



*Spain must choose: to be an open and prosperous country or a closed and poor country. We have chosen the first option,"* Pedro Sánchez, Spanish Prime Minister, speaking in the Congress of Deputies on 9 October 2024.

# RETHINKING MIGRATION : THE SPANISH MODEL

Translated from the original French version :  
*Politique migratoire : l'exception espagnole*

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# Abstract

For a long time a land of emigration, Spain has become one of the European Union's main host countries for immigration in just a few decades. This rapid transformation, which began in the 1990s, has had a profound impact on Spain's demographic, economic and political trajectory. In 2025, nearly 19 % of the population residing in Spain are immigrants, with very diverse profiles and origins such as Latin America, Morocco, or Eastern Europe. Immigration is now an essential lever for addressing demographic ageing in the country, maintaining its economic growth and meeting the needs of its labour market.

Spain stands out for its pragmatic migration policy, which focuses on labour immigration and is based on inclusion through employment. Successive large-scale regularisation programmes have enabled the integration of hundreds of thousands of undocumented workers without creating a pull factor, with a proven positive impact on public finances and economic growth. This conscious choice is largely based on a tradition of social dialogue between the State, trade unions and employers' organisations, and on the involvement of local authorities. However, access to rights remains unequal and administrative procedures are often complex.

The country holds a geographical position that makes it a strategic gateway to the Schengen area. The management of migration routes, particularly in Ceuta, Melilla and the Canary Islands, is marked by recurring tensions and controversial practices. Bilateral agreements with neighbouring countries of departure and transit, particularly Morocco, are accompanied by security cooperation and readmission policies, within a restrictive European framework. The asylum protection rate remains low and reception capacities are insufficient.

Despite the rise of political speech targeting foreigners, especially from the political party Vox, Spanish public opinion remains largely in favour of welcoming immigrants, driven by the perception of their positive economic role in society. The media, NGOs and the Church are contributing to this dynamic. Spain has a unique migration policy based on work and inclusion, its current government speaks a humanist language, in an increasingly polarised European context characterised by policies of closure and rejection of immigration.



# Introduction

Long a country of emigration, Spain has become, in just a few decades, one of the main countries of immigration in Europe. This historic reversal, which began in the 1990s, took place in a context of economic growth, demographic change and European integration. Today, nearly one-fifth of the population residing in Spain was born abroad. This dynamic places Spanish migration policy at the heart of its contemporary economic, social and geopolitical challenges.

The aim of this study is to analyse, in all its dimensions, Spain's migration policy as it has been developed and transformed since the 1980s to the present day. It highlights how Spain has balanced immigration, the labour market and integration, while taking into account European border control requirements and its commitments to asylum rights and international cooperation. By cross-referencing legislative developments, administrative practices and economic and social realities, the study highlights a unique pragmatic approach based in particular on inclusion through work and mass regularisation.

This Spanish singularity, which is particularly evident in the central role played by economic considerations, raises an essential question: how does Spanish migration policy differ from that of its European neighbours, and what lessons can be learned from it in a context of demographic and political realignment on the continent?

To answer these questions, the study is divided into five sections. It first traces demographic trends and migration flows in Spain since the 1980s (1), then examines the role of labour immigration and regularisation programmes (2). It then analyses border and asylum policy (3), integration measures (4), and finally how the Spanish political world approaches immigration, its perception in public opinion and its treatment in the media (5).



# 1

## Demography and immigration, coping with decline

### In brief

Spain has a relatively recent history of immigration. Long a country of emigration, Spain became one of the main destinations for immigration in Europe in the 1990s, due to economic growth linked to its entry into the EU. The number of immigrants rose from 700,000 in 1999 to 5 million in 2009. After a decline due to the 2008 economic crisis, arrivals have been on the rise again since 2018. In 2022, the reasons for entry are varied: movement of European citizens, work, family reunification and humanitarian reasons. Immigration partially offsets demographic ageing. Without it, the Spanish population could fall by 48 million to 24 million by 2100. In 2025, nearly 19% of the resident population will be immigrants. Forty percent will come from Latin America, while Moroccans have become the largest foreign community. Overall, this is a fairly young immigrant population. An average of 150,000 people are naturalised each year under a residence-based system. These trends make migration a crucial issue for Spain's demographic and economic future.

To better understand Spain's migration policy, it is necessary to examine the evolution of migration flows (1.1), the profiles of immigrants (1.2) and the conditions for immigrants to acquire Spanish nationality (1.3).



## 1.1 Historical emigration, recent immigration

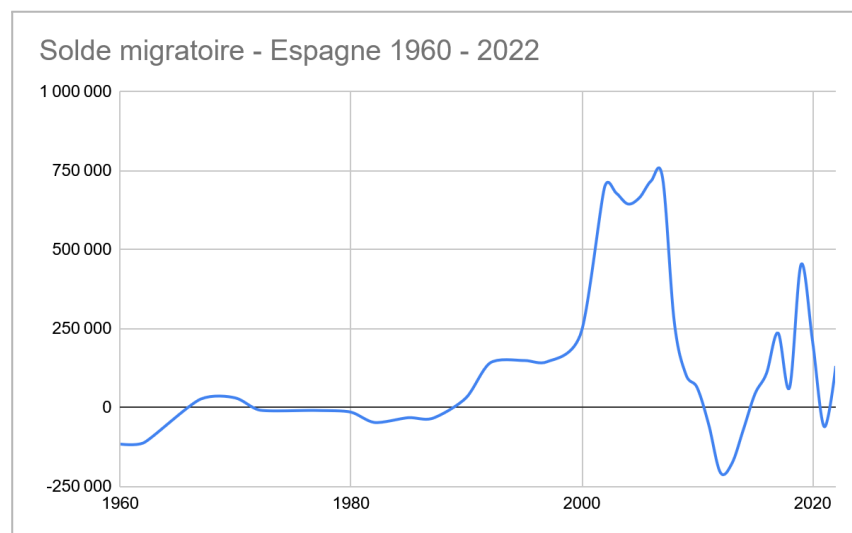
Spain has a relatively recent history of immigration. Until the 1990s, Spain was primarily a country of emigration, but in the 2000s it became one of the main countries of immigration in Europe<sup>1</sup>(a), with a variety of reasons for immigration (b) against a backdrop of demographic decline (c).

### a. Migration flows in contemporary Spanish history

To fully understand the evolution of migratory flows, it is useful to refer to the net migration rate<sup>2</sup>, which measures the difference between arrivals (immigration) and departures (emigration).

Figure 1. Net migration in Spain 1960-2022

Source : compiled by the authors using Eurostat data and 'Perspective Monde', University of Sherbrooke, Quebec, Canada<sup>3</sup>



As for emigration, from the end of the 19th century onwards, Spanish people left for Latin America, Algeria and France<sup>4</sup>. Between the 1960s and 1980s, a period marked by Francoism, many people left for Europe, with around 1.3 million Spanish people leaving their country<sup>5</sup>, while more than 100,000 nationals emigrate to Latin America, Canada and the United States. More recently, in the last decade, there has been a flow of young Spanish

<sup>1</sup> Gemma Larramona, « Espagne : l'émigration des immigrés », *Populations*, 2013, vol. 68, p. 249 ; Verónica Viteri et Santiago Martínez Sánchez, « L'Espagne de pays d'émigration à pays d'accueil », *Outre-terre*, 2017, n° 3, p. 97.

<sup>2</sup> Définition de l'INED : le solde migratoire (ou accroissement migratoire) est la différence entre le nombre de personnes qui sont entrées sur un territoire (immigrants) et le nombre de personnes qui en sont sorties (émigrants), calculé le plus souvent au cours d'une année.

<sup>3</sup> Sources disponibles sur [Eurostat](#) ainsi que celles de l'Université de [Sherbrook](#) (Canada) pour compléter d'un point de vue historique les données Eurostat.

<sup>4</sup> Franck Chignier-Riboulon, « L'Espagne devenue un grand pays d'immigration : histoire et géographie de sa présence étrangère », *Populations & Avenir*, 2023, n° 761, p. 17. Les Espagnol·es ont notamment immigré à Oran, en Algérie : Guy Brunet et Kamel Kateb, « Les Espagnols dans la région d'Oran au milieu du XIXe siècle. Mariages, comportements matrimoniaux, liens familiaux et liens sociaux », *Annales de démographie historique*, 2018, n° 1, p. 81.

<sup>5</sup> José Naranjo Ramírez, « Espagne : de l'émigration à l'immigration », *ATALA*, "Les Espagnes", 2008, p. 130.

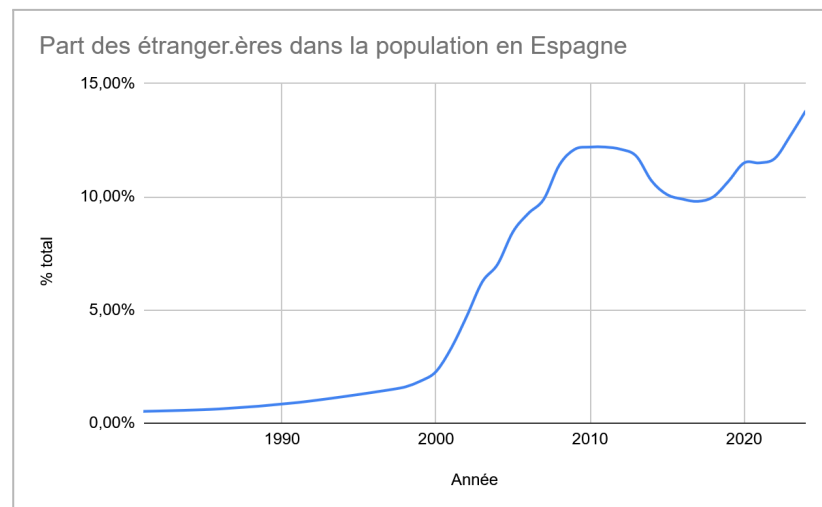


people to France and the United Kingdom, linked to a less favourable relationship between high levels of education and job opportunities<sup>6</sup>.

As for immigration, significant inflows to Spain date back to the 1990s, driven by economic growth largely attributed to its entry into the European Community in 1986. Immigration increased rapidly until 2009. In 1999, Spain had around 700,000 immigrants, representing 1.6% of the population, reaching more than 5 million in 2009, 10 years later, or 12% of the population<sup>7</sup>. Subsequently, the proportion of immigrants in the population fluctuated, falling to 10.7% in 2010, due to the combined effect of an increase in emigration of Spanish citizens and the departure of immigrants, linked in particular to the economic crisis of 2008<sup>8</sup>.

Figure 2. Proportion of foreigners in the Spanish population, 1980-2024

Source : authors' calculations based on INE data<sup>9</sup>



Immigration and emigration have thus fluctuated since the 1990s in line with the country's economic health. During the 1990s, the construction and real estate sectors in particular boomed and attracted immigrants<sup>10</sup>. Conversely, the economic crisis of 2008 led to a drop in immigration and a resumption of emigration, resulting in a negative net migration balance from 2011 to 2014, before rising again<sup>11</sup>. Other factors also explain the decline in immigration, such as the development of a visa policy towards certain Latin American countries and financial incentives for immigrants to return<sup>12</sup>. However, the flow of arrivals is picking up again from 2018 to the present day, with a hiatus during the COVID health crisis<sup>13</sup>.

<sup>6</sup> Alberto Capote Lama, Sandra López Pereiro et Belén Fernández Suárez, « Pourquoi les Espagnols émigrent à nouveau vers la France et le Royaume-Uni ? », *Populations et Sociétés*, n° 629, janvier 2025, p. 1., Alberto Capote Lama et Belén Fernández-Suárez, « La nouvelle émigration espagnole au-delà des «Eurostars » », *Hommes & Migrations*, 2023, n° 1341, p. 57.

<sup>7</sup> Gemma Larramona, « Espagne : l'émigration des immigrants », *Populations*, 2013, vol. 68, p. 249.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> Instituto Nacional de Estadística, [Continuous Population Statistics](#), avril 2025.

<sup>10</sup> Franck Chignier-Riboulon, « L'Espagne devenue un grand pays d'immigration : histoire et géographie de sa présence étrangère », *Populations & Avenir*, 2023, n° 761, p. 18.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

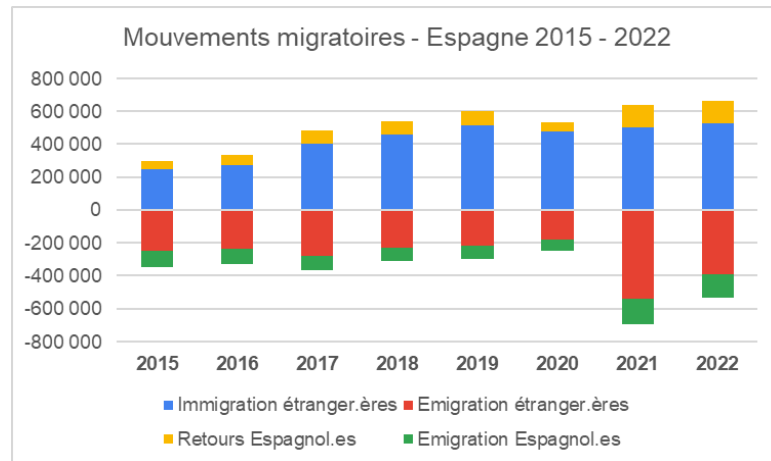
<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> Franck Chignier-Riboulon, L'Espagne devenue un grand pays d'immigration : histoire et géographie de sa présence étrangère, *Populations & Avenir*, 2023, n° 761, p. 18.



Figure 3. Migratory movements in Spain, 2015-2022

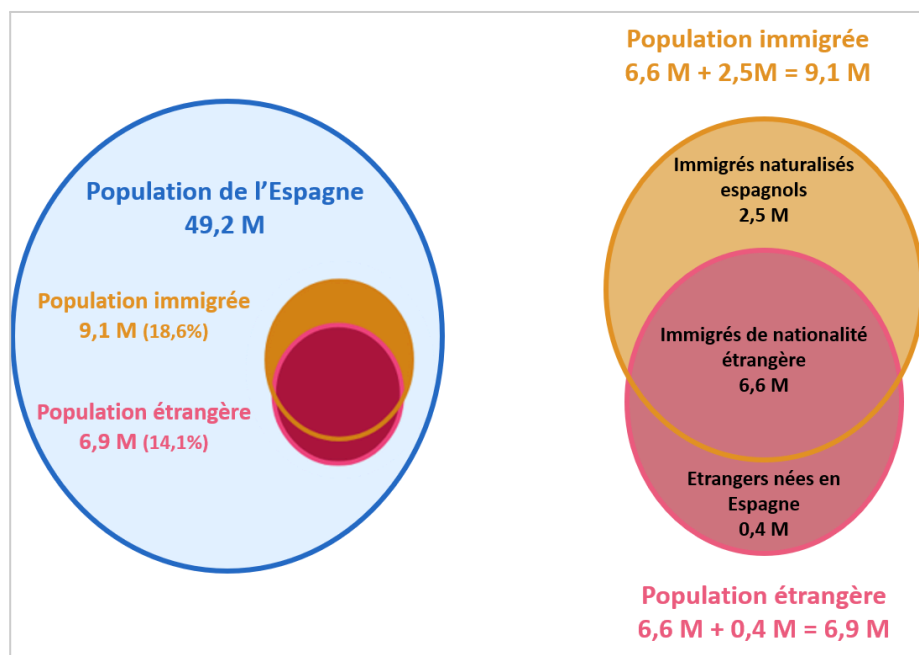
Source : compiled by the authors based on INE and OECD data<sup>14</sup>



At the end of the first quarter of 2025, according to statistics published by the *Instituto Nacional de Estadística* (Spanish National Statistics Institute - INE)<sup>15</sup>, out of a population of 49.2 million, Spain has 9.1 million immigrants (18.6% of the population), of whom 2.5 million are naturalised Spanish citizens, and 6.9 million foreigners (14.1% of the population).

Figure 4. Immigrant and foreign population in Spain, as a percentage of the total population, 1st quarter of 2025

Source : compiled by the authors based on INE data<sup>16</sup>



<sup>14</sup> [Instituto Nacional de Estadística](#) ; [OCDE, Perspectives des migrations internationales](#).

<sup>15</sup> [Estadística Continua de Población \(ECP\)](#), INE, 1/04/2025.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*



As of 1 January 2024, Spain ranks 9th among European Union countries in terms of the proportion of people born abroad within its population<sup>17</sup>.

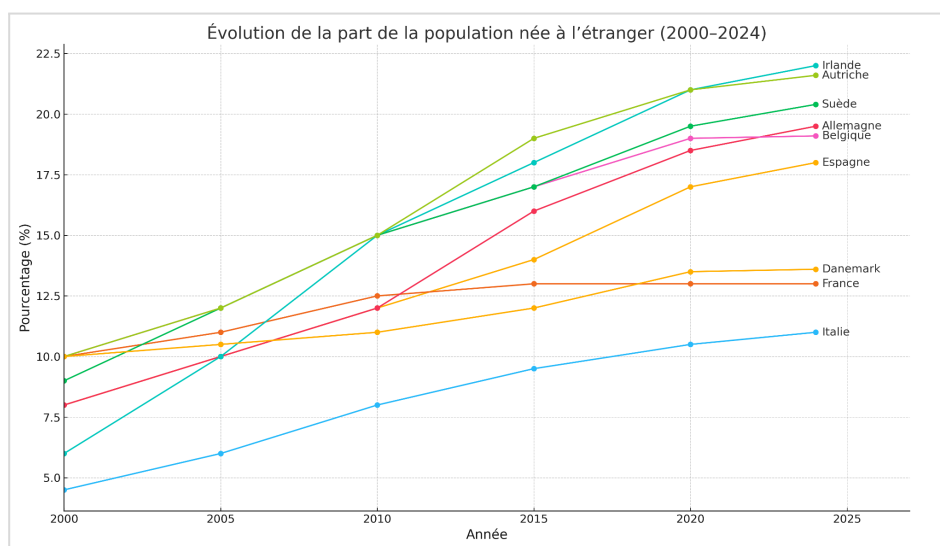
Figure 5. Proportion of the population born abroad, as of 1 January 2024, ranking of the top 15 EU countries

Rang	Pays	% de population née à l'étranger
1	Luxembourg	51,0 %
2	Malte	30,8 %
3	Chypre	26,9 %
4	Irlande	21,8 %
5	Autriche	21,6 %
6	Suède	20,4 %
7	Allemagne	19,5 %
8	Belgique	19,1 %
9	Espagne	17,1 %
10	Portugal	16,1 %
11	Pays-Bas	15,6 %
12	Danemark	13,6 %
13	France	13,1 %
14	Grèce	11,3 %
15	Italie	10,9 %

Source : authors' calculations based on Eurostat data<sup>18</sup>

With regard to immigration trends in Spain within Europe, a comparison with other EU countries shows that Spain, like other countries such as Ireland and Germany, has seen a very significant increase in its immigrant population over the last two decades, representing almost 20% of its population today, a very significant difference from certain countries such as France and Denmark, where the proportion of immigrants has increased only slightly over the same period<sup>19</sup>.

Figure 6. Change in the proportion of the population born abroad in nine EU countries, 2000-2024



Source : authors' calculations based on Eurostat data<sup>20</sup>

<sup>17</sup> [Population on 1 January 2024 by country of birth](#), Eurostat.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

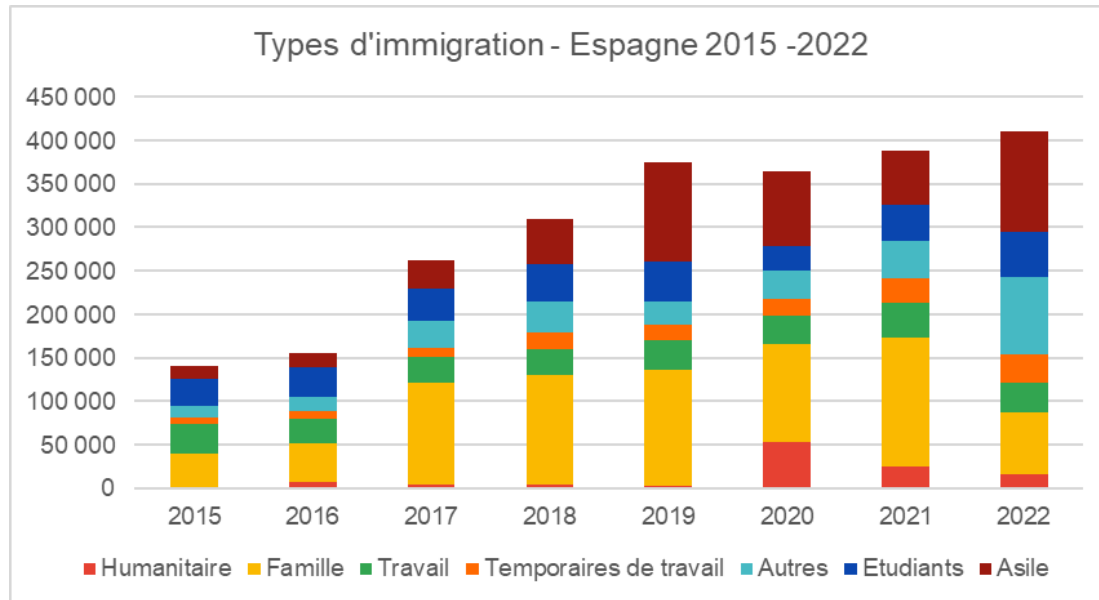
<sup>19</sup> [Population on 1 January by age group, sex and country of birth](#) (code : migr\_pop3ctb), 2000 - 2024, Eurostat

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*



## b. Different types of immigration to Spain

Figure 7. Number of residence permits issued by reason in Spain, per year, 2015-2022



Source : authors' calculations based on OECD data - International Migration Outlook<sup>21</sup>

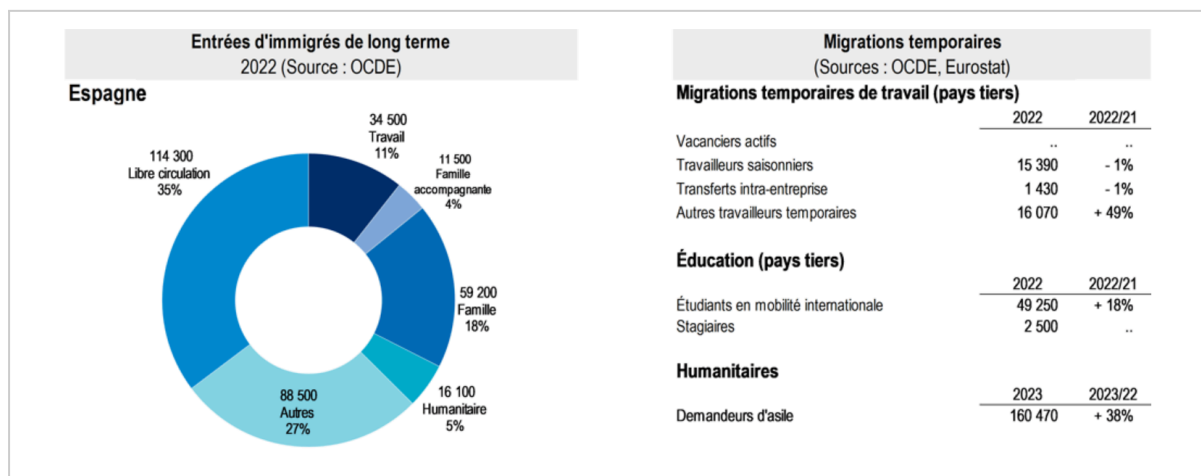
According to the OECD, in 2022, the breakdown of new immigrants admitted to Spain by reason was as follows: 35% under free circulation within the European area, 11% for work, 22% as family members (including accompanying family) and 5% for humanitarian reasons. Approximately 49,000 residence permits were issued to international students in higher education and 35,000 to temporary and seasonal migrant workers (excluding intra-EU migration). In addition, 150,000 intra-EU postings were registered in 2022, an increase of 70% compared to 2021. These posted workers generally have short-term contracts<sup>22</sup>.

<sup>21</sup> OCDE, *Perspectives des migrations internationales*.

<sup>22</sup> *Perspective des migrations internationales 2024, publication OCDE (novembre 2024)*.



Figure 8. Distribution of immigration by reason in 2022 in Spain



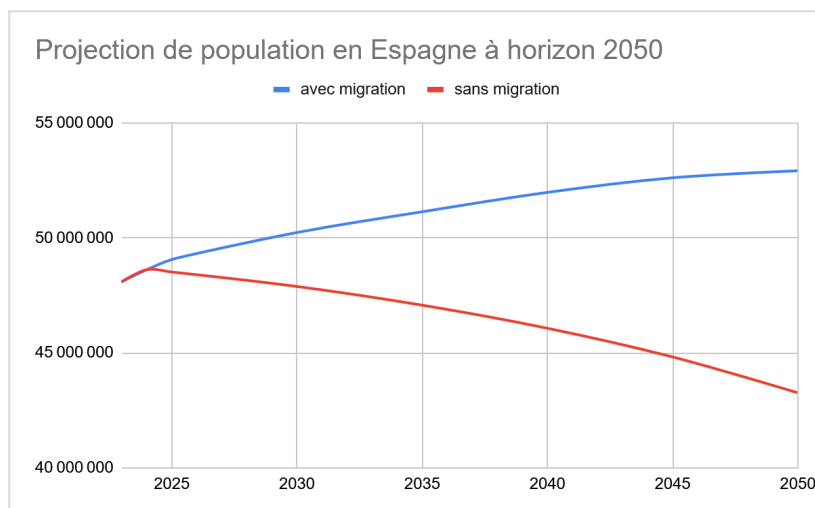
Source : OCDE report, *International Migration Outlook 2024 for Spain*<sup>23</sup>

## c. Immigration and demographic decline in Spain

In Spain, since the 1980s, fertility has been below the replacement level and natural growth has been negative since 2015<sup>24</sup>. Immigration has helped stabilise the country demographically, with average annual growth in the total population of around 0.5% over the last decade. Without immigration, Spain is exposed to demographic decline, with a major population decline by 2040 that would put its social and economic model under severe strain<sup>25</sup>.

Figure 9. Population projections for Spain, 2025-2050

Source : authors' calculations based on Eurostat data - short term population projections<sup>26</sup>



<sup>23</sup> OCDE, Perspectives des migrations internationales, [Notes par pays : Espagne](#) - Novembre 2024.

<sup>24</sup> Franck Chignier-Riboulon, Spain has become a major immigration country: history and geography of its foreign presence, *Populations & Avenir*, 2023, no. 761, p. 18. See also on this subject: Benoît Pellistrandi, "Spain, a major European player grappling with its weaknesses", *International Issues*, Dossier "Demography, a decisive unknown", 2025, No. 130, p. 117.

<sup>25</sup> Voir notamment les [projections de l'Institut national de statistiques espagnol](#).

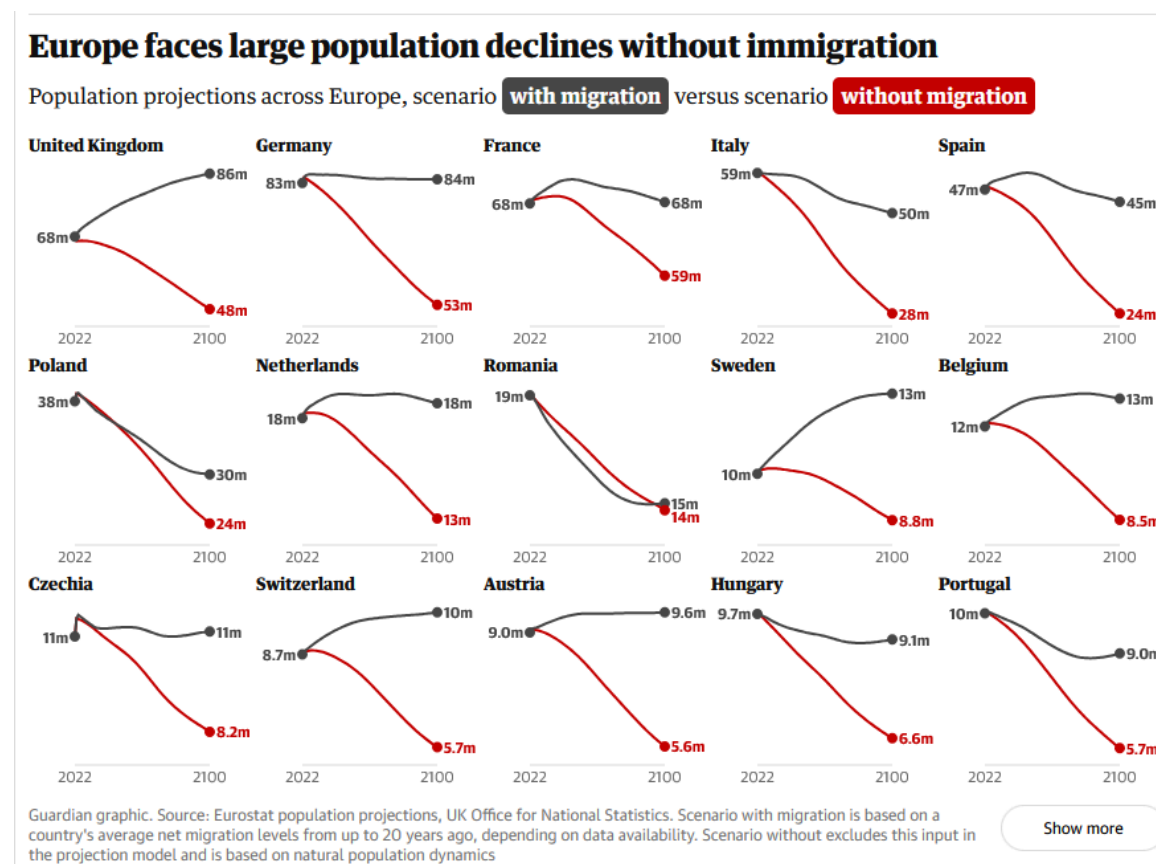
<sup>26</sup> Eurostat - [Short term population projections 2023 - 20250](#).



Long-term forecasts, which do not predict a rebound in the birth rate, show that without immigration, Spain's population could fall from 48 million to 24 million by 2100<sup>27</sup>.

The graph below, published by *The Guardian* in February 2025, based on Eurostat data, projects the faces of European populations with and without immigration. According to this illustration, while Spain is severely affected by its demographic decline<sup>28</sup>, this is a trend common to all European countries.

Figure 10. Long-term population projections for Europe in 2100



Source : *The Guardian*<sup>29</sup>

Spain's migration policy should therefore be viewed in part in light of its demographic projections, given the labour needs of a growing economy and a redistributive social model that relies heavily on the proportion of the population in work.

<sup>27</sup> Eurostat - long terme population projections - [Europop2023](#), mars 2023.

<sup>28</sup> Au sujet du déclin, voir également les chiffres sur le [site Eurydice de la Commission européenne](#).

<sup>29</sup> Alex Clark, « [Visualised: Europe's population crisis](#) », *The Guardian*, 18/02/2025.





