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Irregular migration and deterrence on the West African Route: insularity and border control in Spain (2020-2024)

Migración irregular y disuasión en la ruta de África Occidental: insularidad y control fronterizo en España (2020-2024)

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Abstract

This article examines irregular migration along the West African route between 2020 and 2024 and its relationship with border control policies implemented from the Canary Islands. It aims to identify who is migrating, how they are doing so, and why this route has been reactivated. Drawing on official and unofficial statistics, interviews with migrants, agents, and experts, and non-participant direct observation, the study analyses the migration process and the control strategies applied. Two phases of deterrence practices are identified: temporary confinement on the islands during the initial years and coercive deterrence in countries of origin in the more recent period. In addition to characterising the deterrence models implemented, the article makes a novel contribution by exploring how the peripheral insularity of the Canary Islands has been taken into account in the design of border control policy.

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Keywords: the Canary Islands; mobility regimes; pandemic; undocumented migration.

Resumen

Este artículo examina la migración irregular a lo largo de la ruta de África Occidental entre 2020 y 2024 y su relación con las políticas de control fronterizo implementadas desde Canarias. Su objetivo es identificar quiénes están migrando, cómo lo hacen y por qué se ha reactivado esta ruta. A partir de estadísticas oficiales y no oficiales, entrevistas con migrantes, agentes y expertos, y observación directa no participante, el estudio analiza el proceso migratorio y las estrategias de control aplicadas. Se identifican dos fases en las prácticas de disuasión: el confinamiento temporal en las islas durante los primeros años y la disuasión coercitiva en los países de origen en el periodo más reciente. Además de caracterizar los modelos de disuasión implementados, el artículo aporta como novedad el análisis de cómo la insularidad periférica de Canarias ha sido tenida en cuenta en el diseño de la política de control fronterizo.

Palabras clave: Islas Canarias; regímenes de movilidad; pandemia; inmigración indocumentada.

1 Introduction

Since the effective establishment of the Schengen Area in 1995, 29 European states have consolidated a single external border. The entry of irregular immigrants into this transnational area has become one of the issues of greatest concern for public opinion in these countries in recent years (Bva Xsight, 2024). Irregular migrants access this area in various ways, whether via land, air, or sea borders. In particular, the south-western border, which includes the Western Mediterranean and West African routes, has been one of the main European sea borders in terms of the number of arrivals since 2020, especially via the West African route.

This route is mainly used by immigrants originating from the coasts of Morocco, Western Sahara, Mauritania, Senegal, and The Gambia, with their destination being the small Spanish archipelago of the Canary Islands. This outermost insular region of only 7,447 km^2 located in the northwest of Africa has become one of the main destinations for irregular immigration by sea in Europe (FRONTEX, 2025).

Since the first vessel from the Saharan coast arrived on the Canary Island of Fuerteventura in 1994, the arrival of irregular immigrants has become a constant flow. Godenau (2014) identifies three historical phases in relation to the arrival of immigrants. After an initial period with a smaller number of migrants arriving, between 2001 and 2008 a second period occurred with a notable

increase in arrivals —especially in 2006, with more than 30,000 immigrants (Godenau, 2012; Domínguez-Mujica et al., 2018)— thus consolidating a new migratory route across the Atlantic Ocean (FRONTEX, 2018). At the beginning of the second decade of the 21st century, third phase commenced, characterized by a considerable decrease in arrivals, leading to the assumption of greater effectiveness in border control measures on the West African route (Godenau & Buraschi, 2018; López-Sala & Godenau, 2016; Mesa-Pérez & Parreño-Castellano, 2021a). However, since 2020, with the onset of the pandemic, arrival figures have increased again. Mesa-Pérez, Parreño-Castellano and Domínguez-Mujica (2023) argue that, given the magnitude of the phenomenon, we are facing a new migratory phase on the West African route.

This article aims to analyse the irregular migration reaching the Canary Islands during the most recent phase, between 2020 and 2024, and its relationship with border policy. The study pursues three main objectives. First, it examines the principal characteristics of migrants arriving in the Canary Islands. This involves analysing the scale of migratory flows, the main sociodemographic traits of arrivals, and the emergence of new push factors in countries of origin contributing to the recent rise in arrivals. These recent flows, we argue, reflect the increasing globalization of this border and highlight the need to consider new structural drivers of migration.

The second objective focuses on characterising how the migratory process has unfolded during this period. The analysis addresses the temporal dynamics of migration, the main departure points along the African coast, the types of vessels used, the conditions of the Atlantic crossing, and the actors involved in facilitating the maritime journey. In this regard, we aim to highlight the complexity of this route, shaped by its territorial diversity and the particularly high level of risk it entails.

Following these two objectives—focused on understanding the migratory process and migrant profiles— we formulate the central research question of this article: Why has such a peripheral and dangerous route as the one leading to the Canary Islands experienced such a significant increase in migratory flows? To address this question, migration theories based on push and pull factors could be applied. However, we argue that it is necessary to move beyond these explanations by conceptualizing borders as frictional spaces between those who migrate and promote migration and those who seek to contain it (Mezzadra & Neilson, 2013). From this perspective, greater attention should be devoted to the control and containment factors that shape migratory flows. Accordingly, the third objective of this study is to analyse the border

policy implemented in the Canary Islands during the period under consideration, the strategies adopted, and the role of insularity in border enforcement.

Building on these objectives and premises, the article begins with a theoretical reflection on the concepts of irregular migration, mobility regimes, and deterrence, as well as the role of insularity in the border control system. It then presents the main sources and methodological aspects of the study, followed by two sections detailing the key characteristics of the current migratory process. Finally, before the conclusions, a discussion is presented on how border control has been managed in the Canary Islands and how insularity shapes the migration policies implemented.

2 Theoretical framework: mobility regimes, deterrence and insularity

Irregular maritime migration along the West African route can be examined through the different theories on international migration developed at different times. Traditional theories, such as classical approaches that viewed migration as the result of rational individual decisions or those explaining migration based on the interplay of push and pull factors, did not focus extensively on illegality, or they reduced it merely to a legal dimension. Other theories, such as world-systems theory or dependency theory, centred their explanations of irregular migration at a macro-structural level, ultimately attributing it to structural inequalities in an increasingly globalized world system and to relationships of dependence and subordination between territories.

Within the framework of major contemporary paradigms and related theories, irregular migration occupies a distinct position. Since the 1990s, the transnationalism paradigm (Glick Schiller et al., 1992) has argued that irregular migration can serve as a strategy within complex and dynamic transnational trajectories. From this perspective, irregular status is often a temporary and deliberate condition, adopted as part of a broader migratory project in response to legal constraints.

Alternatively, the mobility paradigm (Sheller & Urry, 2006) argues that contemporary societies are structured not only by mobility itself but also by who is able to move, under what conditions, and with what restrictions. Irregularity arises from the existence of mobility regimes —systems that confer differential mobility rights on different human groups. Thus, irregular migration can be understood as an active response to this structural inequality.

Understanding irregular migration through these paradigms leads us to the concept of mobility regimes (Glick Schiller & Salazar, 2013). These can be understood as systems that normalize and favour the movement of some people while criminalizing or impeding that of others. This

conceptualization views borders not as fixed geographical boundaries but as a complex set of control mechanisms operating both within and beyond territorial limits (Mezzadra & Neilson, 2013). Hence, irregular migration should be understood as a process of complex navigation rather than a simple breach of a barrier (Schapendonk, 2017). Building on these premises, De Genova (2017) argues that irregular migration is produced by states themselves through their actions, within a framework of the social and political production of illegality.

