

# Migratory flows and pandemic: An analysis of impacts on immigrants of foreign origin in Spain

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## Abstract

Restrictions on mobility as a measure to contain the COVID-19 pandemic meant, in the case of Spain, an abrupt ending to what could be called the second international migratory boom. At the same time, internal migrations underwent considerable change, with cities becoming less attractive as a destination for migrants, and increased flows into rural areas. In this context, our aim is twofold. First, it is to describe and analyse the decline in international migration according to origin and, second, to analyse internal migration among the population of immigrant origin. The results point to a temporary steep downturn in international flows, which does not affect all origins equally. In the case of internal migrations, there is a slight reduction in the intensity of movements with patterns similar to those of the autochthonous population. However, this drop in numbers is very significant among Asians and barely noticeable among immigrants from Latin America.

## INTRODUCTION: CRISIS AND CHANGING EFFECTS

In the first two decades of the twenty-first century, international migration in Spain has shown two surges of growth that are remarkable enough to be described as “explosive”. The first boom, lasting from the beginning of the century to the Great Recession of 2008, meant Spain's consolidation as a country of immigration and, with that, as a “complex system of demographic reproduction” (Cabr e, 1999), which occurs when the migratory balance

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becomes more decisive than natural growth in the maintenance or increase of the population. The second boom can be dated from a certain degree of economic recovery in 2014 until the COVID-19 outbreak and the closing of borders as a preventive measure as of 16 March 2020. It may have received less attention, yet it not only stands out as proof of the resilience of the aforementioned demographic system, but it also draws attention to the inertia of migratory systems once they are established (De Haas, 2010), especially those connecting Spain and Latin America (Ruiz-Santacruz & Recaño, 2019). In both booms, migratory growth was abruptly truncated by crises, the first of an eminently economic nature, and the second resulting from the pandemic, but with clear economic consequences that are still being felt. While both crises are notable for their global scope and singular intensity, their growth, decline, and sociodemographic effects will not be the same. It is important to understand how the impacts of both crises have been mutating in tune with the pace at which society has perceived and reacted differently to their causes. These changes have come with narratives providing comprehensive frameworks for the economic recession, on the one hand, and the pandemic on the other.

If the pandemic has tested the social and health systems in the countries where it has spread—where the deadliness of the virus has depended *inter alia* on their robustness—it has represented no less of a challenge for the statistical systems that had to account for its impact (Papademetriou, 2020). We understand statistics as the state's totalising apprehension of a social phenomenon that is deemed to be essential for governability centred on biopolitics when managing the biological and social phenomena that constitute a population (Foucault, 1976). This is evident in statistics on mortality and causes of death and also when assessing morbidity or epidemiological calculation of the transmission of disease. States and supra-state organisations responded to the recent health emergency by improving their records as their weaknesses had been exposed, and by exploring the resource of big data, this latter option being directly related to managing population mobility as a measure that was adopted both for analysing patterns of the spread of the virus and for preventing contagion. In the case of migrations, the statistical shortcomings were evident from the outset. Spain was no exception and this was in spite of the fact that it stood out for its records of international migratory movements, which were enviable on the European scale thanks to its linking of official registration with a granting of rights, regardless of the immigrant's legal situation in the country (healthcare cover, schooling, and the future obtaining of a residence permit). Hence, the two main sets of statistics that cover migratory movements, the Residence Variation Statistics (RVS), produced on the basis of official registrations and de-registrations, and the Migrations Statistics (MS), which is the estimate made by the National Statistics Institute (INE, in Spanish) essentially by comparing the RVS with data from the Municipal Register of Inhabitants (henceforth *padrón*), have revealed their flaws. One of these is the delay of half a year in publication (RVS), but there are also growing doubts about the accuracy of temporary records of de-registrations when referring to the immigrant population from abroad (which affects both sets of statistics), which must be added serious uncertainties arising from internal mobility as a result of what are called “atypical registrations”,<sup>1</sup> which involve the Spanish population even more. This is not just a “methodological” matter. The problem is that, from the very start, with the drift of the narrative framework to the supposed disjunction between “economy” and “health” where the biopolitical challenge of the pandemic was reflected in terms of governability, statistical uncertainty fuelled narratives in which social phenomena were rendered into spectacle.

The publication in mid-June 2022 of the RVS for 2021 enables us to present a first analysis of recent developments, in which we compare both booms and explain the limitations of the statistical record. First, we analyse the effect of the pandemic on international migratory flows, taking into account differences according to country of origin. Then, we analyse the changes in internal migration by the immigrant population.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND STATE OF THE QUESTION

In the analysis of the effects and impacts of COVID-19, the demographic phenomenon that has received least attention is international migration. Despite the difficulties in measuring the phenomena, there have been many studies

inquiring into the pandemic's impact on mortality and life expectancy (for example, Trias-Llimós et al., 2020), as well as on fertility (Aassve et al., 2020). However, partly because of the problems with the records we have referred to, little has been done in the area of migration and, when there are studies, internal migration has attracted more attention, especially in terms of the rural–urban dichotomy and migratory flows to less densely populated areas.

As for international migration, in addition to studies concerning its role in spreading COVID-19 due to the existence of migration corridors (Sirkeci & Murat, 2020), other notable works describe its contribution to the labour market in times of confinement (Fasani & Mazza, 2020), and migrant living conditions during the pandemic (Orozco-Martínez et al., 2022). However, less attention has been given to the decline in flows that was directly related to the management of the pandemic, or to the different consequences of this among the various immigrant groups. There are also some studies that focus on the termination of jobs and the consequent return of economic migrants (Lee et al., 2021).

Reports of the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) on the changes occurring in international migration during the pandemic (McAuliffe & Triandafyllidou, 2021) indicate a generalised downturn in international migratory flows owing to restrictive measures during the pandemic and closure of borders. In numerical terms, there was a 27% decrease in the number of migrants expected (McAuliffe et al., 2022). In this regard, Spain appears as one of the high-income countries with the most notable decreases in flows, with a drop of 45% with regard to expected numbers (and second to the 60% estimated for Australia), which would be explained by the large number of migrants who travel long distances (González-Leonardo et al., 2023).

As Martin and Bergmann (2021) indicate, and in keeping with United Nations reports (IOM, 2020a,b), several reactions directly related to the migratory phenomenon and expressed in the management of the flows have had their effects in the falling numbers: (1) restrictions on entry from certain geographical areas with quarantine associated with travellers from these places; (2) changes in documentation requirements for entry to certain countries; (3) specific restrictions for certain nationalities; (4) changes in visas and requirements; and (5) new medical requirements.

In contrast, there is more literature about the effects of COVID-19 on internal migration. Hence, independently of the context of analysis, several authors coincide in documenting increased migration from more densely populated areas to rural zones (Tonnessen, 2021 for Oslo; Vogiazides & Kawalerowicz, 2023, for Sweden; González-Leonardo et al., 2022 for Spain). In addition to students returning to their areas of origin, this movement could have been motivated by a desire to escape the pandemic's greater intensity in urban areas or to enjoy environments that are more hospitable than that of the big city. These migrations have been selective, along the lines of demographic, employment, class, and nationality criteria. Hence, depending on age and family life cycle, there are smaller inflows of young adults and greater losses of families in big cities, as Stawarz et al. (2022) indicate in the case of Germany. In terms of type of employment, it has been documented that jobs with the possibility of teleworking are among those that are more represented by people who emigrate (Tonnessen, 2021), in comparison with those who stay put, many of them in what have been called a basic economy. A third filter that has been identified is social class, where people who earn more (Haslag & Weagley, 2022) or are from higher-income neighbourhoods (Ajuntament de Barcelona, 2021) show greater mobility. Directly related to housing availability, and the upper classes as well, second residences also involve descendants of former internal migrants so, according to Gallent (2020), movement to second residences has been one of the clearest images of the coronavirus crisis.

