The Empire Strikes Back:
Why Civilisational Aspects Matter in Migration Policy

Juan A. Soto

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About the Author

Juan Soto graduated in Business Administration and Management and Law from the University of Navarra, and in Political Science and Administration from the UNED. He has a master's degree in Political and Legal Theory from University College London (UCL) and is currently doing his doctoral thesis in political science at St. Mary's University, London. In 2015, he founded Fortius Consulting, a strategic consulting firm specialized in think tanks and operating in Europe, America, and Africa. He has also held different executive positions in various think tanks, being executive director of the Civismo Foundation (2018-2021) and international director of the Disenso Foundation (2021-2023). He is a social entrepreneur and has founded numerous student and civic organizations, such as Fortius Foundation and Principios, of which he is president. He contributes regularly to Spanish and international media outlets and teaches political theory at the University of Navarra.

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Abstract

Today European countries face demographic crises as a consequence of their low fertility rates. Historically, migration has been used as a tool to rectify the implications of population decline, however in the cases of the United Kingdom, France, and Spain, differences emerge as a consequence of post-colonial migration patterns. These former global empires have experienced and facilitated flows of inward migration from their former colonies. Yet notably, in the cases of Britain and France, integration of migrant populations has proven difficult, while in the Spanish case study, migrant assimilation has proven significantly more successful.

Since the Windrush generation, Britain taken migrants from its former colonies and cultivated an ethos of multiculturalism. Yet despite this apparent societal value, the United Kingdom has created a hostile environment for migrants through successive policies designed to restrict immigration in various ways. In France, migrants are expected to conform to the secular univeralism of the French Republic, but public upheaval against concerns of a growing Muslim population in the country has fomented social division. By contrast, Spain has integrated migrants from its former imperial territories far easier due to shared religious and cultural values.

As a consequence of their histories as global empires, Britain, France, and Spain have largely received inward migration from their former colonies. Through this pattern, the nature of their respective imperial pasts has influenced their ability to integrate migrants from these territories, determinate on factors such as cultural proximity and their administrative policies throughout former dominions.

Introduction

In the autumn of 2015, I was studying at the Sorbonne (Université Paris 1-Panthéon) as part of an exchange programme from the University of Navarra. One evening in mid-November, after a dinner with the person in charge o international programmes at my home university, I walked alone back to my residence at the Cité Internationale Universitaire de Paris. I had been assigned to the Collège d'Espagne, but due to renovations, I was temporarily relocated to the Maison du Maroc. That night, police sirens pierced the chaos. It was the night of the Bataclan massacre—November 13, 2015—when Islamist terrorists murdered over 150 people across Paris, including several of my fellow students. I could have been one of them.

Later that night, as the city mourned and the government prepared to declare a state of emergency, I witnessed something that forever changed my perception of migration and integration. In the shared kitchens of the Maison du Maroc, where I lived alongside highly educated, secular, French-speaking Moroccan students, there were celebrations. Laughter and music marked what some residents referred to casually as "the evening's events." The chilling normalcy of this reaction—among those who had seemingly integrated—left a permanent mark on my understanding of what truly divides civilisations. Since that night, I have known with certainty that the greatest challenge the West faces is not radical Islam per se, but a foreign civilisation entrenched in its midst—a civilisation with a long record of conquest and a short one of coexistence. Of all the lands Islam once conquered, it has only been fully expelled from one. They have referred to it for centuries as Al-Andalus—and still do. I call it Spain.

My story is one of many that could be recalled here, yet the West still lacks a coherent response rooted in a clear understanding of who we are, where we come from, and what kind of civilisational contract we expect newcomers to join. This paper, therefore, seeks not only to diagnose the problem but to explore whether Europe—fractured, aging, and unsure of itself—still has the cultural resources and political courage to shape its own destiny.

Since the early twenty-first century, migration has become both a pressing policy concern and also a civilisational existential question across Europe and North America. The Global South poses a major migration challenge on the Global North, paired with ageing populations and shrinking labour forces across the West. That has been particularly the case in Europe since the 2015 migration crisis, which led to a decade of mass migratory influxes parallel to an unprecedented demographic winter.[1] In response, governments have oscillated between two extreme visions on the migratory question: A securitarian perspective or a humanitarian perspective; between the *refugees welcome* mantra and full-on cultural retrenchment and isolationism.

A big part of the European migration challenge dynamics consists of the arrival of former imperial subjects as migrants, asylum seekers, and citizens demanding recognition, rights, and belonging. This is the phenomenon popularly captured by the phrase "the empire strikes back." Originally coined by scholars of race and post-colonial studies in the British context, the phrase can also be repurposed to describe the way in which former imperial powers now confront the return of their historical subjects —from former colonies or overseas territories—in the form of migration.[2] It is not simply that people are moving from South to North or East to West; but rather, that some considerable percentage of migratory flows unfolds along the former imperial lines

Yet not all imperial legacies produce today the same migratory outcomes, neither in terms of flows of migration nor when it comes to integration or assimilation. There are important differences in how migrants from former colonies integrate—or fail to do so—into the metropole. This report argues that such differences in coping with the challenge of migration and integration stem from one overarching factor which, nevertheless, is greatly impacted by the current policy in place. And this factor is the nature of the former empire itself. Its duration, the extent of cultural and linguistic transfer, religious commonality, the ideological frame and the administrative construct through which it was governed. Whether an empire was pluralistic or assimilative, extractive or civilisational,

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[1] The concept of demographic winter refers to the phenomenon by which fertility rates fall below replacement levels. It has been an ongoing major political issue across Europe for over a decade. See, for instance, Europe's demographic winter (2019). ECR Working Group on Demography, Intergenerational and Family Policies. Available at: https://ecrgroup.eu/files/Europes_demographic_winter_brochure.pdf

[2] See for example, Alexander, C. (2014). 'The Empire Strikes Back: 30 years on', Ethnic and Racial Studies, Vol. 37, No. 10, pp. 1784-1792.

indirect or integrative, shapes not only the migrants' cultural proximity but also their potential for incorporation today—and welcoming—in European societies.

This is what this report intends to explore, thus focusing on the qualitative aspects of migration. Oftentimes, the literature is more concerned with quantitative aspects, addressing questions such as *how many*, or *how fast*. However, examining the issue of migration from a purely numbers or rates-based perspective overlooks crucial aspects which ought to be taken into consideration. As a result, some qualitative aspects also need to be included in migration research, however politically incorrect that might be. There is indeed research pertaining to labour force skills and also that which looks into race or geographical provenance. However, there is little research conducted on the cultural baggage or civilisational background of migrants and how, if at all, that contributes to integration. That is this paper's main concern.

To study this phenomenon, the paper focuses on three major former maritime European empires—Spain, France, and the United Kingdom—and examines how each manages migration specifically from their former colonies or overseas territories. In that regard, Spain, often neglected in the Anglophone migration literature, emerges as a relative success story. Migrants from Hispanic America integrate faster, face less discrimination, and contribute more consistently to the Spanish economy and civic life than any other migrant groups. In contrast, France and the UK continue to face persistent social and political challenges in integrating migrants from their own former dominions.[3]

This paper seeks to put forward a comparative analysis of migration and integration policies of some European countries—as well as some overall patterns across the EU—and also how historical ties condition present integration outcomes. It advances the argument that cultural, linguistic, and religious affinities—rooted, in this case, in historical empire-building—shape the success or failure of migration management in contemporary Europe. Or at the very least, has an important influence over it. This paper thus puts forward the thesis that the way the empire was built matters greatly in shaping contemporary migration and integration dynamics. We argue that there is a correlation between the imperial model adopted by a state—extractive or civilisational—and the degree to which post-colonial migration is disruptive or manageable and even beneficial. In other words, whether the empire strikes back phenomenon is to be desired—for its positive outcomes—or to be avoided—for its negative repercussions.

While some Central European countries, and especially Hungary, are often criticised for their restrictive migration policies, this article suggests that Europe should follow its lead in heavily restricting migration flows, both in numbers and pace, but also when it comes to skills and, above all, shared values.

As a result, the central question of this paper is whether European countries should discriminate on the basis of cultural heritage. This examination shows that the management of pos-timperial migration in these three countries is deeply influenced by their unique imperial legacies. In doing so, it offers a framework for policymakers to understand why some migration flows are more successful than others and why civilisational affinity, not just legal status or economic criteria, should inform migration strategy. This exploration seeks to be not a historical excursion, but to shed light on the type of selection criteria that ought to inform migration policy beyond a labour market or skill-oriented perspective. Moreover, it also intends to illustrate how inter-civilisation migration is often a major challenge for the receiving country whereas intra-civilisation migration tends to be a major opportunity.

Following this introduction, the article proceeds as follows. Section 1 outlines the theoretical framework of the "Migratory Empire Strikes Back" phenomenon, reinterpreting it through the lens of civilisational proximity and imperial legacy rather than traditional post-colonial paradigms. Section 2 examines the distinct imperial histories of Spain, France, and the United Kingdom, highlighting how different models of empire-building—extractive or civilisational—continue to shape contemporary migration patterns. Section 3 analyses how these historical legacies inform present-day national migration regimes, with particular attention to legal frameworks, cultural narratives, and integration strategies. Section 4 explores the role of post-colonial memory and identity in shaping political discourse and mobilisation around migration. Section 5 identifies key points of convergence and divergence among the three cases, particularly in terms of symbolic inclusion and policy effectiveness. Finally, Section 6 offers concluding reflections and strategic implications for migration policy, with an emphasis on the importance of cultural affinity in shaping integration outcomes.