The existence of mobility regimes has been analysed from various critical perspectives. For example, Shamir (2005) argued that we are moving toward a single global mobility regime aimed at increasing the restriction of international mobility, with the sole purpose of maintaining levels of inequality. Building on these ideas, the theory of "migration governmentality" (Walters, 2002) goes further by asserting that states do not seek to eradicate irregular migration through their control policies but rather to govern it as a form of labour management and social control. In this sense, the theory conceptualizes irregular migration as the outcome of restrictive and contradictory migration policies. These policies are characterized by border-closure measures while de facto tolerating the presence of irregular labour in certain productive sectors. This creates a dual system in which irregularity is not an anomaly but a functional component of the economic and political system.

Schwarz (2016) further argues that mobility regimes have a racial component that extends beyond the control of external borders, with racial discrimination understood as a delocalized border practice. Postcolonial and decolonial approaches emphasize how historical colonial relationships continue to shape contemporary migration policies, reproducing discriminatory practices (Mezzadra & Neilson, 2013).

Beyond the justifications offered for the existence of mobility regimes, it is crucial to examine how control practices are implemented—practices that are typically grounded in deterrence. Deterrence encompasses a set of reactive and proactive measures devised by states, either independently or in coordination with other actors, aimed at preventing, restricting, or curbing unauthorized emigration (López-Sala, 2015). These measures are commonly categorized into three types: preventive, coercive, and repressive.

Preventive deterrence aims to discourage potential migrants by disseminating dissuasive information in countries of origin (regarding risks, low chances of success, or limited opportunities), supporting development projects, and promoting legal pathways (Vammen, 2023; Azkona, 2013). Coercive deterrence seeks to prevent arrivals through border surveillance,

interceptions, identification, and deportation at entry points. It extends across origin coasts, the high seas, and destination shores, and is reinforced by international agreements. Repressive deterrence, in turn, targets migrants who have already crossed borders, aiming to prevent settlement through internal controls, confinement measures, deportation procedures, and detention practices.

These practices vary according to states' immigration needs, geopolitical shifts, and public pressure. While states often lead these operations, a trend toward privatization and outsourcing has emerged (Gammeltoft-Hansen, 2016; Nyberg-Sorensen & Gammeltoft-Hansen, 2012; López-Sala & Godenau, 2017a, 2017b, 2020). This raises debates on legitimacy, public accountability, responsibilities, and the rights of migrants (Lenard & McDonald, 2021), particularly concerning agencies such as FRONTEX (Bacon, 2005; CEAR Canarias, 2021).

Against deterrence mechanisms, several factors and agents come into play. These include the resilience of migrants and intermediaries who facilitate international migration, or the so-called migration industry (Cohen, 1997), which encompasses organized criminal networks (Salt & Stein, 1997; Hernández-León, 2012; MacKellar, 2021) as well as less structured informal networks (Nyberg-Sorensen, 2013; Augustova et al., 2023). Moreover, it is necessary to mention the support provided by kinship, national, or community-based networks (Stone-Cadena and Álvarez, 2018), as well as by the "assistance industry," which includes destination-based actors such as NGOs, humanitarian groups, and migrant-led associations (López-Sala, 2020; Mesa-Pérez & Parreño-Castellano, 2024). In this last case, some actors occupy a blurred position due to their financial dependence on public funds and political alignment (Humphris & Sigona, 2019).

In the case addressed in this article, the arrival of irregular migrants must be explained not only by general theories based on the tension between the deterrence inherent to mobility regimes and the agents facilitating the migration project, but also by the particular characteristics introduced by the insular geographic context. Therefore, to conclude this theoretical framework, it is important to highlight the role played by the islands of Southern Europe and Northern Africa within the migration deterrence system.

Specifically, due to their peripheral condition and the constraints of insularity, islands have become advanced border zones of the Schengen Area. They operate within a multilevel filtering system in which territories play differentiated roles (Godenau & López-Sala, 2016). In this framework, islands function as strategic sites of surveillance, control, and filtering (Mountz, 2011; Godenau, 2014).

In these insular settings, specific forms of hybrid migration governmentality emerge, combining rescue operations and humanitarian reception with surveillance, identification, filtering, and even migrant repression and detention (Schapendonk, 2017; Gammeltoft-Hansen, 2016), depending on each island's particular context. This emphasis on migrant retention has been particularly pronounced in Lesbos and Lampedusa (Dimitriadi, 2017; Pulitano, 2022), often hidden behind humanitarian rhetoric, notably when compared to the measures implemented in the Canary Islands.

This hybrid governance further relies heavily on the externalization of migration control (Humphris & Sigona, 2019). On one side, humanitarian actors manage reception and control. On the other, bilateral agreements with African states enable joint patrols, surveillance, and expedited deportations (López-Sala & Godenau, 2017b; FRONTEX, 2025). Thus, islands become terminals in a geopolitical chain of migration governance that begins in countries of origin or transit (Casas-Cortés et al., 2016).

Moreover, islands act as zones of containment, restricting movement to mainland Europe and creating internal borders within Schengen (Mountz, 2011; Andersson, 2014). Papoutsi et al. (2018) analysed this in the case of the Lesbos hotspot, in relation to asylum seekers. The features of extraterritorial border zones have also been studied on other islands outside the EU (Mountz, 2020).

All these insular dynamics turn islands into laboratories for experimental security policies, continuously testing new migration control models. This has led to functional overload in territories often lacking the institutional capacity to manage such flows. Consequently, they have become established as zones of geographic sacrifice (Jerez-Darias & Domínguez-Mujica, 2024) and zones of exception (De Genova, 2017), generating spatial inequalities, social tensions, and xenophobic discourses often fuelled by perceptions of institutional abandonment.

Ultimately, insularity is not just a geographical trait but a governmental dispositive that organizes containment, securitization, externalization, and responsibility-shifting. Islands are now spaces where Schengen's promise of free movement is suspended and restrictive migration regimes are implemented. From a critical perspective, they are key nodes in the reproduction of global inequality and in legitimizing increasingly restrictive and selective migration governance.

3 Sources and method

This study of irregular migratory mobility along the West African route is grounded in empirical research drawing on statistical data from both official and unofficial records, as well as in-depth interviews with key informants (migrants, agents, and experts).

Figures on sea arrivals were sourced from the records of the Spanish Ministry of the Interior and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). Information on the nationalities of arrivals was drawn from FRONTEX records, while data on maritime search and rescue operations, migratory routes, seasonality of flows, and types of vessels were obtained from the public company Sociedad de Salvamento y Seguridad Marítima (SASEMAR), under the Spanish Ministry of Transport and Sustainable Mobility, which is responsible for conducting such operations within the Canary Islands Search and Rescue (SAR) region.

Accident data were based on reports provided by the NGO Caminando Fronteras and official information from the International Organization for Migration (IOM), which maintains the Missing Migrants series. To deepen understanding of the situation of unaccompanied migrant children, information was gathered from the Spanish State Attorney General's Office and the Spanish Register of Unaccompanied Foreign Minors, cross-referenced with data from the NGO Save the Children. Data series from the National Institute of Aerospace Technology (INTA) and the International Satellite System for Search and Rescue (COSPAS-SARSAT) on incidents and alerts in waters near the Canary Islands were also consulted. All quantitative information was processed statistically.