Mobility effects are the opposite among groups at risk, which become trapped populations because of involuntary immobility (Martin & Bergmann, 2021). In some cases, a return to rural areas may be the result of loss of employment in urban areas. These situations have also been observed among international migrants (Lee et al., 2021).

In the particular case of Spain, foreign immigrants have been notable for their high degree of participation in internal migration (Recaño, 2016; Sabater et al., 2012) as their numbers increased in the country as a whole. After the end of 2008, the impact of the Great Recession brought about changes in internal migration of immigrants within the country (Bayona et al., 2017; Maza et al., 2018), which then showed a lesser intensity that was related with smaller inflows from outside the country. There were also changes in territorial patterns (Prieto et al., 2018),

with shifts in the migratory balances of the provinces that were most affected by the crisis, and a certain degree of return to the country's more urbanised areas, which suggests that immigrants were harder hit by the crisis than natives residents were (Gutiérrez et al., 2018). Just before the outbreak of COVID-19, and directly related to the entry of large numbers of immigrants into Spain, there had been renewed participation in internal migration, with intensities comparable with those of the first boom.

## METHODOLOGY AND STATISTICAL SOURCES

The annual recording of migratory flows in Spain is possible thanks to the existence of the Estadística de Variaciones Residenciales (EVR) which, dating back to 1961, have incorporated inflows from abroad since 1980 and, as of 1996, have included the registrations and de-registrations in the *padrón*, an administrative registry where all inhabitants of a municipality are recorded. Published on an annual basis, the RVS present just a few available variables: age and sex of the individuals who move, country of origin, nationality, exact date of start of movement, place of origin, and destination. Moreover, there are quite a lot of problems with place of destination after de-registration. It is subject to data purging procedures in relation to both management of registrations and de-registrations and system interrelation to avoid duplications. Despite the problems associated with an administrative registry, it is established as the main statistical source for territorial analysis of migrations and, in our case, it enables us to outline an overview of the imprint of COVID-19 on recent migrations to and from Spain, and also within the country.

The RVS measure migrations and not migrants, recording every migratory movement that happens, and that is recorded in the *padrón*. Use of the *padrón* for proof of residence in Spain in processes of administrative regularisation based on *arraigo* (roots or regularisation procedure allowing foreigners who have been living in Spain continuously for 3 years to obtain a residency permit) makes it a good instrument for monitoring registration of migrants. Likewise, registration in the *padrón* documented people's presence in second residences during the pandemic, which boosted the registry.

The data will be analysed on a monthly basis. This will make it possible to observe the direct impact on flows of the closing of borders. Data from 2020 and 2021 will be compared with those of 2019 in order to ascertain the effects of the pandemic and subsequent recovery. Analysis of RVS also provides information on cancellation of registrations and, with that, the resulting migratory balance, structure of flows by sex and age, and their territorial distribution. The population will be analysed by country of birth rather than by nationality as a large number of foreigners have acquired Spanish citizenship (2.5 million of the 7.5 million foreigners, a third of the total with a bias favouring Latin Americans, half of whom have been naturalised), and there are more than half a million foreigners born in Spain who have not migrated at all. Migrants are characterised by means of regional grouping in keeping with the characteristics with migratory flows in the country: (1) former EU-15 and developed countries; (2) rest of Europe; (3) Maghreb; (4) Sub-Saharan Africa; (5) Latin America; and (6) Asia and the rest of the world. All this information offers an overview of recent migrations to, from, and in Spain during the COVID-19 pandemic.

## THE CASE OF SPAIN: FROM THE SECOND MIGRATORY BOOM TO THE STEEP DOWNTURN OF THE PANDEMIC

### Evolution of registered arrivals from abroad

In the last two decades, arrivals of migrants from abroad have exhibited a certain annual seasonality with peaks in September and October related with the cost of air tickets and the beginning of the school year

because of the increasing number of students who are enrolled for post-compulsory studies in Spanish universities and also immigrants arriving due to family reunification of minors. In addition to this, two cycles of migratory expansion are clearly drawn, with high points in 2007 and 2019 corresponding to the two booms the country has recently experienced (Figure 1). The first boom reached its peak in 2007, in which 958,266 registrations from abroad were recorded. The figures for the second migratory boom were lower, with 873,842 registrations in 2019.

The downturns in migrant arrivals following these two high points in mid-2008 and March 2020 are different in nature. The first, due to the consequences of the crisis, was more prolonged in time, with an unequal periodisation according to place of origin and influenced by the labour sector in which the immigrants were mainly employed<sup>2</sup> as well as existing unemployment cover. The second, starting on 16 March 2020 and resulting from the closing of borders as a mechanism for managing the pandemic, was more abrupt. After the minimums of April 2020, when there were almost no registrations, the inflows started to recover in May, partly because of the repatriation policies that came into effect on 26 May, which meant that a third of the arrivals that month were Spanish nationals (Fernández-Carro et al., 2022). After this, there was a progressive recovery in the second half of 2020 bringing the monthly arrivals to levels that were higher than those of those in the years when the impact of the economic crisis was greatest, despite the restrictions on mobility. If, after the first crisis, no migratory growth was recorded until 2014—and it was very slight when it did happen—at the end of 2021, pre-pandemic levels of arrivals were reached, with levels comparable with those of 2018. This recovery, observed in the last quarter of 2021, occurred in spite of effects of the third and fourth pandemic waves in Spain and significant eruptions in the countries of origin (Brazil, India, Argentina, and Great Britain, for example). The months of November and December 2021 even exceeded entries for the same months of 2019 (Figure 2).

In terms of declining registrations, the pandemic caused a 40.1% drop in inflows, from 873,842 immigrants in 2019 to 523,618 in 2020. These figures showed a slight recovery in 2021, when the number of arrivals was 662,173 entradas. The drop of 2020 was not as precipitous as might have been expected, partly because January and February showed historic numbers of inflows. The annual decline attributed to the pandemic is, at the same

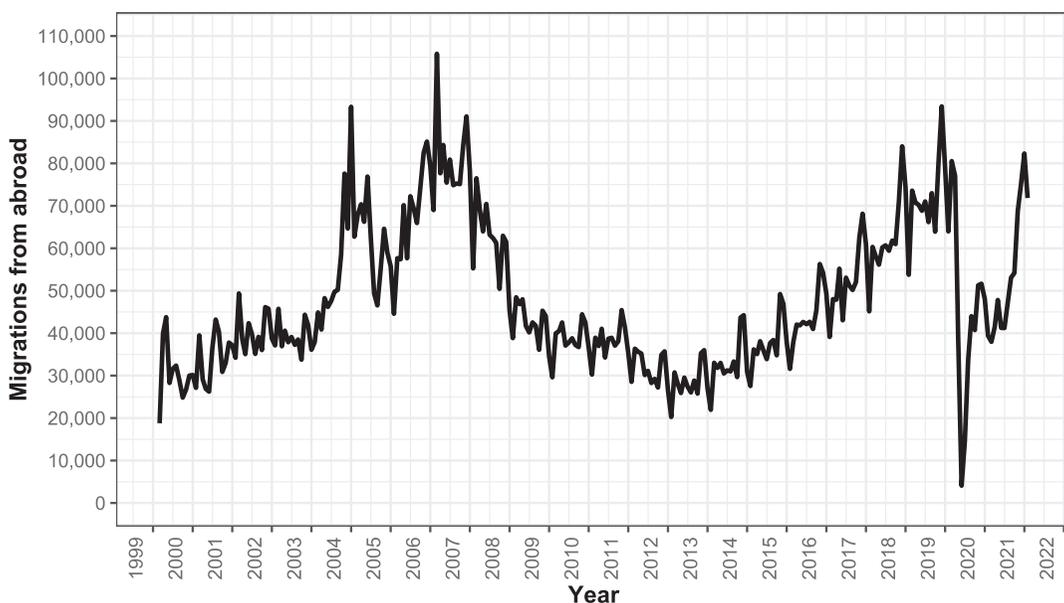


FIGURE 1 Monthly evolution of immigrant registrations in Spain, 2000–2021. Source: Estadística de Variaciones Residenciales (EVR) and INE data.