Finally, before continuing to Section 1, it is important to note that this paper refers primarily to legal migration, not to irregular or undocumented migration, although selected comparisons are made to highlight broader civilisational patterns.

Theoretical Framework:
Empire-building and its Consequences

The concept of *"The Empire Strikes Back"* as applied to migration studies originated in post-colonial theory to describe the ironic historical reversal whereby former imperial centres have become destinations for migration from their former colonies. This idea gained academic prominence through scholars such as Stuart Hall, Paul Gilroy, and Catherine Hall, who emphasised the persistence of colonial relationships in the post-colonial present.[4] Migration, in this view, is not simply a response to economic disparity or global inequality, but a deeply political process rooted in the structures, narratives, and logics of empire.

This report employs this same term but under a different lens, as I do not adhere to the notion that colonial legacies shape migratory pathways and the institutional responses of European states, for empirical data seems to dismiss such views.

Recent estimates suggest that between 15 and 20 million people have arrived in the European Union from former European colonies over the course of the 21st century, making up about 6% of the EU population. In comparison, as of 2024, there were approximately 44.7 million people (9.9% of the EU population) who were born outside the EU. Additionally, there were 29.0 million non-EU citizens living in the EU.

This greatly contrasts with the percentage shown by the largest former maritime European empires, where migration of such provenance amounts to 30-40% of the total number immigrants they have received.

Portugal's immigrant population features a significant presence from its former colonies, with 30% of them coming from Brazil, Angola, Mozambique, and Cape Verde. In the United Kingdom, migration from former colonies—particularly India, Pakistan, and to a lesser extent, Caribbean nations—accounts for roughly 20% of the total immigrant population. By contrast, the cases of Spain and France are notably distinct: in both countries, immigrants from former overseas territories make up over 40% of the foreign-born population, reflecting deeper and more sustained post-imperial migratory ties.

These demographic patterns underscore a crucial starting point: Across Europe, former empires like Portugal and the UK continue to receive significant numbers of migrants from their ex-colonies, though it is in Spain and France where post-imperial migration constitutes a foundational component of the broader migratory landscape. However, the presence of such flows alone does not explain the disparities in integration outcomes. The mere volume or origin of migrants only partially accounts for national responses and societal cohesion. What truly differentiates countries in their ability to manage post-colonial migration lies deeper—in the legacy of civilisational entanglement between metropole and periphery. This is where the concept of the "migration-related Empire Strikes Back" acquires analytical value: it invites us to examine not only who migrates, but how and why their arrival resonates—or dissonates—within the host society. It is not solely a matter of historical ties, but of the quality and nature of those ties: linguistic, cultural, religious, and legal continuities that predispose certain groups to integrate more seamlessly than others.

My account of the migration-related *Empire Strikes Back* holds that the way former metropoles are impacted by the phenomenon of migration and how successfully they manage it is, to an extent, shaped by their history of linguistic, cultural, economic, and legal entanglement with migrants coming from once imperial territories. This does not necessarily entail that post-colonial migration thus seems to be path-dependent either. What it points to, however, is that there are certain cultural backgrounds that integrate better in specific European countries—and overall, across Europe—than others. This fact, examined in a cross-country fashion, does not only reflect the types and consequences of imperial governance, but also provides an interesting insight into migrant-related selection criteria. Criteria which are colour-blind, but which point to a harsh truth. Namely, that whereas civilisations have good and bad elements, there are some who are superior to others. At least when it comes to migration and the challenge of integration whilst protecting national identity.

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[3] Hall, S. (1992). The West and the rest: Discourse and power. In S. Hall & B. Gieben (Eds.), Formations of Modernity (pp. 275–332). Polity Press.

[4] Buettner, E. (2018), 'post-colonial Migrations to Europe', in Martin Thomas, and Andrew S. Thompson (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of the Ends of Empire*, Oxford Handbooks.

Typologies of Empire-Building

As mentioned above, this study advances the argument that the type of empire-building pursued by a given country has enduring consequences for how migrants from former colonies integrate with European societies today, it is important to first examine the phenomenon of empire-building. To do so, I adopt a simplified but analytically useful distinction between two types of imperial constructs: *Administrative or extractive* empires and *civilisational or replicative* empires.

Administrative or extractive empires were primarily organised around economic exploitation and legal differentiation. Colonial subjects were generally not intended to become part of the national core, and citizenship or subjecthood was often conditional, tiered, or denied altogether. The metropole maintained social and cultural distance, often codified in law and practice. Education systems, civic values, and infrastructure were typically geared toward administration rather than assimilation.

This is precisely what the British and French models meant by "colony," which signalled a hierarchical relationship between metropole and periphery. Colonies were legally and administrative inferior or secondary to the metropolitan core (e.g., *Code de l'indigénat* in French Africa, British "native law" systems). From an economic standpoint, they were organised to serve the resource and labour needs of the metropole. And culturally, they were conceived as irreconcilably different. Despite French and British *mission civilizatrice*, they did not intend for their colonies to become extensions of the nation-state.

In contrast, civilisational or replicative empires were territorial jurisdictions within a transatlantic monarchy, as was primarily the case of the Spanish Empire's viceroyalties. Major overseas territories —such as the Viceroyalty of New Spain or the Viceroyalty of Peru—were juridical extensions of the Spanish Crown. The Spanish imperial project, especially in the Americas, was grounded not merely in the logic of domination but in the civilisational ambition to replicate Spain overseas. Language, religion, legal codes, and institutions were exported and imposed, and colonial subjects were actively encouraged—or at times compelled—to become culturally, linguistically, and juridically Spanish. The entire framework of empire-building rested on the principle of convertibility into a shared civilisational identity.

This legal and cultural architecture emerged from a common political-religious matrix and produced, over time, a network of cities, universities, cathedrals, and dioceses in Spanish America that mirrored those in Castile or Aragon. Institutions such as the *Real y Pontificia Universidad de México* (1551) or the *Universidad de San Marcos* in Lima (1551) were conceived as direct analogues of the universities of Salamanca or Alcalá, and taught scholastic legal, theological, and administrative curricula identical to their metropolitan counterparts. Thus, the Spanish Empire's imperial administration was not a mere extractive apparatus—it was a project of transatlantic reproduction, wherein Lima or Quito were imagined as moral and cultural extensions of Seville and Toledo.

Crucially, this integrative imperial model facilitated enduring forms of linguistic, religious, racial, and hereditary exchange. Castilian Spanish became not only the language of administration but also the medium of everyday communication for mestizo and creole populations. Catholicism, likewise, was not simply introduced but institutionally embedded—through baptism, marriage, burial rites, and religious festivities—producing a religiously homogenous civic body across continents. The empire also sanctioned and normalised racial mixing so intermarriage between Spaniards and indigenous peoples were legally recognised and socially functional, giving rise to a mestizo majority in much of Spanish America.

This contrasts sharply with the models adopted by British North America or French Africa, where racial segregation was either de jure or de facto, and where cultural assimilation of the colonised was largely discouraged. In British America, anti-miscegenation laws and binary racial classifications were designed to prevent hybridisation, while French colonialism, especially in North and Sub-Saharan Africa, often maintained rigid civilisational boundaries between coloniser and colonised, offering very limited legal or social inclusion to indigenous populations.

In the Spanish case, over generations, its system gave rise to a legacy of racial and civilisational integration, rather than segregation, that underpins the relative ease with which many Hispanic American migrants integrate into Spanish society today. The shared memory and reality of *La Hispanidad*—built through replication rather than separation—endures in law, language, and lineage, creating a foundation of symbolic familiarity that has no clear equivalent in the British or French imperial aftermaths.

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[5] Eurostat (2024). EU Population Diversity by Citizenship and Country of Birth. Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=EU_population_diversity_by_citizenship_and_country_of_birth#:~:text=update:%20February%202026.-,Highlights,2024%20were%20non%2DEU%20citizens. (last accessed on June 20, 2025).

VE Day procession and celebrations, London. (Shutterstock)

In other words, these different imperial logics established typologies of *demos* overseas with distinct identities which today, in turn, impact positively or negatively the national identities of former metropoles, as post-colonial migrants integrate better or worse with them. In extractive empires, the colonial subject was defined as the "Other"—legally subordinate, culturally alien, and politically peripheral—and post-colonial migrants are still often viewed through this lens: as marginal, disruptive, and foreign. Integration policies in these contexts tend to oscillate between assimilationist demands and restrictive controls, reflecting a persistent unease with the idea of full civic incorporation.

Yet the failure of integration is not only a result of institutional or societal exclusion. It is also, increasingly, the result of self-segregation and resistance to assimilation by the migrants themselves. In many cases, post-colonial populations arriving from former extractive empires exhibit strong attachments to their own linguistic, religious, or communal identities, and do not actively seek cultural convergence with the host society. This dual estrangement—native resistance to reception and migrant resistance to integration—creates a feedback loop of mutual alienation that reinforces the legacy of imperial separation.

In civilisational empires, by contrast, the former imperial subject was constructed as "one of us" or, at the very least, as a "distant relative" or "delayed citizen." This ideological proximity has facilitated more inclusive legal frameworks and cultural narratives of affinity, particularly in the case of Hispanic American migrants to Spain. The Spanish case shows how an empire that sought to replicate itself abroad may generate fewer structural frictions when receiving post-colonial migrants. The hybridised *demos* that emerged from centuries of shared institutions, religious rites, and Inter-ethnic reproduction laid the foundation for contem-porary pathways of inclusion that are less contested and more functional. The lesson is clear: Empires that replicated themselves overseas left behind populations better prepared to reintegrate into the metropole. On the opposite side, those that governed through distance and hierarchy created estrangements that persist across generations.