Complementing these sources, qualitative data were collected from 46 formal and informal interviews. Of the former (29 in total), 12 involved representatives and volunteers from the NGOs Red Cross and Cruz Blanca, as well as from the citizen platforms Somos Red and Ayuda por la Solidaridad, all of whom were engaged in migrant reception in the Canary Islands. These interviews offered a comprehensive overview of the arrival and reception of irregular migrants.

Additional interviews were conducted with representatives of the Asociación Nacional de Migrantes y Refugiados en España and Village du Migrant to provide a broader perspective on the migration process and its implications in countries of origin. Two non-commissioned officers who had coordinated and participated in rescue operations were also interviewed, along with three professionals involved in surveillance activities. Their insights were crucial for developing an in-depth understanding of border control policy.

Six journalists and academics specialising in migration were likewise interviewed, including university researchers from the Canary Islands and Senegal, as well as experienced journalists covering Africa for leading Spanish media outlets. Their professional expertise and scholarly knowledge contributed significantly to contextualising the subject matter. Finally, contact was established with immigrants residing in reception centres, five of whom agreed to participate in formal interviews. Their accounts focused on their personal migration experiences and future expectations.

Most interviews were conducted in person in the Canary Islands, while others took place via video calls with participants in their countries of origin. Each interview lasted approximately one hour and was guided by semi-structured protocols adapted to the characteristics of each interviewee. The thematic areas covered included: the sociodemographic profile of migrants, their causes and countries of origin; the migratory process; rescue operations and border surveillance; reception mechanisms; identification procedures, post-arrival mobility and repatriations; and migration policy frameworks.

Participants were recruited through snowball sampling, using multiple access points to reduce potential bias. Efforts were made to ensure diversity within the sample, including a range of agents and experts, and gender balance, with nine female participants. All interviews were recorded and transcribed.

An inductive open coding process was carried out, and a content analysis was conducted, focusing on selected thematic areas of interest according to the information provided by each interviewee and interview section. Using open-source software, the interviews were coded, and extracts were grouped into thematic categories. Selected findings are presented in Sections 5 and 6.

The 17 informal interviews—conducted without audio recording at the express request of the interviewees to safeguard their anonymity—involved personnel and managers from institutions and organisations related to border control and rescue services, as well as irregular migrants. These groups were the most reluctant to participate in the research.

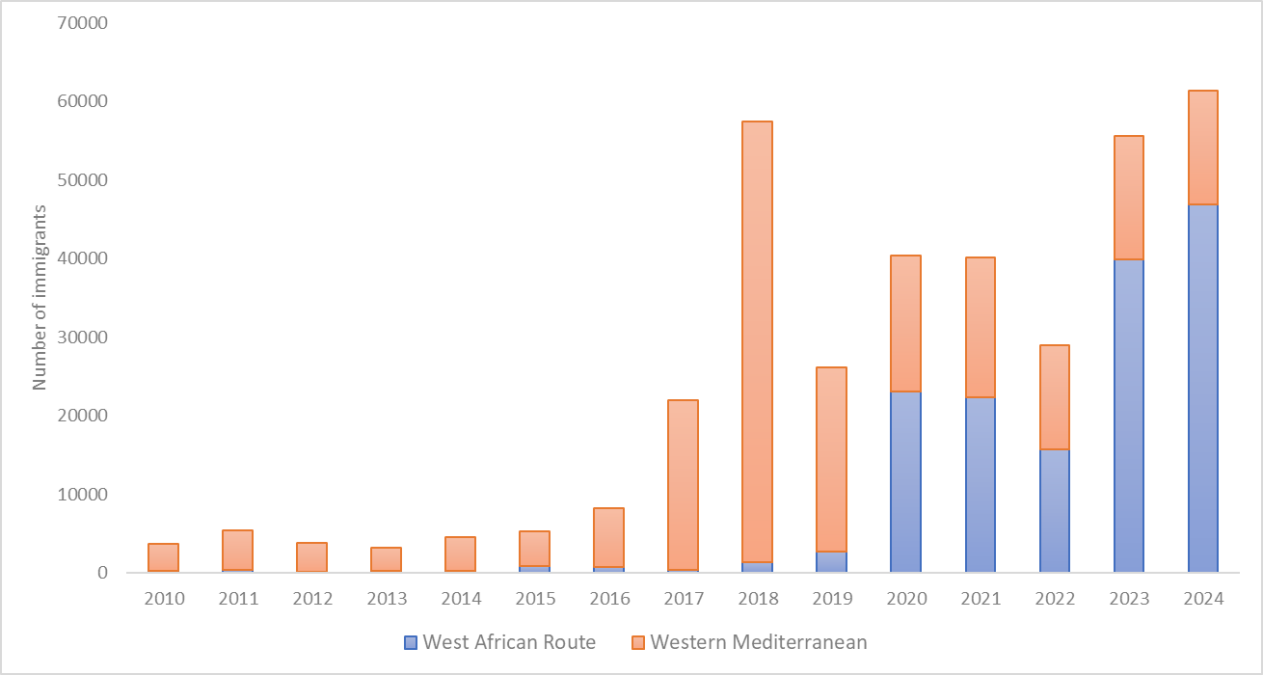
4 Irregular migrants arriving by sea in the Canary Islands

Irregular migratory flows by sea to the Canary Islands from the African coast have increased since 2020. That year, according to the Spanish Ministry of the Interior and UNHCR, around 23,000 people arrived in the islands, representing a ninefold increase in arrivals compared to 2019

(Figure 1). Arrival numbers remained around these figures until 2023, when they began to rise again. In that year, arrivals approached 40,000 people, and in 2024, the highest figure in the migratory history of the Canary Islands was recorded, with 46,843 migrants. Not even during crisis of 2006 was such a high number recorded (Godenau & Zapata Hernández, 2008; Mesa-Pérez & Parreño-Castellano, 2021b). In total, according to the Ministry of the Interior, 147,774 people arrived irregularly in the Canary Islands by sea between 2020 and 2024.

At the same time, entries to the rest of Spanish territory via the Western Mediterranean route have shown a decreasing trend during this period. Consequently, between 54 and 76% of undocumented immigrants arriving on Spanish coasts have done so via the Canary Islands, depending on the year. Therefore, the Canary Islands have become established as one of the main points of entry for irregular migration by sea into the European Union (FRONTEX, 2024).

Figure 1. Irregular migrants arriving in Spain by sea
via the African and Western Mediterranean routes (2010-2024)



Source: authors' own compilation based on Ministry of the Interior (2011-2025)

The total volume of migrants on the West African route is almost certainly higher, given that this route is characterized by a high accident rate, with a significant number of vessels sinking and others being found adrift as far from the Canary Islands as the coasts of South America and the Caribbean (Pardellas, 2023). According to estimates by Caminando Fronteras (2021), made in collaboration with communities from which the migrants originate, 1,851 deaths were recorded

on the Canary route in 2020, and in 2021 the figure reached 4,016 people. The IOM, using a different accounting system based on recovered bodies and survivor testimonies, reduced the data to 877 in 2020 and 937 in 2021, lower figures that do not include "silent shipwrecks" (Mesa-Pérez et al., 2023).

