

Lessons from Spain:

Developing Effective and Ethical UK Immigration Policy

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Abstract

Immigration is undeniably an increasingly polarised and politicised topic, with the UK following the global trend of hardening migration policy by prioritising 'deterrents', limiting 'pull factors' and increasing the selectivity of legal entry routes. By contrast, Spain is pursuing a more liberal, compassionate policy, despite registering much higher net migration, with Prime Minister Sánchez even claiming it should be an example to Europe. This report compares migration patterns and public attitudes in both countries since COVID-19 in order to support an evaluation of the efficacy and ethics of three key Spanish policies: regularisation, circular migration and international collaboration. Fundamentally this research interrogates to what extent the UK could learn from these policies. It challenges the UK's current basis for policy of 'deterrents' and 'pull factors' and highlights the key elements of Spanish policy which understand the balance between expanding opportunity, preventing dangerous journeys, increasing benefit and public trust, and advancing development abroad. The report concludes that some elements are certainly applicable to the UK, including an individualised regularisation system, reforms to the seasonal and circular migration schemes, and cohesive international cooperation which prioritises training and investment in generator countries.

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1. Introduction

Immigration is undeniably an increasingly polarised and politicised topic across the world. As public attitudes harden, so does policy, as seen across Europe; governments from Italy to Denmark have approved tougher immigration policies¹, alongside the EU's strict Pact on Migration and Asylum². New legislation focuses on reducing regular migration and irregular entries, alongside eliminating 'pull factors' and strengthening deterrents.

Recent UK policy certainly reflects this, especially given the public visibility of the UK asylum system's inefficiencies and rising applications. The 2025 "Restoring Order and Control" policy paper demonstrated the UK's approach, claiming the current asylum system "is a significant pull factor" and endorsing "a stronger deterrent effect"³. However, Home Office reports highlight that reducing so-called 'pull factors' has minimal impact on migrant decisions⁴. The University of Oxford's Migration Observatory asserts that deterrence has a minimal effect⁵. And whilst family ties and economic prosperity often determine migrants' ideal destination, ultimately, push factors like global inequality and regional instability generate the most migration. Therefore, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) criticises reducing regular entry routes, as the UK is also doing by making routes

¹ Bertuzzi, Luca. "Meloni, Frederiksen Reiterate Opposition to 'Uncontrolled Immigration,'" euronews, 10th August, 2026, www.euronews.com/my-europe/2026/08/10/meloni-and-frederiksen-reiterate-opposition-to-uncontrolled-immigration, accessed 23rd August, 2026.

² "Pact on Migration and Asylum." European Commission Migration and Home Affairs, 11th June, 2026. home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/policies/migration-and-asylum/pact-migration-and-asylum_en, accessed 23rd August, 2026. and Genovese, Vincenzo. "EU Parliament Approves 'strictest-Ever' Migration Law." euronews, 17th June, 2026. www.euronews.com/my-europe/2026/06/17/eu-parliament-approves-strictest-ever-migration-law, accessed 23rd August, 2026.

³ "Restoring Order and Control: A Statement on the Government's Asylum and Returns Policy (Accessible)." GOV.UK, 21st November, 2025. www.gov.uk/government/publications/asylum-and-returns-policy-statement/restoring-order-and-control-a-statement-on-the-governments-asylum-and-returns-policy, accessed 23rd August, 2026.

⁴ Yeo, Colin. "Home Office Research Report on Why Asylum Seekers Come to the UK." Free Movement, 25th November, 2022. freemovement.org.uk/home-office-research-report-on-why-asylum-seekers-come-to-the-uk/, accessed 23rd August, 2026.

⁵ Walsh, Peter William, and Madeleine Sumption. "UK Policies to Deter People from Claiming Asylum." The Migration Observatory at the University of Oxford, 23rd January, 2024. migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/resources/commentaries/uk-policies-to-deter-people-from-claiming-asylum/, accessed 23rd August, 2026.

more selective⁶, due to “unintended negative consequences”⁷, including driving some migrants to seek irregular, dangerous pathways. Alan Manning goes further, asserting a wider “infernal circle”⁸ which must be broken. If the number of dissatisfied would-be migrants does not decrease, then harsher controls increase irregular entries, in turn increasing hostile public attitudes due to fear and broken trust in immigration enforcement.

In this context, Spain appears an anomaly. Despite having much higher net migration than the UK, Sánchez’ socialist coalition is recognisable for its relatively liberal migration policy, arguing it balances efficacy with a moral duty⁹ of compassion. Therefore, Sánchez even claimed that Spain’s policy should be an example to Europe¹⁰.

This report compares how the UK and Spain, two European albeit not both EU countries, have managed migration since COVID-19, including analysis of numbers, routes, attitudes and policy, considering the latter with respect to efficacy and ethics. Given Sánchez’ statement, this research also interrogates whether the UK can learn from Spain’s policy.

2. Comparison of migration patterns

2.1. Overview

Initially, the UK and Spain’s migration patterns seem comparable; both are in the top 10 OECD countries considering share of the world’s migrant population hosted,

⁶ “Prime Minister unveils new plan to end years of uncontrolled migration”, GOV.UK, 11th May, 2025, www.gov.uk/government/news/prime-minister-unveils-new-plan-to-end-years-of-uncontrolled-migration, accessed 27th August, 2026.

⁷ McAuliffe, M. and P. Ceriani Cernadas (eds.), 2026. *World Migration Report 2026*. International Organization for Migration (IOM), Geneva. Page 98.

⁸ Manning, Alan. *Why immigration policy is hard: And how to make it better*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press Ltd, 2026. Page 6.

⁹ Hernández-Morales, Aitor. “Spain Moves to Grant Legal Status to Half a Million Unauthorized Immigrants.” POLITICO, 14th April, 2026. www.politico.eu/article/spain-greenlights-mass-regularization-of-more-than-500000-undocumented-migrants/, accessed 23rd August, 2026.

¹⁰ “Pedro Sánchez Defiende El ‘Modelo’ Migratorio Español Como Un Ejemplo.” RFI, 8th January, 2026. www.rfi.fr/es/m%C3%A1s-noticias/20260108-pedro-s%C3%A1nchez-defiende-el-modelo-migratorio-espa%C3%B1ol-como-un-ejemplo, accessed 23rd August, 2026.

with 4% and 3% respectively in 2024¹¹. Moreover, the same year, the UK's foreign-born population comprised 19% of the total population, similar to Spain's 18%.¹²

However, differences become obvious when comparing net migration. In 2025, the UK's net migration was 171,000, reflecting a significant and intentional decrease from its 900,000 peak in 2023, primarily due to care sector visa cuts¹³. Contrastingly, Spain's net migration in 2024 fell slightly to 626,268, having peaked in 2022 at 727,005¹⁴.