Migration Regimes as Post-Imperial Constructs

Without indulging in any type of Marxist view on migration as a discourse-based race relations dynamic or Post-colonial phenomenon, one cannot deny that migration regimes today across Europe are not merely technocratic systems but also include some underlying value-based and cultural elements. These are not ideological but identitarian continuations of national self-understandings. Legal categories (e.g., citizenship, residency rights), administrative practices (e.g., visa regimes, integration tests), and discursive frameworks (e.g., narratives of belonging) are all shaped by the memory—and, in some cases, mythology—of empire and, when expanded to include similar former sending and currently receiving countries, the memory and mythology of a shared civilisation.

Thus, I approach migration policy not just as a matter of state capacity or demographic need, but as the afterlife of imperial identities. This allows us to understand why the UK and France—despite their comparative wealth and institutional sophistication—struggle with the integration of post-colonial populations, while Spain, despite being often perceived as a weaker imperial and economic power, and with a much older power summit in time, appears to have more success in managing cultural continuity with its former imperial subjects.

Empire-Building Logics and Migratory Impacts

To understand how contemporary migration regimes are shaped by imperial history or to what extent, it is essential to examine the logics of empire-building that defined each country's approach to overseas expansion. While France, the United Kingdom, and Spain all built vast overseas empires, they did so with very different objectives, strategies, and visions. These differences help explain the composition of post-colonial migrant flows and their integration pathway.

France: Republican universalism and post-colonial dissonance

France represents a contrasting model to Spain in both its imperial legacy and contemporary migration outcomes. While the French colonial empire was vast—particularly across North and Sub-Saharan Africa—it was governed through a centralising, assimilationist model rooted in the principles of *universalité républicaine*. This model, born from Enlightenment ideals and reinforced by the *mission civilisatrice*, promoted a vision of legal and civic equality through the erasure of cultural particularism. In theory, any subject could become French—if they abandoned their native identity. In practice, however, the empire operated through profound legal and cultural hierarchies, maintaining a sharp divide between *métropole* and colony.

From the Mission Civilisatrice to the Banlieues

The French imperial project, particularly in Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia, and Francophone West Africa, was structured around a universalist vision that aimed to transform colonial subjects into full citizens through education, language, and cultural discipline. Yet few were granted full rights. The vast majority were ruled as subjects, not citizens, and often subjected to discriminatory laws, forced labour, and restricted mobility. The contradiction between universalist rhetoric and exclusionary practice would carry over into the post-colonial period.

As Haddad and Balz demonstrate in their landmark study of the 2005 riots, this unresolved tension lies at the heart of France's modern migration crisis.[7] In suburbs such as Clichy-sous-Bois or Villiers-le-Bel, descendants of Algerian, Moroccan, and Senegalese migrants face spatial, economic, and civic marginalisation. These *banlieues*—peripheral urban zones with high concentrations of post-colonial populations—are often characterised by substandard public services, underfunded schools, and frequent police surveillance. The 2005 unrest, during which more than 10,000 vehicles were burned, and dozens of public buildings were attacked, was not a spontaneous criminal outburst, but a political rupture: a rejection by French-born youth of their symbolic and material exclusion from the national community that some have referred to as "Eurabian Civil war."[8] Two decades after the 2005 riots, the consequences of this phenomenon are embodied by the existence and rapid growth of migrant ghettos and *no-go zones* across France.[9] And again, as Spencer (2005) points out, "this clash of values is the heart of the problem."[10]

In recent years, many of these banlieues have evolved into de facto no-go zones—territories where law enforcement operates with extreme caution, if at all. These areas function as parallel societies, governed not by republican norms but by localised codes, clan loyalty, and in some cases, Islamist authority. French journalist Yves Mamou has described these districts as "archipelagos of separatism," disconnected from national life and resistant to integration.[11]

The 2023 riots across cities such as Nanterre and Marseille again laid bare the reality of this fracture. What is emerging is not simply poverty or marginalisation, but the construction of an alternative moral and legal order where the French Republic has little legitimacy. These enclaves embody a civilisational conflict within the nation's own borders.

[6] Haddad, Y. Y., & Balz, M. J. (2006). The October Riots in France: A Failed Immigration Policy or the Empire Strikes Back? *International Migration,* 44(2), pp. 23–34.

[7] See, for example, Cucullu, G. (2005). 'France: the cost of multiculturalism'. *FrontPageMagazine.com*. 23 November.

[8] The term "no-go zone" is used to identify migrant neighbourhoods in European cities where public authorities, particularly law enforcement, have limited or no control, and where the norms of the wider society may not be effectively applied. According to some estimates, France alone has over 750 no-go zones. See, *By Any Other Name: No-Go Zones, Rhetoric and Reality* (March 2018. Migration research Institute. Available at: https://migraciokutato.hu/en/2018/03/06/by-any-other-name-no-go-zones-rhetoric-and-reality/

[9] Spencer, R. (2005). 'Jihad, not joblessness causing rioting,' *Human Events Online*: The National Conservative Weekly. Available at: http://www.humaneventsonline.com/article.php?id=10144. 8 November.

[10] U.S. Senate. Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs. (2017, June 14). I*deology and terror: Understanding the tools, tactics, and techniques of violent extremism: Hearing before the Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, United States Senate, One Hundred Fifteenth Congress, First Session*. U.S. Government Publishing Office. Available at: https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CHRG-115shrg27393/pdf/CHRG-115shrg27393.pdf

Secularism, Islam, and the Boundaries of Belonging

One of the key fault lines in contemporary France is the intersection between secularism and Islam. Post-colonial migrants from former French colonies are predominantly Muslim, and expressions of Islamic identity—such as the hijab, halal dietary practices, or mosque construction—have become recurring flash-points in public debate. Citing the secularist principle of *laïcité*, the French state has passed a series of laws banning conspicuous religious symbols in public schools, outlawing the full-face veil in public spaces, and more recently, targeting forms of "Islamist extremism".

These measures are widely perceived by Muslim communities as discriminatory and alienating. Such policies reinforce the perception among French Muslims—particularly those of Maghrebi descent—that they are permanent outsiders. In many cases, this sense of exclusion produces oppositional forms of identity, ranging from cultural isolation to radical political or religious expressions. French republican universalism, in this context, becomes not a mechanism of civic inclusion but a tool of exclusion, one that denies recognition to ethno-cultural specificity while demanding strict conformity to an abstract, secular ideal.

Assimilation, Distance, and Post-colonial Incompatibility

The contradictions embedded in the French imperial model—universalism in theory, exclusion in practice—have left a deep imprint on post-colonial migration dynamics. While formal citizenship has often been granted to migrants from former colonies more readily than in other European contexts, substantive inclusion has lagged behind. The French state's refusal to acknowledge ethnicity or race in official data collection makes structural inequalities difficult to address, and public discourse on racism or religious discrimination remains heavily constrained by republican orthodoxy.

Moreover, the unresolved trauma of France's colonial past—especially the brutal war of decolonisation in Algeria—continues to shape public sentiment and institutional behaviour. Migrants from North and West Africa are not simply foreigners; they are historical reminders of a national rupture that remains largely unprocessed. As a result, their integration is hindered not only by institutional inertia but also by collective psychological resistance.

Thus, France's post-colonial dissonance lies in the gap between its self-image as a colour-blind—and religious-blind—republic and the lived reality of cultural fracture. The *banlieues*, the veil debates, and the recurrence of urban unrest all point to a deeper structural incompatibility between a model of forced assimilation and populations with strong ethno-cultural continuities. Unlike civilisational empires, where symbolic familiarity can facilitate integration, the French case reveals how administrative distance, ideological rigidity, and some degree of historical amnesia can conspire to produce post-colonial alienation rather than reconciliation.

The United Kingdom: Multicultural Pluralism and the Challenge of Civic Unity

The United Kingdom presents a distinctive post-imperial case. Its global empire was perhaps the most culturally and geographically diverse in history, stretching from the Caribbean to South Asia, West Africa to the Pacific. Unlike the French model of assimilation or the Spanish project of replication, British imperialism operated through legalistic pragmatism, indirect rule, and strategic pluralism. It did not seek to culturally transform its colonies; rather, it governed through localised legal orders and alliances with native elites. This foundational logic—rule through differentiation—deeply shaped the contours of post-colonial migration and integration in Britain.

Legal Status and the Postwar Migration Boom

Citizenship under the British Empire was expansive in theory but ambiguous in practice. The British Nationality Act of 1948 granted millions of colonial subjects the status of *Citizens of the United Kingdom and Colonies* (CUKC), enabling mass migration in the post-war decades, particularly from the Caribbean (i.e., the Windrush generation), India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and parts of Africa. However, the social contract implicit in this legal inclusion was never fully honoured. Despite an initial welcome, many migrants arriving in the 1950s and 1960s faced racism, housing discrimination, employment exclusion, and cultural hostility.[11]

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[11] The "Windrush generation" refers to individuals who emigrated from Caribbean countries to the United Kingdom between 1948 and 1971, primarily to address post-war labour shortages.

