

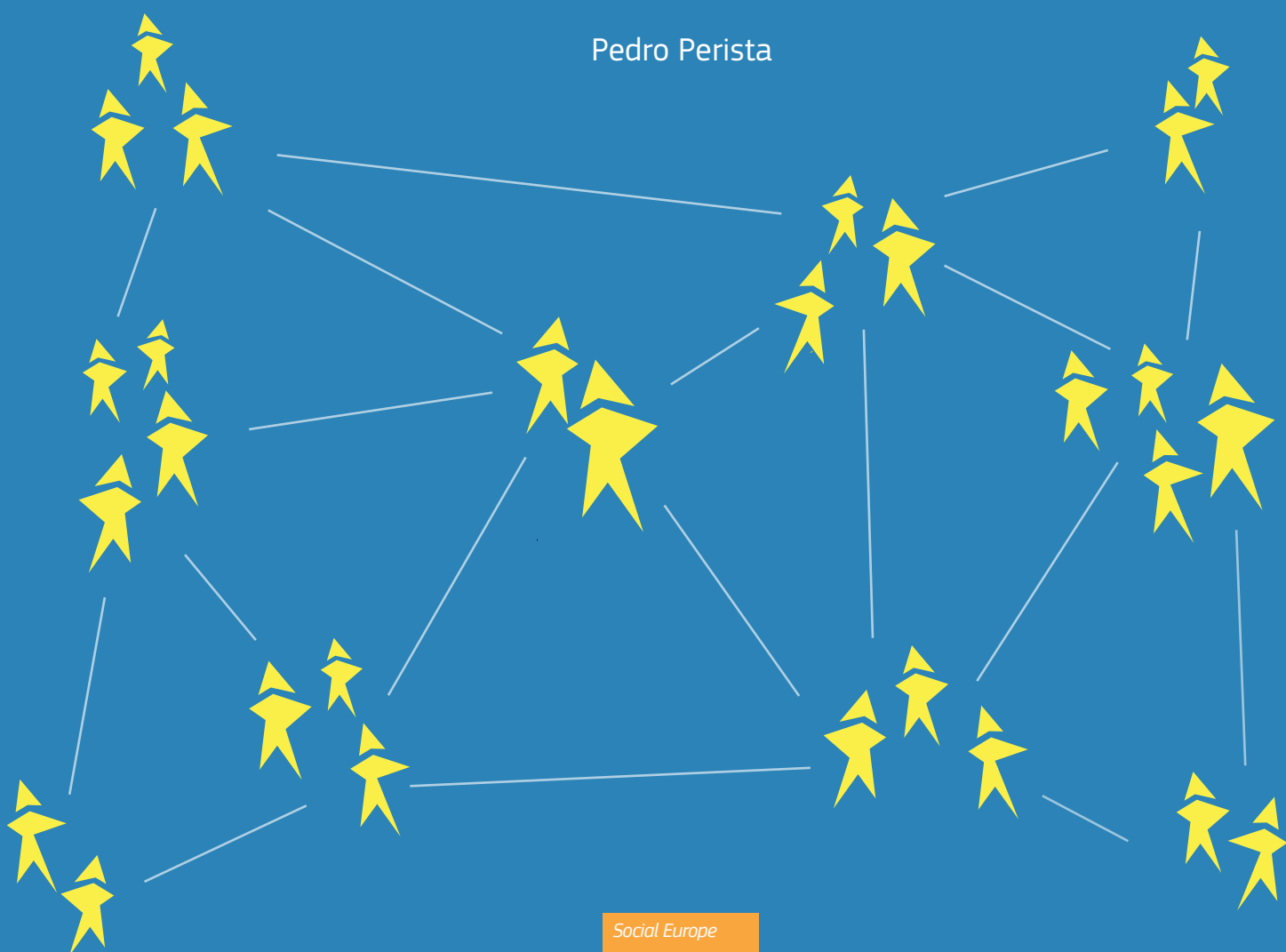


EUROPEAN SOCIAL POLICY NETWORK (ESPN)

Making access to social protection for workers and the self-employed more transparent through information and simplification

Portugal

Pedro Perista



EUROPEAN COMMISSION

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European Social Policy Network (ESPN)

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Summary

The purpose of this report is to identify and analyse policies put in place by the country to improve transparency in access to social protection, considering both access to information and simplification of access. The report focuses on the six social protection branches covered in the 2019 Council Recommendation on Access to social protection for workers and the self-employed (hereafter “2019 Council Recommendation”) and covers policies and measures implemented between January 2017 and May 2022.

In Portugal, in recent years, access to social protection in general for workers and the self-employed has become more transparent through access to information and simplification of access, in line with the government’s objectives.

As regards policies and practices to ensure access to information on social protection rights, entitlements and obligations, an important tool for ensuring access to general information about the conditions and rules of access to social protection is the Social Security website, where relevant information is provided regarding eligibility conditions, benefit entitlements, etc. The website also includes this information in PDF format through “practical guides”.

