



Policy Implications of Increased Migration to Spain

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Despite the significant reduction of irregular migration to the European Union, the number of migrants arriving to Spain is increasing. In the national debate on this issue, the Socialist government of Pedro Sánchez faces growing criticism from both the right and the left. Maintaining the current course in migration policy will require intensifying cooperation with Spain's European partners. The Spanish authorities will reinforce the pressure on them to increase EU financial support for southern European countries and to find a European solution to asylum.

The Migration Situation in Spain. Spain lies on the so-called Western Mediterranean route to the EU leading through Morocco. In contrast to the Central Mediterranean route (from Libya and Tunisia to Italy) and the Eastern Mediterranean route (from Turkey to Greece)—the most heavily travelled during the crisis in 2015–2016—the route leading through the Iberian Peninsula is now the most frequented by irregular migrants. While in 2015 the number of detected cases of irregular border crossings on this route amounted to 7,000, in 2016 it reached 10,000. Then in 2017, the number of arrivals exceeded 23,000. This trend is intensifying—just in January–August 2018, the number of cases recorded exceeded 29,000. If this trend continues, the level of irregular migration to Spain this year will exceed the 2006 record of 39,000. The West Mediterranean route is mainly used by migrants from Morocco, Guinea and Mali. Many people trying to cross this route are lost at sea: 146 such cases were reported in the first half of the year, 70% more than in the same period of 2017.

The reasons for the increase in migration to Spain are seen as, among others, the sealing off of the Eastern and Central Mediterranean routes. In the first case, the EU–Turkey deal in March 2016 was crucial, and in the second, the intensification in 2017 of cooperation between the Italian and Libyan coast guards has made the difference. The policy of the new Italian government, which since June has introduced restrictions on national migration policy, are also not insignificant. Blocking access to Italian ports has meant vessels operated by NGOs that rescue migrants must make a port call on the Spanish coast instead. In June, the Spanish government decided to accept more than 600 people from the ship *Aquarius*, which had been denied access to ports in Italy and Malta. At the request of Spain, some of the rescued migrants will be placed in France, Germany, Portugal, and Luxembourg.

Migration in the National Debate. Sánchez has announced liberalisation of migration policy in order to enlist the support of left-wing voters. However, the prime minister's actions are more conservative than his rhetoric would indicate. In response to repeated attacks on border guards, the government decided to increase the use of deportation proceedings against migrants who behave aggressively. While Sánchez has announced plans to remove barbed wire from the borders in Ceuta and Melilla, two Spanish enclaves in North Africa, this has yet to be implemented. In August, the government implemented a uniform system for the operational coordination of all services operating on the southern border of the country and in the Strait of Gibraltar. The system aims to improve the management of migration and halt the flow of ships from African ports to Spain.

The government does not have a majority and with European Parliament (EP) and municipal elections coming in May 2019 and the risk of early parliamentary elections its position in relation to the other political parties must be considered carefully. The right-wing opposition formed around the Peoples Party (PP) and Ciudadanos considers the government's migration policy to be too liberal while the left-leaning Unidos Podemos considers it too restrictive. Right-wing political parties support the EU relocation programmes but criticise the government for being overly willing in the *Aquarius* case and with the announcement of the liquidation of the barbed wire borders around Ceuta and Melilla. In their opinion, these actions have only attracted more migrants. Both parties consider the government's actions temporary and they are intensifying the debate on this topic and offering, for example, the establishment of special agencies to select migrants in their countries of origin based on the needs of the Spanish labour market. On the other hand, UP, which cooperates with the government, points to inconsistencies in Sánchez's policy. Party leaders emphasise that, on the one hand, the government admitted *Aquarius* while at the same time expelled 116 Moroccans and has not implemented the removal of the barbed wire as announced. UP also disagrees with the idea of establishing migrant control centres inside the EU and is the only political force in Spain against increasing the resources and mandate of Frontex. In the party's opinion, these actions equate migration with a criminal act.

Support for the open-door policy in Spanish society is much higher than in the other EU countries. However, with immigration increasing, criticism of the government's pro-immigrant policy is also rising. In the Eurobarometer survey of March 2018, 63% of the Spanish evaluated positively the impact of immigration on the situation in the country and 27% evaluated it negatively. But in the SIGMA-DOS research for El Mundo, 41.3% of respondents approved of the government's migration policy, while 36.7% agreed it was too soft.

Spain on EU Migration Policy. The Spanish government closely links its activity with the EU's policy, expecting support and solidarity from Union institutions and Member States. In July, the Spanish authorities received €25.6 million from the European Commission (EC) to increase the capacity of the admission of migrants on the southern coast and improve return policy. In August, during a visit to Spain by German Chancellor Angela Merkel, she and Sánchez agreed on a joint application to the EC to increase its financial involvement in the Africa Trust Fund. The fund's resources are to be used primarily to strengthen border controls in Morocco. In August, the Spanish government also signed an agreement with Germany obliging the former to take back asylum-seekers registered in Spain but who have made their way to Germany.

In discussions about reform of European migration policy, the Spanish government supports the idea of creating centres in the Member States for the admission of migrants, as well as the proposals to strengthen Frontex. However, it argues that the EU borders agency must not undermine the sovereignty and competences of the EU Member States. At the same time, the government expresses doubts on humanitarian grounds about the creation of [camps for immigrants in countries neighbouring the EU](#). It also emphasises that the €34.9 billion provided in the draft EU multi-annual budget and marked for border protection and migration policy is not enough.

Conclusions and Perspectives. In the face of recent migration challenges, the Spanish government is trying to balance the need to help those seeking protection in Spain with a commitment to ensuring state security. This policy still enjoys the support of the majority of Spanish citizens. However, criticism of migration policy is a strong element for mobilisation of the electorate of the right-wing opposition. This may affect the results in the local and EP elections in May 2019, and possibly also the national parliamentary elections if held earlier.

The continuing upward trend in migration to the Iberian Peninsula will result in the Spanish government increasing the pressure to develop a European model for managing mass-migration and to increase financial outlays from the EU budget for migration policy.

Although Poland opposes plans to reform the EU asylum system that include relocation, it may seek alternative ways of participating in "solidarity" activities with Spain. Building a permanent partnership with Morocco and the Sahel countries beyond developmental aid may be an option. This approach is in line with the idea of an alliance between Europe and Africa for investment and job creation, proposed by [EC President Jean-Claude Juncker](#), as well as the concept of helping migrants in their countries of origin, which Poland supports.