Migration balance 2019

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1. The Marlaska effect: the number of arrivals drops by 53% compared to 2018

In January 2019, the Spanish government announced a plan to reduce the number of arrivals of people and boats to our coasts by 50%. At the time, few people thought that it would be possible to achieve this goal without addressing the root causes of migration behind the arrival of 64,120 people the previous year.

These root causes included the closure of the Sicilian channel by Italian authorities in 2018, the chaos and warfare in Libya (a key transit country in the Mediterranean migratory system), as well as poverty and social conflict in countries such as Morocco, which affected thousands of young people and forced them to flee.
The plan laid down by the Delegate Committee for Migration Affairs toward the end of 2018 did not, however, address these root causes. Instead, this plan depended on Morocco’s greater involvement in the control of migration flows – both in its mainland and maritime Search and Rescue responsibilities. In addition, the Spanish government planned to increase its immigrant detention and deportation capacity, by enhancing detention infrastructure as well as increasing resources allocated to detention, identification and deportation procedures along the Andalusian coast. At sea, the government sought to limit the actions of Salvamento Marítimo, the Spanish civil agency responsible for sea Search and Rescue operations, to the bare minimum by making the agency’s working conditions more precarious and by outsourcing some of its responsibilities to Morocco. This plan, designed under the leadership of Spain’s vice president, Carmen Calvo, did not include protections of human rights.

In terms of the number of migrant arrivals, the plan has succeeded: only 26,916 people arrived to southern Spanish coasts in 2019 compared to 57,537 in the previous year – a 53% decrease. Arrivals by land through the borders of Ceuta and Melilla have dropped, albeit more moderately, from 6,583 in 2018 to 6,345 in 2019.

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1 Data collected by APDHA unless specified otherwise.
Moroccan cooperation has come at a high price. In 2019, the European Union transferred 140 million EUR to the Moroccan government for the control of illegal immigration. Part of this budget was administered by the Spanish government. For instance, in June, the Spanish Council of Ministers approved the transfer of 26 million euros for the purchase of 750 vehicles, 15 drones, dozens of scanners and additional technical equipment to support Morocco’s border reinforcement efforts.

In addition to the EU funds, in 2019 the Spanish government contributed 32.2 million euros from its own Budget Contingency Fund. This fund is typically used to cover unforeseen expenses and emergencies like natural disasters. In this current context, however, the government found it appropriate to use the Contingency Fund to partially cover expenses incurred by the Moroccan authorities in their collaboration activities with Spain and the EU concerning the surveillance of borders and the fight against illegal immigration toward Spanish coasts. Eligible expenses include fuel, regular maintenance, daily allowances, and payments to operational staff.

Morocco has claimed its role as a strategic partner in the EU’s and Spain’s anti-immigration strategy. According to Khaled Al-Zerouali, the Director of Immigration and Border Control of the Moroccan Ministry of Interior, Moroccan law enforcement forces have prevented 73,973 attempts of illegal entry into Spain and “rescued” 19,554 migrants at sea.

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2 https://www.elmundo.es/espana/2019/08/12/5d5059cfe45c0000000000000000.html
5 https://www.elmundo.es/espana/2019/08/12/5d5059cfe45c0000000000000000.html
6 This information was published in the following link, which is no longer active https://fr.media7.ma/maroc-74-000-tentatives-de-migration-irreguliere-avortees.html
"I'm not afraid of being stranded in a dinghy on the ocean, I'm afraid of Morocco".

All, 19 years old.

There is little doubt that the Spanish government knew that transferring the control of the southern European border to Morocco would result in the extensive and intensive use of violence against people of sub-Saharan origin present in the country.

The dramatic drop in the number of boat arrivals to Spanish coasts is the result of terrible repression. The association Pateras de la Vida has documented the forced and violent displacement of between 11,600 and 12,000 migrants to southern Morocco; these migrants have often been victims of theft and physical violence at the hands of the Moroccan authorities responsible for their relocation. Despite the fact that many of these migrants were legal residents, the Moroccan government forced them out of the northern part of the country, ostensibly on the basis of commitments made to the EU. Migrants deported from the north have been taken to cities as far away as Errachida, Erfurt, or Beni-Mellal. The Moroccan Association for Human Rights (AMDH) has documented the deportation of another several thousand migrants to the Algerian border. Around 1,500 others have also been deported to their countries of origin.