Although FRONTEX data is rather imprecise regarding the nationality of immigrants, it is possible to identify up to 49 different nationalities among the arrivals recorded since 2020. The majority are of Moroccan nationality (24.8% of total arrivals), followed by Senegalese (19.8%), Malian (13.2%), Gambian (4.5%), Guinean (4.1%), Ivorian (2.2%), and Mauritanian (2.1%). Nationals from sub-Saharan African countries are clearly under-recorded in the official statistics, as 21.3% of arrivals are classified as being of unspecified sub-Saharan African nationality, while the nationality of another 5.6% is unknown. Lately, there has been an increase in the arrival of immigrants from even more distant African countries, particularly Comoros, Congo, and Somalia, and even from some Asian countries (Pakistan, Bangladesh, Yemen, among others) (Vega, 2024).

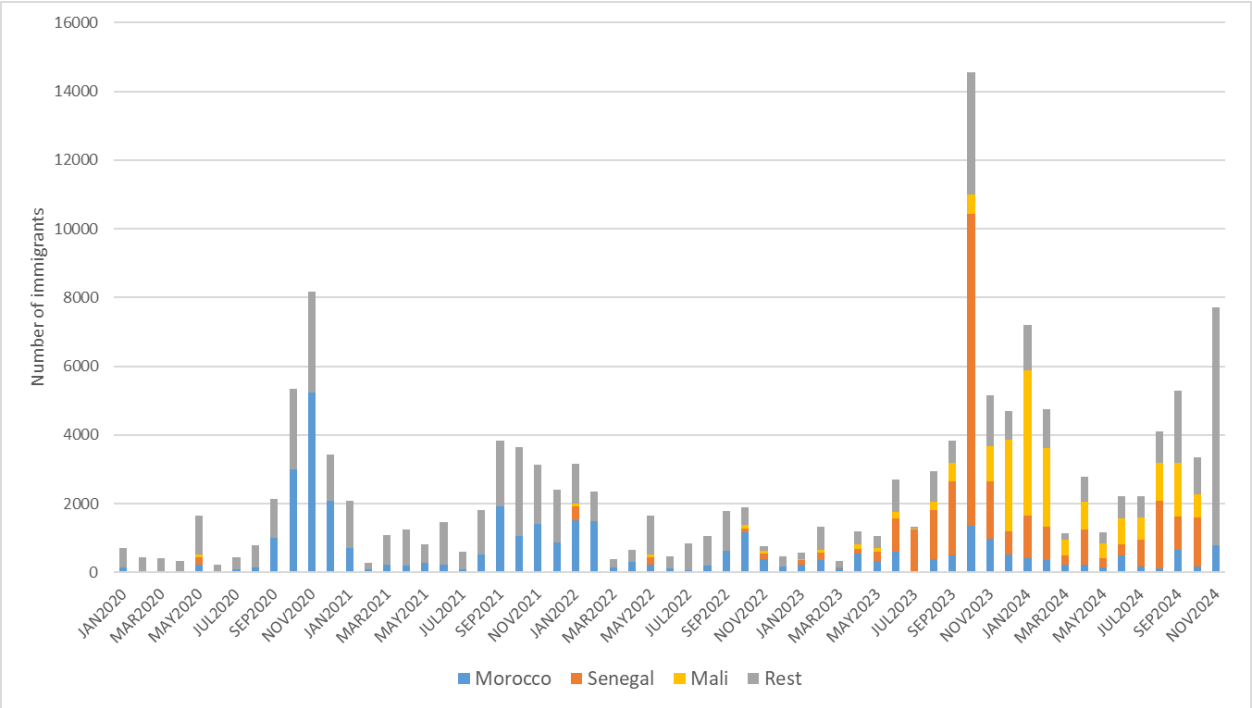
The majority of those arriving are young, low-skilled men, although the presence of women and children is increasingly significant. The arrival of minors has grown in recent years, especially concerning unaccompanied minors. Data for Spain as a whole indicates that they account for around 8.2% of immigrants arriving by sea, according to data from the State Attorney General's Office and Save The Children. The Ombudsman in the Canary Islands (Defensor del Pueblo, 2021) estimated that, in the islands, around 15% of migrants were unaccompanied minors in 2020. According to Save The Children, around 5,800 have arrived in Spain in 2024, the majority in the Canary Islands, highlighting the serious problem faced by public administrations that must assume guardianship of these children. In the Register of Unaccompanied Foreign Minors, as of 31 December 2023, a total of 12,878 minors were registered under the guardianship or care of protection services, of whom 82% were male.

The increase in the number of irregular immigrants since 2020 can be explained by a combination of push and pull factors. In this regard, the academic literature typically identifies three main groups of push factors: severe socio-economic conditions and poverty; armed conflicts and social violence; and, lastly repression and harassment on the grounds of religion, ethnicity, gender, or sexual orientation (Chamorro, 2024). An exhaustive overview of the causes driving the increase in immigration falls beyond the scope of this article. We therefore focus on

three factors that emerged or gained greater relevance during the period under analysis and that must be taken into account to explain the growth of irregular immigration.

The first factor was the closure of borders and the global economic paralysis caused by the pandemic. This severely affected the populations of West African countries, most of whom lacked protection systems to withstand such an adverse situation. A representative case was Morocco, where the pandemic reduced international tourist flows to such an extent that many workers —especially those in low-skilled or informal jobs— were left without a source of income. As a result, the number of irregular Moroccan migrants arriving in the Canary Islands increased sharply in 2020 and 2021 (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Irregular immigrants arriving in the Canary Islands by sea, by main nationalities and month of arrival (2020-2024)



Source: own elaboration based on FRONTEX (2020-2024)

The second factor was the worsening of the military conflict in Mali since 2023. That year, the conflict intensified following the withdrawal of the French army. Consequently, the arrival of Malian nationals on the Canary coasts rose markedly from August onwards, as reflected in figures from the Ministry of the Interior.

The third factor was the deterioration of the political and economic situation in some Sub-Saharan countries after the pandemic. The most notable case was Senegal. Since 2021, Senegal has been plunged into a deep political and socio-economic crisis, stemming from the consequences of the

pandemic, the anti-democratic practices of the presidential government, and the prevailing situation of social injustice in the country (Mané, 2024). The situation became increasingly unsustainable, to the point that in the autumn and winter of 2023-2024 the number of people departing from Senegal to the Canary Islands rose significantly.

