal that encourages hatred and, consequently, violence. It violates the Constitution of the Portuguese Republic. Let us learn to respect and live with the difference. Freedom and Democracy is this—accepting difference and learning from it. PSD, CDS and Liberal Initiative, if you continue to be silent, I will interpret that you are in agreement with this shameful proposal”.

“It is a racist, impractical idea that is only intended to give notoriety to the proponent. It is clear that it is going to be flunked in Parliament but, in the meantime, the proposal fulfils the purpose it was created for which is to rally militants for this far-right political party.”

“Politicians have to start thinking about actually implementing our Constitution, and criminalizing fascism (nationalist, racist, Nazi, xenophobic, supremacist, etc), whether it comes from Chega, the new CDS, the Observador[media name], etc. In Germany, this has been happening for a long time despite the difficulties, which are not new today. Portugal has to be an example to the world, and not a follower of bad examples . . . ”

Those who speak out against this measure also criticize the media space given to the extreme right, constantly advertising messages of hate and racial and ethnic discrimination. However, some users commenting on this news item have favorable opinions regarding the segregation and restriction of freedoms of the Roma communities:

“Only those who have not lived near a community like this can be against it.”

“I don’t believe that the 25th of April Revolution members, when they did it, had a concept of freedom that was equality and equal rights for all, certain groups because of the fear of the word Xenophobia could have a ‘positive discriminatory’ treatment . . . This is due both to the disregard that some Roma have for Portuguese law and the racism that still exists against Roma. We don’t want confinement, but we want them to be more controlled.”

“If they are people who do not know how to integrate themselves into the society where they live . . . then they must have a different plan of confinement . . . adapted to their reality . . . That’s right . . . where’s the racism in that?”

Another news item that emerged following this proposal was the reaction of the football player, Ricardo Quaresma, who represents Portugal in the national squad and comes from a Roma community. This athlete publicly manifested against the leader of “Chega” through social networks (Tavares 2020), generating around 140 comments that in their great majority minimize the position of the player, describing Roma people as criminals. Some comments were removed by the newspaper, although comments that accused the Roma ethnic group of living closed within their culture and disrespecting the Portuguese laws remained.

“They are 0.3% of the population and create more unrest than any other group in our society. They don’t work, they live off the RSI [Social Integration Income] and of taxes of the rest of the Portuguese. Send them to Romania, where they are better off.”

“Not if the option is to confine them. But something has to be done, yes. Just look at the buildings where they live. They move there when they’re young and after 5 years, they’re destroyed inside, the mailboxes no longer exist, the lifts are rubbish dumps because they stop working. They don’t pay the rents, electricity . . . And the city councils give them money under the pretext of reinsertion and to get more votes, and that’s it. Are there gypsies who work? Yes, there are, but when they do, they make the news.”

In 2021, a municipality was accused of xenophobia for making a statement on its Facebook page reporting the existence of positive cases of COVID-19 in the gypsy community living in a neighborhood of the town (Correia 2021a). However, most of the comments defended the position of the municipality, which has since deleted the publication. Many of these comments presented a discriminatory discourse against the Roma community.

“Only in this country. So shouldn’t the mayor warn the population about this situation? Knowing that the gypsies do not respect any restrictions and go about their normal lives, thus spreading the pandemic? The mayor wanted to warn the people, what xenophobia!”

The comments on these news items demonstrate not only an increase in the discourse of marginalization of Roma communities and a feeling of prejudice politically popularized during the pandemic but also a growing mediatization of hate speech.

In addition, episodes of vandalism of public buildings were registered during the pandemic, namely schools and universities, but also NGOs with racist messages and swastikas (Barreto 2020; Cristino and Salcedas 2020; DN 2020). From the 20 comments on this news (Cristino and Salcedas 2020), it is revealed that the majority is not outraged against the acts of vandalism, but rather against immigrants or people of other ethnicities and against left-wing political parties.

“I fully support the message, like every true Portuguese. I only disagree where it was written, for the next I appeal to these patriots to write on the walls of the headquarters of the Socialist Party, the Commies, far-left Dung Blockers and the like. And yes, Portugal and Europe belong to Whites, the race that brought civilization to the world.”