Aside from a continuing effort to update, and ensure simpler access to, general information, there has been an increased focus on ensuring access to personalised information.

The “social security with you” modernisation strategy was implemented from 2017 with direct links to the second generation of the Simplex programme, in place since 2016. This included the new “direct social security” portal as well as the renewal of the Social Security website in 2021.

Regarding general awareness-raising campaigns, a digital campaign in late 2019 was aimed at raising awareness regarding the importance of using and sharing parental benefits. The “We are On” campaign was launched in March 2020 as a way of promoting access to public digital services while making visible the exceptional policies and measures put in place in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The objective of simplifying access to social protection is mentioned in different relevant documents such as the green paper on the future of work, the Portuguese Recovery and Resilience Programme (PRR), the Portuguese 2021 National Plan on Access to social protection, and the Law on Grand Options.

Simplification objectives embedded in reforms of social protection schemes are to be found in the new regime for self-employed workers, in place since 2019. As for the simplification of the application process for accessing benefits, and of the structures within the social protection administration, different measures have been implemented covering most of the six branches under scrutiny.

Available evidence, including from evaluations and other studies, on issues related to information and simplification is scarce in Portugal, and public debate on those issues is limited. However, some reforms are underway focusing on simplifying access and on providing content within a user-centred approach. One area of investment envisaged in the PRR is aimed at the reorganisation and modernisation of the social security system, including (for instance) putting in place increased interoperability between information systems and the possibility for automatic deferrals as well as the digitalisation and simplification of information flows.

1 Current policies and practices to ensure information on, and to simplify access to social protection for workers and the self-employed

1.1 Policies and practices to ensure access to information on social protection rights, entitlements and obligations

This section focuses on policies and practices (including structures/tools) aimed at improving information about the conditions and rules of access to each of the six branches under scrutiny. These policies/practices can be organised at both collective level and individual level.

1.1.1 Policies and practices to ensure access to general and personalised information

This sub-section describes the main policies and practices which provide workers and the self-employed with general information on social protection and specific information on their individual rights, entitlements and obligations regarding access to each of the six branches. It also considers how access to personalised information is provided.

An important tool for ensuring access to general information about the conditions and rules of access to social protection is the Social Security website,¹ where relevant information is provided regarding, for instance, eligibility conditions and benefit entitlements. In addition, the website also includes this information in PDF format through “practical guides”.² The information they contain is reviewed whenever relevant.

Aside from a continuing effort to update, and ensure simpler access to, general information, recent years have witnessed an increased focus on ensuring access to personalised information.

The Portuguese National Plan on access to social protection within the monitoring framework of the 2019 Council Recommendation (hereafter “the Portuguese National Plan”) emphasises the government’s objective of modernising, simplifying and improving the transparency of the social security system, by bringing citizens closer to the system and facilitating their access to information, based on guaranteeing stability and predictability in the rules and on the sustainability of the social security system.

The plan emphasises the renewal of the Social Security website in May 2021, considering that its design is now simpler and more intuitive and easier to access. Furthermore, it considers that the content is provided using a user-centred approach, and complies with all accessibility standards, in order to ensure the access and inclusion of all citizens. It concludes that “*the availability and access to information on social protection was improved*” (República Portuguesa, 2021a: 21-22). This is expected to address gaps in data about access to social protection and to meet the needs of both citizens and companies. The new website is also mentioned as ensuring increased security in the access to information and as deepening the commitment to adapt to mobile devices.

A new platform for the dissemination of statistics was also launched on the same date, providing information in an interactive way.³ The information is now available through tables and allows for a simpler understanding and reading of the main indicators for the social security system, such as those concerning social benefits. This new platform also provides information on the declared remuneration and contributions of employees and

¹ <https://www.seq-social.pt/inicio> (all hyperlinks accessed 23 May 2023).

² Available at: <https://www.seq-social.pt/guias-praticos>.

³ Available at: <https://www.seq-social.pt/estatisticas> in respective sub-sections.

self-employed people, with data analysis also possible by downloading the respective files.

By May 2017 the government of the time had already started implementing a modernisation strategy entitled “social security with you” (*Segurança Social Consigo*). The strategy introduced 43 measures and digital tools to ensure access to information and to simplify access to social security information and services for citizens and companies. 25 measures targeted individual citizens, 25 targeted companies and eight targeted public administration.⁴ It was based on four areas of intervention: i) relationship⁵ (nine measures); ii) social benefits (10 measures); iii) declarations and contributions (16 measures); and iv) efficiency of social security (eight measures). The intended beneficiaries included all citizens, as well as employers and public administration.⁶ Some of these measures were also part of the Simplex programme, which was in place during 2006-2011 and resumed in 2016. It operates on a yearly basis, except for the latest programme, which covered 2020 and 2021. The programme includes measures aimed at promoting a business-friendly environment, building the capacity of public administration, and facilitating the access of all citizens to public services, notably by taking advantage of digital technologies.

