

## **Portugal's 'Unwanted Youth'**

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When the euro crisis was at its peak, European media largely ignored the situation in Portugal, even though the small Iberian country with a population of just over 10 million suffered massive economic and fiscal difficulties. In contrast to Greece, Portugal was seen as a European model student, since the conservative Portuguese government made no effort to resist the Troika's structural adjustment measures. This did not prevent Portuguese citizens from protesting vigorously against the Troika's austerity politics. Recently the 'euro welfare case Lisbon' was officially diagnosed as recovering, but the Portuguese job market remains tough, especially for the young and for people searching for entry level jobs. For many Portuguese citizens emigration is an option or already a reality. Since the euro crisis hit Portugal in 2011 more than 100.000 people have left the country every year.

Many young people from crisis-shaken southern European countries live in Berlin, the capital of a country that holds a powerful position in the EU and represents economic power. What about the young Portuguese who ended up in Berlin? How do they see their country from a distance and what do they think of Berlin?

### **Eduardo – escape from depressing conditions**

I meet Eduardo in Café ORA in Kreuzberg, a fashionable bar located in what once was a pharmacy. A suitable place for what the 26-year-old German-Portuguese is going to tell me about his impressions of Berlin.

'My story is very personal,' Eduardo warns me right away. He has been living in Berlin for two years now. As the son of a German father and a Portuguese mother, he grew up in Berlin until his family returned to Lisbon when he was four years old. At the age of 24 he wanted to make a fresh start.

What exactly made him decide to return to Berlin? Eduardo answers by referring to Fernando Pessoa, the famous Portuguese writer and poet who spent most of his childhood and youth in South Africa. In many of his texts Pessoa idealises his childhood years in the Portuguese capital – the longing for Lisbon being a recurring motif in his writing. Eduardo describes his relationship to Berlin quite similarly. The city symbolises a safe, comfortable and untroubled world for him. At the same time he is aware of this nostalgic romanticisation of his early childhood years. But still he felt drawn back to this city, and the economic and social developments in Portugal sealed his decision to leave Portugal, at least for the time being.

A dual-national background may sound exciting, but Eduardo also talks about the feeling of living between two worlds. 'For the Portuguese I am German; for the Germans I am Portuguese.' In Portugal he always felt 'different', after all he does not look like a typical Portuguese – and on top of that he is blessed with a German surname. He is happy about the matter-of-factness with which he can go into a bar in Berlin to play pool with friends. He calls this normality of life 'sort of cute'.

What Eduardo tells me about Berlin, I can understand all too well. I have moved here myself just recently torn between the joyful expectations of all the possibilities the city holds and a slight discomfort regarding the individualistic excess of this hip metropolis. So, why Berlin?

'Berlin was an easy choice,' Eduardo states, after all thanks to his bilingual background he speaks German without an accent and could start working in Berlin without any difficulties. In the beginning he helped out in a law firm. Shortly afterwards he started a Master's programme in physics and now he also works at his institute. Eduardo summarises his basic feeling about Berlin as follows: 'You

have got all the possibilities, but nobody really cares about what you're doing. Nobody is waiting for you, welcomes and applauds you. There is freedom, but you are free because people ignore you.'

These are the two sides of the coin which according to Eduardo characterise this city: freedom and anonymity. Especially those inclined towards loneliness and self-centredness feel drawn to it. For the young German-Portuguese Berlin is a 'huge accumulation of people who are socially impaired.'

Still, the freedom that Eduardo likes about his life in Berlin is not only the anonymity offered by a major city, but also his newly-acquired financial freedom. Eduardo talks about how much easier his life is, now he has *enough* money to live on. In Lisbon as a student he lived at his parents' place; they paid him a small allowance. 'I was always broke by the middle of the month. You sort of live on the generosity and good will of others.' He would scrounge cigarettes and beer from his friends, count every cent for public transport, food and concerts. Now thanks to the money he earns working at university and to his German study allowance (Bafög) he is entitled to as a German citizen, his life is a lot easier.

When the euro crisis started in 2011, Eduardo and his friends were at an age where a lot of people are still being financially supported by their parents. 'As long as your parents are supporting you, you don't understand the extent of the whole thing,' he says. Eduardo noticed that his parents had to 'tighten their belt', but his family was not directly affected by the crisis. About his friends and relatives he says, '*Everybody* thinks about emigrating.'