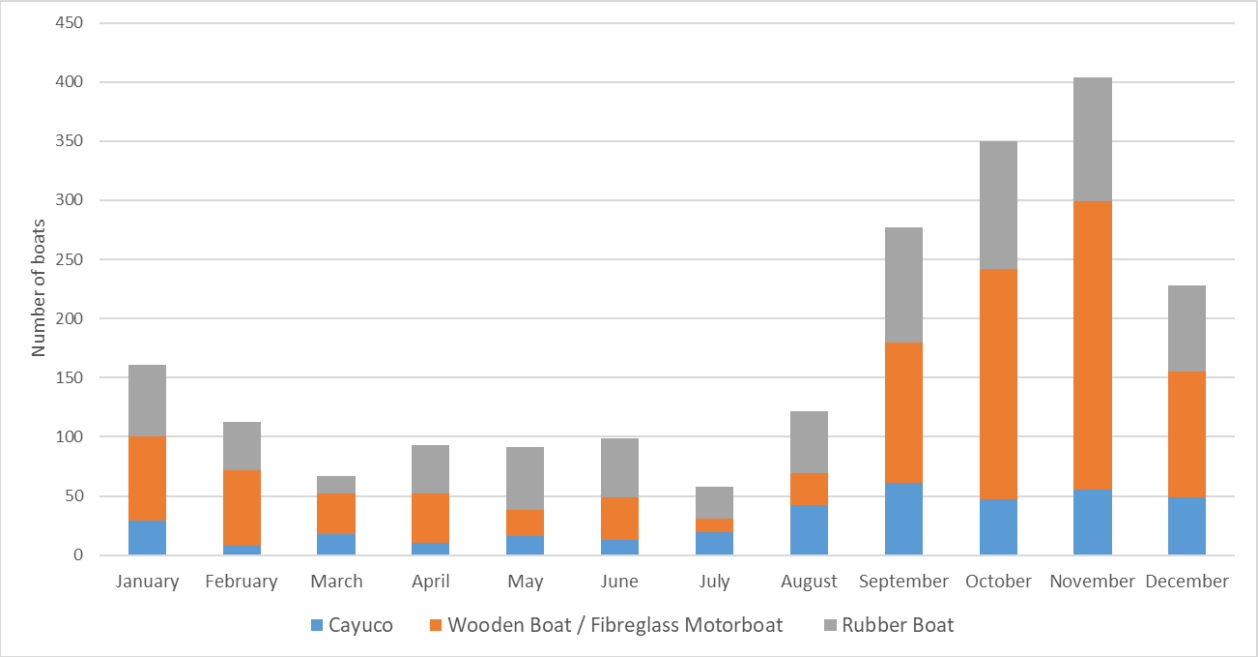
In summary, the irregular migration that has reached the Canary Islands since 2020 is characterized by a sharp increase due to concurrence of new push factors, a diversification in their demographic profiles —with a greater presence of women and unaccompanied minors— and a growth in the number of nationalities and places of origin. The current migratory stage on the West African route, compared to previous ones, is therefore marked by the presence of more complex migratory flows, both in terms of migrants' profiles and their motivations (Zapata Hernández, 2021).

5 Migratory processes and routes

In the previous section, we examined the volume, characteristics, and motivations of migrants arriving in the Canary Islands. In this section, we turn to the migratory process itself, with particular emphasis on the Atlantic crossing. Specifically, we analyse the types of vessels employed, the periods when crossings were most frequent, the main points of departure, the conditions under which the journeys were undertaken, and the actors and networks that facilitated and sustained the process.

Between 2020 and 2024, a total of 2,953 vessels were intercepted or arrived in the Canary Islands, according to data from the Ministry of the Interior. Migrants crossed the Atlantic aboard pateras (small fibreglass or wooden boats), larger fishing boats or cayucos, and rubber dinghies, all of which were motorised. According to SASEMAR, these accounted for 47.1%, 17.6%, and 35.1% of rescues, respectively. Cayucos generally transported larger groups (on average around 50 passengers), while rubber dinghies and pateras usually carried approximately 40 and 25 individuals, respectively. Since 2022, rubber dinghies have become the most frequently used vessel, despite the long distances involved and the hazardous conditions of the Atlantic, which generally discouraged their use. SASEMAR data further showed that arrivals were concentrated between September and January, with autumn representing the most favourable season for crossings. Although flows were continuous throughout the year, peaks during these months often produced saturation in reception facilities (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Number of vessels with irregular migrants arriving in the Canary Islands by sea, by type of vessel and month of arrival (2020-2024)

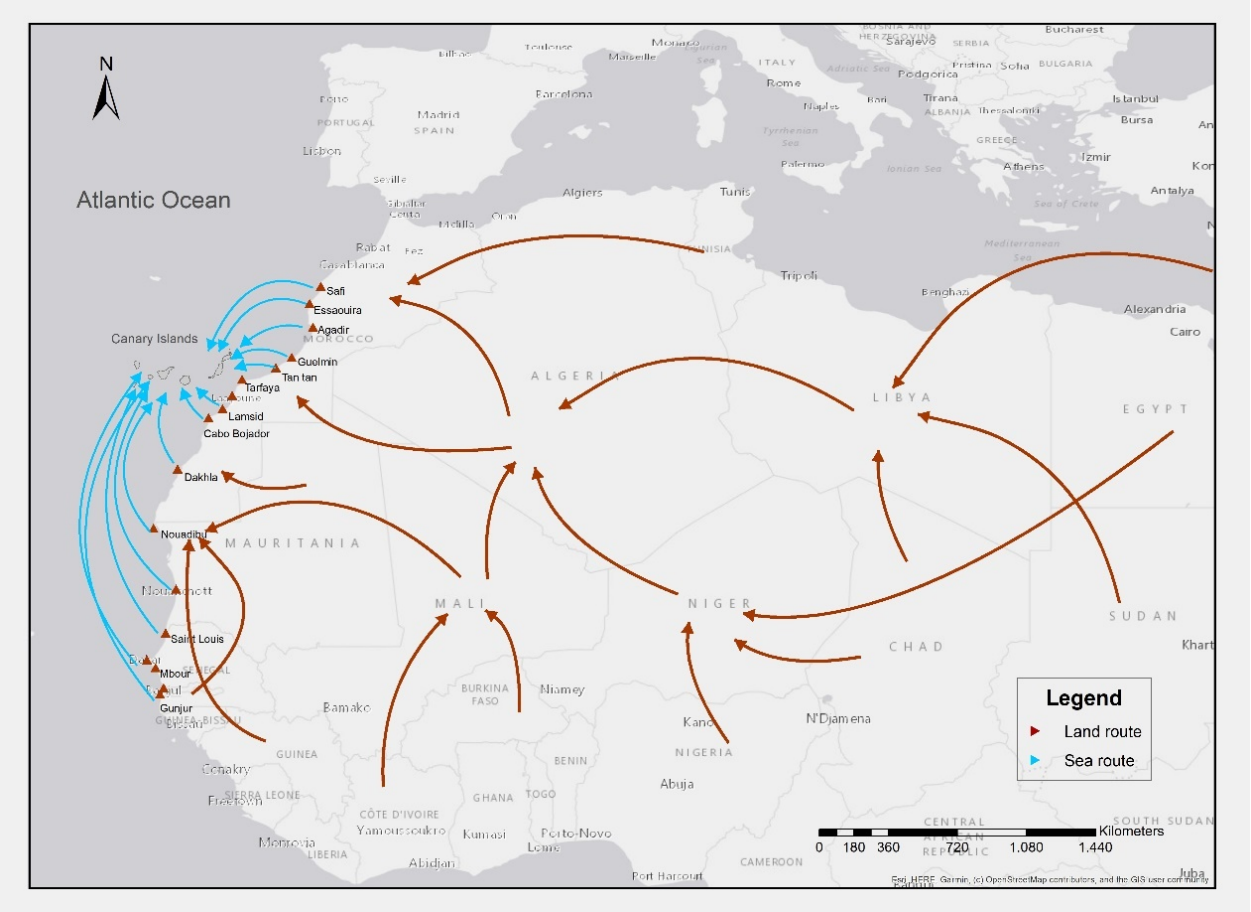


Source: authors' own elaboration based on SASEMAR (2020-2024)

The identification of departure points, based on data from SASEMAR, Caminando Fronteras, migrant testimonies, and press sources, revealed a wide geographical spread across the Atlantic coast of North and West Africa. Notable points included Safi, Essaouira, Agadir, Guelmim, Tan-Tan, and Tarfaya in Morocco; Laayoune, Lamsid, Cape Boujdour, and Dakhla in Western Sahara; Nouadhibou and Nouakchott in Mauritania; Saint-Louis, Dakar, and Mbour in Senegal; and Banjul and Gunjur in The Gambia. These locations functioned as key nodes for the convergence of inland migratory flows from Northwest Africa, as represented schematically in Figure 4.