Moreover, it should be mentioned that some measures target specific groups of individuals, most notably the self-employed. For instance, the 2018 Simplex+ programme included the objective (implemented in 2019) of creating services within the direct social security portal (*Segurança Social Direta*) allowing the self-employed to consult their personal situation regarding reporting and contributory obligations.

The direct social security portal⁷ was established within the framework of the “social security with you” strategy in 2017. It includes the ability to issue access passwords to the platform and to issue electronic tickets for face-to-face services and consultation of waiting lines from mobile devices. The platform includes an agenda of commitments regarding social security, a dedicated message box for every user and a dedicated sub-page (the “*posição atual*”) where the amounts to pay to and/or receive from Social Security and the respective dates may be consulted. The new platform also allows people to consult their contributory career and their personal history regarding (any) benefits received. Additionally, it became possible to schedule an appointment with the social security customer information services via video conference, which until then was only possible after contacting the services by phone. Since 2020, the platform has also included a chatbot using natural language processing, artificial intelligence and machine learning technologies.

In December 2018, the government took stock of the implementation of the strategy.⁸ By then, 30 of the 43 measures had already been implemented and three others had been partially implemented. The assessment concluded that the new direct social security portal and its “simple and easy to use interface” had improved the relationship between citizens and the social security system. The assessment mentioned that, between 11 October 2018 and 13 December 2018, a total of 126,567 access passwords to the platform had been issued, 42.7% of which concerned new users and 57.3% concerned password retrievals.

The assessment also mentioned that, from 2016 to 2017, the number of times the direct social security portal was accessed increased by 55%. It also pointed out that the

⁴ The same measure could target more than one group.

⁵ Set of measures aiming at simplifying the relationship of citizens with the social security system. It includes, for instance, the new social security portal and an agenda of commitments regarding social security.

⁶ According to the aforementioned assessment made by the government in December 2018, the estimated number of working hours saved in public administration resulting from the implementation of the platform amounted to 424,298.

⁷ There is a practical guide regarding access to the platform, available at: https://www.seg-social.pt/documents/10152/13523/N47seguranca_social_direta/9d67a026-1245-4c4e-a76f-490a4777d537.

⁸ Available at: <https://www.portugal.gov.pt/download-ficheiros/ficheiro.aspx?v=%3d%3dBAAAAB%2bLCAAAAAAABAAzszC0BADzQyRHBAAAAA%3d%3d>.

number of views of the agenda of commitments regarding social security increased by 3.52%. Between 2017 and 2018 the number of messages sent to citizens' dedicated message boxes increased by 270%. Between 2016 and 2018, the number of views – by citizens and companies – of the *posição atual* increased by 8.26%. Between 2016 and 2018, the number of electronic tickets issued for face-to-face services and consultation of waiting lines from mobile devices increased by 1.18%.

Aside from this assessment, we are not aware of any other surveys/studies that have been carried out in Portugal since 1 January 2017 to explore the extent to which citizens in general, and more particularly workers and the self-employed, are aware of their social protection rights and obligations.

Finally, it is worth emphasising that the 2017 and 2018 Simplex programmes included a measure on “ensuring accessibility and usability for all” (*Acessibilidade e usabilidade garantida para todos*). The measure was aimed at making all government and public administration portals more accessible to people with disabilities, allowing for their direct online and autonomous interaction with public services. It also included the elaboration of a manual with technical specifications, and the creation of a digital seal – awarded jointly by the Agency for Administrative Modernisation and the Foundation for Science and Technology to the sites respecting the national usability and accessibility rules. The measure was implemented in late 2018.

The provision of simple and user-friendly access to information via clear language practices is mentioned as representing a pillar of the implementation of the direct social security portal.⁹

1.1.1.1 Unemployment benefits

Online practical guides and similar information are available at the Social Security website regarding unemployment insurance and unemployment assistance (full and partial unemployment benefits) for workers and the equivalent benefit (the benefit for termination of activity) regarding different categories of self-employed people (those who are economically dependent; those who earn their income through a registered business of their own or possess an individual commercial establishment; and members of statutory bodies).¹⁰

1.1.1.2 Sickness and healthcare benefits

Online practical guides and similar information are available at the Social Security website regarding sickness and healthcare benefits.¹¹

One of the measures included in the “social security with you” strategy is the “electronic referral in integrated long-term care”. Since 2018, beneficiaries have been able to consult online the status regarding processes of referral to long-term care services.

1.1.1.3 Maternity and equivalent paternity benefits

Online practical guides and similar information are available at the Social Security website regarding maternity and equivalent paternity benefits.^{12/13}

One of the measures included in the “social security with you” strategy was “simpler parenthood” (*Parentalidade + Simples*). Within the scope of that, since 2018 people have

⁹ [http://www.rcc.gov.pt/Diretorio/Temas/MA/Paginas/Plataforma-da-Seguran%C3%A7a-Social,-a-nova-Seguran%C3%A7a-Social-Direta-\(SSD\).aspx](http://www.rcc.gov.pt/Diretorio/Temas/MA/Paginas/Plataforma-da-Seguran%C3%A7a-Social,-a-nova-Seguran%C3%A7a-Social-Direta-(SSD).aspx)

¹⁰ Available at: <https://www.seg-social.pt/desemprego>.

