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Diversity or decline?

Against the European trend, Spain aims to legalise half a million migrants. A strategic step to secure the country's economic and demographic future

The Spanish government plans to legalise around half a million migrants who currently live and work in the country without secure residency status. Few political initiatives capture as clearly the central demographic, economic and social tensions in Spain — and at the same time many of the questions Europe as a whole is facing. Supporters see it as a necessary response to labour shortages, an ageing population and the preservation of the welfare state; critics warn of overstretch, loss of control and social conflict. The debate therefore points beyond the immediate issue to a fundamental choice: how does Spain want to respond to demographic change — through integration and openness, or through closure and retreat?

Demography explains the past, present and future of societies. It shows how populations have grown, why they face particular challenges today — and above all, how they will live in the future and what place they will occupy in the world. We are currently witnessing a global demographic reshuffle: Africa and parts of Asia will drive future population growth, while Europe, Japan and South Korea age and shrink. Latin America is in a phase of demographic maturity, and migration is emerging as one of the central structural factors of the twenty-first century. For Europe, this creates a strategic dilemma: either it integrates immigration to secure its social model — or it isolates itself, accelerating its demographic, economic and political decline.

A positive anomaly

Spain finds itself at a particularly sensitive juncture. Its geographic location, migration history, integration into the European Union, and role as a bridge to Latin America and North Africa make the country a highly revealing laboratory for the opportunities and conflicts of global demographic change. Despite persistently low birth rates – around 1.3 children per woman according to Spain's national statistics institute –

Spain belongs to the small group of industrialised countries that have so far avoided population decline thanks to a positive migration balance. In an international context increasingly defined by competition for young working-age people, Spain has emerged as one of Europe's most important destinations for migration.

This position is no accident. It is based on structural factors: the shared language with Latin America, established migration networks, an economy able to absorb labour across sectors, and a public debate that – despite tensions – has not entirely fallen into the identity-political defensive patterns seen elsewhere. In a world where human mobility has become a constant – intensified by climate change, political instability and global inequality – Spain therefore enjoys a clear competitive advantage.

The Spanish experience points to a sober empirical truth: without immigration, the current growth trajectory would not be possible, and adapting the welfare state would be far more conflict-ridden.

Compared with other European countries, Spain represents a positive anomaly, as it has treated migration primarily as a labour market and social policy resource rather than a security problem. While much of the continent stagnates or shrinks, Spain's population has grown from around 40 million in 1999 to roughly 50 million today — an increase that is increasingly exceptional in Europe. This growth is almost entirely due to immigration and has been accompanied by comparatively dynamic economic development. The Bank of Spainand the Independent Authority for Fiscal Responsibility have repeatedly noted that migration has been crucial to employment growth, stabilising the pension system and expanding the contribution base. This is not only about filling vacancies, but about maintaining the fundamental demographic balance between workers and non-workers — in a country with one of the highest life expectancies in the world.

Against this backdrop, purely pro-natalist symbolic policies, as well as reactive discourses portraying migration mainly as a threat, prove largely unsustainable. The Spanish experience points to a sober empirical truth: without immigration, the current growth trajectory would not be possible, and adapting the welfare state would be far more conflict-ridden. At the same time, the demographic picture remains ambivalent. The positive migration balance strengthens population and economy but

exacerbates existing territorial imbalances. While large metropolitan areas concentrate population, jobs and opportunities, many rural and inland regions continue to lose residents, infrastructure and economic substance.

This territorial divide is more than a demographic problem. If left unresolved, it becomes a major economic, social, political and environmental risk. Depopulation encourages rural flight, inadequate forest management, loss of food sovereignty and greater vulnerability to climate change. Conversely, extreme concentration in cities strains housing markets, public services and social cohesion. Spain's central demographic challenge is therefore not only to attract population, but to distribute it intelligently across the territory, aligning demographics with production models and ecological transformation.

A more balanced population distribution is also crucial for addressing the climate crisis. Vibrant rural areas enable active landscape management, reduce fire risk, foster sustainable production, and can become key regions for the energy transition and bioeconomy. Demography is thus a structural, cross-cutting policy connecting population, spatial planning, energy, food security and ecological resilience. Thinking about Spain's demographic future ultimately means choosing between two models: a concentrated, fragile and unequal country — or a territorially coherent and ecologically sustainable one.

Beyond security-focused narratives

The current political debates on migration and regularisation should thus be seen less as short-term reactions than as expressions of structural adaptation pressures. To meet this challenge, Spain needs a genuine state-level demographic policy along multiple strategic axes. Overall, migration must be recognised as a structural development factor — beyond security-focused narratives and fully respecting human rights, embedded within labour, social and economic policy.

Moreover, reception and integration systems must be improved, through faster work permits, better recognition of qualifications and more effective access to the labour market, in order to avoid underemployment and maximise societal contributions. Territorial development must also be balanced by providing high-quality public services and promoting decent jobs outside metropolitan areas. Rural spaces should be used primarily for productive, non-extractive purposes, so that investments in energy, industry or digitalisation create local value, stable employment and social returns. Finally, population policy and ecological transformation must be systematically integrated — a inhabited,

productive and well-managed territory is a central asset in the fight against climate change.

In the end, Spain faces a far-reaching decision. The country can rely on the strength of a diverse, plural and dynamic society that reinforces the economy, welfare state and territorial cohesion. Or it can be swayed by retreatist debates promising closed identities, while accepting ageing, impoverishment and social as well as economic decline. The current debate over the legalisation of hundreds of thousands of migrants is therefore not an exceptional case, but the expression of a deeper structural conflict. It forces Spain to make a decision that many European societies will also have to confront in the coming years. In the geopolitics of demography, isolation is not a wise strategy. Everything points to the conclusion that an open, intelligent and territorially balanced approach to demographic change is essential for Spain's sustainable and prosperous future.

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