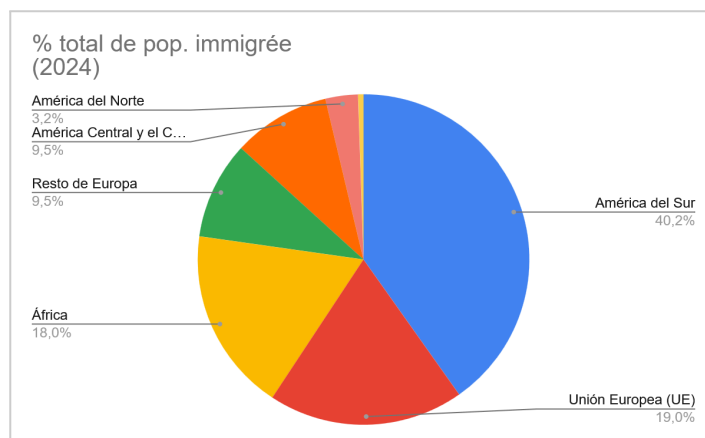
## 1.2. Increasingly diverse profiles

To understand who the immigrants in Spain are, it is useful to look at their origins (a), gender (b) and age (c).

### a. Geographical origins

Figure 11. Origins of immigrants in Spain by geographical area, 2024

Source : compiled by the authors based on data for the INE<sup>30</sup>



The nationalities of origin of immigrants are primarily linked to Spain's colonial history in Latin America and the resulting cultural and linguistic proximity. Thus, in 2024, 40% of the immigrant population will come from this region. Romanians were the largest group until 2012 (900,000), before declining in favour of Moroccans (more than 1 million today). The British are among the top 10 nationalities of origin and the largest from the European Union (before Brexit), with a record 400,000 in 2012 and nearly 300,000 today<sup>31</sup>.

The soft climate and the appeal of the Spanish lifestyle attract foreigners from Western Europe, particularly the United Kingdom, who tend to settle on the coast and in island regions: retirees<sup>32</sup>, but also « *digital nomads* »<sup>33</sup>, and entrepreneurs in the hotel and restaurant sectors<sup>34</sup>.

<sup>30</sup> Instituto Nacional de Estadística, [Población inmigrante en España por área de origen \(2024\)](#).

<sup>31</sup> Franck Chignier-Riboulon, L'Espagne devenue un grand pays d'immigration : histoire et géographie de sa présence étrangère, *Populations & Avenir*, 2023, n° 761, p. 19.

<sup>32</sup> Jordi Giner-Monfort et Kelly Hall, « Older British migrants in Spain », 2023, *Population, Space and Place*.

<sup>33</sup> Fabiola Mancinelli, « Nomades numériques. La mobilité comme « projet du soi », *Erudit*, 2021, n° 2, p. 41.

<sup>34</sup> [The Other Immigrants: EU Citizens from Rich Countries](#) », Real Instituto Elcano, 6/10/2008.



## Spanish population by country of birth:

Source: INE<sup>35</sup>

	2024	2023	2002
1.  Marruecos	1 092 892	1 026 371	328 252
2.  Colombia	856 616	715 655	202 782
3.  Venezuela	599 769	518 918	68 924
4.  Rumania	532 456	538 699	68 440
5.  Ecuador	448 643	430 837	242 522
6.  Argentina	415 987	373 069	111 705
7.  Perú	378 924	322 407	56 157
8.  Reino Unido	285 093	293 696	117 264
9.  Cuba	223 532	198 639	52 701
10.  Francia	217 247	215 283	160 275
11.  Ucrania	215 700	197 192	25 942
12.  Honduras	201 319	177 616	3 730
13.  Rep. Dominicana	201 162	193 653	45 887
14.  China	198 805	192 346	31 233
15.  Bolivia	189 285	183 734	15 121
16.  Brasil	179 033	167 265	34 980
17.  Alemania	177 715	176 496	142 500
19.  Paraguay	146 047	127 767	2 336
20.  Rusia	134 068	118 801	15 634
21.  Pakistán	123 882	114 693	12 289
22.  Bulgaria	104 756	106 680	31 181
23.  Portugal	96 171	95 171	58 203
24.  Senegal	95 812	91 568	12 414
25.  Uruguay	89 595	86 620	25 993
26.  Argelia	87 854	79 026	30 709
27.  Nicaragua	87 786	80 013	2 123
28.  México	79 581	72 669	22 282
29.  Chile	76 638	70 307	19 786
30.  Estados Unidos	69 171	64 227	22 494
31.  India	65 799	60 679	9 800
32.  Suiza	59 718	59 406	54 156
33.  Países Bajos	57 711	55 312	24 465
34.  Filipinas	57 498	54 807	18 028
35.  Polonia	54 832	52 289	18 111
36.  Bélgica	54 776	53 460	29 384
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>8 838 234</b>	<b>8 204 206</b>	<b>2 334 098</b>

<sup>35</sup> [Población residente por fecha, sexo, grupo de edad y país de nacimiento](#), Instituto Nacional de Estadística.



The notable increase in flows from Latin America dates back to the 1990s. While only a few tens of thousands were living in Spain at the beginning of the decade, the serious financial, economic and institutional crises of the period 1998-2000, which brutally impoverished the middle classes, generated significant flows from Ecuador, Colombia and Venezuela in particular<sup>36</sup>.

From 2002 onwards, and particularly following Romania's entry into the European Union in 2007, there was a considerable expansion of the Romanian diaspora in various EU countries, particularly Spain<sup>37</sup>.

Finally, with strong growth in recent decades, Moroccans represent the largest flows, becoming the largest foreign community in Spain. This can be explained by geographical proximity: land borders with Morocco at the enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla, and maritime borders with the Strait of Gibraltar and the Canary Islands.

## **b. Gender**

In 2023, the OECD estimated that 52 % of the immigrant population in Spain was female<sup>38</sup>, a proportion similar to the rest of Europe<sup>39</sup>. However, there are significant differences depending on the origin of the immigrants :

- Women outnumber men among immigrants from South America (53.42% women) and Central America (59.42% women).
- The ratio of women to men from Europe is slightly in favour of men (52.41% men).
- Men are in the clear majority among immigrants from Africa (sub-Saharan and North Africa): women account for only 31.81% of this group.

## **c. Age**

The immigrant population in Spain is generally younger than the Spanish population. Thus, 51.91% of foreigners residing in Spain (compared to 32.66% of the population as a whole) are aged between 20 and 39, and 30.19% of foreigners are aged between 25 and 34 (compared to 17.44% of the population as a whole)<sup>40</sup>.

Migration flows have changed over time, both in terms of emigration and immigration. In the case of immigration, the profiles of people coming to settle in Spain vary, but can be summarised into three types of origin: former colonies in Latin America, geographically close countries such as Morocco, and EU members countries who enjoy freedom of movement, such as Romanians. Immigrants can then apply for Spanish nationality.

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<sup>36</sup> Juan David Sempere Souvannavong, « Evolution de la situation migratoire de l'Espagne de 1991 à nos jours », *Migrations Société*, 2009, vol. 21, n° 125, p. 62.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 63.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>39</sup> OCDE - Les indicateurs de l'intégration des immigrés 2023 - [Composition des populations et ménages immigrés](#).

<sup>40</sup> [INE Población extranjera por sexo, país de nacionalidad y edad Archivado](#).



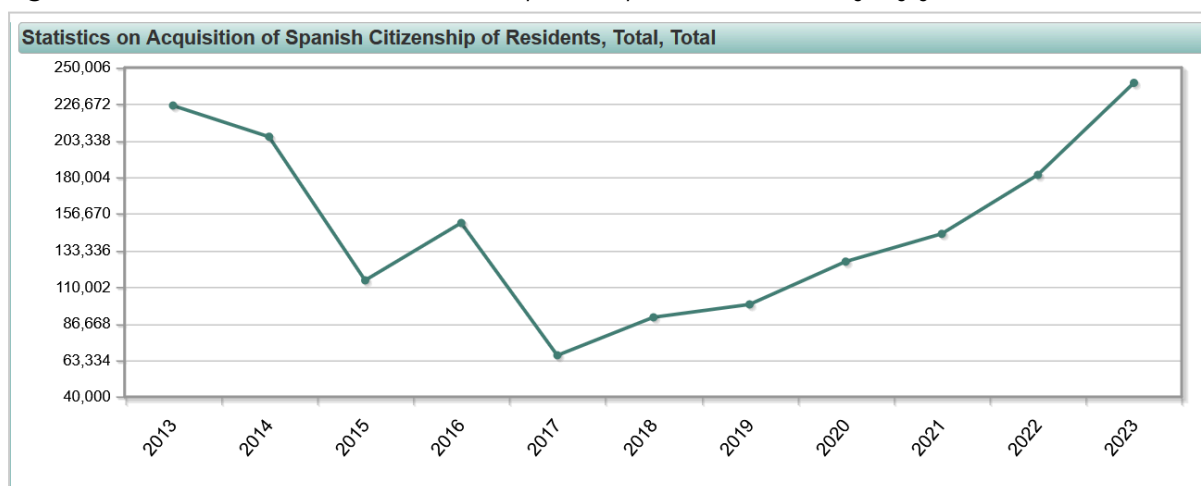
## 1.3. Conditions for acquiring Spanish nationality

The main route to acquiring Spanish nationality for foreigners is naturalisation through residence, which can be applied for by proving "legal, continuous and immediately prior to the application" residence, as well as a "sufficient degree of integration into Spanish society"<sup>41</sup>.

The period of residence to be demonstrated is in principle ten years but may be reduced in certain cases. For example, the period of residence required is five years for people with refugee status; two years for nationals of Latin American countries or Equatorial Guinea; and one year for those born in Spain<sup>42</sup>.

Over the decade 2013-2023, Spain granted nationality to an average of 150,000 people per year<sup>43</sup>, and in the last two years to more than 200,000 per year (240,000 in 2024<sup>44</sup>).

Figure 12. Number of residents who acquired Spanish nationality, by year, 2013-2023



Source : INE<sup>45</sup>

In Spain, the acquisition of nationality for children born on Spanish territory to foreign parents is governed by Article 17 of the Spanish Civil Code<sup>46</sup>, as is the case for children with at least one foreign parent who was themselves born in Spain, born to stateless parents or of unknown parentage.

<sup>41</sup> Article 23 du code civil espagnol, voir également Alberto Martin-Perez et Francisco Javier Moreno-Fuentes, « Migration and Citizenship Law in Spain : path-dependency and Policy Changes in a Recent country of Immigration », *International Migration Review*, 2012, n° 46.

<sup>42</sup> [Voir le site dédié à ce sujet par le gouvernement espagnol.](#)

<sup>43</sup> Ministerio de Inclusión, Seguridad Social y Migraciones - *Observatorio Permanente de la Inmigración (OPI)* - [Concesiones de nacionalidad española por residencia](#), 22/05/2025.

<sup>44</sup> « [Quelle est la nationalité des personnes naturalisées dans l'Union européenne ?](#) », *Toute l'Europe*, 26/03/2025.

<sup>45</sup> Instituto Nacional de Estadística - [Estadística de adquisiciones de nacionalidad española de residentes](#).

<sup>46</sup> [Article 17 du code civil](#), *Boletín Oficial del Estado*.



A dozen countries, such as Argentina, Brazil and Portugal, have specific agreements with Spain allowing for the facilitated acquisition of nationality for children born in Spain to foreign parents, including dual nationality agreements<sup>47</sup>.

\* \* \*

Spain's recent status as an immigration country has influenced its migration policy choices, in line with its demographic evolution, economic needs and social model. The profiles of immigrants vary, linked on the one hand to the former Latin American colonies and on the other to the geographical areas closest to Spain, and they are generally younger than the Spanish population. Spain's main objective is to attract immigrants through work, to integrate them and potentially grant them nationality after they have been in the country for a certain period of time.

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<sup>47</sup> [Convenios de doble nacionalidad](#), Ministerio de Inclusión, Seguridad Social y Migraciones.

# 2

## Labour immigration and regularisation for economic growth

### In brief

At the beginning of 2025, Spain is the only European country to see its GDP grow (3.2% growth in 2024). Three factors are identified as contributing to this growth: tourism, the European recovery plan and immigration. Spain has thus been able to link migration policy and economic needs by relying on immigration to support its growth, in particular through the integration of immigrants already present on its territory. The regularisation of undocumented workers affected 1.25 million people between 1985 and 2006, and some 900,000 people could be affected from 2025 onwards, with more flexible legislative measures. The impact of the largest wave of regularisation in 2005 (around 600,000 people) has been assessed: no increase in migration flows was observed, contradicting the pull factor myth. On the contrary, formal employment increased for immigrants without affecting that of nationals, while informal employment declined. Tax revenues increased without any rise in public spending. These regularisations thus promoted integration, stimulated the economy and improved working conditions.

A key issue for the Spanish government, labour immigration is at the heart of current political discussions. Although anticipated immigration is relatively low (2.1), regularisation programmes enable large numbers of foreign workers to enter the labour market (2.2).



## 2.1. Labour Immigration: a driver of Spanish economic growth

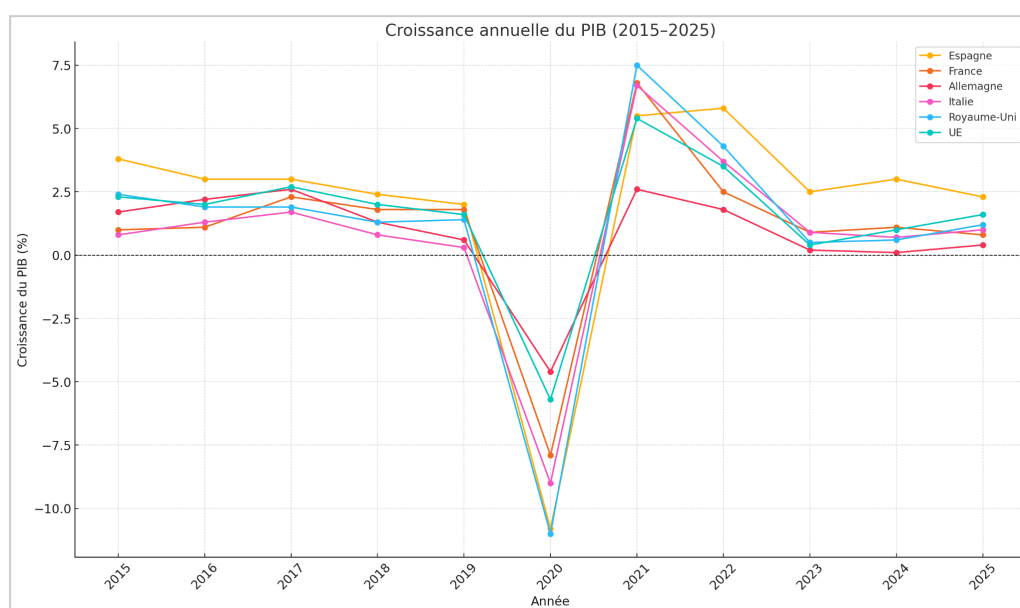
Spain has made immigration one of the driving forces behind its economic growth (a), with trade unions and employers' organisations involved in meeting the labour needs of sectors under pressure (b), particularly the high demand for seasonal workers in the agricultural sector (c).

### a. Strong economic growth linked to immigration

According to the United Nations<sup>48</sup>, Spain will need to integrate around 12 million immigrants between 2000 and 2050 to meet the needs of its labour market<sup>49</sup>. Immigration is proving to be one of the drivers of Spain's economic development, as confirmed by INSEE<sup>50</sup>. The country is experiencing strong economic growth in 2024, stronger than its European neighbours<sup>51</sup>. Three factors explain this surge: the use of the recovery plan financed by European funds, tourism and immigration<sup>52</sup>.

Figure 13.  
Annual  
GDP  
growth in  
different  
European  
countries,  
2015-2025

Source :  
Compiled  
by authors  
based on  
Eurostat  
data<sup>53</sup>



<sup>48</sup> UNDESA, Division de la population, « Migrations de remplacement : une solution aux populations en déclin et vieillissantes », 2000.

<sup>49</sup> Isabel Piquer, « [España necesitará 12 millones de inmigrantes de aquí al año 2050, según la ONU](#) », *El País* du 7 janvier 2000.

<sup>50</sup> Augustin Baron Rault et Alexandre Simcic, « Le dynamisme économique espagnol depuis la crise sanitaire : miracle ou mirage ? », *Note de conjoncture de l'INSEE*, 17 décembre 2024.

<sup>51</sup> Brèves économiques d'Espagne, n° 01/2025, Direction générale du Trésor, ministère de l'Economie : La croissance du PIB espagnol atteint 3,2% en 2024, à comparer à 2,5 % pour la zone euro, +1,1 % pour la France, + 0,7 % pour l'Italie et -0,2 % pour l'Allemagne, selon les données provisoires.

<sup>52</sup> Augustin Baron Rault et Alexandre Simcic, « Le dynamisme économique espagnol depuis la crise sanitaire : miracle ou mirage ? », *Note de conjoncture de l'INSEE*, 17 décembre 2024.

<sup>53</sup> Eurostat - [Real GDP growth rate](#).





Spanish growth benefits structurally from a demographic momentum, fuelled by the growth of the immigrant population. Immigrants are rejuvenating the population, which means a more active population that supports the economy<sup>54</sup>. Between 2021 and 2024, 40% of jobs created in Spain were filled by foreigners, representing some 800,000 jobs and highlighting the importance of demographic dynamics in GDP growth<sup>55</sup>. According to some authors, the government has gambled that immigrants will become taxpayers and actively participate in the Spanish economy<sup>56</sup>. As early as 2006, the French media outlet *Les Échos* noted that "immigration plays a key role in the Spanish 'economic miracle'" <sup>57</sup>. This observation was based on a report presented by Spanish economist Miguel Sebastian.

In the 1990s, Spain attempted to organise economic immigration, becoming the first European country to introduce a quota system for issuing work permits<sup>58</sup>. Trade unions and employer representatives negotiated the quotas by region and economic sector<sup>59</sup>, giving them an important role in managing immigration and promoting its acceptance in society. From the outset, the quota system did not work, with the thresholds struggling to be reached. A pragmatic solution was then considered, namely to integrate people already present in Spain but in an irregular situation. Thus, the annual entry quota ultimately gave rise to annual regularisation targets<sup>60</sup>. This system was made permanent by the adoption of a law in 2000<sup>61</sup>.

## **b. The role of trade unions and employers' organisations in migration policy**

Spain has a long tradition of tripartite social dialogue (*Diálogo Social*) between the government, trade unions and employers' organisations, which has been a hallmark of its political and social model since the transition to democracy in 1978. This social dialogue has led to the adoption of numerous social agreements at both national and autonomous community level, which are then translated into legislation resulting from these negotiations<sup>62</sup> (e.g. the 2024 Royal Decree on regularisation<sup>63</sup>). Thus, employers' association, professional associations and trade unions play a leading role in Spanish labour immigration policy<sup>64</sup>.

<sup>54</sup> Augustin Baron Rault et Alexandre Simcic, «Le dynamisme économique espagnol depuis la crise sanitaire : miracle ou mirage ? », *Note de conjoncture de l'INSEE*, 17 décembre 2024.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.* Écouter également «[En Espagne, l'immigration dynamise la croissance](#)», *Regarde le monde*, Marie Boëton, 19 février 2025.

<sup>56</sup> Claudia Finotelli and Sebastian Rinken, « [A pragmatic bet: The Evolution of Spain's Immigration System](#) », 2023, *Migration Policy Institute*.

<sup>57</sup> « [Le «miracle» de l'immigration espagnole](#) », *Les échos*, 17/11/2006.

<sup>58</sup> Gemma Pinyol-Jiménez et Silvia Carabello, « Immigration and integration Management in Spain », 2018, *Friedrich Ebert Stiftung*, p. 15. Le système de quotas a été créé en 1993, et un plan appelé « GRECO » a été élaboré à partir de 2000. Selon les autrices, les quotas ne couvraient que 30 % des besoins du marché du travail. Il a finalement été remplacé par un catalogue des métiers en tension, à partir de 2009.

<sup>59</sup> Juan David Sempere Souvannavong, « Evolution de la situation migratoire de l'Espagne de 1991 à nos jours », *Migrations Société*, 2009, vol. 21, n° 125, p. 53.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 54.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 59.

<sup>62</sup> María Nieves Moreno Vida, « Consulta a los agentes sociales : la concertación tripartita y el diálogo social como medio de gobernanza para el progreso económico y social », Universidad de Granada, *BOE*, 01/2024

<sup>63</sup> Voir 2.2. b).

<sup>64</sup> Miguel Martínez Lucio, "Trade unions and immigration in Spain: The politics and framing of social inclusion within industrial relations," 2017, Chapters, in: Stefania Marino & Judith Roosblad & Rinus Penninx (ed.), *Trade Unions and Migrant Workers*, chapter 14, p. 287, Edward Elgar Publishing ; Miguel Martínez Lucio, Stefania Marino, and Heather Connolly, «Broadening and reimagining regulation: Trade unions, 'active servicing' and immigration in Spain since the early 1990s », *Journal of Industrial Relations*, 2013, n° 55.





Although collaboration between employers' organisations, trade unions and the Spanish administration on labour immigration policy existed before 2004? within the framework of *the Diálogo Social (Social Dialogue)*, it was mainly after that date that it became institutionalised. Indeed, the most important regularisation programme in Spanish history, drawn up in 2004 by the government, is the result of direct collaboration with the trade unions CCOO (*Comisiones Obreras*, Workers' Commissions), UGT (*Unión General de Trabajadores*, General Union of Workers), and employers' organisations, the CEOE (*Confederación Española de Organizaciones Empresariales*, Spanish Confederation of Business Organisations) and the CEPYME (*Confederación Española de la Pequeña y Mediana Empresa*, Spanish Confederation of Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises). The agreement reached highlighted, among other things, the need to ensure the effective integration of the immigrant population into the labour market and Spanish society, emphasising that labour immigration is "*an area in which it is essential that the government and the social partners reach a consensus*"<sup>65</sup>.

The government subsequently institutionalised the *Comisión Laboral Tripartita de Inmigración* (Tripartite Labour Commission on Immigration), bringing together the administration, employers' organisations and the main trade unions, which is responsible for defining policy guidelines on labour immigration<sup>66</sup>. This permanent advisory body, attached to the Ministry of Inclusion, Social Security and Migration, is called upon to set the rules for managing labour immigration and to give its opinion on major reforms, particularly with regard to regularisation and labour market needs<sup>67</sup>.

During the 2008 general election campaign, the main Spanish employers' organisations publicly supported the outgoing government's (PSOE) record and immigration policy, recognising the value of the integration contract for foreigners and the regularisation of 600,000 undocumented workers in 2005<sup>68</sup>.

Today, faced with labour shortages in certain sectors, employers' organisations are proposing solutions to integrate irregular immigrants into the labour market. In March 2025, for example, the *Confederación Nacional de la Construcción* (CNC, National Construction Federation) launched a plan to provide rapid training for these people in order to meet the needs of the construction sector. The plan includes 60- to 100-hours courses to facilitate their integration into the labour market and offers also expand the list of occupations in high demand in order to recruit skilled workers from abroad<sup>69</sup>.

*Hostelería de España*, the main employers' organisation in the hotel and restaurant sector, points out that in 2024, 25% of employees in the sector will be foreign nationals. The hotel and restaurant industry is therefore the sector with the highest number of foreign workers.

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<sup>65</sup> Inara Stürckow, « Undocumented Workers in Spain and the Politics of Regularization », *Ifri*, 21/05/2012.

<sup>66</sup> Publication au *Boletín Oficial del Estado*, [Orden TAS/1713/2005, de 3 de junio 2005](#).

<sup>67</sup> Par exemple, comme le dispose l'article 65 du Règlement de la Loi organique 4/2000 sur les droits et libertés des étrangers en Espagne, la consultation de la Commission est une étape obligatoire dans le processus d'élaboration trimestrielle du Catalogue des professions en tension (*Catálogo de Ocupaciones de Difícil Cobertura*), qui identifie les métiers pour lesquels le recrutement de travailleurs étrangers est facilité en raison de pénuries de main-d'œuvre. La dernière [publication au Bulletin officiel](#) date du 17 janvier 2025.

<sup>68</sup> « [Patronal y sindicatos respaldan cuatro años de política de inmigración](#) », *El País*, 21/02/2008.

<sup>69</sup> « [La construcción busca acabar con el déficit de trabajadores con cursos cortos para regularizar extranjeros](#) », *El País*, 20/03/2025.



According to the employers' organisation, *"foreign workers are saving the hotel industry and providing relief to the sector"* <sup>70</sup>.

According to the secretary general of the employers' organisation *Hostelería de España*, Emilio Gallego, immigration is a factor of *"very positive expansion and growth"* for the sector, given that the Spanish age pyramid is ageing<sup>71</sup>. *"The sector is calling for recruitment at source, encouraging the recruitment of workers in their countries of origin in order to address the difficulty of finding people outside Spain who want to work in Spanish bars and restaurants."* The secretary general describes the Spanish model of recruitment at source as *"insufficient"* for one very clear reason: it is *"non-existent"*. In his view, Spain has a *"major shortcoming"* with regard to this immigration model and *"does not have a strong format for work visas in countries of origin with the recruitment of potential workers"* <sup>72</sup>.

### c. Immigrants in the agricultural and circular migration program

The Spanish agricultural sector is heavily dependent on foreign labour, particularly for seasonal work, especially in regions such as Andalusia (Almería, Huelva) and Catalonia (Lleida). It is essential for harvesting fruit and vegetables, often in precarious conditions<sup>73</sup>.

Since 2000, Spain has implemented circular migration programmes, which involve returning to the country of origin after each season, with countries such as Morocco, allowing the recruitment of seasonal workers for specific periods<sup>74</sup>. In 2023, approximately 17,200 people participated in these programmes<sup>75</sup>.

In 2022, a decree-law was adopted to facilitate the granting of work permits and temporary residence permits for foreign nationals, in line with the EU directive on seasonal workers of 2014<sup>76</sup>. To make them more attractive, and above all to improve the living conditions of seasonal workers, interested foreign nationals will now be able to apply for a four-year work permit. This document allows the person concerned to work for up to nine months per year, but they will be required to return to their country after each harvest season. After four years, if they meet all the conditions, workers will be able to apply for a two-year work and residence permit, without any obligation to return regularly, paving the way for continuous residence and a possible subsequent application for a long-term permit. The reform also

<sup>70</sup> « [Los trabajadores extranjeros salvan la hostelería y suponen un "desahogo" para el sector](#) », *El Economista*, 15/09/2024

<sup>71</sup> Gurría Gascón José Luis, Reques Velasco Pedro, Rodríguez Rodríguez Vicente, Neffar López María. « Le vieillissement de la population espagnole et les défis sociaux futurs ». In *Sud-Ouest européen*, tome 26, 2008. La population espagnole en ce début de XXI<sup>e</sup> siècle. pp. 57-69.

<sup>72</sup> « [Los trabajadores extranjeros salvan la hostelería y suponen un "desahogo" para el sector](#) », *El Economista*, 15/09/2024

<sup>73</sup> Catherine Vincent, « Une précarisation institutionnelle des migrants en réponse aux besoins du marché du travail », *Chronique Internationale de l'IRES*, 2024, N° 188, p. 211.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.* Voir également la directive de l'Union européenne sur l'emploi saisonnier : directive 2014/36/UE du Parlement européen et du Conseil du 26 février 2014 établissant les conditions d'entrée et de séjour des ressortissants de pays tiers aux fins d'un emploi en tant que travailleur saisonnier.

<sup>75</sup> « [En Espagne, Pedro Sánchez veut contre le récit sécuritaire et met en avant une "migration synonyme de richesse et de développement"](#) », *Le Monde*, 28/11/2024.

<sup>76</sup> [Directive 2014/36/UE](#) du Parlement européen et du Conseil du 26 février 2014 établissant les conditions d'entrée et de séjour des ressortissants de pays tiers aux fins d'un emploi en tant que travailleur saisonnier.



provides for a quarterly update of a list of Spanish employers who are experiencing difficulties in finding staff. This is intended to facilitate recruitment and make it faster<sup>77</sup>.

In 2025, Moroccans constitute the largest foreign community in Spain, with more than 343,000 workers registered with social security. Around 33% of them are employed in agriculture, livestock farming and fishing, sectors offering wages below the national average<sup>78</sup>.

Labour immigration is central to Spain in order to meet the needs of the labour market, which explains, in particular, the steps taken towards large-scale regularisation.

## 2.2. Regularisation : the Spanish exception

Spain has regularised more immigrants than any other European country, with six campaigns carried out since 1985, resulting in the regularisation of approximately 1.25 million immigrants between 1985 and 2006<sup>79</sup> (a). In 2025, the country is preparing to regularise between 300,000 and 500,000 people (b), supported by a Popular Legislative Initiative (c), in order to drastically reduce the number of undocumented migrants in the country and encourage declared work. In addition to extraordinary programmes, Spain has a regularisation process based on presence in the country, via a special residence permit, which will benefit more than 300,000 people by the end of 2024 (d). Research covering two decades shows that regularisation programmes have no "pull factor" consequence and have positive economic and social effects (e).

### a. History of regularisation programs

- 1985 - 2004 period

Although the first regularisation procedures took place in 1968<sup>80</sup> and then in 1978<sup>81</sup>, the 1985 law on foreign nationals was the first large-scale regularisation programme implemented by Spain. In 1986, the year Spain joined the European Economic Community, it enabled the regularisation of nearly 40,000 people<sup>82</sup>, mostly Moroccans.

<sup>77</sup> « [L'Espagne adopte une nouvelle loi permettant à des milliers de migrants d'intégrer le marché du travail](#) », *InfoMigrants*, 12/08/2022. Voir Viviana Echeverria, « [Recent changes to the Spanish Alien Act and their implications](#) », sur le blog du cabinet d'avocats Echeverria Abogados, qui souligne une augmentation de 30,4 % de titres de séjour entre 2022 et 2023.

<sup>78</sup> « [Los marroquíes ya son la principal fuerza laboral extranjera de España](#) », *El País*, 16/3/2025.

<sup>79</sup> Conseil de l'Europe, [rapport sur Programmes de régularisation des migrants en situation irrégulière](#), Juillet 2007.

<sup>80</sup> Juan David Sempere Souvannavong, « Evolution de la situation migratoire de l'Espagne de 1991 à nos jours », *Migrations Société*, 2009, vol. 21, n° 125, p. 51.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*



In the following years, similar programmes were implemented, with 100,000 people regularised in 1992 and 20,000 in 1996<sup>83</sup>.

In 2000, a new programme was launched, but while the government and civil society expected around 80,000 to 100,000 applications, more than 240,000 were submitted<sup>84</sup>. This episode led to a period of social tension over immigration, with occupations of buildings throughout the country by undocumented migrants demanding regularisation<sup>85</sup>. Following various processes, Spain regularised some 500,000 people between 2001 and 2002<sup>86</sup>.

From January 2002 onwards, the government in power (the right-wing People's Party, or PP) categorically declared that there would be no further regularisation in Spain and took measures to combat irregular immigration<sup>87</sup>. It will last until 2005.

