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How immigration has changed Spain

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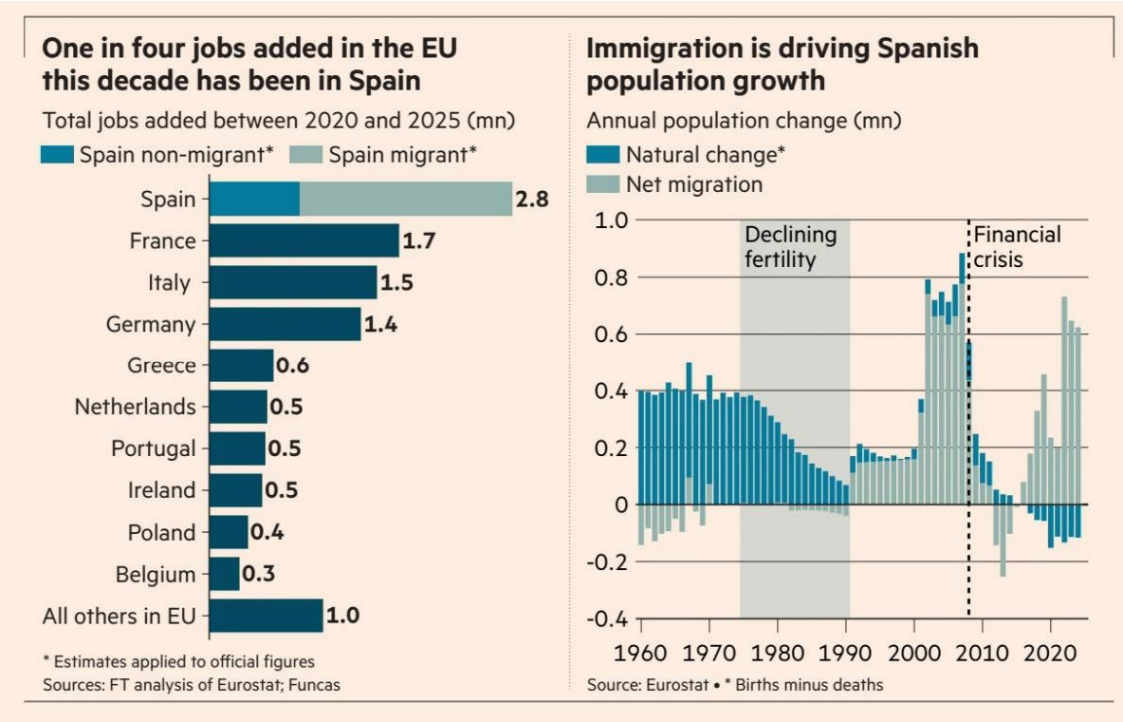
The country accounts for a quarter of new EU jobs this decade, 70 per cent of which have gone to immigrants. What effect the arrivals have on housing, crime and politics is hotly debated.

Spain is carrying out Europe's last remaining experiment in large-scale immigration. Even as other governments across the continent and in the US have imposed new controls at their borders, Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez's open-door policy has led to an extraordinary rise in new arrivals.



Since 2022, Spain's foreign-born population has surged by an annual average of 665,000, the equivalent of adding a city the size of Málaga each year. Last year the country accounted for roughly one-third of the total increase in the EU's immigrant population, according to the Rockwool Foundation, a Berlin think-tank.

Supporters say the influx has given Spain's ageing society a much-needed burst of economic vigour. Critics call it a poorly planned strategy that is straining the country's infrastructure and creating new social tensions.

The FT has analysed official data to shed light on how immigration has transformed the country and how it compares to the rest of the EU.

In less than a quarter of a century, Spain's foreign-born population has gone from one in 20 residents to almost one in five, a higher proportion than even the US.

There are Senegalese men guarding beachside parking spaces in Valencia and Pakistani boys playing cricket in Basque village squares. American digital nomads have snapped up luxury apartments in Madrid and Barcelona.

Sánchez, in power since 2018, said last year that Spain and the west as a whole must choose between being “an open and therefore prosperous society, or closed and impoverished”.

The Socialist prime minister’s stance contrasts starkly with the virtual halt of undocumented crossings that President Donald Trump has effected at the USMexico border. It is also poles apart from clampdowns on both legal and unauthorised migration by other leftleaning European governments, such as Denmark and the UK.

Last month the Spanish government’s most contentious immigration move to date took effect — a sweeping amnesty giving at least half a million people the chance to gain residency and work permits and move out of the shadow economy.