“I bet it was a refugee who wrote the messages or some left-winger!!! There are more false reports of racism and xenophobia than real racist crimes!!!”

We highlight the inclusion in these messages of death threats (Ferin and Claudino 2020; Ropio and Costa 2020) and warnings to leave the country, being addressed to members of anti-racist or immigrant support organizations (Antunes 2021), and that were claimed by extreme right-wing groups. Currently, the online petition (Petição Pública n.d.) for the extradition of Mamadu Ba, an activist and leader of the organization SOS Racismo in Portugal, has 32,066 signatures and 76 comments that constitute hate speech.

In addition to the growing insecurity expressed by those who work to combat racism and other human rights activists, there is also a report of harassment and threats on the Council of Europe platform for the protection of journalism and the safety of journalists. These regard offenses made to the journalists responsible for a news story on the SIC TV channel on the extreme right-wing party “Chega!”, broadcast between December 2020 and January 2021 (Safety of Journalists Platform 2021).

3.5. Denunciation of Discriminatory Practices in Portugal

The refusal, limitation or impediment regarding the enjoyment of public and cultural goods or services, access to public places, access to and normal exercise of economic activity, access to health care or to educational or teaching establishments, including segregation in the constitution of classes, according to discriminatory criteria, or even the refusal or conditioning of the sale, lease or sub-lease of real estate; these are only some examples of situations that are considered as discriminatory practices and therefore are prohibited by law (Law No. 93/2017).

The CICDR is the specialized body for combating racial discrimination in Portugal, which is responsible for monitoring the application of Law No. 93/2017 of 23 August. This law establishes the legal framework for preventing, prohibiting and combating discrimination on the grounds of racial and ethnic origin, color, nationality, descent and territory of origin. Analyzing the available data from the Commission for Equality and Against Racial Discrimination data (CICDR), based on reports between 2017 and 2020 we noted an expressive increase in discriminatory practices reported (Figure 1).

Since 2014, there has been a significant increase from year to year. We highlight that between 2017 and 2019, the victims reported more situations of discrimination. In 2020, this trend changed, with third parties presenting a higher number of reports. In this last year, there was also a decrease in the number of reports made by public entities or associations/NGOs. There has been a greater mobilization, namely in the last two years, as shown by the number of complaints, although the CICDR itself states in its reports that this number is not representative of the real universe of the problem of racial and ethnic discrimination in the national context, only of the cases that were presented. Additionally, ERCI warned about the lack of knowledge of the victims on how to act or file a complaint and about the legislation that prohibits discriminatory acts (ECRI 2018).

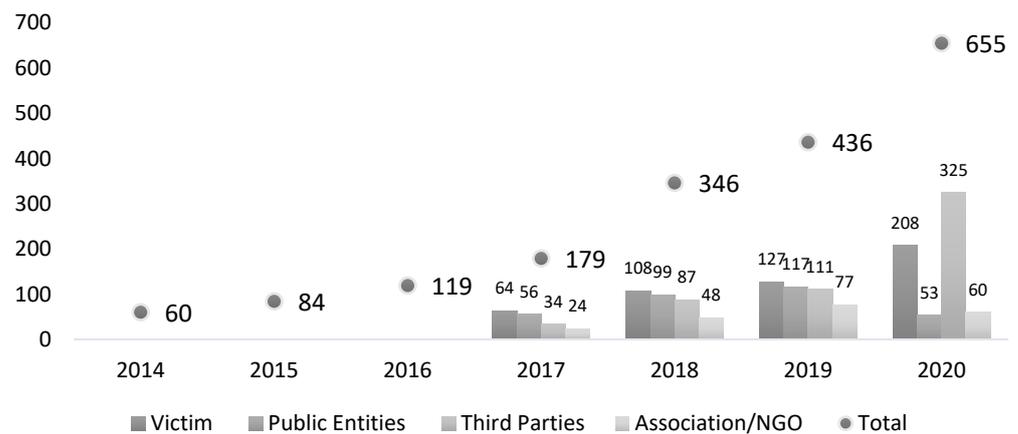


Figure 1. Evolution of participation, complaints or denunciations received by the CICDR (n)—2014 to 2020. Source: Data retrieved from [CICDR \(2017, 2018, 2019, 2020\)](#).

