

# Public narratives and attitudes towards refugees and other migrants

## Spain country profile

Claire Kumar with Diego Faures

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### Key messages

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**Spain is known for its generally tolerant attitudes towards immigration.** Concerns appear highest around immigration's impact on the employment prospects of local people, though these concerns appear to be declining. There are also comparatively low levels of concern around immigration in relation to crime or terrorism.

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**Traditionally the salience of immigration in Spain has been low, peaking only around certain key events,** such as the 'crisis of the dinghies' in the Canary Islands in 2006. Over the last decade, according to national survey data, the salience of immigration has rarely exceeded 10%.

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**As in many European countries, attitudes towards the overall impact of immigration have generally become more positive.** A survey in 2018 shows that 45% of the Spanish public report that immigration makes Spain a better place to live, a significant increase from the 26% recorded in 2002.

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**The Spanish population also has very welcoming and supportive attitudes towards refugees.** The country stands out consistently on this aspect in international surveys, with high levels of sympathy expressed with refugees. People in Spain are far less suspicious of refugees than their counterparts in other European countries and are also much more likely to believe refugees are genuine.

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Historically, political parties have not taken strong positions against immigration and popular narratives are often positive and welcoming. **However, this is changing given the rise of the extreme right-wing Vox party, now the third largest in parliament.** Vox's political platform is strongly nationalist, and the party has advanced xenophobic and anti-immigrant narratives.

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### **About this publication**

This briefing presents an overview of the key features of migration and asylum policy in Spain, recent trends in migration patterns and public perceptions and political narratives around refugees and other migrants. It is part of a wider project supported by the IKEA Foundation aimed at supporting public and private investors interested in engaging with migration and displacement.

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# 1 History of immigration in Spain

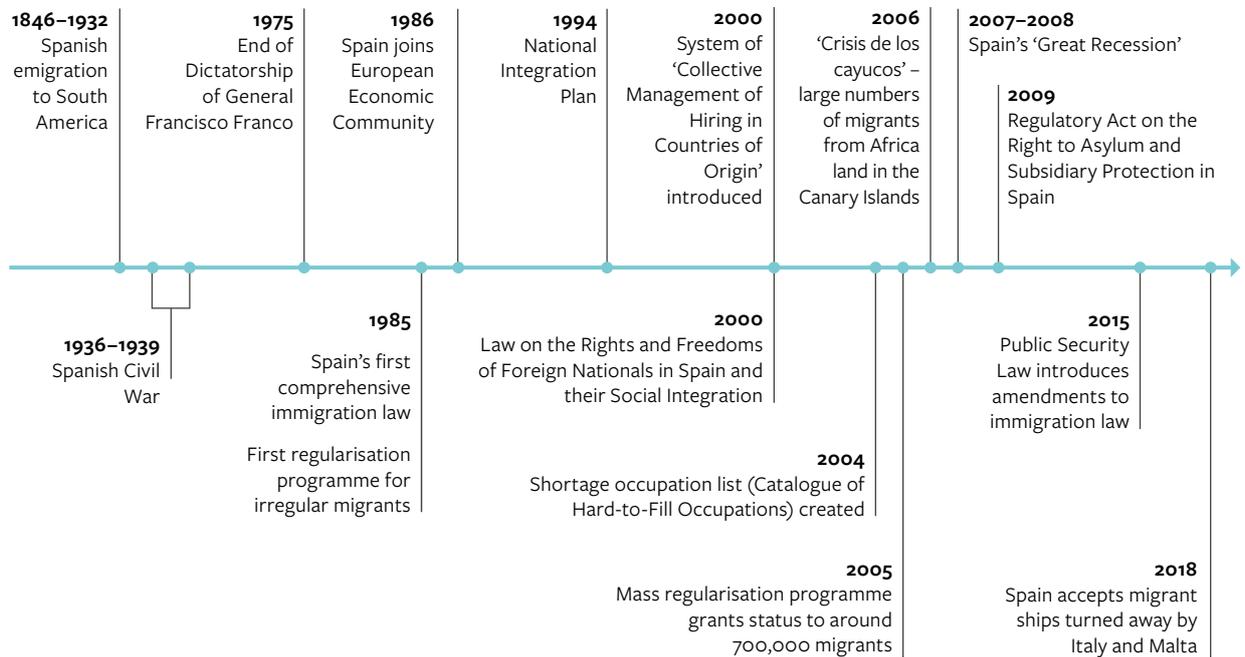
Until relatively recently, Spain was a country of emigration. In the early twentieth century emigration to South America, particularly Argentina, was common due to Spain's stagnant economy and turbulent politics (Izquierdo et al., 2015). Large numbers of Republicans (the losing side in the Spanish Civil War) emigrated at the end of the fighting, first to France and then to Central and South America (Guilhem, 2005). Further emigration was banned after the civil war ended in 1939, but was allowed again from 1946 (Izquierdo et al., 2015). Spanish workers also moved to northern European countries, often under post-Second World War guest worker programmes (Éltető, 2011; Vintila et al., 2015). In the 1960s just under 2.9 million people left the country, with outflows remaining high for several more decades (Vintila et al., 2015). (For an overview of key historical moments see Figure 1.)

Immigration increased in the 1980s, and from the 1990s Spain became a country of net immigration. In 2000, around 1.5 million immigrants were living in Spain (4% of the population); by 2009, this had risen to 6.5 million, or 14% of the population (Arango, 2013). On average between 2000 and 2009, the country saw an annual net inflow of immigrants of around 500,000, making Spain the largest recipient country in Europe (Martínez i Coma and Duval-Hernández, 2009; Arango, 2013).

