

## Is the Legalization of Immigrants in Spain a Model for Europe?

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### **Thousands of migrants seize the opportunity to legalize their residency.**

Madrid is relying on immigration to boost growth and the job market, taking a unique approach in Europe. But this also fuels concerns – both within the country and in the EU.

Sandra Louven, May 6, 2026 - 9:33 AM

Madrid. Spain is taking a different approach to migration policy than many of its EU partners: Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez's government wants to legalize the residency status of hundreds of thousands of migrants already living in the country. Other countries, such as Germany, are working more intensively on returns.

The aim is to counteract demographic change and support economic growth. Employers and economists welcome the policy. However, it faces criticism within the EU, and in Spain, the far-right Vox party uses it to further its anti-immigrant agenda.

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It is unclear how many people will be able to benefit from legalization. The government estimates around 500,000 people. The Spanish savings bank foundation, Funcas, however, expects up to 840,000.

Applicants must have either applied for asylum in Spain before January 1, 2026, or have lived in Spain continuously for at least five months. They must also have no criminal record. If they meet the requirements, they initially receive a temporary residence and work permit for one year. After that, they must apply for regular residency status.

Spain has already legalized the residency status of migrants eight times in the past four decades.

- The country has one of the lowest birth rates and one of the highest life expectancies in Europe.
- In the coming years, the Spanish working-age population will therefore become too small to support the growing number of retirees.
- Migrants are filling this gap. They now make up 20 percent of the population.
- Immigration is already making a significant contribution to Spain's economic growth. The country has been growing faster than the EU average for years.
- This year, the European Commission expects growth of 2.3 percent for Spain and 1.4 percent for the EU.
- Last year, 41 percent of all new jobs in the EU were created in Spain.
- According to calculations by Funcas, 47 percent of the growth since 2022 is attributable to immigrants. "They consume in Spain – and thus create new jobs," says labor market expert Marcel Jansen from the Autonomous University of Madrid. Many of them currently work in the undocumented sector.

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- Employers' associations expressly welcome the granting of residency permits to migrants already living in Spain, which would allow them to take up regular employment. Sectors such as tourism, agriculture, care work, and construction are experiencing labor shortages.

Experts view the pragmatic Spanish approach positively and as a potential model. "Many EU countries have similar problems with demographic development, but don't dare to open up to migrants for fear that right-wing extremist parties could exploit the situation," says labor market expert Jansen.

However, there are also concerns that he has not yet been able to address.

**The lack of housing**, in particular, is becoming an increasingly pressing problem. While migrants are not the only cause, they are exacerbating the already existing shortage. This shortage is especially acute in the major cities, which offer the most jobs. The Spanish central bank estimates that there is a nationwide shortage of 700,000 homes.