Besides these forced displacements and deportations, the year 2019 saw the extremely violent dismantling of migrant camps in the forests near the Ceuta and Melilla border fences. State authorities argued that the dismantling of these camps was necessary in order to build a third fence (at the time, there were two) on Moroccan soil. This points to another aspect of the externalization of the EU and Spanish borders: the transfer of the razor wire formerly placed on the old Spanish fences to the new Moroccan ones, which will also be taller and equipped with additional elements to deter migrants' potential attempts.

Previously, Spain’s Salvamento Marítimo (the Spanish civil SAR agency) has carried out SAR operations in Morocco’s area of responsibility due to the latter’s lack of capacity, and always with authorization of the Moroccan government. In 2019, however, due to pressure from Spain and the EU, Morocco began conducting its own SAR operations, with insufficient resources and a lack of professional staff.

The sudden reduction of SAR operations carried out by Salvamento Marítimo – which we define as a criminal move – is yet another element in this strategy to curb arrivals to Spanish coastal areas. While in 2018 a third of the Spanish sea rescue service’s operations took place in Morocco’s zone of responsibility (involving 16,618 persons), in 2019 the Spanish government limited Salvamento Marítimo’s operations to the Spanish SAR responsibility zone. Furthermore, Salvamento Marítimo has received orders to immediately transport migrants rescued in the Moroccan SAR zone to Moroccan ports – in direct violation of the principle of non-refoulement.

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7 https://www.apdha.org/cadiz/?p=3939
8 https://www.eldiario.es/desalambre/Aumentan-violaciones-personas-migrantes-Nador_0_968353318.html
9 https://www.apdha.org/cadiz/?p=3939
11 https://elpais.com/politica/2019/03/26/actualidad/1553613053_040695.html
Along with this effort to limit interventions, the Spanish government is slowly dismantling Salvamento Marítimo. As we have reported on several occasions, professionals at this public agency are working under duress due to insufficient means, the precarization of working conditions in the agency, and a shortage of personnel. Currently they are a civil agency housed within the Ministry of Development, but some of the coordinating responsibilities have been transferred to the mandate of the Guardia Civil (a law enforcement agency under the authority of the Ministry of Defense, Interior, and Finance). The transition has already begun, and since 2019 Salvamento Marítimo requires orders from the Guardia Civil’s Single Command before leaving port on a SAR mission, unnecessarily slowing down life-saving rescue missions.

The militarization of border control goes well beyond the taking over of Salvamento Marítimo’s daily operations by the Single Command. In mid-2019, the Spanish Armed Forces officially joined the “fight against illegal immigration” in the Alboran Sea and the Strait of Gibraltar in the context of the EPN-Indalo operation, financed by Frontex. It is worth noting that Frontex has no rescue mandate whatsoever: their role is simply to “protect” the border.

All of this contributes to the militarization of migration management and the subsequent criminalization of migrants. We anticipate the stakes will be even higher in the future, as the European Border and Coast Guard continues to come into shape, counting among its ranks 5,000 new agents "made in the EU" by 2021, with a total expected force of 10,000 agents on the ground between 2024 and 2027.
The agreements with Morocco had a clear impact on arrivals to Spain. If we focus on the months prior to the implementation of the agreements, we see some variation in the number of arrivals: 4,874 in December 2018 and 3,771 in January 2019. The numbers of arrivals plummeted with the enforcement of the agreements in February, increasing again only in the last quarter of 2019 with the (re)activation of new migratory routes to circumvent the Moroccan blockade.

In addition to the agreement with Morocco, the Spanish government’s plan was met with an expected escalation in the number of boat arrivals and included increasing the number of Temporary Care Centres for Foreigners (in Spanish, Centros de Atención Temporal de Extranjeros or CATEs) already in place in the region of Andalusia. New facilities were made available in record time in Motril, Almeria, Malaga and San Roque; some of these facilities were provisional and temporary (for example, some were repurposed warehouses). Despite their name, these spaces are not actually care centers, but rather detention centers, that function as an extension of police stations, for people arriving to the territory in dinghies. In theory, people cannot be held in these facilities for more than 72 hours.

