



**BACHELOR'S DEGREE IN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS AND LAW**

**Bachelor's Thesis**

**Securing the Border: Irregular Immigration as a Challenge to  
Spain's National Security**

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## Acknowledgements

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This thesis would not have been possible without the support of all the people who, in one way or another, contributed to its completion. Their help, advice, and support were essential in achieving this goal.

Without a doubt, however, this thesis is dedicated to my parents, for their unconditional love and endless support. I will be grateful to them for showing me, in Dakar, a reality that awakened in me a deep desire to write about this topic. And above all, thank you for believing in me even in the moments when I didn't believe in myself.

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Esta tesis no habría sido posible sin el apoyo de todas las personas que, de una forma u otra, han contribuido a su realización. Su ayuda, consejos y apoyo han sido fundamentales para la realización de esta meta.

Pero sin duda, esta tesis va dedicada a mis padres, por su amor incondicional y apoyo infinito. Estaré infinitamente agradecida por mostrarme, en Dakar, una realidad que despertó en mí el deseo profundo de escribir sobre este tema. Y gracias, sobre todo, por creer en mí incluso en los momentos en los que yo no lo hacía.

## Abstract and keywords

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**Abstract:** Migration has long been part of human history, yet in the modern era, it has evolved towards a politicized and securitized issue. Spain, considered a bridge between Europe and Africa, has experienced evolving migration patterns shifting policies from an economic and demographic necessity to a national and European security issue. This study examines how irregular migration is a challenge for Spain's national security and border sovereignty. It examines the key crisis affecting the Spanish territory, evaluating both national and European Union responses to this issue, the role of external actors, and geopolitical considerations. This research examines the sensitive balance between migration and security shedding light on the challenges and future directions of Spain's migration strategy within the European framework.

**Keywords:** *Migration, Irregular migration, Spain, Cayuco, Border control, National security.*

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## Abbreviations

Acronym	English	Spanish
ATVF	Technical Assistance in Border Surveillance	Asistencia Técnica en Vigilancia Fronteriza
BOE	Official State Gazette	Boletín Oficial del Estado
CCRC	Canary Island Regional Coordination Center	Centro de Coordinación Regional de Canarias
CEAR	Spanish Commission for Refugee Aid	Comisión Española de Ayuda al Refugiado
EU	European Union	Unión Europea
EUROPOL	European Union Agency for Law Enforcement Cooperation	Agencia de la Unión Europea para la Cooperación Policial
FRONTEX	European Border and Coast Guard Agency	Agencia Europea de la Guardia de Fronteras y Costas
IOM	International Organization for Migration	Organización Internacional para las Migraciones
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization	Organización No Gubernamental
SDG	Sustainable Development Goals	Objetivos de Desarrollo Sostenible
SIVE	Integrated External Surveillance System	Sistema Integrado de Vigilancia Exterior
UN	United Nations	Naciones Unidas
UNEP	United Nations Environmental Programme	Programa de las Naciones Unidas para el Medio Ambiente
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees	Alto Comisionado de las Naciones Unidas para los Refugiados
WAAR	Western African Atlantic Route	Ruta Atlántica de África Occidental
WMR	Western Mediterranean Route	Ruta del Mediterráneo Occidental

\*The acronyms have been kept in their original language when creating the table.

# 1. Introduction

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## 1.1 Objectives of the Study

The objective of this thesis resides on determining whether irregular migration constitutes a challenge to Spain's national security, underlying reasons and conditions which sustain this hypothesis. In order to achieve this general objective, following a deep analysis of the concepts of security and migration and their interrelation. This thesis highlights several specific objectives that will guide the structure and direction of the research: (i) identifying the geographical and operational dimensions enabling irregular migration from Africa to Spain; (ii) examining the critical events which have impacted on the perception of Spain towards this issue; and (iii) evaluating the concrete actions, policies, and mechanisms established by the Spanish authorities to address and mitigate the challenge posed by irregular migration.

This thesis aims to provide insight into Spain's approach to the concept of irregular migration, examining its evolution since the first irregular arrival to the present day. It focuses on how it has evolved from being considered as an economic necessity to being framed as a security concern in the Spanish agenda.

Moreover, it seeks to shed light on the complexity of migration, with particular emphasis on the dynamics of irregular migration. While acknowledging the importance of the humanitarian dimension that often frames this issue, the research highlights the role of non-state actors who have capitalized on this phenomenon to establish a highly profitable business. Additionally, this study considered the role of state actors who, through their involvement in migration governance, have increased their geopolitical relevance by using migration as a tool to influence bilateral negotiations.

In recent decades, the link between migration and security has drawn the attention of experts and professionals seeking to academically analyze this phenomenon due to the political and social focus among European nations. Therefore, the motivation of the author behind this study is rooted in the aim to bridge the gap between these two



concepts with special focus on Spain. Through a deep analysis, this research aims to offer valuable data to clarify the current landscape contributing to the existing literature on migration and security challenges. Finally, it aims to provide strategies that balance between effective border control and the protection of human rights, ensuring a more sustainable and cooperative migration model.

## 1.2 Significance of the Study in Relation to the Sustainable Development Goals

Migration has been recognized by the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, considered of great importance within the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). By securitizing migration, countries experiencing high levels of irregular migration, including Spain, aim to tackle human trafficking, organized crime, and other risks arising from uncontrolled migration flows. Considering these global issues, securitization plays a crucial role in safeguarding migrants themselves, through their prevention of embarking on potentially fatal journeys. This study aims to bridge the gap between Spain's security priorities and the protection of migrants' rights, promoting a migration framework which is safe and legally regulated.

Migration holds essential importance regarding SDG 1, focusing on ending poverty in all forms. Irregular status limits migrants' access to stable employment, education and healthcare, perpetuating the cycle of poverty and exclusion. Target 1.3 emphasizes the implementation of nationally appropriate "*social protection systems for all, including floors*" (UN, n.d.). However, undocumented migrants are often excluded from such protections, leaving them at a higher risk of living under extreme poverty and precarious conditions.

In addition, irregular migration poses significant vulnerabilities to women and children, leading to a special focus to achieve SDG 5 in order to "*achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls*" (UN, n.d.). Women face great discrimination and gender inequalities which restrict their autonomy and economic opportunities. Moreover, these challenges are exacerbated during irregular migration journeys, where they are exposed to higher risks. Therefore, addressing these issues through a gender-sensitive lens will ensure migration policies which promote quality and protection of the rights of all women and girls.

Moreover, the issue of poverty is closely linked to SDG 6 which aims to "*ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all*" (Migration Data Portal, 2025). Many countries facing significant inequalities also struggle with challenges related to water access and desertification, problems that are

exacerbated by climate change and other threat multipliers<sup>1</sup>, conditions that contribute significantly to forced migration and displacements. Particularly, target 6.1 is highlighted due to its focus on the achievement of universal and equitable access to safe and affordable drinking water, as well as target 6.4 seeking to substantially increase water-use efficiency across all sectors and ensure sustainable supply of freshwater to combat water scarcity and reduce the number of people affected by it.

It is also important to mention its alignment with SDG number 8, more precisely indicators 8.8.1 which focuses on the need to safeguard migrants from hazardous working conditions and labor exploitation, and 8.8.2, ensuring that migrant workers receive fair treatment and legal protections. In this context, irregular migration poses a significant challenge to the achievement of SDG 8, with the aim of promoting decent work for all due to their exclusion from labor markets and legal protection, which leaves them in vulnerable situations.

Similarly, it is highlighted in SDG 10.7 in order to “*facilitate orderly, safe, regular and responsible migration and mobility of people, including through the implementation of plans and well-managed migration policies*” (Migration Data Portal, 2025).

Regarding the conditions and vulnerable status of migrants, it is essential to stress SDG 16 *Peace, justice and strong institutions*, more precisely, indicator 16.4, which aims to “*tackle organized crime linked to smuggling, trafficking and the flow of forged identity and travel documents*” (Migration Data Portal, 2025). This points out the importance of cooperation between the different actors, including Spain, the European Union (EU), states of origin, and the role of agencies such as Frontex.

Target 17.18 emphasizes the need to cohesively support developing nations to strengthen the *availability of high-quality, timely and reliable data disaggregated by income, gender, age, race, ethnicity, migration status, disability, and geographic location*. This indicator demonstrates the importance of segmenting data according to demographic groups, especially migrants, in order to promote inclusivity and combat discrimination. Precisely, considering SDG’s motto to “leave no one behind”,

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<sup>1</sup> Threat multipliers are factors –such as climate change, environmental degradation, or resource scarcity– that exacerbate existing social, economic, or political vulnerabilities. In this context, they intensify conditions like poverty, food insecurity, and water scarcity.

a deep understanding of migrants' living situations and how migration affects health, income, education, and other important sectors is necessary. Optimizing data is crucial for integrating the migratory issue in several policy sectors, leading to more effective responses (Migration Data Portal, 2025).

All the SDGs presented and analyzed will be referenced throughout this thesis in order to establish a deeper integration and understanding of how irregular migration overlaps with broader global development challenges established in the Agenda 2030 of the United Nations.

## 2. Methodology

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### 2.1. Research Methods

The research methods used throughout this study are a combination of both primary and secondary sources. The primary sources gather firsthand information from the Ministry of the Interior of Spain, international institutions and organizations such as the United Nations, the European Union and the European Border and Coast Guard Agency (Frontex). These sources provide raw data regarding migration routes, arrival statistics, and economic figures. Secondary sources complement the primary data offering an analysis of the migration trends and motivations, interpreting statistics through a deep analysis of both historical and geopolitical context.

This research uses a mixed approach to integrate quantitative and qualitative data extracted from official sources and further studies, providing a specific understanding of the concept of migration while maintaining an objective perspective by avoiding biased information. Moreover, it is important to mention previous papers which have provided valuable data, offering perspectives on the issue of migration and border control (Orobal Fernández, 2024; Powell, 2024).

