



ANALYSIS

PUSHED TO THE LIMIT?

ITALIAN AND SPANISH LESSONS FROM THE MIGRATION CRISES

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INTRODUCTION

Lithuania and increasingly Latvia, as well as Poland, have been experiencing major pressure caused by illegal migrant flows, pushed to their border by the regime of illegitimate president Alyaksandr Lukashenka in Belarus. However, this kind of crisis is not new in the European Union (EU). Countries like Italy and Spain have been traditionally at the front line of irregular migration. The aim of this paper is to provide some valuable insights about the management of migration emergencies based on the experiences of Spain and Italy.

1. MIGRATION FLOWS ON THE EU SOUTHERN BORDERS

Both Spain and Italy have been dealing with the effects of a migration crisis during most of the last decade. The first major migration crisis that hit Spain was the 2006 Cayuco Crisis which reached a peak of 90 000 arrivals in 2018–19 after the migration flows moved from the Central and Eastern front to the Western front.¹ At present, the country is still facing the costs of the current crisis with Morocco, which once saw the arrival of 10 000 irregular migrants to the city of Ceuta in a period of 48 hours.²

¹ “Informe Quincenal Inmigración irregular 2019” [Biweekly Report Irregular Immigration 2019], Ministerio del Interior, Gobierno de España, accessed 21 July 2021.

² “Interior cifra en 10.000 las llegadas a Ceuta en la crisis migratoria, pero aún no lo incluye en el balance oficial,” [The Ministry of the Interior puts the number of arrivals in Ceuta in the migration crisis at 10,000, but does not yet include them in the official balance sheet], Europa Press, 17 June 2021.

Italy, historically, has been at the centre of two migration routes: the Central Mediterranean Route and the Adriatic Route have seen a constant flow of migrants and refugees trying to reach the coasts of the *Bel Paese* with the aim of reaching the north of Europe, as in the case of Spain. The situation turned to a crisis in 2011, with the Arab Spring in Libya drastically increasing the number of landings in Italian territory of migrants from the African continent. The peak was reached in 2016–17, with more than 300 000 migrants arriving in Italy in 24 months.³

Spain and Italy have been suffering the social, economic and political consequences of these migration crises.

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2. AN OVERWHELMED SYSTEM

During the respective crises, both Spain and Italy suffered from overloaded systems, and it appears that Lithuania and, to some extent, Latvia are beginning to experience a similar overload.

In 2018, the already stressed Spanish migrant reception system collapsed due to the high number of arrivals in a very short period. The number of arrivals to the Spanish territory increased from 14 500 in 2016 to more than 62 000 in just two years.⁴ The system did not have the capacity to deal with such a large number of people arriving at the same time.

Spanish migrant settlements (*Centro de Internamiento de Extranjeros*, CIEs) ended up hosting more people than they were intended to

³ “Cruscotto statistico giornaliero 31-12-2017” [Daily statistical dashboard], Dipartimento per le libertà civili e l’immigrazione, Ministero dell’Interno, accessed 21 July 2021.

⁴ “Informe Quincenal Inmigración irregular 1/01-18/12 del 2018” [Biweekly Report Irregular Immigration 1/01-18/12- 2018], Ministerio del Interior, Gobierno de España, accessed 21 July 2021.

host. Meanwhile numerous legal applications blocked the judicial system and pushed the time period required for resolving the applications beyond legal limits. In these settlements, migrants are not allowed to leave until their legal situation is resolved, so this gave rise to questions about respect for their human rights

Spain increased the use of “automatic push-backs” at the Spanish–Moroccan land border in the cities of Ceuta and Melilla, a practice heavily criticised as a human rights violation

in the centres and concerns about possible ‘indefinite detentions’ of migrants.⁵ Increased tension ensued and even riots occurred within the migrant population at some centres.⁶

During the crisis, Spain also increased the use of “automatic push-backs” (*devoluciones en caliente*) at the Spanish–Moroccan land border in the cities of Ceuta and Melilla, a practice heavily criticised by NGOs as a human rights violation.⁷ These actions allowed the Spanish government to send migrants who crossed the border illegally directly and collectively back to Morocco without the obligation of checking each migrant’s situation.⁸ In February 2020, the European Court of Human Rights ruled that the Spanish automatic push-backs did not breach the European Convention on Human Rights.⁹

Italy faced a similar situation, and soon became overwhelmed with the large numbers of migrants stretching the capacity of its reception centres, while Europe turned a blind eye.

