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# Will Europeans adopt the Spanish model for the treatment of immigrants?



Spain is setting a strong **precedent** for European governments with its decision to legalise the residences of hundreds of thousands of illegal migrants.

As European governments tighten migrant entry rules, Spain's "amnesty" serves as a test case for one of the continent's most complex political issues.

The government in Madrid explained its decision on the temporary legalisation of residence for hundreds of thousands of immigrants, mainly for economic reasons. But will those arguments, which Europe also finds appealing, influence other EU partners?

Amid the rise of the right across Europe, especially in its most developed economies such as France, Germany, and Scandinavia, the EU has tightened its rules on the entry and treatment of migrants and asylum seekers.

Adopted in 2024, the EU Pact on Migration and Asylum will enter into force in June, introducing stronger border controls, faster processing of asylum requests, and a more efficient return policy.

Spain is one of four countries in southern Europe (along with Italy, Greece, and Cyprus) that are recognised as being under particularly strong migrant pressure.

However, its centre-left government is rejecting growing European pressure to process the status of asylum seekers in third countries.

According to Spain's Interior Minister **Fernando Grande-Marlaska**, external processing centres, as Italy attempted in partnership with Albania, are "no magic solution".

His government remains consistent in pre-emptively deterring migrants from arriving by cooperating with transit governments, primarily those in Africa, where large numbers of migrants originate.

## Positive impact on the economy

Economic parameters give the minority government of Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez the justification to take, for other Europeans, a rather unusual step and legalise the stay of hundreds of thousands of undocumented immigrants.

The number of illegal entries into Spain decreased by as much as 42% last year. Madrid attributes this primarily to its lenient immigration policy, as well as cooperation with North African governments, with which it seeks to prevent mass refugee waves.

The growth of the Spanish economy, close to 3% in 2025 and 3.2% in 2024, is significantly higher than that of other large European economies.

**In the last quarter of 2025, Spain recorded the lowest unemployment rate in the past 18 years**

An important factor in this is the participation of migrants in the national economy as a force that compensates for negative trends in the labour market.

Of the approximately 470,000 **new jobs in Spain** in 2024, as many as 410,000 were filled by migrants or workers with dual citizenship.

In the last quarter of 2025, Spain recorded the lowest unemployment rate in the past 18 years, and foreign workers now make up 14% of the workforce.

## Different historical experiences

Despite this, the Spanish immigrant precedent is unlikely to become a model for other European governments in the near future.

Most of these governments take a harsh approach towards migrants and asylum seekers, a result of the growing strength of the

right and far right across the continent.

The positive economic aspects of immigration receive little support; at the EU level, for a long time, slightly **less than half of citizens** (around 47%) have believed that immigrants contribute to the national economy.

Moreover, the attitude of European governments towards migrants is influenced much more by political anti-migrant pressures than by economic factors.

These pressures stem from populist anxieties about national identity and changing demographic structures.



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In this respect, Spain **historically differs** from other developed European economies, as the vast majority of immigrants come from Latin American countries. They are people who speak the same language and share the same cultural patterns as the Spanish.

As many as 77% of illegal migrants come to Spain from Central and South America, while less than 10% come from Africa.

Furthermore, the move made by Pedro Sánchez's government is not a precedent in the Spanish history of similar "amnesties". The last major legalisation of illegal immigrants was in 2005, when about half a million immigrants received documents.

From the fall of Franco's dictatorship until

2005, Spain made as many as six similar decisions, establishing a tradition of a soft approach to the reception of migrants, which continues to this day.

## Effects of the Spanish model

Before considering the adoption of the Spanish model, Europeans will wait to see the effects of the new, stricter rules on immigration and asylum.

The anticipated impact is already evident in the significant reduction in the number of undocumented immigrants, but the conservative policies prevailing in the European political landscape will certainly maintain this direction.

**Europeans will closely monitor the Spanish experience, primarily from an economic perspective**

At the same time, they will closely monitor the Spanish experience, primarily from an economic perspective, as each country seeks as many ways as possible to improve its economic parameters.

"It's food for thought for policymakers across Europe and across the world, especially as this competition for talent and skill shortages, and ageing and demographic decline are plaguing our economies and societies, and it will all ramp up," said **Jasmijn Slootjes** from the Migration Policy Institute Europe.