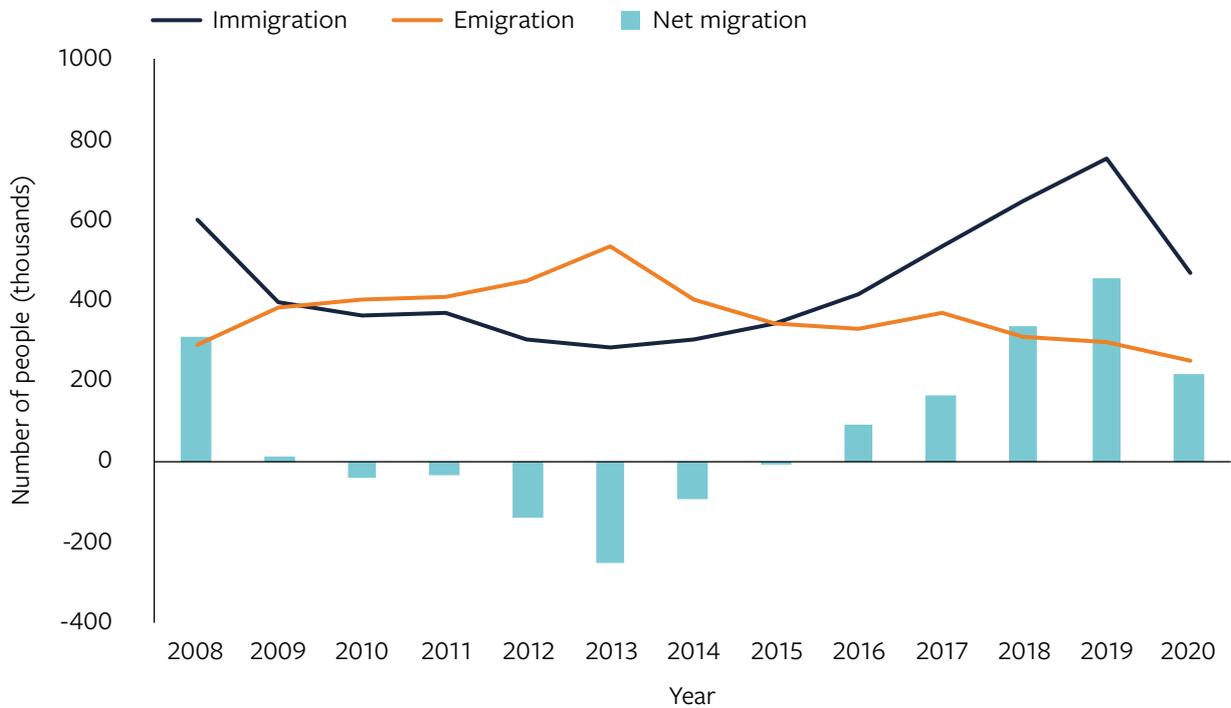
This influx was primarily driven by Spain's growing economy: the country had the highest economic growth rate in southern Europe in this period, and was second only to Ireland across Europe as a whole (Martínez i Coma and Duval-Hernández, 2009). There was a high demand for workers, mainly in jobs deemed low- or semi-skilled, with many coming to work in the construction and agriculture sectors (Arango, 2013; Chislett, 2018). With the enlargement of the European Union (EU) in 2004 and 2007, workers also started to arrive from Romania, Poland and Bulgaria (Vintila et al., 2015). While the number of Romanians in Spain has been falling, Romania remains the second largest nationality among the foreign-born population (INE, n.d.c.).

The global financial crisis of 2007–2008 had particularly severe effects in Spain, plunging the country into a 'Great Recession' with significant impacts on the labour market, and rapid rises in unemployment from 2008 (Izquierdo et al., 2015). While average unemployment reached almost 27% in 2013, the young and migrants were particularly affected (experiencing rates of 55% and almost 40% respectively) (ibid.). Labour migration fell after 2009, given the much-reduced demand for foreign labour (Arango, 2013). Emigration increased, reaching more than 400,000 people a year from 2010 until levels fell in 2015 (see Figure 2). Spain once again became a country of net emigration between 2010 and 2015 (Hooper, 2019).

**Figure 1** Timeline of Spanish immigration



**Figure 2** Recent migration trends in Spain



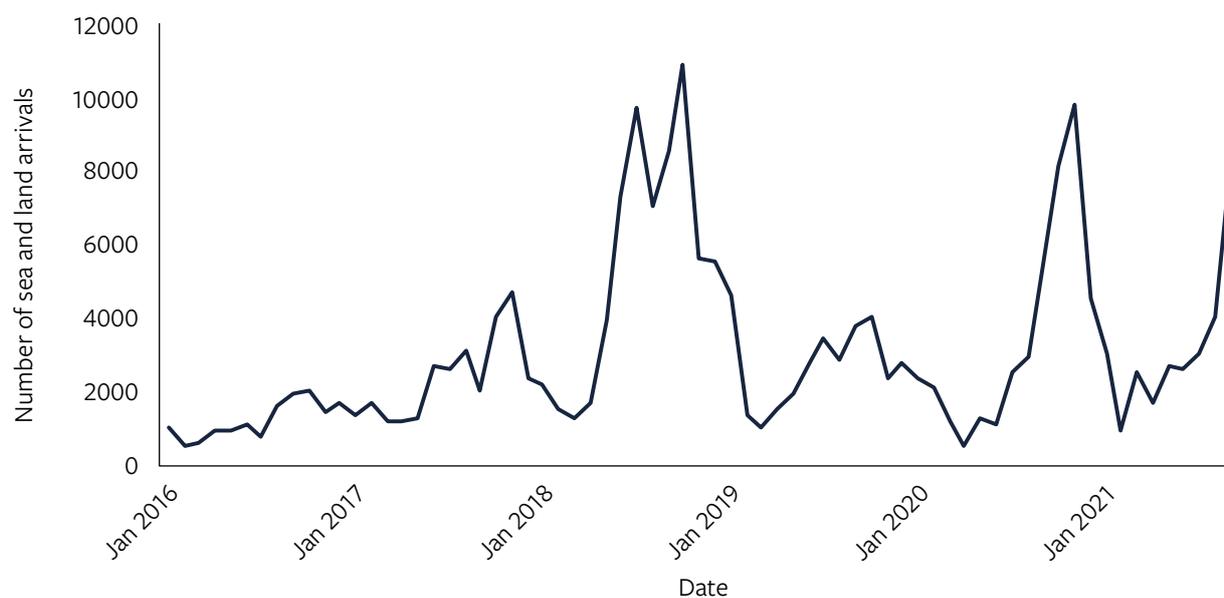
Source: INE, n.d.a

Spain's geographical position means that the country has regularly received migrants from Africa. Two Spanish cities – Ceuta and Melilla – are located on Morocco's Mediterranean coast and represent the EU's only land border with Africa. Apart from land crossings from Morocco into Spain, migrants also use boats to reach the Canary Islands, 70 miles off the coast of north-west Africa. In 2005 and 2006 the 'crisis of the dinghies' (crisis de los cayucos) saw a seven-fold increase in the number of migrants arriving by boat from West Africa (Fanjul, 2018). The number of people using land and sea crossings to reach Spain has fluctuated, with a large reduction between 2006 and 2013 along the western Mediterranean route (Berry et al., 2016). Numbers have risen once more since 2017 (UNHCR, n.d.) (see Figure 3). While this migration attracts a good deal of attention, numbers are small in the context of overall migration flows and irregular migration.