Before the crisis started in 2014–15, Italy was commonly dealing with around 17 000 to 37 000 migrants and asylum seekers arriving through

the Central Mediterranean Route yearly. New emergency reception centres were established to cope with the increasing waves of asylum seekers, to help the regular stream of reception. These emergency centres, however, became the standard measure of reception for the period 2015–20.

Italy still struggles because the majority of people arriving in its territory should be returned to their countries, according to the territorial commissions that are responsible for the first contact with migrants and their asylum requests. Yet, the returns are blocked since the majority of people appeal the decisions, and the Italian immigration sections of the judicial system are not able to quickly process the appeals.¹⁰ In fact, Italy returns only 20% of those migrants who receive a return order and are sent to the centres for returns (*Centri per i Rimpatri*, CPR), due to both overcrowding of the centres and bureaucratic and structural difficulties.¹¹

The key strategy of the Italian governments during the years has been to cooperate with the authorities of the origin or transit countries

This situation was exacerbated with the abolition of the permit for humanitarian reasons: after Salvini’s *Decreto Sicurezza* of 2018, the irregular number of migrants in Italy skyrocketed, increasing by over 37 000 by 2020.¹²

Up until now, the key strategy of the Italian governments during the years has been to cooperate with the authorities of the origin or transit countries. The clearest example is that of

⁵ Human Rights Watch, “[España: Inmigrantes retenidos en condiciones precarias](#)” [Spain: Migrants held in precarious conditions], 31 July 2017.

⁶ Jose Luis Roca, “[La Policía aborta un motín en el CIE de Aluche](#)” [Police stops a riot at Aluche’s CIE], *elPeriodico*, 17 October 2019.

⁷ “[ND and NT v. Spain](#),” European Centre for Constitutional and Human Rights (ECCHR), accessed 21 July 2021.

⁸ VerificaRTVE, “[Te Explicamos El Procedimiento de Devolución de Inmigrantes a Marruecos](#)” [We Explain The Procedure for Returning Immigrants to Morocco], RTVE, 19 May 2021.

⁹ ECHR – Grand Chamber, [Case of N.D. and N.T. v. Spain](#) (ECHR 13 February 2020).

¹⁰ Alessandra Benignetti, “[Immigrazione, ecco quanti sono i migranti ‘fantasma’ e perché non vengono espulsi](#)” [Immigration, here are how many ‘ghost’ migrants are and why they are not expelled], *Sputnik*, 24 February 2021.

¹¹ Arianna Poletti, “[En Italie, L’expulsion Opaque Des Migrant-Es Tunisien-Nes](#)” [In Italy, the opaque expulsion of Tunisian migrants], *Inkyfada*, 26 November 2020.

¹² Matteo Villa (@emmevilla), “[#DecretoSicurezza: con il ritorno della protezione umanitaria si pone rimedio a una delle situazioni più paradossali di sempre](#)” [#SecurityDecreets: with the return of humanitarian protection, one of the most paradoxical situations ever is remedied], Tweet, 6 October 2020.

the 2017 memorandum of understanding between Italy and Libya.

One of the biggest causes of system overwhelm is the inaction at the European Union level. Italy and Spain paid the consequences of the failed EU

One of the biggest causes of system overwhelm is the inaction at the European Union level. Italy and Spain paid the consequences of the failed EU system of the mandatory refugee quota

system of the mandatory refugee quota. This system would have temporarily eased the reception system of their countries and benefited the migrants while sending a message that neither country was alone in facing an issue that affects the entire EU.