Finally, this thesis was enriched with a face-to-face interview carried out to Rodrigo Ciudad Blanco –Civil Guard and Sea Border Officer<sup>2</sup>– with the aim of gathering the most accurate and objective information possible and reinforce some points and arguments throughout this thesis<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> This position in Frontex missions is carried out by members of the Maritime Service of the Spanish Guardia Civil, who are involved in maritime surveillance, border control, and operational support within the framework of international cooperation for migration management and border security (Frontex, n.d.).

<sup>3</sup> See Annex.

## 2.2 Scope and Limitations

In order to reach the general objective of this thesis, the research will be primarily limited to the Spanish context within the broader European Union framework considering migration from West and North Africa to this territory due to the increase in numbers in recent years. The time framework will also cover the 21st century, more specifically from the year 2006, when the *Cayuco Crisis* marked a turning point in Spain's migration landscape, up to the present day. Moreover, Senegal, Mauritania and Morocco will have significant presence in the thesis due to their role as key departure points, serving as a gateway between the African and European continents. These three countries are of great interest for the analysis due to their geopolitical relevance and diplomatic engagement with Spain. Nevertheless, it is important to bear in mind that the mentioned countries differ and must be considered individually when evaluating their respective roles within this phenomenon.

It is important to mention that the scope does not extend to regular migration channels, asylum law in detail, or integration policies within Spain. Rather, it will concentrate on the concept of security applied to irregular migration, the involvement of state/non-state actors, and the political instrumentalization of migration in geopolitical relations.

In terms of limitations, the main drawback consists of the lack of precise data due to the clandestine nature of irregular migration. Exact figures on unauthorized border crossing, detected irregular stays, deportations, and victims are difficult to document. The absence of a standardized and global system for tracking irregular migration complicated the collection of reliable statistics. Nevertheless, this study relies on both primary and secondary sources including reports from governmental agencies, non-governmental organizations, and international institutions, in order to present the most accurate and objective data available.

Additionally, due to the fact that the issue of irregular migration directly impacts Spain, a significant portion of the data, official documentation, governmental reports, and academic analysis relevant to this study are originally published in Spanish. As a result, much of the material used throughout this thesis required a careful translation

to ensure both accuracy and consistency to provide real meaning and context. In this sense, linguistics has been essential to maintaining the original meaning of the sources while making the content accessible within an English-language academic thesis.

### 3. Theoretical Framework

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#### 3.1 Definition and Origins of Migration

Over the past decades, migration has become a significant global phenomenon representing a regular aspect of life. In fact, some countries have been built up due to migration, while others have experienced historical waves of both immigration and emigration (Kynsilehto, 2022). Although there is not a universally accepted definition of migration, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) defines it as “*the movement of persons away from their usual place of residence, either across an international border or within a state, regardless of the cause or duration of the movement*” (IOM, 2019).

Despite its influence and impact, there is no single and coherent theory of migration in the area of International Relations (Massey et al., 1993). Nevertheless, it could be stated that the origin of migration studies started in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, where it can be found in Ravenstein’s (1885-1889) book the *Law of Migration*. It aimed to explain patterns of internal and international migration through general principles, such as the tendency for people to migrate, and major migration flows due to economic opportunities. Another key contribution is *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America* by Thomas and Znaniecki (1918-1920), which serve as a basis for the ongoing development of the studies by emphasizing the role of social structures and cultural dislocation. Finally, it is also important to mention Everett S. Lee’s *Push and Pull Theory* (1996), who developed the concept of push and pull factors highlighting the role of economic, social, and political factors which drive individuals to leave their country of origin and attract them to a specific destination.

Similarly, there is no universal definition to the concept of regular and irregular immigration due to its complexity. Nevertheless, this thesis adopts the definitions provided by the International Organization for Migration considering regular migration as “*migration that occurs through recognized, authorized channels*” (IOM, 2019). In contrast, irregular migration refers to “*the movement of individuals outside legal frameworks governing entry, exit, or stay in a country of origin, transit, or destination*”



(IOM, 2019). These definitions are considered the most comprehensive and widely accepted within international migration governance, and thus part of the basis of this thesis. At the same time, due to the importance of the European context in this research it is also important to consider the definition provided by the European Commission defining irregular migrant as *“a person who, owing to irregular entry, breach of a condition of entry to the expiry of their legal basis for entering and residing, lacks legal status in a transit or host country”* (European Commission, n.d.).

This term holds special importance as its denomination over irregular and illegal has been subject of contradiction. While the term “irregular” remains a subject of debate, it is considered more appropriate than the common alternative “illegal”, which carries stronger connotations. The latter is often associated with criminal activity, despite the fact that most irregular migrants have not committed crimes per se. The UN Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Non-Citizens (2004) highlighted that this distinction had to be made as migrants, regardless of their legal status, should not be treated as criminals. Similarly, the Council for Europe’s European Committee on Migration (2004) stated the improper use of the term “illegal” as it could be seen as dehumanizing, considering people for their legal status instead of prioritizing their fundamental rights, referring to Resolution 1509 (2006) of the Council of Europe Parliamentary Assembly (Council of Europe, 2006). Additionally, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR, 2004) expressed its concern of the use of this term as inappropriate due to the possibility of negatively targeting asylum seekers impacting the outcomes of their applications. Therefore, the three valid terms used in this context are “undocumented”, “irregular” and “unauthorised”. Regardless of the avoidance of the term “illegal”, at the end of the day this is legitimized.<sup>4</sup>

Moreover, it remains important to differentiate between migrant smuggling and human trafficking due to its close implication with the topic. Until the early 21st century, these terms were considered synonyms and often used interchangeably, however, the implementation of the UN Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish

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<sup>4</sup> In reference to Resolution 1509 (2006) of the Council of Europe Parliamentary Assembly, “illegal” is preferred when referring to a status or process, whereas “irregular” is preferred when referring to a person (IOM, n.d.). However, both terminologies are legitimate and should be legally considered.

Trafficking in Persons (2000) and the UN Protocol against the Smuggling of Migrants by Land, Sea and Air (2000), the respective definitions have been more clearly stated. The IOM defines human trafficking as “the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat, or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation” (IOM, 2019). Meanwhile, the smuggling of migrants is defined as “the procurement, in order to obtain directly or indirectly a financial or other material benefit, of the illegal entry of a person into a state party of which the person is not a national or a permanent resident” (IOM, 2019).

Therefore, in this thesis the term that is going to be referenced the most is smuggling, since this is involved with the business of “*cayucos*”<sup>5</sup>. While human trafficking has an important presence between Africa and Europe, the fact that there are hundreds of thousands of people giving their consent and paying to be taken illegally to European soil demonstrates that this practice is more observed and registered.

### 3.2 Definition of Security

Security studies constitute one of the basic pillars of International Relations, offering an objective view in which states and international actors determine threats and formulate responses. Over time, the notion of security has evolved substantially, particularly regarding the referent object –what or who is being secured– and the appropriate means of achieving that security (Collins, 2022).

Historically, security was widely conceptualized through the lens of realist theory, positioning states as the primary referent object and viewing the international system as anarchic. In this context, security is equated with state survival, considering the principal threats as external and need for military responses. Structural realism

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<sup>5</sup> Type of small, narrow wooden boat, typically used for fishing that has become one of the main vessels employed for irregular maritime migration from the West African Coast towards the Canary Islands. Not to be confused with *pateras*, which are smaller-sized boats used for shorter routes such as the Mediterranean from north Africa.

developed by Kenneth Waltz (1979) emphasized that states must rely on self-help mechanisms to ensure their survival, as there is no existence of a higher authority which can guarantee their protection. Moreover, Stephen Walt (1987) introduced the balance of threat theory, suggesting that states respond to both power capabilities and perceived intentions of other actors. John Mearsheimer (2001) further elaborated this perspective including his offensive realism theory, explaining that great powers are inherently driven to maximize their power to ensure security in a competitive international environment. Barry Buzan (1991) highlighted that states remain the central element of analysis in security studies, forming the basis for later critical approaches considering other forms of insecurity beyond the military.

Classic security, through this perspective, was closely linked with sovereignty, territorial integrity, and military strength, considering threats as the rivalry with third states. Nevertheless, the end of the Cold War, followed by accelerated globalisation, significantly broadened the security agenda to include non-traditional threats such as climate change, terrorism, cyber warfare, energy shortages, pandemics, and large-scale human displacement. Issues which transcend national boundaries and need multinational responses that incorporate political, social, economic and humanitarian dimensions (Collins, 2022). Under this broader concept of security, new referent objects emerge -states are no longer considered the only element to be securitized, but also individuals, communities, and ecosystems- which challenges the traditional state-centric model.

After having analyzed the definition of security applied to the international relations framework, as well as taking into account the limited scope of Spanish territory, it is also essential to examine this term in the context of Spain's 2021 National Security Strategy from the central government. Therefore, it is defined as "*the action of the State aimed at protecting the freedom, rights, and well-being of its citizens, ensuring the defense of Spain and its constitutional principles and values, as well as contributing—together with our partners and allies— to international security in fulfillment of the commitments undertaken*"<sup>6</sup>. In this same legal document, the third chapter outlines the risks and threats to national security, emphasizing their dynamic

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<sup>6</sup> Article 3 of Law 36/2015, 28 September, National Security.

and interconnected nature. Within this chapter, there is a section that describes the irregular migration flows and how it affects Spain's security (Gobierno de España Presidencia del Gobierno, 2021).

### 3.3 Theories on Securitization of Migration

The broader concept of migration has emerged as a prominent topic within contemporary security and governance discourses. Traditionally, migration was primarily viewed through political, economic, or humanitarian lenses. However, in recent decades, it has become increasingly politicized and securitized- particularly in Western states where national identity and border integrity have been the main themes of public opinion and political debates (Bourbou, 2011).

From a classical realist perspective within International Relations, migration would not typically be considered a security issue, as it does not constitute an external military threat to the state, at least explicitly. Realism focuses on state-centric threat laying aside phenomena like migration. Nevertheless, global events including the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, and the 2015 European Migration Crisis have drastically shifted the perception of states and their responses regarding migration. Therefore, this concept is framed not only as an economic challenge but also as a potential threat to national sovereignty, societal cohesion and internal stability.

