

Failed predictions

In 1968, a biology professor at Stanford University named Paul Ehrlich published a book (Ehrlich, 1993) in which he wrote: "In the coming years, hundreds of millions of human beings will die of starvation due to overpopulation [...] no one will be able to prevent a huge increase in mortality."

It did not take long for the predictions of the UN, MIT and Ehrlich to be proven completely ridiculous, as that "terminal" demographic crisis never existed and today we are facing a crisis of food distribution, but not of production. In fact, more is produced than is consumed, and we can even talk about an epidemic of overeating on the one hand and food waste on the other. On the other hand, the population needed for agricultural production has decreased dramatically. Not long ago, between 30% and 40% of the working population worked in the fields, and now, with 3%, more food is produced than is needed.

Demographers have long warned that fears of an unlimited explosion in the world's population are unfounded. Fertility is declining in all countries of the world, and the United Nations' regularly updated population projections show that, although the population will continue to grow in the coming decades, especially in some regions of the planet, there is a date on the horizon, which this organisation places in the next decade of the 1980s, when the population will stop growing.

The demographic transition is spreading across the globe

What the evolution of the world's population since the middle of the last century shows is that the demographic transition, a process that until now has been completed only by the most developed countries, is universal in nature. The changes, which have already occurred at different times and at different rates in rich countries, can be divided into three phases: the first is one of population stagnation, with high fertility almost offset by high overall mortality and catastrophic events such as famines, wars and epidemics; the second characterised by high population growth, as mortality declines and fertility remains high; and the third, in which both fertility and mortality decline and population growth is moderat .

Following the generalised (but uneven) increase in life expectancy, recent evidence of the spread of declining fertility in virtually all countries, including many in Africa and the Islamic world, confirms the general nature of this trend, although the specific conditions in each society vary. However, the still high rates of population growth and, above all, the sharp imbalances anticipated in the distribution of the world's population still keep alive the alarm over overpopulation.

Around 1950, the world population was around 2.5 billion, and since 2022 it has exceeded 8 billion. The United Nations estimates that by 2050, the population will reach 9.7 billion and that the human population will peak at around 10.4 billion in the 2080s (United Nations, 2022a). In any case, these forecasts may fail miserably, so I will stop this line of research/forecasting. This does not mean that we should not address population-related issues, of which we would like to highlight two: a) some countries have been left behind in this transition process, and b) the enormous diversity in the rates of demographic change has caused huge imbalances in the spatial distribution of the world's population.

Sharp decline in fertility. Some countries are left behind

Since 1970, fertility has declined rapidly, and the latest United Nations projections (from 2022) predict that this indicator will fall below the replacement level (approximately two children per woman) from 2050 onwards. From that point on, the world population will not be replaced, although the inertia generated by a high proportion of women of childbearing age and declining mortality will cause the population to continue growing until approximately 2080, as mentioned above. It should be noted that, at the end of the projection period (2100), the estimated fertility rate is 1.75, which is higher than that currently seen in many European countries, particularly in the United Kingdom, where the fertility rate in 2024 was 1.29 children per woman, one child less than the global average for that year (2.32).

Africa was the only continent where, in 2021, there were countries with fertility rates above five children per woman (ten countries), and of the twenty countries with the highest fertility rates, eighteen are in Africa. Overall, it is the continent with the highest fertility rate in 2021: 4.31 children per woman, compared to 6.59 in 1950.

In terms of the progression of life expectancy at birth, it has risen globally from 46.5 years in 1950 to 71.0 in 2021. At birth, the difference between men (68.4) and women (73.8) is 5.4 years. The global average for men was reached in Spain (currently one of the countries with the highest life expectancy) in 1966 and for women in 1988: the delay is clearly greater among men. The lowest levels are also observed in Central Africa: from 37.1 years in 1950 (approximately the level in Spain around 1900) to 59.2 in 2021 (lower than in Spain in 1950).

The African continent, and especially its central part, has been left behind in this process of demographic modernisation. These conditions, combined with climate deterioration, political instability and local armed conflicts, make this region a humanitarian challenge and fuel emigration and population displacement that are difficult to manage.

Growing imbalances in the distribution of the world's population

Although global overpopulation is no longer considered a credible prospect by the vast majority of experts, imbalances between regions and countries have become more pronounced over the last fifty years and will increase in the future, according to the latest United Nations projections for 2022. Already today, the centre of gravity of the population has shifted to Asia, and in the future it may shift to Africa.

Between 1950 and 2021, the population of Europe as a whole has grown by just under 200 million, while India alone has 1.05 billion more inhabitants, and China, thanks to its one-child policy, only 887 million more. In relative terms, while Europe's population has grown by 0.4% per year (0.7% in Spain), Africa's has grown by 2.6% (2.8% in Central Africa). To give an idea of the significance of this difference, let us say that, at Europe's growth rate, it would take 159 years for the population to double, and only 27 years at Africa's rate.

In a century, from 1950 to 2050, the distribution of the world's population will have been turned upside down. The most populous country, which was initially China with 539 million inhabitants, will be India in 2050 with 1.669 billion. In China, after strong growth (in 2021, with 1.426 billion, it still slightly exceeded India), the United Nations projection forecasts a real collapse to 778 million in 2100, although in 2050 it would still have 1.317 billion inhabitants. The most spectacular growth will be in Africa, which will go from 225 million

in 1950 to 2.466 billion in 2050, and will continue to grow, according to the projection, to almost 4 billion in 2100, accounting for nearly 38% of the entire human population. In contrast, the weight of the European continent has continued to decline, and projections indicate that this trend will continue. In 1950, it accounted for 22% of the world's population. Today (2021), it stands at 9.5%. It will fall to 7.3% in 2050 and 5.7% in 2100.