The nationality demographics of migrants also differ heavily. After Brexit, UK visas issued to EU citizens plummeted, comprising 4% of all residence visas between 2021 and 2024¹⁵, creating net negative EU migration since 2022/23. Now, non-EU nationalities, especially Indian, Pakistani, Chinese and Nigerian, register the highest entries. Unsurprisingly, non-EU nationalities also comprise the most emigrants¹⁶. Meanwhile, Spain registered net positive EU migration each year in the same period, albeit only forming 5% to 6% of total net migration. In 2024, South American nationalities, especially Venezuelan and Colombian, comprised over half of net migration, whilst 20% was from Africa¹⁷. Non-EU European entries increased

¹¹ OECD (2025), *International Migration Outlook 2025*, OECD Publishing, Paris, doi.org/10.1787/ae26c893-en.

¹² Sumption, Madeleine, Ben Brindle, and Peter William Walsh. "Net Migration to the UK." The Migration Observatory at the University of Oxford, 27th May, 2026. migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/resources/briefings/long-term-international-migration-flows-to-and-from-the-uk/, accessed 23rd August, 2026.

¹³ Sumption, Madeleine. "Essay: Migration Ten Years after the EU Referendum." The Migration Observatory at the University of Oxford, 17th June, 2026. migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/resources/commentaries/essay-migration-ten-years-after-the-eu-referendum/, accessed 23rd August, 2026.

¹⁴ "Nota de Prensa: Estadística de Migraciones y Cambios de Residencia (EMCR). Año 2024." Instituto Nacional de Estadística, 11th December, 2025. www.ine.es/dyngs/Prensa/EMCR2024.htm, accessed 23rd August, 2026.

¹⁵ Sturge, Georgina, and Denis Kierans. "Who Migrates to the UK and Why?" The Migration Observatory at the University of Oxford, 15th August, 2025. migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/resources/briefings/who-migrates-to-the-uk-and-why/, accessed 23rd August, 2026.

¹⁶ "Long-Term International Migration, Provisional: Year Ending December 2025". Office for National Statistics, 21st May, 2026. www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/populationandmigration/internationalmigration/bulletins/longterminternationalmigrationprovisional/yearendingdecember2025, accessed 23rd August, 2026.

¹⁷ "Nota de Prensa: Estadística de Migraciones y Cambios de Residencia (EMCR). Año 2024." Instituto Nacional de Estadística, 11th December, 2025. www.ine.es/dyngs/Prensa/EMCR2024.htm, accessed 23rd August, 2026.

sharply in 2022 with Ukrainians fleeing the Russian invasion, however this was clearly an anomaly; the statistic dropped significantly in 2023¹⁸.

2.2. Study

Study is consistently the highest reason for UK immigration, constituting 47% of long-term non-EU migration in 2024, and reaching 41% for EU nationals¹⁹. Even so, tertiary-level international students decreased gradually from 2022 to 2024, alongside a sharp drop in permits issued to dependents; in 2023, the United Kingdom granted the most family permits for international students in the OECD²⁰. Meanwhile, Spain almost doubled study permits between 2014 and 2024²¹, becoming the second biggest European destination for tertiary-level international students in 2024 (excluding the UK)²². However, education reasons, including outside of university study, only rose above a fifth of first-time residence permits once, to 21% in 2024²³. Also contrary to the UK, dependents only received 3% of permits in 2024²⁴. However, both countries expanded their graduate visa programmes in 2021 and 2022²⁵, increasing the long-term impact of study permits. In

¹⁸ “Saldos Por Año, Sexo, Edad (Grupos Quinquenales), Nacionalidad (Agrupación de Países) y Tipo de Saldo.” Instituto Nacional de Estadística. www.ine.es/jaxiT3/Tabla.htm?t=69759&L=0, accessed 23rd August, 2026.

¹⁹ Sturge, Georgina, and Denis Kierans. “Who Migrates to the UK and Why?” The Migration Observatory at the University of Oxford, 15th August, 2025. migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/resources/briefings/who-migrates-to-the-uk-and-why/, accessed 23rd August, 2026.

²⁰ OECD (2025), *International Migration Outlook 2025*, OECD Publishing, Paris, doi.org/10.1787/ae26c893-en.

²¹ “Study Permits Increase by 93% in 10 Years Reaffirming Spain as an International Educational Destination.” Ministerio de Inclusión, Seguridad Social y Migraciones, 17th February, 2026. www.inclusion.gob.es/en/w/las-autorizaciones-de-estancia-por-estudios-aumentan-un-93-en-diez-a%C3%B1os-reafirmando-a-espa%C3%B1a-como-destino-educativo-internacional, accessed 23rd August, 2026.

²² OECD (2025), *International Migration Outlook 2025*, OECD Publishing, Paris, doi.org/10.1787/ae26c893-en.

²³ “First Permits by Reason, Length of Validity and Citizenship.” Eurostat. ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/migr_resfirst_custom_22196783/default/table, accessed 23rd August, 2026.

²⁴ “Study Permits Increase by 93% in 10 Years Reaffirming Spain as an International Educational Destination.” Ministerio de Inclusión, Seguridad Social y Migraciones, 17th February, 2026. www.inclusion.gob.es/en/w/las-autorizaciones-de-estancia-por-estudios-aumentan-un-93-en-diez-a%C3%B1os-reafirmando-a-espa%C3%B1a-como-destino-educativo-internacional, accessed 23rd August, 2026.

²⁵ “Graduate Route to Open to International Students on 1 July 2021.” GOV.UK, 4th March, 2021. www.gov.uk/government/news/graduate-route-to-open-to-international-students-on-1-july-2021, accessed 23rd August, 2026. and “Main New Regulations Affecting Student Permits in Spain.” AGM

the UK, the percentage of graduates transferring visa route rose from less than 20% in 2020 to over 50% in 2022, 2023, and 2024²⁶, whilst the number of changes to immigration status from education to employment reasons increased almost tenfold between 2022 and 2025 in Spain²⁷.

2.3. Family

Whilst study permits make up the highest proportion of UK immigration, family visa routes are most common in Spain, comprising over 40% of first-time residence permits since 2023²⁸. Meanwhile, UK family visas including refugee reunion have formed 8% to 10% of visas issued annually since 2010, excluding a dip from 2021 to 2023 where many humanitarian routes replaced family pathways²⁹. Before 2022, marginally more family visas were issued to family members joining non-EU citizens, however since, more family members have joined EU citizens annually³⁰.

2.4. Permanent and Temporary Work

Labour migration has decreased in both the UK and Spain since 2023 and 2022 respectively³¹. In the UK, this is primarily after dramatic cuts to care sector

Abogados, 14th September, 2022. www.agmabogados.com/en/main-new-regulations-affecting-student-permits-in-spain/, accessed 23rd August, 2026.

²⁶ "Analysis of migrants use of the Graduate route." GOV.UK, 14th May, 2024. www.gov.uk/government/statistics/analysis-of-migrants-use-of-the-graduate-route/analysis-of-migrants-use-of-the-graduate-route, accessed 26th August, 2026.

²⁷ "Change of Immigration Status Permits by Reason and Citizenship." Eurostat. ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/migr_reschange_custom_22296802/default/table, accessed 23rd August 2026

²⁸ "First Permits by Reason, Length of Validity and Citizenship." Eurostat. ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/migr_resfirst_custom_22196783/default/table, accessed 23rd August, 2026.