In this specific context of Spain, this evolution is reflected as previously mentioned throughout the different National Security Strategy published, which acknowledge security not only as the safeguard of the State, but fundamentally as the protection of citizens' rights, freedoms and daily life. The 2011 National Security Strategy already identified the management of migration flows as a strategic action area (La Moncloa, 2011). However, it is the latest 2021 National Security Strategy which explicitly recognizes irregular migration as a risk to Spain and European security. This approach frames irregular migration as a multidimensional risk linked to transnational organized crime, border vulnerabilities, and humanitarian crises reinforced in the

2023 Annual National Security Report<sup>7</sup> and the 2024 National Maritime Security Strategy<sup>8</sup>. Said phenomena falls within the so-called *grey zone* of hybrid threats, where non-state actors exploit legal and institutional gaps (Hoffman, 2007). As such, it addresses this challenge through an adaptive security strategy which prioritizes national resilience.

### *3.3.1 The Copenhagen School*

The securitization of migration is mostly theorized by the Copenhagen School, led by Ole Waever and Barry Buzan. Weaver (1995) introduced the concept of *securitization* to describe the process by which political actors transform certain issues into matters of “security” considering them as existential threats. Security is discussed as a speech act, explaining that an issue becomes securitized not due to its inherent nature, but because it is presented as a threat to influential actors such as politicians, the media, or the citizens.

Building on the theoretical framework, other scholars such as Jef Huysmans (2000) and Didier Bigo (1998, 2002) have examined how migration has been increasingly securitized in the European context. Huysmans, on one hand, highlights how irregular migration has been labeled as a major security issue within the European Union. Due to growing migration flows, European countries have considered irregular migration as a significant threat such as border security, organized crime, terrorism, and economic and social issues (Pérez de Armiño, 2015) . In response, the EU has adopted migration as a top security concern within the agenda. On the other hand, Bigo’s expands the concept of the “field of security professionals”, with special focus on the role of non-state actors in the securitization process. Throughout this thesis, the role and expansion of border control agencies such as Frontex will be considered as a crucial part of this phenomenon and securitization process.

### *3.3.2 Critical Approaches to Securitization*

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<sup>7</sup> Irregular Migration ranked third among the top five risks, classified as having “very high intensity”, following disinformation campaigns and cybersecurity threats.

<sup>8</sup> It highlights the risks posed by “state and non-state actors” who may exploit Spain’s vulnerabilities through uncontrolled irregular migration flows by sea, as well as other hybrid strategies (BOE, 2024).

While the Copenhagen School has become one of the roots for the securitization of migration, some scholars have offered significant critiques and alternative perspectives, advocating for more flexible interpretations. These critical perspectives question the theoretical limitations as well as the politicization of migration, downplaying the complexity of this phenomenon.

Boswell (2007) suggests that the securitization narrative overstates the degree of coordination and intentionality behind migration policies. The portrayal of migration as a “threat” is more linked with the management of uncertainty, administrative control and policy implementation than to a state of emergency. This perspective provides an exemplification of a routine practice of risk management within bureaucracy, undermining not only supranational organization but also national institutions.

Similarly, scholars like Neal (2009) and Lahav & Courtemanche (2012) emphasize the role of public opinion, emotions, and media narratives in shaping perceptions of migration. They argue that the framing of migrants as threats does not always originate from political elites. Instead, it is driven “from below”, making reference to fear, anxiety and cultural insecurity within society influenced by the media and political polarization. As a result, migration is responded to as a threat even when there is an absence of an actual security risk.

Finally, we can also consider Bourbeau (2011), who argues that the securitization of migration does not respond to a unified concept but relies on different patterns depending on the regions and states. In this sense, migration is framed depending on national history, political institutions, societal values and public perception, and it can be dangerous to apply a unified securitization theory for these cases. Instead, focusing on “resilience” as a fundamental characteristic in security suggests a shift from exceptional security measures toward everyday practices of adaptation and control.

Considering the theoretical approaches outlined throughout this section, this thesis adopts a framework primarily grounded in the Copenhagen School and its understanding of the securitization of migration. This perspective is especially

relevant to the Spanish context, where migration has gradually shifted from being perceived predominantly as a political or humanitarian issue to being framed as a security matter reflected in Spain's 2021 National Security Strategy.

## 4. Contextual Analysis

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### 4.1 Important Routes

#### *4.1.1 Historical and Geopolitical Background of the Routes*

Throughout history, Africa has been characterized by constant forced displacements and internal migratory flows, driven both by the need to escape slavery during the colonial period and by the search for refuge from armed conflicts and humanitarian crises. Starting in the 1950s, with the consolidation of independent African states, a new perspective on mobility emerged. In this context, two main motivations for migration are distinguished: on one hand, those driven by political or legitimate reasons, and on the other, those of an economic nature, considered voluntary and autonomous decisions (Adepoju, 2008).

Although migration has been a longstanding phenomenon at a worldwide scale, it was not until the late 1990s that irregular African migration to Spain gained visibility due to the increase of migrants and the first shipwrecks which captured public attention. Moreover, because of its geography, specifically the Canary Islands and its shared borders with Morocco via the autonomous communities of Ceuta and Melilla, have made it a key entry point for African migrants aiming to reach Spanish and European territory throughout history, but it remains a hub nowadays (López Sala, 2005). The first recorded arrival of a *cayuco* in the Canary Islands occurred in 1994. However, it was not until 1999 that a significant influx of African migrants began reaching both the Canary and Andalusian coasts. The increase in the number of migrants was conducted within the concept of *push and pull factors* previously mentioned (Lee, 1996), which provides a deep understanding of migratory motivations.

#### *Push factors*

Between 1980 and 2000, many sub-Saharan countries experienced a severe economic drawback where their Gross National Product (GNP) rates fell drastically (IMF, n.d). In many cases, this economic deterioration escalated into an economic collapse due to the combination of prolonged armed conflicts, poor governance,



weak institutions and corruption<sup>9</sup>. Moreover, the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) has highlighted how states covered by the Sahel are severely affected by desertification<sup>10</sup>, the rise of temperatures, and water scarcity, which has accelerated rural exodus by the reduction of agricultural productivity (UNEP, 2011). As a result, these economic, political, and environmental challenges served as threat multipliers and contributed to the structural conditions that led individuals to migrate as a means of survival.

### *Pull factors*

Considering the issue from another perspective, several *pull factors* have contributed to making Europe, and Spain in particular, an attractive destination. The process of globalization and the advancement of communication technologies have played a crucial role in the perception of Europe as a continent of opportunities (Lahlou, 2002). In fact, a study conducted in 2002 showed that many migrants were motivated to leave their home countries after being exposed to television images of Europe, which reflected a lifestyle that many migrants aimed to reach (Lahlou, 2002). Additionally, it is important to state that during the 2000s, Spain was experiencing a period of economic growth that began in the 1990s, lasting until the 2008 economic crisis. This economic boom created a high demand for labor, particularly in sectors such as construction, tourism, and services, which could not have been met with merely the national workforce. As a result, employment opportunities served as a dominant pull factor for migrants seeking improved living conditions and financial stability<sup>11</sup>.

Due to Spain's geographical position serving as a bridge between Africa and Europe, migratory routes from these two continents have historically followed two trajectories. The first is linked with the Spanish mainland, the Balearic Islands and the autonomous regions of Ceuta and Melilla. The latter connects the Western African countries, particularly Senegal and Mauritania, to the Canary Islands.

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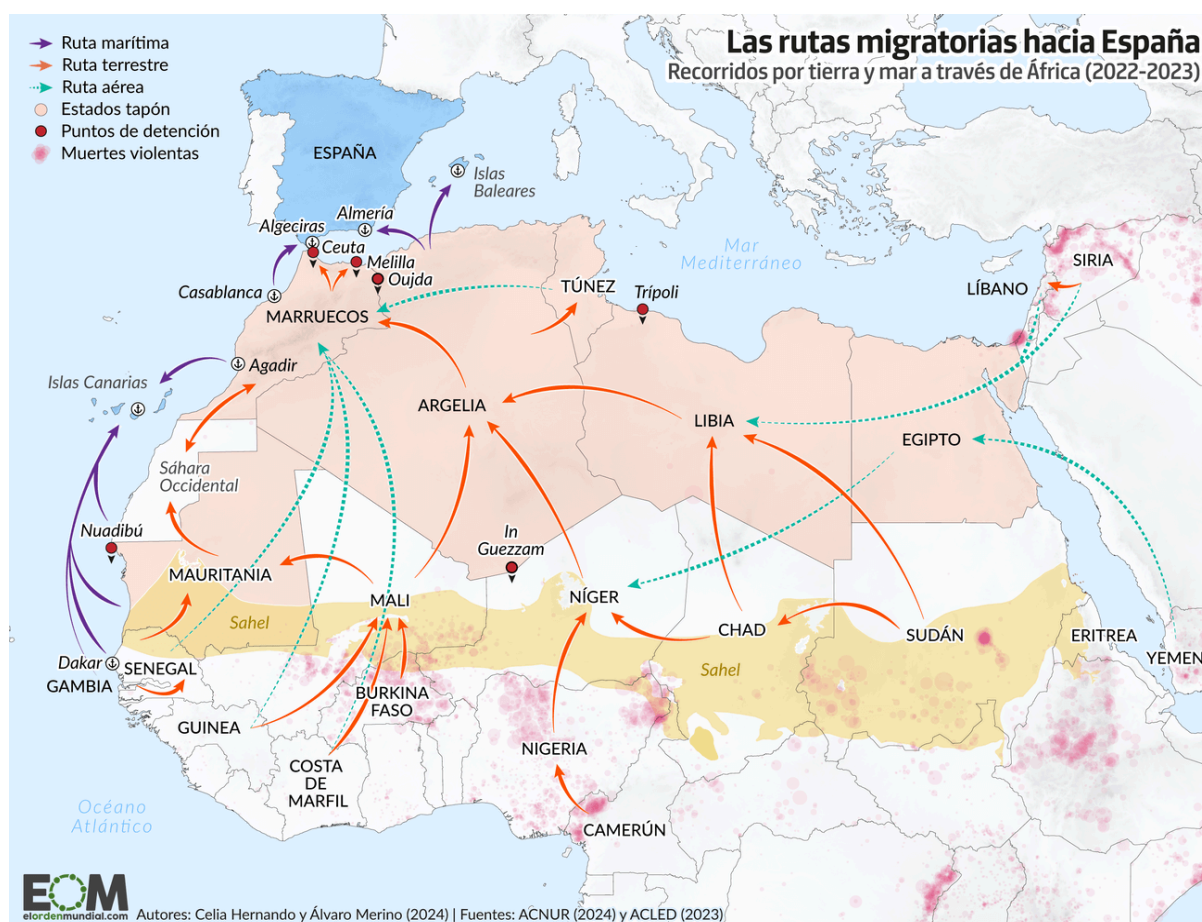
<sup>9</sup> Sustainable Development Goal 1: No Poverty.