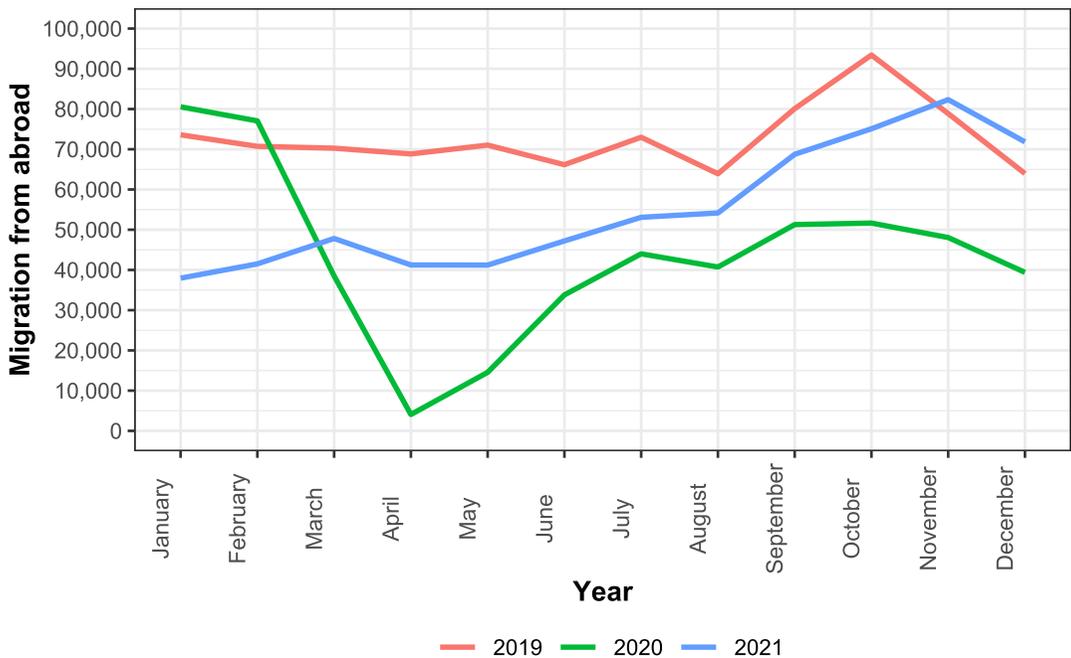


FIGURE 2 Monthly evolution of immigrant registration in Spain, 2019–2021. Source: Estadística de Variaciones Residenciales (EVR) and INE data.

time, the steepest in the sequence, with numbers exceeding the 24% of 2007–2008 and 31.3% of 2008–2009. After the first boom, and between the maximum in 2007 and the minimum of 2013, migratory flows fell by 64%, a drop that was sharper than that recorded for the pandemic but with a more delayed impact.

### Composition of migrations and differential impact by origin

In the second migratory boom, between 2014 and 2019, Latin Americans are prominent, with numbers of arrivals exceeding even those of the first boom (Figure 3). Hence, the 427,000 immigrant registrations of 2019 surpassed the 336,000 of 2007, and the 51% they represent in total flows of 2019 are well above the 36% of the first boom.<sup>3</sup> This growth was closely related with the positive discrimination in Spanish legislation with regard to Latin American citizens by comparison with other origins (Izquierdo et al., 2002). As a policy seeking to maximise integration of a population that was seen as close to the receiving Spanish community, (Bauböck, 2010; Domingo, 2018), this ended up shaping these flows, which were defined as “ethnic migrations”. Nevertheless, among Latin Americans, the main countries of origin of these movements were not the same as those in the first decade. Among the groups that showed most growth in this latter period, we find three different typologies.

First, are the inflows of Venezuelans, many of them requesting asylum and expelled from their country because of the serious economic and political crisis it was experiencing. Their sociodemographic profile, which differed from that of other Latin Americans, did not show the typical feminised bias of immigration like that from elsewhere in Latin America where externalisation of reproductive work has been a key factor in its increasing presence as a link in the global care chains (Hochschild, 2000). Second, are countries that could be called emerging or relative newcomers, which saw their incipient growth cut short as a result of the Great Recession, especially in the case of migrants from Honduras and, to a lesser extent, those coming from Nicaragua, Guatemala, and El Salvador. The reason for this rise is to be found, above all, in increasing citizen insecurity resulting from the ruinous

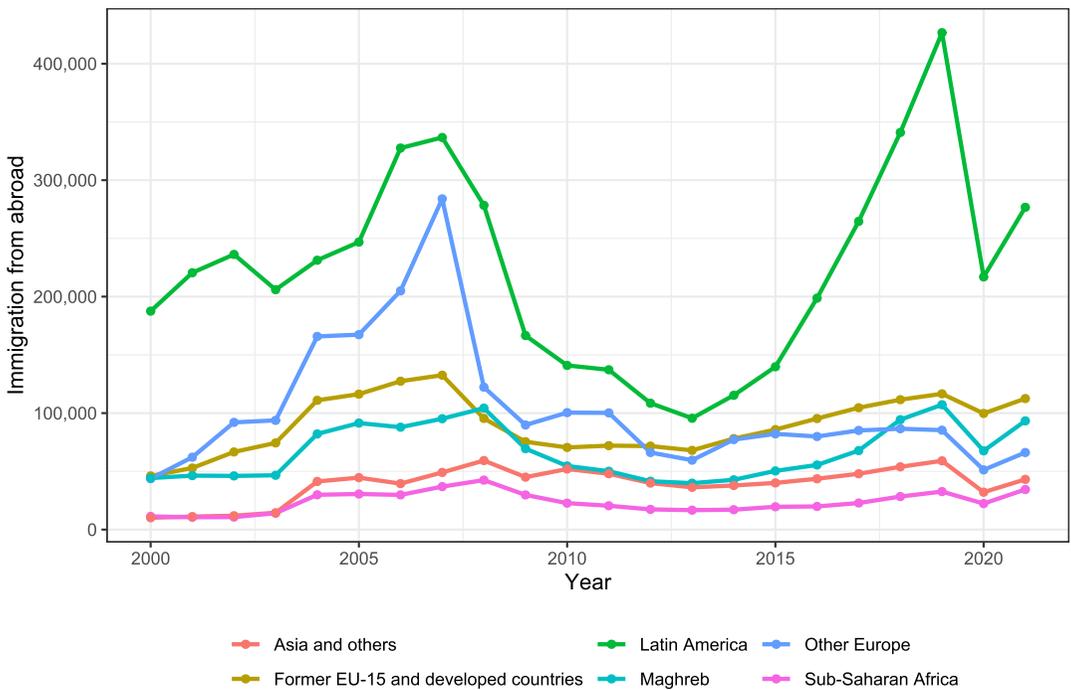
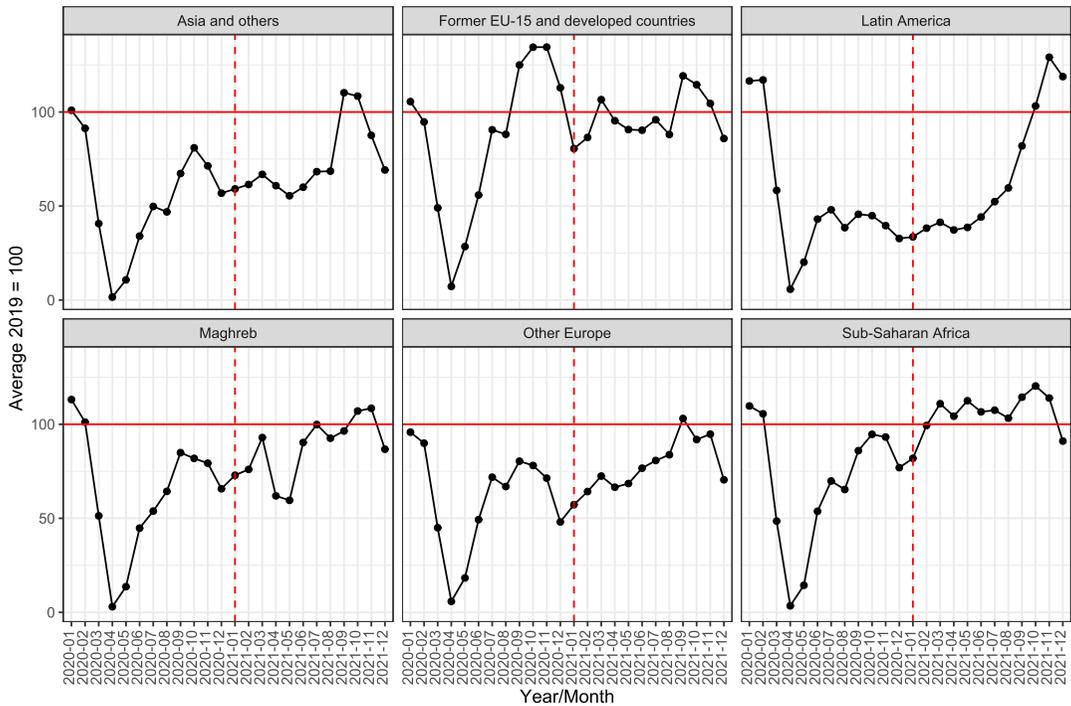