## ● 2005

At the end of summer 2004, the socialist government of José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero (PSOE) decided to launch a massive regularisation process based on professional criteria. The government's stated aim was to bring Spain's underground economy to the surface and combat undeclared work<sup>88</sup>.

The regularisation programme sought to shift workers from the informal to the formal sector, increasing tax revenues and social security contributions and promoting the integration of immigrants. The programme is the result of a consensus between the government (PSOE), trade unions, employers, civil society and the regions. It was motivated by a genuine demand from all parties concerned to meet the needs of the labour market and society. It should be noted in this regard that more than 33% of those whose situation was regularised were working as domestic workers<sup>89</sup>, which partly explains the strong public support for this programme, as many families were thus able to regularise their situation, either as employers or employees.

South Americans, Moroccans and Romanians make up the majority of applicants for the 2005 regularisation programme, with the most represented countries being Ecuador (21%), Romania (17%), Morocco (13%), Colombia (8%) and Bolivia (7%)<sup>90</sup>. However, the figure of 600,000 regularised persons represents less than half of the number of undocumented immigrants present in Spain at that time (1.7 million according to cross-checked estimates<sup>90</sup>).

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<sup>83</sup> *Ibid*, p. 53.

<sup>84</sup> Joaquin Arango et Maia Jachimowicz, « Regularizing Immigrants in Spain: a New Approach », *Migration Information Source* (MPI), 2005.

<sup>85</sup> Lorenzo Cachón, L'immigration en Espagne (1996-2006) : logique de marché et « institutionnalisation », *Travail et Emploi*, 2008, n° 115, p. 81, qui évoque les conflits à partir des années 2000, pour l'amélioration des conditions de vie des travailleurs·euses immigré·es.

<sup>86</sup> Juan David Sempere Souvannavong, « Evolution de la situation migratoire de l'Espagne de 1991 à nos jours », *Migrations Société*, 2009, vol. 21, n° 125, p. 60.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid*, p. 65.

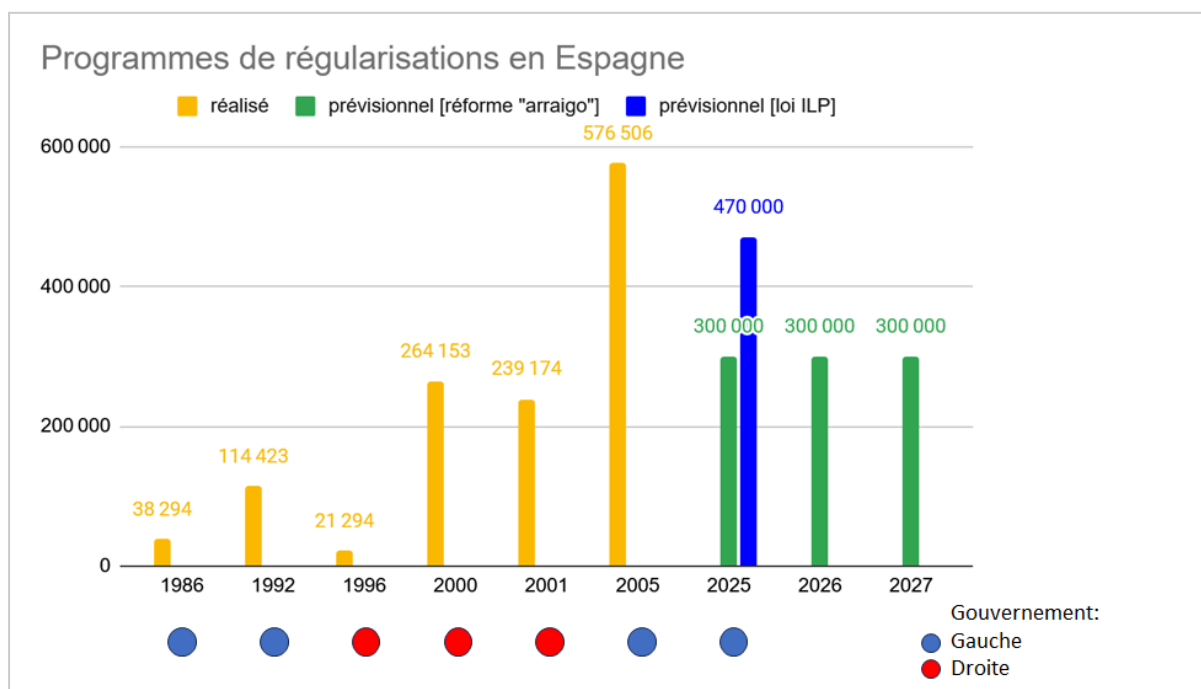
<sup>88</sup> Joaquin Arango et Maia Jachimowicz, « Regularizing Immigrants in Spain: a New Approach », *Migration Information Source* (MPI), 2005.

<sup>89</sup> Selon les propos du ministre espagnol du Travail, Jesús Caldera, en conférence de presse du 7 avril 2005, repris par [El País](#) ou [Ultima Hora](#).

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid*.



Figure 14. Number of people regularised under extraordinary regularisation programmes in Spanish history 1986-2024, projection 2025-2027. Political colour of the government in power at the time of the regularisations. .



Source : compiled by the authors, based on historical data compiled by the Real Instituto Elcano and forecasts provided by the Spanish government<sup>91</sup>

## b. Outlook for 2025

The last extraordinary regularisation of immigrants took place in 2005. Through a Royal Decree published on 20 November 2024, the Spanish Government adopted a reform of its immigration legislation<sup>92</sup>, which aims, from its entry into force on 20 May 2025<sup>93</sup>, to regularise hundreds of thousands of undocumented migrants present on the territory by simplifying the procedures for obtaining residence and work permits. The objective is set out in the explanatory memorandum: to meet Spain's economic and social needs, while ensuring that foreigners who wish to settle in Spain can benefit from new opportunities<sup>94</sup>.

The reform relaxes the conditions for obtaining specific residence permits known as "arraigos" (rootedness), intended for people in an irregular situation who can prove their roots in Spanish society in order to regularise their situation. At the end of 2023, more than

<sup>91</sup> Données historiques : [Una evaluación del último proceso de regularización de trabajadores extranjeros en España](#), Instituto Real Elcano, 14/08/2006, à partir des données issues des archives officielles du ministère du Travail, de la Direction Générale de l'Emigration, et du ministère de l'Intérieur espagnols ; données prévisionnelles : communiqué du Conseil des Ministres du 19/11/2024 publié par [La Manclao](#).

<sup>92</sup> Décret Royal espagnol publié le 20 novembre 2024 sous la référence Real Decreto 1155/2024, de 19 de noviembre, dans le [Boletín Oficial del Estado](#) (BOE). Ce décret approuve le nouveau règlement de la Ley Orgánica 4/2000, qui encadre les droits et libertés des étrangers en Espagne et leur intégration sociale.

<sup>93</sup> Le décret prévoit un délai de 6 mois entre sa publication au [Boletín Oficial del Estado](#) et son entrée en vigueur.

<sup>94</sup> Olivier Lecucq, « [La sorprendente réforme du droit des étrangers en Espagne](#) », *Le Club des juristes*, 28/11/2024.





210 000 people had an “arraigo” permit in Spain, compared with an estimated 900 000 people in an irregular situation<sup>95</sup>.

Several types of residence permits have been created under this regularisation programme:

- « *arraigo* de la segunda oportunidad » (second chance), for people whose permits have expired ;
- « *arraigo* socio-formativo » (socio-educational rooting), for people in vocational training for a profession with a labour shortage, allowing them to start working at the beginning of their training ;
- « *arraigo* socio-professionnel » (socio-professional rooting), which reduces the number of hours worked required, subject to two years' residence in Spain ;
- « *arraigo* social » for people with family ties to other legal residents, reducing the residence requirement in Spain from three years to two ;
- « *arraigo* familiar », (family ties), which, in addition to parents and children of Spanish citizens, now includes parents of minor children and carers of disabled persons from non-European countries.

The reform also provides for changes to one-year visas, which are now renewable for four years. Finally, the new law also includes temporary regularisation for rejected asylum seekers, who will be able to apply for the “rootedness permit” of their choice on condition that they have been present in Spain for six months. This extraordinary process is to last one year and takes into account the time spent in the country while the asylum application is being processed.

In addition, family reunification has been made easier, and the new residence permit for seasonal workers strengthens their rights and protection. This new law would allow for the regularization of 300,000 undocumented workers per year by 2027. « *An essential workforce to maintain Spain's standard of living until 2050* », says the Spanish Government<sup>96</sup>.

While the stated objectives of regularisation are supported by the majority of politicians, a number of criticisms have been raised by the civil society regarding the complexity and obstacles to its implementation, casting doubt on the possibility of achieving the targets for the number of people regularised each year. These criticisms include:

- **The exclusion of asylum seekers whose applications have been rejected, outside the exceptional period:** outside the one-year exceptional period, the time spent in Spain while an asylum application is being examined, will no longer be taken into account for obtaining a residence permit via the “*arraigo*” procedure. This means that rejected applicants will have to wait an additional two years in an irregular situation before they can begin the regularisation process. This provision is considered unfair, as it will penalise people who are already integrated into Spanish society<sup>97</sup> ;

<sup>95</sup> « [Régularisation des migrants en Espagne : ce que contient la nouvelle loi](#) », *InfoMigrants*, 22/11/2014.

<sup>96</sup> Ministerio de Inclusión, Seguridad Social y Migraciones - Observatorio Permanente de la Inmigración - [Personas con autorización de residencia por arraigo en vigor](#).

<sup>97</sup> [En Espagne, le gouvernement souhaite régulariser 900 000 sans-papiers en trois ans](#), *France 24*, 21/12/2024.



- **Administrative complexity and bureaucratic obstacles:** despite the reduction in the required residence period from three to two years, the procedures remain complex. Foreign nationals must provide numerous documents, obtain difficult appointments and face long delays<sup>98</sup> ;
- **Mixed results for the « arraigo para la formación » :** this scheme allows immigrants to undergo training in sectors facing labour shortages in order to obtain a residence permit. However, of the 23,097 people who completed such training between 2022 and 2023, only 1,347 obtained an employment contract at the end of the programme. This low conversion rate highlights the limitations of this measure<sup>99</sup>.

### c. A bill on regularization resulting from a Popular Legislative Initiative

In Spain, the popular legislative initiative (ILP) is a tool of semi-direct democracy enshrined in the Spanish Constitution that allows a bill supported by at least 500,000 Spanish citizens (approximately 1.26% of the electorate) to be submitted to the Congress of Deputies<sup>100</sup>.

Launched by the citizen platform *Regularización Ya* (Regularisation Now), an ILP entitled "*Esenciales*" (*Essential*), aimed at regularising around 500,000 people in an irregular situation in Spain, has received broad cross-party support, with more than 700,000 signatures collected after more than two years of campaigning, enabling it to be submitted in the Congress of Deputies, then accepted by a large majority of 89% of MPs on 9 April 2024<sup>101</sup>.

In May 2025, the Spanish Government announced its intention to fast-track a corresponding bill that would allow the regularisation of 470,000 people, on the sole condition that they arrived in Spain before 31 December 2024. The text, discussed with parliamentary groups, would allow for the issuance of a "single authorisation for exceptional circumstances" and would allow all foreign nationals who arrived before 2025 to reside legally and work freely throughout Spain<sup>102</sup>.

These conditions for obtaining a residence permit, which are much simpler than those of the November 2024 reform of the "*arraigos*" permits, would, according to supporters of the ILP, make it possible to achieve the regularisation objectives by 2025. The timetable for submitting the bill to parliament for a vote is not yet known<sup>103</sup>.

<sup>98</sup> "[Ces campagnes de régularisation sont un piège](#)" - comment les personnes en déplacement sont empêchées d'obtenir un statut légal dans la région occidentale de la Méditerranée », *AlarmPhone*, 12/12/2023.

<sup>99</sup> « [Espagne : bientôt un nouveau titre de séjour par le travail pour les sans-papiers, le "Arraigo Sociolaboral"](#) », *InfoMigrants*, 4/9/2024.

<sup>100</sup> Sénat, « [Les procédures décentralisées de l'Allemagne et de l'Espagne](#) », *Étude de législation comparée*, mars 2019.

<sup>101</sup> « [Vers la régularisation massive de 500 000 migrants sans papiers ?](#) », *Le Courrier d'Espagne*, 21/5/2025.

<sup>102</sup> [Immigration : l'Espagne examine un projet de loi qui pourrait permettre de régulariser 500 000 migrants](#), *France Info*, 21/05/2025.

<sup>103</sup> This study was written in July 2025..

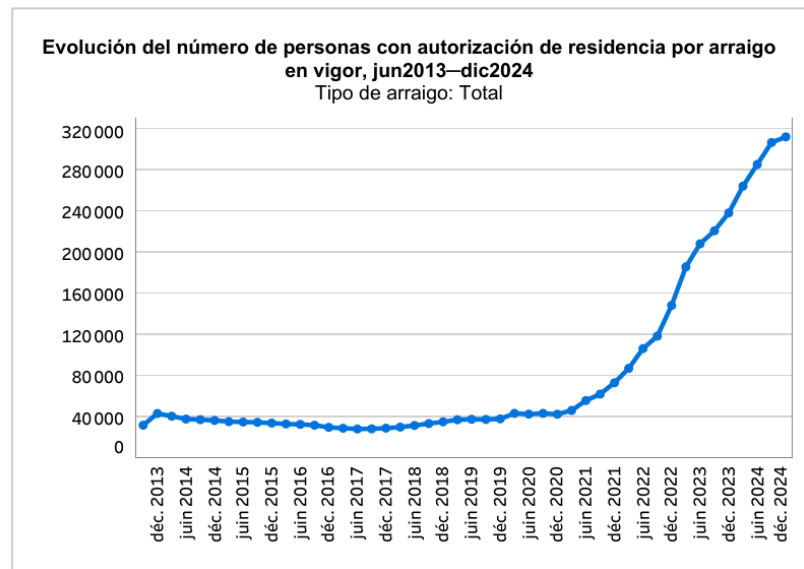


#### d. Regularization outside extraordinary programmes

Outside of extraordinary regularisations, undocumented migrants can obtain a residence permit through the "*arraigos*" procedures, which are the main route to individual regularisation. As of 31 December 2024, 313,075 people had a valid residence permit granted on the basis of their "roots", a significant increase since 2020<sup>104</sup>.

Figure 15. Change in the number of people with an « *arraigo* » residence permit, 2013 - 2024

Source : Observatorio Permanente de la Inmigración<sup>105</sup>



« *Arraigo* » residence permits are issued under specific procedures for undocumented migrants who can prove that they have established roots in Spain. The main types and conditions are:

- *Arraigo social* : continuous residence in Spain for at least 3 years, employment contract for at least 30 hours per week or 20 hours if cumulative, no criminal record.
- *Arraigo laboral* : continuous residence for at least 2 years, proof of employment for at least 6 months, no criminal record.
- *Arraigo familiar* : family ties with Spanish citizens or legal residents, specific conditions depending on the relationship.
- *Arraigo para la formación* : continuous residence for at least two years, enrolment in vocational training in sectors experiencing labour shortages, no criminal record.

These procedures enable undocumented migrants to regularise their status in Spain according to their personal and professional circumstances<sup>106</sup>.

<sup>104</sup> Ministerio de Inclusión, Seguridad Social y Migraciones - Observatorio Permanente de la Inmigración - [Personas con autorización de residencia por arraigo en vigor](#), mars 2025.

<sup>105</sup> Ministerio de Inclusión, Seguridad Social y Migraciones - Observatorio Permanente de la Inmigración - [Personas con autorización de residencia por arraigo en vigor](#), 3/04/2025.

<sup>106</sup> Ministerio de Inclusión, Seguridad Social y Migraciones - Observatorio Permanente de la Inmigración - [Personas con autorización de residencia por arraigo en vigor](#), mars 2025.





### e. Impact of regularisation and absence of a pull factor

Spain's policy of regularising many undocumented immigrants dates back to the 2000s, which means that its effects can now be assessed with sufficient hindsight.

Herewith, the extensive study « *Understanding the Effects of Granting Work Permits to Undocumented Immigrants* » conducted by three Spanish economists<sup>107</sup>, published in 2023 analyses the consequences of Spain's regularisation policy, based on the approximately 600,000 regularisations in 2005.

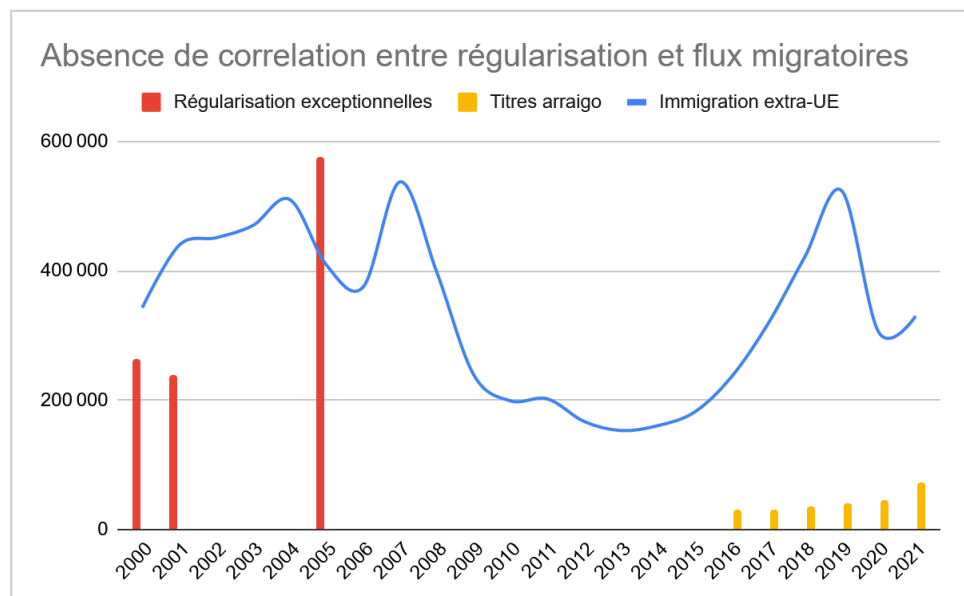
In particular, it demonstrates that there was no pull factor and no correlation with migration flows in subsequent years (for example, immigration fell sharply between 2008 and 2016).

Furthermore, formal employment among immigrants increased, while that of nationals remained unaffected. In addition, large-scale regularisation programmes led to a decrease in informal employment for both nationals and low-skilled immigrants.

The impact on tax revenues is clearly positive, with an increase of around €4,000 per regularised immigrant, without any noticeable increase in public spending<sup>108</sup>.

Figure x.  
Extra-EU  
migration flows  
vs.  
regularization  
in Spain,, 2000 -  
2021

Source: authors'  
calculations  
based on INE and  
OPI data<sup>109</sup>



\* \* \*

Spain has focused on labour immigration as the main driver of its economy, which is reflected in its GDP growth in 2024. This choice takes precedence over other reasons for granting residence permits, such as asylum, with many asylum seekers being redirected towards labour immigration. Furthermore, the country's approach to border control is dictated by European rules due to its membership of the Schengen area.

<sup>107</sup> Understanding the Effects of Granting Work Permits to Undocumented Immigrants, Ferran Elias, Joan Monras and Javier Vázquez-Grenno - 2023.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 5.

<sup>109</sup> INE, [Flujo de inmigración](#) et OPI [Flujo de autorizaciones de residencia concedidas a extranjeros](#).

# 3

## External borders and asylum: European influence

### In brief:

As a country bordering the European Union, Spain is a major entry point into the Schengen Area. Spain's integration into the Schengen area has strengthened its role as an EU border guard, with increased pressure, involving tighter controls and bilateral agreements with African third countries, notably Morocco, Mauritania and Senegal. Migration cooperation is part of strategies combining security, development aid and readmission.

The "Spain-Africa 2025-2028" plan proposes a realistic approach to the issue, recognising that migration in Africa is not limited to a one-way movement towards Europe, but is more complex and often involves short-distance movements. Spain is one of the only European countries to increase its official development assistance by 2025.

On the other hand, although the right to asylum is recognised by the Spanish Constitution, it is poorly enforced: the protection rate is among the lowest in Europe, reception is uneven and accommodation capacity is insufficient. Border practices, particularly pushbacks from the enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla, are regularly condemned. Caught between European requirements, security concerns and fundamental rights, Spanish border policy reveals the contradictions of a model geared towards integration through work but faced with ever-tighter control constraints.

The Spanish Constitution of 1978 expressly mentions the right to asylum (Article 13 § 4). Spain acceded to the 1951 Geneva Convention on the Status of Refugees during its period of political transition in August 1978<sup>110</sup>. The country is one of the gateways to the Schengen area, which entails responsibilities towards other Member States (3.1). One of Spain's strategies has been to develop bilateral agreements (3.2.), while the reception and management of asylum seekers remains inadequate (3.3.) as does the situation of unaccompanied minors (3.4.). Spain also carries out removals in accordance with European regulatory requirements (3.5).

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<sup>110</sup> UNHCR - [Etats parties à la convention de 1951 relative au statut des réfugiés](#).



### 3.1. Migration routes to Spain and the consequences of the Schengen area

From the 1990s onwards, due to the creation of the Schengen area, which came into effect in 1995, Spanish visa policy changed: a visa became mandatory for a larger number of foreigners, including Moroccans<sup>111</sup>. This requirement placed a burden on Spain, as it shares an external border with the Schengen area and was therefore required to strengthen its controls on behalf of the other Schengen countries. The number of people crossing in precarious boats increased from the 1990s onwards, although crossings had been taking place since the 1970s, departing from the Moroccan coast<sup>112</sup>. The migrants' goal is to cross the Strait of Gibraltar or swim to Ceuta or Melilla<sup>113</sup>, the two Spanish enclaves in Morocco (Ceuta is located 13 kilometres from the Spanish peninsula coast).

The 1990s also left a lasting impression on the Spanish public with recurring images of people disappearing at sea and their bodies being found on the coast, particularly on the beaches of Cadiz<sup>114</sup>, in southern Spain. Between 1990 and 2010, around 100 people died each year in the Strait of Gibraltar while attempting to cross<sup>115</sup>.

Faced with this increase in irregular arrivals on its territory, the Spanish government invested in a steel security fence around its Moroccan enclaves and in a "Comprehensive External Surveillance System" (SIVE installed on the southern Spanish coast, designed in 1998 and operational in 2002<sup>116</sup>), which enables the detection of moving objects in an unstable field, in other words, at sea. One of the consequences of the SIVE's implementation was to open up the migration route to the Canary Islands<sup>117</sup>. The Spanish government subsequently deployed the SIVE in the Canary Islands as well<sup>118</sup>.

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<sup>111</sup> À compter de mai 1991, voir Juan David Sempere Souvannavong, « Evolution de la situation migratoire de l'Espagne de 1991 à nos jours », *Migrations Société*, 2009, vol. 21, n° 125, p. 53.

<sup>112</sup> Mohammed Charef et Juan A. Cebrián, Des Pateras aux Cayucos, danger d'un parcours, stratégies en réseau et nécessité des passeurs, *Migrations Sociétés*, vol. 21, n° 125, 2009, p. 103.

<sup>113</sup> Ceuta et Melilla sont des petits territoires, restés espagnols après la fin du protectorat au Maroc en 1956, voir également Juan David Sempere Souvannavong, « Evolution de la situation migratoire de l'Espagne de 1991 à nos jours », *Migrations Société*, 2009, vol. 21, n° 125, p. 65.

<sup>114</sup> Le premier décès daterait de 1988, sur une plage de Tarifa : Jesús A. Cañas, « [30 years on since first migrant death, still no end to tragedy at sea](#) », novembre 2018, *El País*.

<sup>115</sup> Mohammed Charef et Juan A. Cebrián, Des Pateras aux Cayucos, danger d'un parcours, stratégies en réseau et nécessité des passeurs, *Migrations Sociétés*, vol. 21, n° 125, 2009, p. 104.

<sup>116</sup> In concrete terms, the SIVE is managed by the Guardia Civil and includes radars, thermal detectors, helicopters and patrol boats, see Lorenzo Gabrielli, "The construction of Spanish immigration policy: ambiguities and ambivalences through the case of West African migration", thesis defended in 2011 at the University of Bordeaux, p. 192..

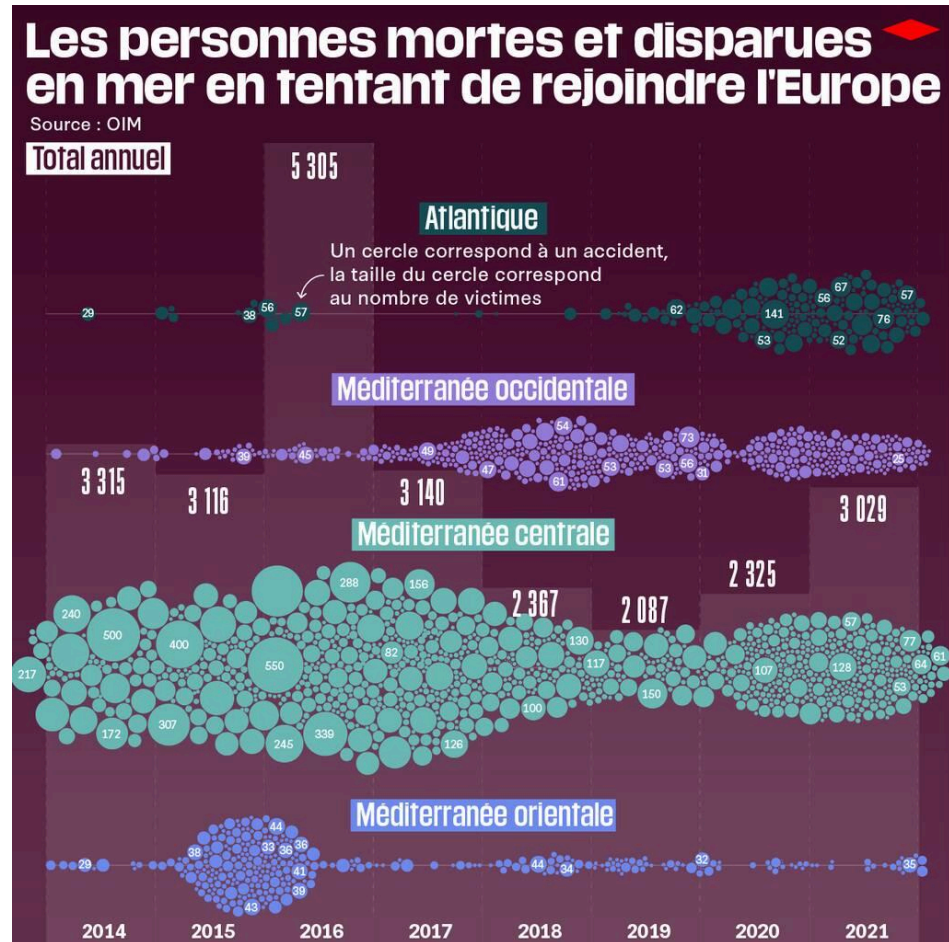
<sup>117</sup> Guillaume Le Boedec, « [Le détroit de Gibraltar. Les limites d'un espace modèle de la lutte européenne contre les migrations irrégulières](#) », *Echo Géo*, 2007, n°2 : « Le SIVE entre en fonction en 2002 à Algésiras, avant d'être étendu à Tarifa et Malaga en 2003, Cadix et Huelva en 2004, Ceuta et Melilla en 2005 et Almeria en 2006. Le SIVE a au total coûté 260 millions d'euros et dispose aujourd'hui de 25 stations de surveillance ».

<sup>118</sup> Le SIVE est déployé également aux Îles Canaries à partir de 2007. Cette croissance va notamment être financée par l'Union européenne, voir à ce sujet : Olivier Clochard et Claire Rodier, « Circulez, c'est privé ! », *Plein droit*, 2014, n° 101, p. 26.



Thus, from the 2000s onwards, the controls exercised by Morocco and this surveillance of the Strait of Gibraltar led to the development of another migration route, from Senegal or Mauritania to the Canary Islands<sup>119</sup>, which are part of the Schengen area, unlike the enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla<sup>120</sup>.

Figure 16. People who died or disappeared at sea while trying to reach Europe



Source : IOM data processed by Liberation, 2022<sup>121</sup>

The infographic above shows how maritime routes have evolved over time and how dangerous they are. The closure of certain routes leads to the opening of new ones, which is particularly striking in the case of the Atlantic route to the Canary Islands.

Restrictive Spanish and Moroccan policies, prompted by the surveillance of the Schengen external border, will also have consequences for the enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla. Although they are more than 400 kilometres apart, similar approaches to surveillance and crossing strategies exist. In September 2005, rumours spread about a successful crossing at

<sup>119</sup> Even if « *The first boats from the African coast arrived in the Canary Islands in the 1990s, following Spain's integration into the Schengen area. As a border territory located less than 100 km from the African coast, these arrivals have been a constant feature of the archipelago over the last three decades, with varying degrees of intensity.* », Andrea Gallinal Arias, « L'accueil humanitaire d'urgence aux Îles Canaries : encampement et pandémie aux frontières de l'Europe », *Journal des Anthropologues*, 2024, n°1, p. 57.

<sup>120</sup> Mohammed Charef and Juan A. Cebrián, « Des Pateras aux Cayucos, danger d'un parcours », stratégies en réseau et nécessité des passeurs, *Migrations Sociétés*, vol. 21, n° 125, 2009 p. 107.

<sup>121</sup> « [La mortalité s'aggrave sur les routes migratoires vers l'Europe](#) », *Libération*, 17/01/2022.



Melilla<sup>122</sup>, prompting people in camps near Ceuta to approach in groups, which was replicated in early October at Melilla. A dozen people were killed during these events, and many were injured<sup>123</sup>. Spain subsequently deployed the army to Ceuta and Melilla<sup>124</sup>. Episodes of this kind recurred regularly, notably in June 2022, when one of the clashes with border guards resulted in the deaths of around 40 people, according to the NGO *Caminando Fronteras*<sup>125</sup>.

Migration routes change regularly. There was a significant increase in crossings to Spain between 2015 (5,000 arrivals recorded) and 2018 (58,000 recorded), before falling by half in 2019 (29,000)<sup>126</sup>. Since 2022, the migration route from Algeria has shifted eastwards to reach the Balearic Islands. As a result, 2,278 people arrived on these islands in 2023, with this number rising significantly in 2024 (3,700 recorded between January and October 2024)<sup>127</sup>.

In addition to sea crossings, a network for transporting people by truck via Tangier in Morocco is developing, with the aim of reaching Algeciras in Spain. This route has prompted Morocco to build a 6-metre-high protective wall around the port, with the support of European funds<sup>128</sup>.

In this context, Spain very quickly decided to develop partnerships with third countries, with the dual aim of influencing migration flows and securing trade partnerships.

## 3.2. Active relations with third countries on migration

Spain has long been committed to addressing migration issues in its relations with third countries. This approach was initiated in the 1990s with Morocco. Morocco is a key partner: Moroccan immigrants represent the largest foreign community in Spain (1 million nationals in 2024) and this neighbouring country is also a transit and departure point for Spain. Another dimension that should not be overlooked is that Morocco and Spain have significant economic relations in the field of imports and exports<sup>129</sup>.