By the 1970s and 1980s, a series of increasingly restrictive immigration acts—culminating in the 1981 British Nationality Act—redefined British citizenship in more exclusive terms. These were often driven by explicit racial anxieties. The result was a dual legacy: legal inclusion without cultural recognition, and a growing sense among migrant communities of conditional belonging. These mistreatments surfaced in 2018 in the so-called "Windrush scandal", revealing the devastating impact of immigration policies and a hostile environment created by the Home Office.

Multiculturalism and Its Discontents

In contrast to France's assimilationist rigidity, the UK adopted a multicultural policy framework during the 1980s and 1990s. Migrant communities were encouraged to preserve their languages, religions, and cultural identities. Local authorities funded cultural associations and supported minority faith schools; national legislation prohibited discrimination on racial and religious grounds. However, this model, while initially celebrated as a tolerant alternative, gradually came under criticism for fostering parallel communities rather than shared national belonging.

As Claire Alexander notes in her essay *The Empire Strikes Back: 30 Years On* (2014), the multicultural framework may have unintentionally weakened civic cohesion by abandoning the expectation of common values or integration. In cities such as Birmingham, Leicester, Bradford, and Luton, residential and educational segregation hardened into cultural isolation. Surveys conducted during the 2000s showed that many British Muslims, particularly of South Asian descent, identified more strongly with their religious or ethnic group than with the British nation-state.

This tension was exacerbated by events such as the 2001 riots in Oldham and Burnley, the 2005 London bombings, the growth of Islamist extremism within UK-based networks and the 2015-onwards migrant crisis consisting of a massive influx of Muslim migrants. These crises prompted a political turn away from multiculturalism toward a renewed emphasis on "British values," and even national sovereignty, whose best example was the Brexit referendum and result.

Integration in an Age of Populism

The government's response has oscillated between coercive assimilation and exclusionary rhetoric. Campaigns such as the 2013 "Go Home" vans targeting undocumented migrants, and the Windrush scandal that exposed the wrongful deportation of lawful residents, reveal a punitive approach driven by populist pressure. The *hostile environment* policy, combined with Brexit-era anxieties, has deepened mistrust between migrant communities and society in general.

But abuse committed by migrant communities has also fuelled this mistrust. One of the clearest examples of this phenomenon is the infamous Rotherham child sexual exploitation scandal. From the early 1990s to 2013, over 1,400 girls were abused by grooming gangs of British-Pakistani men.[12] These crimes were covered up or downplayed by the authorities to prevent anti-migrant or anti-Muslim sentiments.

The Rotherham case was not an isolated episode. Across England—in towns like Oxford, Telford, Rochdale, and Huddersfield—similar patterns of grooming, sexual exploitation, and institutional cover-up emerged over the course of several decades. Estimates suggest that thousands of young girls were violently raped and abused, often by networks of British-Pakistani men, while local authorities failed to act.

One of the most shocking elements of these cases was not just the abuse itself, but the refusal of police, social workers, and council officials to intervene—often out of fear of being accused of racism—prioritising what they argued was "community cohesion" over child protection. Only in 2025 did the UK government finally authorise a nationwide inquiry into the scandal, highlighting its continued reluctance to fully confront the systemic nature of the abuse and its cultural dimensions.

This breakdown of trust is not solely the result of top-down policies; it also stems from the existence of important incompatibilities between certain migrant practices and British societal norms. The Rotherham scandal, in particular, exposed not only horrific abuses but also the

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[12] The report that identified the victims emphasised that this is a "conservative estimate," while some other estimates point to over 100,000 abused girls.

Crowds at the traditional San Telmo Market, Buenos Aires. (Shutterstock)

paralysis of institutions gripped by fears of being labelled racist. Such incidents have fuelled a narrative of mutual alienation, in which both the state and segments of the public view integration not as a two-way process but as a battleground. This tension underscores the deeper identity crisis that the UK faces today.

Unlike Spain, the UK lacks a civilisational continuum with its former colonies. And unlike France, it lacks a universalist ideological template for assimilation. Its post-imperial condition is defined by ambiguity: between legal inclusion and cultural ambivalence, between pragmatic tolerance and populist reaction. The result is a fragile equilibrium—a society legally open, culturally divided, and increasingly uncertain of what holds it together.

Spain: Replication and Cultural Continuity

Among European countries, Spain stands out for its relatively successful record of post-colonial integration, particularly with migrants born in Hispanic America. As of 2025, nearly four million Hispanic American migrants live in Spain, mainly from Colombia, Venezuela, Argentina, Peru, Cuba, Honduras and the Dominican Republic. These groups, which amount to 10% of the population in Spain, not only exhibit higher rates of legal regularisation and naturalisation than other foreign populations, but also report lower levels of discrimination and civic alienation. In contrast to migrants from Morocco (the largest foreign-born population group in Spain) or Sub-Saharan Africa, Hispanic Americans tend to experience smoother social and institutional integration, a difference often attributed to shared cultural, linguistic, and historical legacies.

One of the central factors behind this pattern is civilisational proximity. Hispanic American migrants typically arrive with a common language—Spanish—as well as a Roman Catholic religious background and legal-cultural norms rooted in Spanish civil law. Unlike in France or the United Kingdom, there is minimal linguistic or cultural distance between newcomers and the host society. Spanish media, education systems, and bureaucratic institutions are immediately familiar and accessible. Migrants themselves frequently refer to their relocation as a "return" or "re-encounter" rather than a rupture, highlighting the depth of symbolic continuity.

This continuity is not incidental but the product of Spain's unique imperial legacy, the earliest and longest lasting of the three examined here. Beginning with the conquest of Granada and the voyages of Columbus in 1492, the Spanish Empire lasted more than four centuries, dissolving only at the end of the 19th century with the loss of Cuba, Puerto Rico and the Philippines in 1898. This prolonged imperial presence enabled the formation of transatlantic institutions that mirrored those of the Iberian Peninsula: universities, religious orders, legal codes, and administrative bodies were transplanted to the Americas in a deliberate effort to reproduce Spanish civilisation abroad. Cities like Lima, Mexico City, and Bogotá were not conceived as colonial outposts but as extensions of Seville, Salamanca, or Toledo.

Even at the sunset of the empire, in the early 19th century, amidst the Napoleonic invasion of Spain (1808–1814) and the resulting crisis of legitimacy in the Spanish monarchy, serious proposals emerged to relocate the Spanish Crown to Mexico, particularly to Mexico City— the capital of the Viceroyalty of New Spain. This historical fact reflected real political calculations within a composite monarchy where sovereignty resided in the monarch himself rather than in a fixed territorial core.[13]

These ideas reflected a deep ideological continuity within the Spanish imperial imagination. Unlike the extractive models of France or Britain, Spain regarded its American territories as integral kingdoms, not colonial possessions.

Time also played a role in cultural replication. By the time Harvard University was established in British North America in 1636, nearly twenty universities had already been founded across the Spanish Americas under royal or papal authority. These institutions followed the scholastic model of Salamanca or Alcalá and taught theology, law, and the humanities with curricula indistinguishable from their counterparts in Spain. This transatlantic intellectual infrastructure illustrates how the Spanish Empire conceived of its overseas territories not as culturally alien spaces, but as integrated components of a shared civilisational mission.

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[13] New Spain, at the time, was the most affluent and stable part of the Spanish Empire, with a loyal elite class, robust institutions, and relative immunity from European military conflict. It seemed a viable alternative political centre, controlling both the Atlantic and Pacific oceans and equidistant to European and Asian (e.g., the Philippines) dominions. Proposals circulated among royalists and conservative elites, both in the Americas and in Spain, to establish an autonomous or even monarchical government under a Bourbon prince. Some advocated for relocating the royal court itself. Later, during the age of independence, thinkers like Lucas Alamán would echo these visions, culminating in the First Mexican Empire under Agustín de Iturbide and, decades later, the Second Empire under Maximilian of Habsburg.

The enduring legacy of this integrative empire is visible today not only in language, religion, and legal traditions but also in Spain's contemporary migration policies. Spain grants facilitated pathways to citizenship for nationals of Hispanic America, the Philippines, and Equatorial Guinea, reinforcing the notion of a shared Hispanic world. These policies have been reinforced by migration flows that have long moved in both directions: from Spain to Hispanic America during periods of war, exile, and economic hardship, and from Hispanic America to Spain particularly since the 1990s. This bi-directional movement underscores a transnational identity shaped by common historical roots rather than colonial rupture.

Unlike Britain's *UKIP* or France's *Rassemblement National*, Spain's populist movements have not placed immigration at the centre of their political agenda until very recently, when migratory pressure has increased and, most importantly, migratory provenance has shifted. In that regard, Spain has not yet witnessed the emergence of a major populist backlash against Hispanic American immigration—the political party *Vox* does, however, firmly oppose MENA and Muslim migration, and other regional parties such as *Aliança Catalana* in Catalonia have also waged war against mass Muslim migration.

Scholars such as González Enríquez suggest that this relative calm is due to the perception of Hispanic Americans as culturally proximate—more "assimilable" than other groups. The idea of *Hispanidad*—a narrative of shared language, faith, and historical destiny—continues to shape public attitudes and official policy, acting as a bridge across centuries of post-colonial transformation.[14]

Spain's longer and more culturally and politically integrative empire thus left symbolic and institutional residues that continue to structure patterns of migration, reception and integration today. This legacy, embedded in law, culture, and memory, provides a foundation for post-colonial integration that is comparatively more inclusive.