FIGURE 3 Evolution of immigrant registration by region of origin, Spain, 2000–2021. Source: Estadística de Variaciones Residenciales (EVR) and INE data.

political and economic situation combined with the closing of the United States borders during the presidency of Donald Trump. In this group, women are pioneers and clearly prominent, thus emulating the early profiles of Ecuadorian and Colombian women in inflows twenty years earlier. The third group to be highlighted consists of Argentines, Colombians, and Peruvians who, with a long tradition of emigration to Spain and having occupied a prominent place in the first boom, were now being pushed to leave in greater numbers for economic reasons, exiting Argentina because of Macri's neoliberal economic policies, and from Colombia because of those of Duque. In the latter case, the peak coincided with the 2021 protests, in the midst of the pandemic. Now that there are large colonies in the main Spanish cities, one sees growing numbers of minors and adults in family reunification endeavours, and increased flows of older people. With regard to the rapid growth of flows, in all three typologies, the various expulsion or push factors seem to have been much more influential than pull factors. This is not the first time. One example is the exodus resulting from the Argentine *corralito* (mandatory restrictions on cash withdrawals from banks) in 2001, which automatically led to increased flows to Spain.

Comparison of monthly immigrant registration recorded in 2020 and 2021 with that of 2019, the year before the pandemic, reveals the intensity of the downturn in international migrations, and the time needed to re-establish the earlier figures (Figure 4). Hence, one sees that in the months of January and February, just before the pandemic, immigrant numbers were very similar to those of the previous year, with arrivals from Latin America and Sub-Saharan Africa that even surpassed earlier averages. In the month of April, the drop to almost zero occurs for almost all origins, but recovery differs considerably depending on regional origin. The closure of airspace and subsequent restrictions represented an obstacle for immigrants entering Spain through airports, so they turned to other routes (Esteve et al., 2021). In Spain, inflows from the former EU-15 were reactivated in 2020 to the extent that arrivals in the second half of the year exceeded those for 2019 and continued along the lines displayed throughout 2021. In the case of Sub-Saharan Africa and, to a lesser extent, the Maghreb, flows had practically recovered by the end of 2020 and, in the former case, they outnumbered, in 2021, those of prior to the pandemic.



**FIGURE 4** Comparison of immigrant registrations of 2020 and 2021 with those of 2019, by origins. *Source:* Estadística de Variaciones Residenciales (EVR) and INE data.

However, the patterns for Asians and especially Latin Americans differed from earlier ones, and recovery of earlier inflows was more difficult and not achieved until the final months of 2021. In fact, in some countries of Latin America, the highest levels of COVID-19 mortality occurred in the first half of 2021 and, accordingly, the containment measures were prolonged over time. Asia presents an extreme situation since some countries like China have extended their prophylactic measures well beyond the months covered in this study.

With regard to the sociodemographic composition of flows, there is a hypothesis that the pandemic, with its associated closing of borders, could have affected the profile of arrivals, which is to say the composition of flows by sex and age. If these profiles of the last 3 years are represented with data, the changes do not appear to be very great (Figure 5). Feminisation among immigrants from Latin America is slightly reduced (from 55.5% to 54%), as is concentration in younger ages (from 42% to 39.5%). Among the immigrants from developed countries, the downturn in registrations appeared mostly with the younger ages, although the numbers quickly rose again in 2021, in a pattern where the decline in migration for educational reasons might be the reason. Conversely, among Sub-Saharan immigrants, the earlier masculinisation of flows increased in 2021 (with a drop in women immigrants from 23.8% to 22.2%), a situation related with the increase in flows and not unlike the case of the Maghreb which, in 2021, also showed a greater masculinisation of flows (a drop from 36.5% of women to 34.9%) and a larger presence of young people. By contrast, and coinciding with the greater impact on flows of the pandemic, a notable feminisation was observed among Asians (from an initial 39.9% to 44.8%) together with a drop in the numbers of young people.

### Are the effects of the great recession of 2008 and the pandemic of 2020 comparable?

The decline in immigration after the Great Recession is analysed by comparing the data from 2007 and 2010, which show an average drop of 51% in arrivals. In this first case, the reduction was very uneven from the standpoint of