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<sup>122</sup> Anaïck Pian, « Aux portes de Ceuta et Melilla : regard sociologique sur les campements informels de Bel Younes et de Gourougou », *Migrations Société*, 2008, n° 116, p. 11.

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>124</sup> Guillaume Le Boedec, « Le détroit de Gibraltar. Les limites d'un espace modèle de la lutte européenne contre les migrations irrégulières », *Echo Géo*, 2007, n° 2.

<sup>125</sup> Voir le rapport de l'ONG Caminando Fronteras, « [Massacre frontières Nador-Melilla](#) », 24 juin 2022 ».

<sup>126</sup> Voir la publication du CNES (centre national d'études spatiales), « [Espagne/Maroc - Ceuta : une enclave entre enjeux géostratégiques, tensions migratoires et zone grise économique](#) ».

<sup>127</sup> Marlène Panara, « [Route algérienne : près de 4000 migrants sont arrivés aux Baléares depuis le début de l'année, un record](#) », *InfoMigrants*, publié le 31/10/2024.

<sup>128</sup> Guillaume Le Boedec, « Le détroit de Gibraltar. Les limites d'un espace modèle de la lutte européenne contre les migrations irrégulières », *Echo Géo*, 2007, n° 2.

<sup>129</sup> Frédéric Dubessy, « Ceuta et Melilla, baromètres des relations entre le Maroc et l'Espagne », *Econostrum*, publié le 9 décembre 2020.





In February 1992, the two countries signed an initial bilateral readmission agreement, which was not implemented until the 2000s<sup>130</sup>. This agreement required Morocco to readmit persons who had transited through its territory before reaching Spain, regardless of their nationality. However, Morocco quickly sought to renegotiate the agreement<sup>131</sup>. This is because, except in cases of entry via Ceuta and Melilla, it is difficult to prove that a non-Moroccan foreign national actually transited through Morocco before reaching Spain. Morocco therefore took back very few people under this agreement<sup>132</sup>.

To clarify this issue, the two countries have reached an agreement that takes into account the nationality of the driver of the *patera* (small boat): if he is Moroccan, the people on board are assumed to have transited through Morocco and are returned there<sup>133</sup>.

Furthermore, Spain relies on Morocco to control entry into its territory. This delegated border surveillance role creates a diplomatic power struggle, with Morocco sometimes resorting to "migrant blackmail". The border incident that occurred in May 2021, following a diplomatic crisis between Morocco and Spain, is particularly striking in this regard. In response to Spain's welcome in April 2021 of the representative of the Sahrawi independence movement (Polisario Front)<sup>134</sup>, Morocco relaxed its controls in Ceuta. Around 8,000 people, mainly Moroccans, including many minors, entered the Spanish enclave within a few hours, most of them swimming from the Moroccan coast<sup>135</sup>. Diplomatic discussions led to a return to the previous situation in May 2022<sup>136</sup>, after two year of crisis<sup>137</sup>, but this does not put an end to border incidents. On 24 June 2022, around 30 people died during a new attempt by nearly 2,000 people to enter Melilla<sup>138</sup>.

More structurally, Spain has developed its cooperation with third countries within the framework of a "comprehensive programme for the regulation and coordination of foreigners and immigration" (2001-2004), which includes the signing of readmission agreements but also aspects relating to the granting of visas and development aid<sup>139</sup>. The programme also provides for cooperation and information exchange between the Spanish police and those of the countries of origin or transit, as well as strengthening of external borders. Together with Ecuador and Colombia, Spain adopted two agreements in 2001, which included labour immigration quotas<sup>140</sup>.

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<sup>130</sup> Nora El Qadim, « La politique migratoire européenne vue du Maroc : contraintes et opportunités », revue *Politique européenne*, 2010, p. 91.

<sup>131</sup> Claudia Cortes-Díaz, « Le Maroc et l'Espagne contre les pateras », *Plein droit*, 2004, n° 62, p. 30.

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>134</sup> Le territoire du Sahara Occidental était contrôlé par l'Espagne jusqu'en 1975. Un mouvement indépendantiste naît alors : le Front Polisario qui s'oppose au Maroc qui en revendique la souveraineté.

<sup>135</sup> « [A Ceuta, la frontière entre le Maroc et l'Espagne s'apaise mais les tensions diplomatiques restent fortes](#) », *Le Monde*, 21/05/2021.

<sup>136</sup> « [L'Espagne renoue avec le Maroc après un an de brouille](#) », *Le Monde*, 08/04/2022.

<sup>137</sup> « [Maroc-Espagne : les frontières terrestres rouvrent après deux ans de crise](#) », *Le Monde.fr*, 17/05/2022.

<sup>138</sup> « [Drame de Melilla : comment une tentative d'entrée en Europe a conduit à la mort de dizaines de migrants](#) », *Le Monde.fr*, 8/07/2022.

<sup>139</sup> Anna Amiach, « [L'externalisation des politiques migratoires espagnoles : cadre légal](#) », *Migreurop*, 5 mai 2020.

<sup>140</sup> Gemma Pinyol-Jiménez et Silvia Carabello, *Immigration and integration Management in Spain*, 2018, Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, p. 8 et 9.



In 2003, Spain adopted a readmission agreement with Mauritania, followed in 2006 by an emergency cooperation plan that also led to the creation of a detention centre in Nouadhibou for people expelled from the Canary Islands who were in an irregular situation<sup>141</sup>, with the agreement covering both Mauritians and people from other countries<sup>142</sup>. The centre was heavily criticised and nicknamed "*Guantanamo*", in reference to the US detention centre and the appalling conditions there<sup>143</sup>. In this regard, Spain was one of the first European countries to invest in outsourcing its migration policy with the aim of preventing the departure of people in an irregular situation.

In 2006, Spain unveiled its diplomatic strategy with a second "Africa Plan" (2006-2008), precipitated by the arrival of around 40,000 boats in the Canary Islands. This plan linked immigration, security and development, whereas the first plan (2001-2002) focused mainly on economic relations<sup>144</sup>.

In terms of security, Spain positioned itself to participate in the stabilisation of countries in conflict, with an increased diplomatic presence, police cooperation and a development aid component. Spain was behind the establishment of Frontex patrols in Senegal in 2006-2008<sup>145</sup> and between Mauritania and the Canary Islands (Operation Hera, launched in 2006<sup>146</sup>). Subsequently, bilateral agreements multiplied (Gambia and Senegal in 2006, Guinea and Mali in 2007, Niger and Cape Verde in 2008 and Guinea-Bissau in 2009)<sup>147</sup>, and were sometimes amended to include other dimensions, such as strengthening the capacity of Mauritanian border surveillance services<sup>148</sup>. With this series of agreements, « *Africa became a priority for Spanish diplomacy* »<sup>149</sup>.

In May 2019, the "Africa Plan III" was published. It pursues these objectives<sup>150</sup> and is part of a broader commitment to sustainable partnership, incorporating a trade strategy. While the trade objectives appear to have been achieved, with the establishment of Spanish companies and the use of the Spanish language on the continent, the results on the issue of

<sup>141</sup> Anna Amiach, « [L'externalisation des politiques migratoires espagnoles : cadre légal](#) », *Migreurop*, 5 mai 2020. Voir plus récemment, le rôle de la Mauritanie dans la gestion des migrations au nom de l'Union européenne : « [Mauritania: Mass Arrests and Deportations as EU Continues Efforts to Create «Bulwark» Against Irregular Migration](#) », publication du Global Detention Project du 27 mai 2025 ainsi que le plan de la Mauritanie de 2010 « [Document de stratégie nationale pour une meilleure gestion de la migration](#) », qui permet de suivre les financements européens et espagnols.

<sup>142</sup> Lorenzo Gabrielli, « [Flux et contre-flux entre l'Espagne et le Sénégal. L'externalisation du contrôle des dynamiques migratoires vers l'Afrique de l'Ouest](#) », *Asylon(s)*, n° 3, 2008.

<sup>143</sup> Rapport d'Amnesty International « [Mauritanie : personne ne veut de nous. Arrestations et expulsions collectives de migrants interdits d'Europe](#) », juillet 2008, p. 9.

<sup>144</sup> Voir le dossier Grand Format « [Espagne-Afrique. à l'heure des retrouvailles](#) », *Revue Jeune Afrique*, mars 2019, spécifiquement p. 90.

<sup>145</sup> Lorenzo Gabrielli, « Flux et contre-flux entre l'Espagne et le Sénégal. L'externalisation du contrôle des dynamiques migratoires vers l'Afrique de l'Ouest », *Revue Asylon(s)*, n° 3, mars 2008.

<sup>146</sup> Frontex, « Longest Frontex coordinated operation - HERA, the Canary Island », 2006 ; pour un avis critique sur l'opération, voir Vera Wriedt et Darius Reinhardt, « [Opaque and Unaccountable : Frontex Operation Hera](#) », *Statewatch*, 2017.

<sup>147</sup> Anna Amiach, « [L'externalisation des politiques migratoires espagnoles : cadre légal](#) », *Migreurop*, 5 mai 2020.

<sup>148</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>149</sup> Mohammed Charef et Juan A. Cebrián, « Des Pateras aux Cayucos, danger d'un parcours, stratégies en réseau et nécessité des passeurs », *Migrations Sociétés*, vol. 21, n° 125, 2009, p. 111.

<sup>150</sup> Anna Amiach, « [L'externalisation des politiques migratoires espagnoles : cadre légal](#) », *Migreurop*, 5 mai 2020.





migration are considered less positive<sup>151</sup>. A « Focus on Africa 2023 »<sup>152</sup> was then adopted in March 2021 which, in line with the third Africa plan, focuses on certain countries on the continent: Nigeria, Ethiopia and South Africa, on the one hand, as "flagship countries" due to their demographics and economic situation, and Senegal, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Kenya, Tanzania, Mozambique and Angola, on the other hand, considered "priorities". Spain is therefore seeking to invest in the African continent, despite its long history of relatively weak economic and diplomatic relations with the region, including with Equatorial Guinea, a former colony<sup>153</sup>. This desire to invest is reflected in trade cooperation, sometimes accompanied by public development aid, which are considered traditional instruments of foreign policy but can also be used to control migration flows. This raises questions about the potential misuse of public development aid<sup>154</sup>.

With regard to migration issues, "Focus on Africa 2023" indicates, for example, that it supports actions to improve the capacity of countries of origin and transit countries in terms of border control and migration management, and promotes regular migration mechanisms<sup>155</sup>.

The most recent "Spain-Africa Plan" covers the period 2025-2028<sup>156</sup>, and, more comprehensive than the "Focus on Africa 2023", proposes a more global approach, including sustainable development issues. The plan takes a pragmatic approach, acknowledging the reality of migration in Africa and noting that *"migration is a complex reality, as African countries are not only countries of emigration; they can also be transit and receiving countries"*<sup>157</sup>.

It should also be noted that the majority of Spanish citizens share the view that immigrants contribute to the host society. Spanish public opinion is therefore very critical of border externalisation agreements with countries outside the European Union and is opposed to the expulsion of irregular immigrants who have not committed any crime, especially if they are working<sup>158</sup>. Migration policies aimed at expanding legal channels and mechanisms for immigration to Spain enjoy broad support (labour immigration from countries of origin to economic sectors in need of labour, safe corridors for refugees, simplification of the recognition of qualifications and family reunification)<sup>159</sup>.

On migration issues, the "Spain-Africa Plan 2025-2028" states that it is based on three pillars:

- "addressing the root causes of forced migration, with a strengthening of development programmes targeting young people in particular;
- dialogue with African partners to achieve safe, orderly and regular migration;

<sup>151</sup> Guy Arsene B Kimbatsa, « [Analyse des effets du IIIe Plan Espagne-Afrique à travers le modèle de gravité structurel en équilibre partiel](#) », EENI Global Business School, 2022

<sup>152</sup> [Focus Afrique 2023](#).

<sup>153</sup> Dossier Grand Format « [Espagne-Afrique, à l'heure des retrouvailles](#) », *Revue Jeune Afrique*, mars 2019, p. 92.

<sup>154</sup> Lorenzo Gabrielli, « [Flux et contre-flux entre l'Espagne et le Sénégal. L'externalisation du contrôle des dynamiques migratoires vers l'Afrique de l'Ouest](#) », *Asylon(s)*, n° 3, 2008.

<sup>155</sup> [Point 7 du Focus Afrique 2023](#).

<sup>156</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>157</sup> Plan « [Espagne-Afrique, 2025-2028. Travailler ensemble dans le cadre d'une relation stratégique](#) », p. 25.

<sup>158</sup> « [Europe Talks Migration - Spain](#) », More In Commons, mai 2025.

<sup>159</sup> *Ibid.*



- and the fight against criminal networks involved in irregular migration, which endanger the lives of migrants”<sup>160</sup>.

This plan places migration within a broader framework, in line with the increase in the budget allocated to official development assistance. In 2023, Spanish parliamentarians adopted a new law on cooperation for sustainable development and global solidarity, replacing the previous law of 1998<sup>161</sup>. For the first time, the law will set a target of increasing official development assistance to 0.7% of gross national income (GNI) by 2030. In 2022, the OECD estimated Spain's official development assistance expenditure at €4 billion, or 0.3% of GNI<sup>162</sup>. Among the dozen objectives set, one that stands out is to "promote a comprehensive approach to migration, focusing on people and their rights, the root causes of migration, mobility through regular, orderly and safe channels, and sustainable development"<sup>163</sup>. Official development assistance is provided by the AECID (Spanish Agency for International Development Cooperation), created in 1998, and the FIIAPP (International and Ibero-American Foundation for Public Administration and Public Policies). As highlighted in the "Spain-Africa Plan 2025-2028", the FIIAPP also plays a role in combating human trafficking, with projects that strengthen the capacity of African countries' institutions to combat trafficking (the plan cites as an example the A-TIPSOM project in Nigeria, which focuses on preventing trafficking and smuggling of women and girls)<sup>164</sup> and promoting legal and safe migration (the Migrasafe project<sup>165</sup>, which consists of online courses on regular migration).

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<sup>160</sup> « [Espagne-Afrique, 2025-2028. Travailler ensemble dans le cadre d'une relation stratégique](#) », p. 57.

<sup>161</sup> Site focus2030.org « [L'Espagne adopte une nouvelle loi sur le développement durable et s'engage sur la voie du 0,7 %](#) », avril 2023.

<sup>162</sup> « OECD Development Cooperation Peer Reviews: Spain 2022 », OCDE, février 2022.

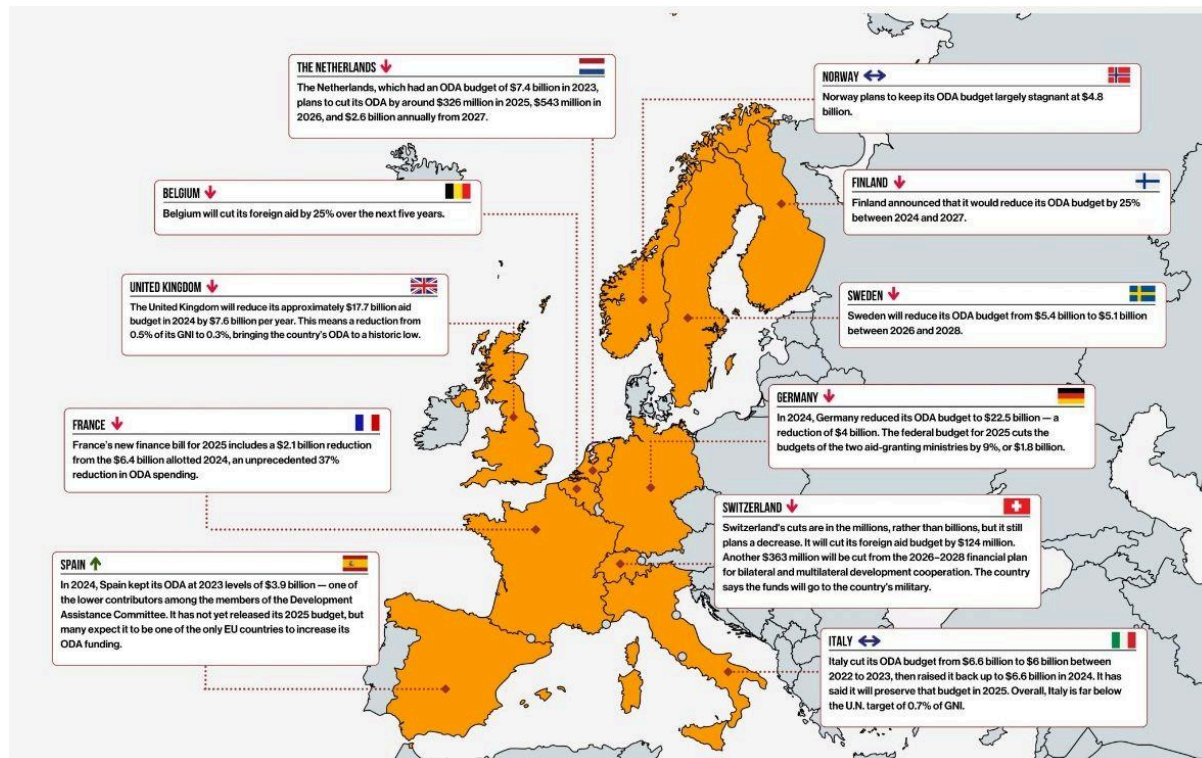
<sup>163</sup> Site focus2030.org « [L'Espagne adopte une nouvelle loi sur le développement durable et s'engage sur la voie du 0,7 %](#) », avril 2023.

<sup>164</sup> « [Espagne-Afrique, 2025-2028. Travailler ensemble dans le cadre d'une relation stratégique](#) », p. 58.

<sup>165</sup> [Cours en ligne « Migrasafe »](#).



Figure 17. Evolution of national public development aid policies in Europe in 2025  
Spain is the only country to increase its budgets in 2025



Source : Jesse Chase-Lubitz and Yula Marie Mediavillo, Devex, March 2025<sup>166</sup>

That being said, Morocco remains one of the Spanish Government's priority objectives, in line with European migration policy. The issue of migration is a significant diplomatic lever, sometimes described as "diplomatic blackmail": *"The conclusion of a fisheries agreement, competition in the vegetable market, drug trafficking and smuggling, territorial claims (the Presidios, the Persil Islet) and the diplomatic future of Western Sahara are all subjects of disagreement whose resolution is now conditional on the management of migration flows passing through Morocco"*<sup>167</sup>.

Morocco receives tens of millions of euros in aid each year from Spain from its share of the EUTF (the European Union Trust Fund for Africa), in particular to strengthen the Moroccan security system<sup>168</sup>.

<sup>166</sup> Jesse Chase-Lubitz, [«Europe is cutting development spending, and it's not because of Trump»](#), Devex, 25/03/2025.

<sup>167</sup> Guillaume Le Boedec, [«Le détroit de Gibraltar. Les limites d'un espace modèle de la lutte européenne contre les migrations irrégulières»](#), *Echo Géo*, 2007, n°2,

<sup>168</sup> Gabriel Echeverría, Gabriele Abbondanza et Claudia Finotelli, « The Externalisation Gamble: Italy and Spain at the Forefront of Maritime Irregular Migration Governance », *Social Science*, 2024, p. 517.



Spain's other key partner is Mauritania, which, for example, received €2 million in 2020 from the EUTF to improve its migration management<sup>169</sup>. The Spanish National Police and Civil Guard are permanently deployed in Mauritania, Senegal and Gambia (around 100 personnel). These countries have agreed to cooperate closely with Spain on irregular migration issues. According to Spain, these operations are yielding "very positive" results<sup>170</sup>. The deployment of personnel is increased when the activities of smuggling networks are detected<sup>171</sup>. This approach is also clearly reflected in the "Spain-Africa Plan 2025-2028" : *« We will continue to combat irregular immigration and human trafficking, focusing on a preventive strategy carried out in collaboration with countries of origin and transit »*<sup>172</sup>.

Once people have entered Spanish territory, despite the externalisation agreements and the dangerous nature of the migration route, the reception given to asylum seekers – which also meets European requirements – is open to criticism.

### 3.3. Reception and management of asylum seeker

Asylum is managed at the national level by a dedicated agency, with a relatively low protection rate (a), while the accommodation system for asylum seekers is under strain (b), with numerous shortcomings identified (c).

#### a. Asylum management

Asylum applications were regulated in Spain for the first time in 1984<sup>173</sup>, although the Geneva Convention was ratified in 1978. Asylum seeker status is recognised by the OAR (*Oficina de Asilo y Refugio*, Office for Asylum and Refugees, under the authority of the Ministry of the Interior), which issues a "red card" after six months of residence, allowing the asylum seeker to work (upon registration of the application, a "white card" is issued). Language courses are provided in reception centres, with a vocational focus.

The asylum application interview is conducted by an OAR officer, who makes an initial decision on the admissibility of the application. In a second stage, when protection is considered, the draft decision is submitted to the Interministerial Commission for Asylum and Refugees (CIAR), which grants or refuses international protection, and is then signed by the Minister of the Interior (in practice by the Under-Secretary of State for the Interior)<sup>174</sup>. The CIAR is composed of representatives from each of the departments with responsibilities for home affairs, foreign affairs, justice, immigration, reception of asylum seekers and equality. The Spanish representation of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

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<sup>169</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>170</sup> « [Espagne-Afrique. 2025-2028. Travailler ensemble dans le cadre d'une relation stratégique](#) », p. 57.

<sup>171</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 57.

<sup>172</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 76.

<sup>173</sup> [Loi 5/1984](#) (BOE) celle qui s'applique actuellement est la loi 12/2009 sur l'asile, dont le chapitre III porte sur les droits sociaux, la possibilité de travailler etc.

<sup>174</sup> [Voir pour plus d'information le document de l'OAR sur le sujet.](#)



(UNHCR) also participates<sup>175</sup>, but can only express an advisory opinion on cases, without the right to vote<sup>176</sup>.

While in 2015-2016 Spain received only around 10,000 asylum applications (and fewer before that), there was a gradual increase until 2019, with more than 100,000 asylum applications that year. In 2023, 163,200 people sought protection in Spain (+37% compared to 2022)<sup>177</sup>. Venezuelans are the largest group of asylum seekers (more than 60 000) followed by Colombians and Peruvians.

The protection rate in Spain is very low: 19.8% in first instance in 2024<sup>178</sup>, 12 % in 2023<sup>179</sup>. In practice, asylum seekers are often redirected towards a humanitarian permit or the work-based regularisation system.

In addition, there is also a humanitarian residence permit, which is granted by the same authorities as asylum<sup>180</sup>. The initial basis is the recognition of particular vulnerability, which would be exacerbated in the event of return to the country of origin and which requires a residence permit. However, it is more precarious than a refugee status, as the permit is only valid for one year and can only be renewed once. For the foreign nationals concerned, it is often easier to seek another basis, such as work, in order to obtain a residence permit. In 2019, the government announced that Venezuelans (who have a low protection rate) whose applications have been rejected can apply for humanitarian status. This allows them to access the labour market and then switch to a work-related residence permit<sup>181</sup>.

Spain's strategy focuses on developing labour immigration rather than asylum, which is symptomatic of the government's pragmatic (or even utilitarian, according to some authors<sup>182</sup>) approach, which prioritises labour immigration for the country's economy. As a result, the asylum system has undergone relatively little reform and faces recurring difficulties, particularly with regard to reception facilities. In practice, the asylum system is more restrictive than access to work permits, which transforms potential refugees into workers with a less protective status.<sup>183</sup>

Spain has also taken in more than 200,000 Ukrainians benefiting from temporary protection since 2022, ranking fourth among European host countries<sup>184</sup>. Spain transfers very few asylum seekers under the Dublin procedure, as Spain receives more request : 9000 requests from other countries to Spain compared to 600 requests from Spain to other countries in 2022<sup>185</sup>.

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<sup>175</sup> [HCR/ACNUR en Espagne, fiche d'information du HCR.](#)

<sup>176</sup> [Rapport sur l'Espagne par AIDA \(ECRE\)](#), mis à jour en 2023.

<sup>177</sup> Rapport du gouvernement espagnol sur le [système de protection internationale en Espagne](#), juin 2024, p. 2.

<sup>178</sup> « [En Espagne, une nouvelle campagne de régularisation à contre-courant du repli européen](#) », France Terre d'Asile, *Vues d'Europe*, 2/05/2025

<sup>179</sup> Romain Philipps, « [Migrants return to Spain hoping to obtain asylum](#) », *Infomigrants*, 17/04/2025.

<sup>180</sup> Fondé sur l'article 46 de la loi sur l'asile de 2009.

<sup>181</sup> Juan Iglesias, Rut Bermejo et Isabel Bazaga, « [Beyond the asylum growth. The limits of the Spanish refugee reception program](#) », *International Migrations*, 2024.

<sup>182</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>183</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>184</sup> Rapport du gouvernement espagnol sur le [système de protection internationale en Espagne](#), juin 2024, p. 2.

<sup>185</sup> Rapport du gouvernement espagnol sur le [système de protection internationale en Espagne](#), juin 2024.





## b. Reception of asylum seekers

Spain is highly regionalised, but the central government remains solely responsible for "nationality, emigration, the status of foreigners and the right of asylum" (Article 149-2 of the Constitution). The Ministry of Inclusion, Migration and Social Security, created in 2020, is responsible for housing asylum seekers, while centres for irregular migrants fall under the remit of the Ministry of the Interior. The issue of reception management has been slow to emerge in Spain, due to its status as a country of emigration and transit for several decades. It was introduced at the instigation of the European Union, due to European obligations to receive asylum seekers.

Currently, accommodation rules vary depending on the status of the person, depending on whether they are asylum seekers or undocumented migrants. Immigrants who have a residence permit and are not asylum seekers may be accommodated if they are in a vulnerable situation, according to the Spanish common law system. The issue of reception therefore mainly concerns asylum seekers, in accordance with European requirements on the subject (the so-called "Reception" Directive<sup>186</sup>).

Today, in terms of accommodation, the typical pathway for an asylum seeker involves several stages<sup>187</sup> :

- « Reception » : during the first 30 days, accommodation is provided in a CATE (*Centro de Atención Temporal de Extranjeros*, with a total capacity of 1,000 places nationwide) or in emergency centres and requisitioned hotels. The aim is to identify and register asylum seekers, provide first aid and temporary accommodation. These centres are run by the Ministry of the Interior.
- « Integration » : for a maximum of six months, the person is housed in a CAR (*Centros de Acogida de Refugiados*). The CARs are supplemented by centres directly managed by associations, notably the Red Cross and the CEAR (*Comisión Española de Ayuda al Refugiado*). The total number of places for asylum seekers is 21,000<sup>188</sup> nationwide. The accommodation facilities are managed by the Ministry of Inclusion, Migration and Social Security.
- « Autonomy » : for 6 to 18 months, people are rehoused in shared flats with social support, still under the management of the Ministry of Inclusion, Migration and Social Security (approximately 6,800 places<sup>189</sup> nationwide).

Given the unique circumstances in Ceuta and Melilla, accommodation is handled differently there. Spain has set up semi-open reception centres in these territories, initially intended for asylum seekers<sup>190</sup> (the CETI - *Centra de Estancia Temporal de Inmigrantes*: 520 places and *La Esperanza* (reception centre for minors: 300 places). The centres are used to sort those

<sup>186</sup> Directive 2001/55/CE du Conseil du 20 juillet 2001 relative à des normes minimales pour l'octroi d'une protection temporaire en cas d'afflux massif de personnes déplacées et à des mesures tendant à assurer un équilibre entre les efforts consentis par les États membres pour accueillir ces personnes et supporter les conséquences de cet accueil, remplacée par la directive 2024/1436.

<sup>187</sup> [Short overview of the reception system, Spain](#), version 12/05/2025, ECRE.

<sup>188</sup> [Informe 2023: La personas refugiadas en España y Europa](#), CEAR.

<sup>189</sup> Rapport du gouvernement espagnol sur le [système de protection internationale en Espagne](#), juin 2024.

<sup>190</sup> Cristina Fernández Bessa, « Quelques caractéristiques et conditions de l'internement des étrangers en Espagne », *Enfermés dehors*, 2009, Editions du Croquant, p. 163.





who will be returned to Morocco from those who will be allowed to enter the Iberian Peninsula, who are fewer in number. In practice, *"the image of mass arrivals via Ceuta is largely contradicted by figures showing that only a small proportion of people ultimately obtain permanent reception"*<sup>191</sup>. These semi-open centres effectively confine people to small territory of each enclave. There is no time limit on how long people can stay, and some have remained there for several years<sup>192</sup>.

### c. Failings in the accommodation and reception of asylum seekers

As in most European countries, there are not enough accommodation places for asylum seekers in Spain, as noted by the Spanish Ombudsman in 2022<sup>193</sup>. Faced with an increase in the number of people seeking asylum, Spain has opted for greater collaboration with NGOs<sup>194</sup>, such as the Red Cross and CEAR, even though investments are regularly announced<sup>195</sup>. Despite this approach, many people find themselves on the streets, without accommodation<sup>196</sup>, or turn to their families or communities, which is an easier option for Latin Americans<sup>197</sup>.

The difficulties are particularly acute in Ceuta, Melilla and the Canary Islands, which are first points of arrival. The situation in the Canary Islands prompted the Spanish government to declare a migration emergency to keep certain accommodation facilities open and ensure a smoother transfer between the Canary Islands and mainland Spain<sup>198</sup>. This emergency declaration in 2023-2024 was accompanied by budgetary investments<sup>199</sup>.

In Ceuta and Melilla, it is the obstacles to applying for asylum that raise questions. Paradoxes arise: in order to access the Spanish asylum offices in the enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla, applicants must already have a valid residence permit (valid passport and work permit or visa) or arrive by their own means, i.e. by swimming<sup>200</sup>. Some point out that asylum offices are not open to sub-Saharan nationals who are blocked upstream by the Moroccan military (according to a study covering the period from September 2014 to March 2015<sup>201</sup>,

<sup>191</sup> Voir la publication du CNES (centre national d'études spatiales), « [Espagne/Maroc - Ceuta : une enclave entre enjeux géostratégiques, tensions migratoires et zone grise économique](#) ».

<sup>192</sup> [Report of the fact-finding mission by Ambassador Tomáš Boček, Special Representative of the Secretary General on migration and refugees, to Spain](#), SG/Inf(2018)25 -, 18-24 March 2018.

<sup>193</sup> Defensor del Pueblo, 'Informe anual 2021 y debates en las Cortes Generales Volumen I. Informe', March 2022, p. 158.

<sup>194</sup> [Europe discussion paper regarding integration of asylum seekers and refugees](#), International Ombudsman Institute, July 2020, p. 7. Par exemple, concernant le transfert de mineur·es, voir « [Spain adopts measures to move lone migrants minors away from Canary Islands](#) », 19/03/2025, *Euronews*.

<sup>195</sup> [Country Report Spain](#), AIDA, ECRE, 2023.