<sup>10</sup> Sustainable Development Goal 6: Clean Water and Sanitation.

<sup>11</sup> Sustainable Development Goal 8: Decent Work and Economic Growth.

**Figure 1**

### *Migration Routes to Spain through Africa (2022-2023)*



Celia Hernando & Álvaro Merino (2024), *El Orden mundial*, based on data from UNHCR (2024) & ACLED (2023)<sup>12</sup>.

#### *4.1.2 Western Mediterranean Route (WMR)*

The Western Mediterranean Route (WMR) is one of the most established and historically used corridors for irregular migration from North Africa to Spain. Migrants who embark themselves on this route typically originated from sub-Saharan nations such as Niger, Mali, and Burkina Faso, traveling thousands of kilometers through the Sahel region to reach Algeria or Morocco, which served predominantly as transit rather than origin countries (UNHCR, 2023). Nevertheless, recent data indicates that

<sup>12</sup> Migration Routes to Spain through Africa (2022-2023). Despite being in Spanish, this map was selected for its comprehensive and up-to-date description of the two migration routes which will be also explained. It clearly illustrates maritime, land, and air routes, as well as key countries or origin, transit and points of arrival. It also highlights buffer states, detention points, and areas of violence, offering a 360° view rarely found in similar maps in other languages.

the majority of migrants detected along the WMR were Algerian (59%) and Moroccan (27%) nationalities, shifting these countries to states of origin (Frontex, 2025). From there, two primary pathways emerge. The first involves maritime crossing of the Mediterranean Sea, with migrants departing from key cities such as Tangier, Tan-Tan, Nador, and Casablanca. Depending on the specific point of departure, these crossings can lead to the southern coast of mainland Spain, particularly the Andalusian coast, such as Algeciras and Almería, or the Balearic Islands. The second pathway is carried out through the land border into the Spanish autonomous cities of Ceuta and Melilla, which represent the only physical land borders between the African and the European continent<sup>13</sup> (Frontex, 2024).

#### *4.1.3 Western African Atlantic Route (WAAR)*

The Western African Atlantic Route (WAAR) is another key migrant corridor, characterised by a migration flow from the African coast across the Atlantic Ocean to the Canary Islands. According to Frontex (2024), the route involves migrants primarily from Mali (36%), Senegal (27%) and Guinea (9%) although as its can be seen in the map, most departures originate from Senegal (Dakar, Saint Louis, Kolack) and Mauritania (Nouadhibou) (IOM, 2025). This demonstrates how these two countries serve as departure points, where the majority of migrants are from other states, different from the origin of the *cayucos*.

One of the main characteristics of the WAAR is its short distance from the nearest point on the African coast to the Canary Islands, being less than 100 kilometers. Despite this, the journey has been considered as one of the most dangerous as migrants embark on the ocean with unpredictable conditions, inadequate supplies, and the possibility of death. Nevertheless, throughout these past years, a paradigm shift in migration route patterns has been observed. The Western African Atlantic Route (WAAR) has become more predominant compared to the Western Mediterranean Route, as increased surveillance and control measures by both the

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<sup>13</sup> The Spanish Autonomous cities of Ceuta and Melilla are excluded from the Schengen Area as established in Spain's Act of Accession to the Schengen Agreement (1991), along with provisions states in Regulation (EU) 2016/399, which governs the Schengen Borders Code.

European Union and Morocco have made the latter more difficult to navigate successfully (Frontex, 2024).

Throughout the years, it can be seen that there has been a change in paradigm regarding migratory routes to Spain, which will be thoroughly explained and detailed in this thesis at a later stage. As a result, in 2024, 73% of all irregular arrivals to Spain occurred in the Canary Islands, while 23% were recorded in various coastal regions, including Andalucía, Murcia, the Valencian Community, and the Balearic Islands. Land-based entries were just 4% of the total (Spanish Ministry of Interior, 2024).

Upon the examination of both migratory routes, it becomes evident that the Western African Atlantic Route (WAAR) holds great significance, precisely in terms of numerical data and security implications. Its growing prominence, despite being considered one of the deadliest migrant routes in the world, has led to greater symbolic relevance within the broader migratory context<sup>14</sup> (IOM, 2023a). Therefore, this thesis will primarily focus on the WAAR as it most accurately reflects the current dynamics of irregular migration from Africa to Spain. Due to its growth and implementation of Spain's migration management strategies, particularly in preventing and reducing irregular migration flows. Nevertheless, it remains vital not to diminish the analytical value of the Western Mediterranean Route (WMR), which continues to contribute to the understanding of both historical and geographical dimensions of these movements.

## 4.2 Key Crisis

Throughout the past two decades, irregular maritime migration towards Spain has been marked by two major episodes conducted in the WAAR that have led the country to redefine its migration policy framed within its own security agenda. Both the 2006 Crisis and the resurgence of arrivals in 2020 have led to immediate national and supranational responses, exposing institutional vulnerabilities and the adaptability of non-state actors' operations in the route. The analysis of these crises

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<sup>14</sup> According to the Spanish Commission for Refugee Aid (CEAR), approximately one out of every 26 individuals attempting this route loses their life.

offers insight into the evolving securitization of migration by Spain and the responses provided by the government.

#### *4.2.1 Cayuco Crisis 2006*

The year 2006 marked a turning point in Spain's migration management with the *Cayucos Crisis* due to the arrival of 31,678 irregular migrants in the Canary Islands through the WAAR route. In addition, 7,502 migrants entered Spanish territory through the Balear Islands and the peninsula, leading to a total of 39,180 (Ministerio del Interior, 2007). This crisis not only exposed the vulnerabilities in Spain's migration control but also marked a shift in how the Spanish state, and the European Union, approached border externalization.

This unexpected surge in the number of individuals trying to enter Spain through the archipelago could be driven by a combination of factors. The first was seen as a consequence of strengthening border surveillance in the Mediterranean region. As a consequence, criminal networks quickly adapted to the situation and started operating in the southern states of Western Sahara namely Senegal and Mauritania, taking advantage of the geographical proximity between Africa and the Spanish archipelago<sup>15</sup> as well as the high demand for passage into Europe due to the pull factors<sup>16</sup>. Thus, the WAAR started to gain relevance due to the high influx of migrants crossing.

The adaptability of these operations increased significantly in the mid-2000s. *Cayuco* owners, mostly fishermen, started this business due to the high profits it generated. These wooden vessels soon became the primary means of transporting migrants due to their ability to endure long distances, although they were often overcrowded, sometimes carrying up to 40 migrants at a time, and charging individuals between 400 and 500 euros (Bárbulo, 2006). In many cases, migrants who had previously reached Spain and obtained legal status have become intermediaries. With greater financial means and established community ties, they coordinate departures, recruit

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<sup>15</sup> The journey, depending on several factors such as the difficulties of navigation and the port of departure, can vary between 3 or 7 days.

<sup>16</sup> Mentioned in the section *4.1.1 Historical and Geopolitical Background of the Routes*.

participants, and serve as crucial links in the broader smuggling chain (Mixed Migration Centre, 2024), which as a result can lead to what is known as *call effect*<sup>17</sup> (Orobal, 2024). What began as a localized informal activity has evolved into a complex, transnational business structure. Scholars estimate that in 2006, human smuggling through the Atlantic corridor generated more than 75 million euros in revenue, leading to a surge of new criminal organizations operating (Brandon, 2020).

The second motivation for the redirection of migratory flows toward the Canary Islands was the growing cooperation between Spain and Morocco regarding migration control. At the beginning of the 2000s, both countries reinforced bilateral agreements that led to the strengthening of surveillance mechanisms along the northern routes. This cooperation included joint police operations, readmission agreements, and financial support from Spain to improve Morocco's border infrastructure. As Morocco increased its deterrence capacity, irregular migration through the northern corridors became increasingly difficult. As a result, migrants and smuggling networks settled alternative paths to continue conducting their activities, favoring the WAAR through countries with weaker enforcement mechanisms contributing to the dramatic rise in arrivals to the Canary Islands during the *2006 Cayuco Crisis*.

#### *4.2.2 Crisis 2020*

The 2020 migration crisis in the Canary Islands represented a noticeable shift in migration patterns which started to manifest in 2018. That year, the number of arrivals increased after years of stability, due to the governmental response to the Cayuco Crisis, which led to the emergence of a new way of operating both in terms of routes and methods employed by migrants and smuggling networks. This trend was reinforced in 2020 due to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic combined with the deepening of socioeconomic instability and armed conflicts in various regions of West Africa and the Sahel (CEAR, 2021).

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<sup>17</sup> Migratory-welcoming effect caused by open migration policies or search and rescue missions (Orobal, 2024).