APDHA has repeatedly stated that there is no such thing as a reception system for migrants arriving to Spain. Instead, most of the funds are earmarked to increase the country’s identification, detention, and deportation capacity. Furthermore, we have reported serious deficiencies in the country’s detention infrastructure, which is not subjected to any kind of normative framework: in fact, the Ministry of Interior does not consider CATEs as detention centres, since they do not meet the criteria established in Regulation 11/2015. In practice, CATEs have become a discriminatory management system that allows the government to expedite the removal of Moroccan nationals thanks to the reactivation of return agreements between the two countries.

The decrease in arrivals to Spanish coasts in 2019 may be explained by the militarization of the border, the outsourcing of migration and border control responsibilities to Morocco, the dismantling and displacement of Salvamento Marítimo’s operations, and the reinforcement of the country’s detention and deportation capacity.
2. Arrivals by zone: the reactivation of the Canary Islands route

The decrease in the number of arrivals to Spain between 2018 and 2019 has mainly taken place on the routes leading to the Andalusian coast (20,309 compared to 52,411 in 2018, or roughly 60%). In the same period, the number of arrivals to the Canary Islands has increased more than twofold.

This decline has been particularly noteworthy in the province (county) of Cadiz. In 2018, 20,084 people entered through Cadiz, compared to 5,805 in 2019: a reduction of 71%. In terms of the number of dinghies used, 1,025 rubber boats were intercepted in Cadiz in 2018 compared to 276 the following year.

Once again, the reason behind the decline of the Western Mediterranean route is Morocco’s involvement through the deployment of its military both at land and at sea. Throughout 2019, this deployment was particularly intense in the zone of the Strait of Gibraltar, between the cities of Tangiers and Tetouan – which was also the main area of sea departures for migrants in 2018. To respond to the reinforcement of the border, migrants arriving to Cadiz from Morocco in 2019 usually departed from sites further south from Casablanca, on the Atlantic coast.

The decrease in the number of arrivals to other provinces such as Malaga, Almeria or Granada – where migrants who departed from less militarized areas arrived – was not as striking. Finally, the number of arrivals to the Balearic Islands, Alicante and, most notably, in the Canary Islands, increased between 2018 and 2019.
Regarding the (re)activation of the eastern Spanish route towards the Levante region, arrivals to the provinces of Alicante, Murcia and the Balearic Islands started to increase in early June. Most of the people using this route came from Algeria, a country undergoing a major political and social crisis, particularly since the beginning of the protests that forced President Bouteflika’s resignation in 2019. Algerian citizens represent 67% of nationals who arrive to the eastern provinces and the Balearic Islands, followed by Moroccans (22%), and others from countries such as Lebanon or Syria.

On the other hand, the number of arrivals to the Canary Islands increased by more than 50% between 2018 (1,425) and 2019 (2,918). The cause, we assume, is the same: the strengthening of control and repression in Northern Morocco by Moroccan authorities has reactivated the Atlantic route with more departures from Senegal, Mauritania, and the Western Sahara.

Arrival through the Spanish enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla in northern Morocco deserves special attention.

The number of arrivals to Ceuta by sea decreased by 569 people in 2019. On the other hand, 230 more people arrived by boat through the fences separating Spanish and Moroccan territories. More concretely, 684 persons arrived in Ceuta by sea in 85 dinghies and 1,361 persons have arrived across the land border in 2019. The official point of entry of El Tarajal was the main point of access. Two events involving migrant persons being smuggled though the land border were particularly noteworthy: the accident of a car with 7 people that left one passenger in critical condition in May, and the interception of a van with 52 people in November. We do not know how many migrants have successfully crossed the border through this checkpoint.
Regarding entries through the border fence (and not through designated points of entry), in August 2019 155 people managed to access Ceuta near the small settlement of Benzú, in Spanish territory, eight of which were violently rejected. Violent pushbacks along the border predate the agreements with Morocco discussed here. In October 2019, a provincial tribunal convicted 9 of the 602 people that participated in a group jump over the fence in July 2018. This was the first verdict to be made for immigrants for trying to jump the fence to enter Spanish territory.