<sup>196</sup> [Types of accommodation in Spain](#), AIDE, ECRE, dernière mise à jour 12/05/2025.

<sup>197</sup> Juan Iglesias, Rut Bermejo et Isabel Bazaga, « [Beyond the asylum growth. The limits of the Spanish refugee reception program](#) », 2024, *International Migrations*.

<sup>198</sup> « [Spain: boosting migrant accommodation as a priority](#) », 06/12/2024, *Infomigrants*.

<sup>199</sup> [Types of accommodation in Spain](#), AIDE, ECRE, dernière mise à jour du 12/05/2025: « *In January 2024, the declaration of the migration emergency was extended, and the Council of Ministers approved an allocation of 60.6 million Euros. Before this new declaration and since October 2023, a total of 10,000 new reception places within both the asylum and the humanitarian assistance programs, and a total of almost 100 million Euros have been employed to face such a situation* ».

<sup>200</sup> Isaline Roverato, « [Ceuta, au péril de leur vie](#) », *visionscarto*, 25/02/2025.

<sup>201</sup> Lorenzo Gabrielli, « [Récurrence de la crise frontalière : l'exception permanente en Espagne](#) », *Culture & Conflits*, n° 99-100, 2015, p. 75.



confirmed in 2021<sup>202</sup>). This observation regarding the difficulty of accessing asylum offices is shared by the Council of Europe's Human Rights Committee, which noted in 2022 that it is effectively impossible to apply for asylum in the enclaves<sup>203</sup>. Furthermore, the criteria for transferring people from the enclaves to the mainland are not transparent, with reports denouncing discrimination based on nationality<sup>204</sup>. In 2015, Spain adopted legislation providing for immediate push-back at the border in cases of illegal entry into the enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla<sup>205</sup>. This practice was initially condemned by a Chamber of the European Court of Human Rights in 2017 on the grounds that the push-back was carried out without any consideration or individual decision, in violation of the prohibition of collective expulsions<sup>206</sup>. However, the decision was reviewed by the Grand Chamber<sup>207</sup>, which ruled in 2020 that there had been no violation of the European Convention on Human Rights, as the persons concerned could have attempted to enter Spanish territory legally by submitting an application for international protection at the border post in Beni-Enzar<sup>208</sup> (Moroccan town near Melilla).

Finally, the CIE (*Centros de Internamiento de Extranjeros*, detention centres for organising deportations) are often criticised by Human Rights organisations, particularly with regard to the poor living conditions of foreigners<sup>209</sup>. Reports indicate that people who should not be detained are sometimes held in CIEs, such as alleged minors or European citizens, and that the management of CIEs varies from one centre to another<sup>210</sup>. The lack of transparency regarding detention conditions is also questioned<sup>211</sup>, particularly with regard to the violence that foreign nationals may suffer there.

The death in 2011 of Martine Samba, a foreign citizen detained in a CIE, brought the debate on the detention of foreign nationals in Spain<sup>212</sup>. The lack of care received by this woman led to her death, for which her family was finally compensated in 2020 by the Government. The Ministry of Interior – responsible for CIEs – and the Ministry of Inclusion, Social Security and Migration admitted that her death was linked to the poor functioning of the CIE in question in Madrid<sup>213</sup>.

The difficult reception of foreigners also affects unaccompanied minors, who have recently been at the centre of heated debates on the territorial distribution of their care, particularly those arriving via the Canary Islands.

<sup>202</sup> « [Tarajal and the legacy of racism in Spain's migration system](#) », *Picum Blog*, 08/02/2021.

<sup>203</sup> [Visite de l'Espagne par le Commissaire aux droits de l'homme du Conseil de l'Europe](#), 29/11/2022.

<sup>204</sup> [Differential treatment of specific nationalities in reception](#), AIDA, ECRE, dernière mise à jour du 12/05/2025.

<sup>205</sup> Loi organique 4/2015 du 30 mars 2015 sur la protection sécuritaire des citoyens.

<sup>206</sup> En violation de l'article 4 du Protocole 4, décision de la Cour EDH, *N.D et N.T. c/ Espagne*, req. n° 8675/15 et 8697/15.

<sup>207</sup> Qui peut être saisie par l'une des parties après une décision de chambre.

<sup>208</sup> Décision de Grande Chambre, 13/02/2020, *N.D. et N.T. contre Espagne*, req. n° 8675/15 et 8697/15, point 229.

<sup>209</sup> Cristina Fernández Bessa, « Quelques caractéristiques et conditions de l'internement des étrangers en Espagne », *Enfermés dehors*, Editions du Croquant, 2009, p. 163.

<sup>210</sup> [Diferencias que generan desigualdad. Informe CIE 2022](#), Servicio Jesuita a Migrantes, juin 2023

<sup>211</sup> [Country Report Spain](#), AIDA, ECRE, 2023, p. 148.

<sup>212</sup> « [Spain: Case into Martine Samba's detention centre death to be reopened](#) », Statewatch, 06/02/2014.

<sup>213</sup> [Country Report Spain](#), AIDA, ECRE, 2023, p. 151.



### 3.4 The difficult situation of unaccompanied minors

Since 2021, unaccompanied underage children who cross the border irregularly are placed in child protection facilities and are offered the possibility of obtaining resident status when they reach the age of majority<sup>214</sup>. Unaccompanied foreign minors (MENA, *Menores Extranjeros No Acompañados*), considered to be "abandoned and helpless", fall under the child protection system, which is managed by the autonomous communities. This can lead to differences in treatment between communities<sup>215</sup>, since it is the Community in which the minor is located that is responsible for them. For protection to apply, the minor must be recognised as such, in accordance with an age assessment procedure dating from 2014 (MENA protocol<sup>216</sup>). In case of doubt, the Attorney General initiates a process of medical examinations (including X-rays of the wrists, collarbones or molars)<sup>217</sup>. In 2021, the government also adopted a decree to facilitate access to residence permits for unaccompanied minors who have reached the age of majority, while excluding those with a criminal record. The aim is to prevent young people from finding themselves in an irregular situation when they reach the age of majority. After the first year of implementation, more than 16,000 young people obtained residence permits, exceeding the government's predictions by 10%<sup>218</sup>.

Nevertheless, deportations of minors are still taking place, particularly from Spanish enclaves in Morocco. Spain has adopted an agreement with Morocco that takes into account the situation of isolated Moroccan minors with the aim of returning them to their country of origin. According to a 2003 Spanish-Moroccan memorandum, the Moroccan authorities are supposed to identify the families of minors before they are returned<sup>219</sup>, but this does not always seem to be the case. These returns are accompanied by Spanish funding for the training of deported minors once they return to Morocco, according to a protocol of 2007 implementing the memorandum<sup>220</sup>. Spain subsequently adopted a similar agreement on the return of unaccompanied minors with Senegal in 2008<sup>221</sup>.

For example, in 2021, Spain and Morocco agreed to transfer 700 young people, but in practice fewer than 50 unaccompanied minors were actually returned to Morocco. The Spanish judge nevertheless ruled that some of the 50 young people transferred should not

<sup>214</sup> « [Spain: over 16,000 young migrants obtain residence permits thanks to 2021 reform](#) », PICUM blog, 04/04/23.

<sup>215</sup> Augustín Villafaña et Lidia Carnicero, « Les mineurs étrangers non accompagnés en Espagne », *Revue Vie sociale et traitement*, 2016, n° 130, p. 84.

<sup>216</sup> Voir à ce sujet le rapport du Sénat de 2023 sur les [mineurs étrangers non accompagnés](#), la partie sur l'Espagne, étude de législation comparée n° 297, octobre 2021.

<sup>217</sup> [Rapport de la mission d'information](#) effectuée par l'Ambassadeur Tomáš Boček, Représentant spécial du Secrétaire Général sur les migrations et les réfugiés, en Espagne du 18 au 24 mars 2018 (SG/Inf(2018)25).

<sup>218</sup> « [Spain: over 16,000 young migrants obtain residence permits thanks to 2021 reform](#) », PICUM blog, 04/04/23.

<sup>219</sup> Claudia Cortes-Díaz, « Le Maroc et l'Espagne contre les Pateras », *Revue Plein droit du GISTI*, 2004, p. 30.

<sup>220</sup> Nora El Qadim, « La politique migratoire européenne vue du Maroc : contraintes et opportunités », *Politique européenne*, 2010, p. 91.

<sup>221</sup> Voir la fiche de [Migreurop sur le sujet de l'externalisation](#) (non datée) et la loi 2/2009 sur le séjour des étrangers-ères (article 35), qui prévoit la signature d'accords de collaboration avec les pays d'origine sur la migration irrégulière, la protection et le retour des mineur-es non accompagné-es.



have been transferred due to a failure to comply with the conditions for returning minors<sup>222</sup>. In order for a minor to be removed, the following conditions must be met: the return must be in the best interests of the child, a safe return must be guaranteed, the return must be voluntary and the young person must have had the opportunity to be heard by a court<sup>223</sup>. This highlights the complexity of the issue of minors.

Furthermore, the Spanish government regularly attempts to modify the powers of the autonomous communities in order to transfer responsibility for the reception of minors to the central government<sup>224</sup>. It was notably due to the greater burden on the Canary Islands that the question of reviewing the functioning of the autonomous communities arose, with approximately 5,000 minors and a capacity of 900 places<sup>225</sup>. The distribution of unaccompanied minors across Spain is a complex issue due to the regional institutional system. The PP, the opposition party to the current government, holds a majority in many autonomous communities and opposes the central government's relocation proposals. The latter finally formed a coalition in 2024 with the Catalan party to reach a national agreement.

Finally, in March 2025, a royal decree-law was adopted to improve the distribution of unaccompanied minors among the regions<sup>226</sup>. To ensure this distribution, the reform takes into account the characteristics of each Community (population, economy, reception efforts, employment rate, etc.). The transfer should take place within 15 days of the minor's arrival on Spanish territory<sup>227</sup>. The reception capacity of each Community will be calculated as the basis for distribution. However, there is no mention of taking into account the wishes of the minor.

The Minister for Territorial Policy acknowledges the need to fully integrate minors, stating that Spain has taken in tens of thousands of minors since the invasion of Ukraine, that they are the same children, of the same age, and that the only difference is their skin colour<sup>228</sup>. In essence, he asserts that what has been done for Ukrainians (Spain is the 4th European country to have taken in the most Ukrainians) must be possible for young people of other nationalities.

In the first quarter of 2025, approximately 19,000 unaccompanied foreign minors were officially taken into care in Spain, under the protection of the social services of the autonomous communities, with an "*expediente de tutela abierto*"<sup>229</sup> (official guardianship file), ensuring accommodation, schooling, healthcare and educational and social support. In addition, in 2025, Spain had approximately 17,000 former unaccompanied minors aged

<sup>222</sup> « [Atlantic Route and Spain: Rescues and Tragedy. Moroccan Migration Cooperation Morocco. Judge Orders Return Of Expelled Minors. Border Procedure Plans Spanish Enclaves](#) », ECRE, 18/02/2022.

<sup>223</sup> [Country Report Spain](#), AIDA, ECRE, 2023.

<sup>224</sup> « [Îles Canaries : un bras de fer politique, mais pas de solution pour les mineurs isolés étrangers](#) », France Terre d'Asile, *Vues d'Europe*, 13/11/2024.

<sup>225</sup> « [Spain adopts plan to relocate unaccompanied minors from Canaries](#) », RFI, 11/04/2025.

<sup>226</sup> « [The Government of Spain establishes a model of solidarity, objectivity and flexibility for the reception of unaccompanied migrant children](#) », *La Moncloa*, 18/03/2025.

<sup>227</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>228</sup> « [The Government of Spain establishes a model of solidarity, objectivity and flexibility for the reception of unaccompanied migrant children](#) », *La Moncloa*, 18/03/2025.

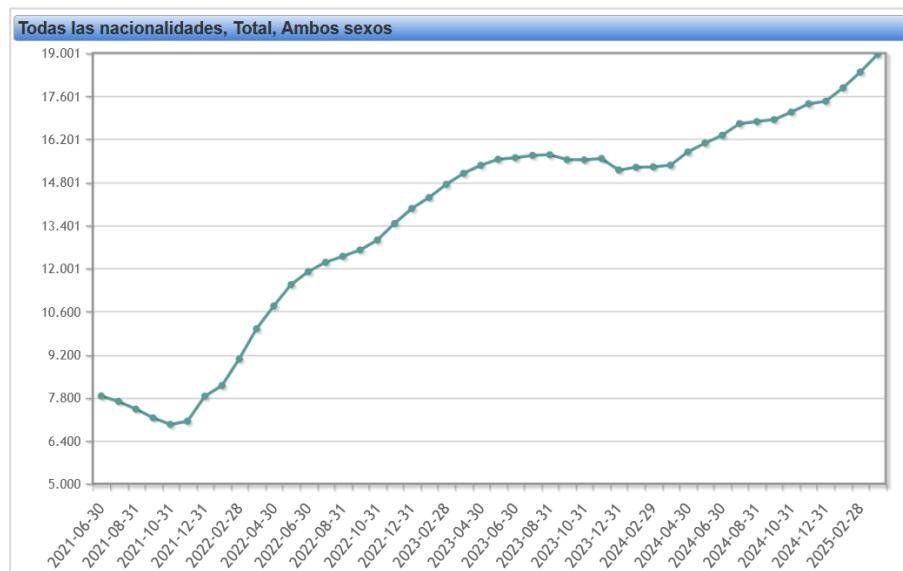
<sup>229</sup> Ministerio de Inclusión, Seguridad Social y Migraciones, Observatorio Permanente de la Inmigración. Menores Extranjeros No Acompañados. [Datos acumulados mensuales. 2025](#)



between 18 and 23 with a specific residence permit known as "*extutelado*"<sup>230</sup> » (release from guardianship). These are young people who were taken into care by the Spanish child protection system and who, upon reaching the age of majority, were granted a specific residence permit thanks to the 2021 reform. There are specific support programmes for "*extutelados*" managed at the level of the autonomous communities (accommodation, education, vocational training), but this is not a guaranteed and uniform right throughout the country; each autonomous community defines its own mechanisms, capacities and criteria<sup>231</sup>.

Figure 18.  
Unaccompanied  
foreign minors  
taken into care in  
Spain, 2021-2025

Source : Observatorio  
Permanente de la  
Inmigración<sup>232</sup>



The issue of caring for minors is important in Spain, with tension between the powers of the autonomous communities and the central government, which seems to have taken up the issue. For example, the current Minister of Territorial policy, Angel Victor Torres, believes that investment is needed to care for these children, who will contribute to Spain's economic and social structure in the future<sup>233</sup>.

### 3.5 Deportation of foreigners in an irregular situation

In order to meet European requirements linked to the creation of the Schengen area and tighter controls at the EU's external borders, an initial law on foreigners (*Ley de Extranjería*)

<sup>230</sup> Ministerio de Inclusión, Seguridad Social y Migraciones, Observatorio Permanente de la Inmigración. «Menores y jóvenes extutelados de 16 a 23 años con autorización de residencia en vigor ». [Datos mensuales. 2025.](#)

<sup>231</sup> Ministerio de Inclusión, Seguridad Social y Migraciones. Programa de atención a jóvenes extutelados. Informe OPI 2024–2025.

<sup>232</sup> Ministerio de Inclusión, Seguridad Social y Migraciones, Observatorio Permanente de la Inmigración. Menores Extranjeros No Acompañados. [Datos acumulados mensuales. 2025.](#)

<sup>233</sup> « [Spain adopts plan to relocate unaccompanied minors from Canaries](#) », *RFI*, 11/04/2025 : "These children will be part of our economic structure, of our labour, social and cultural potential in the future. Let us invest in their future, because their future will be everyone's future ».





was adopted in 1985. This opened the way for the creation of detention centres for foreigners (CIE, *Centros de Internamiento de Extranjeros*, which are under the authority of the Ministry of the Interior). Placement in a CIE is an administrative measure involving deprivation of liberty, aimed at organising deportation. There are currently 1,200 places in CIE centres in seven active centres throughout Spain<sup>234</sup>.

The second law on foreigners of 2000 specifies the conditions for the detention of foreigners, in particular prior authorisation by a judge and the prohibition of minors except in family groups. The maximum period of detention in a CIE is currently 60 days<sup>235</sup>. During this period, their expulsion is organised. Failing this, they are released and transferred to the mainland if the CIE is located on an island or in the Spanish enclaves in Morocco. Currently, the CIEs in Ceuta and Melilla are no longer operational, and expulsions are managed from CETIs (temporary semi-open reception centres). In order to manage arrivals at the enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla, Spain adopted a law in March 2015 allowing immediate deportation<sup>236</sup>, despite the legal possibility of challenging this administrative decision.

Shortly after the adoption of the 2000 law, the Spanish government tested various mechanisms to reduce the number of people in an irregular situation. For example, it offered Ecuadorians a return ticket to apply for a visa from their country of origin and return to Spain with legal status. This programme attracted almost 25,000 Ecuadorians, making the plan unworkable. In the end, the government opted for regularisation on the spot<sup>237</sup>.

CIEs are used to organise the deportation of recently arrived undocumented migrants. Detention for the purpose of deportation sometimes also takes place in less formal detention facilities, particularly in former military barracks on the island of Las Palomas, in Tenerife or Gran Canaria<sup>238</sup>. Other spaces are used, such as transit areas in international airports (Room 4 at Madrid Airport) for a maximum of 72 hours.

After 72 hours, asylum seekers must be accommodated in CARs or centres run by NGOs (total capacity in public CARs is 833 places, mainly located in Madrid<sup>239</sup>).

Regarding the pace of deportations, the figures seem to indicate that it has remained fairly constant over time. According to Eurostat data, since 2015, approximately 10,000 people have been removed each year<sup>240</sup>. Administrative expulsion measures vary more, with around 50,000 orders to leave the country since 2018 and around 30,000 in previous years<sup>241</sup>.

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<sup>234</sup> Madrid – Aluche (~280 places), Barcelona – Zona Franca (~80 places), Murcia – Sangonera la Verde (~130 places), Valence (~160 places), Las Palmas de Gran Canaria (~168 places), Tenerife – Hoya Fría (~238 places), Algeciras + Tarifa (~170 places cumulées).

<sup>235</sup> Voir la [fiche Espagne de la Cimade](#) (mise à jour en août 2022).

<sup>236</sup> Escamilla Martínez E. et al., « [Expulsiones en caliente. Cuando el estado actúa al margen de la Ley](#) », *Docta Complutense*, 2014.

<sup>237</sup> Juan David Sempere Souvannavong, « Evolution de la situation migratoire de l'Espagne de 1991 à nos jours », *Migrations Société*, 2009, vol. 21, n° 125, p. 53.

<sup>238</sup> Cristina Fernández Bessa, « Quelques caractéristiques et conditions de l'internement des étrangers en Espagne », *Enfermés dehors*, 2009, Editions du Croquant, p. 163.

<sup>239</sup> Madrid – Pozuelo : 406 places, Madrid – Vallecas : 96 places, Madrid – Alcobendas : 90 places, Valence – Mislata : 121 places, Séville : 120 places.

<sup>240</sup> Eurostat, [Third country nationals returned following an order to leave](#).

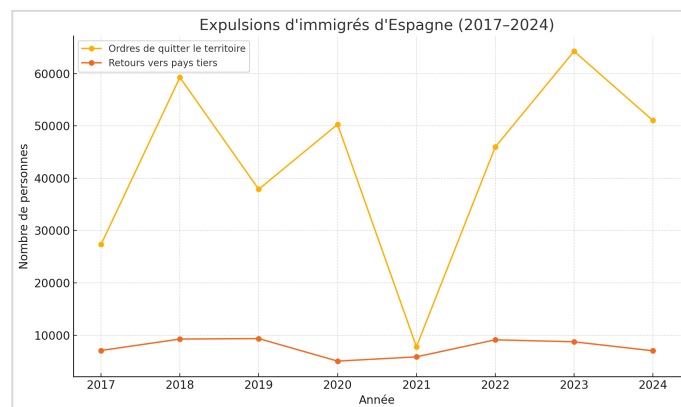
<sup>241</sup> Eurostat, [Enforcement of immigration legislation statistics](#).





Figure 19. Obligations to leave the territory and expulsions, Spain, 2017 - 2024

Source : authors' calculations based on Eurostat data<sup>242</sup>



\* \* \*

The objectives of Spanish leaders are clear: foreigners are directed towards labour-based residence permits rather than asylum. The rules governing these two issues are not the same. On the one hand, asylum is regulated by the European Union and the Geneva Convention, while on the other, labour immigration is fully managed by the state. The consequences are also different, as European countries have committed to providing asylum seekers with dignified reception, while workers are only entitled to standard benefits. Is this partly what explains this choice, or is it simply a desire to maintain economic growth? In any case, the situation is clear: most foreigners are directed towards work permits, which are supposed to help them integrate.

<sup>242</sup> *Ibid.*

# 4

## Integrating immigrants through work

### In brief

In Spain, immigrant integration is mainly based on access to employment. Since 2020, the Ministry of Inclusion, Social Security and Migration, which is part of the Ministry of Labour and independent from the Ministry of the Interior, has been responsible for setting policy guidelines on migration and integration. Implementation is largely decentralised to the autonomous communities and municipalities.

The Spanish economy – particularly the tourism, construction, agriculture and hospitality sectors – is heavily dependent on foreign labour. Between 2021 and 2024, 40% of new jobs were filled by immigrants. Public policies prioritise professional integration, with the involvement of employer organisations. Skills acquisition and the gradual recognition of qualifications facilitate socio-economic integration. However, obstacles remain, including job insecurity, access to housing and unequal access to rights. The Spanish model stands out for its pragmatic approach based on inclusion through work, despite administrative procedures that remain complex.

The existence of a specific ministry, separate from the Ministry of Labour, responsible for inclusion, social security and migration (4.1) is a further sign of the focus and priority given to employment for immigrants (4.2).



## 4.1. Decentralisation and dedicated ministry

Until 1986, when it joined the European Community, Spain had no immigration policy, not even an immigration law. It was not until 1985 that the first immigration law was enacted, as a prerequisite for Spain's accession to the European Community. At the turn of the 1980s, Spain was still a country of emigration, and the bilateral agreements of the time with Western European countries were aimed at welcoming and protecting Spanish migrant workers. Ten years later, Spain became a country of immigration with increasingly heterogeneous migratory flows<sup>243</sup>.

Before 2020, ministerial powers on immigration were divided between a State Secretariat for Immigration and Emigration, within the Ministry of Labour, and the Directorate-General for International Relations and Foreigners, within the Ministry of Interior. In 2020, Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez created a ministry detached from the Ministry of Labour, with responsibility for social security, to which were added responsibility for social inclusion and migration. The Ministry of Inclusion, Social Security and Migration is thus responsible for formulating and developing government policy on foreigners, immigration and emigration, and inclusion policies. Under its responsibility, the State Secretariat for Migration is the body responsible for developing the government's migration policy in terms of immigration, integration of immigrants and Spanish citizenship abroad<sup>244</sup>. The issuance of residence permits is the responsibility of the Ministry of Interior, through the *Oficina de Extranjería* (Foreigners' Office), attached to the *Subdelegación del Gobierno* (Government Sub-delegation) in each province, which is responsible for receiving and processing applications within the territory.

Between 1985 and 2017, various governments approved six laws on the status of foreigners and related implementing regulations. At the state level, the first policies specifically addressing the integration of immigrants appeared with the 1994 Social Integration Plan for Immigrants<sup>245</sup>, followed by the *Strategic Plan for Citizenship and Integration* for 2007-2010 (PECI) and 2011-2014 (PECI II)<sup>246</sup>.

In 2007, the first PECI was adopted by the government, with a budget of €2 billion for the period 2007-2010, setting out its priorities for education, reception and employment to the regions, municipalities and civil society. The aim is not to offer foreigners specific social services or benefits, but to promote universal access to public services, with the coordination and evaluation of local initiatives by regions, municipalities and associations in the field of integration, without any desire for centralisation<sup>247</sup>.

With the welfare state in decline for many years in Spain and the management of social policies largely transferred to the autonomous communities access to rights and benefits is

<sup>243</sup> Anna Terron, Secrétaire d'Etat espagnole à l'Immigration et à l'Emigration, communication au colloque "Identité européenne", organisé le 8 avril 2010 au Conseil supérieur du Notariat à Paris.

<sup>244</sup> <https://www.inclusion.gob.es/>

<sup>245</sup> "Le rôle des Communautés autonomes dans le modèle contemporain d'intégration des immigrants en Espagne : variabilité de réalisation" - Encarnación La Spina - Universidad de Deusto - 2015.

<sup>246</sup> Plan stratégique de citoyenneté et d'intégration. Verónica Viteri et Santiago Martínez Sánchez, « L'Espagne de pays d'émigration à pays d'accueil », *Outre-Terre* (2017/3 N° 52).

<sup>247</sup> Sylvie Koller, « Politiques d'intégration en Espagne », *Etudes*, 2007, p. 177.



uneven across regions<sup>248</sup>. These difficulties can be exacerbated by language barriers, isolation, lack of knowledge of the law, etc.<sup>249</sup>.

The central government sets out principles and establishes a fairly loose framework within which local authorities operate. Subsidies for integration policy are negotiated bilaterally, based on objective indicators such as the proportion of the foreign population, but also on political alliances<sup>250</sup>. There is little consultation between Autonomous Communities<sup>251</sup>.

Spanish integration policy should be viewed in the context of Spain's social and democratic model, where regional identities often take precedence over the idea of a nation, which is also highly decentralised<sup>252</sup>. In Spain, foreigners have to integrate into society rather than into the nation<sup>253</sup>, integration takes place at a very local level.

Spain, with its strong cultural diversity, reflected for example in the coexistence of five official languages<sup>254</sup>, is thought to have a certain tolerance for diversity, linked to the presence of foreigners in public spaces. Spain imposes few conditions for initiation or adherence to the values of the host society, which are moreover poorly defined due to a multicultural national identity<sup>255</sup>.

In July 2023, Spain adopted a new integration plan: the "Strategic Framework for Citizenship and Inclusion, against Racism and Xenophobia, 2023-27"<sup>256</sup>. This strategic framework aims to promote the integration and inclusion of immigrants and to combat racism, xenophobia and other forms of intolerance. Moreover, the Spanish government has announced that it will address the issue of professional downgrading of foreigners by providing them with greater support in integrating into the labour market<sup>257</sup>.

Attached to the State Secretariat for Migration, and therefore to the Ministry of Integration, Social Security and Migration, the Spanish Observatory on Racism and Xenophobia (OBERAXE) was created in 2000 with the mission of studying, analysing and proposing actions to combat racism and xenophobia in Spain. The Observatory regularly publishes reports and campaigns, particularly against persistent discriminatory attitudes against foreigners and includes a Permanent Observatory on Immigration<sup>258</sup>.

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<sup>248</sup> For example, the Minimum Living Income (IMV), a national benefit, is linked to regional minimum incomes (*rentas mínimas autonómicas*) which vary greatly from one community to another, the time limits for entitlement to benefits for dependent persons and the amount per beneficiary depend on each region, as do housing assistance and supplementary healthcare.

<sup>249</sup> Sylvie Koller, « Politiques d'intégration en Espagne », *Etudes*, 2007, p. 177.

<sup>250</sup> Bruquetas-Callejo, María et al., « Políticas de integración en España: Estado y Comunidades Autónomas en perspectiva comparada ». *Fundación CIDOB*, 2011, p.48 ; et Rapport du ministère espagnol de l'Inclusion sur le Plan Estatal de Ciudadanía e Integración, 2023, p. 27.

<sup>251</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>252</sup> Francisco Colom González, *La cuestión nacional en España*, Centro de Estudios Políticos y Constitucionales, 2018.

<sup>253</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>254</sup> Castillan, Catalan, Galicien, Basque, Aranais.

<sup>255</sup> « Políticas de Integración en España: balance y desafíos », Institut européen de la Méditerranée (IEMed), 2019.

<sup>256</sup> [Marco Estratégico de Ciudadanía e Inclusión, contra el Racismo y la Xenofobia, 2023-2027](#)

<sup>257</sup> Ashifa Kassam, « [How Spain's radically different approach to migration helped its economy soar](#) », *The Guardian*, 18/02/2025.

<sup>258</sup> Voir la page du site internet de [l'Observatoire Permanent sur l'Immigration](#).



### The revitalisation of rural areas through the reception of immigrants: the example of Burbáguena

The rural Spanish village of Burbáguena, in the province of Teruel in Aragon, is located in one of the least densely populated areas of Europe<sup>259</sup>. Its population, which had been in sharp decline for years, stood at 207<sup>260</sup> before the opening in 2021 of a centre for asylum seekers run by the Accem association<sup>261</sup>.

Since its opening, the centre has taken in more than 1,000 people awaiting the examination of their applications. Around 100 of them have now settled in the region, almost doubling the population of Burbáguena, which now has 350 inhabitants, including 25 children <sup>262</sup>.

The effects on the revitalisation of the village are noticeable, with, for example, the reopening of small shops (pharmacy, bakery, bar) and the resumption of the school bus service<sup>263</sup>.

The social rights of foreign citizens with legal status are identical to those of Spanish citizens, particularly in terms of social benefits, subject to residence requirements<sup>264</sup> :

- access to the universal public healthcare system, on the same terms as Spanish citizens, subject to legal residence and registration in the municipal register (*padrón*).
- Minimum income (*Ingreso Mínimo Vital*), subject to at least one year's residence and means testing, and participation in social inclusion measures, such as actively seeking employment
- Housing assistance, managed at the autonomous community level, if they meet the residence and income criteria defined by each region.
- Family benefits, pensions and unemployment benefits, provided that contributions have been made to the Spanish social security system

Foreign citizens in an irregular situation do not have access to these social rights, with the exception of the public health system. Since Decree-Law 7/2018<sup>265</sup>, undocumented foreigners have almost universal access to the public healthcare system, including primary care, specialists, emergencies, hospitalisation, prevention and medication, subject to three cumulative conditions: they must have been living in Spain for more than 90 days, they must not have health coverage in their country of origin, and they must not have sufficient resources<sup>266</sup>.

In terms of civil rights, foreign citizens who have been legally resident in Spain for at least five years without interruption have the right to vote in municipal elections, in the case that

<sup>259</sup> Avec moins de 10 habitants au kilomètre carré (135 000 en tout), celle-ci est considérée comme un désert démographique.

<sup>260</sup> « [Espagne : des migrants redonnent vie à un village dépeuplé](#) », *TV5 Monde*, 20/2/2025.

<sup>261</sup> <https://www.accem.es/>

<sup>262</sup> « [Dans l'Espagne rurale, des réfugiés redonnent vie à un village dépeuplé](#) », *France 24*, 19/02/2025.

<sup>263</sup> « [Burbáguena, le village espagnol sauvé par les réfugiés](#) », *Géo*, 20/02/2025.

<sup>264</sup> [Ley Orgánica 4/2000, de 11 de enero, sobre derechos y libertades de los extranjeros en España y su integración social](#), *Boletín Oficial del Estado (BOE)*.