The large-scale influx of Syrian and other refugees to Europe in 2015 did not significantly impact Spain. Refugee flows to the country were relatively modest, and more in line with flows to Ireland, Portugal and the United Kingdom (UK) (Heath and Richards, 2019). Since 2018, however, the number of asylum-seekers in Spain has notably increased (European Parliament, n.d.). Spain is now the European country processing the third highest number of asylum requests, behind Germany and France (Martin, 2020).

Around 7.2 million people living in Spain, or 15% of the population, are foreign-born (INE, n.d.b). A large share of the immigrant population originates from Latin America given historical and linguistic ties, with immigrants coming particularly from Colombia, Ecuador and Venezuela (INE, n.d.c). In 2020, the Office of Asylum and Refuge received 88,762 applications, the majority from Venezuela and Colombia (Asylum Information Database, 2021). There are also large immigrant populations from Africa, particularly Morocco (INE, n.d.c).

**Figure 3** Sea and land arrivals in Spain, January 2016–September 2021



Source: UNHCR, n.d.

Spain has received large numbers of undocumented workers, with estimates from 2004 suggesting that around 1 million irregular migrants were living in the country, many of whom were granted legal status in a regularisation programme in 2005 (Tremlett, 2005; Arango, 2013). There are currently an estimated 390,000–470,000 irregular immigrants in Spain, around 0.8% of the population, and a much lower figure than Spain has previously experienced (Fanjul and Gálvez-Iniesta, 2020). Most are from Central or South America, with only 9% from Africa (ibid.). Large numbers of migrants escaping the difficult political and economic situation in Venezuela enter Spain legally but then overstay their visas, adding to the ranks of the undocumented (Hooper, 2019).

## 2 Current Spanish immigration system and approach

Spain passed its first comprehensive legislation on immigration (*Ley de Extranjería*) in 1985. This established the rights and freedoms of foreigners living in Spain, as well as focusing on border controls and the rules around entry, residence and working visas. The law was a condition of the country's entry to the EU (Hooper, 2019). However, it was 'poorly crafted' and 'offered limited opportunities for employers in a fast-growing economy to sponsor foreign workers or for labour migrants to maintain their legal status' (ibid.: 1). It is seen as having contributed to a rapid increase in the size of the undocumented population.

Further legislation in January 2000 expanded the rights of foreign nationals living in the country – including to family reunification and access to basic services – and established a principle of equality with Spanish citizens (Hooper, 2019; Gerstein, 2020). The law also sought to regulate labour migration, introducing a key aspect of the government's approach to facilitating legal migration – the system of 'Collective Management of Hiring in Countries of Origin' (Hooper, 2019). Under this system government-led committees identify and select seasonal and short-term workers (for roles up to two years) for particular sectors, such as construction and hospitality. This collective hiring system has been supported by employers and trade unions and is generally implemented under the framework of bilateral agreements signed with origin countries. Between 2003 and 2009, around 330,000 seasonal workers entered Spain under the collective hiring system (CGD, 2021). However, much lower numbers have been recruited under this system following the recession in 2007–2008 (ibid.) and certain sectors – such as agriculture – still rely on irregular migrant workers (Güell and Garcés-Mascreñas, 2020). In 2013, the government introduced new categories of visas targeting entrepreneurs, people investing in business activity or real estate and for highly skilled professionals (Gerstein, 2020).

Periodic regularisations have been a key part of Spain's policy response to immigration. The first regularisation programme was implemented in 1985–1986 (Dentler, 2008). Successive governments have continued efforts both to provide legal admission schemes and enact periodic regularisations between 1991 and 2005 (ibid.). The 2005 regularisation was particularly significant, benefiting around 700,000 irregular migrants (Tremlett, 2005). Both the centre-left Socialist Party (*Partido Socialista Obrero Español*) (PSOE) and the centre-right Popular Party (*Partido Popular*) (PP) have carried out regularisations when in government (Arango, 2013). While regularisation policies have been expansive, they have also gone hand in hand with increasingly restrictive immigration policies. After the 2005 amnesty, for example, the government moved quickly to implement an 'immediate crackdown on black-market employers and newly arrived illegal workers' (Tremlett, 2005: n.p.).

There have been more recent efforts to launch a new regularisation programme. In July 2020, *Unidas Podemos*, the junior partner in Spain's governing coalition, presented a legislative proposal

to regularise undocumented migrants and asylum-seekers, as well as granting citizenship to migrant workers doing essential work during the Covid-19 pandemic (Díez and Casqueiro, 2020). Despite a nationwide advocacy campaign, the proposal was rejected by Congress, the lower chamber of Spain's parliament (Asylum Information Database, 2021). A Popular Legislative Initiative around regularisation supported by a coalition of civil society organisations is, at the time of writing, about to be launched.<sup>1</sup> The petition needs the support of 500,000 citizens (with the right to vote), at which point the regularisation proposal would be formally submitted to Congress for consideration.

Spanish government policy on immigration has been heavily influenced by the challenges the country has faced with sea and land arrivals by migrants from Africa. Policy responses have included significant border control efforts. The Spanish government erected border fences separating Melilla and Ceuta from Morocco several decades ago, with recent efforts focusing on fortifying barriers and high-tech solutions such as motion-activated sensors and thermal imaging cameras (Edwards, 2021). As such, Spain has been one of Europe's early adopters of comprehensive border control and surveillance systems (Fanjul, 2018). The government has also made significant efforts to establish development and repatriation agreements with a number of North and West African countries, which also seek to deter and control irregular migration (ibid.).

Alongside investments in border control infrastructure and technology, the government also introduced a controversial Public Security Law in March 2015 (Berry et al., 2016). The law placed general restrictions on citizens' rights to protest, freedom of expression and peaceful assembly. It also legalised 'the automatic and collective expulsion of migrants and refugees from the borders of Ceuta and Melilla by introducing a new administrative practice dubbed "border rejections" (rechazo)' (Amnesty International, 2015: n.p.). Also known as 'hot refoulements' (devoluciones en caliente), this practice means that Spain regularly returns migrants to Morocco without formal procedures, denying people the chance to identify themselves or claim asylum (Sundberg Diez, 2020). The measure has been widely criticised as in open violation of Spain's international protection obligations and potentially leading to human rights violations (Amnesty International, 2015; Asylum Information Database, 2021). There have been legal challenges to the measure, though the European Court of Human Rights declared two cases of refoulement legal in 2020 (López González, 2020). Legal challenges are likely to continue. (See Box 1 for more discussion on Spain's asylum policy).