For example, only 302 of the around 11 500 migrants who reached Italy in 2019 have been relocated to other EU countries.¹³

3. MIGRATION ENTERS THE POLITICAL DEBATE

Nonetheless, migration only appeared at the centre of the Spanish political arena during the peak moment of the 2018 crisis. Even though the Spanish population still keeps a positive attitude towards migration, the regional elections at the end of 2018 saw the emergence of the first political party openly critical of migration, VOX.¹⁴ The topic helped to polarise the politics with VOX, usually labelled as rightist/far-right, claiming tougher measures were required for illegal migrants, while *Podemos*, usually labelled as leftist/far-left, demanding the process for regularising the irregular migrants be made easier.¹⁵

VOX won a quite a significant number of seats in regional elections in the provinces in the migration flow front line (Andalusia, Ceuta, Melilla, and Murcia) and even some seats in the last national elections.

The media pictures of large groups of migrants jumping over the Ceuta and Melilla wall and the sea arrivals through the Strait of Gibraltar to the Spanish beaches produced some kind of “invasion anxiety” that had an impact, albeit limited.¹⁶ However, what has increased during the last few years is the proportion of Spanish people arguing that immigrants enjoy preferential access to public resources.¹⁷ Although this perception is typically exaggerated, the feeling that the locals are being left behind is one of the main migration-related issues for the Spanish population.

Furthermore, some of the neighbourhoods hosting the CIEs have had issues with them and call for migrants to be moved to other places in the country.¹⁸ Common issues raised include local security problems with the migrants, frequent runaways and overcrowded centres. Similar concerns are expressed by people in the regions at the front line of migration flows that have to deal with the arrivals. They feel that the other regions that are not directly affected, and even the national government, do not cooperate, showing a lack of understanding between the different levels of the Spanish public administration.

In Italy, on the other hand, migration and how to handle it has prompted heated debate in Italian politics since flows of migrants started to arrive on its territory. Over the years, different governments with different views on how severely migration needed to be tackled have followed one another, contributing to distort the perception of migration of Italian citizens and to feed discontent and mistrust towards the migrants. The narratives of Italian politicians,

¹³ Mara Bizzotto, “[Parliamentary questions – Subject: Italy’s irregular immigration crisis](#),” last updated 9 November 2020.

¹⁴ Carmen González Enríquez and Sebastian Rinken, “[Spanish Public Opinion on Immigration and the effect of VOX](#),” The Elcano Royal Institute, 15 April 2021.

¹⁵ Vox España, “[100 Medidas para la España viva](#)” [100 Measures for a Living Spain], 6, 2019; Podemos, “[Podemos ya tiene programa, aquí resumido en 29 claves](#)” [Podemos already has a programme, summarised here in 29 keys], 5 May 2015.

¹⁶ Financial Times Editorial Board, “[Spain’s migrant influx is a warning shot for Europe](#),” *The Financial Times*, 19 May 2019.

¹⁷ Sebastian Rinken, “[Attitudes to Immigration and Electoral Behaviour in Spain](#),” *Anuario CIDOB de la Inmigración*, no. 2019 (29 November 2019), 79.

¹⁸ María Martín, “[La Fiscalía investiga a grupos que se organizaron para agredir a inmigrantes en Gran Canaria](#),” [The Public Prosecutor’s Office investigates groups organised to attack immigrants in Gran Canaria] *El País*, 1 February 2021.

especially those shared by right-wing parties and endorsed by the media, have depicted migrants as threats to the community and to the “Italian identity”, especially in connection with organised crime, terrorism and religion.¹⁹ The last couple of years are a perfect example, with the governments of the right leaning, populist parties *Lega* of Matteo Salvini and *Movimento Cinque Stelle* of Giuseppe Conte. Both governments have expressed their anti-immigration views on various occasions, and during their respective governments in 2018 and 2019, these views were transformed into laws that restrict protections offered to the migrants.