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[14] González Enríquez, C. (2016). Luces y sombras en la integración de los migrantes en España (ARI 38/2016). *Real Instituto Elcano*. Available at: https://www.realinstitutoelcano.org/analisis/luces-y-sombras-en-la-integracion-de-los-migrantes-en-espana/

Migration and Integration Models Today

The legacy of empire continues to shape how some European countries cope with migratory pressure and implement integration policies. These regimes are not simply responses to labour market needs or demographic shifts—they are also the institutional expressions of national identity, informed by historical narratives, colonial memory, and the perceived nature of former subjects. Or it should, for it is certainly politically incorrect to state the obvious, which is that similar peoples integrate more easily than those apart. This is precisely why this examination is important, to provide arguments and data to back up what should be obvious, but it is not anymore, with some notable exceptions such as the case of Hungary, who understands that civilisation and culture matters.

This section compares the contemporary migration and integration systems of France, the United Kingdom, and Spain, focusing on four key dimensions: legal frameworks, cultural narratives, policy instruments, and societal reception. In each case, we observe that the structure and tone of these regimes correlate strongly with the underlying model of empire-building outlined in Section 2.

France: Assimilation without Belonging

France's migration regime is grounded in a republican assimilationist model that assumes migrants must conform to a universal French identity defined by strong secularism, language, and shared civic values. While France formally offers citizenship to many migrants—especially from former colonies—its integration policies are demanding and top-down, often denying the legitimacy of ethnic or religious differences in the public sphere.

The French state provides relatively quick access to nationality for those born in France (*jus soli*) or those from former colonies. However, formal inclusion often coexists with de facto exclusion in housing, employment, education, and policing—particularly in the urban peripheries (*banlieues*). State-driven integration efforts, such as the *Contrat d'intégration républicaine*, emphasise language acquisition and civic instruction, but it is often insufficient for integration purposes and also fails to be applied in practice.

Public discourse around migration in France today is marked by anxiety over Islam. Debates over headscarves, secularism, and radicalisation—translated into terrorism, mass riots, lootings, etc.—have deepened the perception of post-colonial migrants as culturally incompatible—even when they are legally French—and also an increased explicit rejection of French identity by migrant groups. As a consequence, the French model of integration reveals the tension between universalism in principle and exclusion in practice and increasingly desired by both natives and migrants. The result is a growing fault line among these two population groups.

United Kingdom: Multiculturalism under Siege

The UK's migration regime historically relied on a liberal legal framework and a relatively permissive attitude toward cultural pluralism—an outgrowth of its fragmented, indirect colonial governance. Migrants from the Commonwealth initially arrived as legal citizens, and the British state developed policies of multicultural accommodation in education, media, and community representation.

However, since the 1980s—and particularly in the wake of Brexit—this framework has undergone significant retrenchment. A succession of immigration acts from 1962 to the present has progressively restricted access, culminating in a "hostile environment" approach. The UK now operates a points-based system, which favours high-skilled migration and excludes many traditional post-colonial entrants.

Contemporary discourse is increasingly shaped by securitisation, and suspicion of dual loyalties. For example, a recent poll by the Henry Jackson Society showed that 32% of British Muslims believe Sharia Law to be very or somewhat desirable.[15] As a result, while multiculturalism offered formal space for ethnic and religious expression, it has been criticised for enabling segregation and weakening common civic identity. The Windrush scandal exposed the precarity of legal status for even long-settled migrants, revealing how post-colonial sense of belonging or common legacy is fragile. And the societal and political response to

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[15] See *British Muslim and general public attitudes polling* (March 2024). Henry Jackson Society. Available at: https://henryjacksonsociety.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/HJS-Deck-200324-Final.pdf

this failure of multiculturalism is clear. In a recent YouGov poll in June of 2025, the Reform Party was on track to get the most seats if an election took place this year, securing 271 seats in the House of Commons.[16]

Spain: Selective Affinity and Pragmatic Flexibility

Spain's migration regime is comparatively recent but deeply influenced by its civilisational imperial legacy. Since the 1990s, Spain has emerged as a major destination for migrants from Hispanic America, North Africa, and sub-Saharan Africa. Yet, unlike France and the UK, Spain has crafted a regime that privileges historical and cultural proximity, especially with former overseas territories.

Legal access is shaped by a dual logic: one of selective inclusion based on "Hispanic" identity, and another of pragmatic adaptation to economic demand. Nationals from Hispanic America, the Philippines, and Equatorial Guinea benefit from shortened naturalisation periods and bilateral labour-based agreements. In practice, this has enabled smoother transitions to legal residency and eventual citizenship for many post-colonial migrants.

Integration programs tend to be less ideologically rigid than those in France or the UK. There is no strong assimilationist doctrine or multicultural agenda; rather, integration is treated as a municipal and social policy challenge, often focused on housing, health, and language access. While racial and ethnic discrimination exist, public discourse has not (yet) crystallised around a polarised narrative of post-colonial threat or incompatibility.

The Spanish case suggests that the legacy of an integrative imperial vision, where former colonies were imagined as culturally continuous with the metropole, facilitates a more flexible and inclusive migration regime—though one not without its contradictions.

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[16] June 2025 YouGov Poll available here: https://yougov.co.uk/politics/articles/52437-first-yougov-mrp-since-2024-election-shows-a-hung-parlia-ment-with-reform-uk-as-largest-party

People strolling through the old town of Lyon, France. (Shutterstock)

Comparative Reflections and Strategic Implications

A comparative examination of the Spanish, French, and British responses to post-colonial migration reveals two decisive truths. First, that the structure and civilisational logic of empire profoundly shapes integration outcomes. While economic conditions, legal frameworks, and political ideologies matter, these are mediated through the deeper sediment of imperial memory—how a society once imagined itself in relation to those it ruled—and civilisational replication. And second, that countries should take those cultural and religious elements into consideration when drafting their migration policies

Cultural Proximity Matters

Spain's imperial model, particularly in Hispanic America, was rooted in a project of transatlantic civilisational unity. Unlike the British or French who governed through differentiation—either via indirect rule or assimilationist universalism—Spain envisioned its colonies as cultural extensions of the metropole. From law to language, religion to racial mixing, the empire produced a system in which former subjects were cast not as alien others but as cultural kin.

This historical foundation explains the relative cultural proximity experienced by migrants from Ecuador, Colombia, the Dominican Republic, or Peru. These groups arrive in Spain not merely as economic actors but as participants in a shared symbolic order—speaking the same language, sharing religious rituals, and referring to Spain as the "madre patria." Spanish legislation reflects this continuity, with migrants from Hispanic America eligible for naturalisation after just two years of residency, compared to ten years for others. In many cases, bilateral labour agreements further facilitate legal and economic mobility.

By contrast, France's assimilationist model rested on the premise of transforming colonial subjects into French citizens through cultural erasure. Algeria, despite being formally annexed to France, governed its Muslim population through discriminatory codes such as the *Code de l'indigénat*, which persisted well into the 20th century. Even when citizenship was offered, it came at the cost of personal status laws and religious identity. After independence, the Algerian diaspora in France grew but remained socially and spatially excluded—most starkly visible in the marginalised banlieues. The 2005 riots exemplify how the promise of universalism collapsed under the weight of structural inequality and cultural estrangement.

The British case illustrates yet another model: a pragmatic, legalistic imperial framework that recognised colonial subjects as British subjects without meaningful pathways to integration. The Windrush generation entered the UK as labourers and citizens, only to confront a society unprepared for their inclusion. Similarly, and this is also the case of France and virtually every other EU member state, the 2015 mass migrant influx did not integrate in European societies, leading to the rise of societal fracture, political populist discourses and an eventual retreat into more restrictive immigration laws fuelled by crime and scandals like Windrush, which revealed the hollowness of Britain's multicultural promise.

Limits of Universalism and Multiculturalism

France and the UK demonstrate the limits of both universalist and multiculturalist frameworks when disembedded from deeper civilisational continuity. France promises equality in theory but offers it unevenly in practice. Britain tolerates difference but fails to foster shared identity. These regimes reflect the contradictions of their respective empires: assimilation without belonging in France, and recognition without unity in Britain.

Spain, while lacking a fully articulated integration doctrine and now suffering the Sub-Saharan and North African migratory pressure, benefits from an inherited civilisational narrative—Hispanidad—that positions many migrants as inherently familiar. This proximity lowers symbolic tension and reduces political backlash. For example, despite significant numbers of Hispanic American migrants, Spain has not witnessed large-scale xenophobic mobilisations specifically targeting them, but quite the opposite.[17] Until very recently, anti-immigration parties in Spain had little electoral traction, particularly compared to France's *Rassemblement National* or the UK's *UKIP or Reform UK*. And even now, these parties direct their opposition to mass migration towards African or Middle Eastern migrants from Muslim majority countries.

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[17] The president of the Regional Government of Madrid, Isabel Díaz Ayuso, for instance, has constantly toured Hispanic American capitals such as Lima in Perú, as well as Miami in the United States of America, calling for Madrid to be the "capital of the Hispanidad" and inviting all who want to come to Spain, to do so under the promise of a warm welcome. Because they are us, and we are them.