Spain's border controls depend heavily on cooperation with Morocco, and both countries receive significant EU funds to support action in this area (Fanjul, 2018; European Commission, 2019). These efforts appear to have been effective, leading to a 50% drop in the number of irregular migrants reaching Spain in 2019 compared to the previous year (Sundberg Diez, 2020). While Spanish–Moroccan cooperation around migration is robust, diplomatic tensions have arisen, resulting in Morocco reducing its border controls in May 2021, after which 5,000 migrants crossed into Ceuta in a single day (Deutsche-Welle, 2021).

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1 Information provided by porCausa.

While border control is a central plank of the government's response to immigration, the country is also known for its significant integration efforts with immigrant communities (Arango, 2013). A national integration plan for immigrants was adopted in 1994, alongside the creation of a Forum for the Social Integration of Immigrants (ibid.). The Forum, which includes representatives from the private sector, trade unions, civil society, immigrant associations and government, is consulted on legislation and plans in relation to immigration and integration. For the most part the work of integration takes place at the level of regions and municipalities, with partnerships between local government and NGOs for the delivery of social and support services and a notable bottom-up approach to the design and delivery of services (Arango, 2013; Gilligan, 2013). However, serious integration challenges remain for non-EU migrants, who face more precarious working conditions and much higher in-work poverty rates (44% compared to 17%) than the native population (European Commission, 2020).

## Box 1 Overview of Spanish immigration and asylum policies

### Spanish citizenship policy

Immigrants who wish to obtain Spanish citizenship typically must live in the country legally and continuously for 10 years prior to the application. In some cases, this period is reduced and people who are granted refugee status can obtain nationality after five years of residence. A fast-track access route to citizenship is also available to immigrants from Latin America, as well as from other countries with colonial links to Spain, such as Equatorial Guinea. These immigrants have to show two years of legal residence in Spain to qualify. A child born in Spanish territory can acquire Spanish citizenship after a one-year residence period, as can a person who marries a Spanish citizen if they reside continuously for one year in the country (Government of Spain, n.d.).

### Spanish asylum policy

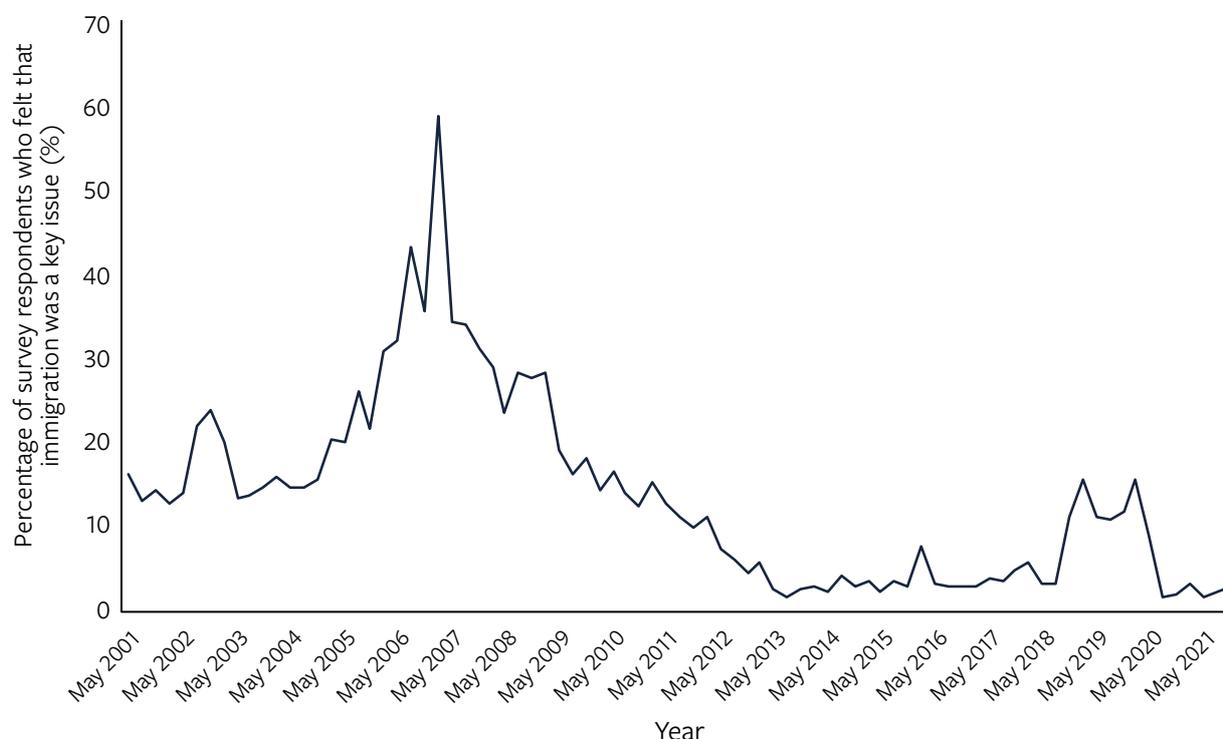
The Regulatory Act on the Right to Asylum and Subsidiary Protection (2009) states that refugee status is available for people with a justified fear of persecution in their own country. Asylum-seekers can make an application at the border with the Border Police. If inside Spanish territory, an application can be made at the Office of Asylum and Refuge, any Aliens' Office, a Detention Centre for Foreigners, or at a police station. All applications are centralised and reviewed by the Office of Asylum and Refuge (OAR), and if the application is found to be admissible, a decision should be made within six months. However, in practice this may take up to two years. Asylum-seekers generally receive accommodation and financial support which varies according to the phase of the process. The Inter-Ministerial Commission on Asylum takes the final decisions on applications based on OAR's submission. Asylum-seekers have the right to appeal both decisions on admissibility and if their application is rejected on the merits of the case. Major shortcomings have been identified with Spanish asylum procedures and reception, including inadequate identification of victims of human trafficking, inadequate treatment of unaccompanied minors and delays in procedures. Conditions in reception centres, particularly in Ceuta, Melilla and on the Canary Islands, have consistently been highlighted as very poor, with overcrowding in reception centres common (Asylum Information Database, 2021).