Salvini’s *Decreto Sicurezza* of October 2018 abolished the permit for humanitarian protection, a safety measure that allowed the provision of residency permits to those people who did not fall under the parameters of the Geneva Convention, when their return was not possible due to the conditions of the country of return or transit. This provision for a humanitarian permit was abolished by a new law by the Conte government in 2020, and consequently, the number of irregular migrants to Italy has skyrocketed, increasing by over 37 000 by 2020.²⁰

This decree also started a war against NGOs rescuing migrants at sea. In fact, it also gave power to the Interior Minister to limit or impede the entry, transit or layover of ships in Italian territorial waters for security reasons.²¹ Furthermore, it hiked up the maximum fines for ships entering Italian territorial waters without authorisation and provided for the arrest of captains who ignored orders to not enter Italian waters and called on naval authorities to seize their boats.²² This was the case for Carola Rackete, captain of the *Sea-Watch 3*, who was forced to remain at sea for two weeks with more than 40 rescued migrants on board, because

Salvini denied her the right to dock into Lampedusa. Rackete was subsequently arrested and her vessel seized after she made the decision to dock during the night because the conditions on board were deteriorating.²³

The narratives of Italian politicians, especially those shared by right-wing parties and endorsed by the media, have depicted migrants as threats to the community and to the “Italian identity”, especially in connection with organised crime, terrorism and religion

The *Rackete* case was one of the many stand-offs between Salvini and rescue ships. Now, Salvini is waiting for trial on charges of kidnapping and illegal detention, over the decision to prevent the *Open Arms* rescue ship with more than 100 migrants on board from landing in Lampedusa in 2019.²⁴

Salvini’s Decree was substituted with the new ‘*Decreto Immigrazione*’ of Giuseppe Conte in October 2020, which did not officially reintroduce the humanitarian permit, but reintroduced the possibility to evaluate migrants case by case and to allow asylum when special protection is needed. Additionally, it introduced a new permit to allow for climate migrants.²⁵ However, even though this new Decree reduced the fines and abolished administrative sanctions for rescue ships, it did not abolish the penal sanctions.²⁶

4. SECURITISING MIGRATION

According to securitisation theory, “political issues are constituted as extreme security issues to be dealt with urgently when they have been labelled as ... ‘threatening’. ... Calling immigration a ‘threat to national security’, for

¹⁹ Luca Dilda, “[Securitization of Migration in Italy](#),” Centrum pro bezpečnostní analýzy a prevenci (CBAP), 24 April 2020.

²⁰ Villa (@emmevilla), “#DecretiSicurezza”.

²¹ Luca Blengino and Elisa Gambarini, “[Sbarchi e immigrazione in Italia: i dati degli ultimi 5 anni](#)” [Landings and immigration in Italy: data for the last 5 years], *YouTrend*, 15 February 2021.

²² “[Italy Senate Passes Salvini’s Security Decree Against Migrants](#),” *TeleSUR/jf-MH*, 6 August 2019.

²³ Roland Hughes, “[Carola Rackete: How a ship captain took on Italy’s Salvini](#),” *BBC News*, 6 July 2019,

²⁴ “[Salvini ordered to stand trial on migrant kidnapping charge](#),” *Aljazeera*, 17 April 2021.

²⁵ Sara Occhipinti, “[Decreto immigrazione: le novità sui permessi di soggiorno](#)” [Immigration decree: the news on residence permits], *Altalex*, 22 December 2020.

²⁶ Annamaria Graziano, “[Decreto immigrazione, la Camera approva le nuove norme. Cosa cambia](#)” [Immigration decree, the Chamber approves the new rules. What changes], *The Italian Times*, 10 December 2020.

instance, shifts immigration from a low priority political concern to a high priority issue that requires action, such as securing borders”.²⁷

Migration was only properly securitised in Spain in response to the 2006 Cayuco Crisis that saw the arrival of 31 000 illegal immigrants in the Canary Islands alone. The Spanish reaction to the crisis at the strategic level was formulated by the Cabinet of the Presidency of the Government

The experience reoriented the Spanish migration policy from an approach based exclusively on border control and integration to one that complemented this internal approach with an external one aimed at promoting collaboration with the EU (Europeanisation) and African countries (regionalisation)

which at the time did not have experience in dealing with similar crises nor did the current National Security system exist, so the government approached the issue with a complete *ad hoc* management.

Spain decided to deploy an extensive diplomatic effort: collaboration with countries of origin and transit was prioritised and new Cooperation Framework Agreements (*Acuerdos Marco*) were signed, while existing ones were reinforced with, in total, 11 West African countries for migratory assistance, readmission and repatriation, and the fight against organised crime.²⁸ The Spanish government also decided to reinforce their embassies in the region and opened two more in Mali and Cape Verde.