Regarding the means of complaint (Figure 2), the complaints filled online are the ones with the highest expression, i.e., there seems to be a greater inclination to distance reporting mechanisms, among which filling out an online form becomes more used than email, especially in 2020. The sending of complaints by post, which increased consecutively between 2017 and 2019, shows a very sharp decrease in 2020. We should note that no in-person complaints were registered in 2020.

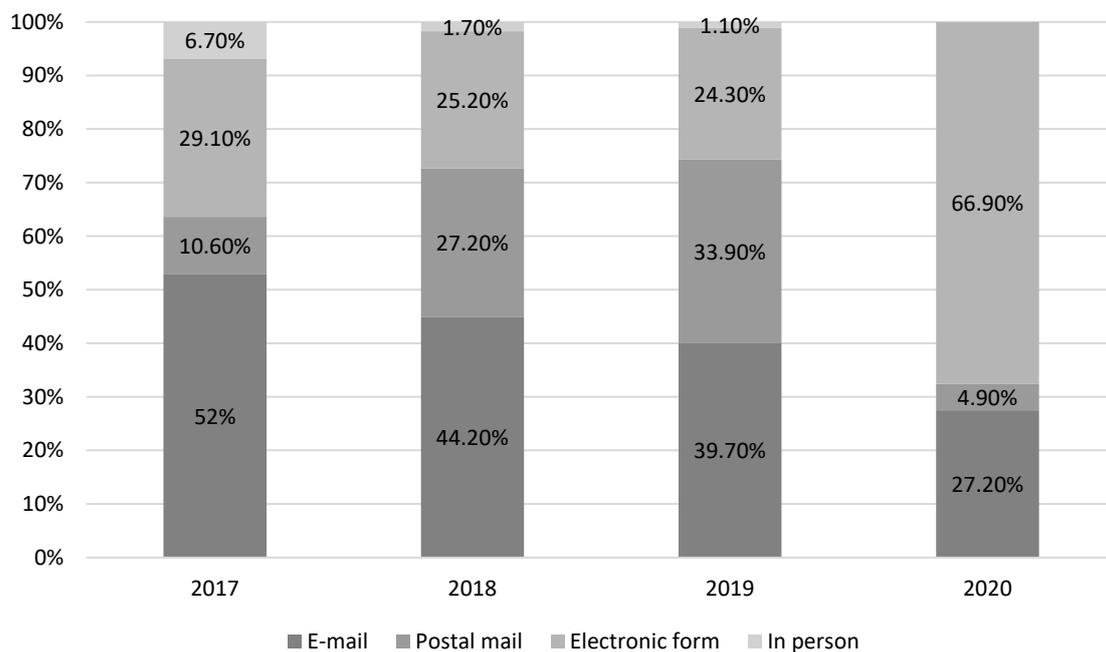


Figure 2. Means of complaints presented to CICDR (n)—2017 to 2020. Source: Data retrieved from [CICDR \(2017, 2018, 2019, 2020\)](#).

As for the contexts of the reported discriminatory practices, we find that between 2017 and 2019, the commercial sector was the one with the highest expression. However, in 2020, there was a high frequency of complaints about discrimination on the Internet and social networks, revealing the increase in reports of discrimination through online means (Figure 3).