²⁹ Sturge, Georgina, and Denis Kierans. "Who Migrates to the UK and Why?" The Migration Observatory at the University of Oxford, 15th August, 2025. migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/resources/briefings/who-migrates-to-the-uk-and-why/, accessed 23rd August, 2026.

³⁰ "First Permits by Reason, Length of Validity and Citizenship." Eurostat. ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/migr_resfirst_custom_22196783/default/table, accessed 23rd August, 2026.

³¹ OECD (2025), *International Migration Outlook 2025*, OECD Publishing, Paris, doi.org/10.1787/ae26c893-en.

visas, with 50% fewer visas granted to main applicants for work in 2025 than 2023³². Meanwhile in Spain, employment reasons decreased from 31% to 18% for all first-time residence permits from 2022 to 2025³³, especially due to the expansion of humanitarian routes.

However, both countries have substantial temporary labour migration. Since the UK introduced a seasonal worker visa quota in 2019, this type of permit has increased to 50% of all temporary work visas³⁴. Spain's temporary work migration is particularly prominent, registering the largest increase in the EU/EFTA area in 2025, a trend present since 2019 and largely stimulated by promotion of circular or seasonal migration under its GECCO and trainee programmes. More stability introduced in the GECCO programme in 2025 is likely to continue this trend, whilst the growth of the 2022 trainee programme made Spain one of the top three receiving countries in the OECD in Europe of trainees in 2023 and 2024. The programme allows individuals living in Spain for over two years to enrol in training to regularise their status³⁵.

2.5. Humanitarian and Refugees

Both countries have high numbers of asylum applications, with 15% of all claims in the EU+ and UK being for Spain, and 11% for the UK in 2025³⁶. Numbers of humanitarian migrants and refugees in both countries were impacted heavily by millions of Ukrainians fleeing the Russian invasion, causing significant increases in 2022, on top of substantial rises starting in 2019³⁷. Previously, in the UK, refugee

³² "Why Do People Come to the UK? Work." GOV.UK, 26th February, 2026.

www.gov.uk/government/statistics/immigration-system-statistics-year-ending-december-2025/why-do-people-come-to-the-uk-work, accessed 23rd August 2026

³³ "First Permits by Reason, Length of Validity and Citizenship." Eurostat.

ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/migr_resfirst_custom_22196783/default/table, accessed 23rd August, 2026.

³⁴ "Why Do People Come to the UK? Work." GOV.UK, 26th February, 2026.

www.gov.uk/government/statistics/immigration-system-statistics-year-ending-december-2025/why-do-people-come-to-the-uk-work, accessed 23rd August 2026

³⁵ ³⁵ OECD (2025), *International Migration Outlook 2025*, OECD Publishing, Paris, doi.org/10.1787/ae26c893-en.

³⁶ "How Many People Claim Asylum in the UK?" GOV.UK, 26th February, 2026.

www.gov.uk/government/statistics/immigration-system-statistics-year-ending-december-2025/how-many-people-claim-asylum-in-the-uk, accessed 23rd August 2026

³⁷ Sturge, Georgina, and Denis Kierans. "Who Migrates to the UK and Why?" The Migration Observatory at the University of Oxford, 15th August, 2025.

and humanitarian arrivals per year more than doubled from 2019 to 2021, particularly due to the launch of the Hong Kong British National (Overseas) visa and Afghan resettlement programmes in 2021. Since 2022, numbers dropped from 239,103 to 110,955 in 2024³⁸. Meanwhile in Spain, the number of first permits issued for those with humanitarian, refugee or subsidiary protection status annually has increased almost constantly since 2021, from 25,037 to 79,447 in 2025, faltering only slightly in 2024. However, grants had increased much more rapidly than in the UK since before COVID-19, from 5,670 in 2019 to 52,806 in 2020³⁹, significantly impacted by the decision to allow Venezuelan asylum seekers whose claims had been rejected to apply for a one-year humanitarian visa, due to the inability to return these migrants to Venezuela⁴⁰. Despite growing numbers of West African asylum seekers, Venezuelans consistently constitute the largest group of asylum seekers in Spain, forming 55% of applications in 2025⁴¹. In comparison, the equivalent group in the UK was Pakistanis, constituting 11% of applicants⁴²; both demonstrate the impact of pre-existing communities as the most significant ‘pull factor’ for asylum seekers.

2.6. Irregular Entries (Within Asylum)

An unavoidable key factor in asylum claims in both countries is irregular entries, especially by sea. In the UK, 95% of those arriving on small boats have

migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/resources/briefings/who-migrates-to-the-uk-and-why/, accessed 23rd August, 2026. and “First Permits by Reason, Length of Validity and Citizenship.” Eurostat. ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/migr_resfirst_custom_22196783/default/table, accessed 23rd August, 2026.

³⁸ Sturge, Georgina, and Denis Kierans. “Who Migrates to the UK and Why?” The Migration Observatory at the University of Oxford, 15th August, 2025.

migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/resources/briefings/who-migrates-to-the-uk-and-why/, accessed 23rd August, 2026.

³⁹ “First Permits by Reason, Length of Validity and Citizenship.” Eurostat.

ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/migr_resfirst_custom_22196783/default/table, accessed 23rd August, 2026.

⁴⁰ Finotelli, Claudia, and Rinken, Sebastian. “A Pragmatic Bet: The Evolution of Spain’s Immigration System.” Migration Policy Institute, 18th April, 2023. www.migrationpolicy.org/journal/country-profile/pragmatic-bet-evolution-spains-immigration-system, accessed 23rd August, 2026.

⁴¹ “Focus on Spanish Society. May 2025.” Funcas, May 2025. www.funcas.es/boletines/focus-on-spanish-society-may-2025/, accessed 23rd August, 2026

⁴² “How Many People Claim Asylum in the UK?” GOV.UK, 26th February, 2026. www.gov.uk/government/statistics/immigration-system-statistics-year-ending-december-2025/how-many-people-claim-asylum-in-the-uk, accessed 23rd August, 2026.

claimed asylum since 2018, comprising 41% of total asylum seekers in 2025⁴³. Crucially though, despite current political discourse, irregular routes into the UK are not wholly responsible for increasing asylum claims; almost 40% of asylum seekers in 2025 previously entered the UK on another visa path or with an Electronic Travel Authorisation⁴⁴. However, given that asylum seekers must be in the UK to apply, and safe and legal entry pathways are lacking, irregular entries unsurprisingly remain prominent. Similarly, whilst it is newly possible to claim legal entry for asylum-seeking at some Spanish embassies abroad, this pathway remains largely theoretical and ineffective⁴⁵. As in the UK, the links between irregular entries and asylum claims are clear. For example, in 2025, Malian nationals were the second largest group of asylum applicants. They also constituted 37% of irregular boat arrivals to the Canary Islands⁴⁶.

