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Comparing Migration Policy Narratives

Denmark, Spain and the limits of transferability



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At a glance

Europe's social democracies seemingly have two alternative migration policy narratives to choose from. The Danish model, which claims that a viable welfare state depends on closed borders, and the Spanish model, which suggests that prosperity depends on openness. This opposition between Copenhagen and Madrid shapes the debate. In this paper we examine the two cases and highlight the specific economic structures, institutional arrangements and historical paths that underpin these narratives. Indeed, they would make no sense without them. Instead of seeking a transferable model, this paper clarifies the conditions under which the two narratives are most persuasive, and provides some pointers for the German context.

Narratives owe their potency to their ability to translate politics into something more tangible: they confer order on complexity, establish causality and – perhaps their most consequential effect – construct a collective »we«, which defines belonging and legitimises exclusion. They exert their effects by means of a setting, a plot and a set of characters, although they owe their stability and effectiveness to their interaction with existing institutional and cultural foundations.

Denmark: in defence of the welfare state

Denmark's Social Democrats are eager to frame migration as a fiscal management issue. Every penny spent on asylum seekers is one less penny available for schools and pensions. While it's true that the Social Democrats have played a decisive role in shaping this narrative, its continuing potency – going back decades – is rooted in a cross-party acceptance shared by both the state authorities and across the political spectrum. Key to this is a socially deeply ingrained notion of ethnic homogeneity. But as asylum figures continue to fall, this narrative of the welfare state in peril is increasingly giving ground to the security discourse of the right.

Spain: migration as economic driver

Spain's ruling Socialist Workers' Party (PSOE) presents migration as a demographic imperative. This position is endorsed by a broad coalition including the Spanish Central Bank, business organisations and the church. The narrative is rooted in the intertwining of migration and economic growth over decades in such key sectors as construction, tourism and agriculture. Having said that, it is very much based on hardnosed economics, chiefly the exploitation of cheap labour.

The two narratives share structural similarities. They are embedded in collective self-perceptions and oriented towards delivering concrete benefits, gaining stability from cross-party institutional alliances.

Three strategic points of departure suggest themselves with a view to formulating a social democratic migration narrative for Germany: the activation of historical and structural resources, the establishment of broad institutional alliances beyond party politics and integrating migration as a natural component of an overarching-project for a social democratic future.

Against this background even a preliminary mapping of the German terrain suggests more options for a progressive approach to migration than the current defensive crouch might suggest.

1.

Introduction

The so-called »Danish way« has been touted as the holy grail in halting the progress of the right from the British Labour Party via the Döskozil wing of the SPÖ to parts of Germany's SPD (Leonard 2025a; Meinhart 2023). The idea is that working class voters can be won back without veering to the right economically by pitting migration against the welfare state. In the opposite corner, generally represented by party factions on the left and trade unions, stands Spain's Pedro Sánchez. His success is taken as evidence that a progressive policy based on openness can still command majority support, as long as it is framed in an economically sensible way (Encarnación 2025).

In the political debate this is often reduced to a choice between »Copenhagen or Madrid?« or perhaps »toughness or openness«. But such a narrow framing is scarcely amenable to the formulation of a properly tailored migration policy narrative. Recipes for political success and their related narratives cannot easily be transferred from one national context to another. Rather they are the result of specific historical, economic and institutional conditions, a national »terrain« in which a narrative must be embedded in a variety of ways if it is to be credible and effective.

In this context, comparing the migration policy narrative policies of Denmark and Spain may help us to better conceptualise their logic of construction. How do such structural realities as the Danish Budget Act, Spain's labour market needs and the countries' respective welfare state systems give rise to identity-forming political narratives, and how do they resonate with social democratic values? This paper deliberately avoids a comprehensive and substantive examination of migration policy measures. Its analytical focus lies instead on the strategic-communicative dimension: how do political narratives take shape through an engagement with their structural prerequisites; how are they anchored institutionally; and under what conditions do they remain viable?

The analysis is divided into four sections. Section 1 discusses why in polarised political domains narratives shape how we think and talk about politics and what context-dependent conditions determine their success. In Sections 2 and 3 this framework is applied to Denmark and Spain, with a reconstruction of their respective narratives, an analysis of the historical and institutional terrain that made them politically potent in the first place, as well as a critical evaluation of their limitations. Section 4 presents some reflections on the strategic considerations needed to develop a sustainable narrative.

The analysis is based not only on an assessment of primary sources and the academic literature, but also on conversations with experts from the two countries, including Dr Susi Meret (University of Aalborg) and Professor Ferruh Yilmaz (Tulane University), as well as representatives of the FES office in Madrid and contacts from Danish and Spanish institutions.

2.

The significance of narratives in times of political polarisation

Politics is about more than facts and data. Narratives have always played a central role in election campaigns and the work of governments. This is based on the observation that people tend to process information largely through stories. Narratives reduce complexity by sorting fragmented information in terms of causal connections. They are not merely a rhetorical technique but a fundamental cognitive strategy. Successful political narratives tend to have a recognisable structure: a concrete setting, clearly defined characters (heroes, villains, victims), a causal plot and also a moral of the story that makes political solutions seem like a logical conclusion.¹

But not every well constructed story hits its mark. The context, the credibility of the »sender« and the receptiveness of the addressee (or receiver) are three necessary, but not sufficient conditions of success.

Conditions for a successful narrative

1. **Context.** Narratives are most effective where people are seeking orientation, in conditions of uncertainty, complexity and perceived threat. Migration meets these conditions: the topic is multi-layered, emotionally fraught and one of the central issues of public debate.
2. **The narrative has to be credible:** this implies internal coherence and external evidence. Political actors need data to back up their stories, even if they are often presented somewhat selectively. The trustworthiness of the sender is also important. Parties enjoying a certain issue ownership in a given area are more likely to be listened to than newcomers lacking a track record.
3. **The receivers or addressees must be receptive:** effective narratives stimulate the imagination and enable people to visualise stories. They confirm existing convictions rather than create conflict. They fit in with the identity, values and perceived interests of the target group.

Not only that, but what galvanises people in one country, turns them off in another. Narratives are embedded in existing political struggles and historically developed patterns of interpretation. Societal common sense² – in other words, what is taken to be self-evident – is largely shaped by established structures.

Constitutions codify particular values. Welfare systems embody specific notions of solidarity. Economic models shape material reality and conflicts about distribution. Education systems transmit certain stories about national identity. Media structures boost some voices and marginalise others. Narratives are strategies by means of which political forces »respond to specific historical situations recursively, in other ways on the basis of experience« (Kannankulam and Georgi 2012: 39). A narrative will hit its mark only if it connects with common sense: not necessarily by fully reaffirming it, but by remaining sufficiently legible within it. This creates a narrow range of possible narratives that vary between societies. And while political conflicts are increasingly transnational, potent political narratives seem to remain primarily national.