So, what about the often quoted 'brain drain'? Shouldn't one stay when everybody else is leaving, build something up and fight against political apathy? For Eduardo this argument ends at the point when you realise that 'you not only receive only a third of the wage you should be earning in your job, but that those jobs do not even *exist*.'

When Eduardo talks about the political elite of his home country, his deep frustration is evident. He talks about the basic feeling of not being wanted in Portugal. The government did not make an effort to keep the youth in the country, (now ex-)Prime Minister Passos Coelho even advised people to emigrate. The Portuguese government has acted during the crisis like the 'good pupil of Europe'. But in Eduardo's eyes Portugal is currently characterised by mainly one thing: 'sad, depressing living conditions'.

His younger brother is currently crashing on the couch in Eduardo's small apartment in Charlottenburg. With his big brother as a role model he wants to explore what Berlin has to offer him.

### **Portuguese community?**

Is there already something like a Portuguese community in Berlin? Marta and Tiago, a couple from Portugal, who have lived in Berlin for 6 years now, regularly organise an event called *KinoZuhause*. They invite their German and Portuguese friends, show Portuguese movies, and everybody brings food. But the group is not that big yet. While other German cities like Hamburg have quite a strong Portuguese community, established in the times of work migration to Germany, in Berlin the number of Portuguese is still low. Or, at least, there do not seem to be strong ties among the Portuguese immigrants and expats in the German capital and, of course it has to be kept in mind that this small Iberian country only has ten million inhabitants. My guess that the Goethe Institute might observe an increase in German language students from Portugal is not confirmed. Two friends of mine, André and Carolina, both from Coimbra and in their mid-20s, laughingly wanted to know where I found all the Portuguese for my article. Both looked at me curiously, 'because we know almost none here.' André is listed as number 428 at the embassy, 'you see, we are only a few.'

**Tomás – no reason to stay**

Tomás is 23 and works as a dish washer in a Portuguese bar. He has been living in Berlin for five months. We met in a café at Boxhagener Platz, in the centre of Friedrichshain. The neighbourhood is densely populated by cafés, cocktail bars and falafel snack bars. Each weekend groups of tourists

crowd the streets. The district around Simon-Dach-Straße is derisively called Berlin's Costa Brava. 'I work two days a week, but the work is quite boring,' Tomás confesses. Tomás and his brother share a room in a colleague's apartment. In Portugal both lived with their mother.

Tomás doesn't like big cities and always avoided Lisbon. For the past three years, he lived in Albufeira, a small town in the Algarve. Tomás misses his friends, his mother, his cats and the small village where he grew up. 'I don't particularly like Berlin's anonymity.'

Tomás is reserved, but during our conversation he eases up and tells funny stories. 'I haven't got to know a lot of people so far, but not because it's difficult. I am just shy.' He plays online games with his friends from Sera da Estrela and often chats with them. He does not own a computer, but regularly visits an Internet Café. Unlike other young international people I meet, Tomás seems unimpressed or even aware of the Berlin hype. 'The city is quite green – I like that – and people are nice.'

So, why Berlin? Tomás' father is German, his mother Portuguese. They met in Portugal. 'My mum was living with her mum. I guess my father was 'that foreign guy', her salvation from a boring life. They left for Germany together.'

Tomás was born in Portugal and as until 1993 in Germany, the mother of an illegitimate child had to be German for the child to get German citizenship, Tomás only holds a Portuguese passport. During the first three years of his life he grew up in Regensburg with his father's family. Back in Portugal, his parents' relationship fell to pieces. Tomás only met his father three times. But then, out of the blue, his father invited both of his sons to visit him in Berlin, for as long as they wanted. 'I thought I should just go, without knowing what I would be doing there.'

For Tomás' heading to Berlin also was something like a search for his roots. 'It is important for me to understand this side of me. If I hadn't had come here, I would have regretted it later.' Tomás only knows a few words in German. Soon he wants to start an integration course at the adult education centre. The course is paid for by the job centre.

'I never thought that I would be saying this, but I'm happy to be going back to school.' He did not finish school in Portugal because he failed math, but he would like to be a programmer. 'Programming language is quite logical and simple. You need to have a good memory.' But currently, studying in Berlin is not a possibility due to his lack of language skills and of a university entrance diploma. Tomás would rather finish school in Portugal, maybe study there.