¹¹ Available at: <https://www.seg-social.pt/doenca>.

¹² The formulation used in Portugal is parental benefits and not maternity and paternity benefits. However, there are specific components that may be used only by the mother or only by the father.

¹³ Available at: <https://www.seg-social.pt/maternidade-e-paternidade>.

been able to consult the status of benefits linked to pregnancy and the birth of a child, at the new direct social security portal.

1.1.1.4 Invalidity benefits

Online practical guides and similar information are available at the Social Security website regarding invalidity benefits.¹⁴

One of the measures included in the “social security with you” strategy was the “list of support products for people with disabilities”, which has been available online at the Social Security website since 2017.¹⁵

The 2018 Simplex+ programme included a measure aimed at concentrating, in one single digital space, all the information relevant for someone confronted with a situation of permanent or temporary disability. The announced goal was to assist people searching for available support, and resulted in the elaboration and publication of the practical guide on the rights of people with disability. The guide was released in May 2019 and is available on the website of the National Institute for Rehabilitation.¹⁶

1.1.1.5 Old-age benefits and survivors’ benefits

Online practical guides and similar information are available at the Social Security website regarding old-age benefits and survivors’ benefits.¹⁷

One of the measures included in the “social security with you” strategy was “closer pensions” (*Pensões + próximas*). Within the scope of that, from May 2018 it became possible for people to forecast their pension amount through an online simulator included in the direct social security portal, which is expected to benefit all citizens.

The system allows for automatic as well as tailored simulations. For the former, the system retrieves the information already included in the system regarding salaries. Future salaries are calculated by increasing them by 1% per year (presupposing an inflation rate of 0.5% and real salary growth also of 0.5%). Contributions towards other national and foreign social protection systems are not considered. All these parameters may be changed when using a tailored simulation, in which case early-retirement options (such as in the case of disability or long-term unemployment) may also be considered.

Between 8 May 2018 and 13 December 2018, 2,446,578 simulations were undertaken in the new pension simulator included in the direct social security portal, 66.4% of which were automatic and 33.6% tailored (República Portuguesa, 2018a).

1.1.1.6 Benefits in respect of accidents at work and occupational diseases

Online practical guides and similar information are available at the Social Security website regarding benefits in respect of occupational diseases.¹⁸

1.1.2 General awareness-raising campaigns

This sub-section is aimed at describing information initiatives, notably awareness-raising campaigns, to improve awareness among workers and the self-employed of their rights, entitlements and obligations regarding access to one or more of the six branches under scrutiny. Additionally, it is aimed at describing information initiatives to ensure that the exceptional support measures in force during the COVID-19 crisis in relation to one or more of the six branches reached all the potential beneficiaries they were targeted at.

¹⁴ Available at: <https://www.seg-social.pt/invaliddez>.

¹⁵ Available at: <https://www.seg-social.pt/produtos-de-apoio-para-pessoas-com-deficiencia-ou-incapacidade#>.

¹⁶ Available at: https://www.inr.pt/guia_pratico.

¹⁷ Available at: <https://www.seg-social.pt/reforma>.

¹⁸ Available at: <https://www.seg-social.pt/doenca>.

To the best of our knowledge, since 2017 the only information initiative to improve awareness among workers and the self-employed of their rights, entitlements and obligations regarding access to the six branches under scrutiny, regarded maternity and equivalent paternity benefits (see Section 1.1.2.3 below).¹⁹

The following campaign did not address one or more of the six branches specifically.

The “We are On” (*Estamos On*) campaign was launched by the Portuguese government in March 2020, addressed at all citizens, as well as companies. Its main aim was to promote access to public digital services. It did not address any of the six branches specifically. However, it was indirectly linked to some of the benefits discussed in the report, as it was also aimed at making visible the exceptional policies and measures put in place in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, and thereby ensuring that the measures reached all the potential beneficiaries they were targeted at.

The campaign consisted notably of short videos that were broadcast on TV and in social media²⁰ and of a dedicated webpage and app gathering relevant information.²¹ It was also advertised in newspapers.

No information/evaluation of the impacts of the campaign could be found. Similarly, no action to promote different insurance possibilities with a view to improving the take-up of voluntary insurance schemes could be found.

1.1.2.1 Unemployment benefits

To the best of our knowledge, since 2017 there have been no information initiatives to improve awareness among workers and the self-employed of their rights, entitlements and obligations regarding access to unemployment benefits.

1.1.2.2 Sickness and healthcare benefits

To the best of our knowledge, since 2017 there have been no information initiatives to improve awareness among workers and the self-employed of their rights, entitlements and obligations regarding access to sickness and healthcare benefits.