The demographic concentration in which the world is immersed extends, within each country, to growing urbanisation, which is taking on unprecedented proportions and will intensify in the future. According to the World Bank, around 56% of the world's population, 4.4 billion people, currently live in cities, and by 2050, almost seven out of ten people are expected to do so. Addressing the challenges posed by this trend requires tackling the growing demand for housing and the increasing proportion of those who cannot access it due to lack of solvency. It also requires greater investment in transport infrastructure, basic services and strong job creation. On the other hand, the number of displaced people is increasing, crowded into substandard housing that lacks basic public services (World Bank, 2023) .

Urban concentration is one of the key phenomena of our time. Its consequences extend to all areas. It is undoubtedly one of the driving forces behind the sharp decline in fertility worldwide. Children, who were once an asset and an investment in family farming or livestock operations, have become a burden in the city, with increasing costs.

What happened in China deserves a mention

The Chinese population had grown significantly between 1949 (founding of the communist state) and 1979, and after three decades of "brilliant socialist construction", China remained a rural society. Rural and hungry (in the mid-1970s, more than 77% of Chinese people had less than \$1.25 a day to live on).

This was the situation in September 1979 when all members of the Chinese Communist Party received a letter from the party leadership urging them to set an example and have no more than one child. A year later, in September 1980, the one-child policy was imposed on the entire population, and anyone who failed to comply with the order would receive heavy fines. Later, in the 1990s, women who had had more than one child were forced to undergo sterilisation.

This policy had immediate disastrous consequences: first, a wave of infanticide, the outright killing of newborn girls, as well as the existence of 'clandestine' women whose births were concealed by their parents. In fact, in EARLY 21ST-CENTURY China, the number of males between the ages of 0 and 35 was already significantly higher than that of females in the same age group. Specifically, in 2016, according to official Chinese data, the ratio of boys to girls aged five to fifteen was 118 males to 100 females. In other words, over the last thirty years, some thirty million more boys than girls were born in China. It is therefore not surprising that the marriage rate there has been falling significantly for some years now.

In what follows, to refer to any estimate about the future population, we will use the term 'projection', thus removing from these calculations the predictive burden that is often attributed to them.

Today in Europe there is talk of the "catastrophe" of ageing. And one might ask: how can we know for sure that this will be the reality of the future? In any case, it is sensible to make "projections" rather than "predictions". What gives demographic projections greater robustness than other branches of the social sciences is that much of the future, especially the next fifteen to twenty years, is already contained in the current population structure, and the rest depends largely on the evolution of fertility and mortality, which have great temporal inertia. However, any population projection is nothing more than the quantification of hypotheses about the future behaviour of fertility, mortality and migration. It is important to bear this in mind.

Spanish demographics on the decline

The decline in marriage rates, the increase in divorce rates and the fall in fertility to very low levels have led to a decline in the Spanish population. This decline has been tempered by the arrival of immigrants (a topic we will address at the end of this study).

The data used below predate the pandemic.

In a generation subject to the rates of first marriage¹ by age observed in Spain in 2018, 54% of Spanish men and 50% of Spanish women would remain single. These proportions were unimaginable just 45 years ago, when the proportion was around 10% or even lower.

In 1976, the average age of women in Spain when they entered into their first marriage was 24.1 years (26.6 for men). In 2018, these ages were 33.6 for women and 35.6 for men. The trend towards marrying less and doing so at an older age is therefore clear. This has been accompanied by less marital stability. Let us look at the latter:

- In 2016, there were 101,294 marital breakdowns, of which 96,824 were divorces, 4,353 were separations and 117 were annulments. The average duration of these marriages was 16.3 years.
- In 2016, the average age of men at the time of divorce was 44.8 years and that of women was 42.2 years.

The change that has taken place in society is twofold in terms of marriage-related demographics. Firstly, there has been a gradual decline in marriages, accompanied by the spread of the idea that marriage is no longer necessary for couples to live together. And, at a later stage, with cohabitation without marriage becoming socially acceptable, the idea of children in unmarried couples has been introduced. Hence the rapid increase in the proportion of children born outside marriage.

Although there may not be public records of all couples who have chosen to be de facto couples—although the INE's Continuous Household Survey gives us a good numerical estimate of this phenomenon—it is clear that the family model consisting of a married couple with children has been partially diluted. How have these changes influenced fertility patterns? Does the stability of the couple favour fertility? There are contradictory theories when it comes to answering these questions, and empirical studies carried out at European level are far from conclusive.

Oral contraceptives have had a remarkable impact on fertility control. Used—especially at first—by married women who did not want more children (stop contraception), they were then used by married women in the early stages of marriage (spacing

¹ Primonupciality indicates the theoretical probability of marrying at least once in one's lifetime, based on the percentage of people of various ages who marry for the first time in a given year. It is usually calculated annually for people under the age of sixty.

contraception) and, finally, by young women before marriage. However, it should also be noted that when oral contraceptives arrived in Spain in the mid-1970s, fertility was already 40% to 50% lower than it had been a century earlier, a decline in the number of children per woman in which contraceptives played no role. In Spain, according to the Fertility Survey published at the end of 2000, 53.2% of women of childbearing age reported using reliable contraceptive methods.