In particular since the rise of right-wing populist movements in Europe and the United States in the 2010s a further dimension of narratives has attracted more attention, namely identity formation. Narratives perform a dual function in this instance. They offer concrete policy solutions, at the same time anchoring them in a collective identity. The »we« that is constructed in this fashion serves as an Archimedean point for the narrative, and the relevant policy measure cannot be dismissed as some random option, but as a logical consequence of one's own nature (»we're doing this because that's who we are«). At the same time, the narrative has a reciprocal effect on the group. By managing to frame the policy as an expression of its own values, it reinforces the very »we« from which it arose.

Two analytical consequences emerge from this for social democratic policymakers seeking effective narratives.

1. Analysis of the terrain. Political narratives do not emerge from thin air, but always in a national, strategically selective (see Jessop 1999) terrain. Effective strategies thus

¹ For an account of the theoretical foundations of these structural characteristics see primarily Jones and McBeth (2010). The analysis in this paper draws heavily on the Narrative Policy Framework (NPF) they have developed.

² For Gramsci »common sense« (*senso comune*) is a fragmented, pre-critical worldview belonging to a particular social stratum. Although it is not shared universally many regard it as simply how things are, thereby effectively legitimising society's status quo (see Hall/O'Shea 2013: 9).

cannot be imported, but need to be grounded in some sort of society-specific common sense: what latent notions of solidarity and norms of justice might be found amidst local everyday shared understandings that might be turned to progressive use?

2. The political party as organiser of the »we«. Policy alone is not sufficient in an antagonistic environment. Political parties, functioning as a kind of »modern prince« (cf. Spours 2016), must take the initiative in constructing a kind of collective will. They can bundle together disparate groups by means of a consistent interpretative framework that can translate concrete government actions into an identity-forming narrative. A renewal project will be stabilised only when it offers its own constituency not merely economic solutions, but also a sense of cultural belonging.

In what follows, based on migration policy narratives in Denmark and Spain, we shall outline how social democratic parties operate under different conditions. Our focus will be on the conditions we have identified for success. Has the national terrain been properly assessed so that the narrative resonates with a shared historical understanding (or »common sense«)? And are these particular narratives capable of constructing a long-term »we« that can not only counter the rise of the right in the short term but may serve as the basis for a progressive counter-hegemony going forward?

3.

In practice: Denmark

3.1 The Danish claim to universality

The Danish model occupies a special place in the current debate on the renewal of European social democracy. Virtually no other party is so often cited as a point of reference as the Danish Social Democrats. Mette Frederiksen led her party back into government after years in opposition, reaffirming its position as the strongest political force in March 2026.³ Party strategists have enthusiastically marketed this success story as a political export. Such figures as Minister for Immigration and Integration Kaare Dybvad Bek and Frederiksen's long-time spin doctor Martin Rossen have issued veritable playbooks in the international media. With articles such as »What the SPD can learn from Denmark« or »Denmark shows how [UK] Labour can defeat the

populist right« they are trying to characterise their national strategy as a generalisable solution for the crisis of European social democracy (Leonard 2025b; Dybvad Bek 2025). Frederiksen herself has a pragmatic response to her European critics: »If they have better policies, why aren't they winning elections?« (Frederiksen quoted in POLITICO 2026)

In their efforts to explain their model Danish strategists emphasise one tactical move above all others: the consistent decoupling of the immigration debate from culture-war or ethnic issues. Their narrative steers well clear of identity and sticks ruthlessly to the economic viability of the welfare state. This framing is intended to legitimise the harsh measures the policy entails in terms of social democratic caring.⁴

3.2 The Danish narrative: defending the welfare state

The setting: an economic zero sum game

The welfare state is a closed system that would collapse if the ratio between contributors and recipients was disrupted. The core message here is that non-Western migration costs the state a net 31 billion krone a year (Finansministeriet 2020). The state budget is portrayed as a zero-sum game. Every krone that goes into the asylum system is lost to the schools, hospitals and pensions of hardworking Danish people.

The characters: the elite vs reality

Villains: The enemy is already among us. It is primarily the cosmopolitan elite or what education minister Mattias Tesfaye has described as the »creative class«, which according to him is spatially and socially disconnected from the majority. He accuses them of cutting themselves off and obsessing about »what kind of area they get to live in«⁵ (Tesfaye 2017). According to Minister for Immigration and Integration Kaare Dybvad Bek their moral sin involves turning away from social reality and instead mocking their fellow citizens who complain

about problems with integration (Dybvad Bek 2017), while they themselves are socially insulated.

Victims: The average Danish worker (often referred to under the generic name »Arne«) suffers economically, but the main thing is that nobody listens to him. For years, his legitimate demand to regain control of the borders has been dismissed as racism. But he represents a community based on solidarity whose trust is at breaking point because of uncontrolled immigration.

Heroes: Mette Frederiksen, with the backing of a loyal party leadership, portrays herself as the sole authentic social democrat: »Being a traditional Social Democratic thinker means you cannot allow everyone who wants to join your society to come«. Otherwise, it would be »impossible to have a sustainable society, especially when you are a welfare society like we are«. This claim to be taking charge is legitimised by what she frames as her break with the naivety of the past: »For decades, it was as if the politicians in Christiansborg and the population lived in separate worlds. I know. Because I myself understood much too late how bad it was« (Leonhardt 2025).

³ After receiving only around 21.9 per cent of the votes, however, the Social Democrats suffered their worst result since far back in 1903. Mette Frederiksen is the likely prime minister, but the formation of a government in a highly fragmented parliament has proven to be a difficult task. Even though this result is clearly a bitter setback for the party (see Tagesspiegel 2026), Frederiksen remains prime minister and one of the most influential figures in European social democracy.

⁴ Rossen is quoted as saying: »Frederiksen's achievement was to find an authentically social democratic approach. She decoupled the debate about migration from arguments about race and culture and linked it to one about the future of the Danish social model and the welfare state« (see Leonard 2025b).

⁵ In the original Danish: »bevidste om, hvilke områder der er værd at bo i« (Tesfaye 2017). Tesfaye draws a direct comparison here with the economic upper tier in order to highlight the spatial and social isolation of the educated elite from the working class.

The plot in the social democratic narrative

In a globalised world Denmark's welfare state acts like a magnet, and open borders inevitably result in the inundation of the system. The real tragedy is domestic: cosmopolitan elites dismiss the likes of Arne's appeal for controls as racism and disregard his concerns. The turning point came in 2015 when pictures of rampant flows of refugees shed a harsh light on the failure to control the borders. Frederiksen took over the party, broke with the cosmopolitan elites and sided with the Arnes of this world. The solution was to demagnetise the magnet. All stays were to be strictly temporary, with the ultimate goal of turning off the tap of asylum applications. Integration efforts would be replaced by repatriation schemes (Sandberg 2025). The government would finally start listening to Arne and he'd regain his dignity.