As we denounced at the time, this verdict not only further criminalizes migrants, but it also intends to deter further arrivals through the message of exemplary punishment. Even though Spanish legislation establishes that accessing the national territory through an unauthorized point is an administrative offence and not a crime – and neither, in the case of refugees and asylum seekers –, the Spanish government continues to treat these actions as if they were criminal offences. But instead of achieving its intended (official) goal – i.e., discouraging smugglers – the conviction of a few randomly selected people accused of instigating and organizing the fence jumps has exacerbated the xenophobic and racist discourse against migrants present in Spain.

In the case of Melilla, despite the announcement by the Minister of the Interior in March of a 77% reduction in arrivals, 4,984 people entered by land and 995 by sea – roughly the same number as in 2018.

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13 https://www.eldiario.es/desalambre/migrantes-condenados_0_983402482.html
14 https://www.servimedia.es/noticias/1120028
Attempts of crossing the Melilla border fence last year were insignificant, except for those that took place on the 15th May and the 19th September of 2019, with 50 nationals of sub-Saharan countries during each attempt. The most common method of access by land is through the official border crossings of Beni Enzar and Farhana. Other isolated events resulted in the detention of migrants and asylum seekers by Spanish state security forces.15

The arrival of migrants by sea has typically not involved direct arrivals to the coast of Melilla. Instead, migrants (mostly women and minors from sub-Saharan countries and men from Asian countries) arrive to the uninhabited Chafarinas Islands and are transferred to Melilla by Spanish official authorities.16 The majority of these border crossings took place between August and December.

In regards to the information discussed in APDHA’s 2019 annual report, we wish to highlight the lack of transparency and the hurdles we have faced to access official administrative (quantitative) data from the Ministry of the Interior, the regional Government Delegation, the Security Forces and the CATEs.

3. A detailed analysis of migrants’ arrivals to the Spanish coast through the Southern Border

Morocco’s actions, which seek to implement the country’s agreements with the EU and Spain, have also had an impact on the profile of people arriving to the southern Spanish coast, notably their country of origin, gender and age.

As a direct consequence of the violent raids in and deportations from Morocco, for the first time in many years the relative weight of sub-Saharan migrants arriving to Spain has dropped significantly compared to those of Maghrebian descent. Thus, while in 2018 62% of arrivals from Morocco were migrants from sub-Sahara Africa, the share diminished to 54% in 2019.

The drop in the number of sub-Saharan nationals is particularly significant in the province of Cadiz, where this group accounted for only 12% of the total arrivals compared to 87% of Moroccan nationals. The greater control and deployment, as well as the deportations by Morocco in the area between Tangier and Tetouan, explains this.

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15 See for example: 2 de octubre accede un hombre solo de origen subsahariano a través de la valla de Melilla. https://elfarodemelilla.es/nuevo-salto-valla-un-inmigrante- llega-solitario-ciudad/
24 octubre detienen a un hombre en Melilla cuando intentaba pasar a una niña de origen sirio a través de la frontera. http://medios.mugak.eu/noticias/602793/noticia; El 30 de noviembre accede un solo hombre de origen subsahariano a través de la valla de Melilla. http://medios.mugak.eu/noticias/603175/noticia
18 diciembre: 2 mujeres detenidas en la frontera de Farhana al intentar introducir a una mujer de origen libanés. http://medios.mugak.eu/noticias/606675/noticia; El 22 de diciembre consiguieron entrar por Melilla a través de la valla 3 hombres de origen marroquí http://medios.mugak.eu/noticias/606941/noticia
PN detiene a una mujer que llevaba en un carro de la compra a una mejor de origen palestino escondida. https://elfarodemelilla.es/intentar-introducir-melilla-nino-carro-de-la-compra/?fbclid=IwAR2jY-FP1fDNafvPmEz4i6ByaACbKkf_Qq9Og6GmftH1L8jHjUcJ2-wnad3Y
The same is true for the evolution of the share of migrant women between 2018 and 2019. Historically, the number of sub-Saharan women crossing the Strait has been higher than the number of Moroccan women. However, since the former have been expelled to Morocco’s south to prevent their migration, their participation in Spain-bound migration has dropped from 17% of total arrivals in 2018 to 12.63% in 2019. The case of Cadiz is once again noteworthy, as only 5.77% of arrivals in 2019 were women – a percentage much lower than in other destination counties.
In terms of age distribution, and despite the general decrease of migrant arrivals to Spain’s southern coasts, the number of children arriving (both accompanied and unaccompanied) increased from 7,053 in 2018 to 8,066 in 2019. Accordingly, the share of minors in the total number of arrivals has increased significantly, from 12% to 29%. The continuing departure of minors from Morocco has been a recurrent phenomenon for several years. The protracted social and political crisis in Morocco, specifically in the north of the country and particularly in the Rif area, fuels this phenomenon. Thousands of Moroccan youth experience a lack of opportunities and perceive migration as their only option.