Something similar, *mutatis mutandis*, can be said in relation to induced abortion. In 1986, just before the first full year with the abortion law in force, and with fewer than 500 legal abortions in Spain, the average number of children per woman was already only 1.56, a very low fertility rate. The conclusion to be drawn from observing these sharp declines in fertility prior to widespread access to contraceptives and abortion would be as follows. There is no doubt that the easy availability of contraceptives and abortion physically facilitates having fewer children, devalues the significance of pregnancy and helps to trivialise sexual relations and their possible consequences. But if a society does not want to have children, even if they are not available, they will not have them.

Table 1 shows that Spanish fertility has been lower than that of the EU as a whole for many years. Furthermore, in none of the countries that make up the EU does fertility reach the replacement level (2.05). In 2018, metropolitan France had the highest fertility rate (1.84), followed by Sweden and Ireland (both 1.75).

Cuadro 1. Hijos por mujer (ISF) 2007-2018

Año	España	UE a 27 (sin RU)
2007	1,38	1,52
2008	1,45	1,57
2009	1,38	1,56
2010	1,37	1,57
2011	1,34	1,54
2012	1,32	1,54
2013	1,27	1,51
2014	1,32	1,54
2015	1,33	1,54
2016	1,34	1,57
2017	1,31	1,56
2018	1,26	1,55

Fuente: Eurostat

The changes that accompanied the decline in fertility do not answer an important question: why is Spanish fertility lower than the European average?

According to the results of the INE Fertility Survey, the number of children desired was much higher than the number of children actually born. Thus, 48% of women aged 25 to 34 wanted to have two or more children, and only 13% did not want to have any.

Eight per cent of women aged 35 to 44—again according to the INE Fertility Survey—stated that they had not had more children because they had not found the right partner, and approximately 50% cited economic, work and work-life balance reasons. According to data from the Natural Population Movement (MNP), which classifies births by the mother's economic activity, in Spain there were 204,656 births to economically inactive mothers (52.6% of the total) and 188,525 to economically active mothers (47.4% of the total).

The two most commonly used indicators for measuring mortality are the probability of death between birth and one year of age (known as the infant mortality rate) and life expectancy at birth, both of which have evolved very positively in Spain. In other words, the former has fallen sharply and the latter has risen to enviable levels — the highest in the European Union, despite Spain not being one of the leading countries in terms of GDP per capita and other economic indicators — which represents a great success for Spanish society as a whole and gives an idea of the high degree of quality and social cohesion in everything that affects life expectancy, such as food, the healthiness of the air we breathe and the water we drink, physical lifestyle habits, social habits and health services (in terms of quality and universal coverage).

In 2018, the infant mortality rate was 2.7% (3% for boys and 2.4% for girls), and it should be remembered that in 1976 this rate was 17.1% and in 2000 it was 4.3%.

This indicator narrows the significant differences in life expectancy at birth between women and men, to such an extent that in some European countries, men have more healthy years than women (see Table 2).

Cuadro 2. España: años de Vida Saludable. 2017

	Hombres	Mujeres
Total e_0	80,6	86,1
e_0 saludable	69,0	69,9
% saludable e_0	85,6%	81,2%
Total e_{65}	19,3	23,4
e_{65} saludable	12,3	12,4
% saludable e_{65}	63,7%	53,0%

e_0 = esperanza de vida al nacer

e_{65} = esperanza de vida a los 65 años

Fuente: Elaboración propia con datos de Eurostat

At the age of 65, men and women in Spain in 2017 had virtually the same number of healthy years ahead of them: 12.3 versus 12.4.

If, instead of taking a single year, we take a decade as a reference, for example, 2007-2016, at age 65 it would be 9.2 years for women and 9.7 years for men, which shows us that Spanish women's old age is more "ailment-ridden" than that of men, perhaps because men have been 'selected' more rigorously by mortality prior to the age of 65, or because women's physical wear and tear is paid for with greater deterioration.

In Western Europe, the healthy life expectancy of Spanish women in 2017 (66.5) is surpassed by five countries: Sweden (73.3), Ireland (69.8), the United Kingdom (67.8), Germany (67.3) and France (67.2). As already noted, this is not the case for life expectancy at birth.

The 65.9 years of healthy life expectancy for Spanish men are only surpassed by three European countries: Sweden (73), Norway (72) and Ireland (67.3).

It should be noted, however, that while life expectancy at birth or at any age can be estimated very accurately—because death is an unmistakable event and must be recorded—a "healthy" life is a concept that can be measured with much less accuracy.

COVID

As in so many countries, the coronavirus has claimed the lives of many thousands of people in Spain. Behind the data lies a reality: the ageing of the Spanish population. The older the person, the greater the risk of dying from coronavirus.

This was the case with this disease, which reached a death rate in Spain per 100,000 people that doubled every five years of age above the 40-44 age group.