1.1.2.3 Maternity and equivalent paternity benefits

The digital campaign “parental leave: sharing between mother and father” was begun in late 2019 by the Portuguese Commission for Equality in Labour and in Employment.²² The campaign was addressed at all citizens, notably those with children.

The campaign was aimed at raising awareness regarding the importance of using and sharing parental benefits, remembering that the Portuguese constitution determines that maternity and paternity are social values regarding which workers and the self-employed are entitled to be protected by society and the state. Different short videos were produced and broadcast.²³

No information/evaluation regarding the impacts of the campaign could be found.

¹⁹ Aside from that, there was also an awareness-raising campaign on the social insertion income (RSI), which is not included in the framework of the report. This campaign ran in the second half of October 2017 and included spots on television and radio, as well as posters in the press and on trains. It also included the creation of a phone line specifically for providing information regarding the RSI. A report by the GEP-MTSSS considered that this may have been a contributing factor in the increase in the number of beneficiaries of the scheme registered in 2017 (GEP-MTSSS, 2021: 36).

²⁰ Example available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ie2xnirLNZQ>.

²¹ <https://covid19estamoson.gov.pt/>

²² <https://www.ciq.gov.pt/2019/12/campanha-cite-licencas-parentais-2019/>

²³ Example available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=110jD3zuyJ0&t=26s>.

1.1.2.4 Invalidity benefits

To the best of our knowledge, since 2017 there have been no information initiatives to improve awareness among workers and the self-employed of their rights, entitlements and obligations regarding access to invalidity benefits.

1.1.2.5 Old-age benefits and survivors' benefits

To the best of our knowledge, since 2017 there have been no information initiatives to improve awareness among workers and the self-employed of their rights, entitlements and obligations regarding access to old-age benefits and survivors' benefits.

1.1.2.6 Benefits in respect of accidents at work and occupational diseases

To the best of our knowledge, since 2017 there have been no information initiatives to improve awareness among workers and the self-employed of their rights, entitlements and obligations regarding access to benefits in respect of accidents at work and occupational diseases.

1.2 Policies and practices to simplify access to social protection

The aim of this section is to describe the main national policies and practices designed to simplify access to the social protection schemes for workers and the self-employed in each of the six branches. Three main aspects of simplification are covered: i) simplification objectives embedded in reforms of social protection schemes; ii) simplification of the application process for benefits; and iii) simplification of the structures within the social protection administration.

Different relevant policy documents address the objective of simplifying access to social protection, such as the green paper on the future of work, the PRR and the Portuguese National Plan. The green paper on the future of work was issued in 2021 by the Office for Strategy and Planning of the Ministry of Labour, Solidarity and Social Security. It includes a set of reflections on changes of a substantive and operational nature, aimed at *"improving effectiveness and adequacy to atypical work modalities, so that the social security duty of ensuring income replacement social benefits does not lose its efficiency"*. The suggested changes include the following: i) simplifying access to social protection systems for all categories of workers, promoting the reduction of bureaucracy, while taking advantage of new technologies; and ii) implementing a digital reform of social security and of the way it connects with companies, citizens and beneficiaries, including a focus on personalised responses to beneficiaries, using artificial intelligence (Moreira, Dray, Neves, 2022: 184). The way the PRR and the Portuguese National Plan address the objective of simplifying access to social protection will be detailed in the following sub-sections.

1.2.1 Simplification objective embedded in reforms of social protection schemes

This sub-section covers policies and practices regarding which the authority in charge explicitly stated the objective of simplifying access to social protection schemes available for workers and/or the self-employed in one or several of the six branches under scrutiny.

Decree-law 2/2018, of 9 January, taking effect in January 2019, established a new regime for self-employed workers. The changes were described as being based on a set of fundamental principles that should contribute to strengthening a trust relationship between the social security system and the self-employed and to improving social protection for the self-employed, as well as on *"the need to promote simplification and more transparency in the relationship between social security and the self-employed"* (República Portuguesa, 2018b: 238).

The Portuguese National Plan describes the different amendments and adjustments made to the self-employment scheme, aimed at filling gaps and shortcomings in these workers' social protection, including in relation to the transparency of rules, as "*meeting, in advance, the normative requirements of the Recommendation*" (República Portuguesa, 2021: 11).

1.2.1.1 Unemployment benefits

There was no simplification objective embedded in reforms in respect of unemployment benefits specifically.

1.2.1.2 Sickness and healthcare benefits

There was no simplification objective embedded in reforms in respect of sickness and healthcare benefits specifically.

1.2.1.3 Maternity and equivalent paternity benefits

There was no simplification objective embedded in reforms in respect of maternity and equivalent paternity benefits specifically.

1.2.1.4 Invalidity benefits

There was no simplification objective embedded in reforms in respect of invalidity benefits specifically.

1.2.1.5 Old-age benefits and survivors' benefits

There was no simplification objective embedded in reforms in respect of old-age benefits and survivors' benefits specifically.