For his first three months here, Tomás was employed illegally. In order to get an employment contract, one needs a permanent residence in Germany. Apart from that, a person with a non-German citizenship can only claim housing benefits after three months. Now Tomás is allowed to earn up to 450€ in a mini job. The job centre subsidises his rent with 350€ and pays for the integration course. 'I used to be quite lazy, but here I have to take responsibility for myself.'

In Portugal, Tomás sold supplies for mobile phones in a phone shop, waited tables in a restaurant and set up the sound system for a karaoke artist. I ask if he and his family had been affected by the crisis. First he shakes his head, then he recalls that they moved back from the north towards the more

touristic south so that his mother could work in a hotel. The tourism sector seems to be quite unaffected by the crisis. Nevertheless it is not always a reliable income source. 'In the Algarve you work five to six months, then there is nothing for quite a while.'

A few weeks after our meeting, I came to know that Tomás quit his job at the bar. He is planning to fly back to Portugal to see friends and family again. He didn't have a reason to stay, he says, which is a pity since 'Berlin é awesome.'

### **David – his share of the cake**

'Berlin 9º, not so bad,' David posts on Facebook. I text him and, indeed: David, a friend from Lisbon, happens to be visiting Berlin for a few days. He was spontaneously invited to a job interview at an online shop for fashion. The company paid for the flight. When I saw David the last time, he was working on his PhD in Information Technology, had long hair and played guitar in jazz clubs. Now, he has almost finished his PhD and cut his hair. Was he searching for jobs in Berlin? 'Oh no, I did not apply – they asked *me*.' In his LinkedIn profile he changed his place of residence to Berlin; shortly afterwards he had a few requests in his inbox. He did not really look for jobs in Lisbon. 'Why would you work in Lisbon for half the money you should be earning? Especially with the living expenses in Lisbon being almost as high as here.'

After a while, a friend of David joined us at the bar. Rui, who has been living for seven years in Germany, moved from Leipzig to Berlin six months ago. Why were they attracted to Berlin? Rui sits up. 'The sheer potential! Here you can find everything you are looking for.'

'I think we have an advantage here,' David chimes in. 'Even at the job interview I was being welcomed super nicely. Portugal, wow, what a beautiful country.' Everybody here has been to Lisbon and raves about it.' Rui cynically answers: 'Of course they are super nice those head hunters so that you agree to work for less money.' Both of them are sure about one thing, though: you can earn good money in Berlin and live comfortably. In Portugal the situation is different: 'Tem trabalho mas não há emprego.' There is work, but no jobs. We speculate about what David will do if he actually gets the job. 'Flights are not that expensive. I would definitely try to meet my friends back in Portugal once in a while to hang out and cook something.' Rui looks at him for a long time then shakes his head. 'But you are going to be here then. That is also a decision.'

A few weeks after we met, David texts me on Facebook. He got the job starting in January. The company is currently seeking an apartment for him. His first day at work will be his birthday. 'Maybe Merkel will be there to share a piece of cake with me,' he jokes.

### **Rui – music as the most important thing**

Rui has curly black hair that points wildly in every direction and wears dark clothes. Rui says he lives for art but not from art. Currently he is working on his PhD in physics at the Federal Institute for Materials Research. Science is a major interest of his but he says 'I don't actually *have* to do the PhD.' Somehow he ended up working there - he needed money. What is much more important to him is music.

At the age of 27 Rui did an Erasmus year in Leipzig. Until then he had been studying in Lisbon living with his parents. He wanted to get out of Portugal. Erasmus was a stepping stone. That he ended up in Germany was a coincidence. 'It was here that I asked myself for the first time: Who am I? And why am I the way I am?' In Portugal it is much more common to live with one's parents while at university. The secure feeling of his parents' home had made Rui 'deaf', he concludes. He had a good time in Leipzig and 'simply stayed there.' After finishing his Master's degree he worked in a call centre and was offered a job in Würzburg. It seems as if far from home Rui liberated himself from conventional concepts of career. Apart from earning money he took his time to realise his own

projects: he founded a bike workshop and, later on, a bike rental system. At the company he was working with in Würzburg he made a good friend, who runs a small record label. In order to fully concentrate on his music he claimed unemployment benefits and lived off them for 21 months. During this time he went to the countryside for a couple of weeks in order to record his music. While he had never felt at odds in big cities it was there that he noticed strange reactions to him for the first time. 'Some women, in the village where I was staying were about to call the police when they first saw me,' he laughs. His friend motivated him to perform his songs in front of an audience. His first concert in a small venue in Würzburg completely altered his perception of the world.