Moral: domestic solidarity

The Social Democrats claim issue ownership over the welfare state. This is their core issue. From this arises their confected predicament afflicting the welfare state as a closed system based on mutual trust, which implies the stark alternative of strict controls or collapse. Accordingly, immigration controls are an unfortunate necessity in order to ensure the privileges of the national base in a globalised economy. According to the narrative this doesn't represent a deviation from social democratic values but their defence (cf. Frederiksen 2019).

3.3 Analysis of the terrain

3.3.1 The economic deep structure of the welfare state

In Denmark the welfare state is the main component of Danes' core identity, to which they are willing to devote a considerable portion of their incomes. Roughly speaking, it can be calculated that 80 per cent of the population pay 80 per cent of the taxes in order to receive 80 per cent of the benefits in return (Lehmann 2011). Because citizens finance this system themselves through heavy contributions, it is not considered to be »state charity« but more like a hard-earned personal investment, which must be maintained as such at all costs.

Brakes on productivity and labour market structure: maintaining the welfare state at this level requires high entry-level wages (ca. 20 euros an hour) and productivity to match. Migrants lacking formally recognised qualifications often fall at this hurdle. According to the OECD (2025) the employment gap between natives and non-EU migrants in Denmark stands at around 18–20 percentage points, which is much higher than in the UK's deregulated labour market, where it is only around 5–8 percentage points. In contrast to the UK a lack of qualifications in Denmark does not lead to the low wage sector but rather to unemployment, thereby imposing a burden on the taxpayer.

Fiscal restrictions: This was exacerbated by the 2012 Budget Law, which in effect prohibits borrowing to cover current expenditure. Despite its extremely low public debt (around 30 per cent of GDP in 2024, in comparison with over 110 per cent in France, for example) Denmark is subject to artificial scarcity. Strict municipal spending caps mean that more expenditure on refugees often necessitate direct cuts in other sectors, which means that people feel the effects of competition for tax revenues directly (Suen-son et al. 2016).

3.3.2 Historical and cultural roots: the genesis of exclusive solidarity

The power of this narrative is also discernible in the specific development of the Danish welfare state. Up until the second half of the twentieth century Denmark was one of the most ethnically homogenous societies in Europe. Up to 1980, 97 per cent of Denmark's inhabitants had been born in the country (Jørgensen et al. 2015). Even at the height of *Gastarbeiter* recruitment around 1973 the total number of foreign workers was only around 20,000. This was a small group but it was Danish society's first encounter with non-Nordic immigration (Wium Olesen et al. 2019). This homogeneity was regarded as one of the fundamental pillars of Danish society and the natural framework for welfare-state solidarity.

»Danmark for folket« – national coding: The ideological foundations for all this were laid as early as the 1930s by Social Democrat prime minister Thorvald Stauning with his »Danmark for folket« (Denmark for the People) programme. Originally, the intention behind this slogan was class oriented, with a view to unifying workers and rural peasantry. Over time, a sense of solidarity emerged from this, centred on a definition of the welfare state as being for the exclusive benefit of the national community. Historically, then, Danish universalism can be understood as something for all Danes, but not necessarily for all those living on Danish territory (Campani/Lazaridis/Benveniste 2016: 6).

A break with homogeneity and the emergence of welfare chauvinism (1980s): In the 1980s some demographic changes became discernible as a result of family reconciliation among guest workers and a rise in asylum applications, which had increased to 9,000 in the peak year 1986 from under 3,000. Although these figures were low by international comparison – even in 1980 Germany ex-

perienced over 100,000 applications and Sweden twice as many as Denmark – it gave rise to an intensive media debate on a putative »inundation of foreigners«. Even at that time, »protecting the welfare state« was already being used as a synonym for defending the Danish way of life. This interpretation increasingly pervaded Danish social democracy, stoked by mayors of Copenhagen's western suburbs (Vestegnen), a Social Democrat stronghold, who warned of the emergence of culturally parallel communities (Wium Olesen et al. 2019).

3.3.3 The mainstreaming of welfare chauvinism in social democracy

The current stance of Denmark's Social Democrats is thus the result of a long process. Over a period of decades the party has internalised the logic of welfare chauvinism, driven by strategic exigencies and with political opponents breathing down their neck.

Laying the ideological groundwork: Rasmussen's »rights and duties« (1990s). Poul Nyrup Rasmussen laid the groundwork for all this as early as the 1990s. Although he drew a strict moral distinction from the right-wing populists and denied that the Danish People's Party would ever be »respectable«, ⁶ he did usher in a decisive rhetorical shift: he transposed the traditional labour market policy doctrine of »rights and duties« (*Ret og Pligt*) to integration policy. He thus enshrined within social democracy the notion that access to social benefits was not a universal human right but a reward for cultural assimilation and economic usefulness (Wium Olesen et al. 2019).

Breaching the dam: the DF as kingmaker (2001–2011).

The actual catalyst for this shift in the whole political spectrum, however, was the period of Danish Liberal Party government from 2001. During this decade the Danish People's Party functioned as parliamentary kingmaker, using this position to strike an effective deal: they would ensure majorities for (neo)liberal economic reforms as long as they could dictate immigration policy in return. It was at this time that the zero-sum logic underlying the idea that immigration would financially wreck the welfare state was mainstreamed, with no pushback even from the opposition (Meret 2025)

The government of Helle Thorning-Schmidt (2011–2015) was characterised by a consolidation of the restrictive approach, albeit under social democratic leadership. Although the government toned down some of the harsher (symbolic) instances of the get-tough policy, for example, by improving conditions in asylum centres, the basic structure of the restrictive legislation remained in place because the

narrative of the conflict between immigration and a strong welfare state was no longer up for debate within the party. As early as 2011 the »A Fair Solution« policy programme was underpinned by the conviction that the welfare state must be protected. This approach culminated at the very latest in the 2015 election campaign in an open welfare nationalism, at a time when humanitarian rhetoric gave way to economic austerity. With slogans such as »If you come to Denmark you have to work« Thorning-Schmidt ⁷ re-affirmed the notion that solidarity is an exclusive resource and must be protected through the imposition of strict conditionalities. This paved the way for the subsequent policy of paradigm shift (Meret 2025).

3.3.4 Synthesis: migration controls as communal common sense

The Danish common sense to which Mette Frederiksen's narrative refers has over decades become enshrined in the very fabric of the state. But the arguments marshalled in defence of this view are produced (and reproduced) not by right-wing think tanks, but by the state bureaucracy itself. When the national statistical authorities and ministries develop their own categories for non-Western citizens and precisely calculate their net cost to the state budget the narrative that they constitute a burden has acquired official objectivity.