Whilst numbers of irregular entries are generally inaccurate as many go undetected, Spain and the UK's trends are clearly different. The professionalisation of the people-smuggling industry has sharply increased irregular arrivals since 2020 in the UK⁴⁷, whereas small boat arrivals have been prominent in Spain since the 2006 Cayucos crisis. In the UK, irregular entries increased by 7% from 2024 to 2025, totalling over 46,000 entries⁴⁸. In Spain, combining the Western Mediterranean land and sea routes and the Western African Atlantic route, Spain totalled 36,775 irregular arrivals in 2025, a decrease of almost 30,000 since 2024; a crackdown on Western

⁴³ "How Many People Come to the UK via Illegal Entry Routes?" GOV.UK, 26th February, 2026. www.gov.uk/government/statistics/immigration-system-statistics-year-ending-december-2025/how-many-people-come-to-the-uk-via-illegal-entry-routes, accessed 23rd August 2026

⁴⁴ "How Many People Claim Asylum in the UK?" GOV.UK, 26th February, 2026. www.gov.uk/government/statistics/immigration-system-statistics-year-ending-december-2025/how-many-people-claim-asylum-in-the-uk, accessed 23rd August, 2026.

⁴⁵ Lenegan, Sonia. "Safe Routes for Refugees: How Does It Work in Spain?" Free Movement, 4th September, 2023. freemovement.org.uk/safe-routes-for-refugees-how-does-it-work-in-spain/, accessed 23rd August 2026. and "Short Overview of the Asylum Procedure - Asylum Information Database: European Council on Refugees and Exiles." Asylum Information Database, 17th July, 2026. asylumineurope.org/reports/country/spain/asylum-procedure/general/short-overview-asylum-procedure/, accessed 23rd August, 2026.

⁴⁶ "Asylum Applications and Sea Arrivals Decline, but International Protection Needs among People Arriving in Spain Persist." UNHCR, 29th January, 2026. www.unhcr.org/europe/news/press-releases/asylum-applications-and-sea-arrivals-decline-international-protection-needs, accessed 23rd August, 2026.

⁴⁷ "How Many People Come to the UK via Illegal Entry Routes?" GOV.UK, 26th February, 2026. www.gov.uk/government/statistics/immigration-system-statistics-year-ending-december-2025/how-many-people-come-to-the-uk-via-illegal-entry-routes, accessed 23rd August, 2026.

⁴⁸ "How Many People Come to the UK via Illegal Entry Routes?" GOV.UK, 26th February, 2026. www.gov.uk/government/statistics/immigration-system-statistics-year-ending-december-2025/how-many-people-come-to-the-uk-via-illegal-entry-routes, accessed 23rd August, 2026

African Atlantic entries via the Canary Islands helped significantly, after arrivals there spiked in 2023 and 2024. This spike followed a clampdown on Western Mediterranean land and sea arrivals since 2019, forcing migrants to find alternative routes⁴⁹.

3. Attitudes

Within democracies, public attitudes are unsurprisingly a key driver of policy concerning ‘hot-button’ issues such as immigration. In stronger words, the IOM’s 2026 World Migration Report warned that “on the political front [...] migration has become overtly weaponized”⁵⁰, reflecting the impact of public attitudes at the highest levels of migration literature. Indeed, this weaponisation is evident in both the UK and Spain, especially in the growth of further right-wing, anti-immigration parties, such as Reform and Vox respectively. However, clear differences in public attitudes towards immigration do exist.

2025 Ipsos polling indicates that both countries are more liberal than the global average when asked if their country “would be stronger if we stopped immigration”⁵¹, with 40% agreeing in Great Britain, and only 34% agreeing in Spain. Whilst this figure had been steadily but slowly increasing in Spain, hostility grew more rapidly in Great Britain. This could be partially explained by the British public’s perception of immigration numbers; half the public thought net migration rose from 2024 to 2025⁵², when in reality, net migration decreased from 331,000 to 171,000⁵³.

⁴⁹ “Europe Sea Arrivals.” UNHCR Data Portal. data.unhcr.org/en/situations/europe-sea-arrivals/location/24567, accessed 23rd August, 2026.

⁵⁰ McAuliffe, M. and P. Ceriani Cernadas (eds.), 2026. *World Migration Report 2026*. International Organization for Migration (IOM), Geneva. Page 97.

⁵¹ “The Ipsos Populism Report 2025.” Ipsos, June 2025. www.ipsos.com/sites/default/files/ct/news/documents/2025-06/ipsos-populism-report-2025.pdf. Page 32.

⁵² Katwala, Sunder, Steve Ballinger, and Heather Rolfe. “After the Fall: Why Hasn’t Falling Immigration Changed Public Attitudes?” British Future, May 2026. www.britishfuture.org/publication/after-the-fall-why-hasnt-falling-immigration-changes-public-attitudes/. Page 9.

⁵³ Sumption, Madeleine. “Essay: Migration Ten Years after the EU Referendum.” The Migration Observatory at the University of Oxford, 17th June, 2026. migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/resources/commentaries/essay-migration-ten-years-after-the-eu-referendum/, accessed 23rd August, 2026.

However, polling shows these worries are shaped most by the visibility of small boats and asylum seekers⁵⁴, matching Ipsos polling showing that in 2025 49% of UK respondents agreed that “we must close our borders to refugees entirely – we can’t accept any at this time”. Only 43% disagreed. Crucially, in comparison, only 34% of respondents in Spain agreed. 61% disagreed: 18% more than in the UK⁵⁵.

However, in the UK, “more people [are] supportive than opposed to opening ‘safe routes’ to undermine people smugglers [and making] a deal with France”⁵⁶, showing support for real-world solutions. Despite this, the government generally continues with a selectivity and deterrence-based approach which eliminates ‘pull factors’.

4. Policy Analysis

This paper will now analyse three major Spanish immigration policies: regularisation or ‘arraigo’, the GECCO programme within ‘circular migration’, and international agreements and cooperation with countries which generate migration. These policies are not based on limiting ‘pull factors’ or creating ‘deterrents’, as UK policy has repeatedly claimed would unlock reduced net migration, however they are built on creating safe and legal pathways to entry and residence, increasing benefits to the native population, and addressing the causes of immigration in order to create a more equitable society.

Ultimately, Spanish policy understands that merely identifying and reducing irregular immigration is insufficient. It does not impact the number of people dissatisfied with their situation nor the inequalities causing their dissatisfaction.

⁵⁴ Katwala, Sunder, Steve Ballinger, and Heather Rolfe. “After the Fall: Why Hasn’t Falling Immigration Changed Public Attitudes?” British Future, May 2026. www.britishfuture.org/publication/after-the-fall-why-hasnt-falling-immigration-changes-public-attitudes/. Page 4.

⁵⁵ “Global Attitudes towards Refugees in 2025.” Ipsos, June 2025. www.ipsos.com/sites/default/files/ct/news/documents/2025-06/ipsos-global-attitudes-towards-refugees-2025.pdf. Page 13.

⁵⁶ Katwala, Sunder, Steve Ballinger, and Heather Rolfe. “After the Fall: Why Hasn’t Falling Immigration Changed Public Attitudes?” British Future, May 2026. www.britishfuture.org/publication/after-the-fall-why-hasnt-falling-immigration-changes-public-attitudes/. Page 5.