The sharp contrast in the experiences lived by these three countries also indicates that, what truly differentiates countries in their ability to manage post-colonial migration lies not only in quantitative data—how many, how fast—but in the civilisational fabric that connects—or disconnects—newcomers from their host societies. This is particularly evident in the case of Muslim-majority migrants from North Africa, the Sahel, and parts of South Asia, whose arrival has introduced not just cultural difference, but religious divergence of a structural kind. Unlike Catholic or secularised migrants from Latin America, Muslim migrants often bring with them a worldview—rooted in Islamic law, communalism, and symbolic resistance to assimilation—that conflicts with both liberal democratic norms and Europe's Christian cultural heritage. Islam, when experienced not as a private faith but as a totalising civilisational code, has become the central axis of integration failure across much of Western Europe. The concept of a migration-related Empire Strikes Back must therefore account not only for historical ties and linguistic affinities, but for the religious and civilisational distance between migrant groups and their hosts—a distance that increasingly defines the fault lines of European societies.

Civilisational Criteria in Migration Policy

There are several strategic lessons which emerge from this brief analysis:

1. Migration policy must be guided not only by labour market calculus or humanitarian ethics but also by cultural compatibility. This is not to endorse ethno-nationalism, but to recognise the empirical reality that shared language, religion, and historical affinity matter in integration outcomes. Spain's selective policies—like preferential naturalisation for Hispanic-American nationals—offer a model of calibrated openness.

2. Legal inclusion alone is insufficient. France's model of early citizenship for Algerians did not prevent their exclusion. Integration requires much more such as educational investment, urban planning, and narrative cohesion. But even those are insufficient if symbolic inclusion—feeling part of the national story—based on real and lived out features is absent.

3. Differentiation by migratory provenance is both legitimate and necessary. Migrants from culturally proximate societies—like Argentina or Peru—tend to integrate faster and more peacefully than those from radically different civilisational backgrounds. Policy should reflect this without collapsing into racial essentialism or bigoted nativism.

4. Integration is a symbolic and generational process. It unfolds not only through schools, jobs, or housing, but also through the cultivation of shared imaginaries, national rituals, and historical consciousness.

Spain's case shows that integration can be smoother when the former empire was structured around cultural replication. Yet this success should not be taken for granted. As migration from Africa increases, Spain may face similar tensions to its northern neighbours unless it builds more inclusive civic structures beyond the Hispanic frame or unless it discriminates heavily in favour of Hispanic American migrants.

This civilisational logic does not end with legal status or formal integration frameworks. The influence of cultural proximity extends into the grey zones of migration—particularly irregular migration—where state control is weaker, but patterns of behaviour and outcomes remain strikingly differentiated. Even when entering or residing illegally, migrants from culturally proximate regions tend to integrate more peacefully, maintain social cohesion, and interact more constructively with host institutions. These cultural continuities not only mitigate social friction but also shape the nature of irregularity itself, revealing that illegality is not a uniform category, but one deeply marked by origin and background. As the next section shows, these same patterns extend into the economic realm: cultural fit is not just a variable in integration or legality—it is a powerful predictor of labour participation, social mobility, and fiscal contribution.

Even in Illegality, Differences Persist: The Spanish Case

While this study has focused primarily on legal migration and the influence of imperial legacies on integration outcomes, the domain of irregular migration also reveals significant and measurable disparities when origin and civilisational background are taken into account. In Spain, for instance, irregular migrants from Hispanic America and those from North or Sub-Saharan Africa exhibit not only different entry profiles but also divergent long-term behavioural and socio-legal trajectories.

In 2024 there were 686,111 illegal migrants in Spain. Of those, over 500,000 living in Spain in an irregular situation were from America and only 23,000 from Africa.[18] However, data from the Ministry of the Interior shows that Africa-born people commit nearly 30% of all violent robberies whereas they only represent 2.6% of Spanish society (1.2 million out of 47). In other words, the African population in Spain are 12 times more prone to commit these crimes than "natives." As for other crimes, Africa-born people living in Spain commit 4.52% of all sex-related (assault, rape, etc.) crimes and 3.28% of all murders, being again vastly over-represented compared to their numbers in Spain.

The legal pathways into irregularity differ markedly. According to the *Ministerio del Interior*, more than 65% of unauthorised maritime entries to Spain in 2023 involved nationals from Morocco, Algeria, Mali, and Senegal. These crossings—often via precarious boats to the Canary Islands or Andalusian coast—constitute the most visible face of illegal migration and are typically managed under emergency frameworks, frequently involving detention or deportation. By contrast, the vast majority of Hispanic American migrants in irregular status in Spain entered with valid visas, usually as tourists or students, and simply overstayed. In 2022, the *Instituto Nacional de Estadística* reported that the five most common nationalities among those who fell into irregularity through visa overstays were Venezuelan, Colombian, Peruvian, Argentine, and Dominican.

These divergent paths into illegality are paralleled by stark differences in post-entry behaviour and criminality rates. Irregular migration from North Africa and Sub-Saharan Africa is statistically correlated with significantly higher rates of crime and incarceration. In 2024, data from Spain's *Secretaría General de Instituciones Penitenciarias* revealed that Moroccan nationals represented over 27% of all incarcerated foreign nationals, despite not being the most numerous foreign-born groups in the country. Sub-Saharan Africans are likewise over-represented in detention facilities relative to their share of the migrant population. the over-representation of migrants when it comes to crime

statistics in Spain is staggering. Nearly half of all crimes are committed by migrants, whereas they only represent 10% of the population. They commit 32% of all murders, 39% of all rapes and 47% of all robberies.

By contrast, Hispanic American irregular migrants are underrepresented in crime and incarceration statistics, especially in categories such as violent crime or organised theft. Although they may be active in informal labour markets —often concentrated in domestic work, caregiving, or hospitality—they show far lower levels of involvement in criminal activities requiring police intervention. This indicates that, whereas most irregular migrants living in Spain are from Hispanic American origin, they pose a much smaller problem for civic life than those of African origin. These empirical differences are not marginal; they are significant enough to shape public policy but also judicial outcomes.[19]

These patterns are not explained solely by socio-economic conditions or levels of education. Cultural proximity—manifested in language, religion, and behavioural norms—plays a central role in facilitating informal adaptation and reducing the friction that often leads to delinquency. Hispanic American migrants, even in irregular status, are more likely to maintain social ties, access support networks, and navigate institutional systems effectively. In contrast, migrants from the Sahel or Maghreb—whose cultural frameworks are often more distant—face higher barriers to integration and exhibit statistically higher involvement in criminal activities.

Thus, the divide between legal and illegal migration in Spain is further compounded by a factual divide in outcomes. Irregular migrants, also, are not all the same. The available data point to structural and behavioural differences that align with civilisational proximity. Hispanic Americans, even when undocumented, statistically integrate more peacefully and productively into Spanish society, while North African and Sub-Saharan African migrants are disproportionately present in the penal system and implicated in categories of crime that generate high levels of public concern.

[18] See Notas de Coyuntura Social (2024). Funcas (May of 2024). Available at: https://funcas.es/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/2405-NCS.pdf

[19] The regularisation processes carried out under the Socialist-led government of Pedro Sánchez represent a significant departure from traditional patterns observed in Spain's migration policy. While regularisation through mechanisms like arraigo social, family reunification, or humanitarian grounds has historically benefited Hispanic American migrants—whose cultural and linguistic proximity facilitates integration—the current wave of mass regularisations predominantly affects migrants of African origin. Over 30,000 irregular migrants have already been granted legal status, and the government expects this figure to rise to half a million by the end of the year. These measures do not appear to respond to labour market demands or integration potential, but rather to political and electoral motivations, aligning with the ideological and demographic objectives of the Sánchez administration. As a result of this regularisation phenomenon, it is becoming increasingly difficult to track illegal migration in Spain, as the data changes rapidly and lacks stable reference points.

These are not mere perceptions or politicised narratives, but data. And the implications are clear: Irregularity is not a uniform category, and civilisational background continues to matter—not only for how migrants are received, but also for how they act once in the host country. This reinforces the central thesis of this study: that cultural proximity is a critical variable in predicting not only integration success but also law-abidingness and social stability, even among those who arrive outside legal channels.

Economic Performance is Downstream from Culture

Beyond the legal and symbolic dimensions of migration, one of the most politically sensitive questions remains its economic impact. Here, once again, the data confirms that not all migration flows yield equal fiscal outcomes. While public discourse often frames migrants as either burdens or assets, the reality is more nuanced—and closely tied to questions of cultural compatibility and proximity.

University of Pennsylvania professor Jesús Fernández Villaverde, underscores that the fiscal contribution of migrants varies significantly depending on their cultural and geographic origin.[20] Drawing on comparative European data, he highlighted that in countries such as Denmark, the average native-born citizen contributes a net-zero balance to the welfare state over their lifetime. Western migrants, including Hispanic American migrants, though slightly below that baseline, remain fiscally sustainable. By contrast, migrants from North Africa and the Middle East typically yield negative net contributions during their whole lives—both in Denmark and across most Western European states—due to lower employment rates, higher welfare dependency, and lower levels of human capital.

This argument finds further support in the international comparative research of Financial Times journalist John Burn-Murdoch. In a wide-ranging 2018 analysis, Burn-Murdoch found that immigrants and their children in Anglo-Saxon countries such as the United Kingdom, the United States, Canada, and Australia tend to outperform those in continental European countries.

This was due a two-fold fact: First, that in the UK and US, for instance, migrants frequently arrive with higher educational qualifications and are over-represented in skilled sectors.

Over time, they equal the native-born and sometimes even out-earn them. And second, because these countries do not have large welfare states unlike continental European countries do. For that reason, migrants tend to become over time be net contributors to public finances, paying more in taxes than they receive in benefits. However, this data belongs to the past, for today, none of these two key elements are present in the Anglo-American world.