The strategic manoeuvre the Danish social democrats performed here was thus not a matter of getting a whole new discourse off the ground, but rather of claiming the competence to be able to tackle most effectively a reality that already enjoys the sanction of the state. They positioned themselves as the most credible defenders of a welfare state culturally coded as an exclusive collective asset and whose status as being under threat is already institutionally entrenched.

This specific state of affairs also explains why the Danish way cannot really be transposed to other national contexts. The blueprint depends implicitly on the basic historical conditions of a largely homogenous society and a political economic structure that treats migration mainly as a cost factor and reproduces it as such in statistics and discourse. The Danish model would lack the underlying conditions it requires in countries in which migration has historically been regarded as an economic imperative or culturally the norm.

⁶ The then Social Democratic Prime Minister used this phrase on 7 October 1999, during the opening debate of the Danish Parliament (*Folketinget*), when he addressed the Danish People's Party directly: »No matter how hard you try, in my eyes, you'll never be respectable!« (In the original Danish: "Uanset, hvor mange anstrengelser, man gør sig – set med mine øjne – stuerene, det bliver I aldrig!") (Rasmussen 1999).

⁷ In the original Danish: »En Fair Løs« and »Kommer du til Danmark, skal du arbejde«. In spring 2015 these slogans were the main messages of a nationwide Social Democrat poster campaign (see Mark 2015).

3.4 The limits of the Danish narrative

In order to assess the viability of the Danish model it is worth taking a critical look at its main thesis, which is that the economic framing of immigration is key to reining in right-wing populist advances. This assumption is historically dubious. Since the late 1990s Danish governments have tried to win back voters with restrictive measures and appeals to the costs of immigration, but without really permanently driving down support for right-wing populists.

The structural weakness in this narrative is that by consistently framing immigration as a fiscal management problem, it becomes decreasingly realistic to convincingly portray an acute threat when asylum numbers decline. There were approximately 1,800 applications in 2025 and only 860 approved applications in 2024 (see AFP 2026), while the system operated at subsistence level. The fact is that since at least 2019 negative public attitudes towards immigration have been motivated primarily by security concerns and not by perceptions of socioeconomic threats (Hercowitz-Amir et al. 2019).

The strategic consequence of this was a shift in the discourse towards security policy and cultural threats. The Social Democrats under Frederiksen have increasingly taken up security concerns that traditionally belonged among the core competences of the (centre) right. Strikingly, they have

adopted the right's interpretative framing, without offering one of their own.⁸ A comparison with Ukrainian refugees shows that a consistent economic logic is not being applied here, but rather a selective construction of the problem. Although these Ukrainians' employment rate stagnated at around 53 per cent no one talked about a threat to the welfare state. Immigrants from MENAPT countries (Middle East, North Africa, Pakistan and Turkey, Danish categories for non-Western immigration) by contrast continue to be framed as a cost, even though their labour force participation recently reached historic highs (around 71 per cent among men). So what really underlies this distinction? Education minister Tesfaye gave away some clues: positive economic data are not enough; what really counts is »cultural integration« (Neff and Scherrer 2022). The link between cultural otherness and security risks has become so embedded in Danes' public consciousness that it's scarcely necessary to spell it out.⁹

It remains to be seen whether the Danish Social Democrats can maintain their success. Criticisms from their own base regarding abolition of the Store Bededag holiday or the possible raising of the retirement age undermine their social policy narrative from the inside. And the decisive question remains, can a party that depends on the security framing of the right remain competitive on this terrain? Or does it ultimately just strengthen the credibility of the original?

⁸ Frederiksen was quoted in the Danish press as saying: »Many of us are aware that an attack can occur at an S-train station, or that a young guy can be sitting alone in the back of a bus, and suddenly two or three individuals with an Arab background come in and assault him. That insecurity is the absolute biggest problem (...).« And also: »This fundamentally changes only when the Muslim community in Denmark itself says that everyone must behave properly« (Larsen 2025). This kind of language differs markedly from how the Danish model is marketed to European sister parties as a sober, pragmatic welfare state policy.

⁹ However, there is little empirical evidence to underpin such perceptions: Danes vastly overestimate the crime rate among young MENAPT men – by nearly eight times (27 per cent instead of the actual 3.5 per cent). This finding highlights the social context shaping people's perceptions of security policy, whatever policymakers' intentions (see Nielsen et al. 2025).

4. Spain

4.1 Opening up instead of isolation – Spain’s alternative approach

Alongside Denmark, Spain is the country whose immigration policy narrative is being discussed most intensively among Europe’s social democrats. Pedro Sánchez, prime minister and leader of the Partido Socialista Obrero Español (PSOE), has governed since 2018, since 2023 in a minority coalition. Recently his government’s plan to regularise the labour market status of over 500,000 people without valid residence status in a one-off legalisation has been the focus of international attention. Across the globe this move has been portrayed as a stark exception in a

fortress Europe fraught with restrictions (see, for example, Jones 2026; Tagliapietra 2026; Wandler 2026).

In common with the Danish Social Democrats the PSOE is not content to restrict itself to domestic communication of its narrative. The fact that in early 2026 Sánchez published an article in the *New York Times* entitled »I’m the Prime Minister of Spain. This Is Why the West Needs Migrants« (Sánchez 2026) makes it clear that Spain intends to speak out as an important voice in the international debate, explicitly acting as a beacon for other European social democratic parties.

4.2 The Spanish narrative: migration as economic driver

The setting:

The demographic dilemma: Sánchez opens his contribution to the *New York Times* by declaring an existential threat to Spain’s prosperity: in common with the West as a whole the country faces a »sharp demographic decline«, that puts the pension and health care systems in acute jeopardy. The narrative setting emphasises that human labour is irreplaceable. Sánchez underlines that »neither AI nor robots« can fill this gap, certainly not in the short term. At stake here is the Spanish welfare state. Furthermore, if it does nothing Spain is at risk of becoming a »closed and impoverished« country (Sánchez 2026).

The characters

Villains: Lined up against this view is a political class that denies demographic reality and frankly would rather perish than admit that we need immigration. Sánchez describes these forces as »MAGA-style leaders«, a term that characterises right-wing politicians as importing an aggressive, un-Spanish, foreign ideology. Their methods are »both unlawful and cruel« (Sánchez 2026); whoever chooses to hunt and then deport rather than integrating immigrants is also choosing isolation, shortages and decline. This reproach is directed less at the Spanish people than at those political actors trying to peddle a false picture of reality.

Victims: The narrative constructs two overlapping victim groups. First, immigrants themselves, people already living and working in the community, but legally precarious, and thus unable to perform their duties however much they might want to. Second, Spanish society as a whole, which runs the risk of impoverishment because the politics of isolation is undermining its own economic foundations.

Heroes: Pedro Sánchez portrays himself and his party as pragmatists with a moral backbone. The heroes include not only the government but also the »nearly two [out] of three Spaniards« who recognise the necessity of immigration (Sánchez 2026). Together with civil society (900 NGOs and the church, which back the push towards regularisation) and the business sector, this broad societal majority makes up an alliance of sanity.