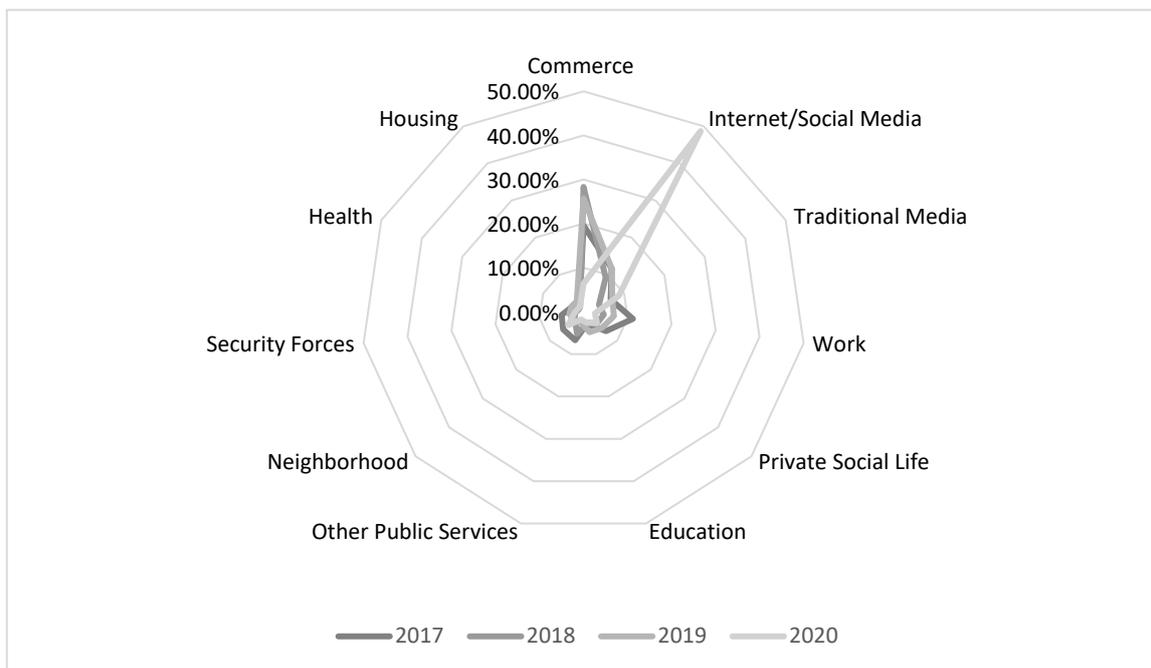


Figure 3. Reported discriminatory practices presented to CICDR by services (*n*)—2017 to 2020. Source: Data retrieved from [CICDR \(2017, 2018, 2019, 2020\)](#).

In terms of regions, we highlight in this figure those which report the highest number of complaints and that, according to data from SEF ([SEF/GEFP 2021](#)), are among the regions with the highest number of foreigners in Portugal (Figure 4). An interesting fact in these reports is that when complaints are distributed by geographical areas/territories, the CICDR includes a category called Media/Internet, which is the category that over the years has presented the highest number of registered complaints. In 2020, this number reaches a new peak with 61.7% of the reports to be geographically classified being attributed not to a specific region, but to the media and Internet.

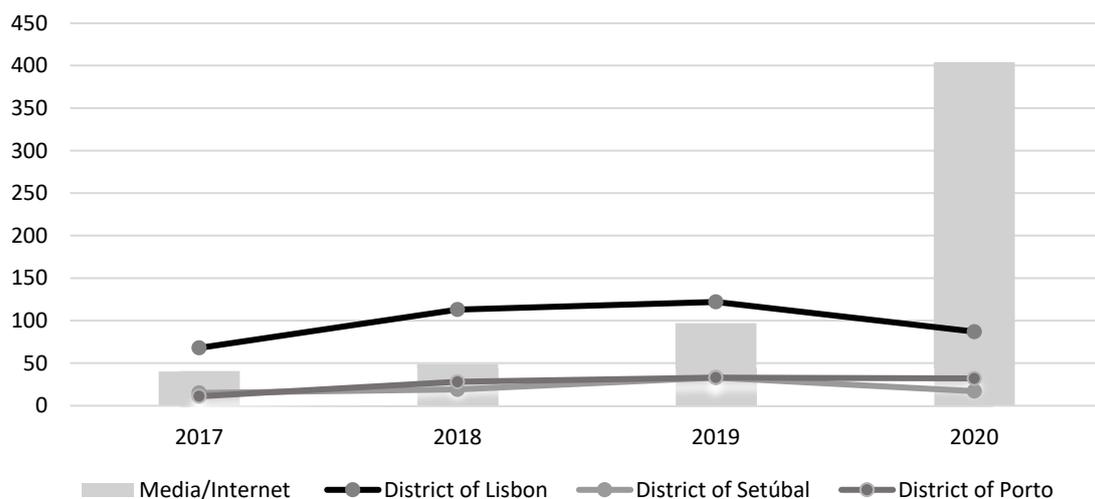


Figure 4. Complaints distributed by geographical areas/territories (*n*)—2017–2020. Source: Data retrieved from [CICDR \(2017, 2018, 2019, 2020\)](#).