This scenario contributed to a renewed migratory emergency, with different characteristics compared to the 2006 crisis. In terms of figures, the second half of 2020 registered an increase in unauthorised entries to the Canary Islands compared to the previous year, leading to high pressure on the archipelago's reception and accommodation capacities. The majority of arrivals occurred via the WAAR, with 40,106 individuals reaching Spanish territory by sea, while only 1,755 by the WMR (Frontex, 2021). This evidence shows the resurgence of maritime flows, recognized for their high level of danger and difficulty in terms of surveillance and detection due to their open sea and vast distances, which hinder the effectiveness of border control mechanisms and maritime rescue operations. The WAAR gained precedence as a hub in comparison to the WMR as the most used pathway from the African continent to Spain in 2020.

Initially, most arrivals were concentrated in the southern coasts of Tenerife and Fuerteventura due to their closer location to African coasts and better-equipped reception infrastructure designed to handle a major number of arrivals. However, a growing number of migrants started aiming to reach El Hierro, the smallest and westernmost island of the archipelago. Despite making the journey longer with difficulties, organized crime groups took advantage of the maritime presence around the eastern islands, aiming to arrive in Tenerife and Fuerteventura as in the more traditional routes. Moreover, this small island presents a very limited reception capacity, which, once it reaches and surpasses asylum reception of 6.300 people, migrants are sent to the peninsula. Said characteristics have made El Hierro more attractive to organized crime in order to conduct their operations (Morel, 2023).

#### *4.2.3 Role of Non-State Actors*

Following the examination of the two major migration crises to Spain, it is essential to analyze the role of non-state actors who are deeply involved and have shaped irregular migration dynamics throughout the relevant time period. As seen in the modes of operation of the crises, organized criminal networks, commonly known as mafias, played a central role in managing and profiting from migrant flows. Their growing influence allows a holistic understanding not only with regard to the crises examined above but also the current migration situation. Therefore, this section outlines how these networks operate, adapt, and capitalize on irregular migration,

constituting one of the most complex challenges to Spain's migration governance and border security.

These organizations play a central role in the WAAR and migratory phenomenon by recruiting migrants, coordinating the journeys and managing the entire logistics chain required for the crossings, including arranging boats, and controlled payment systems. Some of these payment methods include black market currency exchange, through hawala brokers<sup>18</sup> or simply by cash. This way, transferred money remains anonymous and without the possibility for specific and targeted tracking (Andrade & Ojer, 2023).

Migration mafias pose a particular challenge to Spain's national security and border sovereignty due to their asymmetric nature. Unlike conventional criminal structures, these mafias reject hierarchical structures and operate through decentralized, and highly adaptive methods that allow them to be resilient to any response of enforcement (Europol, 2016). Therefore, their resilience to dismantlement poses a great challenge to Spain and national governments. Since 2006, these networks –often led by local actors with extensive knowledge of migratory corridors– have gained influence and profitability by capitalizing on increased demand.

What began as an informal activity along the coasts of Senegal and Mauritania has evolved into a highly lucrative business. With the rise in demand, more spots on the boats are offered. As a result, the *cayucos* have varied when it comes to size or dimensions. Unlike previous years, when these typically carried around 40 migrants, current vessels have reached record capacities of up to 320 individuals per journey (Andrade & Ojer, 2023). Considering the quantity of materials seized in past operations for much smaller groups, it is possible to estimate extensive logistical resources now required to support transatlantic crossings involving hundreds of migrants.

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<sup>18</sup> Informal method of money transfer between unofficial brokers as an alternative of traditional banking systems. This method is very common in illegal transfer of funds, since there is little to no tracking (Investopedia, 2023).



This had led to Frontex declaring the possibility that larger fishing vessels –paid or bribed by smuggling networks– may be used to transport hundreds of migrants to locations just a few hundred nautical miles from the Canary Islands. This theory is supported by evidence of thorough and meticulous preparations, including the purchasing of enough food, water, and effective navigation tools like GPS systems. Given the physical limitations of traditional *cayucos* and the dangers posed by the maritime conditions of the Atlantic Ocean, it would be nearly impossible to transport such a large number of people without extreme risk. Therefore, the idea of paying fishermen/sailors to bring these smuggled migrants closer to Spanish waters is not a thought that would be far from reality. These theories would become more relevant with the passing of the years, especially in 2021 when various vessels originating from Libya arrived at the Italian island of Lampedusa through the Mediterranean route (The Maritime Executive, 2021).

As it has been mentioned, this business is highly profitable, leading to higher awareness of this concerning situation. It is known that the average price a person would pay for a spot in a *cayuco* is estimated to be 400€, nonetheless these prices have raised up to 1000-3000€ approximately (La Gaceta de la Iberosfera, 2025). Also, a distinction system was developed in order to classify the boats used for the routes. Therefore, people would compare the “basic” ones with the more “premium” ones due to additional characteristics, such as life vests or the location within the *cayuco* which can be affected by maritime conditions (Ciudad, 2025). Part of the money earned would not just go to general expenses of the trip but also to bribe local authorities and even cargo ships in order to “buy their silence”.

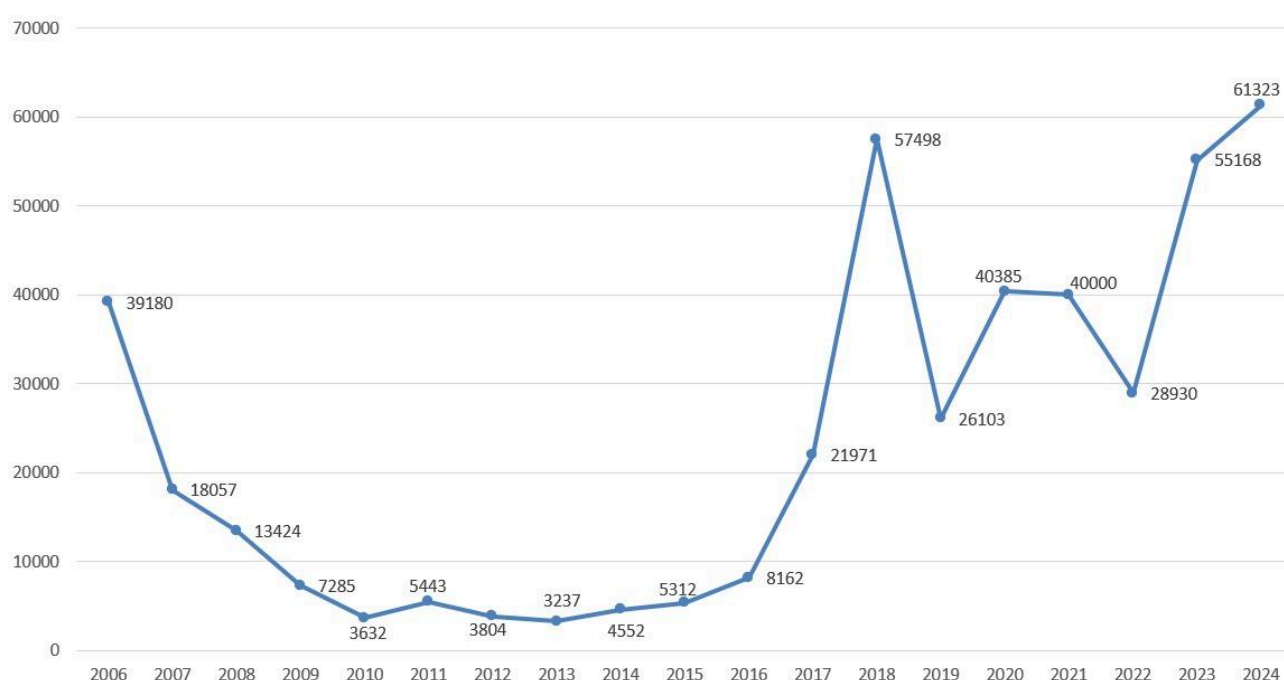
Moreover, according to Rodrigo Ciudad, recent developments reveal another clear evolution in migratory dynamics. In former years, *cayucos* departed from a fixed point of origin with a direct trajectory toward the Canary Islands. However, this pattern has shifted as smuggling networks are now taking advantage of the Atlantic coastline navigation, a strategy which offers two main advantages. On one hand, by departing from more southern countries such as The Gambia and Senegal, these vessels can stay closer to the coast most of the journey, avoiding the immediate risk of entering the open Atlantic Ocean. Thus, it reduces the exposure to hard maritime conditions and achieves a safer crossing. On the other hand, authorities have

detected that many of these *cayucos* make planned stops in a third country, more often than not in Mauritania. These stopovers serve to replenish necessary supplies for the journey, such as fuel and food. Nevertheless, the most interesting aspect is that the stop allows mafias to pick up additional migrants, reflecting the interoperability between smuggling networks operating in different countries. This demonstrates how mafias take advantage of vulnerable people's needs while maintaining a business which is highly lucrative and difficult to stop since they are operating across various national borders and international waters<sup>19</sup> (Ciudad, 2025).

### 4.3 Current Migration Situation

**Figure 2**

*Number of Irregular Migrants Who Arrived in Spain Between 2006 and 2024*



Note: The chart represents the number of irregular migrant arrivals at Spanish borders from 2006 to 2024<sup>20</sup>. Adapted from the Annual Reports by the Spanish Ministry of the Interior (2007-2025). Elaboration by the author (2025).

<sup>19</sup> Sustainable Development Goal 16: Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions.

<sup>20</sup> In 2018, there is a peak in the number of migrants reaching Spain due to the change of government in the country and opening in policies.

As reflected by the most recent data, the situation regarding the arrival of irregular migrants to Spain has reached historical levels, showing trends of further increase. In 2024, the Canary archipelago received 46,843 individuals via maritime routes, representing a 17.4% increase compared to the 39,910 arrivals in 2023 (Ministerio del Interior, 2024). Moreover, these figures increased with the arrivals throughout the WMR, reaching a record of 61,323 unauthorized entries in 2024, as seen in the chart.