1.2.1.6 Benefits in respect of accidents at work and occupational diseases

There was no simplification objective embedded in reforms of benefits in respect of accidents at work and occupational diseases specifically.

1.2.2 Simplification of the application process for accessing benefits

This sub-section is aimed at describing the main policies and practices that seek to simplify the application process for accessing benefits.

According to the Portuguese National Plan, the set of reforms and investment included within the scope of the PRR's "modernisation" flagship initiative, "*is also designed to focus on simplification, digitalisation and automatic granting of social benefits to guarantee that they are paid more swiftly to the beneficiaries*" (República Portuguesa, 2021a: 22). This same formulation is used in the Law on Grand Options 2021-2025.²⁴

1.2.2.1 Unemployment benefits

A measure within the 2020/21 Simplex programme develops the ability to apply for unemployment insurance and unemployment assistance benefits online. Such a possibility is now available²⁵ through the portal of the Institute for Employment and Vocational Training, but only to former employees (i.e. formerly self-employed people cannot access this possibility).

²⁴ The Grand Options 2022 should have been presented to the parliament on 15 April 2022. However, considering that the new government only took office in late March 2022, the presentation was postponed till late June 2022.

²⁵ The concrete timing of implementation could not be found.

1.2.2.2 Sickness and healthcare benefits

One of the measures included in the “social security with you” strategy was the “electronic referral in integrated long-term care”. An online request for social security co-payments within the scope of the integrated long-term care network became possible in 2017. An automatic exchange of information with the Ministry of Health was also put in place.

A measure within the 2020/21 Simplex programme regards giving beneficiaries of the Military Social Action Institute (IASFA) the ability to register/renew their registration as beneficiaries of the military sickness insurance scheme, and to present their health expenses online. The measure has been in place since late-2021.

1.2.2.3 Maternity and equivalent paternity benefits

One of the measures included in the “social security with you” strategy was “simpler parenthood”. Within the scope of that, online requests for benefits linked to pregnancy and the birth of a child became possible at the new portal from 2018.

1.2.2.4 Invalidity benefits

There were no concrete policies and practices designed to simplify the application process for accessing invalidity benefits.

1.2.2.5 Old-age benefits and survivors’ benefits

One of the measures included in the “social security with you” strategy was “closer pensions”. Within the scope of that, as of May 2018 the electronic submission of pension applications became possible.

The 2019 “iSimplex” programme included a measure, implemented in 2020, aimed at ensuring that beneficiaries who have worked only in Portugal, and who have claimed their old-age pension online through the direct social security portal, are informed of the amount of their pension within a maximum period of 60 days.

The 2020/21 Simplex programme includes a further step – “instant pension” (*Pensão na Hora*), through which people can obtain an automatic deferral based on a provisional value as long as they have reached the pensionable age and comply with the necessary contribution period. This may also include citizens who have made contributions outside Portugal as long as they comply with the necessary contribution period in Portugal. However, the amount of the pension will only reflect the contributions made in Portugal and will be provisional until the moment that people’s entire contribution career is determined and considered. The measure was implemented in 2021.

The 2020-2021 Simplex programme also includes a measure aimed at allowing pension applications by civil servants registered in the Caixa Geral de Aposentações sub-system (CGA)²⁶ by reusing data already included in the system. The measure was implemented in 2020.

1.2.2.6 Benefits in respect of accidents at work and occupational diseases

There were no concrete policies and practices designed to simplify the application process for accessing benefits related to accidents at work and occupational diseases.

²⁶ The CGA covers civil servants who had started working in the public sector before 2006. The pension scheme of these employees has been closed since 2007 and has been phasing out in a convergence process towards the general regime of social security since 2005.

1.2.3 Simplification of the structures within the social protection administration

This sub-section describes the main policies and practices designed to simplify the structures within the administration of social protection.

The PRR emphasises that *“by its nature, the field of social security (...) needs generalised strengthening and simplification rooted in the digital relationship with citizens and companies”* (República Portuguesa, 2021b: 181).

With this end in mind, one of the objectives included in the PRR regards the modernisation and simplification of public financial management. This objective includes the promotion of the user-friendliness of the system in terms of its user-facing aspect while also catering for the diversity of social risks in the background. However, it is important to emphasise that the prominent goals of the reform link more directly to increasing the effectiveness and efficiency of the social security system, and the need to promote the control, quality and sustainability of the management of public finances. These goals are in line with the 2019 and 2020 Country-Specific Recommendations as well as with different national laws and plans, such as the new budgetary framework law (República Portuguesa, 2021b).

Regarding the preservation, accumulation or portability of benefit rights in the self-employment scheme, the Portuguese National Plan considers that there are no issues or any administrative barriers, as *“the management of this scheme is carried out in an integrated manner with the scheme of employees, through a single contributory career”* (República Portuguesa, 2021a: 19).

According to the Portuguese National Plan, the set of reforms and investment included in the PRR’s modernisation initiative are aimed at providing a swifter and more efficient social response to citizens. To that end, there is the aim of reinforcing human resources, as well as investing in information systems (República Portuguesa, 2021a).