The plan was to boost the political will and administrative capabilities of those countries through the permanent presence of diplomatic representatives and the Spanish Security Forces

while at the same time providing them with the necessary technical and economic assistance they were lacking.

At the multilateral level, Spanish efforts were aimed at making the regional/subregional organisations (EU, African Union, the Economic Community of West African States and the Economic and Monetary Community of Central Africa) aware of the existence of a structural economic emigration in Africa, its associated problems and the absence of collective instruments for migration management.

In addition, Spain established the Canary Islands Regional Coordination Centre (CCRC) to facilitate the cooperation between the different national, EU and regional authorities at the operative level.

The numbers proved the success of this strategy: 12 478 migrants arrived in the Canary Islands in 2007, 9 181 in 2008, 2 246 in 2009 and 196 in 2010, according to Frontex.²⁹

The experience reoriented the Spanish migration policy from an approach based exclusively on border control and integration to

Italy has signed numerous memoranda of understanding with the countries of origin or transit of migrants, with the aim to stop migration waves from the start, and to delegate the dealing with migrants to the origin countries

one that complemented this internal approach with an external one aimed at promoting collaboration with the EU (Europeanisation) and African countries (regionalisation).³⁰

At the same time, Italy has always looked for a policy of externalisation as a securitising

²⁷ Clara Eroukhmanoff, “[Securitisation Theory: An Introduction](#),” in *International Relations Theory*, ed. Stephen McGlinchey (Bristol: E-International Relations, 2017), 104.

²⁸ Félix Arteaga Martín, “[Las Lecciones aprendidas de la Crisis de los ‘Cayucos’ de 2006](#)” [Lessons Learned from the 2006 ‘Cayucos’ Crisis], in *El Fenómeno Migratorio En España: Reflexiones Desde El Ámbito de La Seguridad Nacional* [The Migratory Phenomenon In

Spain: Reflections From The National Security Scope], ed. Comité Especializado de Inmigración (Madrid: DSN - Presidencia Del Gobierno, 2019), 245–52.

²⁹ José María Rodríguez, “[Spain’s Handling of the Cayuco Boat Crisis](#),” *Euractiv*, 14 June 2017.

³⁰ Arteaga Martín, “Las Lecciones aprendidas.”

measure when it came to migration discussions. Italy, in fact, has signed numerous memoranda of understanding with the countries of origin or transit of migrants, with the aim to stop migration waves from the start, and to delegate the dealing with migrants to the origin countries. This is what happened in Libya, for example: to outsource border control to Libya, the Italian government signed a friendship treaty with Gaddafi in 2008, granting Libya funds to stop migrant boats from leaving Libya.

Further securitisation measures of this kind were taken in the following years, as for example the agreement reached by the Gentiloni government with the Libyan government of Al Sarraj in February 2017, to provide their coast guard with funds, means and training for their search and rescue operations and their reception centres.

Such measures were aimed at limiting the arrival of migrants from Africa to Italian shores. And the numbers play in favour of such solutions: 2017 registered a drop in arrivals of migrants from Libya to Italian shores of 34.2% from 2016, and of 80.4% in 2018.³¹

Some similarities can be drawn between the current Lithuanian migrant crisis, the role of the Belarusian regime and the recent Spanish–Moroccan crisis

However, even if the EU has endorsed this informal approach of agreements with third party countries, such an approach was seen as dangerously similar to “push-back” agreements which might be regarded in breach of international principles such as that of *non-refoulement* and the prohibition of collective expulsions.³²

Moreover, Libyan reception (or more precisely, detention) centres have been repeatedly

accused by NGOs and the international community of the inhumane treatment of migrants. According to Amnesty International, in 2020 around 11 000 refugees and migrants were intercepted at sea and taken back to official or unofficial detention centres, where they were arbitrarily detained for long periods and subjected to torture and ill treatment.³³ This has occurred with the complicity of the Italian institutions, that are keeping silent on the matter.