They have engaged in massive welfare-related public spending and reached to staggering fiscal deficits; and they no longer attract high-skilled migration or, at the very least, not only high-skilled migration. As a result, migrants as net beneficiaries of welfare state is the predominant phenomenon across the West today.

France, for instance, is another good example of how immigration worsens public finances. According to the OECD, the budgetary revenues contributed by immigrants cover only 86% of the public spending allocated to them. Yet again, as with the case of Denmark, there are clear differences depending on the type of immigration.[21]

These discrepancies are not solely attributable to policy design or economic cycles. As mentioned above, they correlate strongly with cultural closeness. Migrants who share linguistic, religious, and normative codes with the host society adapt more quickly, experience less discrimination, and integrate more effectively into labour markets. In Spain, Hispanic American migrants exemplify this trend. According to the *Consejo Económico y Social* (CES), these migrants exhibit high labour market participation and fill critical roles in sectors such as domestic care, hospitality, and retail. By contrast, migrants from the Maghreb and sub-Saharan Africa continue to experience higher unemployment, lower earnings, and greater dependence on state benefits.[22]

[20] Fernandez-Villaverde, J. (2024). 'España (y Europa) en apuros', *Fundación Rafael del Pino*, December 2024.

[21] Observatoire de l'immigration et de la démographie. (2025). L'impact de l'immigration sur l'économie française.
Available at: https://observatoire-immigration.fr/limpact-de-limmigration-sur-leconomie-francaise/

[22] Consejo Económico y Social de España. (2019). *La inmigración en España: Efectos y oportunidades* (Informe 02/2019).
Available at: https://www.ces.es/documents/10180/5209150/Inf0219.pdf

Spain's experience illustrates that the economic viability of migration is not just a matter of skill, but of cultural fit. And so are every other European countries, which also show how cultural closeness brings with it a lower fiscal dependency or even positive contribution to society—especially across time.

Migrants with compatible civilisational backgrounds tend to access employment more easily, navigate bureaucracy with fewer obstacles, and form more durable social networks. This reduces the burden on public services and accelerates their contribution to national development.

In sum, while economic arguments are often framed in neutral or technocratic language, they are inseparable from the deeper question of civilisational compatibility. Culture and economics are not parallel tracks—they are intersecting vectors. The fiscal impact of migration cannot be understood without reference to common heritage. A culturally attuned migration policy—one that recognises symbolic proximity and shared social codes—not only enhances cohesion but also improves long-term economic outcomes.

The Queen's Birthday Parade, London.
(Shutterstock)

Conclusion: The Empire May Strike Back. But It Can Be Welcomed

This article has examined how different imperial legacies—civilisational or extractive—continue to shape contemporary migration regimes in Europe. In particular, it has shown how the cultural logic of empire building influences not only the legal status of migrants but also their symbolic place in the nation and their capacity to integrate. The contrast between France, the United Kingdom, and Spain offers a striking insight: Integration is not merely about policy—it is about historical imagination and civilisational fit.

Spain's case is particularly illustrative. Because its empire operated through replication—transmitting language, religion, legal codes, and symbolic myths—migrants from Hispanic America arrive not as cultural outsiders, but as familiar extensions of a shared historical narrative. Spanish law acknowledges this by offering fast-tracked citizenship and preferential treatment to migrants from former colonies. And public discourse and societal attitudes often frame these arrivals not as immigration, but as a *return to the madre patria*.

By contrast, France and the UK, whose empires were extractive and administratively distant, have failed to build symbolic bridges between the metropole and its subjects. Their post-colonial migrants, therefore, arrive without a shared narrative of belonging. This has led to ambiguous citizenship, politicised resentment, and difficult integra-tion pathways—regardless of how inclusive the laws on paper may be.

But there is a deeper problem at the heart of Western Europe's integration dilemma: The inability of many states to define who they are. What it means to be French, British, or Spanish today. Liberal democracies have grown uncomfortable—even incapable—of articulating a coherent national identity grounded in history, tradition, and civilisational reference points. Instead, identity is outsourced to bureaucratic norms or hollow procedural-ism. Without a defined self-image, how can a society distinguish between those who naturally belong and those who must adapt. Or better yet, how can Europe demand integration from newcomers if that is presented as integra-tion into nothingness. When presented with that choice, many decide to keep their identity of origin, leading to the growing *getthoisation* of society. Moreover, the failure to articulate a compelling shared civic identity has left a vacuum filled by nostalgia, nativism, and suspicion towards "the other."

This incapacity stands in sharp contrast to other countries such as Hungary, which has made an explicit effort to define and defend its national soul. Hungarian migration policy is rooted in the idea of historical continuity, Christian culture, linguistic uniqueness, and cultural cohesion. While controversial to some, it offers clarity: Hungary knows what it wants to preserve, and therefore what it is looking for in those who wish to join its national project.

This divergence points to a fundamental mindset gap. While Western European leaders continue to avoid defining national identity in civilisational terms, Hungary has embraced a paradigm that recognises the cultural roots of citizenship. Prime Minister Viktor Orbán has repeatedly stated that "migration is not a human right" and that Hungary will "not become a country of migrants." In his 2018 speech at Tusványos, he affirmed: "We do not see these people as Muslim refugees. We see them as the advance guard of a Muslim invasion."

This civilisational clarity allows Hungary to formulate selective migration policies grounded in shared culture, religion, and historical continuity—values that much of Western Europe has abandoned in favour of procedural liberalism. While critics call this approach xenophobic, it arguably offers a more coherent framework for national cohesion than the ideological vacuum that now character-ises many EU states.

Orbán reaffirmed this stance in July 2025 at the annual Tusványos summer festival in Transylvania, where he warned that "in ten years, Hungary will have to protect itself from migration coming [also] from the West." This highlights the extent to which Hungary sees the cultural disintegration of Western Europe as a source of future demographic pressure.

Civilisational clarity enables strategic selectivity. The lesson is not that countries must close their borders, but that they must open them wisely—based on shared memory, linguistic familiarity, cultural coherence, and historical

alignment. Migrants from Hispanic America fit this bill in Spain not by accident, but by virtue of centuries of civilisational overlap. Their integration has not required aggressive state engineering or multicultural compromise —it has emerged from proximity.

In this light, Europe faces not just a cultural choice, but a demographic imperative. Our populations are aging, fertility rates have collapsed, and the economic and social model we depend on cannot be sustained without new human capital. Migration is not a question of if, but of from where. And here lies the crucial distinction: Europe can continue down the path of indiscriminate openness— treating all migrants as legally equal but culturally un-known—or it can pursue a strategic and civilisationally coherent migration policy. This does not mean abandon-ing humanitarian values, but rather recognising that integration works best when migrants and hosts already share a symbolic, linguistic, and moral framework.

France's banlieues and Britain's grooming gang scandals both illustrate how migrant-origin communities can form parallel societies where the rule of law is weakened or altogether absent. These phenomena persist not due to

lack of policy, but because the host societies tolerate them—either through negligence or ideological blindness. The question is no longer whether such dysfunction exists, but why it is allowed to continue. Civilisational distance, when ignored, does not disappear; it compounds.

Spain's experience offers a clear precedent: the empire may indeed strike back—but it can do so as kin, not as a stranger. Migration from Hispanic America is not foreign in the way migration from Sahelian Africa or the Islamic world is. It is a return—a reunion of peoples once part of the same civilisational project. And what is true for Spain is also, to a considerable extent, true for Europe as a whole. If the West must import population, let it do so wisely— not from regions marked by civilisational divergence, but from the Western pocket across the Atlantic, where over 500 million Spanish- and Portuguese-speaking men and women remain culturally close, spiritually aligned, and symbolically familiar. Demography may be destiny, but identity shapes the consequences. Europe cannot afford to outsource its future to the incompatible. It must look to those who already belong—because they are, in a very real sense, part of us. And we are still part of them.

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Appendix: The Case for Hispanic America

The term Latin America originated in the 19th century, primarily as a geopolitical construct to distinguish the nations of the American continent that spoke Romance languages from those within the Anglo-American sphere. It was French intellectuals and political strategists who popularised the term, with the aim of emphasising the linguistic and cultural ties between France and the former Spanish and Portuguese territories.

However, the term carries an ideological burden, as it implicitly minimises the Spanish and Portuguese legacy by grouping the region under a broader "Latin" identity that includes non-Iberian influences. Furthermore, the term Latin America was explicitly designed to undermine the authority and prominence of Spain in the discovery and development of the New World. This intention was promoted by France and fuelled by the United Kingdom.

Defining the concept of Latin America is highly controversial and complex. Despite its common use today, significant difficulties arise when reflecting on the term as a concept, along with its meaning and significance.

Today, what is commonly known as Latin America—or Latin America and the Caribbean—is a compound noun that refers to the part of the American continent that stretches from Tierra del Fuego (Chile and Argentina) in the south to the Rio Grande on the border between Mexico and the United States. It includes the Caribbean islands and the southern and central regions of the continent. Politically and socially, it refers to the countries of the continent that differ from what is known as North America—excluding Mexico. From a linguistic point of view, it refers to the group of countries where a Latin or Romance language is spoken, in this case, Spanish or Portuguese.

Nevertheless, as mentioned earlier, the term Latin America means this and much more. It is the result of very complex and long-standing socio-political-economic-geographic-cultural contexts and situations, to quote Fernand Braudel. At the very least, the idea and concept of "Latin America" were shaped both in spite of and thanks to North American expansionism; and it was also a project to create an empire on American soil promoted and supported by France and Napoleon III.