Cuadro 3. Mortalidad Covid por edades y sexos de marzo 2020 a 30/06/2022

	Fallecimientos por Covid		Muertes por 100.000		Tasa de muertes hombres / tasa de mujeres
	Hombres	Mujeres	Hombres	Mujeres	
De 0 a 24 años	53	42	0,9	0,7	1,2
De 25 a 29 años	55	32	4,3	2,6	1,7
De 30 a 34 años	73	56	5,3	4,1	1,3
De 35 a 39 años	140	89	8,9	5,6	1,6
De 40 a 44 años	302	138	15,7	7,2	2,2
De 45 a 49 años	577	279	29,1	14,3	2,0
De 50 a 54 años	1.156	483	62	26	2,4
De 55 a 59 años	1.967	910	116	52	2,2
De 60 a 64 años	3.539	1.396	241	90	2,7
De 65 a 69 años	5.196	2.114	434	161	2,7
De 70 a 74 años	7.495	3.487	727	291	2,5
De 75 a 79 años	10.346	5.685	1.288	565	2,3
De 80 a 84 años	12.742	9.456	2.425	1.246	1,9
De 85 a 89 años	15.721	16.156	4.279	2.549	1,7
90 y más años	13.633	22.599	7.734	5.487	1,4
Total	72.995	62.922	314	260	1,2

Fuente: INE. Defunciones por Causas y Cifras de Población

There were about seven waves of COVID infections in Spain. And since deaths usually occur two or more weeks after infection, some of these waves have overlapped in terms of deaths.

The pandemic also brought statistical confusion surrounding the causes of death, and with the confusion came speculation, not only in the press, leading to the establishment in public opinion of figures that do not correspond to reality.

Between March 2020 and the end of 2022, there have been well over 100,000 deaths from COVID-19 in Spain. Unfortunately, the two main official national sources of information on this subject, the Ministry of Health and the National Institute of Statistics

(INE), present a notable discrepancy regarding the total number of deaths. According to the Ministry of Health, there were approximately 117,000 more deaths than there would have been without COVID-19. According to the INE, there were approximately 145,000 more deaths, including 15,000 suspected COVID-19 deaths in which the presence of the virus was not verified. Eighty-three per cent of those 15,000 suspected COVID-19 deaths occurred in the first three months of 2020, and most of them were elderly people living in nursing homes.

In addition to these deaths, there is the temporary or persistent suffering of hundreds of thousands of survivors who were seriously affected by the Wuhan coronavirus, which, in an as yet undetermined number of people, has led or will lead to a shortening of their lives, as well as various ailments, such as fatigue or loss of memory, smell or taste. The pandemic has also had a high economic cost due to the closure of many businesses and the large increase in public debt.

There were temporary restrictions on personal freedoms. Let us remember, for example, the curfews or the obligation to wear a mask even for those who went on a solo mountain hike. And the states of alarm were subsequently deemed illegal by the Constitutional Court.

In 2021 and 2022, the number of deaths above what would have occurred without COVID-19 has been significant, but considerably lower than in 2020.

How many people have died in Spain from COVID-19? Unfortunately, the two main national data sources, the Spanish Government and the INE, disagree on the particular by a wide margin, especially in 2020, the most tragic year of this drama, as shown in Table 4.

Cuadro 4. Defunciones por Covid-19 de 2020 a primer semestre de 2022

	Según el M ^o de Sanidad	Según el INE	Diferencia INE vs M ^o Sanidad	INE vs M ^o Sanidad (%)
2020 - Muertes totales	50.837	74.839	24.002	47,2%
<i>Con el virus identificado</i>	N/D	60.358		
<i>Sospechoso, sin virus identificado</i>	N/D	14.481		
2021 - Muertes totales	38.610	40.083	1.473	3,8%
<i>Con el virus identificado</i>	N/D	39.444		
<i>Sospechoso, sin virus identificado + síndrome inflamatorio multisistémico asociado</i>	N/D	639		
Primer semestre 2022 - Muertes totales	18.595	20.995	2.400	12,9%
<i>Con el virus identificado</i>		20.915		
<i>Sospechoso, sin virus identificado + síndrome inflamatorio multisistémico asociado</i>		80		
Total muertes de 2020 a 30/06/2022	108.042	135.917	27.875	25,8%

Fuente: Actualizaciones de Covid-19 (Ministerio de Sanidad) y Defunciones por causas (INE)

NB. Los datos de Sanidad de 2021 y 2022 son estimaciones con los del boletín anterior y posterior al último día del período

The data in Table 4 are current as of 30 June 2022. Subsequently, according to the Ministry of Health, in the second half of 2022, there were some 9,000 more deaths from COVID-19, which would bring the total number of deaths due to the pandemic in the period 2020-2022 in Spain to 117,000, according to the Government, or 145,000, according to the INE.

For our part, we give more credibility to the INE data, obtained from death certificates. For its part, the data presented by the government comes, according to the government, from data provided by the autonomous communities.

With the INE's death data, in 2020, Spain would have had the highest COVID mortality rate per million inhabitants in Europe, which is in line with the fact that life expectancy in Spain recorded the largest drop in Europe, with the Community of Madrid as the Spanish and European region with the largest decline, according to Eurostat.

In 2021 and 2022, although still terrible for our country in terms of COVID, there were fewer deaths, which has allowed for a noticeable recovery in life expectancy.

A continent of old people

Before continuing, we will take a brief look at European demographics in modern times.