One would-be beneficiary is Joel Encalada, 34, a Peruvian construction worker. He, like other applicants, must prove he was in Spain before January 1 this year and has been there for five consecutive months. He can do so simply by presenting receipts from his travel card, which he was waiting to collect in a long queue outside a public transport office in Madrid. Encalada says of Sánchez: “We have to thank him for everything.”

But an anti-immigration backlash is also on the rise in Spain with Vox, an insurgent rightwing populist party that is now third in the polls.

Santiago Abascal, Vox’s leader, has accused the government of encouraging “an invasion of migrants”. He added last month: “They have decided to send a message to the world that anyone who breaches our borders will be granted legal status immediately. They have decided to sell us out.”

Kate Hooper at the Migration Policy Institute, a US think-tank, says the amnesty, the seventh of its kind in the past four decades, makes short-term practical sense. But she warns that the bigger question is whether reforms will “make sure that this unauthorised population doesn’t just balloon again”.

The surge in migration has already changed the Spanish economy. Its effects on housing, crime and politics itself are all hotly debated.

Paco Camas at polling firm Ipsos says that over the past two years immigration “has become one of the country’s main problems in the eyes of ordinary people”. The government’s problem is not just the unease expressed by Vox. It is that the unease is spreading beyond the rightwing party’s voters.

More jobs, but mostly for immigrants

Over the past two years, Spain has been the world's fastest-growing large advanced economy and an engine of EU job creation. Since 2020, it has been responsible for one in four of the 11.1mn new jobs added across the bloc, according to FT analysis.

Roughly 70 per cent of those have gone to immigrants, according to Funcas, a think-tank, which has examined the period since 2019.

Juan Félix Huarte, chair of Uriel Investments, whose businesses range from waste management to renewables, says immigrants have become vital for the country's economy for two underlying reasons. One is Spain's fertility rate of 1.1 births per woman, the lowest in the EU after Malta and little more than half the rate of 2.1 needed to maintain demographic stability. The other reason, he says, is that many young Spaniards are disinclined to take arduous jobs: "We're getting society far too used to government assistance, to grants, to support from the state."

Spain's unemployment rate remained the second highest in the EU at 10.3 per cent in March, yet Huarte's businesses have struggled to find people to drive rubbish trucks or bulldozers. "It's a problem, and the only way to overcome it is with immigrants," he says.

While the job surge has been broad-based, the biggest rise in absolute terms has been in hotels, bars and restaurants, which have generated 350,000 new roles since 2020, according to FT analysis of EU data.

Although Africans arriving on small boats in the Canary Islands grab the headlines, Latin Americans remain by far the largest group of immigrant workers in Spain. Spain has an unusually open immigration policy for about 15 Latin American nations, whose citizens can enter visa-free. Those who then apply for residency can seek Spanish citizenship within two years. Those who simply overstay their allotted 90 days in the country end up undocumented.

The country's newest arrivals have tended to have low incomes and limited skills, neatly fitting Spain's traditional economic model, which has long been skewed towards construction, tourism and restaurants.

But those sectors are all low on productivity, prompting warnings that Spain is simply importing cheap labour. Instead, some economists say, the country should make more of its growth streak by focusing on improving productivity. A more skilled workforce would help achieve that goal.

"This is a good moment to consider what kind of immigration is needed," says Raymond Torres, director of macroeconomic analysis at Funcas.

One of Europe's worst housing crises intensifies

As immigrants have flocked to Spain, its supply of new housing has lagged far behind. The result, according to the Bank of Spain, is a huge deficit in the property market: over the past decade 700,000 more households have been formed than homes have been built.

Ana Ibáñez, 27, a graphic designer and bookshop assistant from Madrid, collided with the Spanish capital's housing shortages when she decided to move in with her boyfriend last year. A twoperson apartment in Tetuán, Ibáñez's working-class neighbourhood, would have cost them €600 a month each. Lacking the money, the couple sought to lower costs by sharing with two friends.

But flats advertised online often disappeared before Ibáñez could request a viewing. She saw one apartment with a laundry room advertised as a bedroom and a basement flat with no windows.

"That was a kind of breaking point, the place with no windows," she says.

She continues to live with her parents, and is not the only one: the average age at which Spaniards move out of their childhood home has been above 30 since 2021, according to Eurostat, the EU's statistical agency.

Ibáñez blames rising rents on speculators, tourist apartments and short-term rentals to wealthy foreigners. "I'm working every day," she says. "I studied. I've taken all the steps. I don't know what more I can do."