How does he feel as a Portuguese musician in Berlin? His answer is straightforward: 'I am more confident here. People do not tend to be so prejudiced. In Portugal many react to people like me saying: 'Vai trabalhar. Corta o cabelo' (Start working. Cut your hair).' Rui grew up in Agualva, a suburb of Lisbon. One day he went to school on a unicycle and the other kids laughed at him. 'The mentality is simply different.' He says a lot can be explained by the upbringing and the educational system in Portugal that he refers to as a 'violent system'. He recalls a teacher who even used a cane for punishment. But Rui found subtle forms of violence to be much more present. 'Everybody tells you to always be nice and good, so the world will give you something in return.' Being in Germany he came to think: 'I don't have to do anything I do not want to do.'

With a mixture of self-mockery and surprise he describes how he benefits from his Portuguese origin in the art scene. 'Here I am seen as exotic.' While 'Rui' is one of the most common first names in Portugal, in Germany it serves as his artist's name.

What's next for him? Maybe he will finish his PhD, maybe not. He wants to save up some money in order to travel, only carrying his guitar. In any case he wants to play some more concerts. That much is clear.

### **Carolina and André – not to blame for the crisis**

I met Carolina in September 2013 at a seminar of the Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung in Brussels. At that time she was studying journalism in Coímbra, working for the university's radio station and was the youngest participant of the seminar.

Today Carolina works at an online shop in Berlin. The company runs websites in 23 different countries. Carolina is in charge of the Portuguese website. Does she like the work? Is it stressful? She shakes her head wearily – the work is rather 'monotonous and boring'. She has been waiting for two months to be promoted to the marketing section. 'That would come closer to my educational background, to what I actually want to do.'

Carolina and André got to know each other when they were both working at their university's radio station. Two years ago Carolina finished her Bachelor's degree and started looking for a job. André was unemployed as well. Within two months Carolina arranged an internship in Berlin where she earned a minimum wage and the two of them began searching for an apartment. 'We didn't have anything to do in Portugal anyway. My parents always told me to go look around for work in Europe.' Nobody tends to stay in the smaller towns, most people look for jobs in Lisbon or Oporto. André calls it *desertificação*, desertification. The two of them do not believe that it is mostly the young which are affected by the crisis and start listing people from both families which have been unemployed for quite a while.

The problem is well-known: young, well-educated professionals, who can afford it, emigrate, go to places where they can find work and leave behind regions, which lack the supporting pillars of the social system. Nevertheless André and Carolina reject the argument that they should confront this brain drain instead of fleeing the country. 'Our generation is not to blame for the crisis.' It seems to be



more important for the couple to find any kind of job instead of the perfect dream job, in which they could grow to their full potential. Especially in the media sector this is a difficult task anyway. Since jobs in media are generally fiercely contested by young well-trained professionals, it is even more challenging to get a job there without the necessary language skills.

Carolina is impressed by the workplace strategies of German enterprises. ‘They try to make sure, that their employees are satisfied and content. Even if they do not pay wages as high as others. In Portugal, if you have a coffee machine at your office you can consider yourself very lucky.’ Ping-pong or free beer on Fridays, when she mentions this to her friends at home they can hardly believe it.

### **Berlin as a stop-over**

The young Portuguese I talked to did not necessarily come to Berlin in order to stay in the city for a long time. What sounds obvious is not necessarily self-evident: German language skills are required in most work sectors. Even in an international city like Berlin you can have a hard time if you don’t speak German. Apart from that head hunters of international companies based in Berlin are reaching out for well-trained professionals from all over Europe and therefore benefit from the precarious labour market in southern European countries. Everybody has their individual reasons for coming to Germany. The often-quoted Berlin hype is fading if you take a closer look at it. All the Portuguese I met came here more or less by coincidence not because they had been attracted by the city’s hipness. They do enjoy the cultural offerings, the vibe of the city, but at the same time Berlin simply is a city where you can live and work. Jobs and higher wages seem to be the most important factors for young people from Portugal to move here these days. The idea that people should stay in their home country in order to help build up the local economy sounds like a bad joke as soon as you talk to people who simply cannot find a job. Will Portugal’s new left-wing government be able to regain the trust of its youth, make them feel wanted again and provide them with jobs? Antonio Costa and his crew cannot be expected to work miracles, but perhaps his promise to break ‘the spiral of austerity’ will bring new hope.