4.1. Regularisation and *Arraigo*

Regularisation or amnesty, the process of regularising ones' undocumented status in order to reside legally, is a cornerstone of Spanish immigration policy through mass regularisations and the individualised *arraigo*, or rooting, process.

Mass regularisations were a key migration management tool between 1986 and 2005, with 6 amnesties which regularised 1.2 million migrants⁵⁷. The government has since launched a new short-term regularisation programme in 2026, supported by wide-ranging sectors of Spanish society. Permits granted under the scheme will last a year and be renewable under other visa pathways. Perhaps instrumental in more liberal public attitudes, ministers have justified the programme through its economic benefits; a larger formal workforce increases tax revenue, averaging €4,000 per migrant annually, and social security affiliations, of which foreigners made up 14% in 2025⁵⁸, roughly equivalent to the 18% of the total population which is composed of foreigners⁵⁹. It would also afford migrants equal labour rights, decreasing the risk of exploitation due to irregular status.

After 2005, the *arraigo* process was implemented, generally halting the need for mass amnesties. The policy allows undocumented migrants without a recent criminal record living in Spain for 2 years to apply for a 1-year residency permit. Migrants may then transition to a single residency and work permit, starting a stable path to residency. The process was amended in 2025, expanding the number of available pathways to 5 routes. They are designed primarily to reward efforts to integrate and benefit Spanish society, for example through economic contribution, undertaking educational or training programmes, or proving family ties alongside sufficient social integration. The amendment also introduced a 'second opportunity' pathway for migrants who, through no fault of their own, had lost their residence

⁵⁷ Finotelli, Claudia, and Rinken, Sebastian. "A Pragmatic Bet: The Evolution of Spain's Immigration System." Migration Policy Institute, 18th April, 2023. www.migrationpolicy.org/journal/country-profile/pragmatic-bet-evolution-spains-immigration-system, accessed 23rd August, 2026.

⁵⁸ Chislett, William. "The Seventh Regularisation of Undocumented Migrants in 40 Years Exposes the Need for Greater Migratory Policy Planning." Real Instituto Elcano, 10th March, 2026. www.realinstitutoelcano.org/en/commentaries/the-seventh-regularisation-of-undocumented-migrants-in-40-years-exposes-the-need-for-greater-migratory-policy-planning/, accessed 23rd August, 2026.

⁵⁹ Sumption, Madeleine, Ben Brindle, and Peter William Walsh. "Net Migration to the UK." The Migration Observatory at the University of Oxford, 27th May, 2026. migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/resources/briefings/long-term-international-migration-flows-to-and-from-the-uk/, accessed 23rd August, 2026.

permit⁶⁰. The economic arguments for individualised regularisation are similar to mass amnesties, especially given Spain's aging working population. However crucially, it also offers a legal route to residence that is compassionate to the causes of irregular status; admittance of foreign workers is limited due to EU legislation⁶¹, and asylum cannot be claimed from outside the country, forcing many to enter illegally or on an alternative visa, risking slipping into irregularity.

Meanwhile, the UK, like most European countries, lacks compassionate policy for regularisation. Government policy for residence for 'overstayers' requires either 'exceptional circumstances', or proof of 20 years of continuous residence. Moreover, falling into irregular status is more likely due to recent policy, for example by revoking permanent refugee status, now subject to review every 30 months⁶², and attempting to double the time before which one can request Indefinite Leave to Remain.

Combined, UK policy appears arguably more hostile regarding irregular status than Spain's. Certainly, Spain's population is aging far more rapidly than the UK's⁶³, with reports suggesting if migration to Spain were reduced by 30% by 2075, the population would decrease by 15 million and GDP would decrease by 22%⁶⁴; therefore, Spain has a greater need to regularise migrants who can plug labour shortages and generate fiscal benefits. Therefore, it is hard to see an argument for mass amnesties in the UK, especially considering the UK public's less favourable attitudes towards migrants. However, an individualised regularisation system which assumes a compassionate stance on irregular migrants, whilst only rewarding those who intend to integrate and add economic value, would help prevent labour exploitation, open 'second chance' pathways for migrants, help generate similar

⁶⁰ "Labour Migration Policies Case Study Series." PICUM, 2025. picum.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/02/Labour-Migrations-Case-Study-Series-Spain-EN.pdf.

⁶¹ Mascareñas, Blanca Garcés. "Understanding Spain's Extraordinary Regularisation: Key Elements." CIDOB, May 2026. www.cidob.org/en/publications/understanding-spains-extraordinary-regularisation-key-elements.

⁶² "Refugee Protection to Be Reviewed Every 30 Months." GOV.UK, 2nd March, 2026. www.gov.uk/government/news/refugee-protection-to-be-reviewed-every-30-months, accessed 23rd August, 2026.

⁶³ "Median Age & Demographics: Spain vs United Kingdom 1960-2026." GeoRank, 8th July, 2026. georank.org/demographics/spain/united-kingdom, accessed 23rd August, 2026.

⁶⁴ "The Government of Spain Approves the Extraordinary Regularisation of Migrants Already Residing in Spain." La Moncloa, 14th April, 2026. www.lamoncloa.gob.es/lang/en/gobierno/councilministers/Paginas/2026/20260414-council-press-conference.aspx, accessed 23rd August, 2026.

economic benefits, and address an aging population. Moreover, if applied in a similar manner to Spain, the smaller, individualised nature of the scheme is high-impact but low-visibility; once established, it makes a tangible difference to migrants' lives, whilst avoiding inflaming public attitudes and political tensions. Adaptations to tailor the scheme to the UK's needs would be necessary, such as perhaps rewarding the training pathway in industries which currently face labour shortages, given recent advice that solely training Britons in those industries may not be sufficient⁶⁵.

4.2. Circular Migration and GECCO

Spain's circular migration scheme facilitates migrant labour in temporary or seasonal positions, especially in agriculture, tourism and manufacturing⁶⁶, before migrants' return to their country of origin. Whilst regular seasonal worker visas exist in Spain, most are managed through the GECCO programme: *Gestión Colectiva de Contrataciones en Origen*, or Collective Management of Recruitment at Origin. As the name suggests, the scheme prioritises recruitment in and return to migrants' country of origin. The government also utilises GECCO as a tool in bilateral relations to encourage positive cooperation in migratory issues. In 2025, 17 countries had agreements to participate; most are in Latin America, however West and North African countries such as Morocco, Senegal, Mauritania and The Gambia are being incorporated⁶⁷ as part of wider agreements to reduce irregular migration from these generator countries.

In 2025, reforms gave GECCO workers more stability by creating a 4-year authorisation, in which they can work 9 months each year⁶⁸. Given that a key

⁶⁵ Syal, Rajeev. "Training More Britons May Not Cut Net Migration or Plug Skills Shortages, Study Finds." The Guardian, 18th February, 2026. www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2026/feb/18/training-more-uk-workers-may-not-cut-net-migration-report--?CMP=Share_iOSApp_Other, accessed 23rd August, 2026.