### 3 Public attitudes towards refugees and other migrants: what do we know?

Traditionally the Spanish public has been very tolerant of immigration. Data from 1996, for example, shows only 28% of the population felt there were too many migrants in the country (Éltetó, 2011). Research has also found positive attitudes towards regularisation initiatives, with a longitudinal study recording 45% of participants approving of regularisation for irregular migrants already in Spain in 1994, rising to 57% in 2000 (Díez Nicolás, 2005). Very few people were in favour of returning irregular migrants to their country of origin (12% in 2003) (ibid.). Spain is also notable for increasingly positive attitudes towards immigrants from poor, non-European countries (from 2002/3 and 2016/17), setting the country apart from counterparts including Italy and Hungary, where these attitudes have become more negative (Heath and Richards, 2019). The fact that many immigrants in Spain are from Latin America and assimilate easily given a shared language and religion has likely eased social integration and encouraged broadly positive views (Chislett, 2018).

Over time, and as the number of immigrants has increased, more people report that there are too many immigrants in the country. By July 2011, an Ipsos MORI (2017) survey found that 67% of the population held this view. This significant increase over the prior 15-year period tracks the large increase in immigrant numbers. It has also been linked to the impacts of Spain's economic crisis, rising unemployment and, particularly, growing unemployment among immigrants (Éltetó, 2011). In recent years, however, the perception that there are too many migrants in Spain has fallen, reaching 47% in July 2017 (Ipsos MORI, 2017), possibly linked to increasing outflows of migrants as demand for labour has reduced. As in other European countries, survey respondents in Spain overestimate how many immigrants are actually in the country. According to a 2017 Eurobarometer survey on the integration of immigrants in the EU, Spanish respondents on average estimated that the proportion of non-EU immigrants was 23.2%, while Eurostat recorded an actual figure of 8.8% (European Commission, 2018).

The salience of immigration in Spain has traditionally been low, reaching a peak in 2006, coinciding with the 'crisis de los cayucos' (Berry et al., 2016), then falling back to the low levels consistently seen over the last decade. Figure 4 illustrates national polling data collected by the Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas (CIS). The percentage of those surveyed who perceive immigration as one of the three most important issues facing the country peaks at close to 60% in 2006. Salience then drops significantly, to 10% in July 2011 and has mostly stayed below that level since.

**Figure 4** Salience of immigration as a key issue in Spain

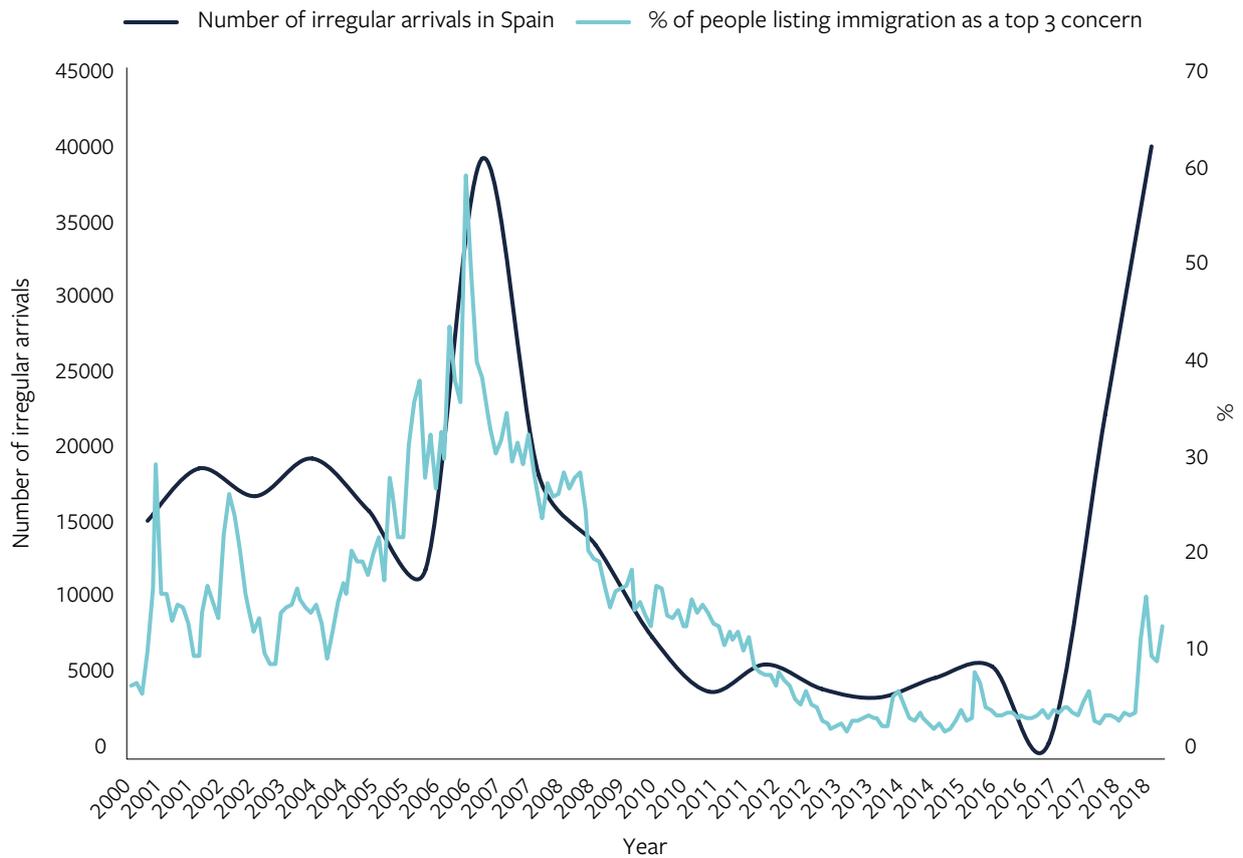
Note: Data has been extracted from Barometer surveys in January, May, July and September. It shows the percentage of people who perceive immigration as one of the three most important issues facing the country. Source: CIS, n.d.

Europe-wide surveys by Eurobarometer show similar findings. Data collected in Spain since 2009 shows the percentage of people reporting immigration as one of the two most important issues facing the country remained between 2% and 8% of the population up until 2015, when saliency spiked (reaching 39%) (Eurobarometer, n.d.). This was a significant increase, though much less dramatic than in other European countries such as Germany and Sweden (Holloway et al., 2021a; Holloway et al., 2021b). Unlike experience in these countries, the salience of immigration also declined more rapidly and is now back at low levels, at 7% in spring 2021 (Eurobarometer, 2021). It is likely that the low levels recorded in the last two Eurobarometer surveys, and in recent CIS surveys, is due to the subsequent large jump in responses for health resulting from the Covid-19 pandemic. However, also notable are the very significant concerns around issues such as unemployment, Spain's economic situation, rising prices and the cost of living recorded in the most recent survey (ibid.).