The old continent, traditionally synonymous with Europe — although geographically it is not a true "continent" but rather the western end of Eurasia — has been the world leader in many things in recent centuries, including demographic trends. Between the 17TH and 19TH centuries, inclusive, European population growth was much higher in relative terms than in the rest of the world. But in the 20TH century, the tide turned, mainly due to the collapse in fertility, and the European population grew proportionally less, a trend that has become more pronounced so far in the 21ST century.

Population growth is also slowing down in the rest of the world because the decline in fertility since 1960-1970 has been universal, including in sub-Saharan Africa. Persistently low fertility has made Europe the geographical region with the oldest population in the world. On the other hand, its life expectancy is the highest.

The old continent is now the "old continent". Without the abundant net immigration from Africa and Asia (and to a lesser extent, Latin America) since the MID-20TH CENTURY, Europe's population would have been declining for decades.

Germany and Italy, among the large European countries, have high levels of ageing and persistent negative differences between births and deaths.

Russia and Ukraine deserve special mention, sadly in the news since the brutal invasion of the latter by the former, as do the countries that made up the former Soviet Union. The former Soviet republics that belong to what we commonly call "Europe", that is, those with Christian roots, have experienced enormous population declines because ly there have been more deaths than births. In the vast majority of them, these losses have been exacerbated by emigration to the Russian Federation or to other European countries.

In contrast, the former Soviet republics with Muslim majorities and Asian geographical locations have experienced strong population growth since the fall of communism, as they have had a fertility rate higher than the replacement rate (estimated at 2.05 children per woman), despite the fact that part of that population has been drained by emigration.

In Eastern Europe (in what were formerly known as the "satellite countries" of the Soviet Union), there have been large deficits in births relative to deaths in recent decades as a

result of low fertility rates, which is why some of these countries, notably Hungary and Poland, have launched very ambitious plans to stimulate birth rates.

Finally, in terms of marriage and divorce rates, there has been a trend across Europe over the last 50-60 years towards far fewer marriages per thousand inhabitants than in the past. On the other hand, those who do marry do so at a much older age than was traditional. There are also high divorce rates.

In 2020, Europe, including Russia (some 35 million of whose inhabitants live in Siberia, which is geographically located in the Asian part of Eurasia), is currently home to almost 750 million people, just under 10% of humanity. The European Union of 27, even after the departure of the United Kingdom, remains the largest bloc in Europe in demographic terms (60%).

Since the Renaissance, and especially since the 19TH century, Europe has made a giant leap forward in technological and economic development. This has also been true in demographic terms, due to the greater abundance of food resources and better living and health conditions. Europe's population doubled in the 19TH century, with an estimated percentage growth of almost twice that of the rest of the world, and more than double that of the rest of the world excluding America, because America experienced a population explosion, mainly due to the massive arrival of Europeans. It is estimated that the population of the United States and Canada increased more than tenfold in the 19TH century, and that of Latin America tripled.

Cuadro 5. Población mundial en 2020. Principales regiones y países

Zona geográfica	Total (millones)	En porcentaje %
Mundo	7.795	100
Europa	748	9,6
UE-27	445	5,7
Reino Unido y otros Europa Occidenta	82	1,1
Rusia	146	1,9
Ucrania y otros Europa oriental	75	1,0
África	1.341	17,2
Norte de África	246	3,2
África Subsahariana	1.094	14,0
Asia	4.641	59,5
China	1.439	18,5
India	1.380	17,7
Indonesia	274	3,5
Resto de Asia	1.548	19,9
América	885	11,4
Estados Unidos	331	4,2
México	129	1,7
Brasil	213	2,7
Resto de América	212	2,7
Oceanía	43	0,5

Fuente: ONU. World Population Prospects 2019

As for Spain, its nineteenth-century population growth, although appreciable, was somewhat below the European average. The war against Napoleon's troops, the three Carlist civil wars, the wars of independence in America and emigration to Latin American countries and others such as France, as well as a somewhat lower life expectancy, would explain Spain's lower population growth in the NINETEENTH century compared to Europe.

It is estimated that around 1900, shortly before Europe began its suicidal involvement in two bloody wars, the European population, including Russia, accounted for around 25% of the world's population.

In the 20TH century, the loss of human life due to the aforementioned world wars that began in Europe (1914-1918 and 1939-1945) was partially ly offset—in demographic terms—by improvements in hygiene and universal access to drinking water,

improvements in nutrition, advances in medical science and access to good health services for virtually the entire European population. However, Europe's demographic weight in the world plummeted from the middle of the 20TH century onwards.

The explosive population growth in the second half of the 20TH century in the countries of the then-called "Third World" explains the bulk of the radical decline in the percentage of human beings living in Europe.

Immigration welcome

The arrival of foreign-born people from the mid-2010s onwards was seen as good news by the Spanish media, experts and politicians. And there were reasons for this.

In the second quarter of 2018, Spain had 4.6 million people who were actually unemployed (3.4 million officially unemployed plus 1.2 million). Despite so many millions of unemployed, from mid-2018 to the first quarter of 2023, the population residing in Spain and born abroad has increased by two million people (more than 2.1 million non-EU nationals, because the foreign population from the EU has decreased during that period). Clearly, such an influx of new immigrants into a country with so many unemployed is not exactly what is needed to drastically reduce unemployment. This not only has economic effects on public accounts, but also contributes, among other things, to the current problems of saturation of public health services and tensions in the housing market in cities with the highest influx of immigrants, such as Madrid (in the first half of 2022 alone, 46,000 additional foreigners registered as residents, according to data from the city council).