But more fundamental forces are at play. House prices have surged past the bubble-era peak of 2008, according to CaixaBank research. Since 2015, they are up by 48 per cent at a national level and have almost doubled in Madrid and Barcelona.

Rents, meanwhile, rose by 39 per cent from 2021 to 2025 across Spain and by 59 per cent in the Madrid region, according to Fotocasa, a property website. Madrid and Barcelona have the most expensive rents relative to net salary in Europe after Lisbon and London, according to Numbeo, a data provider, as well as Deutsche Bank and FT calculations.

The chasm between housing supply and demand also reflects Spain's crushing bureaucracy, which makes it hard to unlock new land for development.

But it raises a question: where are the new arrivals living? Enrique Cañadas of Aesco, a non-profit group that helps migrants, says some sleep for extended periods on relatives' sofas; others squeeze into tiny apartments shared by multiple families.

"We must combat the kind of rhetoric that seeks to blame migrants for this problem," says a housing ministry official. "Migrants are the ones who, along with young people in Spain, suffer most from it."

But Hooper at the Migration Policy Institute says governments should model the impact of possible migration flows on "where services will be needed, where housing and infrastructure will be needed".

Iván Espinosa de los Monteros, a former Vox politician who now heads Atenea, a conservative think-tank, says the Spanish government failed to engage in such planning for homes, hospitals or public transport. "If you have the same infrastructure and you cram in 20 per cent more people, then

yes, it gets full." Noting that most immigrants are working Latin Americans, he says, the problem is that "they are taking up so much space in the public sphere. That is creating this negative reaction."

Opposing sides trade numbers on crime

Vox's tour of the multicultural neighbourhood where teenage Barcelona football star Lamine Yamal played as a kid does not feature in any travel guides.

The party's councillors in the Catalan seaside town of Mataró in north-east Spain point out a convenience store that was robbed at gunpoint, a bench where youths sell hashish, and an apartment building taken over by squatters.

Mónica Lora, Vox's local leader, then shows the square where Yamal's father, who was born in Morocco, once lunged at her after hurling insults and eggs at a Vox campaign tent. For Lora, the mix of north and sub-Saharan African residents in the Rocafonda neighbourhood has translated into crime and insecurity.

Two plainclothes police officers trail behind her on a street of halal butchers and Moroccan supermarkets. "This doesn't feel like Catalonia; it doesn't feel like Spain," Lora says of the area, whose foreign-born population is 39 per cent.

Vox's critics accuse the party of deliberately stoking fear. David Bote, Mataró's Socialist mayor, says the town is imperfect, but a pioneer of integration programmes for immigrants and far more harmonious than Vox claims.

On a walk through another neighbourhood he is greeted by veiled female shoppers and a Chinese ice cream parlour owner. Residents approach with more complaints about uneven pavements than crime.

Bote says there is no direct relationship between criminality and nationality or ethnic group. What academic studies elsewhere show is that crime rates are correlated with age and socioeconomic factors — and immigrants in Mataró tend to be young and poor.

Crime in Mataró is not rising: the number of offences last year was almost identical to 2019, according to Catalan police data. The mayor's office notes that crime statistics do not disclose the nationality of perpetrators. But prison data in the wider region does. The Socialist party stresses that the absolute number of foreigners in Catalonia's prisons — 4,600 — has not increased since 2010 despite overall population growth. Vox emphasises the proportion of prisoners who are not Spanish: 51 per cent.

Immigration races up the political agenda

With Spain's next election due by August 2027, immigration has climbed up the political agenda. The conservative opposition People's Party is in first place in the polls but predicted to be short of a majority — turning Vox into a kingmaker. Since Sánchez's amnesty announcement, the party has

gone on the offensive on immigration. When Vox formed two regional governments with the PP last month it insisted on a “national priority” policy it says will give Spaniards preferential access to public housing, services and welfare benefits.

Some analysts say the prime minister’s electoral strategy is to provoke Vox into ever angrier language about immigration and other cultural issues, rhetoric that helps it attract dissatisfied voters from his main opponent, the PP. Amplifying alarm over the agenda of the “ultra-right” also energises the base of Sánchez’s own Socialist party.

Camas at Ipsos says there is a tension between the traditional leftist view that immigrants should be helped and an awareness that mass migration “can’t be completely uncontrolled”.

Juan Lobato, an independent-minded Socialist lawmaker, says the government’s blanket support for immigration risks alienating leftwing voters who tell him they agree with some of what Vox says.

One person close to Sánchez flags a countervailing factor. Many immigrants have already become Spanish citizens and owe something to the prime minister. “Some of them will vote too.”