The salience of immigration in Spain is closely linked to levels of irregular arrivals reaching Spain via the coast (Dennison, 2019) (see Figure 5). This is particularly notable given that these arrivals are minor contributors to irregular migration (Fanjul and Gálvez-Iñiesta, 2020), yet still appear to drive the debate. However, this link may have been broken more recently as increasing numbers of irregular arrivals after 2017 have not been followed by a jump in salience. This is likely influenced

by the other major challenges facing Spain taking precedence, including high unemployment and the political crisis around the Catalan independence referendum (ibid.). However, Dennison and Mendes (2019) find that the small but notable increase in salience during 2018 correlates closely with an aggregation of all polling for the right-wing Vox party in the 2019 elections. It appears that the salience of immigration issues in Spain has increased in line with the emergence of a new, radical right party (see below).

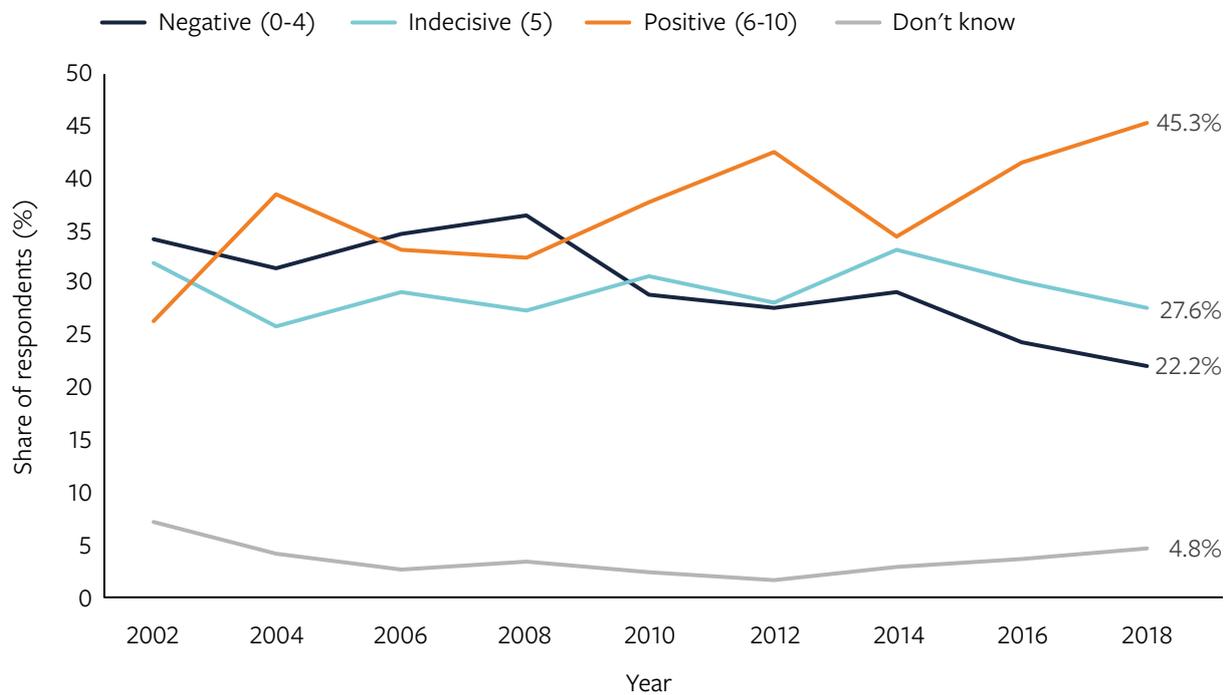
**Figure 5** Number of irregular arrivals reaching Spain via the coast and the salience of immigration in Spain



Note: Salience measures taken from monthly CIS Barometer’s question ‘What is, in your opinion, the most important problem in Spain today? And the second? And the third?; Irregular arrivals statistics are taken from the Spanish Ministry of the Interior.

Source: Dennison, 2019

When it comes to perceptions of the impacts of immigration, results have not always been particularly positive. Ipsos MORI (2017) polling finds that only 20% of the Spanish population think immigration has had a positive impact. This is much less than the UK (40%) but much more positive than perceptions in Italy (10%) (ibid.). However, there is evidence that, in line with other countries in Europe, attitudes are becoming more positive (see Figure 6). Since 2002, negative attitudes have fluctuated but show an overall marked decline. The share of the population feeling positive – reporting that immigration makes Spain a better place to live – has increased significantly, from 26% to 45% (European Social Survey, n.d.) (see Figure 6).

**Figure 6** Attitudes towards immigration: does immigration make Spain a worse or a better place to live?

Note: This data has been extracted from each wave of the European Social Survey. The survey scores respondents from 0–10 only and records ‘don’t know’ answers. We have classified survey respondents who scored 0–4 in their answers to the question ‘Does immigration make Spain a worse or better place to live?’ as holding ‘negative’ views, those scoring 5 as being ‘indecisive’ and those scoring 6–10 as holding ‘positive’ views. Source: European Social Survey, n.d.

While Spain is considered ‘a relatively pro-immigration country by most metrics’ it is notable that more negative attitudes are observed in relation to jobs and unemployment (Dennison and Dražanová, 2018: 19). World Values Survey polling (2010–2014) finds that 53% of the Spanish public agree that, when jobs are scarce, employers should give priority to nationals over immigrants, higher than in Germany (41%) and Sweden (14%) (ibid.). This may be linked to the fact that high inflows of immigrants were accepted due to high levels of labour market demand but, as unemployment has increased, fear about jobs is a key area where attitudes have become more negative (Arango, 2013).

Attitudes related to immigration and jobs may be becoming more positive, however, with an Ipsos MORI (2017) survey finding 41% worried about the impact of immigration on jobs, a decline on the 52% recorded in 2011. Similarly, it appears that concerns about the impact of immigration on public services are receding, with 53% reporting this as a concern in 2017 compared to 70% in 2011 (ibid.). At the same time, the country’s health service has become increasingly dependent on foreign-born doctors (OECD, 2019), and during the Covid-19 pandemic it was revealed that foreign-born workers made up 17% of the essential workforce (Fasani and Mazza, 2020). Immigrants are clearly important in the delivery of public services and critical work. Certain

sectors are particularly dependent on migrant labour, including the care sector (see Box 2) and agriculture (Augère-Granier, 2021). The particular reliance of strawberry businesses on migrant labour is notable given Spain is the world's leading strawberry exporter. The industry depends heavily on migrant seasonal workers from Eastern Europe and Morocco, many of whom live in dire conditions alongside strawberry farms (OHCHR, 2020; Augère-Granier, 2021).