From the second quarter of 2018, in a Spain that was still recovering from the high levels of unemployment reached during the Great Recession, to the first quarter of 2023, the number of native Spaniards in employment rose from 16.148 million to 16.387 million (an increase of 239,000), according to the EPA. The number of foreigners in employment rose from 3.196 million to 4.066 million (870,000 more). And if we discount the net new jobs in the public sector created during that period (406,000, almost 37% of the net new jobs created in those years, more than 90% of which were filled by Spaniards), the result is that, in the first quarter of 2023, there are fewer native Spaniards working in the private

sector than in the second quarter of 2018, and that more than 100% of net new private employment since then has been filled by immigrants.

The main theoretical basis for justifying mass labour immigration, and specifically the fact that more than 7.2 million people born abroad have come to live in Spain between May 1996 and April 2023, is to fill vacancies in the labour market with foreign labour. This has made it possible to fill gaps in the Spanish labour market, gaps created by the persistently low birth rate, which has meant, among other things, that for years more people have been retiring than young people entering the labour market. Immigration has also served to fill certain occupations in the absence of Spaniards willing to perform certain low-paid jobs, such as caring for young children or the elderly, or collecting rubbish.

Main conclusions:

- Immigration has a significant and growing weight in the labour force (more than 20% of jobs in 2024 were held by immigrants), especially in certain types of jobs and sectors of activity, such as agriculture and construction.
- In recent years, the vast majority of new net employment has been taken up by foreigners, close to 100% in new private sector jobs.
- Spain is managing its migration flows very poorly, given its extremely high structural levels of unemployment, both among native Spaniards and (even more so) among foreigners—which are underreported in official statistics—despite which new immigration continues to arrive en masse, which in recent years has been almost exclusively from outside the European Union.

In January 1976, foreigners accounted for just under 0.5% of Spain's population (around 160,000 out of 35.9 million inhabitants), more than 60% of whom were Western Europeans. A significant proportion of the foreign community at that time were European retirees who lived mainly, as they do now, in the Canary Islands, Alicante, Málaga and the Balearic Islands. The participation of foreigners in the Spanish workforce was minimal, apart from executives in multinational companies. Twenty years later (1996), their share of the population was greater (over one million in a Spain with 39.9 million inhabitants), as was their presence in the workforce, although it remained very small (1.3% of those in employment, representing 2.6% of the population as a whole). Currently, foreign-born individuals, with or without dual nationality, represent a very significant percentage of the

employed population. As of 1 April 2023, there were 8.3 million foreigners living in Spain, of whom just over 4 million, according to EPA microdata, were employed in the first quarter of 2023, representing 19.9% of all "employed" persons in that quarter.

By origin, half of those of foreign origin in employment in the first quarter of 2023 were Latin American. Thirty per cent were European or North American (the latter relatively few), of whom more than 70 per cent were from the EU. Fourteen per cent were African (more than 70% of whom were Moroccan), and 6% were Asian.

Immigrants as a whole have much higher unemployment rates than Spaniards, and during the Great Recession that began in 2008, their unemployment levels reached extremely high levels. However, in recent years, the increase in the number of employed foreigners has been much higher than that of Spaniards, so that the vast majority of new net employment is occupied by foreigners.

According to the EPA, between the first quarter of 2022 and the first quarter of 2023, in a Spain recovering from the "old normal" after the pandemic, 368,100 jobs were created. According to INE data, the increase in employment among foreign-born workers, including those with dual nationality, was 284,400 (i.e. 77% of the jobs created). However, analysing the EPA microdata, and counting only those who are Spanish by birth (i.e. excluding those who have acquired Spanish nationality), it can be seen that the increase in employment among foreigners — a group that also includes immigrants who have exchanged their nationality of origin for Spanish nationality — was 348,600: almost 95% of the net employment created.

The vast majority of foreigners who arrived in Spain in recent years initially stayed here irregularly — that is, 'unauthorised' — but their status was regularised because they had acquired 'roots' in our country and had a job. , from 2008 onwards, unemployment rates among Spaniards, not to mention foreigners (especially non-EU nationals), skyrocketed, reaching extremely high levels in subsequent years.

In the following two years, there was a first major anomaly in relation to the immigration model. Let's see: between 2008 and 2009, 400,000 immigrants arrived in Spain, and immigration only began to decline from 2012 onwards. In 2013, there were just over six million unemployed according to the EPA, more than seven million unemployed if we include those who wanted a job but were not actively looking for one. Despite this, the

immigrant population fell by less than 7% between the beginning of 2012 and mid-2015. And from the second half of 2015 onwards, despite the fact that official unemployment was then at 24% —and 32% for immigrants— and unemployment has never fallen below double digits and three million people in the last eight years, a large number of immigrants returned, virtually all from outside the EU (the current EU plus the United Kingdom): a net increase of 2.4 million foreigners between July 2015 and April 2023, according to the INE's Continuous Population Statistics.

Overall, immigrants, who accounted for 16.5% of all jobs in 2022, occupied 26.4% of jobs in the agricultural sector, 11.6% in industry, 24.8% in construction and 16.7% in services. By gender, there are significant differences in the percentages of employed persons by nationality, as shown in Table 6.