According to newspaper El País, an official survey carried out by the High Commission for Planning (the Moroccan national statistics office) revealed that 23.3% of the participants in the survey wanted to emigrate – among those under 30 the percentage that increased to 40.3% of participants. But the association Pateras de la Vida estimates that 70% of the people under 30 in northern Morocco see migration as an opportunity (if not the only way) out of a life they perceive as hopeless.

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4. Hundreds of people lose their lives on the southern border because of the deadly migration policies

Since 2006 – following the country’s handling of the so-called “dinghy crisis” in the Canary Islands and the implementation of the first Africa Plan – Spain has been a pioneer in the European Union’s approach to migration control. This history may explain the government’s level of comfort when providing funds to Morocco for the repression of migration.

While these policies – which Migreurop calls the “war against migrants”19 – have succeeded in reducing the number of arrivals, they have done so at the expense of tremendous human rights violations, suffering and loss of lives. The most direct measurement of this suffering is the number of deaths at sea. According to our own numbers, in 2019, 585 people lost their lives while trying to cross the southern Spanish border. Although the absolute figure is less than half that for the previous year, the percentage of migrants who have died when trying to cross the border has increased.

Year after year, hundreds of people looking for a better future and the opportunity to exercise their freedom of movement die trying to reach Spanish coasts in the Mediterranean and the Atlantic. European migration policies have turned our seas into mass graves.20

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Since the first documented migrant drowning off the coast of Cadiz in 1988, when a body was found on Tarifa’s coast, more than 8,000 people have died trying to cross the southern Spanish border. Governments have adopted a “letting die” approach (which we have called tanatopolitics and others have called necropolitics) with no consideration to the dead or their families. There are many relatives waiting for permission to travel to Spain to honour their loved ones and who find themselves trapped in a bureaucratic maze compounded by the systemic lack of coordination between the different administrative bodies. Bureaucratic disorganization, jurisdictional overlaps and gaps, and the absence of clearly established responsibilities and mandates mean that institutions are unable to properly carry out their work – or find it easy to pass on the responsibility. In the meanwhile, families cannot say goodbye to their loved ones with a minimum of dignity. At best, migrants drowned at sea have a gravestone with the word “migrant” written on it.

There are other consequences. Migration policies that promote the rejection and criminalization of migrants are at the root of an anti-democratic, racist and xenophobic tendency in Spain. The far-right has seized this opportunity to impose their agenda against migrants, and this agenda is taking hold in society. The increase in hate speech based on misinformation and hoaxes is growing, and the universality of human rights is being questioned in Spanish mainstream society and in political discourse. The vibrant diversity of Spain’s immigrant population is being erased in favour of a discourse that homogenizes, dehumanizes, and criminalizes it. The false information promoted by political parties across the political spectrum is not just morally reprehensible, but also has devastating impacts as it advances xenophobia and racism against migrants within the country.

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21 See documentary, “30 años de memoria sumergida” by Diputación de Cádiz https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JAV3U5Pa4cl