### Box 2 In focus: Spain's ageing population

Spain faces significant demographic challenges. The country has experienced negative population growth in the last decade, with the population shrinking by just under 380,000 between 2012 and 2016 (INE, 2021). Population growth recovered in 2017, though it is notable that immigration flows have been solely responsible for the growth recorded since 2017 (INE, n.d.c; INE, 2021). The rapid ageing of the country's population is also set to accelerate. By 2050, Spain's old age dependency ratio will have increased significantly; the country will have more than seven people over the age of 65 for every 10 people of working age (Kenny, 2021). As such, Spain sits alongside countries such as Italy, Greece, South Korea and Japan with one of the most rapid ageing forecasts in the OECD (ibid.). This rate of ageing will significantly increase the demand for elderly care services.

For many years family care has been critical to supporting the elderly given the under-developed formal care system in Spain. However, women are increasingly entering the workforce and – combined with ageing trends – the care workforce has had to grow very rapidly (Geerts, 2011). The government has introduced reforms including the provision of a cash allowance to families to enable them to purchase care services (Peng and Yeandle, 2017). The growing use of these cash allowances means home-based care workers, working under informal arrangements, are increasingly common (Cangiano, 2014). Within this workforce migrants make a significant contribution. Although estimates are difficult, since many of these workers are irregular, an OECD (2015) analysis of labour force surveys found that 67.4% of home-based care givers in Spain were foreign-born. While many migrant care workers in Spain come from Latin America (Bolivia, Ecuador, Colombia), Romanians have also been employed in significant numbers to deliver elderly care (Cangiano, 2014; OECD, 2015).

The rapidly ageing population is also posing a fiscal challenge. The government has struggled to pay pensions, depleting the reserve fund set up to support pension payments over the last decade (Chislett, 2018). Given ageing forecasts, the fiscal burden is set to grow rapidly in this already difficult context. Clearly, continued migration will be important to increase the size of the working-age population, contribute to the country's long-term fiscal sustainability and respond to the increasing demand for elder care services.

Alongside Spain's mainly tolerant and increasingly positive attitudes to immigration, the public generally do not see immigrants as a threat. Dennison and Dražanová (2018) create a 'composite fear index' in their analysis of European survey data related to attitudes to immigration. This index combines findings on whether populations see immigration as a threat in terms of crime, welfare, culture, employment, jobs and the economy, among other aspects. While countries such as Hungary, Greece, Malta and Italy score highly on this index, the Spanish public registers lower levels of 'fear'. In line with other survey findings, they show higher levels of concern regarding unemployment, and lower levels of concern for crime and welfare (ibid.).

This is notable given that Spain has suffered a high-profile terrorist attack, with the Madrid bombings in March 2004 leaving 191 people dead and 1,800 injured (Burridge, 2014). Although the attack was loosely linked to Al-Qaida, it does not appear to have had any significant or long-term impact on attitudes around immigration and fear of crime or terrorism. However, this appears strongly influenced by domestic politics given the government's initial attempts to blame the Basque separatist group ETA for the bombing (Burridge, 2014; Murado, 2014).

Overall attitudes towards refugees also appear positive, including in comparison to many other countries. Ipsos MORI (2016) found that, in a comparison of 12 European countries, Spain showed the second highest level of sympathy for refugees (after Ireland), with 86% expressing sympathy (and 67% saying they had a 'great deal' or a 'fair amount' of sympathy for refugees). A Pew Research Center survey in 2018 found similar, high levels of support – recording 86% of the population as supportive of welcoming refugees, the highest level of support in the 18 countries surveyed (Connor, 2018). While 31% of the population support closing borders to refugees this is notably less than in countries including Italy, Belgium, Germany and Sweden (Ipsos MORI, 2017). In addition, a large majority of the Spanish population also disagree with the proposition that terrorists are entering the country posing as refugees; less than 20% agree that this is the case, the lowest share recorded in Ipsos MORI's 2017 global poll on this question. In this respect, people in Spain are far less suspicious of refugees than counterparts in Italy, France, the UK and Sweden (among many other countries). Similarly, Spaniards are also much more likely to believe refugees are genuine, though only 39% are confident that refugees will integrate successfully (ibid.).

While available data points to positive attitudes, it is likely that some nuance is missing given the lack of in-depth analysis of public attitudes towards refugees and other migrants in Spain. Unlike countries such as the UK and Italy, segmentation data – separating the population into 'tribes' linked by their values and attitudes towards identity, immigration and other aspects – does not exist (Dixon et al., 2018; Juan-Torres et al., 2020). The segmentation technique provides survey data that delves much more deeply into each 'tribe's' views on immigration, often finding nuances both among immigration sceptics and those with positive views. Notably, segmentation analysis also often reveals the significant proportion somewhere in the middle who tend to hold very mixed views on immigration, offering important clues as to how to engage the public with messages more tailored to their concerns. Future work in this area will make an important contribution to understanding more about public attitudes to immigration in Spain.

## 4 Increasingly negative narratives are emerging

Spain is considered unusual in Europe in that the country has maintained an ‘enduring openness’ to immigration (Arango, 2013: 1). Even with the widespread negative impacts of the country’s Great Recession – including the dramatic increase in the numbers of immigrants losing their jobs – social attitudes have not shifted substantially. This has been explained to a large extent by the fact that immigration was seen as a rational response to labour market needs and, positively, as ‘an outcome of economic progress, and perhaps even a sign of modernity’ (ibid.: 3).

Spain’s response to immigration is also explained by its political culture, with the country having undergone significant political, economic and social transformation since the end of Franco’s dictatorship, ultimately making a successful transition to a robust democracy (Gunther et al., 2000; Chislett, 2018). Democratic values, such as equality, liberty and solidarity, have been widely promoted and strongly embedded (Arango, 2013), and until the electoral breakthrough of Vox in 2019 far-right political parties have been notably absent. As such, the country has generally avoided divisive public and political narratives around issues that have caused controversy in other European countries, such as European integration and immigration (Torreblanca, 2020). By contrast, the most polarising issues that generate debate in Spain tend to be topics such as the impacts of Basque and Catalan separatist movements on national unity, the Constitution, the monarchy and the legacy of the Franco era (Dennison and Mendes, 2019; Torreblanca, 2020).