**Cuadro 6. ¿Se siente discriminado en su empleo actual?
(porcentajes por sexo y país de nacimiento)**

Lugar de origen	Ambos sexos			Hombres			Mujeres		
	Sí	No	NS/NC	Sí	No	NS/NC	Sí	No	NS/NC
Total	3,6	95,3	1,1	2,8	96,0	1,2	4,6	94,4	1,0
España	3,4	95,8	0,8	2,8	96,4	0,8	4,2	95,1	0,8
Extranjero - Total	4,7	92,9	2,4	3,0	94,3	2,8	6,5	91,5	2,0
Europa	5,2	92,2	2,6	2,5	94,9	2,6	8,0	89,5	2,6
Iberoamérica	4,3	94,5	1,3	2,0	96,3	1,7	6,2	92,9	0,9
África, Asia y resto del mundo	4,8	90,1	5,1	5,3	89,8	5,0	3,9	90,7	5,5

Fuente: INE-EPA. Módulo 2021. Situación de los inmigrantes y sus hijos en relación con el mercado laboral

The overwhelming majority of foreign women work in the service sector, which is also the majority sector among Spanish women. The majority of foreign men also work in services, but in a smaller percentage than Spanish men. By gender, regardless of nationality, 54% of service jobs in 2022 were held by women.

Foreigners have a much greater relative presence in agriculture, where women are in the minority, as only 23% of all those employed in agriculture in 2022 were women.

In industry, 72% of jobs are held by men.

In construction, where there are very few women (only 9% of jobs in 2022), there is a very large presence of foreigners, particularly from Eastern Europe, Latin America and Africa.

There are significant differences in the educational level of foreigners living and working in Spain, which is closely related to the types of jobs they do. Those with the least education are Africans, with significant illiteracy rates, followed by Asians, Latin Americans and Eastern Europeans. Western Europeans and North Americans, as might be expected given that they come from countries that are wealthier than Spain, have a higher level of academic training than Spaniards themselves.

A corollary of these data is that, as virtually the only immigrants Spain has received since 2015 are Africans, Latin Americans or Asians, it will be difficult to fill many highly skilled and productive jobs with them. This is one of the reasons why the mantra that "it doesn't matter if Spaniards don't have children, immigrants will come" is fallacious. And the worst thing is that many Spanish politicians and intellectuals seem to subscribe to this fallacy of immigration as the only or main strategy against the Siberian-like demographic winter that has been ravaging Spain for forty years.

We are therefore facing a problem that will become serious in the near future: the educational level of the children of immigrants, who today barely reach university level. A policy of educational equality will benefit them, but above all it will benefit Spanish society as a whole.

Immigration and politics

Europe (and Spain) is undergoing a very worrying ageing process, and immigration can be a mitigating factor (never a solution, as immigrants also grow old). In any case, the EU lacks a common migration policy. Josep Borrell reminded us of this in an interview: "Europe has not been able to build a common immigration and asylum policy that is commensurate with the economic and demographic imbalances of our time."

Journalist Ramón González Férriz, referring to a European Council meeting where the issue of immigration was discussed, recalled that in 2022, 330,000 illegal immigrants crossed the European Union's external border. That figure represented a 64% increase over the previous year.

Whether because of its volume or because of the ideological drift it has brought about in recent years, immigration has invaded political discourse.

In Spain, there are more than 8.2 million people born in other countries, accounting for 17.1% of the population, according to the latest data available from the INE. Such high figures have never been seen before. In its latest study, the CIS has identified immigration as the main problem for Spaniards, ahead of unemployment and housing.

Since the late 1990s and the immigration *boom* of the early 21st century, the foreign population in Spain has grown rapidly. The economic crisis slowed arrivals and pushed departures, but with the recovery, the pace of migration resumed. The growth seen in the last year (2023) had not been seen for two decades, driven mainly by the arrival of Latin Americans.

Morocco is by far the largest foreign community in Spain. According to the census, there are more than one million Moroccans living in Spain. They are followed by Colombia, with more than 700,000; Romania and Venezuela, with more than half a million; Ecuador, with more than 400,000; and Argentina and Peru, with more than 300,000.

Among the fifteen countries of birth with the largest populations, there are nine Latin American countries (Colombia, Venezuela, Ecuador, Argentina, Peru, Cuba, the Dominican Republic, Bolivia, and Honduras), four European countries (Romania, the United Kingdom, France, and Ukraine), one African country (Morocco), and one Asian country (China).

National policies within the EU are, in truth, impossible to reconcile. Sweden, for example, is in favour of a hard line. The Dutch Prime Minister wants southern countries to take in immigrants and prevent them from continuing north. Greece and Italy feel, as they did in 2016, that the rest of the Union is doing nothing to help them cope with the extra number of new arrivals. The Austrian chancellor wants a wall to be built on the border between Bulgaria and Turkey, etc.

González Ferriz's conclusion is quite true: the fear of politicians, reflecting that of citizens, is real. Of all the identity shifts that Western politics has undergone in the last decade, the anti-immigration shift has been the most influential in politics.

Let us now look at Spain, using the latest projections made by the INE (2022-2072), which project eight scenarios. Of these, two seem to us to be the most significant and useful for analysing what might happen: the central scenario (understood to be the one the INE considers most likely) and the zero net migration scenario (what would happen if there were no immigration or emigration, i.e. how the current population would evolve without foreign contributions or departures abroad).

