FUTURE OF SOCIAL DEMOCRACY 25.08.2025 | Omar G. Encarnación

Spain is an example to the world

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Spain is having a moment bucking Western political trends. The country has recently recognised Palestine as a state, resisted President Trump's demand that NATO members increase their defence spending to 5 per cent of gross domestic product and doubled down on D.E.I. programs. But there's no better example of Spain going its own way than immigration. At a time when many Western democracies are trying to keep immigrants out, Spain is boldly welcoming them in.

The details are striking. In May, new regulations went into effect that eased migrants' ability to obtain residency and work permits, and the Spanish Parliament began debating a bill to grant amnesty to undocumented immigrants. These reforms could open a path to Spanish citizenship to more than one million people. Most of them are part of a historic immigration surge that between 2021 and 2023 brought nearly three million people born outside the European Union to Spain.

Pragmatic motivations

Demand has something to do with it: Like many Western democracies, Spain needs more people. Last year the national birthrate was 1.4, the second lowest in the European Union and well below the 2.1 threshold needed to maintain the country's population level of around 48 million people. Spain also has a big economy — the fourth largest in the EU — fuelled by a travel and tourism industry that is brimming with jobs that most Spaniards do not want.

But unlike in other countries, backlash has been strikingly muted. That's partly because some of these pro-migrant measures stem from society at large. The push for the undocumented immigrants' amnesty did not originate with the government, tellingly, but with a popular petition that garnered 600 000 signatures and was endorsed by 900 nongovernmental organisations, business groups and even the Spanish Conference of

Bishops. The government, in turn, has designed a humane and pragmatic approach, offering an example for other countries to emulate.

There are, to be sure, some very Spanish reasons for the exception. Because of its vast overseas empire, Spain was for centuries a mass exporter of people. During the Spanish Civil War and the four-decade-long dictatorship of Gen. Francisco Franco, some two million people were forced to leave the country, fleeing famine, violence and political repression. Up until the 1970s, Spain provided migrant laborers to farms and factories across Europe. After the 2008 financial crisis, which sent unemployment soaring to 25 per cent, thousands of professionals left Spain for jobs abroad.

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This rich and complex history helps explain the relatively high level of tolerance for immigration among Spaniards. In 2019, a Pew survey found that Spain had by far the most positive attitude toward immigrants in Europe. This was no outlier. A 2021 study of polls going back about 30 years showed that 'Spain has consistently maintained more open attitudes toward immigration than the European average, with less rejection and a greater appreciation of its contributions to society and the economy.'

Spain's fragmented sense of national identity is another important factor. The strength of regional nationalism in places like Catalonia, the Basque Country and Galicia makes it harder for right-wing politicians to mobilise the public against immigration through nationalist appeals and xenophobic arguments. A Spanish version of 'France for the French,' the doctrine of Marine Le Pen's National Rally, would be absurd in Spain. It took until 2019 for an explicitly anti-migrant party, the far-right Vox, to even enter the Spanish Parliament.

A proven positive track record

Ultimately, however, Spain's immigration politics owe most to the administration of Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez, one of the last exponents of social democracy in Europe. Although decidedly liberal, Sánchez's approach is far from an experiment with open borders. Instead, it's as pragmatic as it is deliberate. It's true he has built-in advantages not shared by other European leaders. But by marrying practical solutions to an uplifting message, he has provided a case study in how to build support for progressive immigration policies.

For starters, the government smartly prioritised immigrants from Latin America, allowing them to apply for citizenship after just two years. Fluent in Spanish and overwhelmingly Catholic, Latin American immigrants blend with the local culture even in the least cosmopolitan parts of Spain. A case in point are Venezuelans, who are now barred from entering the United States, thanks to Trump. To enter Spain, they need only a plane ticket and a valid passport. In the first three months of the year, 25 000 took up the opportunity.

A lot of strategic thinking has gone into using immigration to alleviate some of Spain's biggest problems. Labour shortages in technology, hospitality, agriculture and elderly care, for example, are being addressed by granting international students work permits. Immigrants have also been incentivized to settle in so-called Empty Spain, those parts of the country where the population has dried up. Some of the 200 000 Ukrainian refugees who have settled in Spain since 2022 have brought new life to villages and towns on the brink of extinction.

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Most important, perhaps, Sánchez has excelled at framing the case for immigration. He has emphasised its economic benefits, including bringing younger workers into the social security system and filling jobs unwanted by Spaniards. An expanding economy is adding authority to these arguments. Since the pandemic, the Spanish economy has outperformed its European counterparts. Last year, while Germany, France and Italy experienced modest growth or even a contraction, Spain grew a healthy 3.2 per cent.

Even so, Sánchez has not shied away from speaking in moral terms, drawing on Spain's history as a nation of migrants and refugees. 'We have to remember the odysseys of our mothers and fathers, our grandfathers and grandmothers in Latin America, in the Caribbean and Europe,' he told Parliament last year. 'And understand that our duty now, especially now, is to be that welcoming, tolerant, supportive society that they would have liked to find.'

How long Spain will continue to extend the welcome mat is an open question. Polls show that concerns about immigration among Spaniards are rising, driven in part by the sensationalist coverage of the arrival of African refugees. Thousands have drowned in recent years attempting to reach Spain, and those who manage to enter the country are generally deported. Right-wing parties, especially Vox, are exploiting this

humanitarian crisis. Should Vox manage to enter government after the next election, which must be held before August 2027, a turn against immigration will certainly follow.

For now, though, Spain is proving an important point: A generous immigration policy is not a threat to the nation or to a thriving economy. More than that, it is a resource for growth and renewal that Spain's peers spurn at their cost.

This article originally appeared in The New York Times.



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