This new wave consolidates the WAAR as the main entry point for irregular migration to Spain, and a hotspot for the EU; this is due to the closure of traditional migratory pathways across the Central and Western Mediterranean, with origin in North Africa. Italy succeeded with regards to the number of arrivals by 58% in 2024, which led to the redirection of migrant flows toward the Canary Islands. As it occurred before, the obstruction to access one route leads to smuggling networks to adapt and redirect their movements to reach other routes; a pattern that shows the current migration dynamics. Despite its high mortality rate and the longer journey to take this route, it remains one of the few viable options (IOM, 2023a).

Since 2019, a demographic shift has been visible in the arrival in Spain, particularly with the increase of unaccompanied minors and women via the WAAR. However, it was in 2024 that this trend marked its highest point, diversifying the migrant profiles along the maritime route. According to data from Spain's Ministry of the Interior, approximately 4,421 unaccompanied minors arrived in the Canary Islands between January 1st and October 31st, 2024. Nevertheless, an additional 5,852 minors arrived between the last three months of the year, highlighting an exponential increase in the arrivals. In parallel, the proportion of women among irregular arrivals to the Canary Islands has grown, representing between 10% and 15% of total arrivals in recent years. This shift in profiles has posed another challenge to Spain's response due to the major vulnerabilities that these collectives represent, including greater risks of trafficking, gender-based violence or exploitation during the journey<sup>21</sup>.

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<sup>21</sup> Sustainable Development Goal 5: Gender Equality.

The factors demand more tailored protection and a reception system designed to handle<sup>22</sup> (Save the Children, 2024).

In terms of asylum, due to the mass arrivals to the Canary Islands, Spain's reception system has been overwhelmed and must adjust quickly to manage not only the volume of incoming migrants but also the growing complexity of their profiles. In response, Spain has expanded the capacity of reception centers and strengthened the coordination between regional governments to distribute responsibility. In this context, Spain adheres to the New Pact on Migration and Asylum by the European Union in 2024<sup>23</sup>, providing a unified framework designed to enhance and coordinate essential EU strategies related to migration, asylum procedures, border control, and their integration (Home Affairs European Commission, 2024). This new amendment allows countries to relocate asylum seekers to those Member States which are less affected. Nevertheless, the policy also allows states to reject the acceptance of migrants by contributing €20.000 per individual instead, which fails to alleviate the pressure that Spain's centers have (Fageda, 2024).

The record-breaking number of irregular migrants each year indicates that this is not a temporary phenomenon but rather a trend that is likely to persist in the following years. The complexity of clandestine operations which continue to make Spain's borders insecure and the increasingly diverse profiles of migrants, demand more tailored responses that ensure their protection and needs are met. Since 2006, Spain has implemented several preventive and reactive measures aiming to address both the immediate humanitarian needs and the factors which lead to irregular migration. The following section aims to explore the main strategies and policy responses developed to mitigate this phenomenon.

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<sup>22</sup> Sustainable Development Goal 17.18: Support developing countries to strengthen the availability of disaggregated data.

<sup>23</sup> This Pact originated after the EU Refugee Crisis in 2015.

## 5. Measures of control, reduction and prevention

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The management of irregular migration flows is an issue that heavily affects the national sovereignty of Spain, as well as the integrity of the European Union. As a member state of this supranational organization and serving as a bridge between Africa and Europe, the security problems that the Spanish state endures inherently affect the EU, especially given their implications for the Schengen Area's open borders (Eurenus, 2024). In order to tackle this issue, Spain has intensified its migration control strategy within the scope of a unified EU migration strategy, emphasizing mutual responsibility among the member countries, not only those with external borders. Thus, it has adopted a dual-track approach to irregular migration management, which combines national measures and EU cooperation along with bilateral agreements involving African countries. These efforts not only aimed to curb unauthorized entry but also to combat related threats, including human trafficking, organized crime, and terrorism (Gobierno de España Presidencia del Gobierno, 2021).

### 5.1 Spanish Government Response

Following the Cayuco Crisis, Spain launched a series of operational initiatives aiming to decrease irregular departures from the Western African Coast, primarily in Mauritania, Senegal and Gambia. The approach focused on early intervention as a way to implement it in both countries of origin and transit. The Spanish governmental response could be divided into three sections: (1) Operations and Mechanisms implemented with Spain's Means within EU Agencies (Frontex and EUROPOL); (2) Cooperation with Third States; and (3) Delegation of Competences to Third States.

#### *5.1.1 Spain's means within the EU Agencies*

The year 2006 marked a turning point in migration flow management in the region. It instantly led to a meeting between Frontex and EUROPOL agreeing on the launch of a joint operation whose aim lay in the concept of prevention of departures from the Western coastal African states. As a result, the HERA operation marked a crucial

step in international cooperation for maritime border control, being a pioneer within the European Union's external border management framework. It consisted of the deployment of joint patrols, the identification and processing of migrants at sea, and high-seas inspection, with both logistical and financial support provided by Frontex. The operation was carried out in close coordination with Spanish security forces, including the Civil Guard and later the National Police. Operation HERA was divided into HERA I, oriented on the identification and nationality verification of those that arrived by sea, and HERA II, which focused on operations of control and management of said arrivals. Both operations were conducted under a humanitarian perspective with the general objective of avoiding departures from the country of origin and the interception of vessels in cases of immediate departures in order to avoid losses at sea (Hernández, 2018).

Moreover, the Integrated External Surveillance System (SIVE) was implemented as a system for border protection in 2003 in Spain. The SIVE is composed of coastal radars and mobile sensors initially installed in the Strait of Gibraltar, the southern coast of Spain, the Balear Islands and Fuerteventura. It was later expanded to the rest of the Canary Islands<sup>24</sup> where it became fully operational in 2009. With the help of this technology, it allowed early detection of migrant vessels as well as faster response of deployment teams (Ciudad, 2025).

This surveillance system has been integrated into the Canary Island Regional Coordination Center (CCRC) located in Las Palmas de Gran Canaria since its creation in 2006. The objective of its creation consisted of the establishment of a central hub in order to manage and coordinate both personnel and resources from the different administrations and agencies involved in improving information exchange and operational effectiveness. This center gathers the technological systems used, as well as maritime and aerial patrols, law enforcement agencies, the Armed Forces, Maritime Rescue, the Red Cross, and the agencies of Frontex and EUROPOL. Meanwhile, the SIVE is also integrated within the broader framework of the European Border Surveillance System (EUROSUR), which brings together the

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<sup>24</sup> The SIVE system was expanded to Lanzarote in 2007, Gran Canaria in November of the same year, and to the southern part of Tenerife, including Gomera and Hierro, by December 2008.

sharing of real-time data along the western and southern external borders between EU Member States and Frontex (Brandon, 2020).

Over the last decade, the incorporation of cutting-edge surveillance tools has considerably strengthened Spain's ability to monitor and manage irregular migration by sea. Technologies such as long-range radar systems, thermal imaging, and mobile detection units have played a key role in spotting migrant boats earlier and facilitating timely responses. These advancements have also improved inter-agency coordination, particularly between the Civil Guard and Maritime Rescue services, allowing for more organized efforts in tracking, intercepting, and assisting vessels. As a result, border control operations have become more efficient while also reinforcing the country's commitment to maritime safety and rescue (Fuentes, 2023).

In addition, diplomacy was considered a key pillar in the approach to the issue. The establishment of the Africa Plan I served as the basis to strengthen Spain's institutional presence in embassies and consulates<sup>25</sup>. Spain agreed on the increase of aid and investment to countries of origin in exchange for active cooperation in the repatriation of migrants and enhanced border control. The success led to the creation of Africa Plan II, from 2009 to 2012. It developed new proposals based on trade agreements, investments, and business exchange programs between Spain and the countries involved (Martínez, 2021).

Effective management of irregular migration relies heavily on cooperation with countries of origin and transit. In line with this collaborative approach, the Seahorse Project (2005) was launched by the approval of the European Commission and led by Spain, aiming to enhance coordination and maritime surveillance along key migratory routes by the Spanish Civil Guard. This project later evolved into Seahorse Network 2007-2008 and Seahorse Mediterranean 2013, expanding participation to countries such as Gambia and Guinea-Bissau (Martínez, 2021). These efforts culminated in the West Sahel Project, launched in 2010, to reinforce transnational cooperation following the activities already implemented in the Sahel region. Other initiatives involved in this region of Africa include the GAR-SI Sahel, which is

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<sup>25</sup> The countries in which this presence was reinforced were Senegal, Mauritania, Mali, Côte d'Ivoire, The Gambia and Niger.

managed by the FIAP<sup>26</sup> on behalf of the European Commission, as well as being supported by the Civil Guard in Spain in order to guarantee political/civil stability (Civi pol, n.d.).

The new migrant crisis in 2020 required the strengthened cooperation between Spain and the countries of origin and transit in order to achieve better control of the migratory flows. Since then, the government has based its policies on economic projects and investments, accounting for a total of €1.5 million allocated to Senegal, Mauritania, and The Gambia for equipment and direct aid to support police cooperation (Martín, 2020).

Nowadays, missions through joint operations remain the core of the operations which aim to tackle the issue. Spain is the country that is involved the most in missions across Africa that are financed by the EU trust funds. With the objective of tackling the roots of the migration problems, these projects are financed by the EU and managed by the Spanish Agency for International Development and Cooperation (AECID) (CEAR, 2019).

#### *5.1.2 Cooperation with Third Countries*

At the diplomatic level, the development of the Africa Plan I and Africa Plan II allowed Spain to expand its diplomatic presence in West Africa, as well as facilitating financial aid with countries willing to cooperate on repatriation and border control, establishing a comprehensive framework linking development coordination with migration management. These partnerships focus primarily on joint efforts to dismantle human smuggling networks and strengthen border control cooperation. This proactive diplomatic strategy has distinguished Spain from other southern European states, as it has been the only country in the region to register a sustained decrease in irregular migration flows, largely attributed to its close coordination with

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<sup>26</sup> The Foundation for the Internationalisation of Public Administration is a public organization which manages international cooperation projects where the Spanish Ministry of Foreign Affairs is involved (FIIAPP, 2024).



partner nations along key migratory routes<sup>27</sup>. As a result, Spain has positioned itself as a leading European actor in the establishment of bilateral migration agreements, particularly with key countries of departure including Mauritania and Senegal<sup>28</sup>.