The ECRI report ([ECRI 2018](#)) underlined that in Portugal there is an absence of monitoring by competent entities or authorities and of statistical data on the number of hate speech incidents on the Internet. In its latest report, it states that civil society has reported

the existence of hundreds of hate-laden messages, particularly on the forums of far-right groups on the Internet. This hate speech targets especially Roma, black people, Muslims and LGBT people, portraying them negatively. Another aspect mentioned is that only some media filter user comments before publication on their websites and reject those containing hate speech, which was demonstrated in the analysis presented above.

4. Discussion

The analyzed data that has emerged has provided evidence of issues that our daily lives and the media had already been revealing. In 2021, some indicators already allowed us to see the increase and naturalization of hate speech in digital media. Portugal was, in 2020, the third safest country in the world, having dropped to the fourth position in 2021 ([Institute for Economics & Peace 2021](#)). We understand that, culturally, it is not a territory characterized by violent crime. However, the data presented should make us rethink whether this feeling of safety is truly manifested in the daily lives of people, especially those belonging to more unprotected groups. On one hand, there are data that show a widely held opinion on racism in Portugal, and on the other, we witness a perpetuation of these attitudes in comments in online spaces.

The influence of extreme right-wing ideologies, namely through online communities, has been the object of study of other researchers who also point to the increase of their activities with negative impacts on civilized societies ([Caiani and Parenti 2011](#); [Youngblood 2020](#); [Bliuc et al. 2020](#)). This phenomenon has also reached Portugal, where we are witnessing the naturalization of social problems of ideological origin, discriminatory acts and hate speech. The very speech of some political forces has been an engine for racist attitudes and behaviors. Considering the last ERCI report (2018), we foresee that the next report to be published will show a worsening of the Portuguese context. Advances in anti-discrimination policies are apparently not having a deterrent effect on racist or xenophobic actions. Here too, responsibility is assumed by the media which mediatizes this type of discourse.

We cannot generalize opinions based on the comments analyzed, but there is visible data that allows us to reinforce conclusions that were presented by the Commissioner for Human Rights of the Council of Europe ([Council of Europe: Commissioner for Human Rights 2021](#)). The accounts presented here represent the opinion of citizens, with a large number of comments on digital media that devalue or justify racism. We continue to see entrenched stereotypes perpetuating discrimination against African descendants, Roma and other foreign people. The cases registered in the year 2020 of the unfounded murder of an Afro-descendant citizen and a Ukrainian citizen make us wonder where we are heading. We believe that the existence of those who, still today, excuse or seek to minimize this type of crime is a matter of extreme seriousness. As people, we must all denounce these situations and act to defend human rights, especially of those who are in a more vulnerable social position. Contrary to other countries where there have been manifest forms of discrimination against Chinese people and their descendants in various parts of the world ([Schumann and Moore 2021](#); [Viladrich 2021](#); [Wang et al. 2021](#); [Wen-Ying and Gaysynsky 2021](#); [Reny and Barreto 2022](#)), this evidence was not noted in the official national and international reports on the Portuguese context or in the online news published in the last two years. What we have observed, through data collection and analysis, is the worsening of discrimination and prejudice against groups that traditionally were already victims of ethnic and racial discrimination in Portugal.

In addition, there are countless situations that remain invisible, in which people are daily subjected to injustice, violence, hatred, suffering and for whom the realization of human rights is a distant reality. Many of these situations have only become relevant due to their resulting tragedies or fatalities. Evidence shows this has been a reality in which action needs to be taken ([Council of Europe: Commissioner for Human Rights 2021](#)).