5. WEAPONISATION OF MIGRANTS

Some similarities can be drawn between the current Lithuanian migrant crisis, the role of the Belarusian regime and the recent Spanish–Moroccan crisis.

The Spanish–Moroccan crisis in May 2021 resulted in 10 000 migrants in 48 hours arriving in the Spanish city of Ceuta (a city of 80 000 people) with the compliance of the Moroccan authorities as a reprisal for the Spanish government providing Covid-19 treatment to Brahim Gali, leader of the Saharawi Polisario Front. The Saharawi Polisario Front is a national liberation movement that advocates for the independence of Western Sahara, a territory illegally occupied by Morocco and still under the process of decolonisation.³⁴

The huge number of arrivals sent Ceuta into chaos: the schools had to shut down temporarily, the reception system collapsed, the Covid-19 vaccination campaign was suspended, migrants were wandering in the streets with nowhere to go and the army had to be deployed.³⁵ The active involvement of the Moroccan authorities in stirring up this crisis is evident: there were many videos on social media of Moroccan police literally opening the border for migrants.³⁶ The Moroccan ambassador in

³¹ Blengino and Gambarini, “Sbarchi e immigrazione in Italia.”

³² Samantha Velluti, “[The securitisation of asylum and immigration in European discourse and practice: the case of Italy](#),” Refugee Law Initiative Blog on Refugee Law and Forced Migration, 19 November 2019.

³³ “Memorandum d’intesa Italia-Libia: ‘[Quattro anni di complicità in crimini di diritto internazionale](#)’”, [Italy–Libya Memorandum of Understanding: ‘Four years of complicity in crimes under

international law’], Amnesty International, last modified 1 February 2021.

³⁴ “[The United Nations and Decolonization: Western Sahara](#),” UNdata, last updated 15 May 2019.

³⁵ José Ignacio Torreblanca, “[This time is different: Spain, Morocco, and Weaponised Migration](#),” ECFR, 26 May 2021.

³⁶ El País, “[Policías Marroquíes abren la frontera a los inmigrantes](#)” [Moroccan police open the border to migrants], Youtube, 18 May 2021.

Spain even stated that “there are acts that have consequences and they have to be assumed”.³⁷

Morocco is Spain’s most important partner in fighting illegal migration. Consequently, Morocco has received billions in funding from Spain and the EU in recent years.³⁸ However, this has also given Morocco the power to use the migration valve to bargain to achieve its political interests.³⁹ In this case, Morocco’s campaign to force Spain to reconsider its policy regarding the Western Sahara provided a reminder of what could happen to Spain if they do not accept their claims.

Spain suddenly found itself in a weak position and having to deal with a situation it did not expect. The Spanish government decided to follow the strategy of “Europeanising” the crisis to avoid the risk of escalation and to strengthen its posture against Morocco.⁴⁰ Spain has always maintained that, given that its borders are also the EU borders and that migration is a topic which is, in essence, European, the impact of what is happening on those border will never be limited to Spain.⁴¹ Charles Michel, Ursula von der Leyen, Josep Borrell, Ylva Johansson and other high-ranking EU officials made public statements supporting Spain and the importance of the protection of its borders for the EU.⁴²

In June 2021, the European Parliament approved a declaration “rejecting Morocco’s use of border control and migration, and unaccompanied minors in particular, as political pressure against Spain”.⁴³ In response, the government of Morocco made an outraged public statement arguing that the EU should stay out of it, emphasising that the crisis with Spain was strictly “bilateral” and stressing their “exemplary record of cooperation on migration with the European Union”.⁴⁴

But Morocco saw that the cost of its actions was now higher than expected and could put into risk the very precious EU funds the Alawite Kingdom receives. Thus, the crisis did not escalate further, although the issue is still not solved between the countries. However, it gave Spain enough time

As they attempt to cope with a migration crisis on their borders, it could be beneficial for Lithuania, Latvia and Poland to look at the experiences of the two Southern countries

to consider its future actions and a strategy to follow when faced by numerous waves of migrants.