⁶⁶ "Authorisations Issued for the Purpose of Seasonal Work by Economic Sector, Sex and Citizenship." Eurostat. ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/migr_ressw2_custom_22387786/default/table, accessed 23rd August, 2026.

⁶⁷ "Spain Will Collaborate with Mauritania in the Field of Social Security to Strengthen the Protection of Migrant Workers." La Moncloa, 16th July, 2025. www.lamoncloa.gob.es/lang/en/gobierno/news/Paginas/2025/20250718-spain-and-mauritania-collaboration-social.aspx, accessed 23rd August, 2026.

⁶⁸ "Spain: New Order for Migrant Employment and Circular Migration." European Commission Migration and Home Affairs, 13th January, 2025. home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/news/spain-new-order-migrant-employment-and-circular-migration-2025-01-13_en#:~:text=The%20GECCO%20programme%20contains%20the%20necessary%20regulations%20for

challenge with the programme had been enforcing returns after migrants' contracts end⁶⁹, the reforms incentivise complying with returns requirements as the next year's work contract is dependent on verifying their return⁷⁰. Moreover, upon completion of the full 4 years, migrants may apply for a 2-year temporary residence and work permit which counts towards an application for long-term residence⁷¹. In practice, this process is uncommon, however the incentive seems effective, especially when combined with other efforts to increase returns, such as extending opportunities for women with children in Morocco; family commitments back home successfully incentivised their return⁷².

Given the difficulty of obtaining legal employment in Spain from outside, many feel pushed to enter irregularly, intending to apply in-country. However, by recruiting employees at source, GECCO attempts to limit these often dangerous journeys by offering an alternative safe and legal route, as opposed to enhancing deterrents and controls. Moreover, employers are generally obliged to cover accommodation and travel costs, including return⁷³, making the scheme relatively accessible to those who would benefit most. However, this risks creating a dependence on employers, limiting migrants' ability to flag mistreatment, especially given that only employers can request a migrant to change employers.

Whilst the programme's numbers are currently limited, it has been praised as a mutually beneficial partial solution to irregular immigration, in absorbing part of the

[,safe%20migration%20promoted%20by%20the%20Government%20of%20Spain](#), accessed 23rd August, 2026.

⁶⁹ Enríquez, Carmen Garcés. "Migración Circular versus Migración Irregular." Real Instituto Elcano, 23rd September, 2024. www.realinstitutoelcano.org/comentarios/migracion-circular-versus-migracion-irregular/, accessed 23rd August, 2026.

⁷⁰ "Spain: New Order for Migrant Employment and Circular Migration." European Commission Migration and Home Affairs, 13th January, 2025. home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/news/spain-new-order-migrant-employment-and-circular-migration-2025-01-13_en#:~:text=The%20GECCO%20programme%20contains%20the%20necessary%20regulations%20for%20safe%20migration%20promoted%20by%20the%20Government%20of%20Spain, accessed 23rd August, 2026.

⁷¹ "Labour Migration Policies Case Study Series." PICUM, 2025. picum.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/02/Labour-Migrations-Case-Study-Series-Spain-EN.pdf.

⁷² Enríquez, Carmen Garcés. "Migración Circular versus Migración Irregular." Real Instituto Elcano, 23rd September, 2024. www.realinstitutoelcano.org/comentarios/migracion-circular-versus-migracion-irregular/, accessed 23rd August, 2026.

⁷³ Mascareñas, Blanca Garcés. "Understanding Spain's Extraordinary Regularisation: Key Elements." CIDOB, May 2026. www.cidob.org/en/publications/understanding-spains-extraordinary-regularisation-key-elements.

demand⁷⁴. This is especially true of the WAFIRA (Women as Financially Independent Rural Actors) scheme, pioneered in collaboration with the International Labour Organization. In 2024 to 2025, over 250 Moroccan women were employed in strawberry harvesting, whilst also undertaking a “comprehensive integration and training programme focused on entrepreneurship”⁷⁵, which supported the women in establishing their own businesses in Morocco upon return. Each produced a business plan, with 209 successful launches, helping families become financially independent⁷⁶. The training element of WAFIRA transforms circular migration into “a model of inclusive development”⁷⁷, turning ‘brain drain’ into ‘brain gain’; indeed, the IOM highlights the significant benefits of this “continuous and reciprocal flow of human capital between countries”⁷⁸.

Elements of these programmes are certainly applicable to the UK, especially given government’s supposedly strong commitment to ‘safe and legal routes’. Currently, seasonal worker schemes in the UK are narrow, limited to horticulture and poultry, controlled by government quotas rather than demand, and offer no path to residency, increasing the instability of seasonal work. However, these schemes are essential, given the Migration Advisory Committee’s (MAC) conclusion that “there is an overwhelming need for long-term certainty for food labour needs in the UK”⁷⁹. Therefore, the schemes must be attractive and mutually beneficial, which may be achievable through adjustments in line with Spain. In the same report, the MAC already advised that in some cases, the extension of the visa to 9 months, like Spain’s, would be beneficial due to the increased earnings in comparison with migrants’ upfront costs of seasonal movement⁸⁰. This is especially worth considering

⁷⁴ Enríquez, Carmen Garcés. “Migración Circular versus Migración Irregular.” Real Instituto Elcano, 23rd September, 2024. www.realinstitutoelcano.org/comentarios/migracion-circular-versus-migracion-irregular/, accessed 23rd August, 2026.

⁷⁵ “WAFIRA Project in Spain.” European Commission Migration and Home Affairs. home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/projects/wafira-project-spain_en, accessed 23rd August, 2026.

⁷⁶ “Wafira - Women As Financially Independent Rural Actors.” Migration Partnership Facility. www.migrationpartnershipfacility.eu/mpf-projects/34-wafira-women-as-financially-independent-rural-actors/preview

⁷⁷ “WAFIRA Project in Spain.” European Commission Migration and Home Affairs. home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/projects/wafira-project-spain_en, accessed 23rd August, 2026.

⁷⁸ ⁷⁸ McAuliffe, M. and P. Ceriani Cernadas (eds.), 2026. *World Migration Report 2026*. International Organization for Migration (IOM), Geneva. Page 92.

⁷⁹ Hague, Pip. “Briefing: The Seasonal Worker Visa.” Free Movement, 5th June, 2025. freemovement.org.uk/seasonal-worker-visa/, accessed 23rd August, 2026.

⁸⁰ “Review of the Seasonal Worker Visa (Accessible).” GOV.UK, 16th July, 2024. www.gov.uk/government/publications/seasonal-worker-visa-review/review-of-the-seasonal-worker-visa-accessible, accessed 23rd August 2026.

from a compassionate stance, given that, unlike Spain, UK employers currently face no requirement to cover any costs seasonal workers incur, nor provide suitable accommodation⁸¹. This makes the programme simply inaccessible to many who would benefit most, however in some respects this is a strength of UK policy; decreasing reliance on the employer reduces risk of exploitation, giving migrants more freedom to request to change employer, which they can do in the UK, unlike in Spain. However, given that in practice, migrants are more likely to sacrifice their sponsorship by breaking their contract than request a change⁸², perhaps this element of the system is no stronger than Spain's.