The plot of the social democrats’ narrative

While the rest of the West finds itself trapped in a spiral of isolation and labour shortages Spain has benefitted from a historical memory of its own emigration and is able to treat immigration as a resource rather than a security risk, from which it is reaping a demographic dividend that others are denied. This narrative frames the ongoing attacks by the right, based on polarisation and disinformation (see, for example, Democrata 2026) as a demagogic threat to a project that is working well, and one that must be resisted.

Moral: do not be deterred

Regularisation is not an act of charity, but the logical consequence of Spain's own recipe for success. Whoever is already working, living in the community and could pay taxes – but is not able to, at present – would be taken out of the shadow economy and integrated

into the mainstream. Spain has already proved that openness creates prosperity. With regularisation the country is committing itself even more resolutely to this understanding.

4.3 Analysis of the terrain

4.3.1 Spain's extraordinary growth

For most of the twentieth century Spain was itself a land of emigration. Between 1960 and 1973 alone around 100,000 people left the country every year (Hooper 2019). The turning point came with the demise of the Franco dictatorship in 1975 and accession to the European Economic Community (EEC) in 1986. Since then the foreign population has grown from 279,000 in 1990 to just under 5 million in 2009. Spain's economic dynamic changed fundamentally in particular after adoption of the euro. Between 1997 and 2007 the economy grew by an average 3.5 per cent every year, twice the EU average. This growth was driven primarily by low-efficiency, labour-intensive sectors; in other words, sectors that benefitted most from cheap capital and loose regulation (García-Santana et al. 2020).

The construction sector continues to attract investment to this day through tourism and the green transformation. Its ability to shape migration policy emerged in the 2000s, however. A combination of two factors made an explosive mixture. The Land Law of 1998 declared almost all Spanish land potentially available for development, heralding a decade of real estate speculation. Entry to the euro temporarily pushed real interest rates down into negative territory and boosted the trend towards a full blown construction boom. Only immigration was able to satisfy the demand for labour. The proportion of foreign workers in construction stood at over 20 per cent, double the sectoral average (Doménech et al. 2024). When the bubble burst in 2008 two thirds of all construction jobs were lost. As a result almost 2 million foreign born workers left Spain by 2013. Unemployment among non-EU immigrants shot up. There was no political pushback, however, because the business model in operation here was strictly demand-oriented from the very outset. Migration flowed wherever it was needed and receded when demand dried up. The sector is now recovering again and the same principle is reasserting itself: domestic workers avoid it and the proportion of foreign labour has again topped 20 per cent, making immigration structurally indispensable.

The tourism sector is the driving force behind Spanish economic growth. With just under 95 million visitors a year Spain regularly ranks among the top three most visited countries in the world. Almost 14 per cent of total employ-

ment is in this sector. Two structural features are decisive. Tourism is, on one hand, dependent on physical presence: rooms have to be cleaned, meals cooked and guests looked after. At the same time, visitor numbers have risen continuously since the 1970s, while the domestic population has shrunk and aged and is increasingly unwilling to take jobs that are physically demanding, seasonal and poorly paid. Immigration plays a role here, too, along two institutionally separate but in fact complementary paths. The formal route runs via the GECCO system (Gestión Colectiva de Contrataciones en Origen): employers recruit workers directly in their home countries and bind them to seasonal contracts. Since 2022 such workers have been permitted to work for 9 months over 4 years before they are entitled to apply for permanent residence. The informal route is driven by the shadow economy, which in Spain accounts for 18–24 per cent of GDP, among the largest in Europe. This is significantly larger than in Germany (12–13 per cent) and far larger than in countries such as Denmark (below 7 per cent) (European Parliament 2022). Spain's dependence on tourism as a revenue source inevitably affects immigration policy. Tourism is local, labour intensive and thus is constantly seeking affordable and flexible migrant labour.

After the real estate bubble burst, **agriculture** became an even more important factor in Spain's economic model. The Almería region in southern Spain in particular features tens of thousands of hectares of plastic covered farmland. Spain is the EU's biggest agricultural exporter with over 25 million tonnes of fruit and vegetables a year. Spanish agriculture is built on non-Spanish labour: in the regions of Huelva and Lleida it makes up 43 and 86 per cent, respectively, of the workforce. Around 35,000 others work without regular residence status or permits (Canal Sur 2024). Spain has tackled the sector's demographic challenges by using immigration rather than automation or harvesting robots, which are standard in, for example, the Netherlands. The reason for this is the small farmer-based production structure, which remains in place despite the massive expansion of agricultural production since the 1980s. Obviously the high level of investment robotics requires is utterly beyond such operations. And why bother, given the guaranteed inflow of seasonal workers? As a result, small farmers have been able to organise into politically powerful cooperatives, such as COEXPHAL, which defend the existing model and its competitive advantages, such as low tech infrastructure, low fixed costs and high labour market flexibility. On top of that comes the pressure on profit margins imposed by

northern European retail chains, which dictate prices. From the farmers' perspective labour costs remain the variable on which savings can be made. Immigration, whether formal under GECCO or informal via the shadow economy, thus forms the basis of a model based on low wages.

4.3.2 The immigration factor as a system

This glance at these three sectors shows that immigration is the key piece of the puzzle explaining Spain's exceptional growth, made possible by the economy's orientation towards labour-intensive sectors. This is a politically engineered arrangement. Over four decades, successive Spanish governments, both conservative and social democratic, have helped to embed, regulate and safeguard immigration through bilateral agreements, recruitment systems and a pragmatic approach to the informal sector.

From irregularity to European pioneer of managed immigration

Up until the 2000s the supply of foreign labour in Spain was based primarily on official tolerance of irregular immigration by means of the *Arraigo* system, which retroactively legalised immigrants after a multi-year »probationary period« in the informal shadow economy, thereby ensuring workers for business. In the mid-2000s, however, as a result of the Cayucos crisis (2005/2006) this model hit the buffers. The Spanish government responded to the arrival of thousands of migrants on the Canary Islands in unseaworthy boats with the *África Plan* and the second-generation agreement (Dünnwald 2015), as border controls and legal recruitment schemes with African states became closely interlocking (Wolff 2014).

An example of the latter is seasonal migration in agriculture via the GECCO scheme, for example, in the case of strawberry farming in Huelva. The Spanish government recruits almost exclusively women from rural Morocco – who leave their minor children in the home country – for this tough harvesting work. Such family ties function as a guarantee for the strict requirement to return home when the season ends (Hellio 2012; Komposch 2025). Schemes such as GECCO illustrate the system's fundamental political economic compromise: on one hand, the seasonal migrants satisfy the needs of the agricultural sector, and on the other, critics of migration are silenced because permanent settlement is systematically prevented. This model of circular migration also confers geopolitical weight on Spain. Its recognition of Moroccan sovereignty over the Western Sahara in 2022 shows how Madrid is able to deploy migration controls as a diplomatic bargaining chip (Janker 2022). Within the EU Spain is thus increasingly positioning itself as a pioneer of a pragmatic, bilaterally based migration policy and claims a corresponding voice in shaping the framework of the European Migration Pact (Garcés-Mascreñas 2023).