Spain’s history of tolerant and positive attitudes to immigration is not simply due to the absence of extreme or divisive political forces. The country also has active groups defending migrants’ rights and promoting welcoming narratives. In 2015, for example, the ‘Welcome Refugees, Spain’ (*Bienvenidos Refugiados España*) initiative was launched in response to Europe’s ‘refugee crisis’. As well as its direct support functions, it aims to inform the public about the refugee situation and conducts local and national campaigning around refugee issues (Bienvenidos Refugiados, n.d.). The Open Arms organisation, which conducts migrant rescue missions at sea, was created in Spain, in a city just north of Barcelona. It operates across the Mediterranean and has been recognised for its life-saving work by the Catalan parliament (Catalan News, 2020).

During previous regularisation processes, organised and professional groups – such as trade unions, lawyers’ associations and NGOs – have publicly expressed support for measures to regularise the status of undocumented migrants (Dentler, 2008). Such public support has continued, with the new Popular Legislative Initiative seeking support for a new regularisation process. The initiative is co-led, among others, by the migrant movement Regularisation Now (*Regularización Ya*) together with a team of researchers and journalists working on migration, and is supported by a broad coalition of local and national civil society organisations. Together, these groups make important contributions to maintaining positive narratives around migration in Spain.

Some Spanish mayors have taken up very public positions in favour of migrants' rights. Valencia's mayor has publicly welcomed migrant ships turned away from Italy and Malta, which eventually docked in Valencia port (BBC News, 2018). The mayor of Barcelona has rejected right-wing attempts to stir up controversy around immigration (Junquera and Abellán, 2018), and has declared Barcelona a city of refuge, developing innovative policies to support refugee integration (Garcés-Mascreñas and Gebhardt, 2020).

However, things may be changing given the new political landscape and rapid rise in prominence of the Vox party. Formed in 2014, it took some time before Vox gained a proper foothold, with the party doing very poorly, winning only 0.2% of the vote, in 2016 (Calderón et al., 2017). In April 2019, however, the party won 24 seats in parliament and a 10% share of the vote in the general election, doing particularly well in the southern coastal districts, the poorer parts of the country and where most migrant boats arrive (Gutiérrez and Clarke, 2019; Sánchez and Olás, 2020). The party's fortunes were rapidly transformed, with its share of the vote increasing significantly in a matter of months, when in November 2019 it won 52 seats (Hedgecoe, 2019). Vox is now the third largest party in parliament, after the PSOE and the PP. Vox is also influential in Madrid, where the party won 13 seats in recent regional elections (Turnbull Dugarte and Rama, 2021). As the PP narrowly lost out on a majority there, it now depends on Vox to govern, potentially increasing the leverage and influence of Vox over the PP in future contests (ibid.).

Vox's political platform focuses on patriotism and traditional values, Catholicism and promoting a small-state and economically liberal ideology (Calderón et al., 2017). The party is strongly nationalist and has come out firmly against independence movements in the Basque Country and Catalonia (Saleem, 2019). Vox has also called for tougher controls on immigration and taken a rejectionist stance on a variety of rights issues including gender-based violence, abortion and same-sex marriage (Hedgecoe, 2019). The party has been described as 'openly misogynistic, xenophobic and Islamophobic' (Saleem, 2019: n.p.). Its rhetoric is heavily centred around concepts of the nation, family and security (Aguilera-Carnerero, 2019).

Vox has campaigned strongly in municipalities with high numbers of immigrants (Llaneras and Peinado, 2019) and publicly aired anti-immigrant views. In debates before the November 2019 election, party leaders linked immigrants to violent crime and advanced xenophobic narratives, including targeting unaccompanied migrant children (Jones, 2019). Surveys after the 2018 Andalusian regional elections found that just under 42% of voters said the party's stance on immigration had motivated their vote (Dennison and Mendes, 2019). A desire to remove the current government (34.2%) and 'defend the unity of Spain' (33.7%) were also common motivations, while Vox voters appeared much less interested in the party's economic policies (7.3%) and traditional family (5.6%) and Catholic values (2.8%) (ibid.).

As in other countries, it is likely that Vox's anti-immigration rhetoric will influence the positions and narratives put forward by right-wing political parties in Spain. Both the PP and the centre-right Citizens party (Ciudadanos) had already shifted further to the right before the April 2019

election, leading to the branding of the new 'triple-right' (the PP, Citizens and Vox) as "trifachito' (facha being slang for fascist)" (Jones, 2019: n.p.). The recent Madrid regional elections have also been noted as 'one of the most polarising electoral contests' for years and for having established a new pattern, with the PP moving closer to the far-right position and operating in a bloc with Vox (Turnbull Dugarte and Rama, 2021: n.p.). Whether this model is replicated in other regions, and in national elections, remains to be seen.

## 5 Conclusion

Spain's experience with migration has largely been one of emigration, with a marked change in direction from the 1990s when immigration to the country rose rapidly. Immigration has been driven by Spain's economic growth trajectory and by labour market demands. Irregular migration has played a notable part, with regularisation programmes reducing the numbers of undocumented people in the country. Spain's land border with Africa and its position as one of Europe's southern-most countries mean that it faces ongoing land and sea arrivals of migrants from Africa. As a result, the country has adopted comprehensive border control and surveillance systems and enacted a controversial pushback policy.

Attitudes to refugees and other migrants have remained mainly positive and the country has generally been open and tolerant towards immigration over the past two decades. While the salience of immigration has increased in particular moments of controversy, generally only a small share of the population believe immigration is one of the top issues facing the country. Increasingly people believe that immigration makes Spain a better place to live, and though there are concerns about the impact of immigration on jobs, immigration largely does not provoke fears around crime or terrorism. Equally, the Spanish population stands out for their very welcoming and supportive attitudes towards refugees. These positive attitudes have remained – and indeed deepened – through the country's Great Recession and the increase in land and sea arrivals since 2016.

For much of the last two decades Spain has had no extreme anti-immigrant political force and was free of much of the divisive rhetoric experienced in European countries such as France, the UK and Italy. A range of political and civil society actors have taken predominantly pro-immigration and welcoming stances. However, with Vox's recent electoral successes the picture is changing. Increasingly negative political narratives may well foster increasingly negative public attitudes towards refugees and other migrants. How public and political narratives evolve in this new context will likely determine whether there is a significant backlash against immigrants in Spain in future.

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