One of the measures included in the 2019 iSimplex programme regarded the increased interconnection of data with the tax authority, eliminating the need for the self-employed to make quarterly and annual declarations to Social Security. However, this measure has not so far been implemented.

On February 2021, a project team was created for the management, follow-up and monitoring of processes of administrative modernisation and simplification within the scope of the Simplex programme.²⁷ The team works under the Institute of Social Security (ISS) and had an initial mandate of 12 months (starting in January 2021), to be extended according to need. However, no further information regarding this team and/or its work could be found.

1.2.3.1 Unemployment benefits

There were no concrete policies and practices designed to simplify the structures within the administration of social protection with regard to unemployment benefits.

1.2.3.2 Sickness and healthcare benefits

Regarding beneficiaries of the IASFA, data are updated automatically by resorting to interoperability and data-sharing with the services of the state’s central administration, the tax authority, the ISS, the Institute of Registries and Notary, and the Agency for Administrative Modernisation. Additionally, the adaptation of the information system of the health sub-system for civil servants allows for the creation of synergies.

²⁷ Deliberação (extrato) n.º 132/2021, Diário da República, 2.ª série – N.º 23 – 3 de fevereiro de 2021. Available at: <https://files.dre.pt/2s/2021/02/02300000/0005800059.pdf>.

In overall terms, an automatic exchange of information between Social Security and the Ministry of Health also came into effect.

1.2.3.3 Maternity and equivalent paternity benefits

There were no concrete policies and practices designed to simplify the structures within the administration of social protection with regard to maternity and equivalent paternity benefits.

1.2.3.4 Invalidity benefits

The 2017 and 2018 Simplex+ programmes included the design and implementation of an electronic system allowing for the management of applications made for a special education allowance. The aim was to eliminate the exchange of procedural information on paper between the education and social security departments, thus contributing to speeding up services and cutting processing times. The measure was implemented in 2018 but then terminated due to changes in the legal framework.

1.2.3.5 Old-age benefits and survivors' benefits

The 2019 iSimplex programme included a measure aimed at ensuring that beneficiaries who had worked only in Portugal, and had claimed their old-age pension online through the direct social security portal, were informed of the amount of their pension within a maximum period of 60 days. This measure was expected to benefit all those requiring an old-age pension, as well as the administrative system. It was implemented in 2020.

According to follow-up information on the implementation of the programme,²⁸ it is currently possible to fulfil the above-mentioned objective within 48 hours.

1.2.3.6 Benefits in respect of accidents at work and occupational diseases

The 2017 and 2018 Simplex+ programmes included the development of a web service for the exchange of information regarding the co-funding of medicines related to occupational diseases, including a list of medicines associated with each occupational disease. The service is aimed at speeding up the exchange of information between the health regional administrations and the ISS, thus contributing to increased efficiency of the administrative process. It was implemented in 2018.

²⁸ Available at: <https://www.simplex.gov.pt/simplex2019/medidas>.

2 Issues, debates and ongoing or planned reforms to ensure information on, and to simplify access to, social protection for workers and the self-employed

2.1 Issues, debates and reforms related to information

This section describes issues and debates, as well as ongoing or planned reforms, aimed at ensuring information on social protection for workers and the self-employed.

2.1.1 Issues

There is no evidence, including from evaluations and other studies, on issues related to information in Portugal.

2.1.2 Debates

There are no debates on issues related to information in Portugal.

2.1.3 Ongoing or planned reforms

There is not much evidence regarding ongoing or planned reforms aimed at improving access to general and personalised information about the six branches under scrutiny. The Portuguese National Plan considers that the investment foreseen in the PRR in terms of the digital transition “*will also allow the access to a more comprehensive treatment of the available information*” (República Portuguesa, 2021: 21-22). However, no further information was found regarding how this commitment is going to be translated into more concrete implementation programmes.

2.2 Issues, debates and reforms related to simplification

This section describes issues and debates, as well as ongoing or planned reforms, aimed at simplifying access to social protection for workers and the self-employed.

2.2.1 Issues

Evidence on issues related to simplification, including from evaluations and other studies, is scarce in Portugal. As emphasised by a paper focusing on the effectiveness of the Simplex+ programme, which used interviews with relevant stakeholders: “*there is no evidence of a structured evaluation of Simplex measures performance through efficiency and effectiveness indicators. None of the interviewees know how the impact of Simplex measures has been officially assessed, which evaluation reports exist and what KPI are used*” (Tavares, 2020: 25).

In 2017, the Portuguese government launched an impact evaluation of 13 measures of the 2016 Simplex+ programme (ISEGI-NOVA Information Management School, 2017). The report taking stock of the implementation of Simplex+ 2017²⁹ considered that this evaluation was an important element of the programme. However, it should be emphasised that the measures assessed are largely outside the scope of this report. The only possible exception regards a measure aimed at simplifying remuneration declarations to Social Security which may apply to self-employed workers with employees.