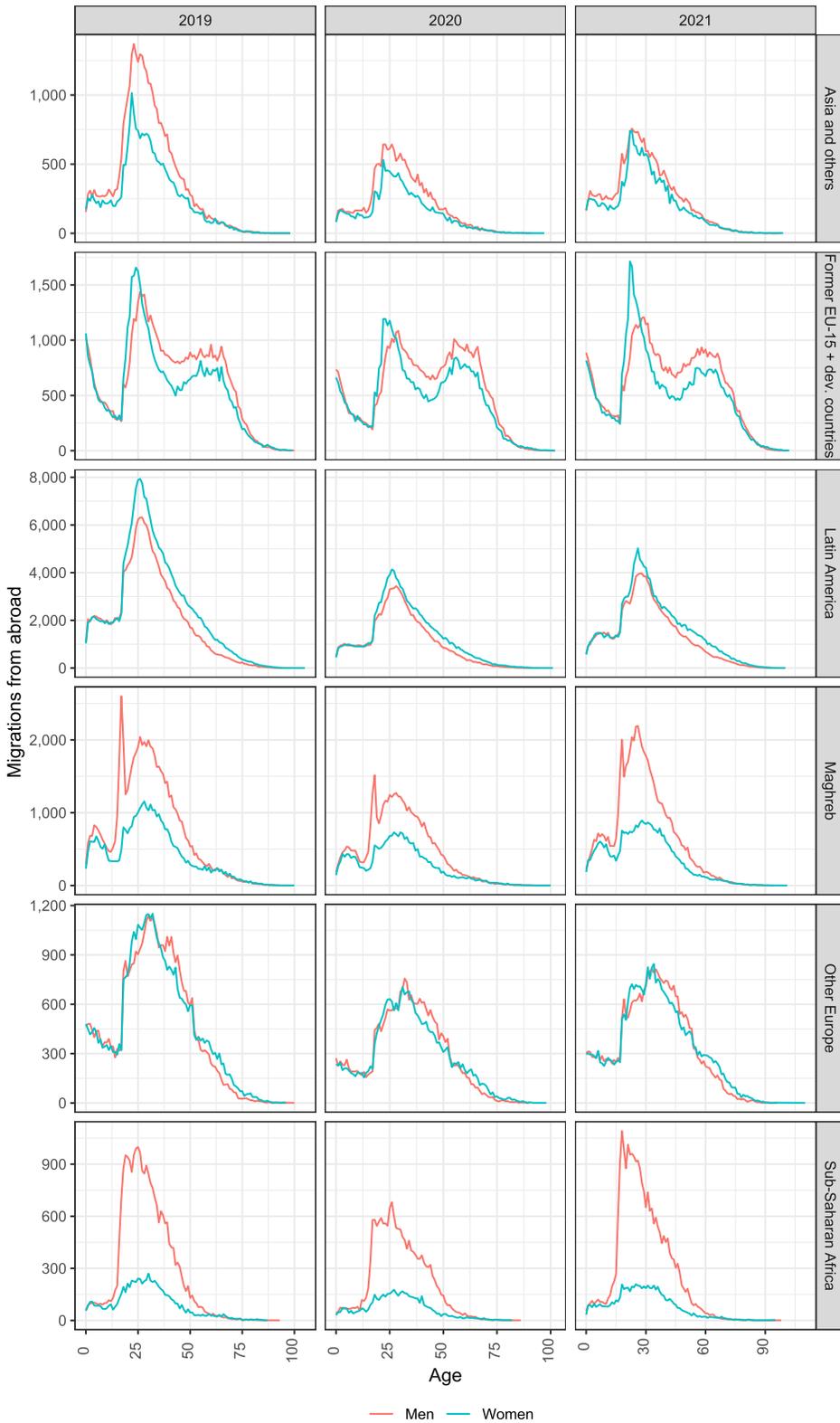


FIGURE 5 Profile by sex and age of immigrant registration in Spain, according to grouping by origins, 2019–2021. Source: Estadística de Variaciones Residenciales (EVR) and INE data.

TABLE 1 Relative differences in registrations of arrivals from abroad by regional groupings, Spain, 2007 versus 2010 and 2019 versus 2020.

	2007–2010		2019–2020	
	Absolute	(%)	Absolute	(%)
Former EU-15 and developed countries	-62,044	-46.8	-16,864	-14.5
Other Europe	-183,562	-64.6	-34,083	-39.9
Maghreb	-40,580	-42.6	-39,577	-36.9
Sub-Saharan Africa	-14,175	-38.4	-10,298	-31.6
Latin America	-195,705	-58.1	-209,667	-49.1
Asia and others	-2,942	6.0	-26,945	-45.6
Total	-493,124	-52.8	-337,434	-40.8

Source: Estadística de Variaciones Residenciales (EVR) and INE data.

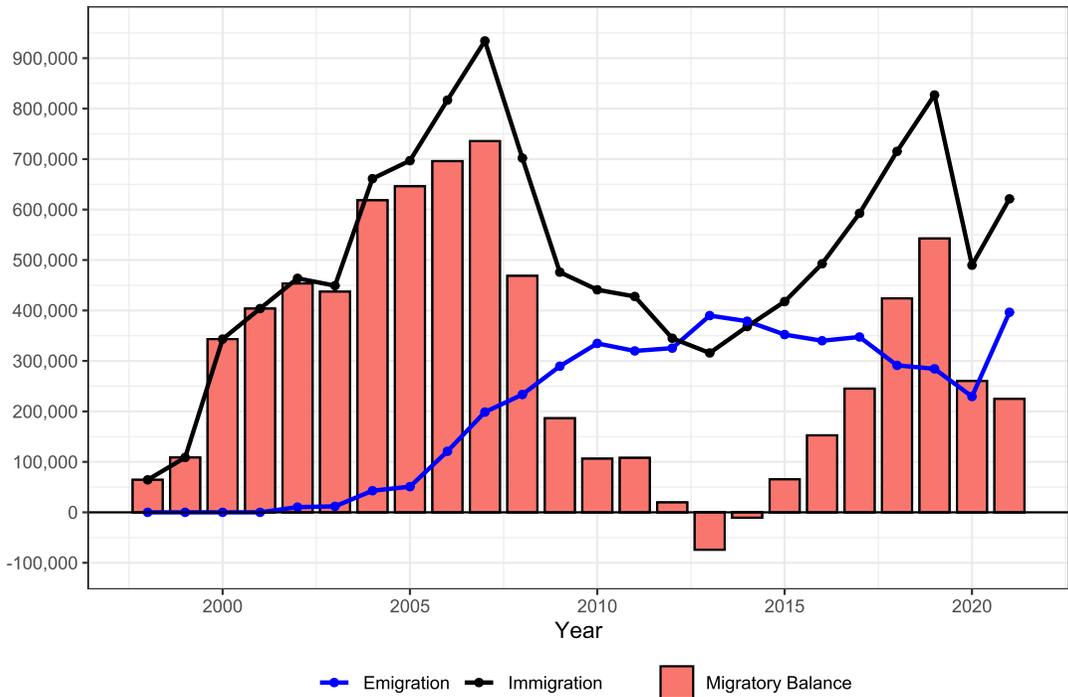
origins, with a figure of 6% among Asians as a whole (including a much higher number for Pakistanis) to drops of around 60% for other European countries (64.6%) and Latin American countries (58%), with somewhat smaller figures for arrivals from the Maghreb (42.6%) and Sub-Saharan Africa (38%). During the pandemic, the decline was more generalised (with the exception of the British, because of Brexit) with lesser consequences in the developed countries (14.5%) and greater ones in more distant countries like those of Latin America and Asia where the effects of the pandemic were intensely felt (Table 1). In this regard, it should be recalled that the specificity of the effects of the pandemic *vis-à-vis* the Great Recession is that, for those who ruled out returning, this latter situation was decisive in the decision to remain and reunite families. In the pandemic, however, the impossibility of leaving due to closed borders and the dissuasive effect of poor data produced by Spain in the first wave explain the lower figures for more distant origins.

Emigration has shown different patterns in these two cases. While there was a continuous increase during the years of economic crisis, with a maximum of 389,000 departures in 2013 (and 453,000 if emigrating Spanish citizens are counted), during the pandemic the numbers dropped (19% lower) with 230,000 departures, a figure that is the lowest of all those recorded in Spain since 2008. The downturn is similar for most origins, except for African countries for which the 2020 figures are very close to those recorded in previous years. Conversely, an increased number of emigrations is recorded in 2021, showing the highest number of departures for the whole series with almost 400,000 de-registrations, which exceeds the former maximum of 2013. In this sense, the departures reflect the consequences of the pandemic for the most precarious sector of the labour market with workers in an irregular situation and without access to the ERTES,<sup>4</sup> which had provided some cushioning of the effects of the crisis. The living conditions of immigrants, more vulnerable than other workers, worsened and hence the greater number of departures. The result was record-breaking emigration, which did not fit with the macroeconomic evolution of the country.