In summary, the main conclusions drawn from these projections in their central scenario, based on the assumption that there will be no significant upturns in fertility, but only very moderate ones, are as follows:

- 1) The total population of Spain will grow moderately in the coming decades (more than five million people in fifty years), but only due to the arrival of immigrants.
- 2) The number of native Spaniards —the descendants of Spaniards of Spanish origin— will decline alarmingly in the coming decades: by around 14-16 million in the next fifty years.
- 3) Depopulation, i.e. the demographic decline of the regions and provinces that have seen the greatest decline in recent decades, will deepen over the next fifteen years.
- 4) The ageing of the population, whether measured as the percentage of people aged 65 and over or by the average or median age of the population, will continue to increase until it reaches very high levels.
- 5) Loneliness, measured by the percentage of people living alone or the average number of residents per dwelling, will continue to grow.
- 6) Life expectancy will continue to increase over the next half-century, but at a slower rate than that observed from the late 19TH century to the present day.

The INE's projections are very optimistic with regard to immigration, so it seems appropriate to point out that, if the population were closed (without migration), the number of inhabitants in Spain would fall to 33.6 million in 2072, and that in the INE's central hypothesis, net immigration between 2022 and 2072 would be 13.9 million people. This is a figure that is difficult to achieve. Let us see: given that immigrants in Spain have a higher fertility rate than Spaniards, of the 32 million inhabitants in Spain in 2072, eight to nine million would be immigrants or their descendants. This would imply a decline in the native Spanish population of some fourteen to fifteen million people. In other words, over

the next fifty years, the native population would fall from the current 38 million to only 23 or 24 million.

It is safe to say that the problem in Europe is not immigration, but the social integration of immigrants, and this is not an easy problem to solve. The ghettos of foreigners that abound in Europe show the seriousness of this integration problem.

The first party to launch an offensive against irregular immigration was Vox. According to analyst María José Fuenteálamo (2024):

"[...] to say that those who profit most from illegal immigration are the mafias that organise the dangerous, sometimes deadly routes is a rhetorical trope. Sometimes, immigrants themselves also profit. Those who survive the journey find a job, settle down and send money home. But that is just looking at it from a monetary perspective. With immigration, there are other collateral winners. [...] My goal must be to analyse the situation better. I return to the CIS statement: 'The main concern of Spaniards is immigration'. This could be a great statement for immigrants. When someone cares about someone else, they take better care of them, help them, give them a hand. But here the key is not what people are concerned about, but who is concerned—because that's why they vote. The subjects are Spaniards and residents of Spain. People are concerned, the government takes care of it. Also because of the votes."

Data on migration flows exist with varying degrees of credibility. I will cite a study by Fedea (Finotelli and Rincken, 2025): the European Social Survey (ESS), which provides, for Spain and dozens of other countries, some indicators on perceived impacts and preferences regarding the management of flows.

The Neos Foundation and immigration

Proper management of immigration can prevent xenophobia and ensure integration. It is important for society to understand the medium-term effects of immigration, beyond the immediate benefits. The experience of other European countries should serve as a guide for Spain to implement necessary reforms.

The Neos Foundation has just published a report on immigration in Spain, which is well worth reading. To encourage you to read it, below is a summary of the proposals with which the study concludes:

- 1) The government must communicate to the public the effects of the migration process, its benefits, costs and risks.
- 2) Society must demand that those in power manage immigration flows strategically in order to avoid economic and social imbalances, as well as disruptions to coexistence that may be caused by alien values.
- 3) Spain must effectively implement EU directives on immigration.
- 4) The Spanish Parliament must harmonise immigration rules with those approved by other European states and avoid new extraordinary regularisation processes. At the same time, the government must prevent immigration fraud and other factors that may attract secondary migration flows from other countries that apply restrictive policies.
- 5) Net migration should be set at zero for three to five years in order to reorganise existing immigration and reabsorb the millions of unemployed in Spain. This objective should only be waived for professions and activities that are in short supply in the labour market.
- 6) Reinforcement programmes should be implemented in the education system to improve the schooling of foreigners, thereby reducing school failure and raising training levels.
- 7) In order to improve the recruitment of immigrants, it is necessary to ease the rigidity of administrative authorisation, expanding the list of activities that are difficult to cover and facilitating recruitment for SMEs. It is suggested that large companies be allowed to make direct selections at source for positions with a shortage of supply. The new Single Permit Directive for combining work and residence needs to be explained. It is recommended that a combined 12-month visa for tourism and job seeking be implemented for citizens of Latin American countries exempt from visas in the EU, which would help to prevent labour irregularities.

- 8) Agree on a state policy that avoids the *pull factor* and guarantees regular and selective immigration. Abolish extraordinary regularisations of foreigners in an irregular situation.
- 9) With regard to the authorisation of long-term residence in Spain, the income and health insurance requirements established for the EU long-term residence card should be applied.
- 10) Reform the EU Directive and Spanish regulations to prevent abuse of the asylum system.
- 11) Reverse the amendment made in 2015 by the EU Directive, which broadened the group eligible for family reunification from the traditional scope of parents and children under the age of 21 to the "extended family".
- 12) Reserve full social benefits and welfare payments for immigrants with residence permits.
- 13) Prevent extraordinary means of regularisation and tighten up the current rules on long-term residence.
- 14) The set of measures to improve compliance with the law, reduce illegal arrivals and situations of fraud and non-compliance comprises a wide range of measures.

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