<sup>265</sup> [Real Decreto-ley 7/2018, de 27 de julio, sobre el acceso universal al Sistema Nacional de Salud](#), *Boletín Oficial del Estado*.

<sup>266</sup> Real Decreto-Ley 7/2018 « sobre el acceso universal al Sistema Nacional de Salud » [BOE-A-2018-10752](#). Ce dispositif se distingue du système français de l'Aide médicale d'État par son panier de soins largement équivalent à celui des assurés ordinaires.



their country of origin applies reciprocity for Spanish nationals. In practice, this only applies to a dozen countries worldwide<sup>267</sup>.

## 4.2. Access to work in priority

Since 2002, the working-age population born in Spain has fallen by more than one million, while the foreign-born population has increased by nearly 4.2 million. The increase in the available workforce in Spain is therefore entirely due to immigration, with an employment rate among immigrants of 78%, compared to 63% among the Spanish population. The overall activity rate among foreigners is higher than that of Spanish people, due to a higher concentration of foreigners in the 25-54 age group and in geographical areas with high employment<sup>268</sup>.

According to the study "*Informe sobre la Integración de la población extranjera en el mercado laboral español*"<sup>269</sup>, if foreigners left the labour market, the Spanish economy would immediately lose 16.9 million jobs.

However, Spain is experiencing a deficit in the integration of foreigners into the labour market. In 2023, the unemployment rate among the foreign population reached 19.7%, which is 7 points higher than the unemployment rate among Spanish citizens (12%)<sup>270</sup>. This does not include the significant proportion of foreigners residing in Spain without a residence permit. At equivalent ages and levels of education, unemployment remains higher among foreigners than among Spanish citizens, a difference that is particularly marked in the case of higher education graduates (4-5% in the Spanish population over 35 years of age, 11-19% in the foreign population)<sup>271</sup>.

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<sup>267</sup> Bolivia, Cape Verde, Chile, Colombia, Korea, Ecuador, Iceland, Norway, New Zealand, Paraguay, Peru, the United Kingdom and Trinidad and Tobago ; [Voting reciprocity agreements](#), INE, 2022.

<sup>268</sup> [Ministerio de Inclusión, Seguridad Social y Migraciones](#).

<sup>269</sup> *Ibid.*

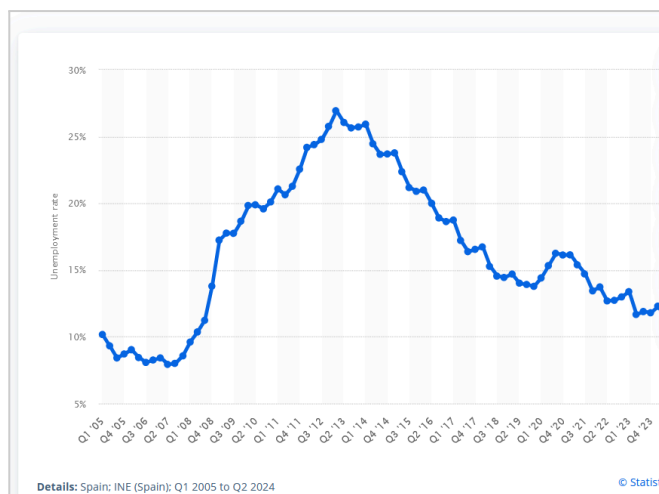
<sup>270</sup> Informe sobre la Integración de la población extranjera en el mercado laboral español, Ministerio de Inclusión, Seguridad Social y Migraciones, 2023.

<sup>271</sup> *Ibid.*





Figure 20. Unemployment rate in Spain, 2005 - 2023



Source : Statista<sup>272</sup>

Conversely, low-skilled jobs account for 28% of foreign employees, compared with only 9% of Spanish employees, with a phenomenon of downgrading of foreigners in relation to their level of qualification. Thus, the presence of foreign workers with higher education in so-called low-skilled occupations (12%) is 6.7 times higher than that of Spanish citizens (1.8%)<sup>273</sup>. This is particularly evident in the domestic work sector, where nearly half of all jobs are held by foreigners, especially women. In addition, nearly 30% of women employed in domestic work are believed to be undocumented<sup>274</sup>.

The overrepresentation of foreigners in so-called low-skilled occupations (37% of foreign workers) or in the catering industry (20% of foreign workers)<sup>275</sup> implies greater vulnerability to unemployment, since these sectors account for nearly 60% of unemployed people who were working before losing their jobs<sup>276</sup>.

The wage gap according to nationality (Spanish-foreign) is 34% on average, with unequal employment characteristics accounting for most of the wage gap; for equivalent jobs, this gross gap falls to 5.3%<sup>277</sup>.

<sup>272</sup> Statista, [Unemployment rate in Spain from 1st quarter 2005 to 2nd quarter 2024](#).

<sup>273</sup> Ministerio de Inclusión, Seguridad Social y Migraciones, Observatorio Permanente de la Inmigración. Informe 2022, publié en 2023.

<sup>274</sup> Carcedo Ana, "Mujeres migrantes en el trabajo de cuidados en España." Fundación Alternativas, 2021, p.16.

<sup>275</sup> Ministerio de Inclusión, Seguridad Social y Migraciones, Observatorio Permanente de la Inmigración. Informe 2022, publié en 2023.

<sup>276</sup> Encuesta de Población Activa (EPA), INE, 2022–2023.

<sup>277</sup> "El impacto económico de la discriminación laboral por origen nacional en España", Ministerio de Inclusión, Seguridad Social y Migraciones – Observatorio Español del Racismo y la Xenofobia (OBERAXE), 2023, p. 24.



Figure 21.  
Distribution of  
foreigners by level of  
education vs.  
Spanish population

Ilustración 9: Tasa de ocupación<sup>278</sup> por nivel de educación máximo alcanzado  
Comparación españoles Vs extranjeros

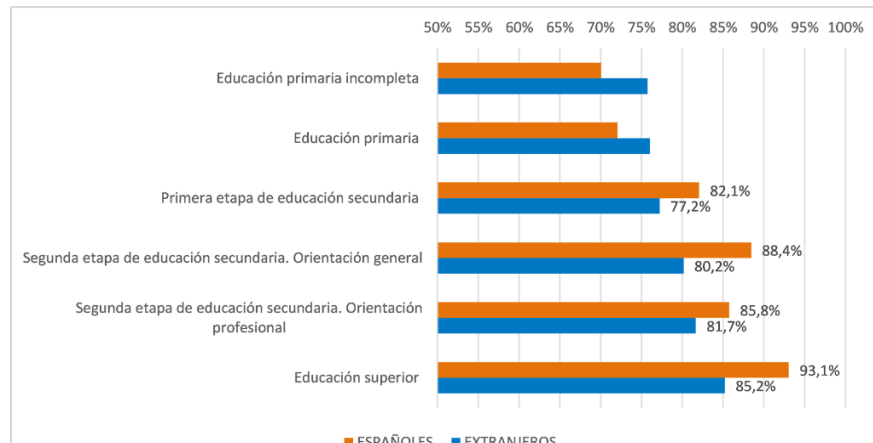
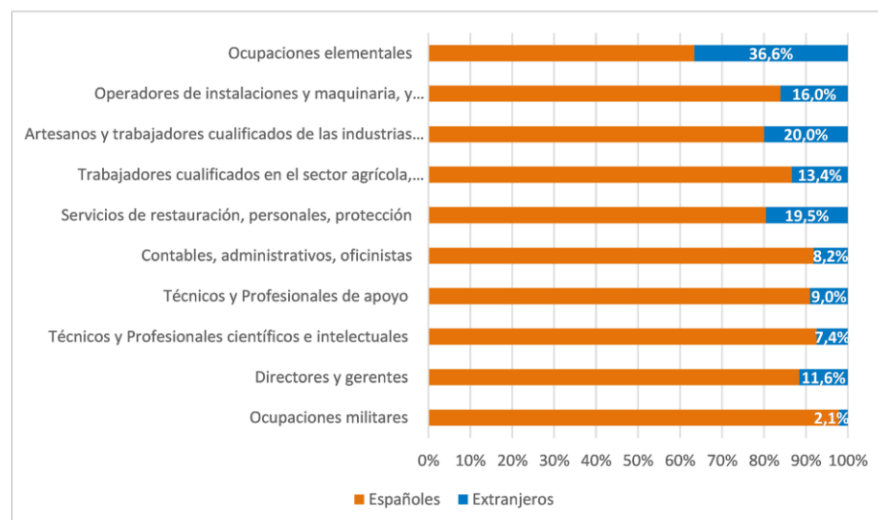


Figure 22.  
Percentage of  
foreign employees  
by type of  
occupation, 2021

Ilustración 13: Presencia de ocupados extranjeros por ocupación (nivel de cualificación)



Source : Ministerio de  
Inclusión, Seguridad  
Social y  
Migraciones<sup>278</sup>

Fuente: EPA (INE). Cuarto trimestre de 2021.

\* \* \*

Questions about the integration of immigrants in Spain began to arise when immigration became a more significant factor in the country's demographics. As Spain's history of immigration is relatively recent, it cannot draw on a national tradition based on a political project or on experience validated by periodic evaluations of integration policy. Integration policy has therefore been developed through a series of measures since the 1990s, in parallel with the entry into force of legislation. While the legislative framework is the responsibility of the central government, as migration policy is one of its exclusive powers, measures related to integration on the ground are largely the responsibility of the autonomous communities and municipalities<sup>279</sup>. This division also has an impact on public opinion and the political landscape.

<sup>278</sup> Informe sobre la Integración de la población extranjera en el mercado laboral español, Ministerio de Inclusión, Seguridad Social y Migraciones, 2023.

<sup>279</sup> Sylvie Koller, « Politiques d'intégration en Espagne », *Etudes*, 2007, p. 177.

# 5

## Public opinion, political landscape and media coverage: polarisation

### In brief:

Spain stands out in Europe for its relatively open public opinion on immigration, although this is marked by growing polarisation. Pedro Sánchez's government has taken a unique stance, defending immigration as an economic and demographic necessity. This approach contrasts with the rise of the far-right Vox party, which has made immigration a lever for electoral mobilisation, particularly in regions most exposed to arrivals. Public debate remains less focused on security than in other European countries and more oriented towards economic and humanitarian issues. The media play an ambivalent role, between anxiety-provoking stories about irregular arrivals and promoting the role of immigrants. Despite local tensions and growing political instrumentalisation, a large majority of society supports a pragmatic view of immigration, based on integration through work and recognition of the economic and social contributions of immigrants.

Pedro Sánchez and his government have adopted a more open stance on immigration than other European countries (5.1), but domestically, the rapid rise of the Vox party has polarised public debate (5.2). Despite this, there is broad consensus among the Spanish public on the need for immigration and its economic benefits for the country (5.3). Media coverage of migration tends to follow the political debate, while remaining largely stereotypical during so-called "crises" at the borders, despite their recurrence over the past 20 years (5.4).



## 5.1. Sánchez Government : a unique position in Europe

While the issue of migration has been exploited by politicians in many European countries since the 2000s<sup>280</sup>, the current Spanish government's discourse stands out, even though the issue is not absent from the debate. Probably due to the Sánchez government's stated economic objectives for integrating immigrants, it seems to speak about the issue in positive terms, while avoiding giving it too much media coverage in order to prevent a backlash from public opinion or its political opponents<sup>281</sup>.

According to statements made by Pedro Sánchez, head of the Spanish government, during a speech delivered in Mauritania in August 2024: *"Despite the rhetoric developing in Europe, migration is not a problem."* Secretary-General of the PSOE (Spanish Socialist Workers' Party) and Prime Minister since 2018, with relatives who fled Franco's dictatorship, he takes a markedly different stance on immigration from his European counterparts, as reflected in the same speech: *"Not so long ago, Spain was also a country of migrants, and many of our Spanish compatriots sought a better life elsewhere, a destiny that was impossible for them in their own country."* He emphasises the economic benefits of immigration for Spain: *"The contribution of migrant workers to our economy, our social system and the sustainability of our pensions is fundamental. For Spain, migration is synonymous with wealth, development and prosperity."* His approach is summarised in the conclusion of his speech: *"Migration is not a problem, it is a necessity, which entails certain problems. That is why we must manage the phenomenon of migration in a humane, safe and orderly manner for the benefit of our respective societies"*<sup>282</sup>.

With a view of immigration as an opportunity for his country's prosperity, he does not follow the positions of his European partners, even though the far right has not spared Spain, with the rise of the Vox party. On 9 October 2024, before the Congress of Deputies, Pedro Sánchez declared: *"We Spanish people, are children of immigration. We will not be the parents of xenophobia"*<sup>283</sup>. Openly opposed to right-wing and far-right MPs on the issue, he accuses them of spreading hate speech: *"Vox and the PP tell us that migrants are endangering our loved ones, but the truth is that half of the people who work to take care of our children, our parents and grandparents are immigrants. They should be cared for with respect and affection, as if they were their own family (...) This is the real contribution of migrants to our economy and society, a contribution that is similar to and complements that of Spanish citizens. A contribution that should be maintained in the coming decades if we*

<sup>280</sup> Joëlle Bastien, « L'ambiguïté des objectifs et le pouvoir discrétionnaire informel dans l'administration des politiques publiques : le cas de la politique d'immigration en Espagne », *Revue internationale des sciences administratives*, 2009, n° 75, p. 738.

<sup>281</sup> Claudia Finotelli and Sebastian Rinken, « A pragmatic bet: The Evolution of Spain's Immigration System », *Migration Policy Institute*, 2023.

<sup>282</sup> « [Sánchez affirme depuis la Mauritanie que "l'immigration n'est pas un problème mais une nécessité" et apporte des bénéfices](#) », *Migrant.es*, 28/8/2024.

<sup>283</sup> « [Pedro Sánchez: "Acoger al que viene de fuera no es sólo un deber, sino un paso para garantizar el Estado del bienestar"](#) », *La Moncloa*, 9/10/2024.



want to overcome this demographic challenge and guarantee the prosperity and progress of our society”<sup>284</sup>.

Nevertheless, due to Spain's position as a country of first arrival, the Spanish government supports the EU and calls for *“the whole of Europe to be involved in the management of migration flows”* with the establishment of a distribution mechanism at EU level. Thus, the majority of MEPs from the PSOE (Spanish Socialist Workers' Party) supported the European Pact on Migration and Asylum, adopted in May 2024, despite it being highly criticised by NGOs<sup>285</sup>. The rules adopted under this pact institutionalise the practice of *hotspots* by creating an asylum procedure at the border, which applies in the context of the detention of the persons concerned. The pact also provides for the distribution of asylum seekers, in which all states must participate, but with modalities of their choosing (admitting people or contributing financially<sup>286</sup>).

Juan Fernando López Aguilar, Spanish MEP (PSOE) and rapporteur for one of the Pact's texts, defended its adoption, emphasising that it represented a necessary step towards more united and orderly management of migration flows within the EU. He stressed that, after years of negotiations, *“is better than leaving things as they are, abandoning European governments to their fate”*.<sup>287</sup> Nevertheless, the solutions proposed maintain the so-called Dublin distribution system and a variable and loosely binding solidarity mechanism<sup>288</sup>. Some Member States consider that the rules adopted in the Pact are insufficient and called in 2024 for the creation of common return *hubs*, which would be located outside the European Union<sup>289</sup>. Spain is not one of the 15 Member States that addressed this complaint to the European Commission, nor did it sign the letter criticising the European Court of Human Rights for its case law on the removal of third-country nationals<sup>290</sup>.

## 5.2 The rapid and recent polarisation of the political landscape with the emergence of Vox

The rapid rise in Spain of the far-right party Vox can be seen as a consequence of the polarisation of Spanish society, which the party tends to reinforce through its rhetoric and ideological positioning<sup>291</sup>. The electoral evolution of the Vox political party is quite striking in Spain, as it reflects a phenomenon that is unprecedented and recent since the country's transition to democracy in 1978: the emergence of a strong national far right. Paradoxically,

<sup>284</sup> [Discurso del presidente del Gobierno en su comparecencia ante el Congreso](#), *La Moncloa*, 9/10/2024.

<sup>285</sup> Voir par exemple, Alyssa McMurtry, [“Spanish NGOs warns of ‘devastating effects of EU’s new Migration pact’”](#), 10/04/2024.

<sup>286</sup> Voir à ce sujet, le règlement de l'Union européenne relatif à la gestion de l'asile et de la migration n° 2024/1351, spécifiquement l'article 56 sur la réserve annuelle de solidarité.

<sup>287</sup> « [El Parlamento Europeo aprueba el Pacto de Migración y Asilo tras superar las discrepancias internas](#) », *HuffPost*, 10/4/2024.

<sup>288</sup> Christina Cerfontaine, « Révision du système de Dublin : le Pacte européen sur la migration et l'asile vu de Belgique. », *Analyses de l'IRFAM*, n°6, 2025.

<sup>289</sup> Charlotte Boitiaux, « [Expulsions de migrants : les “hubs de retour” dans des pays tiers divisent les pays de l'UE](#) », *InfoMigrants*, 18/10/2024.

<sup>290</sup> « [L'Italie, le Danemark et 7 autres pays de l'Union européenne veulent modifier la CEDH](#) », *Euronews*, 23/05/2025.

<sup>291</sup> Alcoceba Hernando, José Antonio, et al., « Análisis del discurso parlamentario de Vox en la XIV Legislatura. Crispación, polarización y nacionalpopulismo », *Estudios sobre el mensaje periodístico*, vol. 29, n° 1, 2023, pp. 1-14.



in comparison with other Western European countries, while the issue of migration is central to Vox's programme, its surge in 2018 at the height of the Catalan crisis, was mainly determined by its nationalist and anti-separatist stance<sup>292</sup>.

Figure 23.  
*Political  
alternation in the  
Spanish  
Government,  
1978 - 2025*

Période	Parti au pouvoir	Couleur	Président du gouvernement
1977–1982	Droite (UCD, puis AP)	●	Adolfo Suárez / Leopoldo Calvo-Sotelo
1982–1996	Gauche (PSOE)	●	Felipe González
1996–2004	Droite (PP)	●	José María Aznar
2004–2011	Gauche (PSOE)	●	José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero
2011–2018	Droite (PP)	●	Mariano Rajoy
2018–aujourd'hui	Gauche (PSOE + coalition avec Podemos/Sumar)	●	Pedro Sánchez

Source : compiled  
by the authors

The absence of the far right from the Spanish political landscape for several decades can be explained by the country's experience of a dictatorial regime between 1936 and 1975, and the fact that the right-wing Popular Alliance succeeded in attracting the more conservative votes of Francoism (in the 1980s, 14% of the Popular Alliance was on the far right). Thus, until recently, the notions of nationalism and patriotism did not prevail, and far-right movements found it difficult to unite<sup>293</sup>.

The Vox party was created in 2013 by former members of the Popular Party (PP), who criticised the latter for its moderation, with their main demand being a re-examination of the model of Spanish autonomy defined by the 1978 Constitution<sup>294</sup>. Vox thus advocates a unitary state, the recentralisation of powers in education, health, policing and justice, the abolition of regional parliaments, restrictions on immigration and a prominent place for Christian values<sup>295</sup>.

Its initial election results were marginal: Vox obtained 1.57% of the vote (without any seats) in the 2014 European elections and around 0.2% (without any seats) in the 2015 and 2016 general elections<sup>296</sup>. The first shock came in 2018 when Vox entered a regional parliament for the first time with nearly 11% of the vote (12 seats) in the Andalusian regional elections, before becoming the third largest political force in the country at national level in 2019, with 15.1% of the vote (52 seats) in the early general elections in November and the party's entry into the Congress of Deputies<sup>297</sup>.

The emergence of Vox coincided with a major political crisis in Spain in 2018, centred on Catalonia's demands for independence, triggered by the regional parliament's organisation of an independence referendum at the end of 2017, contrary to the Spanish Constitution<sup>298</sup>.

<sup>292</sup> Benjamin Biard, « L'extrême droite en Europe occidentale (2004-2019) », *CRISP*, 2019, n° 2420-2421, p. 54.

<sup>293</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 52.

<sup>294</sup> « [ABC Sevilla 17-01-2014 página 45](#) », *ABC Sevilla*, 6/12/2019.

<sup>295</sup> Benjamin Biard, « L'extrême droite en Europe occidentale (2004-2019) », *CRISP*, 2019, n° 2420-2421, p. 53.

<sup>296</sup> Benjamin Biard, « L'extrême droite en Europe occidentale (2004-2019) », *CRISP*, 2019, n° 2420-2421, p. 53.

<sup>297</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>298</sup> Le scrutin, entaché par l'absence de garanties et la répression policière, déclare une large victoire du « oui » à l'indépendance, suite auquel, le 27 octobre 2017, le Parlement catalan déclare unilatéralement l'indépendance.





This crisis crystallised the polarisation of Catalan society, divided between supporters and opponents of independence, and more broadly tarnished confidence in Spanish institutions at the national level. In response, Catalan independence was perceived by a large part of the Spanish population as an attack on the unity of Spain, a highly symbolic value. Part of public opinion, particularly on the right, called for a firmer response than that of the Rajoy government, which was seen as weak or lax. Vox capitalised on this feeling of "national betrayal" by presenting itself as the uncompromising defender of Spanish unity, advocating the abolition of regional autonomy<sup>299</sup>.

Vox's success in the regional elections in Andalusia in December 2018 was thus the result of a convergence of several factors<sup>300</sup> :

- anti-separatist and nationalist rhetoric, which acted as a trigger at the national level ;
- anti-elite rhetoric, which plays a decisive role at the local level in a region that has been a historic stronghold of the Socialist Party (PSOE) for 36 years and is perceived as corrupt and clientelist<sup>301</sup> ;
- the anti-immigration agenda, which resonates strongly in impoverished rural areas with high unemployment rates and little exposure to cultural diversity. Andalusia, a region bordering North Africa, is on the front line of migration management, with irregular arrivals on the coasts of Almería and Cádiz and a significant presence of immigrant workers in intensive agriculture (particularly in Almería and Huelva). As a result, the party achieves its best results in municipalities with the highest immigration rates<sup>302</sup>, having campaigned on promises to deport undocumented immigrants and make the walls of the enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla impenetrable<sup>303</sup>.

Andalusia served as a testing ground for the party, which capitalised on its success in the 2019 regional elections and became a force in most regional parliaments, with the exception of those where Spanish nationalism is in the minority (Catalonia, Basque Country). Its results were confirmed in the two general elections held in 2019.

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En réponse, le gouvernement central espagnol, alors dirigé par Mariano Rajoy (Parti populaire), applique l'article 155 de la Constitution, suspendant l'autonomie de la Catalogne et dissolvant le parlement régional. Plusieurs dirigeants catalans sont poursuivis en justice. De nouvelles élections régionales sont organisées en décembre 2017. Les partis indépendantistes remportent de justesse une majorité. Mais l'investiture d'un nouveau président de la Generalitat est bloquée à plusieurs reprises, jusqu'en mai 2018. En juin 2018, Mariano Rajoy est renversé par une motion de censure. Le socialiste Pedro Sánchez devient président du gouvernement espagnol. Il affiche une volonté de dialogue, sans pour autant accepter de référendum légal sur l'indépendance.

<sup>299</sup> Benjamin Biard, «L'extrême droite en Europe occidentale (2004-2019)», *CR/SP*, 2019, n° 2420-2421, p. 54

<sup>300</sup> Carmen González Enríquez and Sebastian Rinken, « [La opinión pública ante la inmigración y el efecto de VOX](#) », *Real Instituto Elcano*, 16/03/2021.

<sup>301</sup> A corruption scandal has hit the regional executive (the ERE affair).

<sup>302</sup> Carmen González Enríquez and Sebastian Rinken, « [La opinión pública ante la inmigración y el efecto de VOX](#) », *Real Instituto Elcano*, 16/03/2021, p. 9.

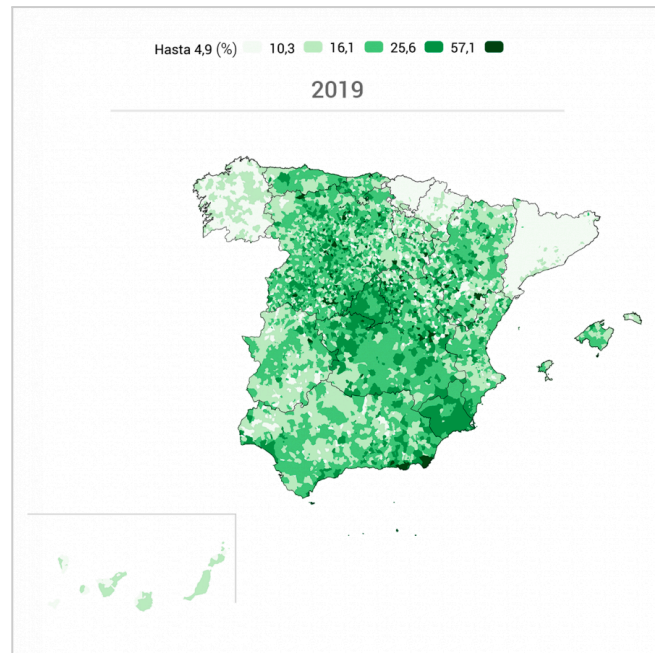
<sup>303</sup> « [L'extrême droite en Andalousie : Pedro Sánchez en difficulté](#) », *RFI*, 3/12/2018.



Figure 24. Vox's results in the April 2019 general elections

A breakthrough across the whole country, except for regions with strong regionalist or separatist identities (Catalonia, the Basque Country, Navarre, Galicia, and the Canary Islands), where its influence remains weak or even non-existent

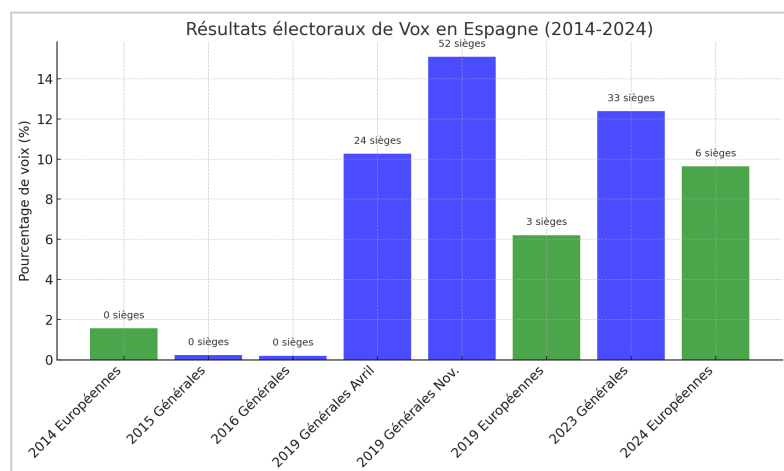
Source : RTVE<sup>304</sup>



Vox subsequently experienced a downward trend in the polls, but maintained its position as the third largest political force in the country, with 12.4% of the vote in the 2023 general election<sup>305</sup> and 9.6% in the June 2024 European elections<sup>306</sup>.

Figure 25. Vox's election results in national elections (general and European), 2014 - 2024

Source : compiled by the authors, based on official results<sup>307</sup>



<sup>304</sup> Elecciones generales 2019 : [El mapa electoral de Vox](#), RTVE, 30/04/2019.

<sup>305</sup> [Elecciones Generales 2023](#), *El País*.

<sup>306</sup> Parlement Européen, Élections Européennes 2024, [Résultats par parti national - Espagne](#).

<sup>307</sup> Parlement européen (résultat des élections européennes par pays - session constitutive - Espagne : [2024](#), [2019](#), [2014](#)) ; Ministerio del Interior, Info Electoral, [Resultados electorales](#).



In some of the autonomous communities, Vox formed an alliance with the PP (*Partido Popular*), but in July 2024, Vox withdrew its support from five autonomous regions that it had governed in coalition with the PP due to disagreements over the distribution of unaccompanied foreign minors<sup>308</sup>.

On migration issues, Vox proposes to control immigration according to economic needs and the ability of immigrants "to integrate and accept Spanish values".<sup>309</sup> The party suggests introducing quotas, deporting illegal immigrants and cracking down on NGOs that assist them. Highly critical of relations with Morocco, it proposes building a concrete wall around Ceuta and Melilla<sup>310</sup>.

Illustration 1. Vox campaign against the agreement between the PP and the PSOE on the territorial distribution policy for the reception of undocumented migrants and unaccompanied minors, 2025

Source : Vox<sup>311</sup>



More radical than Vox, a new political movement, *Se Acabó La Fiesta* (literally "The Party is Over", abbreviated SALF), caused a surprise in 2024 by winning around 4.6% of the vote in the European elections, giving it three seats. Created just a few months before the elections, the movement emerged from a social media phenomenon, particularly around the figure of Alvisé Pérez, a controversial influencer and activist<sup>312</sup>. He espouses what is described as populist rhetoric on issues such as immigration, denouncing elite corruption, defending public order, and hostility towards the mainstream media<sup>313</sup>.

However, the movement quickly faced internal difficulties due to multiple judicial investigations against Alvisé Pérez (for corruption, fraud, money laundering, and forgery<sup>314</sup>)

<sup>308</sup> « [Vox acusa a Feijóo de provocar la ruptura de sus pactos de gobierno al aceptar el acogimiento de 347 menores migrantes](#) », *El País*, 10/07/2024. Voir développements sur les mineur-es à ce sujet.

<sup>309</sup> « [En las entrañas de la campaña de Vox](#) », *France 24*, 19/7/2023.

<sup>310</sup> « [Far-right Spanish political party Vox: What are its policies?](#) », *El País*, 3/12/2018.

<sup>311</sup> <https://www.voxespana.es/>

<sup>312</sup> « [El curioso caso de un pueblo de 14 habitantes donde Se Acabó la Fiesta ganó las elecciones europeas junto con el PP](#) », *ABC*, 17/06/2024.

<sup>313</sup> <https://www.seacabolafiesta.com/>

<sup>314</sup> « [El Supremo abre dos causas contra Alvisé Pérez](#) », *Huffington Post*, 11/04/2025.



and a sanction from the European Parliament for undeclared income. In early May 2025, Nora Junco and Diego Solier, the two other MEPs initially elected with SALF, decided to leave the party and declare themselves independent<sup>315</sup>. Beyond its initial surge, SALF is declining in the polls, now confined to around 2–3% of voting intentions, and although it continues to exist, it remains a marginal voice and its political future is uncertain<sup>316</sup>.

## 5.3 Positive opinions but a trend towards polarisation

The growing perception of immigration as a threat in economic, cultural and security terms is sweeping across the European continent, accentuating political and social divisions. This is reflected both in public opinion and in the rise of far-right political parties<sup>317</sup>. Spain is no exception.

Spain is a multi-party parliamentary democracy with a proportional electoral system, which might suggest that antagonisms between political groups are limited. However, it is one of the most polarised countries in Western democracies<sup>318</sup>, and the radicalisation of partisan positions on immigration is reinforcing this phenomenon<sup>319</sup>.

In general, a country's public opinion on immigration depends on a combination of objective and subjective factors such as<sup>320</sup> :

- geographical location and border pressure;
- unemployment and perceived competition for social resources;
- security fears and concerns;
- identity, sovereignty and religious claims;
- political debate and media coverage.