As for Spain's resulting migratory balance and, due to the different evolutions of registrations and de-registrations, it remained positive in 2020 (Figure 6), with a difference between arrivals and departures of 260,000 movements, which was close to the balance for 2017. There were difficulties for inflows but also for outflows. The balance for 2021 is similar, this time as a result of a recovery in registered arrivals and de-registrations in record numbers. The pandemic, then, has had a greater effect on outflows than inflows.

## Territorial impact on migrant registrations

A final concern when characterising the impact of the pandemic on migratory flows is their unequal spatial distribution, in circumstances where, for a start, the presence of immigrant populations differs greatly, ranging from



**FIGURE 6** Evolution of foreign migrant registrations and de-registrations, 2002–2021. *Source:* Estadística de Variaciones Residenciales (EVR) and INE data.

4.5% in the region of Extremadura to 24.2% in the Balearic Islands in January 2020. Moreover, the second migratory boom was not equally present in the country's seventeen Autonomous Communities. In some, the migratory flows of 2019 exceeded those of 2007, as occurred in the Canary Islands, the Basque Country, and Galicia, or almost equalled them (as in Catalonia and the Community of Madrid). In other communities (Castile-Leon, Castile-La Mancha, La Rioja, and Extremadura), the flows were far from the maximums of the beginning of the decade with arrivals that were barely half of those registered in 2007. The presence of Latin Americans—evidently, the most prominent group of this second boom—in the flows partly explains the differing dynamics (Figure 7) as they were more attracted to urban zones. Consequently, just before the pandemic and from the spatial standpoint, the realities related with the migratory phenomenon were very different. Accordingly, the impact of COVID-19 and the subsequent recovery were also uneven. At the level of the Autonomous Communities, one sees lesser effects in Andalusia, where the decrease in flows between 2020 and 2019 was barely 27.8% and a maximum impact in Asturias with a drop of 50.3% in immigrant numbers. Barcelona and Madrid were situated above the country's average but so, too, were the Autonomous Communities in the north of Spain, while some Communities of the Mediterranean rim were less affected. There is a notable correlation between the decline in flows and their composition. The downturn has been steeper in the Autonomous Communities where the presence of Latin American and Asian immigrants in the flows was greater, while in those where other countries of origin predominated, for example, those of the European Community or of Africa, the decline in numbers has been less.

In a few specific cases, the migratory flows of some groups in 2020 surpassed those prior to the pandemic and registered in 2019, which is what occurred in Andalusia and Murcia with migrations from European and other developed countries. The arrival of people from Great Britain and other origins in zones of second residences and popular tourist destinations when the effects of Brexit (with registration of British citizens coinciding with COVID-19), on the one hand, and migration similar to that coming to second residences but on a different scale, on the other, would explain the rising numbers. A second category but with a contrasting profile is to be found with