In recent years, Nouadhibou (Mauritania) emerged as the principal departure hub along the West African route. According to the interview with an agent from the Civil Guard at the Canary Islands Regional Coordination Centre (CCRC), approximately 35,000 individuals from Sahelian and Sub-Saharan countries were waiting to embark from this port, which hosted numerous traditional fishing vessels. Nouadhibou's proximity to the Canary Islands —just 750 kilometres in a straight line— partly explained why 55% of vessels intercepted in 2024 departed from this location. Under favourable conditions, cayucos reached the Canary Islands in three days, whereas departures from Senegal and The Gambia could take up to five days, according to the testimonies of four migrants interviewed in reception facilities.

Figure 4. Main departure points to the Canary Islands and internal routes in North Africa



Source: authors' own elaboration based on SASEMAR (2020-2025), Caminando Fronteras (2020-2025), interviews with migrants and the press

As summarised in Figure 4, interviews also revealed that the migratory process often involved overland journeys across the Sahel or the desert before reaching coastal departure points. Migrants frequently resided for extended periods in these areas while awaiting a place on a vessel. During this time, many –particularly Sub-Saharan migrants– engaged in low-paid work to save for the crossing, often in conditions of exploitation compared to local labour markets. Testimonies suggested that the cost of the crossing was at least € 1,200 from Nouadhibou and € 300 from Saint-Louis (Senegal), figures that were very high in relation to the local standard of living. One Senegalese migrant explained that the price was adjusted to the resources available, but that this also had repercussions on the conditions of navigation (number of passengers, equipment, etc.).

Interviews with both migrants and border control agents confirmed that departures usually took place at night, when vessels moved swiftly away from the coast to avoid detection by surveillance authorities (the worst that could happen to migrants, according to their statements). Migrants often

waited on beaches near departure ports, after undertaking nocturnal overland journeys, as in the cases of Nouadhibou and the beaches of La Güera (Ruiz Aguiar, 2025). One migrant interviewed recalled the sense of insecurity this generated, given the risks associated with the procedure.

Testimonies consistently emphasised the precarious conditions of the crossings. Boats were equipped only with fuel and basic provisions and lacked adequate emergency equipment. Surveillance and rescue officers interviewed underlined that radio beacons were rarely carried; instead, migrants relied on mobile phones in cases of distress. Cross-referenced data from INTA and COSPAS-SARSAT on distress signals with georeferenced rescue data from SASEMAR for 2023 confirmed that no radio beacons had been activated, a shortcoming that likely prolongs rescue times and may have contributed to the loss of life. Migrants further reported that vessels generally navigated during the day and remained stationary at night. Severe maritime conditions often meant that passengers arrived debilitated, and in certain cases required immediate hospitalization. One migrant who departed from Nouadhibou described the harshness of the journey and the profound sense of relief experienced when intercepted by the Civil Guard.

With regard to the networks and actors that sustain the migratory process, interviews highlighted the importance of family and community support, as the scholarly literature has pointed out. The international coordinator of a humanitarian organisation providing first aid in the Canary Islands stressed that migration was often financed through family resources and debt:

> "You have mortgaged yourself in Senegal, and those Senegalese who have mortgaged themselves with you, that is, your father and mother have dedicated all the resources they had so that you come here, with the hope that you arrive here and have a job and send back some money, which is what will maintain that family… That's why they accept being without a contract, the most precarious jobs, etc., and if they didn't have that debt, they would return, I am completely sure because I have spoken with many of them" (interview with an NGO coordinator, 2024).

However, this was not always the case. Several migrants stressed that they had embarked without the knowledge or consent of their families. What remained constant, however, was reliance on networks of intermediaries. Interviews with journalists and surveillance agents indicated that while some transnational migratory processes in Africa were organised through relatively structured networks associated with human smuggling, a substantial share of arrivals was linked to loosely

organised networks, which operated outside formal regulation but were not necessarily criminalised under national legal frameworks.

Interviewees also pointed out that coastal departures would have been impossible without the participation –typically in exchange for payment– of boat owners, captains, and individuals who assisted in equipping the vessels. Other intermediaries played a vital role in connecting migrants with boat owners.

In summary, the empirical material collected between 2020 and 2024 highlighted three interrelated dimensions of the Atlantic route: the geographical complexity of departure points, the precariousness of maritime journeys, and the predominance of informal and weakly structured support networks. These findings align with broader debates on irregular migration, which stress how mobility is shaped simultaneously by risk, precarity, and relational infrastructures of support. The Canary Islands case demonstrated that the Atlantic crossing was not only a perilous maritime route but also a social process deeply embedded in transnational networks of obligation, debt, and survival strategies.

6 An explanation from border control

After delving into the knowledge of the magnitude and characteristics of irregular migratory transit on the West African route, the need arises to question why one of the most dangerous migratory routes in the European context has experienced such a significant increase since 2020, while the Western Mediterranean route seems to have stabilized its figures, as observed in Figure 1.

Without underestimating the importance of the strategies employed by networks facilitating irregular migration and the new push factors analysed above, we argue that one explanatory factor lies in the migration policy implemented in Spain since 2020. In general terms, this policy is characterized by not facilitating regular migration and by hindering the arrival of irregular migrants. Regarding the latter, two distinct stages can be distinguished in relation to border control: during and after the pandemic. Regardless of the stage, it is important to note that border control in Spain has always been reactive, responding to developments rather than anticipating them.

6.1 Border control during the pandemic: repressive deterrence in island areas

Between 2018 and 2019, substantial maritime arrivals from Morocco, Mali, and Guinea via the Spanish Mediterranean coast, together with land entries through Ceuta and Melilla, prompted a

marked intensification of border control in the region. Cooperation with Morocco was strengthened to prevent departures at origin, while the Índalo maritime operation, in collaboration with FRONTEX, was launched to ensure surveillance, search, and rescue in the Western Mediterranean. Both initiatives, focused on monitoring and interception, were accompanied by repatriation measures (Irazuzta & Ibarra, 2021).

By the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, when Spain closed its external borders and restricted internal mobility, maritime migration in the Western Mediterranean had already been partially curtailed. Nonetheless, pandemic-related measures further reinforced surveillance in the region. The Spanish government concentrated on preventing arrivals in Ceuta, Melilla, and along the Mediterranean coast of the Iberian Peninsula, allocating approximately 80% of migration control resources to this area and advancing a "smart borders" model (Fuentes Lara & Fanjul, 2024).

During this period in the Canary Islands, surveillance and rescue operations were conducted independently of FRONTEX, despite the extensive territorial scope of the maritime border. Responsibility for these activities was divided between the Ministry of Defence and the Civil Guard, which oversaw surveillance and interception (García Sacristán, 2016), and SASEMAR, which was in charge of search and rescue operations. This model was characterized by a shortage of both resources and personnel, a situation repeatedly emphasized in interviews with agents involved in surveillance, interception, and rescue. Informal interviews further revealed a consistent perception of inadequate resources at all times.