Police violence and hate speech by some political parties has proliferated and been disseminated in online and offline spaces. The dangers of populist and racist political discourse from the far-right parties have been highlighted, being associated with a sense of

legitimacy felt by citizens to make discriminatory statements. A change in the country's political framework could also be considered a sign allowing for such conduct to expand. Growing neo-Nazi activities and widespread hate speech should also be a cause for collective concern. Portugal is a country marked by a dictatorship that was in force for 48 years, going through a process of decolonization and implementation of democracy since 1974 (Pimentel 2014). Thus, it has been surprising the evolution of the extreme right, which since 2019 has had representation in the Portuguese parliament, being currently the third political force in Portugal (Figueiredo 2022; RTP 2022).

Regarding the use of digital means to make complaints under Law No. 93/2017, it increases the accessibility to all citizens to denounce, reinforcing the responsibility of condemning discriminatory acts. It is important that entities and services allow remote contact and availability for these processes to facilitate access by citizens and organizations, especially when considering the limitations of close contact as a result of the pandemic restrictions. The CICDR indicates that the increasing use of digital means and the mediation of situations explain the increase of reports made by third parties during 2020. The data allowed us to understand that in the last year, there was a lower involvement of public entities and associations/NGOs. However, we must point out that there was the suspension of attendance of public services and associations/NGOs, restricting the access of citizens who do not have access to the Internet or lack digital skills. This leads us to consider the possible relationship that justifies the increase of complaints on discriminatory practices with the simultaneous decrease of cases reported by these entities or organizations, as well as the absence of face-to-face complaints to the commission.

Some limitations of this study should be mentioned. As we opted to carry out the analysis without resorting to computing, we consider that the sample of data is not very extensive. One of the main sources we used for data collection was recently the target of a cyber-attack, destroying all its online content (Expresso 2022; Reuters 2022; Safety of Journalists Plataform 2022). This did not allow us to cover a wider scope or cover all the published news and forced us to remove some of the initially selected news and comments. However, the news and comments collected were intended to gather the information that would allow us to illustrate and describe the considerations presented by the official reports, so we consider we met the objective. Translation and interpretation of some users' comments also presented challenges since they contained specific slang and cultural references. As a research option, we considered it fundamental that the data be consciously analyzed by a team in the area of social sciences and linguistics. Based on this data, we propose the development of qualitative studies that allow us to go deeper into this theme based on the direct testimony of citizens. Therefore, we reinforce the need for the social sciences to fulfill their role in studying the social aspects of the human world and strengthen the concept that scientific knowledge should contribute to a more just, sustainable and anti-discriminatory society.

5. Conclusions

The pandemic crisis has exposed or exacerbated inequalities and discrimination based on racial or ethnic origin (European Commission 2020a). It is imperative to analyze social intervention in the light of human rights and respect for cultural diversity. This is a vast field of professional action, translating into a challenge to guarantee universal rights for all peoples. We highlight that the vision of the 2030 Agenda seeks to achieve a world in which the human rights of all people are respected, upholding equality and dignity and non-discrimination on the basis of race, ethnicity and culture (United Nations 2015). Among the various goals, it mentions as a target the promotion and enforcement of non-discriminatory laws and policies for sustainable development. Recently, the first National Plan to Combat Racism and Discrimination was approved (Resolution of the Council of Ministers No. 101/2021). It is hoped that the actions foreseen will translate into effective measures that protect the rights of all people and combat the problems of racism and xenophobia that persist in Portuguese society.

Racism, xenophobia, discrimination and racial and ethnic intolerance must be part of the political agenda, the professional agenda and, in particular, of the social intervention professions, as well as of the citizens' agenda, assuming itself as a universal commitment to human rights. In this sense, it is fundamental to act at three levels: 1) in the prevention, combat and intolerance of all forms of racial and ethnic discrimination; 2) in the promotion of intercultural dialogue and cultural diversity as a factor for inclusion and positive change; and 3) in the full integration of all people, especially of the most vulnerable and minority groups. It is therefore important that the mechanisms for denouncing discriminatory practices are broadened, making them accessible to all, but above all, that there is greater awareness and education of the Portuguese population to combat racism and xenophobia.

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