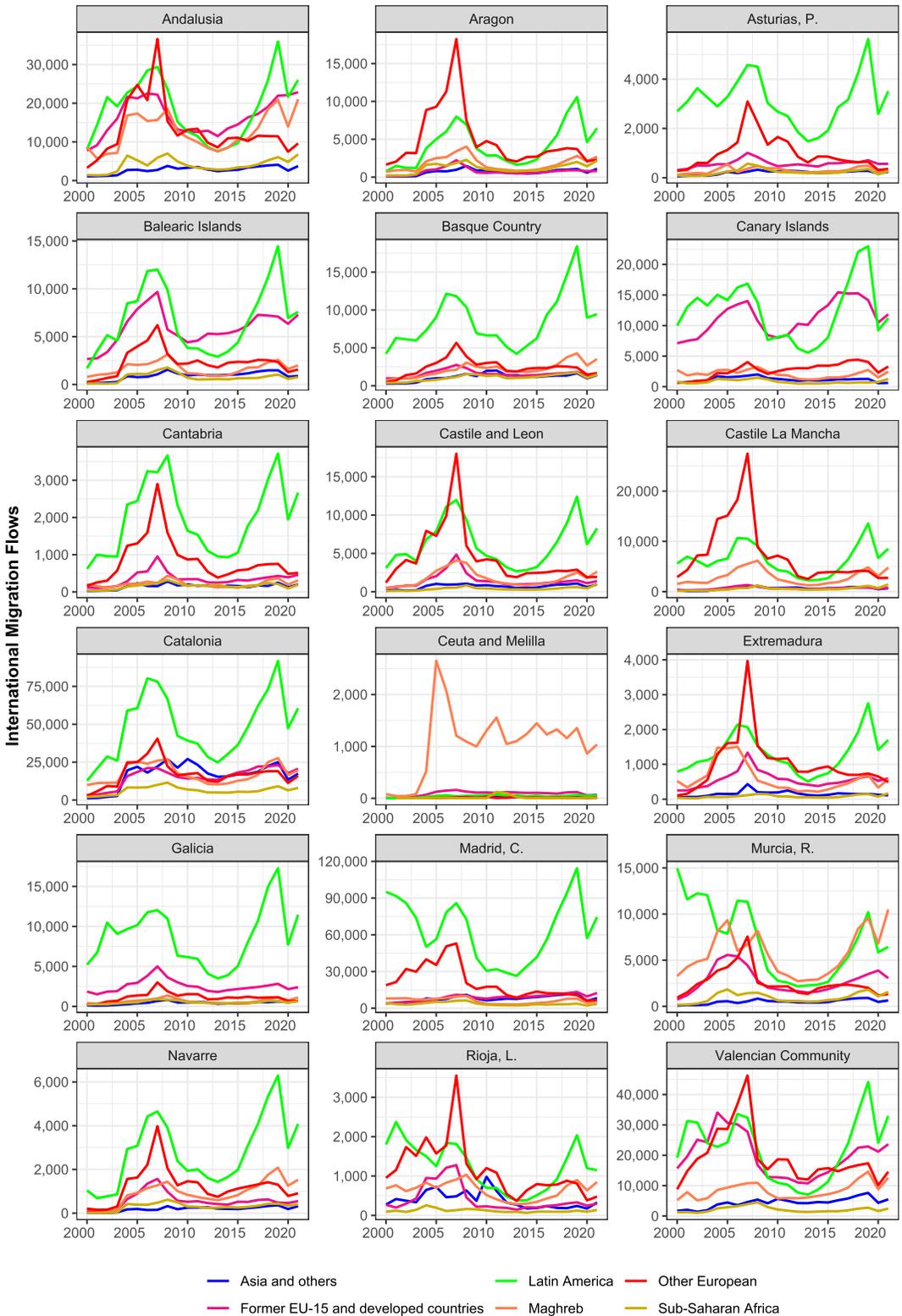


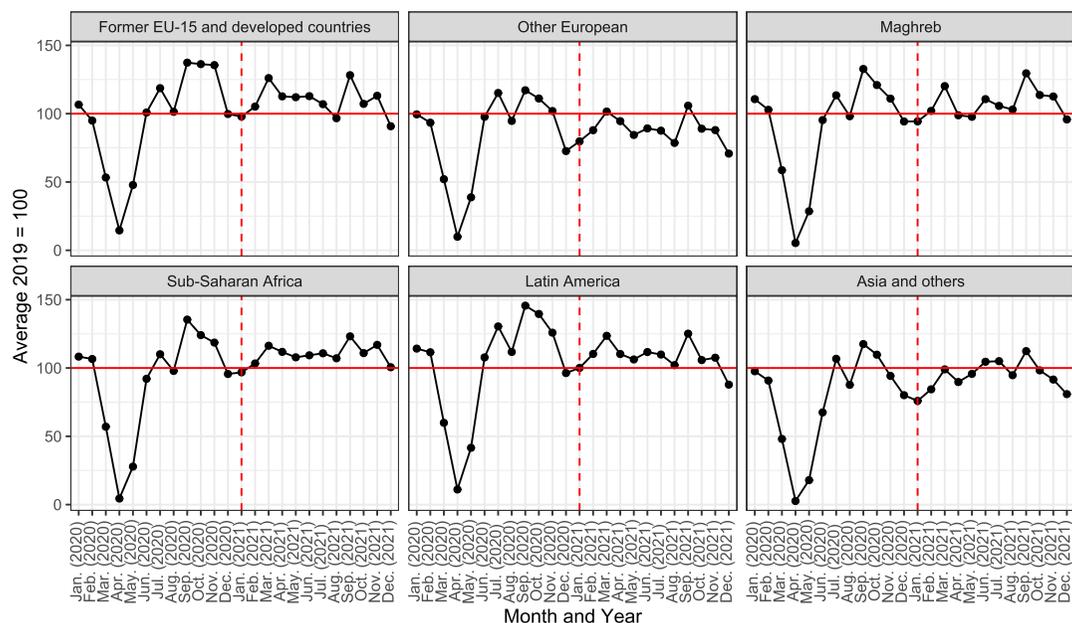
FIGURE 7 Migrant flows in Spain by country of origin and Autonomous Community of destination, 2000–2021. Source: Estadística de Variaciones Residenciales (EVR) and INE data.

the Canary Islands with immigrants from Sub-Saharan Africa, whose numbers rose by 13.5% in 2020, in a context of a recent increase in arrivals in the islands of undocumented immigrants coming by sea (Godenau et al., 2020).

## INTERNAL MIGRATIONS OF THE POPULATION OF IMMIGRANT ORIGIN DURING THE PANDEMIC

The restrictions on mobility during the pandemic were not accurately reflected in the evolution of internal migrations in Spain as the drop at the end of the year was only 7.9%. By origin, the decline among the autochthonous population (-8.4%) was greater than that among the immigrant population (-6.6%) although, in both cases, the decreases were of similar magnitude and low intensity. Moreover, the presence of immigrants in internal migration continued to increase, for example, by 30.9% in 2020, thus reaching figures that are close to those at the beginning of the economic crisis (32.3% in 2008). Compared to the Great Recession, the decline in internal migrations has been less than that recorded in 2008 when the overall drop was 8.5%. A year later, in 2021, there was a clear recovery in internal migratory flows of both autochthonous and immigrant groups, which exceeded those of 2019 (from 1.65 million to 1.68 million changes of municipality) but without reaching the earlier maximums of 2006 and 2007.

In general, regional grouping shows a steep downturn in movements in the first half of 2020 (Figure 8), where the immobility is confined to the months of March, April, and May while, after June, mobility recovers to the extent that, in the second half of 2020, it is of even greater intensity than it was in 2019. This appears more clearly among Europeans from the former EU-15 and Latin Americans while recovery of movements of Asians and immigrants from elsewhere in Europe was slower and less far-reaching. Accordingly, reduction of mobility resulting from the pandemic was differential and especially notable among Asians whose movements in 2020 declined by 23.3% by comparison with 2019, and with immigrants from the rest of Europe (-16%) but, among Latin Americans, the decrease is hardly noticeable (-0.4%) and very small among nationals from developed countries (-4.4%). In



**FIGURE 8** Comparison of the monthly evolution of internal migrations in Spain in 2020 and 2021 with those of 2019, by origin. Source: Data from Estadística de Variaciones Residenciales (EVR) and INE data.

general, internal migrations in 2021 are more significant than those of 2019, except for Asians and immigrants from other European countries among whom the figures remained lower than those for 2019 while, in the other cases, these figures were reached. The increases observed are less than those of the second half of 2020.

Meanwhile, in comparison with the earlier dynamics of 2019, the changes that occurred are not unlike those for the population as a whole, although of a lesser intensity. Large urban centres and provincial capitals would appear to have attracted fewer people while smaller towns attracted more. Figure 8 shows the main residential dynamics in the years marked by the pandemic in comparison with 2019. The inclusion of data from 2021 is decisive when assessing the extent of the changes recorded in 2020 and ascertaining whether this is a change of trend or a circumstantial situation.

Departures from the big cities and provincial capitals and the positive balance in small towns was a pattern that was already appearing in 2019, prior to the pandemic and related to processes of suburbanisation and counter-urbanisation that were happening in the big cities and also those involving, as reception centres, nearby smaller towns, or more popular tourist centres that were further away. In 2020 and, to a lesser extent in 2021, there is a greater influence of dynamics that had already begun to develop, although to a lesser extent in 2021, especially in the smaller towns (Figure 9). When comparing origins, two trends appear: (1) the trend of the migratory balance among immigrant residents is similar to that for the autochthonous population; and (2) the evolution between 2019 and 2020 is less pronounced among immigrants. Notable in the autochthonous population were a drop of 68,000 immigrations to provincial capitals and an increase of 8000 emigrations from them, which meant that, from a negative balance of 15,000 people the figure rose to another negative of 91,000. In 2021, the magnitude of the balance decreases to a negative figure of -64,000 people, although both emigration and immigration increase. In smaller towns, the positive balance rises from 8000 to 88,000 in 2020, to end up as 47,000 in 2021. In this latter year, outflows recover, although without reaching previous levels, while inflows remain the same. Among