The UK does recruit seasonal workers from abroad, however this is not executed through intentionally established systems; instead, recruitment is run by scheme operators who sponsor individuals in accordance with government quotas⁸³. This is functional, however the changeable nature of quotas makes long-term planning difficult for the UK, and the lack of other government regulation increases the risk of exploitative agencies abroad charging unnecessary recruitment fees. In contrast, with government-led recruitment at source and a roadmap to expanding the pathway, Spain proves it can balance long-term planning with positive contributions to bilateral relations in order to deepen cooperation on stopping irregular immigration, as the UK government claims is its aim.

Fundamentally, GECCO and circular migration schemes such as WAFIRA are currently relatively small-scale, however can offer economic benefits and fill labour shortages in host countries whilst preventing irregular immigration, not only through the availability of alternative pathways, but through the sustainable economic and skills development of generator countries, reducing wider global inequalities. The mutually beneficial nature of these programmes aligns well with current public attitudes to immigration in the UK; Oxford University's Migration Observatory defines these as 'cake-ism', where desire for liberal policies that reap the economic benefits

⁸¹ "Seasonal Worker Visa (Temporary Work)." GOV.UK. www.gov.uk/seasonal-worker-visa, accessed 23rd August 2026.

⁸² "Review of the Seasonal Worker Visa (Accessible)." GOV.UK, 16th July, 2024. www.gov.uk/government/publications/seasonal-worker-visa-review/review-of-the-seasonal-worker-visa-accessible, accessed 23rd August 2026.

⁸³ Hague, Pip. "Briefing: The Seasonal Worker Visa." Free Movement, 5th June, 2025. freemovement.org.uk/seasonal-worker-visa/, accessed 23rd August, 2026.

of labour migrants is antithetical to desire for reduced immigration⁸⁴. Programmes like WAFIRA compassionately and ethically balance these contradictory attitudes, building public trust in immigration systems and contributing to a more equitable world.

4.3. International Cooperation and Collaboration

International cooperation and collaboration is clearly a very broad ‘policy’, and expands far outside of migration issues. However, Spain has successfully utilised international agreements with migration as a specific focus to aid immigration policy compassionately and effectively. Recent agreements signed have focussed on North and West African countries which are key generators of immigration, either by nationality or by forming common points of departure for migrants attempting Mediterranean or Atlantic crossings to mainland Spain, its islands or its autonomous cities of Ceuta and Melilla.

Senegal is a particularly successful case study of these agreements, exemplifying Spain’s two-pronged approach to relations. Like most nations tackling significant issues with irregular entry, Spain and Senegal have substantially increased border security cooperation to tackle irregular departures, with members of the National Police and Guardia Civil and various surveillance vessels and vehicles deployed on Senegalese land and maritime territory. Since deployment, interceptions from the coast increased five-fold, decreasing arrivals to Spain from Senegal by over 90%⁸⁵.

However, crucially, Spain has demonstrated an understanding of and compassion to the inequalities, instability and dissatisfaction at the root of irregular migration, accompanying its security policies with those targeted at expanding opportunities, reducing inequalities and encouraging economic development. Alongside circular migration schemes to Spain⁸⁶, the government has also launched

⁸⁴ “Public Attitudes to Immigration.” Kantar Public, June 2023. kantar.turtl.co/story/public-attitudes-to-immigration/page/2/2,

⁸⁵ “Grande-Marlaska Thanks His Senegalese Counterpart for the ‘Preventive Effectiveness’ of His Fight against People Smuggling Mafias.” La Moncloa, 4th November, 2025. www.lamoncloa.gob.es/lang/en/gobierno/news/Paginas/2025/20251104-spain-senegal-irregular-migration.aspx, accessed 23rd August, 2026.

⁸⁶ “Spain Will Collaborate with Mauritania in the Field of Social Security to Strengthen the Protection of Migrant Workers.” La Moncloa, 16th July, 2025. www.lamoncloa.gob.es/lang/en/gobierno/news/Paginas/2025/20250718-spain-and-mauritania-collaboration-social.aspx, accessed 23rd August, 2026.

various initiatives aimed at training and employing Senegalese workers in their home country. For example, Spain's establishment of the Alianza África Avanza (Alianza) in cooperation with other West African countries intends to encourage mutually beneficial investment by Spanish companies in industries in Senegal which have high economic and innovative potential, and can generate stable and prosperous employment, such as finance, infrastructure, telecommunications and agriculture⁸⁷. This framework also facilitates specific schemes such as "Tierra Firma", which in its second year helped 200 young Senegalese achieve diplomas for vocational technical training⁸⁸ in industries such as renewable energies, construction and plumbing, alongside incorporating a programme to 'train trainers' in order to promote the dissemination of the training undertaken to other educational centres across the country⁸⁹. Moreover, cultural exchange forms a key tenet of the Alianza, seen through the establishment of El Instituto Cervantes in Senegal's capital, aiming to increase Spanish literacy abroad with the hope of facilitating further economic collaboration, for example by aiding those who want to work in Spain to learn the language⁹⁰.

Crucially though, not all agreements are well-made, such as with Mauritania. Whilst a circular migration partnership has been established to encourage safe, legal and mutually beneficial pathways to entry⁹¹, and efforts have been made to encourage economic development such as through vocational educational training

⁸⁷ Guijarro, Óscar Garrido. "¿Hasta Dónde Puede Llegar España En África? Senegal Como Modelo de Cooperación Bilateral?" Portal de CESEDEN, 30th October, 2024. www.defensa.gob.es/ceseden/-/hasta-donde-puede-llegar-espana-en-africa-senegal-como-modelo-de-cooperacion-bilateral, accessed 23rd August, 2026.

⁸⁸ "Closing Ceremony of the Tierra Firme Program in Dakar." Welcome Africa, 2nd June, 2025. welcomeafrica.org/en/closure-of-the-terra-firme-programme-in-dakar/, accessed 23rd August, 2026.

⁸⁹ "El Proyecto Tierra Firme de Canarias Logra Un 36 % De Inserción Laboral En África." EFE. www.libertaddigital.com/canarias/2026-08-11/canarias-logra-un-36-por-ciento-de-insercion-laboral-con-tierra-firme-para-ofrecer-alternativas-a-la-ruta-migratoria-atlantica-7447538/, accessed 23rd August, 2026.

⁹⁰ Guijarro, Óscar Garrido. "¿Hasta Dónde Puede Llegar España En África? Senegal Como Modelo de Cooperación Bilateral?" Portal de CESEDEN, 30th October, 2024. www.defensa.gob.es/ceseden/-/hasta-donde-puede-llegar-espana-en-africa-senegal-como-modelo-de-cooperacion-bilateral, accessed 23rd August, 2026.