Spain's welfare state and migration as calculated *laissez-faire*

While in the Danish narrative the welfare state, as something that needs protecting, is used to justify limitations on immigration it serves the opposite function in the Spanish model. Even irregular immigrants can obtain access to schools and emergency medical services by registering with the local authorities. On the other hand, they are not entitled to more cost-intensive core benefits such as pensions or unemployment benefits, because the system is strictly contribution based.

Although both Denmark and Spain exclude irregular immigrants almost entirely from financial benefits they pursue opposite strategies. Denmark uses the exclusivity of its welfare state for the purpose of deterrence and control. Immigrants are subject to strict residence requirements in departure centres and reduced to in-kind benefits. This also serves the purpose of making their stay as unpleasant as possible and motivating immigrants to depart for other EU countries. Spain by contrast practices a kind of calculated *laissez faire*. Because the state provides irregular immigrants with neither accommodation nor food they are largely left to fend for themselves after cursory registration with the police. In effect, this withholding of state care compels mobility. People need to move to wherever the informal labour market will take them in order to survive,¹⁰ in contrast to Denmark, where they are forced into state-run centres.

This state of affairs is not concealed, but proactively defended. Whereas the Danish authorities frame immigration as a burden on the tax payer based on calculations of the costs imposed by MENAPT population groups, Spanish institutions, such as Banco de España and the Spanish tax authorities, publish regular reports portraying immigration as a fiscal imperative. Without an annual net inflow of up to 350,000 immigrants the pension system and economic growth would collapse under the weight of extreme population ageing. This institutional framing is reinforced by the private financial sector. The macroeconomic analyses published by the research departments of BBVA-Research (2024) and CaixaBank (Aspachs 2026) come to the same conclusion. This concerted validation by both the state and the financial markets provide the PSOE narrative with a particularly advantageous claim to legitimacy. Immigrants underpin domestic consumption, relieve gaps in the labour market and help to cushion the fiscal problems arising as the babyboomer generation gets older, and all at comparatively low short-term transfer costs.

The old compromise – order and utility

We can observe a remarkable continuity in Spain's recent history. Even the centre-right has never seriously questioned the fundamental economic benefits of immigration. An approach based on »regulated migration management« (Wolff 2014) has established itself as a dominant compro-

¹⁰ See, for example, B. Finotelli et al. 2024 for an overview of Spain's immigration policy.

mise over decades, combining a hard border policy and allowing in the labour the economy needs. The »old« Spanish right has pursued less an identity-based culture-wars approach and more a utilitarian logic. The mass regularisations of 2000 and 2001 under José María Aznar's conservative government exemplify this. The discursive framework of control and order was maintained, but the urgent labour force needs of Spain's economic boom were met by formalising hundreds of thousands of irregular workers. Such pragmatism continued even under Mariano Rajoy (Newtral 2024). This unspoken tolerance of irregular employment in the domestic care sector functioned as a social policy buffer that made it possible to close gaps in the state social system, and cost-effectively. This consensus is the product of a political convergence. In the second half of the 2000s the PSOE managed to stabilise the neoliberal argument (labour shortages), the social argument (regulated integration instead of irregularity) and the humanitarian argument (development policy to counter push factors) into a coherent framework that even the Partido Popular (PP) could scarcely abjure when it came to it (Wolff 2014). This legacy remains in place. The priority is not absolute isolation but the orderly availability of the labour the economy needs.

The new right

However, this consensus cultivated over decades is now coming under considerable pressure from the extreme right-wing party Vox. The party is trying to replace the utilitarian logic of the centre-right parties with an identity-based agenda, albeit with important strategic nuances.

With regard to immigration from Africa and the Muslim world Vox exploits the habitual repertoire of the European new right. The party is calling for the military sealing off of Ceuta and Melilla, Spain's enclaves in North Africa, as well as massive deportations. It frames unaccompanied minor refugees (known as »menas«) as a financial burden and security threat (Rubio Hancock 2019). In this way Vox has been able to establish itself as the third strongest party in the Spanish parliament. At the same time, targeted smear campaigns have already led to real violence and, for example in Torre-Pacheco (Murcia), have resulted in racist riots (Deutschlandfunk 2025).

Vox's assault on migration policy is extremely selective, however. While the party has called for a military blockade and tough measures against immigration from Africa and the Muslim world, it explicitly welcomes immigration from Latin America. Based on the notion of the Iberosfera formalised by the Carta de Madrid and Vox's own think tank the Fundación Disenso the party is pursuing an institutionalised alliance of Spanish-speaking nations against left-wing governments and so-called »cultural Marxism« (Zanotti/Turnbull-Dugarte 2025).

In this way Vox is defending the existing two-tier system in citizenship law which allows Latin American immigrants to naturalise after only two years, while other foreigners

have to wait ten years (Umpierrez de Reguero et al. 2026). The underlying logic here is not only cultural, but also electoral: because many Latin American immigrants adhere to conservative-Catholic values and are often fleeing socialist governments Vox regards them as potential supporters of its own long-term political project (Fernández-Vázquez et al. 2022).

4.3.3 Synthesis: the nationalisation of necessity

Migration is deeply inscribed in Spain's institutional and economic architecture. Having said that, it's important to note that while structural imperatives can make options available, they are not self-sustaining political projects. It is the narrative that has transformed economic exigency into a means of identity formation. The PSOE has framed something that is structurally inevitable – namely the demographic and economic need for immigration – as a conscious decision. The persuasive power of pragmatism also derives from its basis in material reality, not a whim.

Spain's history as a country of migration provides the material for forming a moral »we«. Sánchez rhetorically channels this historical reality when saying that »we are children of migration – we mustn't allow ourselves to become the parents of xenophobia« (Zelik 2024). In parallel with this, political opponents are portrayed not as concerned citizens, but as ideological bullies, who are demanding that their fellow Spaniards make real economic sacrifices for the sake of a cultural fantasy of a closed, homogenised country. In this narrative, the culture war perspective is strictly on the right. Although this is communicatively powerful it is not enough to explain the model's stability.