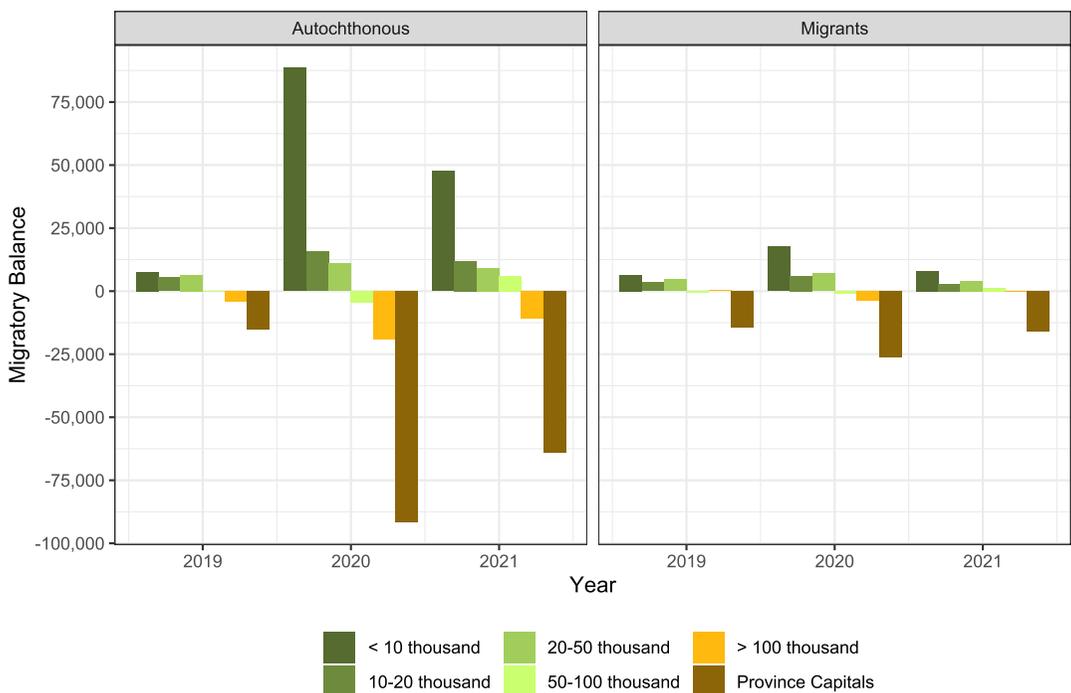
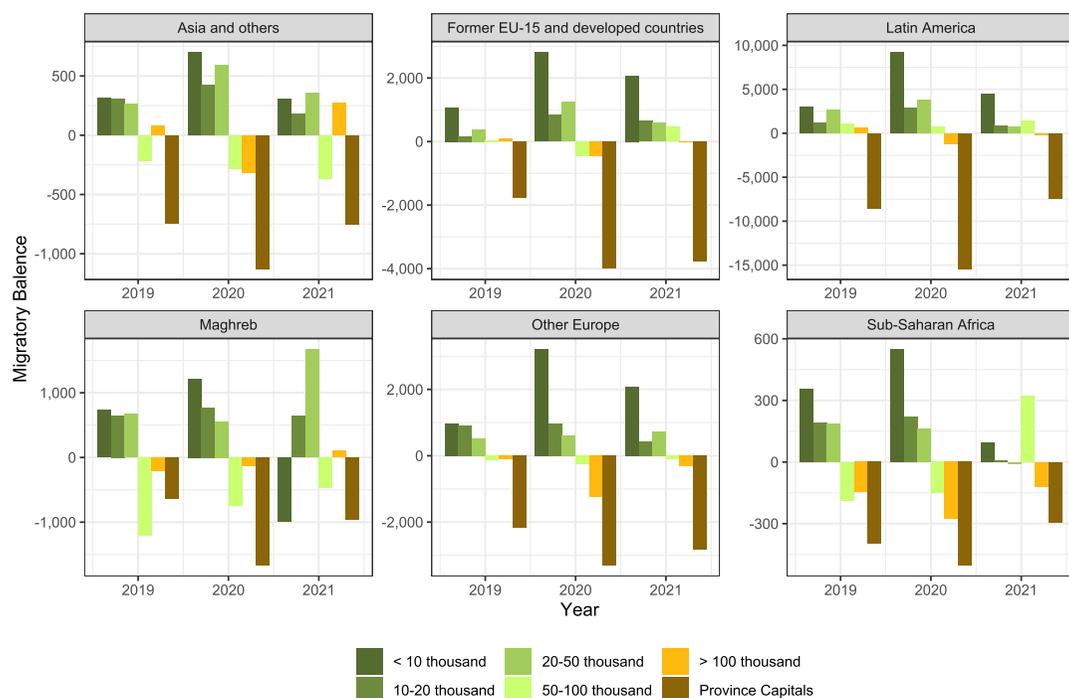


FIGURE 9 Internal migration balance of native and migrant population by size of municipality of residence. Source: Data from Estadística de Variaciones Residenciales (EVR) and INE data.



**FIGURE 10** Internal migratory dynamics of the immigrant population, by origin. Source: Estadística de Variaciones Residenciales (EVR) and INE data.

immigrants, the balance of outflows from provincial capitals in 2021 is similar to that of 2019 and the situation with smaller towns was much the same. In both cases, increased inflows and outflows exceeded mobility in 2019.

If, for the population as a whole, it is documented that, during the pandemic, there were outflows from the big metropolitan areas to areas of lower population density, thus reinforcing earlier dynamics, what is happening among foreign immigrants is not so well known. Hence, [Figure 10](#) shows the recent evolution of migratory flows according to size and origin. One sees in this graph that, in a similar way to the autochthonous population, Latin Americans participate in movements to the smaller towns, with patterns in 2021 that go back to looking like those prior to the pandemic. This trend, which is not unlike that for the whole, is broadly reproduced for all origins, although each has its own particularities, so what happens with cities of more than 100,000 inhabitants that are not provincial capitals is different. In 2019, these cities, often belonging to the greater metropolitan areas (especially around Madrid and Barcelona) were still showing positive balances with Asians, Latin Americans, and Europeans, which was not the case with the autochthonous population. With COVID-19, cities became net expellers of population, a situation that changes in 2021 with regard to immigrants from Asia and the Maghreb. Other notable changes occur with the latter group in 2021 with the appearance of negative migratory balances in the smaller municipalities. Absent in 2019, this outflow could be related with the impact of the crisis on this group.

## CONCLUSIONS: THE DIFFERENTIAL IMPACT OF THE PANDEMIC ON FLOWS

The impact of the pandemic on migratory flows of international immigrants deserves special attention since they differ from those described for the general population. This permits deeper inquiry with regard to origin, which reveals that immigrants of Latin American and Asian origins are especially affected and that they do not return to

pre-pandemic levels until the end of 2021. This brings to light a temporary interruption of the second migratory boom that had been underway in Spain since 2014. The data of recent months, especially those pertaining to Latin Americans who are predominant in this boom, lead us to foresee a continuation of high levels of migratory flows once the effects of the pandemic on mobility are relativised, so that migratory flows will be less affected by the pandemic crisis than what happened with those resulting from the Great Recession.

The impact of COVID-19 on international migration in Spain cannot be understood without taking into account the previous context that led to the extraordinary growth of flows, and the different nature of the crisis that ended this growth. If, together with the decline in flows, the consequences of the Great Recession were increased numbers of departures and more family reunifications for those who decided to remain in Spain because the conditions in their countries were worse, emigration, for obvious reasons, was not an option and neither was immigration for family reunification because of difficulties imposed both by restrictions on mobility and the exceptionally serious nature of the first wave of COVID-19 in Spain. Emigration has taken a different form and, in 2021, reached record figures for several countries of origin, which indicates the consequences of the health crisis for employment and how the most vulnerable groups are affected. This situation will require attention in the coming years.

The change in countries of origin after the crisis of 2008 showed the greater relevance of push factors by comparison with pull factors, especially with those countries that had already constructed consistent migratory systems. From the perspective of 2014 (when it began) this was an unexpected recovery. In the case of the pandemic, the downturn has been short-term and, briefly, more acute but the final result for 2020 is comparable to that of the crisis with regard to volume, and recovery, despite the burdens of the economic crisis, could even be faster than it was the first time, as is suggested by the early data of the Migrations Statistics for the first 6 months of 2022, which show maximum values for migratory flows.

As for internal migrations, with the exception of a few particularities, the behaviour of the immigrant population has not differed substantially from that of the autochthonous population. The decrease in Asian migration in 2020 is notable when, unlike Latin Americans, they were not able to move, which would be in line with a greater impact on vulnerable groups residing in densely populated areas. Also noteworthy is the changing trend of immigrants from the Maghreb in small municipalities as a consequence both of the crisis arising from COVID-10 and its effects on flows, and of demographic changes in small towns where immigrants from the Maghreb are the most numerous.

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## CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

## PEER REVIEW

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## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

NA.

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## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> This is understood as referring to individuals who normally reside outside the municipality where they are registered, a situation that occurs, among other reasons, because of second homes.
- <sup>2</sup> The first to be hit by the economic crisis was the construction sector and subsidiary industries. The downturn in care-related work came later and was smaller, but it affected women more.
- <sup>3</sup> During the first boom, there was a significant influx of immigrants from European countries that had just joined the European Union, especially Rumania which, in Spain, topped the list of origins between 2008 and 2013.
- <sup>4</sup> The ERTE (Expedientes de Regulación Temporal de Empleo—Temporary Employment Regulation Expenditure) were applied in Spain by employers affected by COVID-19 so that workers would not lose jobs and would receive the corresponding unemployment benefits.

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