The influence of these various factors on Spanish public opinion on immigration is presented below.

<sup>315</sup> « [Se acabó la fiesta también para Alvisé](#) », *Huffington Post*, 27/04/2025.

<sup>316</sup> « [La extrema derecha ya suma casi un 17% en estimación de voto. su mejor dato desde las elecciones](#) », *El País*, 7/04/2025.

<sup>317</sup> Hervé Le Bras, *Le Grand Enfumage. Populisme et immigration dans sept pays européens*, Éd. de L'Aube/Fondation Jean-Jaurès, coll. *Monde en cours*, 2022.

<sup>318</sup> Noam Gidron., James Adams et Will Horne, « American Affective Polarization in Comparative Perspective ». 2020, *Cambridge: Cambridge University Press*.

<sup>319</sup> Christoph Arndt, « Issue Evolution and Partisan Polarization in a European Multiparty System: Elite and Mass Repositioning in Denmark 1968–2011 ». *European Union Politics*, 2016, p. 660.

<sup>320</sup> Caoimhe Goya García de Paor, « La polarización de la opinión pública europea ante la inmigración: Análisis de los factores influyentes », 2021, *Comillas Journal of International Relations*, p. 21.



### a. Security fears: limited impact of terrorism

Between 2000 and 2020, Europe was hit by a wave of terrorist attacks claimed by Islamist movements<sup>321</sup>, including the attacks in Madrid on 11 March 2004 and in Catalonia on 17 and 18 August 2017.

- **2004 Madrid bombings**

On 11 March 2004, in Madrid, ten bombs exploded in four commuter trains during the morning rush hour, killing 191 people and injuring more than 1,800. This was the most deadly terrorist attack in modern Spanish history. In the absence of any immediate claims of responsibility, the government initially attributed the attacks to ETA, despite denials by the Basque separatist organisation. It took several days for the Aznar government to confirm the Islamist link, with the attacks taking place three days before the national general election. The Spanish government's response was the subject of heated debate, with many criticising it for being too quick to blame ETA<sup>322</sup>.

On the evening of the election, 14 March 2004, with polls showing the PP in the lead before the attack, the PSOE won a relative majority, and a month later the socialist José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero was sworn in as Prime Minister by the Congress of Deputies<sup>323</sup>.

Considering that his election was a strong sign of disapproval of Spain's alignment with US anti-terrorism policy, Zapatero announced the withdrawal of Spanish troops from Iraq and emphasised cooperation with Muslim countries in the fight against terrorism<sup>324</sup>. He launched a political dialogue with Morocco, particularly on the issues of counter-terrorism and migration, as Morocco had become the main country of origin for immigrants to Spain. While Morocco was also hit by a deadly Islamist attack in Casablanca in May 2003, Zapatero's first visit to Morocco, shortly after his election in 2004, marked Spain's consideration of Morocco as a privileged partner in the fight against terrorism<sup>325</sup>.

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<sup>321</sup>Notably, on 7 July 2005 in London, four coordinated explosions on public transport killed 52 people and injured more than 700, in a suicide attack claimed by Al-Qaeda. On 7 January 2015 in Paris, an attack on the headquarters of the newspaper *Charlie Hebdo* killed 12 people, with the attackers claiming responsibility on behalf of Al-Qaeda. On 13 November 2015, coordinated attacks in Paris included shootings in cafés and restaurants, explosions near the Stade de France, and a hostage-taking at the Bataclan theatre, 130 people were killed and more than 400 wounded, claimed by Islamic State; on 22 March 2016, in Brussels, two suicide bombings at Zaventem airport and one in the Maelbeek metro station, 32 people were killed and more than 340 wounded, claimed by Islamic State; On 14 July 2016, in Nice, a truck ploughed into a crowd on the Promenade des Anglais, killing 86 people and injuring more than 400, claimed by Islamic State; on 19 December 2016, in Berlin, a truck ploughed into a Christmas market. 13 dead and 55 injured, attack claimed by Islamic State; on 22 May 2017, in Manchester, explosion in the middle of a crowd leaving a concert at the Manchester Arena, 23 dead and 237 injured, claimed by Islamic State.

<sup>322</sup> « 11-M. el fin de una investigación. Islamistas criminales contra la guerra de Irak », *El País*, 17/07/2006.

<sup>323</sup> « El PSOE gana las elecciones con una mayoría holgada sobre el PP », *El País*, 14/03/2004.

<sup>324</sup> Luis M. González de la Cuesta, « La política exterior de Zapatero: cambios y continuidades », *Revista CIDOB d'Afers Internacionals*, 2005; et Charles Powell (2010), « José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero: una nueva política exterior », Real Instituto Elcano, 2010.

<sup>325</sup> Nora El Qadim, « La politique migratoire européenne vue du Maroc : contraintes et opportunités », *Politique européenne*, 2010, p. 91.





- **2017 attacks in Catalonia**

In Barcelona, on 17 August 2017, a terrorist attack using a vehicle was carried out on La Rambla, followed by another attack the next day, using the same method, in Cambrils, Catalonia. These attacks left 16 people dead and more than 130 injured and were claimed by the Islamic State group, which said it was targeting Spain because of its participation in the coalition in Syria and Iraq, although Spain did not carry out air strikes in these countries and its role within the coalition was limited to law enforcement, mine clearance and first aid missions<sup>326</sup>.

These events took place in an already tense political climate, just weeks before the referendum on Catalan independence, scheduled for 1 October 2017. The attacks highlighted differences between the Catalan security forces (*Mossos d'Esquadra*) and the Spanish central authorities, particularly with regard to information sharing and coordination. Criticism then emerged concerning the lack of cooperation between the various security forces, which fuelled political tensions<sup>327</sup>. The attacks therefore raised tensions between Catalonia and the Spanish central government, which were exploited by both sides, initially on security issues, with each accusing the other of negligence or incompetence, and then on the political front, concerning Catalonia's roadmap to independence and the central government's opposition to it<sup>328</sup>.

- **Influence on public opinion on immigration**

The terrorist attacks of 11 March 2004 are associated in Spanish public opinion with a domestic political scandal and a change in foreign policy. Afterwards, the government chose to develop its anti-terrorist cooperation with Morocco, the Muslim country of origin of the largest immigrant community in Spain. The 2017 Barcelona attacks are associated with the Catalan crisis and their political exploitation by both the Spanish central government and the Catalan authorities. In both cases, rather than fostering national unity against terrorism, the attacks accentuated internal political divisions<sup>329</sup>. The focus of the media and public debate on a political crisis, rather than on the perpetrators of the attacks, their origins, their relationship to immigration, their radicalisation and the presence of radical Islam in Spain, explains why, until recently, with the revival of this theme by Vox and certain media outlets, the association between immigration and security risks is weaker in Spain than in other European countries that have suffered large-scale Islamist attacks<sup>330</sup>.

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<sup>326</sup> « [Attentat de Barcelone : "Le but est de faire le plus de victimes et de radicaliser l'opinion"](#) », *Le Nouvel Obs*, 19/08/2017.

<sup>327</sup> « [Divergences entre Madrid et Barcelone dans l'enquête sur les attentats](#) », *Le Figaro*, 21/08/2017.

<sup>328</sup> « [Espagne: après les attentats, le spectre de l'autonomie de la Catalogne](#) », *RFI*, 19/08/2017.

<sup>329</sup> María José Canel, « Communicating strategically in the face of terrorism : the Spanish government's response to the 2004 Madrid bombing attacks », 2012, *Public Relations Review*, p. 214.

<sup>330</sup> González Enríquez, Carmen, « España y el terrorismo yihadista: Resiliencia social y respuesta política » *Real Instituto Elcano*, 2017; et Ballesteros Peña, Miguel Ángel, « España ante el terrorismo yihadista », Chapitre in *Seguridad Nacional y Defensa en España. Contexto actual y perspectivas*, ed. Alianza Editorial, (2019)





## b. The economic situation: a determining factor in public opinion on immigration

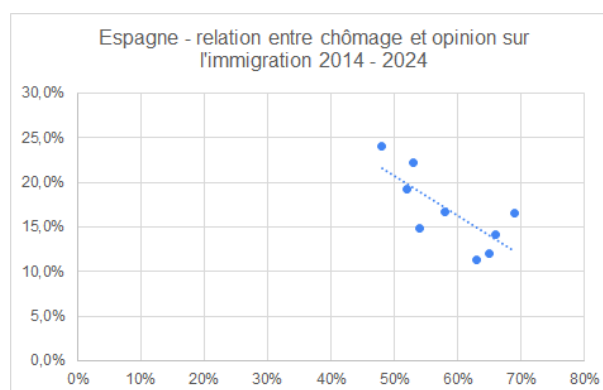
In Spain, as shown by an analysis of the factors influencing the polarisation of public opinion on immigration<sup>331</sup>, the predominant factor in the evolution of public opinion is the country's economic situation and the unemployment rate.

Opinion on immigration is strongly correlated with the unemployment rate in Spain. A fall in unemployment leads to a positive shift in public opinion. For a long time, work has justified the presence of immigrants in the eyes of Spanish citizens. In 2007, 75% of them said they were in favour of allowing new immigrants with employment contracts to enter the country<sup>332</sup>, while in 2024, 66% of Spanish citizens believe that immigrants make a positive contribution to the country, with the main reason cited being their contribution to the economy and the labour market<sup>333</sup>.

Figure 26. Correlation between positive opinion on immigration and unemployment rate in Spain, 2014-2024.

	Opinion positive Immigration	Taux de chômage	
2014	48%	24,0%	
2015	53%	22,2%	
2016	52%	19,3%	
2017	58%	16,7%	
2018	54%	14,8%	
2019	66%	14,1%	
2020	69%	16,5%	
2023	65%	12,0%	correlation -0,75
2024	63%	11,3%	

Source : compiled by the authors based on Eurostat data<sup>334</sup>



However, public opinion is also influenced by sensationalist coverage of immigration in many media outlets and by its use as a political tool in a country in a quasi-permanent "pre-election" state<sup>335</sup>.

<sup>331</sup> Caoimhe Goya García de Paor, « La polarización de la opinión pública europea ante la inmigración: Análisis de los factores influyentes », 2021, *Comillas Journal of International Relations*, p. 21.

<sup>332</sup> Oberaxe, Rapport de l'Observatoire Espagnol sur le Racisme et la Xénophobie, 2007.

<sup>333</sup> Baromètre CIS (Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas), septembre 2024

<sup>334</sup> Données d'opinion: Eurobaromètre Standard, réponses positives à la question QB4.2 ; «Veuillez me dire si la proposition suivante vous évoque un sentiment positif ou négatif: L'immigration de personnes venant de pays en dehors de l'Union européenne» (%); Taux de chômage : données annuelles Eurostat.

<sup>335</sup> En effet, en raison du modèle démocratique (notamment le scrutin proportionnel et la nécessité de coalitions gouvernementales), des élections sont fréquemment organisées. Ainsi, il y a eu cinq élections législatives depuis



### c. State and evolution of public opinion on immigration

*The cayucos crisis* in 2006, named after the fishing boats that arrived from Africa<sup>336</sup>, put Spanish institutions and civil society organisations to the test, propelling immigration to the forefront of public attention as never before<sup>337</sup>. It was largely as a result of this episode that immigration became an important issue in Spanish public debate, with right-wing political parties arguing that the phenomenon should be contained and restricted, and left-wing parties taking a more favourable stance towards the rights of foreigners.

The issue of immigration has become a political tool, combining high visibility in public debate, ideological disagreement on the positions adopted and the use of stereotypical frameworks, increasing social division for electoral purposes<sup>338</sup>. It was particularly with the success of the far-right Vox party in 2018 that hostile rhetoric towards immigrants became prevalent in the political arena, contributing significantly to the polarisation of the debate<sup>339</sup>.

Electoral preferences in Spain follow a traditional left-right divide, with the left placing greater emphasis on social issues and egalitarian redistributive concerns, while the right and far right focus on socio-cultural issues related to national identity, culture and immigration<sup>340</sup>. In Spain, the main political parties were already using immigration as a tool in electoral competition before the emergence of the radical right-wing party Vox in 2018. The parties' positions on immigration were then widely divergent, leading to a polarisation that highlighted the positive aspects of the in-group (us) and exaggerated the negative aspects of the out-group (them), fuelling stereotypes about immigrants. It is mainly the right that has changed its discourse on immigration in recent decades, using the issue as a tool for polarisation<sup>341</sup>.

The hostile attitude of some political leaders towards immigrants plays an important role in perceptions of foreigners, by relentlessly bringing migration issues back to the centre of the public debate. In this polarised context<sup>342</sup>, voters tend to follow their party's positions more closely, paying less attention to objective information, which is often scarce when it comes to immigration. In this context, a degree of "emotional polarisation" is reached in the public opinion, which translates at the individual level into strong rejection of supporters of other parties and, at the same time, strong attachment to voters from one's own party or

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2015. Voir à ce sujet : Bakdid Albane, Kaoutar; Clavero Mira, Esther y García Escribano, Juan José, « La inmigración como tema polarizador en España », 2025, *Revista Más Poder Local*, p. 102.

<sup>336</sup> « [Flux migratoires sur les routes occidentales](#) », Conseil européen, rév. 14/04/2025.

<sup>337</sup> « [Canarias recibe 31.000 irregulares, casi los mismos que en cuatro años](#) », *El País*, 27/12/2006.

<sup>338</sup> Berta Chulvi, Mariangeles Molpeceres, María F. Rodrigo, Alejandro H. Toselli et Paolo Rosso, « Politization of Immigration and Language Use in Political Elites: A Study of Spanish Parliamentary Speeches », 2023, *Journal of Language and social Psychology*, p. 1.

<sup>339</sup> Bakdid Albane, Kaoutar, Clavero Mira, Esther et García Escribano, Juan José, « La inmigración como tema polarizador en España », 2025, *Revista Más Poder Local*, p. 102.

<sup>340</sup> Ian P. McManus, « Socio-economic and socio-cultural foundations of voter support for far-left and far-right parties », 2021, *Journal of Contemporary European Studies*, p. 214.

<sup>341</sup> Berta Chulvi, Mariangeles Molpeceres, María F. Rodrigo, Alejandro H. Toselli et Paolo Rosso, « Politization of Immigration and Language Use in Political Elites: A Study of Spanish Parliamentary Speeches », 2023, *Journal of Language and social Psychology*, p. 1.

<sup>342</sup> James N. Druckman, Erik Peterson et Rune Slothuus, « How Elite Partisan Polarization Affects Public Opinion Formation », 2013, *American Political Science Review*, p. 1.



ideological group<sup>343</sup>. Thus, ideology and party spirit are factors that fuel and shape the debate on immigration today.

Vox's strategy is based on three arguments: the loss of traditional values (cultural), competition for social benefits and jobs (economic), and problems of coexistence and security<sup>344</sup>, which make immigrants scapegoats of inequalities of the neoliberal system and security issues in Spain, fuelling disinformation and the spread of fake news<sup>345</sup>.

Nevertheless, Spain is one of the European countries with a predominantly positive opinion of immigration, which has remained stable over time. This opinion has no direct correlation with the flow of arrivals at its borders and is significantly higher than in southern European countries of first arrival such as Greece and Italy, as well as in European countries receiving large flows of immigrants such as Germany and France<sup>346</sup>.

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<sup>343</sup> Ismael Crespo Martínez, « Introducción », 2024, *IV Encuesta Nacional de Polarización Política, Grupo Especial de Investigación CEMOP*.

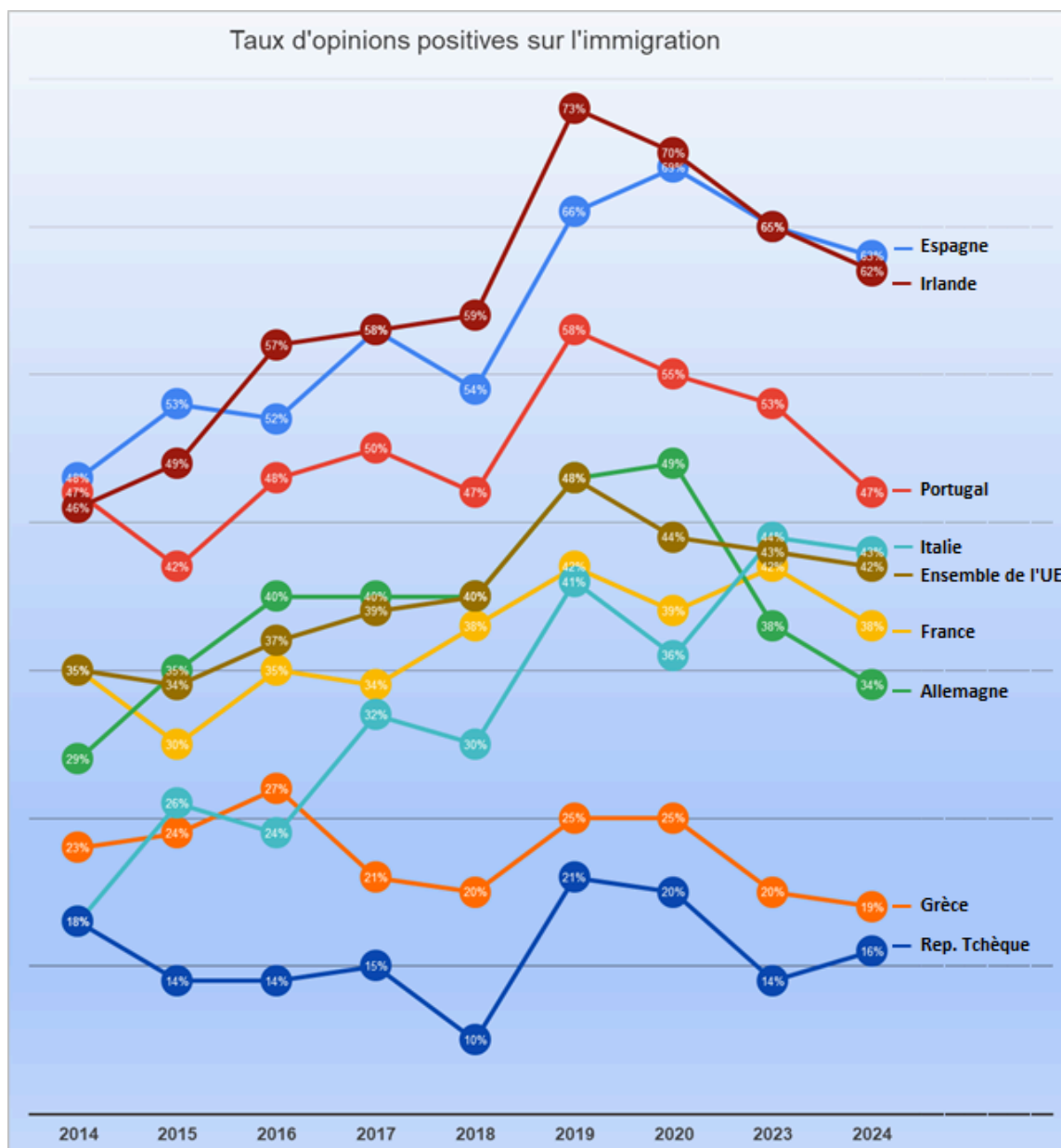
<sup>344</sup> Ismael Crespo Martínez et Alberto Mora Rodríguez, « El auge de la extrema derecha en Europa: el caso de Vox en la Región de Murcia », 2022, *Política y Sociedad*, p. 3.

<sup>345</sup> Laura Camargo Fernández, « El nuevo orden discursivo de la extrema derecha española: de la deshumanización a los nulos en un corpus de tuits de Vox sobre la inmigración », 2021, *Cultura, lenguaje y representación*, XXVI, p. 63.

<sup>346</sup> José Bautista, Isabella Carril Zerpa, Lucía Fernández, Ana Acatrinei, Angelina Boufi et Lide Mandicisor, Externalisation, 2024, *PorCausa*, p. 23.



Figure 27. Evolution of positive opinions on immigration in different European countries 2014-2024



Source : compiled by the authors based on annual data from the Eurostat opinion survey<sup>347</sup>

The evolution of Spanish opinion on immigration over time follows a trend observed elsewhere in Europe. In 2019, the European elections brought European issues to the forefront of the news and led to a rise in all opinion indicators regarding the European Union, including immigration. With the 2015-2016 refugee crisis now over, arrivals in Europe are declining and are less of a concern for the public and media debate, particularly in border countries (Spain, Italy) and asylum countries (Germany). In 2020, the year of Covid-19,

<sup>347</sup> Eurostat, [Standard Eurobarometer](#). Answer to question QB4.2; Please tell me whether the following statement evokes a positive or negative feeling for you: Immigration of people from countries outside the European Union (%).



immigration fell dramatically in the ranks of Europeans' concerns in all countries, with those at the forefront, often immigrants in essential jobs, being highlighted, and the perception of immigration benefiting as a result. With the Covid-19 episode behind, far-right parties are gaining ground across Europe, maritime arrivals of migrants are on the rise again and receiving extensive media coverage, particularly in Lampedusa and the Canary Islands, and positive attitudes towards immigration are falling across Europe<sup>348</sup>.

Nevertheless, according to data from the November 2024 Eurobarometer Standard opinion poll<sup>349</sup> :

- Only 21% of Spanish people consider immigration to be one of the two most important issues facing their country, which is in line with the European average. The most frequently cited issues are inflation and the cost of living, as well as housing.
- 81% of Spanish citizens are in favour of a common European migration policy, well above the European average of 69%.
- 66 % of Spanish citizens say that immigrants contribute positively to their country, a remarkably positive view in a much more divided Europe (53% across the EU as a whole).
- 87 % of Spanish citizens believe that Spain should help refugees, the highest score among EU countries.

This greater tolerance and acceptance of non-European immigration can be explained by several historical and cultural factors, in particular the geographical proximity to Morocco, the historical and cultural ties with this country and Spain's Arab-Andalusian history, as well as the historical, economic and cultural ties with Latin American countries, which have Spanish-speaking and predominantly Catholic populations. Furthermore, Spain has been a country of emigration throughout the last century, and many Spanish citizens have a family history linked to emigration. Finally, the Spanish Mediterranean lifestyle encourages daily social interaction between nationals and immigrants<sup>350</sup>.

#### **d. Immigration is not a major source of concern**

Another way of gauging public opinion is to ask people what they consider to be the most important issues facing the country and to observe how immigration ranks and how this ranking changes over time. This is one of the data points from the monthly barometers published by the Centre for Sociological Research (CIS)<sup>351</sup>, which records spontaneous, unsuggested responses, allowing us to capture the first idea that comes to mind when respondents are asked about the problems affecting the country.

Thus, although immigration is a recurring theme in public debate in Spain, an analysis of the Spanish population's personal views on immigration carried out by the CIS in September 2024<sup>352</sup>, shows that almost half of them are equivocal or ambivalent (48.2%). As for the other half, the majority (32.2%) adopt favourable positions towards immigration and only a minority

<sup>348</sup> Eurobaromètre Standard (2019–2024), Commission européenne ; Claudia Finotelli et Sebastian Rinken, « A pragmatic bet: The Evolution of Spain's Immigration System », Migration Policy Institute, 2023.

<sup>349</sup> [Standard Eurobarometer 102](#) - Autumn 2024.

<sup>350</sup> José Bautista, [Fondación porCausa](#), interview with the authors 12/05/2025.

<sup>351</sup> [Barómetros](#), Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas.

<sup>352</sup> Estudio 3.419 del Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas, de septiembre de 2024.

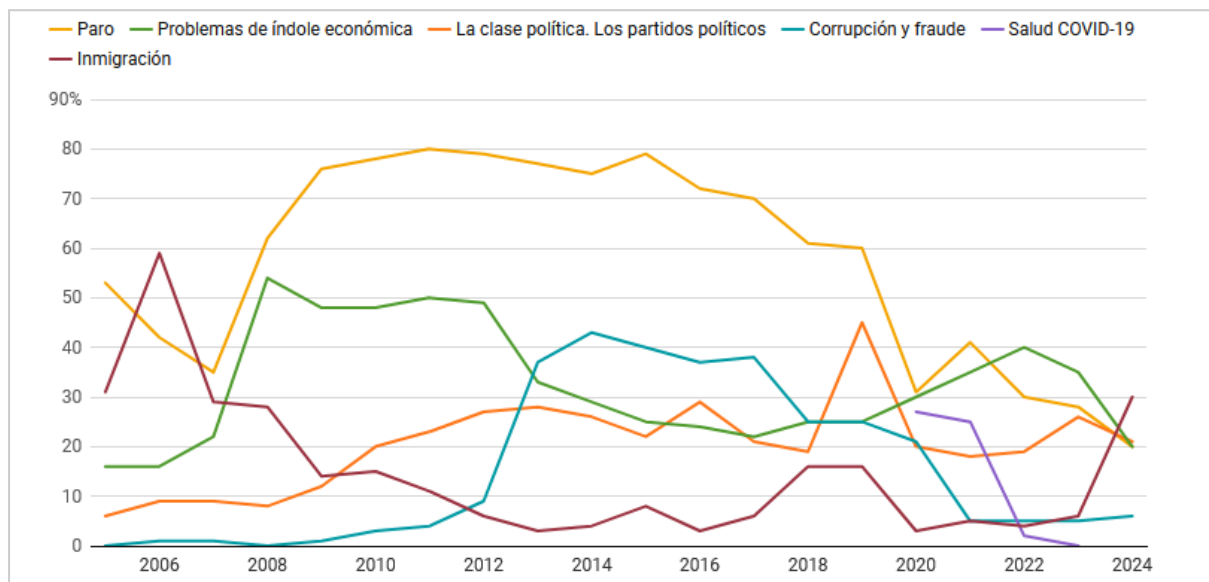


(19.6%) of those surveyed have clearly negative attitudes. These data therefore show that the majority of Spanish citizens have favourable or mixed views on immigration.

The proportion of people opposed to immigration is higher among men, people living in sparsely populated areas, older people, believers and religious people, those with a basic level of education and those who consult little diverse information, generally identifying politically with the PP or Vox parties<sup>353</sup>.

Figure 28. Immigration among the country's perceived priorities

Percentage of people who cite one of these issues as one of the three main problems facing the country: unemployment (*paro*), economic difficulties (*problemas de índole económica*), the political class and political parties (*la clase política, los partidos políticos*), corruption and fraud (*corrupción y fraude*), health Covid-19 (*salud*), immigration (*inmigración*)



Source : graph from the publication "Spanish public opinion on immigration in its context" by the Real Instituto Elcano, based on data from the CIS barometer<sup>354</sup>

Immigration was spontaneously mentioned by at least 28% of respondents as one of the three main problems facing the country between 2005 and 2010, with a highest peak in frequency in 2006, the year of the "cayucos crisis". Subsequently, throughout the following decade and a half, i.e. from 2010 to the present, immigration has occupied a much lower place.

<sup>353</sup> Bakdid Albane, Kaoutar; Clavero Mira, Esther et García Escribano, Juan José, «La inmigración como tema polarizador en España», 2025, *Revista Más Poder Local*, p. 102.

<sup>354</sup> Rut Bermejo and Carmen González Enríquez, "[La opinión pública española sobre la inmigración en contexto](#)", Real Instituto Elcano, 3/10/2024, graph based on data from monthly barometers CIS *Barómetros* (Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas).





The sharp rise in concern about immigration in 2024 cannot be interpreted as a sudden rejection of immigration by the Spanish people. In fact, since 2007, immigration had not been among the main concerns, despite Spain welcoming 4 million immigrants during this period, who now represent 18% of the Spanish population. Consequently, it is not the immigrants already present in the country who are responsible for these spikes in concern<sup>355</sup>. Historical data from the CIS show that immigration only became the third most important concern for Spanish citizens when there was an exceptionally high number of irregular arrivals by sea or land, or when the issue became central to partisan political competition, accompanied by intense media coverage. In 2024, there was a very substantial increase in these irregular arrivals, particularly in the Canary Islands, and recently the migration issue has become increasingly politicised, particularly with regard to the care of unaccompanied minors. Their reception has become a source of conflict between the two main right-wing parties (PP and Vox) – to the point of breaking their alliance at the head of several autonomous communities – and a very important factor in the competition between the opposition and the government. The continued presence of migration in political discourse gives it greater visibility and has an additional alarmist effect on public opinion<sup>356</sup>.

#### **e. High tolerance, hostile stance towards immigration concentrated around Vox**

The importance of immigration as a major issue varies greatly among different segments of the population. Conservative party voters attach much greater importance to it than progressive voters: for Vox voters, for example, it is the most important issue, while Podemos voters rank it fifteenth on their list of priorities<sup>357</sup>.

While a majority of 53% of the Spanish population believes that the cost-benefit ratio of immigration is positive or neutral, the difference in perception is mainly ideological, as with almost all aspects of the immigration debate, reflecting political affinities<sup>358</sup>.

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<sup>355</sup> Rut Bermejo et Carmen González Enríquez, « [La opinión pública española sobre la inmigración en contexto](#) », Real Instituto Elcano, 3/10/2024,

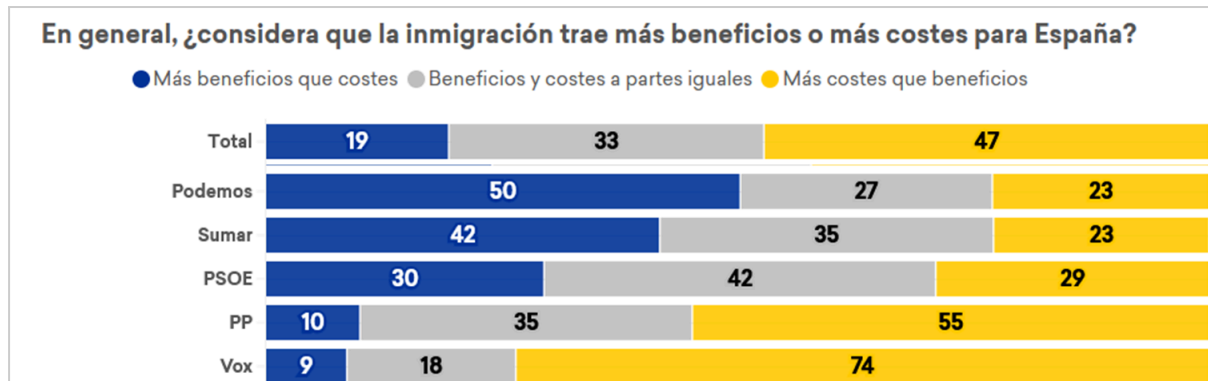
<sup>356</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>357</sup> [Europe Talks Migration](#), España, *More In Commons*, mai 2025.

<sup>358</sup> *Ibid.*



Figure 29. Perception of the cost-benefit ratio of immigration in Spanish public opinion  
Response to the question : "In general, do you consider immigration to bring more advantages or disadvantages to Spain? More benefits than costs / As many benefits as costs / More costs than benefits"; ranked by political sensitivity



Source : extract from the study « Europe Talks Migration - Spain », More in Commons, May 2025<sup>359</sup>

At the same time, a majority of society sees immigration as an opportunity or a necessity: 19% of Spanish citizens think that immigration is an opportunity that Spain should seize and 44% think that immigration is a need that Spain must manage, compared to 29% who believe that immigration is a threat that Spain must combat.