In this context, migratory flows in 2020 were redirected from the Mediterranean to the Canary Islands, taking advantage of differences in border control between the two regions and the inherent permeability of migratory routes. This shift was unusual and demonstrates the adaptability of migrant networks to borders with lower friction (Mezzadra & Neilson, 2013). For instance, many Malians initially attempted to migrate to Europe via Libya and Morocco, but the tightening of controls at the western and central Mediterranean borders since 2019 displaced part of these movements towards the Canary route (Naranjo, 2020).

Why was there such a marked difference between the two borders in terms of resources and personnel? According to experts interviewed (academics and journalists), this could have been a strategy by the Spanish government to optimize resources, based on the expectation that the inherent dangers of the maritime route to the Canary Islands would deter a significant portion of migratory flows. After all, the islands had received relatively few irregular migrants in previous years, and it was anticipated that this trend would continue.

However, most reception facility managers stressed that restrictions on mobility after arrival were also deliberately used as a control mechanism. In other words, insularity was considered a strategic element in the design of Spanish border control policy. Given the limited capacity to carry out returns in 2020 and 2021, the strategy necessarily relied on mechanisms of repressive deterrence. From a central perspective, it was simpler and more effective to retain migrants in remote insular locations.

Indeed, most migrants who arrived in the Canary Islands during this period were temporarily confined in emergency facilities, reception centres, and hotels (Domínguez-Mujica et al., 2022). Even when confinement measures were less strict, migrants granted international protection or those who had applied for asylum faced significant difficulties in continuing their journey to other parts of Spanish territory (Mesa-Pérez & Poy, 2024). The testimony of a reception facility manager illustrates the confinement situation that prevailed on the islands:

> "Thanks to our lawyer, we obtained a court ruling that forced the police to allow the boys to travel if they had certain documents, that is, either a passport or a request for reception from their families in another country or another place in Spain, because until those moments they were not allowed to travel" (Interview with a manager of a reception centre, 2024).

Although reports from NGOs and academic literature point out that this temporary confinement on the islands was characterized by violations of rights (Amnesty International, 2021; CEAR Canarias, 2021; Defensor del Pueblo, 2021; Médicos del Mundo, 2021) —such as lack of legal assistance and translation, detentions exceeding 72 hours, and the inability to exercise freedom of movement— this issue was not highlighted in interviews with agents directly involved in arrivals. Instead, they consistently emphasized the precariousness of reception resources, an aspect also noted in previous analyses (Rodríguez Salinas, 2022). The images of migrants crowded on the Arguineguín dock, in the south of Gran Canaria, together with the establishment of large-scale temporary reception facilities, vividly reflect the situation experienced at that time.

Therefore, it can be inferred that Spain used the peripheral and insular character of the Canary Islands as a migration control mechanism, employing them as an advanced border for the temporary containment of flows. Nonetheless, the repressive deterrence measures implemented in the archipelago were not comparable to the more severe forms of confinement applied in other insular migration destinations, such as Lesbos in Greece (Dimitriadi, 2017; Papoutsi et al., 2018). According to interviews conducted, in the Canary Islands prolonged detentions did not

occur, nor was it possible to carry out expedited returns. While the pandemic intensified the archipelago's role as an advanced border for the temporary containment and staggering of migratory flows, the practice remained far from a hotspot model. This does not preclude the fact that the accounts of interviewed migrants consistently emphasized their feeling of confinement and their perception of the island as a prison.

6.2 Border control in the new normal: coercion at origin

After 2022, Spain's border control policy underwent significant transformations. With the renewed capacity to carry out repatriations more efficiently, control efforts in the Canary Islands increasingly relied on mechanisms of repressive and coercive deterrence. This section focused specifically on coercive deterrence —its defining features and implications— before concluding with an assessment of the role played by the islands in this policy framework.

Repatriations, often regarded as the most repressive component of migration policy, were marked by a high degree of discretion, as emphasized in interviews with staff working in reception and migrant assistance services. A reception centre manager illustrated this point:

> "These boys were expelled and ended up on the street. Many of them had passports but hid them, because if they were detained with the passport, it was the easiest way to expel them—to send them back to their country of origin, which in most cases they strongly opposed. But regarding the actual number of expulsions, we had no idea, because in many instances they were carried out without anyone knowing" (Interview with a reception centre manager, 2025).

The central strategy after 2022 was to seal off the West African border through coercive deterrence. What distinguished this approach was its reliance on actions at the point of origin, specifically surveillance and detection at departure sites and in their surrounding areas. According to an agent of the Civil Guard Control Centre, 45% of interceptions were conducted at the origin. This was confirmed by a succession of high-level agreements signed between Spain and countries of departure after 2022. Through these agreements, Spain sought the cooperation of border surveillance authorities in those countries, often providing technical assistance and operational support. In return, these countries received economic or geopolitical compensation.

The majority of experts highlighted that the control model adopted after 2022 differed from that implemented during the previous major migratory crisis in the Canary Islands, the cayuco crisis of 2006. At that time, actions at the origin were carried out under the Africa Plan, but the primary focus was on large-scale surveillance and control operations (Godenau & López-Sala, 2016). By

contrast, after 2022 border control became embedded in Spain's broader geopolitical relations with its southern neighbours.

This origin-based deterrence strategy, aligned with new approaches at other European frontiers (Vives, 2023), made rescue operations increasingly precarious, shifted responsibilities to countries of origin, and further militarized the maritime space. However, the results fell short of expectations. Although the strategy contributed to a decline in arrivals to the Canary Islands in 2022, this reduction was not sustained. In 2023 and 2024, arrivals increased once again, prompting a critical reassessment of its effectiveness. Several agents interviewed emphasized that these outcomes revealed the limits of origin-focused coercion.

According to the qualitative analysis and interviews, in Northwest Africa, the complexity of border control —arising from the larger number of states involved— combined with improved enforcement of departures from Algeria and Tunisia along the Western and Central Mediterranean routes in 2024, decisively shaped the outcomes observed in the Canary Islands (González, 2024, September 2).

Moreover, coercion at the point of origin also influenced the routes taken, the types of vessels used, and the level of accidents. By concentrating surveillance at departure sites, vessels were forced to move quickly away from coastal areas and avoid sailing near the shore. As a result, maritime routes departing from Mauritania, Senegal, and The Gambia increasingly crossed the high seas, with many boats landing on the western islands of the archipelago —particularly El Hierro— in areas lacking adequate reception facilities, which heightened risks due to the longer and more hazardous crossings. For similar reasons, departures from southern Morocco and the Laayoune area in Western Sahara more frequently employed rubber boats. These enabled faster exits from the coast and reduced the likelihood of detection by Moroccan surveillance services, but increased the danger of the journey. Their affordability further encouraged their use.

Despite the shortcomings of this coercive model, its persistence was justified through a dual narrative, as several experts stated: first, that it was framed primarily as a fight against criminal groups engaged in human trafficking, and second, that it was presented as part of Spain's cooperation policy. However, this official discourse of origin-based coercion contrasted with the empirical evidence, since not all flows directed toward the Canary Islands could be associated with large organized criminal groups. For instance, trafficking networks run by major criminal organizations typically relied on mother ships; yet no interceptions of such vessels were recorded, according to an interview with a representative of the CCRC.

With respect to the second argument of cooperation, while it was true that the agreements entailed economic compensation, it was often overlooked that they also involved supplying partner countries with military equipment not always used to control departures, as acknowledged in interviews with Spanish authorities.

