

Lessons from Spain:

Developing Effective and Ethical UK Immigration Policy

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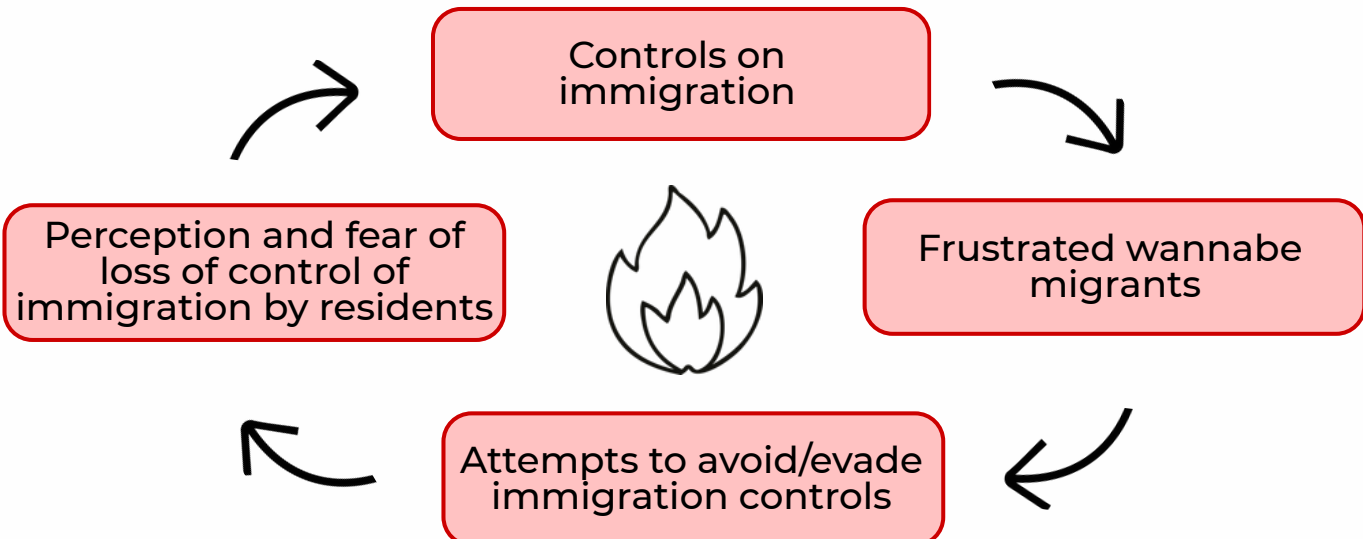


Aims and Context

With Europe toughening migration policy, along with the UK, Spain breaks the trend with its liberal migration policy. The UK currently prioritises ‘deterrents’ and reducing ‘pull factors’, despite limited evidence that this is effective. Moreover, legal pathways are becoming narrower and more selective, despite government claims of commitment to widening safe and legal routes. The International Organization for Migration and experts such as Alan Manning are critical, asserting this risks pushing migrants to find alternative, often dangerous routes. Manning argues this forms an “infernal circle” (see right), as the number of dissatisfied would-be migrants is unaffected. Therefore, effective policy must compassionately aim to widen opportunities and reduce migration ‘push factors’, as demonstrated by Spain’s approach. Prime Minister Sánchez even claimed that Spain’s migration policy should be an example to Europe. Through analysis of patterns, attitudes and policy, this paper asks if the UK could learn from Spain, as Sánchez claims.

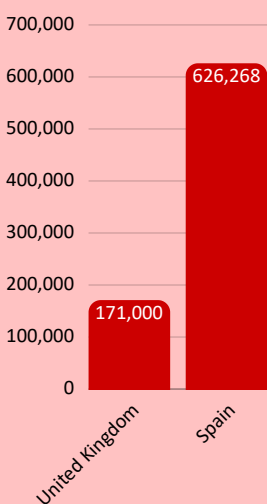


The ‘Infernal Circle’



Migration patterns

Net Migration (Most Recent Data)

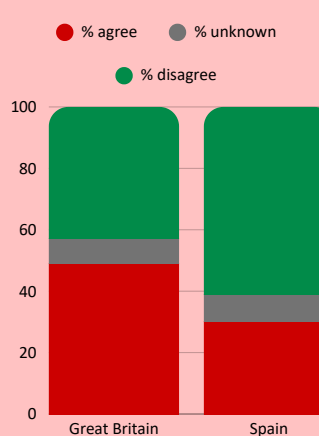


- Both countries host 3-4% of the world’s migrant population each.
- The UK has had much lower net migration than Spain since 2024, due to dramatic UK care visa cuts, however the UK peaked at 900,000 in 2023, where Spain has been more consistent, peaking at 727,000 in 2022.
- Study is the most common reason for UK immigration, making up 47% of long-term non-EU migration in 2024, and 41% for EU nationals.
- Family is the most common reason for Spain’s immigration, comprising 40% of first-time residence permits.
- Both Spain and the UK have substantial temporary labour migration.
- Both countries have high numbers of asylum applications; 15% of all claims in the EU+ and UK are for Spain, and 11% are for the UK.
- Spain registered fewer irregular arrivals in 2025 than the UK.