²⁹ Available at: <https://simplex.gov.pt/simplexmais/app/files/85760296ee27f0acb4afe22352d94000.pdf>.

2.2.2 Debates

During the general election campaign held in January 2022, some media seem to have paid (limited) attention to the proposals of the main political parties regarding (simplification in) social security.

Within this framework, they emphasised that the electoral programme of the Socialist Party – winner of the elections and currently in office – included the unification of different non-contributory social benefits, following the simplified model already used for the social benefit for inclusion (which replaced three previously existing benefits).³⁰ Social benefits mentioned as possibly being involved in this simplification process include unemployment assistance, the non-contributory parental benefit, the solidarity supplement for older people, and the RSI (the latter two are outside the scope of this report). No explicit reference to the 2019 Council Recommendation could be found regarding debates on simplification.

2.2.3 Ongoing or planned reforms

The latest action plan of the ISS, released in November 2021, mentioned as one of its strategic guidelines in terms of organisational development “*the contribution towards the debureaucratisation and simplification of social security procedures*” (GPE-ISS, 2021: 13). To this end, the PRR may provide an important contribution, as it includes an investment under the name of “digital transition of social security”. The PRR is expected to guide Social Security’s process of digital transition through increased flexibility and speed in the implementation of new measures, as well as more transparency and simplification of processes (GPE-ISS, 2021).

The PRR investment is based on five strategic axes. The most relevant for the purposes of this report are the following: first, the reorganisation of the design of the social security system and the modernisation of the social security information system as regards different areas – including benefits, contributions, information management and payment channels; and second, the development and implementation of a new model for the relationship of citizens and companies with social security (“Vision 360°”), which expedites and integrates into an omnichannel the different channels in place, using emerging technologies.

Relevant investment envisioned under the first axis includes: i) modernisation in terms of the architecture, accessibility, usability, security and availability of the direct social security portal; ii) simplification, digitalisation and automatising of the processes regarding social benefits (e.g. automatic deferrals, digitalisation and simplification of information flows); iii) simplification of declaration procedures by self-employed workers through interoperability with tax authorities; iv) modernisation of the channels for payments and receipts through the use of new solutions (e.g. MBWay); and v) implementation of interoperability between the information systems of labour and social security through the use of new technologies (e.g. machine learning, artificial intelligence). Table 1 below provides the timing and related investment regarding interventions in axes 1 and 2.

Media reports³¹ suggest that the government is preparing a set of reforms which, according to the Minister of Labour, Solidarity and Social Security, amounts to “a digital revolution” that will eliminate “senseless bureaucracy”. Planned reforms include unifying a set of non-contributory benefits, following the proposals made in the electoral programme of the governing party (see Section 2.2.2), and the automatic granting of

³⁰ For a detailed description of this social benefit, targeting people with disabilities with an associated degree of incapacity of at least 60%, please refer to Perista (2022).

³¹ “Governo vai eliminar declarações mensais de remunerações”, DN 27/04/2022, available at: <https://www.dn.pt/dinheiro/governo-vai-eliminar-declaracoes-mensais-de-remuneracoes-14803183.html>.

some benefits without prior application. No indication is provided on which concrete benefits are at issue.

No explicit reference to the 2019 Council Recommendation could be found in the documents screened.

Table 1 – Distribution of the investment in axes 1 and 2, per intervention and year (€)

	2021	2022	2023	2024	2025	2026	Total
Axis 1	11,132,797	26,659,227	26,959,220	24,789,169	19,489,169	6,520,214	115,549,796
PTSS New Generation	4,200,000	6,900,000	6,700,000	6,530,000	5,330,000	2,000,000	31,660,000
Simplification of contributions	309,739	2,636,169	2,636,169	2,636,169	2,636,169	499,999	11,354,414
Data analytics initiatives	0	3,000,000	3,500,000	3,000,000	1,000,000	0	10,500,000
Simplification, digitalisation and automatisisation of processes regarding social benefits	2,000,000	4,600,000	4,600,000	4,100,000	2,000,000	500,000	17,800,000
PTSS co-operation	300,000	1,000,000	1,000,000	1,000,000	1,000,000	1,000,000	5,300,000
New digital services	3,523,058	6,523,058	6,523,051	5,523,000	5,523,000	520,215	28,135,382
Databases supporting PTSS	800,000	2,000,000	2,000,000	2,000,000	2,000,000	2,000,000	10,800,000
Axis 2	3,667,387	2,681,417	2,612,408	2,181,752	4,067,852	1,339,551	16,550,367
Relationship solutions	1,324,577	1,102,825	983,816	470,660	1,579,260	398,459	5,859,597
Modernisation of service channels	1,792,810	928,592	1,078,592	1,211,092	1,688,592	791,092	7,490,770
Automation solutions (AI, RPA, PM, ML)	550,000	650,000	550,000	500,000	800,000	150,000	3,200,000

Source: GPE-ISS, 2021: 92.

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