The PSOE's political achievement goes deeper. The party has functioned as the mediator of a coalition of interests. Regularisation has been framed as a humanitarian imperative for the church; as a source of legal certainty and guaranteed labour for the business community; and as a weapon for fighting wage dumping in the shadow economy for the trade unions. By binding together divergent interests a hegemonic project has emerged that has massively narrowed the political space for the opposition and at times can even get the PP to compromise on the issue. This constriction of political space explains the evasions of the right. Because the benefits of labour migration are pretty much indisputable traditional welfare chauvinism has found it hard to find a foothold in Spain (El Español 2025). It is largely confined to the issue of unaccompanied minors who generate costs and cannot contribute to the economy. The evasions of Vox and parts of the PP on labour migration are twofold. They are willing to tacitly accept Latin American immigrants as culturally compatible, and have tried to shift the debate into the area of security. In this way they are trying to attack the government's economic rationality on an emotional level.

Finally, we need to challenge a widespread misconception, at least in the German-language debate,¹¹ that the Spanish model works mainly because Latin America immigration enables it to avoid cultural and linguistic frictions. Having said that, no doubt the high employment rate of Latin American immigrants is of real importance. But the structural basis of the economy, especially industrial agriculture, does not depend on Latinos, but rather on workers from Morocco, Romania and Sub-Saharan Africa. What counts in the greenhouses and on the construction sites is not linguistic competence, but physical stamina. These sectors are thriving not because of cultural affinity but because of the ability of a low-wage sector to recruit – and exploit – labour regardless of its origin. In this context, the regularisation policy should not be understood as a humanitarian gesture, but as a macroeconomic course correction. The inevitable result of the current growth model, based on cheap, informal and all too often exploited labour is a productivity trap (see International Monetary Fund 2025). Workers without status cannot pursue education or training, or, indeed, pay taxes. Legalisation is an attempt to shape the transition away from importing cheap labour to developing skilled workers and taxpayers. What the PSOE has achieved through its regularisation policy should not be underestimated, however. Legal status means that people become citizens, who in a democracy have the opportunity to express their interests and organise collectively. This therefore amounts to a structural shift, not merely a symbolic one. At the same time, the model as a whole remains largely a pragmatic arrangement that translates precarity into growth. The fact that by European comparison this calculation is being debated as a progressive model is less testament to Spanish generosity than an indication of how far the European frame of reference has been shifted to the right. As things stand, the Spanish approach is based on a logic of exploitation that is not negated by its relative economic rationality.

¹¹ See, for example, this letter to the editor in the *Krone Zeitung* from 2026: Migration in Spain: <https://www.krone.at/das-freie-wort/697d4d0c720556cd8c08dcf1> (19 February 2026).

5.

Conclusions

5.1 Method over blueprint

The comparison set out in this report presents two fundamentally different paths. Denmark is using the welfare state as justification for restrictions, while Spain frames immigration as an economic imperative. Both narratives emerged in response to specific structural conditions, and both define a »we« to foster a sense of identity. Their vulnerabilities lie in different places. While the Danish model is increasingly veering into the culture wars dimension, the Spanish model remains strictly linked to economic growth.

To be sure, this insight that these models are context dependent is present in the German debate.¹² However, its application depends on personal preference. Those inclined towards restrictions emphasise Spain's peculiar features, in particular the linguistic bridge with Latin America, with the implication that Germany is much more like Denmark. This ignores the fact that Denmark too has singular characteristics, for example, that the imposition of restrictions is easier in a small state with a relatively homogenous society and a defensive political culture. Progressive voices by contrast see the Spanish model as an attractive alternative, while underplaying the fact that it is based not on political courage, but on a coalition of interests with fairly deep historical roots. It thus cannot provide a blueprint for German social democracy, but at best a method.

Both examples illustrate first and foremost that successful narratives emerge in close interaction with the structures in which they operate. They take up existing cultural and material dispositions, reinforce them and channel them politically. This involves a real strategic decision. Every society harbours contradictory dispositions, whether solidarity oriented or exclusive, open or self-protective. Which of these a narrative reproduces and elevates as the dominant meaning is a question of political will, though not unconstrained. Economic structures set the boundaries of what can plausibly be sustained. For a narrative to carry weight, two conditions must thus be met: first, rootedness in collective self-understandings, historical experience and cultural values; and second, a credible vision of what there is to gain. Neither condition holds if it remains at the level of discourse — both require material and institutional backing to confer the stability required to attain political hegemony.

This mechanism was understood in both Spain and Denmark. Institutional validation ultimately conferred credibility on the respective narrative beyond party politics. In Denmark, the state authorities calculatingly provide data that gives the restrictive approach an empirical basis. In Spain such validation is more far-reaching. Not only do economic institutions such as the central bank, the fiscal authorities and business organisations sing from the same hymn sheet as the government, but parts of civil society and the Catholic Church also lend it their support. This alliance of economic rationality and moral authority makes it much harder to denigrate the narrative as a left-wing utopia or made up by do-gooders. It rather shows that support for a functioning migration system can be based on the most varied foundations, on economic calculation, as well as on ethical convictions.

It is also key that the two narratives have established a political language that goes beyond technocratic explanations. They are compelling because of their internal coherence, defining a »we« and a »they« and thus foster a political identity. Both are based on protecting a community of solidarity, although they interpret it quite differently. While the Danish model codes solidarity and national and ethnic, and asserts that social balance depends on cultural homogeneity Spain defines »we« via work and common growth. What distinguishes both is their ability to frame these definitions with a certain strategic precision by describing their own actions not as arbitrary policy but as a logical response to the most pressing challenges.

The comparison between Spain and Denmark also shows that government parties are able to shape their respective terrains actively. The acceleration of recognition procedures and the mobilisation of organised interests could strengthen the economic argument and unleash the narrative beyond the purely party political sphere.

5.2 Points of departure for German social democracy

Convincing political narratives do not emerge straight from the drawing board but where they are able to combine with existing collective experiences and institutions. Even a cursory first assessment of the German terrain offers more

¹² For an example of the German debate on the lack of transferability of the Spanish regularisation campaign, see *dpa*, 12 February 2026: https://www.comdirect.de/inf/news/detail.html?ID_NEWS=1158361495 (5 March 2026).

starting points for this than the somewhat defensive state of the debate might suggest.

5.2.1 Activation of historical and structural resources

Immigration as an integral part of German prosperity.

Germany has been down this road once before – and it paid off. The inflow of so-called *Gastarbeiter* in the 1960s not only solved the labour shortage but also made possible Germany's industrial ascension to become a global export nation in the first place (Pflugbeil 2005). In contrast to Denmark, Germany has de facto long been a country of immigration with socio-economic ties that go deep into its post-war history and form a distinct, established foundation for a progressive narrative. Anyone calling for isolation these days is basically calling for the abandonment of this model and at a time when it is more urgently needed than ever. Without continued immigration the German labour market will be short of around 16 million workers by 2060 (Fuchs 2021) and the social security system will be structurally unsustainable.¹³ Whether the local bakery or care home has enough workers is not an abstract issue. The core message of social democracy concerning immigration should not focus on diversity and tolerance alone, but on a promise to build prosperity for everyone, and to distribute it fairly.