6. RELEVANCE TO THE BALTIC REGION

As they attempt to cope with a migration crisis on their borders, it could be beneficial for Lithuania, Latvia and Poland to look at the experiences of the two Southern countries. Both Spain and Italy made some choices as to how to face the emergency in which they found themselves. It would be useful for the Baltic and Polish authorities to take their achievements and failures into account when evaluating how to best tackle the situation and contextualise it into their own reality.

The sudden move from receiving up to a hundred migrants per year to having to accommodate more than 4 000 people in the last few months is seriously straining the Lithuanian system. The growing number of arrivals, in such a short period of time, to Lithuania and increasingly to Latvia, as well as Poland, is reminiscent of the Italian and Spanish cases. These nations may have to face similar problems: overcrowded centres, struggling

³⁷ “Embajadora de Marruecos: ‘Hay actos que tienen consecuencias y se tienen que asumir’” [There are actions that have consequences and they have to be accepted], *Europa Press*, 18 May 2021.

³⁸ Emilio Ordiz, “España ha entregado a Marruecos más de 320 millones entre ayudas y créditos en cuatro años” [Spain has provided Morocco with more than 320 million in aid and loans in four years], 20 minutos, 22 May 2021.

³⁹ Torreblanca, “This time is different”.

⁴⁰ Eduard Soler Lecha, “Morocco vs Spain: Why It Matters for the EU,” *EUobserver*, 7 June 2021.

⁴¹ Ana Palacio, “Spain-Morocco Tensions: How the EU can make progress on Western Sahara – European Council on Foreign Relations,” *ECFR*, 17 June 2021.

⁴² Soler Lecha, “Morocco vs Spain.”

⁴³ European Parliament, “The breach of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and the use of minors by the Moroccan authorities in the migratory crisis in Ceuta,” EP Declaration, *RC-B9-0349/2021*, 10 June 2021.

⁴⁴ Margarita Arredondas, “Morocco stresses that the Crisis with Spain is ‘Bilateral’ and calls on the European Parliament to stay out of it,” *Atalayar*, 11 June 2021.

judicial systems and the presence of migration in the national political debates.

The spike in number of arrivals is directly linked to Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko's retaliation for EU sanctions targeting his regime and Lithuania's support for, and hosting of, the main exiled Belarusian opposition leader, Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya. The use of migrants as a political weapon by Lukashenko evokes the recent Spanish–Moroccan crisis in Ceuta. The

The challenge remains about how to respond to the regimes, such as Belarus, that turn migrants into a geopolitical weapon, while at the same time to ensure the human rights of the migrants and that the humanitarian obligations of the target countries are properly upheld

political use of migrants in disregard to their human rights and their lives is not something difficult to imagine when it comes to non-democratic regimes. Spain's case highlighted the role the EU can play in helping manage these crises and strengthen the position of a EU member state.

Migration divided the political arena in both Spain and Italy. Even if the impact in Spanish politics was limited, it still polarised the debate. In Italy, it is still a major topic dividing the population and it is used by politicians as an instrument of political propaganda. It is quite likely that Lithuania and perhaps Latvia and Poland will also experience a similar scenario if a common approach is not agreed upon between the main political forces.

Spain and Italy provided different ways of securitising migration with either an exclusive border control issue to a combined one of border control, externalisation and integration. Whatever approach the Baltics and Poland choose to deal with the situation, it is clear that migration is now an important factor worth taking into account in their security strategy. As such, it will need to be considered not only for the immediate future, but also looking at the longer term.

CONCLUSIONS

As the situation in Lithuania, Latvia and Poland demonstrates, migration is no longer an issue contained to the European Union's southern borders. It is expanding as a phenomenon, with spill-over effects to multiple member states beyond the countries of entry. Therefore, cooperation between the member states and with the EU institutions is key. If this cannot happen, some third-party countries will keep trying to take advantage of this disunity and use migration as a weapon against other European countries.

There is no magic solution for irregular migration. Cooperating with origin and transit countries in some cases has been proved a fruitful strategy for reducing it. Nonetheless, dealing with regimes such as Belarus, which turns migrants into geopolitical weapons, while at the same time ensuring respect for the human rights of the migrants themselves and the humanitarian obligations of target countries, continues to present a challenge.

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