It is considered that the ideologues of Napoleon III, and more specifically Michel Chevalier, are the creators and architects of the concept of Latin America. Chevalier is referenced for his book *Des intérêts matériels en France* (1838), where he emphasises the importance of establishing a "Latin America" as a counterweight to the previously more accepted and widespread term "Hispanic America" or "Spanish America," used from the beginning of the colonisation of the New World until nearly the end of the 19th century and even into the 20th century. This was a novelty even in France, where until the 1910s newspapers and books constantly referred to *les pays hispano-américains, les hispano-américains,* or *l'Amérique espagnole*.

In reality, Chevalier first used the term Latin America in 1836, in the introduction to *Lettres sur l'Amérique du Nord*. In this text, the author begins to outline his idea of "Latin America." Still, it is not until *Des intérêts matériels en France* that a more developed concept emerges. In this work, Chevalier argues that modern "Civilisation" has a dual root, both complementary and contradictory: the Roman tradition and the Germanic tradition. Thus, the future of society and "Civilisation" is once again at stake, now in a new space called "America," where both traditions coexist and clash once again. For Chevalier, the American continent harbours two "civilisations" or cultures, complementary but opposed. One is Saxon and Protestant: hard-working, white, attached to and respectful of the institutions it creates, but discriminatory, disdainful of what is different, driven by a clear manifest destiny. The other America is Latin, Catholic, mixed-race, both European and barbarian, with little recognition or respect for nascent institutions, but unafraid of the other, eager to meet, confront, teach, and learn. This reflects a highly romanticised view of Latinity as opposed to a very pragmatic view of the Saxon world.

In addition to Chevalier, a merchant and author named Benjamin Poucel reflected around 1850 on the idea of Latin America in two of his works: *On European Emigrations in South America* and *Studies on the Reciprocal Interests of Europe and America, France and South America*. Poucel issued an international policy call for France to establish a stronger presence in the Americas and counter the growing influence of the United States over the emerging nations of the continent. To this end, he invoked the idea of Latinity, attempting to show that the southern nations of the continent had much more in common with France than with the United States.

Alongside these two French authors, several American authors also engaged with the concept of Latin America. Among them were the Dominican Francisco Muñoz del Monte and the Colombian José María Torres Caicedo; the latter is often considered the first Hispanic American with a historical consciousness of Latin thought.

The Chilean Francisco Bilbao also contributed to this trajectory. In 1856, following Torres Caicedo, Bilbao published a poem titled *The Two Americas*, where he clearly and unequivocally distinguishes between two Americas: one Saxon and the other Latin. Bilbao's work reflects the influence of another French thinker, Abbé Félicité de Lamennais, who also explored the idea of Pan-Latinism from a European perspective, under different circumstances and logics. In a lecture delivered in Paris in 1856 titled *Initiative of the Americas: Idea of a Federal Congress of Republics*, Bilbao articulated the dominant vision among Hispanic American elites: the existence of two races, two cultures, and two civilisations, each seeking to dominate the world in its own way. One represented the Saxon materialist culture, while the other symbolised the Latin and more spiritual culture.

From 1860 onward—and practically until today—the term Latin America has been considered a French invention, created and promoted by the imperialist ideologues of Napoleon III to justify his interest in establishing an empire on Mexican soil. As already mentioned, the use of Latin America aimed to erase or diminish the idea of "Hispanic America" or "Spanish America," offering a common identity that had no strong ties either to the former colonial power or to the new northern giant. This also explains why terms like "Ibero-America" and "Hispano-America" remain common in Spain, as well as the rejection by Latin American countries of calling the United States simply "America," as is customary in the US.

Due to the rapid and tumultuous political and social events from the 1860s onward in the Americas, two terms gained prominence. The English term America came to refer to the Saxon tradition and the regions of the continent under that influence, while Latin America described the parts of the continent outside the Saxon world.

The Case for Hispanic America

The term Hispanic America is more culturally and historically accurate than Latin America to describe this part of the world, as it highlights the shared Spanish heritage of the region. It reflects the centrality of the Spanish language, Catholic traditions, and cultural values brought by Spain during the colonial period. This terminology reaffirms the unity of nations bound by a common history and linguistic identity, while avoiding the broader and often diluted connotations of the term Latin America.

Spain transplanted its entire civilisation to these countries without any external help. Once grown and mature, these Hispanic countries followed the example of the United States and separated from their Mother Country, Spain, naturally preserving their language, laws, customs, and traditions, just as they had before. They also imitated the United States in this regard, preserving their native English language, Common Law,

and English customs and traditions, despite the diversity and large number of immigrants they admitted.

In addition to the majority of the region's countries, which are Spanish-speaking republics, there is Brazil, created by Portugal, where Portuguese is spoken and Portuguese laws, customs, and traditions prevail. However, this country is also Hispanic, because Hispania, like Iberia, included both Portugal and Spain. Therefore, the term Hispanic America encompasses everything derived from Portugal and Spain. The name of the Hispanic Society of America in New York, founded in 1904 to study American history linked to Spain and Portugal, is no coincidence. It was chosen over Latin Society of America, as the latter would have been misleading, false, and grossly incorrect, just like applying the term Latino to Spanish- and Portuguese-speaking nations that descend neither from France nor Italy. France's influence in the Americas never extended to the Hispanic countries; it only applied to territories that are now part of the United States or Canada. Strictly speaking, as a result, if we want to use the term Latin for Spanish-speaking countries, we should also call French and Italian colonies—like Algeria, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, or Senegal—Latin colonies, which France rightly rejects. If the criterion is linguistic heritage, then the United States and Canada should be called Teutonic America due to their linguistic origins and populations of Teutonic descent. Thus, we would have two Americas: Latin and Teutonic. Therefore, the fair and logical designation remains the universal standard: English or British America and Hispanic America—nothing more, since the small European-language territories in the Americas are mathematically insignificant, as shown by the following figures:

Number of speakers by language in Hispanic America (2023):
- English: 6.6 million
- French: 11.7 million
- Portuguese: 216.4 million
- Spanish: 426.5 million
  Source: World Bank (2023)

Today, nearly 430 million people in Hispanic America speak Spanish. Around 216 million speak Portuguese. French and English speakers represent only 2% of the regional total. As a result, these are Hispanic or Spanish peoples, not "Latinos." Calling Anglo-America Teutonic America would be just as accurate as calling Central and South America Latin America. The United States has more Germans, Swedes, Norwegians, and Dutch than there are French, Italians, or Romanians in Hispanic America.

The United States represents Anglo-Saxon civilisation and speaks English, while south of the Rio Grande, Spanish civilisation predominates and Spanish and Portuguese are spoken. Therefore, there is no justification for the use of the term Latin America or its derivatives.

Historical accuracy demands the rejection of these terms, and Spain—and Portugal, to a lesser extent—deserve recognition for their legacy, which should not be obscured by misleading terminology.

When it comes to Spain and Portugal, they bear the blame for a fascinating lack of appreciation for the value and methods of self-promotion on the international stage. More commercial nations place enormous importance on and understand the value of overshadowing or suppressing the promotion of their competitors. Every time Spanish America, Hispanic America, or Hispanic Republics is printed or spoken, the name of Spain is justly mentioned. In contrast, every time Latin America or its variants are used, the names of France and Italy are erroneously and unjustly promoted, as neither France nor Italy played any role in the creation of these nations. Even if no nation directly benefits from the use of the term Latin America today, the rightful recognition of Spain is constantly ignored and erased.

The use of the term Latin America lacks historical, cultural, and logical justification. The nations of Hispanic America owe their foundation, language, and civilisation to Spain and Portugal, not to any supposed Latin or Roman legacy tied to France or Italy. Historical justice and truth require correcting these inaccuracies and preserving Spain's rightful recognition in the Americas.

Adopting the term Hispanic America shifts the emphasis toward cultural pride, shared history, and the preservation of traditions that have shaped conservative thought in the region. It also underscores Spain's role as a bridge between Europe and the Americas, positioning cultural diplomacy as a key tool for strengthening relations.

A second-best alternative is the term Ibero-America, which broadens this concept to include Portuguese influence in Brazil, the region's largest country. It highlights the Iberian Peninsula as the historical and cultural origin point of the region's shared identity. Ibero-America emphasises the unifying role of Iberian culture, although, as noted, etymologically Hispanic is as inclusive as Iberian, since it also acknowledges both Spanish and Portuguese contributions.

Beyond doing justice to the region's historical, cultural, and linguistic identity, Hispanic America is also geopolitically advantageous. The term provides a framework for Europe to position itself as the region's natural partner, based on genuine cultural ties and shared heritage. It also offers a coherent thread for nearly all countries on the American continent—except two: the United States and Canada—helping them reach regional agreements and operate as a bloc, which would benefit transatlantic dialogue with the EU.

May this etymological excursus contribute to the abandonment of the imprecise terminology of Latin America, fostering greater unity within the region and greater clarity in transatlantic dialogue, emphasising the importance of cultural and spiritual ties.

I conclude this terminological note by recalling that, during the 2024 US presidential campaign—at a rally in Albuquerque, New Mexico—Donald J. Trump asked the audience whether they preferred to be called "Latinos" or "Hispanics." The audience overwhelmingly chose the latter, confirming the thesis that Latin America is a term imposed from outside and not one chosen by its own peoples. A sobering reality check from the second-largest Spanish-speaking country in the world—after Mexico: the United States of America.

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