#### 5.1.2.1 Mauritania

Spain's cooperation with Mauritania is grounded in the Memorandum of Understanding<sup>29</sup> signed in 2006, which laid the foundation for joint efforts in managing irregular migration and enhancing border security. The project *Cap Blanc* allowed the permanent deployment of the Spanish Civil Guard/National Police in Nouadhibou, supporting Mauritanian authorities with joint patrols to regain control of their borders by fighting smuggling networks. This includes a liaison officer specialized in immigration and an Interior Ministry attaché based at the Spanish Embassy in Nouakchott. The Civil Guard's presence consists of joint maritime and land patrols, as well as the presence of a helicopter for aerial surveillance, which has led to a multidimensional proactive measure to prevent departures (Blanco, 2025).

Over time, this relationship has been consolidated through bilateral agreements in order to establish the roots for a coordinated and orderly migration management. Financial support has also been a key pillar to support Mauritania's socioeconomic development, including projects related to financial cooperation, humanitarian aid, and border controls. In 2024, Spain announced a €300 million investment with a backup of €210 million from the EU as a way to enforce these previously mentioned measures (Euro News, 2024).

The result of this cooperation has been positive, according to the Spanish Ministry of Interior. During the first half of 2024, this partnership prevented the arrival of approximately 7,000 irregular migrants trying to reach the Canary Islands (Embajada

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<sup>27</sup> According to the European Commission (2021), southern countries like Italy and Greece continued to experience high irregular arrivals, Spain saw a decline from 2020 to 2021 attributed in part to said agreements.

<sup>28</sup> Spain signed its first migration control agreement with Morocco in 1992, and since then, has expanded its bilateral framework to include countries like Mauritania (2003) and Senegal (2006).

<sup>29</sup> Signed between the Director General of Spain's National Police and Civil Guard and the Chief of Staff of the Mauritanian Gendarmerie after the *Cayuco Crisis* of 2006 and officially renewed on February 8, 2013.

de la República Islámica de Mauritania en España, 2024). Nevertheless, Mauritania still remains a strategic departure point for smugglers due to its location, increasing the need to strengthen long-term strategies.

#### *5.1.2.2 Senegal*

The Memorandum of Understanding signed between Spain and Senegal in 2006, while similar to the agreement established with Mauritania, extends its scope by allowing the involvement not only of Spanish assets but also of those from other EU member states. This agreement laid the foundation for joint maritime patrols aimed at combating irregular migration, supported by Frontex.

Since 2025, Spain's operational presence in Senegal has been strengthened by the increase of dedicated maritime resources and a permanent detachment of approximately 33 Civil Guards and National Police officers. These personnel are responsible for preventing and intercepting irregular departures through joint patrols, technical training programs conducted both in Senegal and Spain, and coordinated investigations into organized criminal networks (La Moncloa, 2025). Additionally, an attaché and a liaison officer are stationed at the Spanish Embassy in Dakar to ensure effective cooperation with Senegalese authorities, along with the officials of other countries intervening.

Throughout time and due to the quick adaptation of mafias to the surveillance systems of Frontex, locations such as Kaolack and Saint Louis –located in the south and north of the country respectively, have become key departure points for irregular migration. This shift has led to the establishment of Technical Assistance in Border Surveillance (ATVF)<sup>30</sup> units in these regions to monitor and manage the increasing number of vessels departing from their shores. These areas are considered strategic as Saint Louis lies across the Senegal River from Mauritania, facilitating cross-border movement, while Kaolack is considered an important junction along the Dakar-Niger railway, providing inland connection. Unlike the detachment established in Dakar, which requires a larger deployment of personnel and equipment due to its geographical importance and considered as a central hub, ATVF units in Kaolack

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<sup>30</sup> This ATVF is also located in Banjul (The Gambia).

and Saint Louis operate with fewer resources, due to their smaller scale operations and localized functions (Ciudad, 2025).

Moreover, migration cooperation between these two countries has been strengthened, both at the bilateral level and within the framework of the European Union. In 2024, Spain and Senegal signed a new “circular migration<sup>31</sup>” agreement aiming to create a legal migration channel for Senegalese workers in sectors where Spain is suffering from labor shortages (La Moncloa, 2025). These agreements serve as the basis to establish a safe pathway for migrants while combating smuggling networks and ensuring the protection of migrants’ rights.

## 5.2 Delegation: The role of Morocco

Morocco plays a crucial role in Spain’s migration overall, due to its strategic geographical position and its capacity to regulate the movement of individuals across its territory<sup>32</sup>. The term “delegation” has been employed to refer to Morocco in order to highlight the distinct, autonomous, and representative role within the framework of Spain’s migratory relations. This designation serves to provide a specific differentiation of Morocco from the broader scope of third countries, considering it as an actor which exerts a direct influence on Spain’s borders and migratory policy (Powell, 2024).

The migration routes previously discussed go through both the country’s mainland –including the autonomous cities of Ceuta and Melilla– and the maritime borders, particularly the waters adjacent to Western Sahara, a territory over which Morocco claims sovereignty. Therefore, Morocco has adopted strategies of so-called “migration diplomacy”, positioning itself as a key regional partner in the management of Spain and the EU’s borders, receiving over 300€ million since 2014 (New Direction, 2024.).

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<sup>31</sup> Sustainable Development Goal 10.7: Orderly safe, regular and responsible migration.

<sup>32</sup> Spain externalised part of the control of its southern border to Morocco, aligning with the European strategy for migration control. This collaboration was not based on one single agreement but a collaboration between the two states since 1990.

Spain's bilateral relations with Morocco, while longstanding, are also complex and sometimes strained. Although the two states have maintained diplomatic recognition and official relations for several decades, migration cooperation only gained prominence in the 1990s<sup>33</sup>. The agreements signed laid the basis and the prevention of irregular border crossings. As a result, both countries have engaged in the development of collaborative frameworks aimed at mutually reinforcing the protection of their respective territorial sovereignties (Martínez, 2018). While Rabat is considered an essential partner, it often prioritizes its own political and strategic interests. Morocco's territorial claims over Western Sahara, as well as its historic contention over Ceuta and Melilla, frequently influence its foreign policy decisions.

Nevertheless, in parallel to the increase in the number of arrivals in the WAAR, the WMR marked the beginning of a new crisis, specifically in Ceuta. The year 2021 was marked by one of the most significant migratory crises in recent history through the Western Mediterranean Route (WMR). This episode was characterised by the massive and sudden entry of migrants from Morocco into the autonomous Spanish city.

This event was directly linked to a deterioration in bilateral relations between the two countries, triggered by the hospitalisation of Brahim Ghali, leader of the Polisario Front, in Spain on 18 April 2021. The decision to intern Ghali for medical treatment was taken at Algeria's request and executed with maximum discretion, in order to avoid diplomatic tensions with Morocco. However, once the information became public, the Moroccan government accused Spain of violating mutual trust and bilateral agreement, explicitly warning that such actions would have consequences. In response, Spain justified its actions as humanitarian and legally appropriate.

Despite attempts to de-escalate the situation and exhaust the diplomatic channels, the rapid and unregulated movement of thousands of people led to a serious humanitarian and logistical crisis in Ceuta. According to estimates from the Spanish Ministry of the Interior, between 8,000 and 10,000 individuals crossed the border irregularly, approximately 1,500 of whom were minors (Ministerio del Interior, 2021). This situation led to Spanish security forces and emergency services to be

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<sup>33</sup> Supported with the Readmission Agreement and High-Level Meetings.

overwhelmed, highlighting the vulnerability of national border management systems in the face of politically motivated migratory pressure.

As of today, the current situation regarding migrant routes going through Morocco seems to have become more stabilized. In 2024, Moroccan authorities detained over 300 human trafficking networks, as well as registering over 14 crossing attempts from massive migrant groups. This resulted in over 4 thousand people detained and prevented from crossing the borders of Spanish exclaves Ceuta and Melilla. These are the results of collaborative efforts made by both Spanish and Moroccan authorities in order to improve regional security by preventing the mafias from completing their tasks in their smuggling routes.

The strategy of delegating migration control to Morocco has effectively reduced irregular migration flows in the short term, but raises concerns over Spain's sovereignty with regard to its own migratory policy. The reliance of the North African state to control external border pressures has undermined and risked Spain's border security, as it is a third country whose priorities do not always align with European democratic values or Spain's interests. The 2021 crisis showed how the control of borders provides great power to the holder over a third country and how migration has been instrumentalized.

## 6. Conclusion and Future Prospects

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### 6.1 Final Conclusions

This thesis aimed to examine whether irregular migration constitutes a national security challenge for Spain, and if so, under what circumstances and through which mechanisms this phenomenon has evolved. Based on the complex interrelation between the concepts of security and migration, this study has addressed the key dimensions of irregular migratory flows from Africa to Spain, including geographical, historical, operational, and institutional variables. Through a deep and comprehensive analysis of critical events, institutional responses, and the power of geopolitics, this thesis has revealed how irregular migration has shifted from being viewed primarily as an economic and demographic phenomenon to being framed as a security concern. Moreover, some key themes have emerged that contribute to a deeper understanding of this phenomenon.

First and foremost, it is important to recognize that migration is not a new phenomenon. It has been a constant feature throughout human history and is expected to persist—and even increase—in the coming years due to threat drivers such as inequality, conflict, climate change, and lack of opportunities. The growing impact of environmental degradation and regional instability has intensified the movement of people across borders, making migration a structural necessity. However, irregular migration represents a more contemporary manifestation of mobility, often shaped by the expansion of global criminal enterprises that have turned human displacement into a profitable business model.

This context has also contributed to a shift in the understanding of both the concept of security and migration, where the state continues to be the referent object of protection. Therefore, migration is no longer seen merely as a humanitarian or socioeconomic issue, but as a powerful tool for internal destabilization. As a result, migration policy has increasingly been shaped by national security policies in order to secure national borders and maintain sovereignty and internal cohesion.