Attitudes

- Public concerns over migration have fuelled the weaponisation of migration policy, especially by further-right wing parties, such as Vox in Spain and Reform in the UK.
- Both countries’ attitudes are more liberal than the global average, however hostility is higher and increasing more rapidly in the UK than in Spain (see right). This is especially driven by the visibility of small boats and asylum seekers in the UK.
- The British public’s views are partially driven by major misconceptions; half thought net migration rose from 2024 to 2025, when in reality, it almost halved.
- The British public generally supports practical policy and real-world solutions, such as opening safe routes and a deal with France.

We must close our borders to refugees entirely – we can't accept any at this time



Policy Analysis

Regularisation / Arraigo (rooting)



- Regularisation or amnesty involves regularising ones’ undocumented status in order to reside legally. In Spain, this occurs through mass regularisations and the individualised *arraigo*, or rooting, process. The UK’ lacks a similar policy, instead requiring ‘overstayers’ to prove 20 years of continuous residence or exceptional circumstances.
- Mass regularisations were a key migration management tool in Spain from 1986 to 2005, however the government launched a new mass amnesty in 2026, with wide support.
- The *arraigo* process means migrants living in Spain for 2 years may apply for a 1-year residency permit which can be extended. New reforms opened more pathways which reward efforts to integrate and contribute economically to society, and allow a ‘second opportunity’ for those who lost their residence permit through no fault of their own.
- Regularisation is compassionate to the causes of irregularity; it is not possible to claim asylum from outside the country, so many enter on alternative, short-term visas.
- The economic benefits justify *arraigo*; entering the formal workforce, migrants are not exploited through illegal labour, and generate €4,000 of tax revenue per migrant, annually.

Circular Migration and GECCO



- Spain’s circular migration scheme facilitates seasonal labour, and is managed through the GECCO programme, which prioritises recruitment in migrants’ country of origin.
- 17 countries across Latin America and North/West Africa have signed agreements under GECCO, under wider bilateral efforts to reduce irregular migration.
- 2025 reforms created more stability with a 4-year permit under GECCO, in which migrants can work 9 months per year. The next year’s contract is dependent on return home, incentivising compliance. Upon completion of 4 years, migrants may apply for a 2-year temporary permit, which counts towards an application for long-term residence.
- The WAFIRA scheme is a strong example of a GECCO scheme. In 2024-2025, 250 Moroccan women were employed in strawberry harvesting, whilst undertaking an entrepreneurship training programme, in which each made a business plan. 209 businesses were successfully launched in Morocco, increasing financial independence and GDP.
- The UK’s seasonal worker visa is very narrow, and is controlled by government quotas rather than demand, despite the significant need to plug labour shortages. Unlike Spain, UK employers are not required to cover any costs. The UK does recruit at origin, however through scheme operators not the government, increasing risk of exploitative extra fees.

International Cooperation and Collaboration



- Spain has successfully used international agreements on migration to aid policy, for example with Senegal, where the government has used a two-pronged approach.
- Collaboration has significantly increased border security, increasing interceptions from the Senegalese coast five-fold, and decreasing arrivals to Spain from Senegal by over 90%.
- Spain is ensuring these decreases are sustainable by expanding opportunities, reducing inequalities and encouraging economic development, in order to combat the ‘push factors’ behind emigration. This is done through circular migration, vocational training and employment initiatives in Senegal and investment in high-potential industries, for example.
- The UK has a more random approach to international agreements, prioritising deterrence and border security, however shows little interest in promoting development abroad.

Scan for selected references



Conclusion

The UK can certainly learn from Spain’s policy which compassionately and effectively aims to break the infernal circle. Mass amnesties are not appropriate for the UK, however an individualised process would increase economic benefits whilst helping vulnerable migrants. Seasonal work schemes like WAFIRA offer migrants stability, and fit the UK public’s contradictory desires to reduce immigration whilst reaping the fiscal benefits; over time, the programme economically develops generator countries, reducing dissatisfaction. Similarly, within international cooperation, the UK should target training, employment and investment initiatives in generator countries to decrease the number of unhappy would-be migrants.