⁹¹ "The Government of Spain Signs Agreements with Mauritania, the Gambia and Senegal to Reinforce Safe and Regular Migration Channels and Protect Workers' Rights." La Moncloa, 29th August, 2024. www.lamoncloa.gob.es/lang/en/gobierno/news/Paginas/2024/20240829-africa-agreements.aspx, accessed 23rd August, 2026.

programmes⁹², there are concerns over outsourcing the fight against people-smuggling mafias and irregular departures. With increased collaboration to facilitate patrols and police cooperation, security forces intercepted 3,500 people leaving Mauritania between January and October 2025, contributing to a 59% decrease in arrivals to the Canary Islands from 2024⁹³. However, Human Rights Watch (HRW) has criticised years of serious human rights abuses committed due to outsourcing. Despite this, HRW also praised recent reforms ensuring procedures are regulated to protect migrant rights⁹⁴. Alongside the case of Senegal, it is therefore plausible that international cooperation that specifically ensures compliance with ethical guidelines is an effective policy in preventing irregular migration.

Unsurprisingly, the UK already utilises international cooperation regarding migration, mostly focused on tackling people-smuggling gangs and reducing irregular departures. For example, the UK has funded border security technology and law enforcement training and liaised in disseminating digital awareness campaigns on the risks and lies of irregular entry routes facilitated by people-smuggling gangs in Albania, Vietnam and Iraq⁹⁵. Since the implementation of these schemes, the number of Iraqi nationals entering the country by small boats has fallen from 2,600 to 1,900 per year, for example⁹⁶, proving some success of these agreements in preventing dangerous journeys.

⁹² Santos, Ana P. "Spain Seeks to Stem Migration with Vocational Training in West Africa." InfoMigrants, 24th February, 2025. www.infomigrants.net/en/post/63029/spain-seeks-to-stem-migration-with-vocational-training-in-west-africa, accessed 23rd August, 2026.

⁹³ "Grande-Marlaska Thanks Mauritania for Its 'Excellent Cooperation' in Security Matters and in the Fight against Human Trafficking Mafias." La Moncloa, 16th October, 2025. www.lamoncloa.gob.es/lang/en/gobierno/news/Paginas/2025/20251016-spain-mauritania-cooperation.aspx, accessed 23rd August, 2026.

⁹⁴ "Mauritania: Years of Migration Control Abuses." Human Rights Watch, 27th August, 2025. www.hrw.org/news/2025/08/27/mauritania-years-of-migration-control-abuses.

⁹⁵ "UK Expands Campaign to Stop Migrant Smugglers and Their Lies." GOV.UK, 4th March, 2025. www.gov.uk/government/news/uk-expands-campaign-to-stop-migrant-smugglers-and-their-lies. and "UK and Vietnam Sign Joint Communiqué at Annual Migration Dialogue." GOV.UK, 4th March, 2025. www.gov.uk/government/news/uk-and-vietnam-sign-joint-communique-at-annual-migration-dialogue?utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=govuk-notifications-topic&utm_source=9134e035-b4d4-47d5-b7e6-3295d65fd2ae&utm_content=immediately. and "UK/Iraq Border Security Pact to Target Smuggling Gangs." GOV.UK, 28th November, 2024. www.gov.uk/government/news/uk-and-iraq-border-security-pact-to-target-smuggling-gangs. and "New Technology to Combat Criminal Gangs in Albania and UK." GOV.UK, 15th May, 2024. www.gov.uk/government/news/new-technology-to-combat-criminal-gangs-in-albania-and-uk, all accessed 23rd August, 2026.

⁹⁶ "UK Strengthens International Diplomacy to Tackle Illegal Migration." GOV.UK, 20th August, 2025. www.gov.uk/government/news/uk-strengthens-international-diplomacy-to-tackle-illegal-migration, accessed 23rd August, 2026.

Recently, the UK also signed the 'one-in-out-out' agreement with France, whereby migrants making illegal channel crossings can be returned, in exchange for an equal number of migrants being granted legal entry to the UK from France, providing they have not previously attempted irregular entry⁹⁷. Like their Conservative predecessors who spearheaded the failed Rwanda resettlement plan, the new Labour government hoped that facilitating returns would act as a deterrent, however showed some moral commitment to expansion of opportunities for migrants in offering others legal entry. Despite this, the UK still appears to lack any interest in creating opportunities in generator countries to decrease the inequality and instability that drives migration, irregular or otherwise.

Deterrence and dismantlement of routes promoted by people-smugglers is an important step, however when alternative safe and legal routes are not offered for those who would otherwise be desperate enough to attempt dangerous journeys, or efforts are not made to promote development of generator countries, the number of frustrated and often vulnerable migrants does not decrease. This is known to drive instead the development of alternative irregular and dangerous routes, as occurred when security tightened on the Mediterranean route to Spain, increasing those attempting the Atlantic route.

5. Conclusion

This report has compared migratory patterns and management in Spain and the UK, considering the interplay of policy with public attitudes, global patterns and the necessity of migration.

Despite heavily differing net migration numbers and demographics, this research concludes that there are certainly elements of Spain's migration policies that the UK can learn from. Where UK policy has grown increasingly restrictive, prioritising increasing selectivity, decreasing 'pull factors' and strengthening 'deterrents', Spanish policy understands that compassionate, effective and mutually beneficial policy must create safe and legal routes, generate national economic benefit and

⁹⁷ "UK-France treaty targeting illegal crossings comes into force." GOV.UK, 4th August, 2025. www.gov.uk/government/news/uk-france-treaty-targeting-illegal-crossings-comes-into-force, accessed 23rd August, 2026.

advance stability, opportunity and prosperity abroad, to reduce desire to emigrate. These aims are exemplified in Spain's policies of regularisation, circular migration and international cooperation and collaboration. Indeed, evaluation of the efficacy and ethics of these policies has revealed the extent to which lessons can be learnt.

Mass regularisations would likely be unsuitable for the UK, however an individualised regularisation system which does not villainise those who have fallen into irregular status and increases migrants' fiscal contributions would be a welcome update to current policy which is hostile to 'overstayers' and increases the chances of accruing this status.

The UK seasonal worker visa offers migrants no year-on-year stability nor path to residency, and is driven by annual government quotas which mismatch with need; it does not facilitate long-term planning for migrants nor the UK. However, adaptations inspired by Spain could improve this. The introduction of Spain's 4-year seasonal worker visa, valid for 9 months each year and to be used to apply for temporary residency, would mutually increase stability. Moreover, through the incorporation of the scheme into bilateral relations, aiming to equip workers with the skills to contribute to the economic development of their home country, the programme helps turn 'brain drain' into 'brain gain'.

Lastly, the UK currently has an arguably random approach to international cooperation, which no cohesive strategy other than aiming to prevent irregular migration, whether through increased border security aimed at people-smuggling networks or deterrent returns agreements. Spain's example could therefore be particularly impactful, through targeting relations with groups of generator countries to strengthen efforts to prevent dangerous crossings, and crucially to facilitate training, outreach and investment in these countries to drive down numbers of dissatisfied would-be migrants.

Future research would benefit from an interrogation of the sustainability and long-term suitability of Spanish policies, both in Spain and in their theoretical application to the UK. However, this report has made clear that compassionate policy which helps develop a more equitable world holds the key to future-oriented, effective migration policy.

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