The main findings of this research are that irregular migration has been used as an instrument within hybrid strategies, deliberately designed to exploit institutional

vulnerabilities and apply political pressure on receiving countries. Said practice reflects not only the operational capacity of transnational smuggling networks, but also the strategic use of migratory flows as tools in order to gain geopolitical leverage. This dual-use nature of irregularity is driven by both human desperation to achieve a better life, reinforced by the push and pull factors, and the weaponization of said phenomenon as a powerful tool by state and non-state actors, making border control increasingly complex.

Although the measures implemented since the 2006 *cayuco* crisis, including joining maritime operations, bilateral agreements, and enhanced surveillance within the EU framework and bilateral agreements, initially proved effective in reducing irregular arrivals, they have shown limited success in the long run. The persistent and evolving presence of smuggling networks has generated a new wave of irregular migration, particularly along the Western African Atlantic Route (WAAR). These networks have demonstrated a high degree of adaptability, changing routes, operation patterns, and logistics in response to enforcement pressure. The asymmetric nature of these criminal organizations, their ability to remain covert, and their adaptability to enforcement mechanisms make their eradication extremely challenging. This reinforces the idea that purely reactive or militarized responses are insufficient to tackle the root of the problem.

Despite investments not only in new technologies and personnel but also financially made by both Spain and the European Union, origin countries must address the root causes of irregular migration by tackling structural inequalities, promoting development and enhancing coordination between all countries involved, in order to decrease push factors. Moreover, it is imperative that Spain's national migration strategy aligns with European frameworks, ensuring the right balance between national security, human rights and international responsibility.

Finally, geopolitical factors, such as Spain's complex diplomatic relations with Morocco, play a crucial role in shaping migration governance. A greater degree of political initiative is required. This is not only to address migration-related emergencies, but also as a way to respond effectively to broader diplomatic/regional tensions that may affect national security and management of the migrants.

Migration cannot be dealt with through an isolated approach since it is strictly linked to foreign policy, development cooperation and regional stability. In an increasingly interconnected but uncertain global context, the management of irregular migration movements is not only a test of resilience, but also a way to measure a nation's commitment

Nevertheless, effective management of irregular migration has become essential, not only as a measure of resilience against harmful actors, but also as a reflection of a state's commitment to its democratic values and international obligations. In Spain's case, irregular migration has evolved into a significant national security issue, exposing internal vulnerabilities and testing the country's social cohesion. Migrants, who are themselves in a situation of extreme vulnerability, have at times been instrumentalized for political and economic benefits, used as tools within broader strategies of pressure, perpetuating the cycle of vulnerability. This reality demands a coordinated response that addresses the roots and consequences of this phenomenon. Thus, the future of migration governance will largely depend on how Spain and the European Union choose to respond to this multidimensional challenge. It requires more than isolated or reactive measures, taking the form of a 360-degree strategy with all actors involved, based on cooperation, shared responsibility, and long-term vision.

## 6.2 Strategies for Migration Governance

Having analyzed how and why irregular migration constitutes a national security challenge for Spain, as well as the responses implemented, this last section aims to provide several policy recommendations to promote regular and humane migration management in the short and long term.

### *6.2.1 Addressing Root Causes Through Structural Reforms*

First of all, one of the fundamental pillars to eradicate the issue at hand resides in the structural factors that motivate people to migrate. While issues such as poverty, social inequality, armed conflicts, political instability and environmental degradation are present in countries of origin, individuals and communities will be forced to migrate in search of better opportunities. Said countries are not alone, as Spain and



the European Union have enhanced their development by investing in education, job creation<sup>34</sup>, and infrastructure to reduce the push factors. Therefore, collaboration between Spain and third countries needs to continue to improve the situation.

### 6.2.2 Awareness Campaigns

An effective migration governance strategy which has not been implemented is the establishment of awareness campaigns. Establishing robust mechanisms to deliver accurate information about the dangers associated with irregular migration routes entails exploitation, extreme uncertainty, poor travel conditions, high risk of death, and the likelihood of being forced to return is essential. Providing firsthand knowledge can help discredit narratives and myths promoted by smuggling networks, reducing the appeal of *push and pull* factors and the *call effect* to deter others from pursuing the journey. Such campaigns should promote legal migration pathways and alternative opportunities through the collaboration of both Spanish institutions and local authorities from the countries involved<sup>35</sup>. Testimonies from returnees to individuals who know someone who has attempted the journey play a vital role. Thus, this could significantly reduce the demand for dangerous irregular migration routes.

### 6.2.3 Expanding Safe and Legal Pathways

Facilitating legal and safe pathways for migration is a core strategy to reduce reliance on dangerous and irregular routes. In line with Sustainable Development 10.7, policies should aim to promote well-managed and rights-based migration frameworks in order to avoid the expansion of humanitarian corridors, which do nothing but risk lives and strengthen organized crime networks. Therefore, cooperation among countries of departure –Morocco, Mauritania, and Senegal– is still crucial to prevent the embarkation of migrants<sup>36</sup>. Nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge that economic investments are not the solution to the problem, which requires a stronger capacity of resources and personnel, being part of missions which have demonstrated to alleviate the problem, although not tackle it. Moreover, in order to ensure the availability of legal pathways, pre-arranged work contracts

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<sup>34</sup> Sustainable Development Goal 8: Decent Work and Economic Growth.

<sup>35</sup> Sustainable Development Goal 16: Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions.

<sup>36</sup> Sustainable Development Goal 17: Partnerships for the Goals.

prior to migrants' arrival represent a vital tool. This approach was already used during the economic growth period Spain experienced, allowing migrants to enter the country with guaranteed employment and under legal conditions (Baldwin-Edwards, 2014).

In short, these measures would help manage migration flows in a more humane and organized manner by addressing the root causes of migration, ensuring that migrants can exercise their right to seek a dignified life in conditions of safety and according to human rights.

## 7. References and Appendices

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## 7.2 Interview

*Interview with Rodrigo Ciudad Blanco, Civil Guard and Sea Border<sup>37</sup>*

*Date: 16/05/2025*

***C: How many international operations have you participated in since joining the Maritime Service?***

*R: Well, I've been involved in several missions across different African countries over the years: in Dakar, Senegal (2012); Lampedusa, Italy (2013); Nouadhibou, Mauritania (2016), and most recently in Banjul, Gambia (2021).*

***C: What are the primary objectives of these international missions?***

*R: The main goal is to patrol coastlines to prevent the departure of vessels attempting irregular migration. Equally important is our cooperation with local authorities and the involvement with the citizens. We exchange knowledge and operational strategies, which serves to kill two birds with one stone as we learn from them and they from us. For instance, in Gambia, we integrated into the operational framework and held high-level meetings with the Gambian Navy to coordinate joint actions.*

***C: How has the perception and approach to irregular migration evolved since 2006?***

*R: There has been a significant evolution. In 2006, responses were more reactive, and local perceptions were sometimes disengaged. From 2012 onward, we've seen the inclusion of information officers working closely with local intelligence units, which has helped to prevent several departures. By 2021 in Gambia, local involvement had increased substantially, with the Navy and Immigration Department showing greater commitment. Additionally, more individuals now openly express their intentions to migrate, allowing for more preventive measures.*

***C: How are these missions perceived by local communities and authorities?***

*R: Generally, they are viewed positively, especially when the primary goal of saving lives is understood. Many locals know someone who attempted the crossing or didn't return, which raises awareness. There's also a "pull factor" or "call effect" when someone successfully reaches Europe, influencing others. Our role includes bridging*

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<sup>37</sup> This interview was carried out face-to-face and took place on May 17th, 2025, with the respondent's consent to include both questions and answers. He is currently serving in the Maritime Service of the Civil Guard, based at the Port of Castellón. The interview was conducted in Spanish, and both the questions and responses have been translated and transcribed.



*the gap between those who made it and those contemplating the journey although we don't have a formal role of deterrence.*

**C: What strategies are employed to detect and prevent irregular migration movements?**

*R: Maritime patrolling is essential. Regular observation helps identify patterns, as vessels often depart simultaneously from the same areas; so knowledge and information are key. We also provide continuous training to local forces.*

**C: What are the conditions like for migrants attempting to cross the Atlantic? Are they aware of the dangers?**

*R: Many aren't fully aware of the risks. Those who are usually have firsthand experience because they have tried to do it or know someone who didn't survive have more knowledge of the dangers.*

**→ Follow up question: Is there any structured awareness campaign?**

*R: In Gambia, some local radio stations attempt to dissuade people, but I am not sure who was behind that and if it reached many citizens.*

**C: Beyond these core countries, which other regions are key in migration cooperation efforts?**

*R: Apart from our operations, we have liaison officers in countries like Cape Verde, Niger, Guinea-Bissau, and Mali. These roles are vital for broader coordination. These missions are not only operational but also diplomatic, which help –or sometimes to prevent– building diplomatic trust.*

**C: Could you highlight any specific strategic areas within these operations?**

*R: Certainly! Apart from Dakar and Nouadibhou in which there are permanent maritime detachment with around 12 officials, locations such as Kaolack and Saint Louis (Senegal) and Banjul (Gambia) are what is known as Technical Assistance in Border Surveillance (ATVF), which are particularly strategic regions with special conditions and less personnel.*

**C: Would you categorize these missions as more preventive or reactive?**

*R: Well, I would say it gathers both aspects. Patrolling has a preventive effect by deterring those departures but also reactive as we often intervene once the movement has started or is about to depart.*

**C: How crucial are bilateral agreements and donations between Spain and these countries?**

*R: They are essential. For example, in the case of Gambia, Spain donated two vessels which allowed the resume of the mission in 2020. However, it also has some limits because when we arrived back in 2021 to Banjul, the previous vessels which were donated were now in the process of being scrapped, so sometimes it doesn't depend on what is given but how it is maintained. Apart from that, Spain is currently focused on economic aid as the principal means to curb this issue.*