At the same time, coercion-focused border control at the origin also had to be assessed in terms of its economic implications within Spain, as highlighted in an interview with a journalist. The demand for increasingly sophisticated surveillance equipment, together with the expansion of public tenders financed by Spanish budgets, generated significant business opportunities for product and service providers (El Confidencial & Fundación por Causa, 2022).

In this new scenario based on surveillance at the origin, the Canary Islands no longer played a central role as a detection and temporary retention point, as they had during the pandemic. After 2022, most agents involved in assistance services emphasized the importance of the archipelago in the staggering of migrants' internal mobility, delaying their onward journeys to the mainland. This was also emphasized in the academic literature, which noted that the islands had instead become a laboratory for the control and transferability of migrants (López-Sala & Godenau, 2024).

Insularity made the "triage" or filtering of arrivals more effective, as it was difficult for migrants to leave the islands shortly after arrival. Unlike other island destinations in the Mediterranean, the Atlantic insularity of the Canary Islands served as a useful tool for filtering, in a more controlled manner, the groups that would be repatriated, those that would be transferred to the Spanish mainland, and those that would remain on the islands (López-Sala & Moreno-Amador, 2020), without the need to resort to imposed retention. This role was reflected in the narratives of many interviewees, such as the following account from a volunteer in an assistance facility:

> "Yes, this is the perfect prison, because you cannot leave by land or by sea... in Spain, supposedly when you arrive and they do an expulsion procedure or you request international protection, legally you can move throughout the country. However, for that, the Canary Islands are not Spain... The Police and the Civil Guard at the borders tell you that you cannot move... here you have the boat, you know, or the airport control" (Interview with a volunteer in an assistance resource, 2025).

In the case of the Canary Islands, insularity enabled tighter control over onward mobility to the rest of European territory and facilitated decision-making regarding repatriation, transfer, or retention, in line with the characteristics of the Spanish mobility regime (Godenau & Zapata

Hernández, 2022). This corresponded to the role of an advanced border within European territory, with strategic functions of surveillance, control, and filtering, as has also been discussed in relation to other island contexts (Mountz, 2011; Bousiou, 2022). In this sense, the Canary Islands could operate as an internal border within the Schengen area (Andersson, 2014).

Moreover, the archipelago played a second role within this new border model: that of organizing the externalization of migration control, as emerged from interviews conducted with border surveillance agents. In other words, the role of the islands was to logistically support the existence of an even more distant European border, located along the African coast. Thus, the Canary Islands simultaneously operated as a testing ground for Spain's externalized border policies and as a mechanism for managing migratory flows before they reached European territory.

7 Conclusions

Since 2020, irregular maritime migration flows to the Canary Islands increased considerably, consolidating the archipelago as the main gateway to the European Union for irregular maritime migration. In this context, this study pursued three objectives: to analyse the migratory flows occurring since that year, to examine the migratory process, and to explore the reasons behind the increase in arrivals.

Regarding the first objective, the arriving migrants were characterised by diverse profiles. While the majority were young men of Moroccan, Senegalese, and Malian nationality, the diversification of countries of origin —together with the growing presence of women and unaccompanied minors— reflected the increasingly transnational and heterogeneous nature of the West African route. This diversity in the flows represented the main difference compared to previous periods in the Canary Islands, to the extent that it can be considered evidence of the globalisation of the migratory phenomenon.

In relation to the second objective, concerning how migratory mobility was taking place, we examined the geographical complexity of maritime routes and the multiplicity of departure points along the African coast; the precarious navigation conditions, with an increased use of new types of vessels; the temporalities of the journeys; and the predominance of informal and loosely structured support and assistance networks as the main characteristics of the migration routes developed during the study period. The diversity of departure points stood out as one of the most striking features, along with their connection to overland migratory routes across the African continent.

Finally, regarding the third objective —why such a dangerous and peripheral route in the European context experienced increased arrivals— we identified new drivers of migration linked to the pandemic, the worsening political and socio-economic situation in some Sub-Saharan African countries, and the rise in armed violence, particularly in Mali. However, this article contended that the border control model implemented partly explained this migratory crisis in the Canary Islands.

In this regard, following theories on mobility regimes and deterrence mechanisms, we distinguished two stages in the Canary Islands. The first, during the pandemic, was marked by repressive deterrence through mobility restrictions, implemented in a context where deportations were not feasible. This approach brought the situation in the Canary Islands closer to that observed since the mid-2010s in other Mediterranean island borders —particularly the Greek islands (Gazzotti, 2024)— which shifted from being spaces of transit to spaces of detention and confinement. However, repression in the Canary Islands relied on temporary mobility restrictions; it did not involve the establishment of hotspots or migrant detention facilities.

The second stage took place after the pandemic. The poor outcomes of the border control model during the pandemic led to its transformation into one based on a combination of repression —primarily through deportations— and coercion, with a mixed system of surveillance and interception in which a large part of operations were outsourced to the African coast. Therefore, in this period, the model developed resembled that previously implemented in the Canary Islands under the Africa Plan and in other island spaces, such as Lampedusa (Cuttitta, 2014), which was based on sustaining border control through international relations and processes of borderization, or the artificial construction of borders.

Based on these two models, we argued that, in the first period, the large-scale arrival of migrants to the Canary Islands was the result of a control strategy that concentrated resources in the Mediterranean. In the second, the persistently high number of arrivals was linked both to the reinforcement of other borders in the Western and Central Mediterranean and to the multiplicity of states involved in border control in the Canary Islands, which considerably increased its complexity. These dynamics suggested that the permeability between migratory routes required greater inter-state coordination in border management.

What was evident, however, was that the recent model had a clear impact on the configuration of migratory routes and on the conditions under which maritime transit occurred, fostering longer crossings, more precarious circumstances, and heightened risks throughout the journey.

In this article, we examined how the two border control strategies implemented in the Canary Islands were shaped by their peripheral insular character. Theoretical contributions have emphasized that, over recent decades, Europe's efforts to curb irregular maritime migration have transformed islands into advanced borders of the Schengen Area, where hybrid governance models —combining control and humanitarian assistance— were employed. Practices of retention, filtering, and staged transit were integrated with flexibility according to temporal and geographical contexts, while the externalisation of border control was systematically organised.

These features were clearly observable in the Canary Islands. Their peripheral insularity initially enabled the implementation of a border control strategy based on mobility restrictions following arrivals in 2020 and 2021, without resorting to the prison-like model employed in other, less remote insular contexts. Moreover, insularity facilitated more effective staging of migrant mobility after arrival and enhanced efficiency in filtering processes among new arrivals after 2022. Finally, peripheral insularity contributed to the establishment of external borders along the African coast through the transformation of the Canary Islands into a logistical platform. In this sense, the Archipelago was transformed into an experimental laboratory for innovative forms of border deterrence.

Seen through the lens of migration governmentality, the Canary Islands illustrate how peripheral insular territories are mobilised as laboratories for testing and refining mechanisms of control that combine coercion, humanitarian governance, and the externalisation of borders. As critical scholarship on migration management has argued, such practices do not merely regulate mobility but also produce differentiated categories of migrants and legitimate new forms of state intervention. In conclusion, the analysis demonstrates how migration policies not only regulate flows but also operate as technologies of governmentality, transforming territories into borders and reshaping their spatial and political functions within the European migration regime.

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