From arrival to local participation. Germany has a civil society network that is second to none in Europe in terms of density and regional variety. For years now it has shown what can be done when commitment and involvement meet well functioning structures. Clubs, initiatives and diaspora organisations help people with such practical matters as coping with all the red tape involved in entering the labour market. They also help with arrival in the country and local integration of all family members. The economic benefits of immigration are only part of the equation. Targeted support for organisations that help people to get involved is thus also an investment in societal cohesion and thus in building trust that everyone is pulling together. Ensuring that a progressive migration narrative gains traction beyond party politics thus depends on broad civil society alliances at municipal level that make joint achievements visible.

5.2.2 Alliances that broadly reinforce the narrative

Skilled trades and SMEs as strategic partners. For much too long social democrats have devoted far too much attention to concerns deliberately concocted and relentlessly propagated by right-wing actors. What they need now is to resume the role of pragmatic problem-solvers. But in order to play this role, also beyond their class constituency, the SPD needs to make an effort to win over skilled trades and SMEs on the immigration issue. After all, their long-

term problem is not too much immigration but too much unutilised potential in the form of stalled recognition of qualifications or deported staff and skilled workers who were swallowed up by the administrative vortex. If the SPD engages in this dialogue more systematically and makes a deliberate effort to tackle businesses' most pressing needs they will accomplish a narrative shift. As a result, a restrictive immigration policy would no longer be a law and order issue, but be perceived as business-hostile bureaucracy. Rapid labour market integration is not about loss of control but cutting red tape. The aim must be to forge an alliance around the issue. If the SPD can demonstrably make life easier for German businesses it must also strive to persuade business organisations to publicly demand such pragmatic solutions and defend them.

External validation in the struggle to dominate the economic narrative. Conservatives and the right more generally continue to bask in a reputation for economic competence. However, this is starkly contradicted by their immigration policy the upshot of which would be to accelerate demographic decline, strain social security funds and entrench skilled labour shortages. It has to be Social Democrats' political mission to bring this message home to the public. However, this argument will be credible only if external voices chime in. Business organisations, research institutes and social insurance bodies need to be brought into the debate as independent actors. Medical associations, for example, are already speaking out, loud and clear, about what a policy of isolation would mean for the health and care system, including how many doctors' practices would immediately close. A progressive policy must seize on these warnings, institutionalise them and bring them centre stage. To be able to cultivate such alliances a party would not only have to attack the isolation policy on moral grounds, but let the hard economic and societal reality speak for itself.

5.2.3 Migration as part of social democracy's vision of the future

But one-off narratives for separate issues will not be enough. What is needed is a coherent project that treats the party position on immigration not as a separate topic but as embedded in a bigger social democratic story. This needs to invoke values that transcend particular themes.

Opportunity through contribution. Work has always been at the heart of successful social democratic policies. Not merely as a factor of production or growth driver, but as a cornerstone of human coexistence. It fashions dignity, fosters community and gives people the feeling that they are needed. That applies to both wage labour and care and domestic work, to people able to join the workforce right away every bit as much as those who need appropriate

¹³ A more recent study (Werdning 2024) estimates that immigration reduces the government's budget deficit by approximately 104 billion euros a year.

structures to be able to stand on their own feet. Anyone who wants to work and make their own contribution should have access to the structures they need, regardless of where they come from. In times of crisis, it is true more than ever that we need everyone to do their part. The goal is not control, but enablement, because joint efforts have always been Social Democrats' strongest agent of cohesion.

Solidarity as non-negotiable core value. Both the historical and the contemporary strength of social democracy is based on a clear principle. It is unwaveringly on the side of working and socially vulnerable people, regardless of origin. Current attempts by political opponents to play precisely these groups against one another and to ethnicise questions of social distribution must be decisively rejected under the rallying cry »we will not be divided«. Societal pressures on housing, education or infrastructure are not the result of immigration but of systematic lack of investment. Solving this problem needs to be our top priority, for all our sakes.

And last but not least...

People will always try to exploit immigration as an issue of political controversy. It has an inherent potential for antagonisation, regardless of what an honest reckoning with the evidence would show. A successful narrative would not try somehow to neutralise its conflict potential with promises of technocratic solutions. It is much more important what narrative resources a party has at its disposal to withstand the pressure. And even resilient narratives do not unfold in direct interaction between politicians and the electorate, but are filtered through the media ecosystem, which strongly affects the stories being told. This would require a separate analysis.

Abbreviations

AI	Artificial intelligence
COEXPHAL	Cooperativa de Exportadores de Productos Hortofrutícolas de Almería (Almería Fruit and Vegetable Exporters' Cooperative)
DF	Dansk Folkeparti (Danish People's Party)
EU	European Union
FES	Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung
GDP	Gross domestic product
GECCO	Gestión Colectiva de Contrataciones en Origen (Spanish recruitment system for seasonal labour migration)
MAGA	Make America Great Again, Donald Trump's political movement
MENA	Middle East and North Africa
Mena	Menor extranjero no acompañado (unaccompanied foreign minor)
MENAPT	Middle East, North Africa, Pakistan and Turkey (Danish category of non-Western migration)
NGO	Non-government organisation
OECD	Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development
PP	Partido Popular (Spanish People's Party)
PSOE	Partido Socialista Obrero Español (Spanish Socialist Workers' Party)
SPD	Social Democratic Party of Germany
SPÖ	Social Democratic Party of Austria

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About the Autor

Leon Schaller is a political scientist whose work focuses on political economy, social inequality and labour migration. He pursued his studies with the help of an FES scholarship in Munich, Paris and London. Today he divides his time between analysis and practical activities, having held positions at the OECD and the European Union. He writes regularly for the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung.

Comparing migration policy narratives



Two migration policy models are regularly held up as exempla in the German debate: the Danish model based on restrictions and the Spanish model based on regularisation. While some point to Danish social democrats' success with winning back voters using restrictive immigration policy, others see Spain's more positive approach as an alternative. But could these narratives be applied so easily.



The present paper examines the political economy of immigration policy narratives. How do economic structures, institutional arrangements and historical paths influence how people talk about migration? The Danish narrative is rooted in a vision of the welfare state that defines solidarity in terms of exclusivity. The Spanish model is based on a coalition between business organisations, the church and the trade unions, whose interests are underpinned by institutional validation, from the central bank to the fiscal authorities. Neither narrative is merely rhetorical. They both emerged under specific material and cultural conditions.



They can provide German social democracy not with a blueprint but with a method: honest assessment of their own terrain. Which organised interests could support a progressive narrative? Which historical and political reference points – ranging from Germany's history of immigration to its regionally very diverse civil society structures – remain unused? And which institutional actors could lend them external credibility? Successful narratives emerge not through imitation but through strategic engagement with local conditions and integration in a vision of the future that resonates with people's values.

Further publications of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung can be found here:

➤ <https://www.fes.de/en/displacement-migration-integration>