Put in these terms, the gap between perceptions of immigration works differently: among voters on the radical left, left and right, positive opinions predominate (among PP voters, 63% consider immigration to be an opportunity or a necessity), while it is only among voters for far-right parties that the perception of a threat predominates <sup>360</sup>.

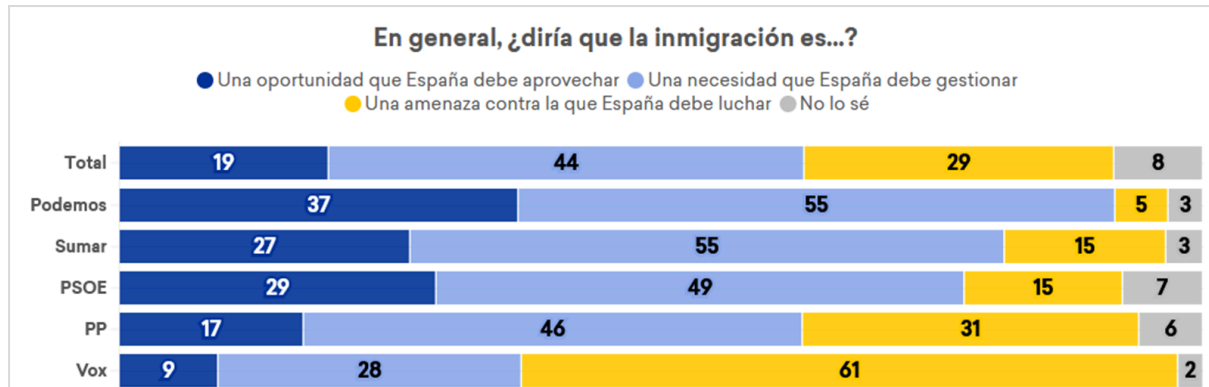
<sup>359</sup> [Europe Talks Migration](#), España, More In Commons, mai 2025.

<sup>360</sup> *Ibid.*



Figure 30. Characterisation of immigration in Spanish public opinion

Response to the question : "In general, would you say that immigration is : An opportunity that Spain must seize / A necessity that Spain must manage / A threat that Spain must fight / No opinion"; classification by political sensitivity



Source : extract from the study « Europe Talks Migration - Spain », More in Commons, May 2025<sup>361</sup>

Hostile attitudes towards immigration therefore remain strongly concentrated among Vox supporters. There is a broad consensus in Spain, including among right-wing voters, on a pragmatic view of immigration as a demographic and economic necessity<sup>362</sup>.

Ultimately, in the debate on immigration, the desire to control entry into the country largely prevails over opinions in favour of more or less immigration, even among voters of parties with hostile positions. Spain is one of the European countries where the population is most strongly in favour of controlling migration flows rather than reducing them<sup>363</sup>.

<sup>361</sup> [Europe Talks Migration](#), España, More In Commons, mai 2025.

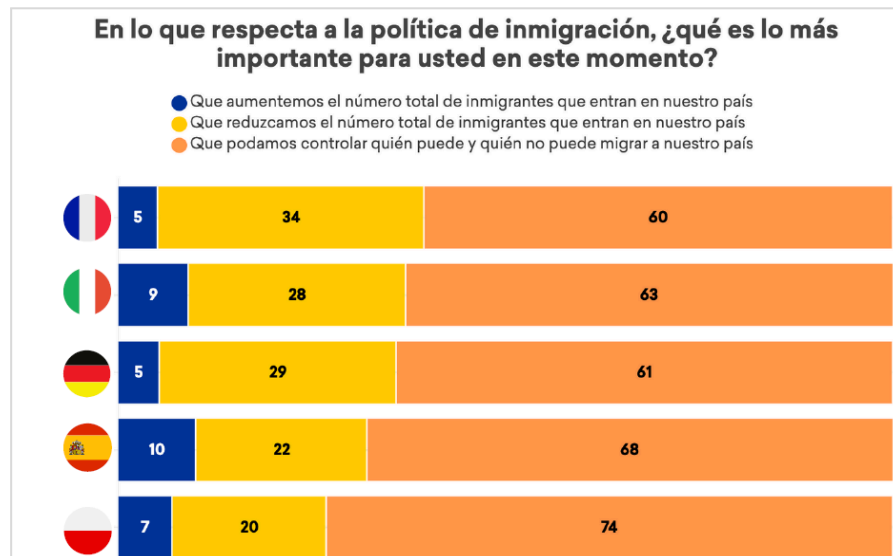
<sup>362</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>363</sup> *Ibid.*



Figure 31. Priority given to immigration control or immigration numbers in public opinion, comparison between five European countries

Response to the question : « In terms of migration policy, what is most important to you at the moment? That we can control who can and who cannot immigrate to Spain / That we reduce the total number of immigrants entering Spain / That we increase the total number of immigrants entering Spain.»



Source : extract from the study « Europe Talks Migration - Spain », More in Commons, May 2025<sup>364</sup>

60% of the Spanish population and a majority of voters across all political parties are in favour of a policy that improves border control and, at the same time, increases legal immigration mechanisms and channels. Only 10% of the population is in favour of an approach based exclusively on increased border surveillance<sup>365</sup>.

55% of the population associates immigration with economic growth. When asked about the benefits of immigration, economic impacts are the most frequently cited: availability of labour, jobs that Spanish citizens would not be willing to do, and tax revenue to finance pensions. The increase in the birth rate is also one of the positive social impacts generally identified<sup>366</sup>.

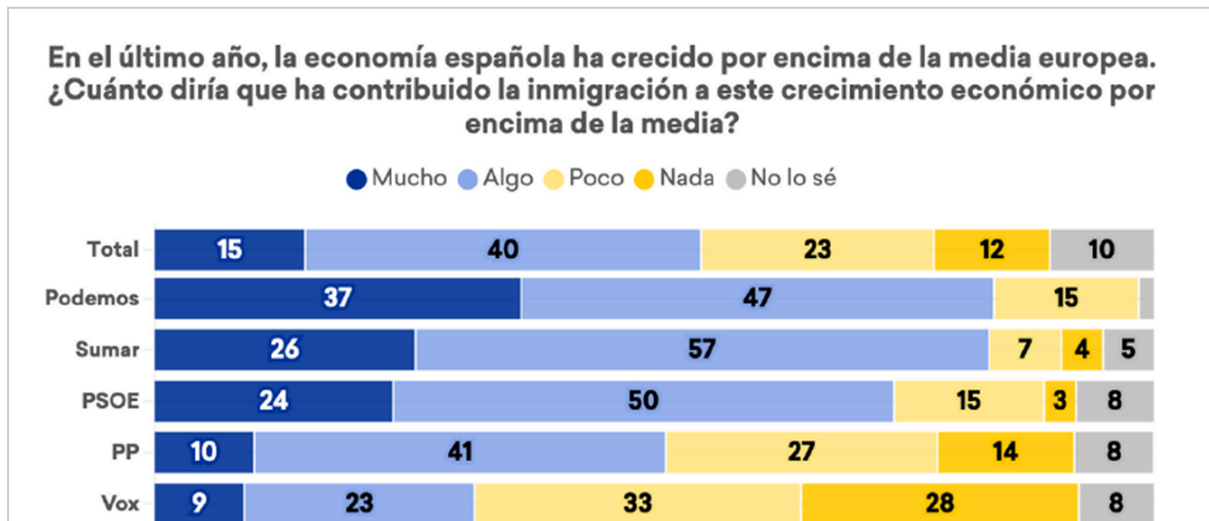
<sup>364</sup> [Europe Talks Migration](#), Spain, More In Commons, May 2025.

<sup>365</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>366</sup> *Ibid.*



Figure 32. Spanish public opinion on the contribution of immigration to economic growth  
Answer to the question: "Over the past year, the Spanish economy has grown faster than the European average. Would you say that immigration has contributed to this? A lot / Somewhat / Not much / Not at all / I don't know"; ranked by political affiliation.



Source : extract from the study « Europe Talks Migration - Spain », More in Commons, May 2025<sup>367</sup>

The vast majority of public opinion supports Spain's pragmatic approach to migration policy, viewing migration flows as an economic asset (providing labour for sectors under pressure) and a demographic asset (tax contributions enabling the redistributive pension system to be maintained)<sup>368</sup>.

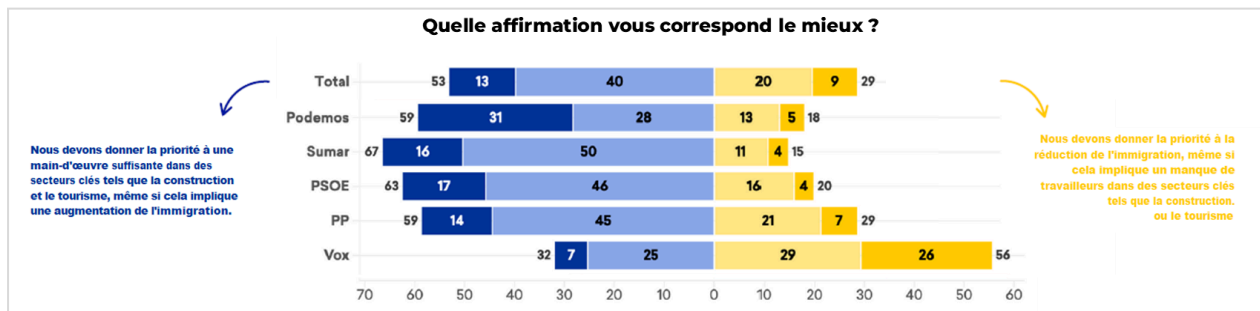
<sup>367</sup> [Europe Talks Migration](#), España, More In Commons, mai 2025.

<sup>368</sup> *Ibid.*



Figure 33. Spanish public opinion on the relative priorities of reducing immigration and economic impact

Response to the question: "Which statement best applies to you? We must prioritise sufficient labour in key sectors such as construction and tourism, even if this means an increase in immigration / We must prioritise reducing immigration, even if this means a shortage of workers in key sectors such as construction or tourism"; ranked by political sensitivity.



Source : extract from the study « Europe Talks Migration - Spain », More in Commons, May 2025<sup>369</sup>

More than just an administrative issue related to residence permits, Spanish society sees integration primarily as an economic and linguistic issue. The three most important aspects cited for the successful integration of immigrants are: working and paying taxes in Spain, respecting Spanish law, and knowing or learning the local language<sup>370</sup>.

## f. Growing mobilisation of civil society

The evolution of immigration in Spain and the measures taken by successive governments have been accompanied by growing mobilisation of Spanish civil society since the 2000s against racism and in defence of the rights of foreigners<sup>371</sup>. The main NGOs fighting against precariousness include the situation of immigrants in their advocacy work, anti-racist movements are becoming more structured, and numerous citizen groups are emerging to welcome new arrivals.

<sup>369</sup> [Europe Talks Migration](#), España, More In Commons, mai 2025.

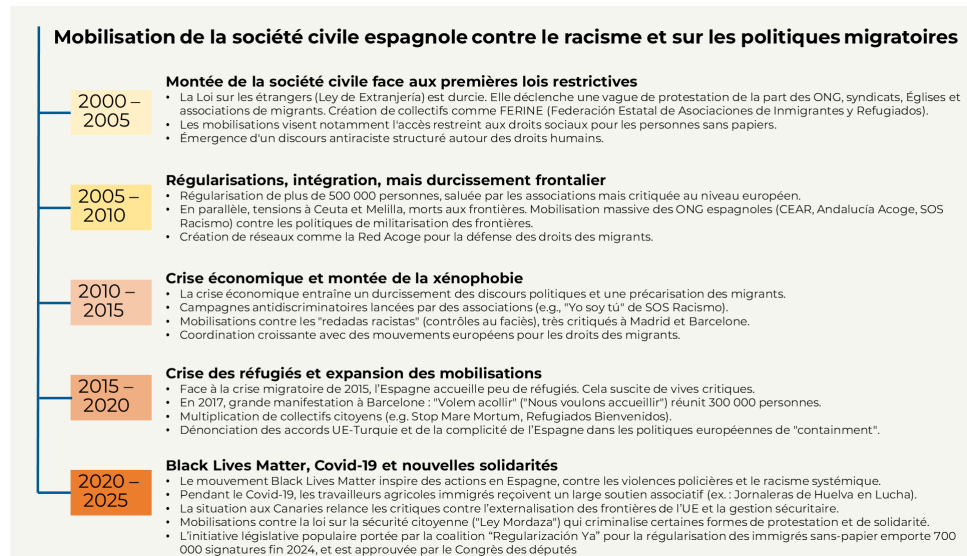
<sup>370</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>371</sup> María José Aguilar Idáñez et Daniel Buraschi « Del racismo y la construcción de fronteras morales a la resistencia y el cambio social: la sociedad civil frente a las migraciones forzadas », *revue Servicios Sociales y Política Social* du Consejo General del Trabajo Social, n°111, août 2016.





Figure 34.  
Overview of  
the growing  
mobilisation of  
Spanish civil  
society against  
racism and on  
migration  
policies since  
the 2000s  
Source :  
compiled by the  
authors from  
various  
publications<sup>372</sup>



The largest demonstration in Europe against the European Union's migration policy took place on 18 February 2017 in Barcelona, when 300,000 people took to the streets to support refugees, safe migration routes and freedom of movement<sup>373</sup>.

Another example is the "*welcome2Spain guide*" published by associations and small booklets containing useful information and contact points distributed throughout Spain. Citizens' initiatives are calling for public spaces to provide dignified reception facilities. In some towns in Catalonia and the Basque Country, houses are being occupied to shelter foreigners and enable citizens' movements to organise themselves<sup>374</sup>.

Since 2010, the group "*CIEs No*" has been campaigning for the abolition of detention centres (CIEs) and deportations from Spain. Following scandals relating to the conditions of detention in these centres, a court ruling in 2011 authorised NGOs to access them. In Malaga, a CIE was closed following continuous protests<sup>375</sup>.

More recently, numerous NGOs have criticised the "utilitarian" approach of Spanish migration policy, which prioritises employment over human rights considerations. More than 20 NGOs, including Amnesty International, CEAR, Accem, Médicos sin Fronteras, Cruz Roja and Servicio Jesuita a Migrantes (SJM), have publicly warned against a labour-focused migration policy in the implementation of the EU Asylum and Migration Pact. They fear a rollback of fundamental rights, with the risk of detention in third countries and the outsourcing of migration controls, which jeopardises the right to asylum<sup>376</sup>.

<sup>372</sup> María José Aguilar Idáñez et Daniel Buraschi « Del racismo y la construcción de fronteras morales a la resistencia y el cambio social: la sociedad civil frente a las migraciones forzadas », *revue Servicios Sociales y Política Social* du Consejo General del Trabajo Social, n°111, août 2016.; Carla Höppner, [migration-control.info](https://migration-control.info), 10/07/2020.

<sup>373</sup> Carla Höppner, [migration-control.info](https://migration-control.info), 10/07/2020.

<sup>374</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>375</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>376</sup> « [Más de 20 organizaciones reclaman al Gobierno participar en la aplicación del pacto migratorio de la UE](#) », *El País*, 5/12/2024



### g. The unprecedented popular mobilisation « *Regularizacion Ya* »

The popular mobilisation « *Regularización Ya*<sup>377</sup> » for the regularisation of undocumented immigrants, which gathered 700,000 signatures by the end of 2024, is a recent illustration of the generally positive attitude of Spanish citizens towards immigration and their capacity for mobilisation.

Launched by a citizens' collective, "*Regularización Ya*" (Regularisation Now) is a Popular Legislative Initiative (ILP) aimed at regularising around 500,000 people in an irregular situation in Spain (see 2.2. c.). A citizen mobilisation platform has been launched to support this ILP, bringing together more than 900 organisations across Spain: migrant rights associations, trade unions, NGOs and citizen collectives involved in the fight for migrants' rights<sup>378</sup>.

*Illustration 2.*  
*Demonstration by*  
*Regularizacion Ya collective*



Source : *Regularizacion Ya*<sup>379</sup>

The initiative received broad cross-party support. The Spanish Socialist Workers' Party (PSOE), the People's Party (PP), Sumar, Podemos and the Basque Nationalist Party (PNV) expressed their support, although some proposed amendments to regulate the regularisation process. The Spanish Catholic Church, notably through the Cáritas organisation and the Spanish Episcopal Conference, also supported the initiative, influencing the PP's vote in favour.

After more than two years of campaigning, more than 700,000 signatures were submitted to the Congress of Deputies. On 9 April 2024, the initiative was accepted for consideration by Congress with 310 votes in favour and 33 against, mainly from the far-right Vox party. In mid-June 2025, the Government transcribed the initiative into a bill, which is currently being negotiated with parliamentary groups so that it can be put to a vote by MPs under an accelerated procedure.

<sup>377</sup> <https://regularizacionya.com>

<sup>378</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>379</sup> *Ibid.*



## 5.4 A widely stereotypical media coverage

Since the "cayucos crisis" in 2006, migrant arrivals by sea, particularly to the Canary Islands, have been designated by the Spanish government as a "matter of state". This is a rather symbolic term signifying the priority of government action, but it associates this phenomenon with a state of permanent "crisis". As a result of this priority, arrivals from sub-Saharan Africa to the Canary Islands quickly become the focus of attention in the Spanish media. To describe the phenomenon, journalists use sensationalist vocabulary, with terms such as "avalanche", "assault", "invasion" and "massive", which are used in most of the media<sup>380</sup>.

By focusing on border issues, particularly in Ceuta and Melilla, as well as in the Canary Islands, the media reinforce a disproportion between their symbolic importance and the quantitative dimension of the flows<sup>381</sup>. Indeed, while nearly 47,000 people arrived by sea in the Canary Islands in 2024<sup>382</sup>, the total number of immigrants increased by more than 458,000 in Spain that same year<sup>383</sup>. It is therefore paradoxical to note the political and media treatment of a long-standing and recurring phenomenon, which is portrayed as an unpredictable situation described as a "migration crisis", even though it has been going on for more than twenty years<sup>384</sup>.

An in-depth study of media coverage in Spain from 2015 to 2016, at the height of the "migration crisis" – or reception crisis – in Europe, reveals that migration issues are generally treated from two superficial angles. The first describes sub-Saharan Africans desperately trying to cross the walls of the enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla from Morocco, or precarious, overcrowded boats washing up on the Spanish coast; the second associates immigrants in Spain with criminal activities, Moroccans involved in drug trafficking, Romanian organised crime gangs, or young Latin Americans committing acts of violence<sup>385</sup>.

On television and in press photographs, immigrants generally appear as young, destitute men, passive actors in the narrative, with the voices of those concerned rarely heard and little context provided on their situation. In the press and on the radio, however, more in-depth analysis is sometimes offered. Depending on their ideological orientation, conservative media outlets defend positions hostile to immigration, while progressive media outlets are more committed to humanitarian issues and more critical of authoritarian responses<sup>386</sup>.

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<sup>380</sup> Lorenzo Gabrielli, « Récurrence de la crise frontalière : l'exception permanente en Espagne », *Culture & Conflits*, n° 99-100, 2015, p. 75.

<sup>381</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>382</sup> « [Espagne : près de 47 000 migrants ont rejoint les îles Canaries en 2024, record historique](#) », *Info Migrants*, 03/01/2024.

<sup>383</sup> « [La población española supera los 49 millones de habitantes gracias al aumento de extranjeros](#) », *El País*, 13/02/2025.

<sup>384</sup> Lorenzo Gabrielli, « Récurrence de la crise frontalière : l'exception permanente en Espagne », *Culture & Conflits*, n° 99-100, 2015, p. 75.

<sup>385</sup> « How does the media on both sides of the Mediterranean report on migration ? », le cas de l'Espagne par Jose Miguel Calatayud, *the Ethical Journalism Network*, International Centre for Migration Policy Development, 2017, p. 59.

<sup>386</sup> « How does the media on both sides of the Mediterranean report on migration ? », le cas de l'Espagne par Jose Miguel Calatayud, *the Ethical Journalism Network*, International Centre for Migration Policy Development, 2017, p. 59.



Migration is generally covered from a single perspective. It is therefore striking that the issue of Spanish emigration is absent from the media, even when it concerns hundreds of thousands of young graduates unable to find work in Spain, as was the case after the 2008 economic crisis until 2013. The more than 700,000 people who left Spain are not referred to as migrants, but simply as Spanish citizens abroad<sup>387</sup>.

During "crisis" episodes, although humanitarian and security aspects coexist in media coverage, it is the latter that predominates. An analysis of the Spanish press coverage of the incident in Ceuta and Melilla on 17 May 2021 highlights a negative tone, the invisibility of migrant women and a narrative that pits "us" against "them".<sup>388</sup>

An analysis of immigration coverage in Spain's most widely read national newspapers<sup>389</sup>, also shows that the angles taken vary significantly depending on the political affiliation of the government in power<sup>390</sup>. A comparative study of the last five months of the Rajoy (PP) administration and the first five months of the Sánchez (PSOE) administration in 2018 reveals notable changes in editorial lines<sup>391</sup>.

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<sup>387</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 63.

<sup>388</sup> Teresa Terrón-Caro, Rocío Cárdenas-Rodríguez et Fabiola Ortega-de-Mora, « Discourse, Immigration and the Spanish Press: Critical Analysis of the Discourse on the Ceuta and Melilla Border Incident », Pablo de Olavide University, 29/03/2022.

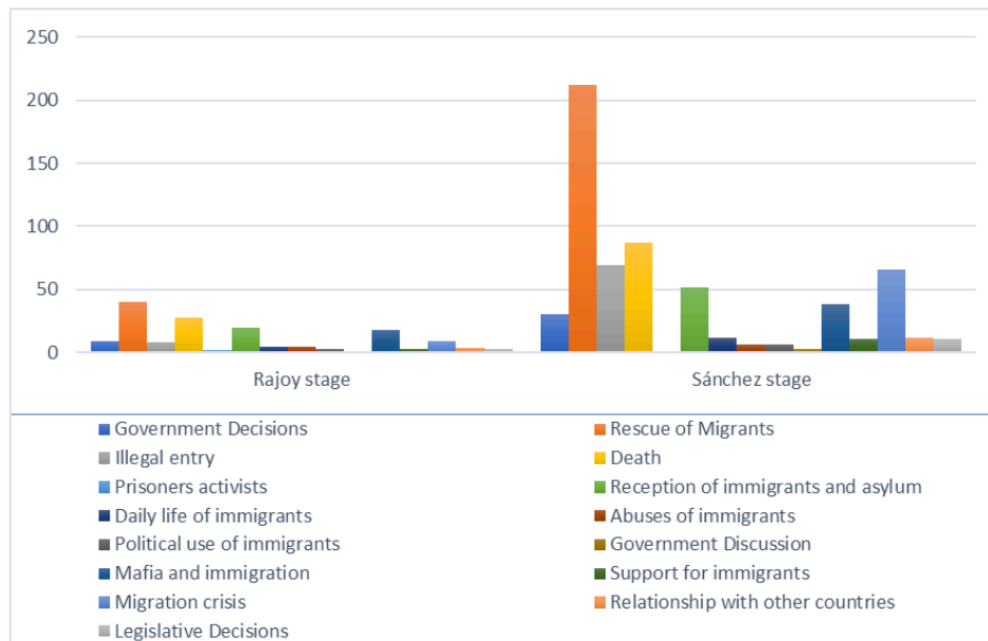
<sup>389</sup> *La Razon* (droite conservatrice), *ABC* (droite catholique), *El Mundo* (centre droit), *El País* (centre gauche).

<sup>390</sup> Aimiris Sosa-Valcarcel, A. Leticia Quintana-Pujalte et Antonio Castillo-Esparcia, « Humanitarian crisis and public opinion. Treatment of immigration in the Spanish media », Universidad de Málaga, 12/07/2019.

<sup>391</sup> *Ibid.*



Figure 35. Nature of immigration issues covered in four newspapers in 2018 and volume of coverage  
Comparison between the Rajoy and Sánchez presidencies



Source : Sosa-Valcarcel et al., « Humanitarian crisis and public opinion. Treatment of immigration in the Spanish media<sup>392</sup>. »

At the beginning of Sánchez's presidency, although the handling of immigration remained very limited, even controversial in the media supporting the opposition, more diverse perspectives emerged in other media outlets, such as *El País*. In particular, these included recognition of the geopolitical and environmental causes of migration and explanations of the composition of migration flows (showing that they do not originate solely in the poorest countries). In this way, the media is positioning itself against the discourse that attempts to present migration as a new phenomenon that can only be addressed from a security perspective. This varied framework is accompanied by a different lexical field, with the use of expressions such as "forced migration" instead of "irregular migration"<sup>393</sup>.

Although media coverage of immigration remains largely stereotypical in the Spanish media landscape today, observers have noted significant developments in recent years, particularly with regard to the recognition of the positive role that immigration plays in the country's economic health<sup>394</sup>. Furthermore, both during the Covid-19 pandemic, which hit Spain hard, and more recently during the catastrophic floods in Valencia in November 2024, the image of immigrants involved in the Spanish community in dealing with the crisis has been fairly reported in the media. This has been accompanied by semantic changes, with the term

<sup>392</sup>Aimiris Sosa-Valcarcel, A. Leticia Quintana-Pujalte et Antonio Castillo-Esparcia, « Humanitarian crisis and public opinion. Treatment of immigration in the Spanish media », Universidad de Málaga, 12/07/2019.

<sup>393</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>394</sup> José Bautista, [Fondacion porCausa](#), entretien avec les auteurs, 12/05/2025.



"irregular" replacing "illegal" and the less dehumanising term "foreign minor" replacing the acronym "MENA"<sup>395</sup>

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<sup>395</sup> José Bautista, [Fondacion porCausa](#), entretien avec les auteurs, 12/05/2025.





# Conclusion

The study reveals Spain's unique trajectory in terms of migration policy within the European Union, shaped by a recent history of immigration, sustained economic growth and a demographic reality marked by an ageing population. By combining historical, legislative, economic, social and geopolitical dimensions, the study highlights a hybrid model that is pragmatic and rooted in Spain's specific characteristics.

Spain is primarily faced with a major demographic challenge, to which immigration is a partial but essential response. With a structurally low birth rate and a negative natural balance since 2015, migration flows are enabling the Spanish population to maintain itself and even revitalise certain regions. The immigrant population, which is younger than the Spanish average, actively participates in the country's economic and social fabric. This context explains the attention paid since the 1990s to labour immigration, which remains at the heart of Spanish migration policy today.

The second unique feature of Spain is its widespread use of regularisation, a process often criticised elsewhere in Europe. With more than one million people regularised since 1985 and nearly 500,000 planned for 2025, Spain has chosen to formally recognise the presence of undocumented workers who are already integrated into society. These regularisations have proven effective, leading to increased tax revenues, a decline in informal work, professional integration without any negative impact on national employment, and no pull factor. The reform adopted in 2024 and the citizens' initiative "*Regularización Ya*" testify to the democratic vitality and social and political consensus surrounding regularisation.

Thirdly, Spain has been able to link its migration policy to a vision of inclusion through work. Integration is primarily achieved through employment, supported by strong involvement from trade unions and employers' organisations. The state largely delegates implementation to the autonomous communities, reinforcing a local approach to integration. Despite persistent inequalities (downgrading, precariousness, unequal access to rights), this model allows for gradual integration based on the principles of proximity, recognition and participation.

However, this unique position also has its limitations and tensions. Border management, particularly in Ceuta, Melilla and the Canary Islands, remains marked by a security-based approach under pressure from European requirements. Spain's role as the first country of entry into the Schengen area obliges it to adopt strict control measures and encourages it to implement bilateral cooperation on migration with Morocco, Mauritania and Senegal, which is sometimes contested for its effects on fundamental rights. Similarly, the Spanish asylum system remains inadequate, with low protection rates, overburdened management and unequal reception. The priority given to economic immigration reduces asylum to a marginal option, often circumvented in favour of regularisation through work.

Finally, Spain stands out for its relatively open public opinion and more concentrated political polarisation than elsewhere in Europe. This is partly due to cultural factors (linguistic proximity to Latin America, memories of Spanish emigration), but also to a conscious choice to adopt a political discourse that values the contributions of immigration. This vision is



reflected in the policy pursued by the Sánchez government, which publicly embraces the idea that immigration is a demographic, social and economic necessity, not a problem.

Ultimately, Spanish migration policy is characterised by pragmatic consistency: it seeks to meet the country's structural needs while integrating European constraints. While significant challenges remain, particularly at the borders and in the processing of asylum applications, Spain is demonstrating that a humane, regulated and inclusive approach to migration can not only work, but also become a strategic asset in a European context dominated by mistrust and rejection.



# Acronyms

## A

**AECID** *Agencia Española de Cooperación Internacional para el Desarrollo* - Spanish Agency for International Development Cooperation

## C

**CAR** *Centro de Acogida de Refugiados* - Refugee Reception Centre

**CCOO** *Comisiones Obreras* - Workers' Commissions

**CETI** *Centro de Estancia Temporal de Inmigrantes* - Temporary Immigrant Reception Centre

**CIAR** Interministerial Commission on Asylum and Refugees

**CIE** *Centro de Internamiento de Extranjeros* - Foreigners' Detention Centre

**CIS** *Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas* - Centre for Sociological Research

**CNC** National Construction Confederation

**CEOE** Spanish Confederation of *Business* Organisations

**CEPYME** Spanish Confederation of Small and *Medium*-Sized Enterprises

**COVID** Coronavirus Disease

## F

**FIIAPP** *Fundación Internacional y para Iberoamérica de Administración y Políticas Públicas* - International and Ibero-American Foundation for Administration and Public Policies

## H

**HCR / UNHCR** United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

## I

**ILP** *Iniciativa Legislativa Popular* - Popular legislative initiative

**INE** *Instituto Nacional de Estadística* - National Institute of Statistics

**INSEE** National Institute of Statistics and Economic Studies (France)

## M

**MENA** *Menores Extranjeros No Acompañados* - Unaccompanied Foreign Minors

**MI** *Ministerio del Interior* - Ministry of the Interior

## O

**OAR** *Oficina de Asilo y Refugio* - Asylum and Refugee Office

**OCDE** Organisation for Economic Cooperation and development

**NGO** Non-governmental organisation

## P

**PACI** *Plan de Ciudadanía e Integración* - Citizenship and Integration Plan

**PECI** *Plan Estratégico de Ciudadanía e Integración* - Strategic Plan for Citizenship and Integration

**PNV** *Partido Nacionalista Vasco* - Basque Nationalist Party

**PP** *Partido Popular* - People's party

**PSOE** *Partido Socialista Obrero Español* - Spanish socialist worker's party

## S

**SALF** *Se Acabó La Fiesta* - The party is over (name of a political party)

**SIVE** *Sistema Integrado de Vigilancia Exterior* - Integrated External Surveillance System

**SAPI** *Sistema de Acogida de Protección Internacional* - International Protection Reception system

## U

**UGT** *Unión General de Trabajadores* - General Union of Workers

**EU** European Union



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