



By: *Tomorrow's Affairs Staff*

Spain is testing the limits of European migration policy



The Spanish government's **decision** to legalise around half a million irregular migrants is not unusual in European practice. The exception lies in how it was carried out – publicly, swiftly, and without political concealment.

The decree adopted by Pedro Sánchez's government on 14 April allows approximately 500,000 people to obtain temporary residence and work permits between 20 April and 30 June.

The conditions are clear: proof of residence in the country before the end of 2025 and a clean criminal record. Thus, people already working in the economy move from the grey zone into the system of contributions, taxes, and health care.

Reactions from parts of Europe were predictable. Criticisms focus on the "signal" sent to migrants and the possible consequences for Schengen. What is missing in these reactions is basic consistency.

This is not a precedent

Spain has used the same instrument several times. Since the late 1980s, it has carried out seven **legalisation processes**. The largest waves occurred in the early 2000s and in 2005, when more than half a million people had their status regulated.

The effects of those legalisations were concrete and statistically verifiable. Workers entered the formal economy, income from contributions increased, and the labour market showed no negative effects on the local population.

This is not a political interpretation, but a finding from research that monitored those processes.

Similar measures were implemented elsewhere, but without political visibility

Similar measures were implemented elsewhere, but without political visibility. In 2020, **Italy legalised** hundreds of thousands of agricultural and domestic care workers.

In recent years, Germany has arranged the status of tens of thousands of people it could not deport.

Demography leaves no room for ideology

The reason for this decision is not the political profile of the government, but the structure of the population. Spain already has more than a fifth of its **population over the age of 65**.

Projections indicate further growth of that proportion in the coming decades, alongside a simultaneous **decline in the working-age population**.

Without migration, the labour force will shrink. Without a workforce, pension and social systems become unsustainable. That is basic mathematics.

The new measure could generate around one billion euros per year through contributions

Meanwhile, the Spanish economy is experiencing **stable growth** among the major economies of the European Union. That growth relies in part on work already performed by people without regulated status.

Legalisation means the inclusion of that work in formal channels and budget revenues.

The government estimates that the new measure could generate around one billion euros per year through contributions. This is not a negligible effect in a system dependent on the number of active payers.

Brussels recognises the

problem but avoids addressing it

The **European Commission** responded cautiously, expressing "serious reservations" and warning of consequences for the common migration policy.

The core concern is clear: individuals who obtain a residence permit in Spain gain the right to short-term movement within Schengen.

There is a risk of secondary migration to wealthier member states

In other words, there is a risk of **secondary migration** to wealthier member states.

This is a genuine problem, but not a new one. It has persisted for years and has not been solved by restrictive rhetoric. National governments tackle it with ad hoc measures tailored to their own needs.

Migration policy is formally common, but in practice it remains managed at the national level. Spain has simply acted as other countries do, albeit more openly.

The political framework has been deliberately tightened

Sánchez did not present the decision as a technical measure; instead, he incorporated it into a broader political narrative that directly opposes restrictive approaches in the US and parts of Europe.

This has opened an additional front. Criticism now concerns not only migration, but also the political model that Madrid seeks to offer as an alternative.

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This increases political risk at home. The government lacks a stable parliamentary majority, and the opposition is already challenging both the procedure and the substance of the decision.

There is also a genuine risk that the administrative system will be unable to handle the volume of requests in the short term. In other words, the operational phase is yet to begin.

What is the real significance of this decision?

This move should be considered outside the realm of daily politics. The key question is not whether the measure will cause **controversy** – that is already certain. The main issue is whether it will achieve the results Spain has seen in previous legalisation cycles.

If the answer is yes, European countries facing similar demographic challenges will have a functional model before them.



The question that remains is not whether the decision is politically controversial – it is. The question is whether it is sustainable – Pedro Sánchez

France has experienced labour shortages in certain sectors for years. Germany is

attempting to accelerate the import of workers but faces slow administrative processes. Italy is balancing restrictive policies with the need for seasonal workers.

All these countries share the same problem, but have different political narratives.

Spain has chosen to separate the issue.

Madrid's decision does not resolve the European migration dilemma, but it makes it more visible than before.

For years, the European Union has tried to maintain the appearance of a unified policy, while member states simultaneously pursue their own, often contradictory, approaches.

The question that remains is not whether the decision is politically controversial – it is. The question is whether it is sustainable.

If it proves to be, it will pave the way for changing approaches across the continent. If not, it will serve as an argument for those who advocate restriction.

In either case, the consequences will extend beyond Spain.