



El Legado Imperial y la Política Migratoria en Europa

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Why Civilizational Factors Matter in Contemporary Migration Management

Executive summary

The European migration debate continues to be dominated by quantitative variables — volume of inputs, pressure on public services, fiscal impact or labour market needs — while qualitative factors continue to be systematically undervalued in the design of public policies. However, the comparative experience of several European States suggests that the ability of a society to absorb and integrate migrant populations depends not only on how much it receives, but also on who it receives.

The comparative analysis of Spain, France and the United Kingdom shows that the results of integration differ substantially according to the cultural, linguistic, religious and historical proximity between the receiving and broadcasting populations. These differences are not accidental, but are profoundly conditioned by the nature of the historical relations between metropolis and imperial periphery, as well as by the type of civilizational legacy left by each model of imperial construction.

While Spain has higher levels of functional integration with migrants from Latin America, France and the United Kingdom continue to face persistent structural tensions in the integration of important segments of the population from their former colonial domains. This suggests that migration management cannot be addressed exclusively from economic or humanitarian parameters, but must also incorporate considerations of cultural and civilizational compatibility.

This report argues that the nature of the historical imperial model—integrative/replicative versus extractive/administrative—requires to a large extent the contemporary patterns of postcolonial integration. Consequently, it proposes incorporating cultural and civilizational affinity variables as a legitimate criterion of analysis and design in European migration policy.

I. The phenomenon of the “Empire Strikes Back”: post-imperial migration as a historical return

Much of contemporary migratory flows to Western Europe do not simply respond to abstract dynamics of globalization or economic inequality, but follow clearly post-imperialist patterns. A substantial percentage of immigration received by former colonial powers comes precisely from their former territories of influence or domination.

This phenomenon, frequently described as the empire strikes back, reflects the return of former imperial subjects to historical metropolises in the form of migrants, asylum seekers or citizens claiming integration, rights and membership.

However, although the phenomenon is common to several former colonial powers, its consequences are profoundly unequal. Not all ancient metropolises experience the same degree of conflict, social fracture or integrative difficulty in the face of their postcolonial flows.

The central reason for this divergence lies in the different nature of the historical link between metropolis and periphery.

II. Two imperial models, two migration legacies

The comparative analysis makes it possible to distinguish between two great models of imperial construction with differentiated consequences for contemporary migration integration.

The extractive-administrative model

Characteristic mainly of the British and French empires, this model was based on the hierarchical administration of populations considered culturally distinct and legally subordinate. The colony was conceived as functional periphery, not as extension of the nation.

The colonial populations were governed, but not integrated. The metropolis did not seek to replicate itself culturally in those territories, but to manage them efficiently for strategic, economic or geopolitical purposes.

This model produced a clear identity separation between colonizer and colonized, whose effects persist today in the difficulties of integration of numerous postcolonial groups in the United Kingdom and France.

The Civilizational-Replicative Model

Represented in a paradigmatic way by the Spanish case in Hispanoamerica, this model was characterized by an explicit desire for institutional, religious, linguistic and legal replication of the overseas metropolis.

The American territories were conceived as integrated extensions of the Crown, not as mere extractive colonies. Universities, dioceses, legal structures, administrative institutions and complete cultural frameworks were exported. Religious, linguistic and legal homogenization was promoted, as well as broad levels of mestizaje and social hybridization.

This model left behind a legacy of civilizational continuity that continues to positively condition migration integration between Hispanic America and Spain.

III. France: republican universalism and postcolonial fracture

The French case illustrates the limits of an integration model based on abstract universalism when there is not enough grassroots cultural proximity between the receiving and migrant populations.

Although France formally offers a universalist framework of republican citizenship, in practice the integration of large sections of population from the Maghreb and sub-Saharan Africa continues to face significant structural difficulties.

The persistence of the banlieues as spaces of socio-economic and cultural segregation, the proliferation of urban enclaves disconnected from ordinary republican life, recurrent disturbances and the rise of conflicts linked to religious identity reflect a deep fracture between the French republican ideal and the reality of post-colonial integration.

French universalism offers formal citizenship, but it does not always produce substantive belonging.

IV. United Kingdom: multiculturalism and erosion of civic cohesion

The British model represents the opposite pole to the French. In the face of assimilationist universalism, the United Kingdom developed for decades a multicultural approach based on the coexistence of differentiated communities.

However, British experience has shown that passive recognition of cultural difference does not necessarily generate national cohesion. In many British cities, the consolidation of segregated communities has weakened shared civic identity and generated growing tensions around values, loyalties and integration.

Scandals such as Rotherham, the rise of radical domestic Islamism, growing concern for parallel societies and the subsequent political reaction that partially culminated in Brexit reflect the erosion of confidence in the British multicultural paradigm.

The United Kingdom is thus caught between formal legal inclusion and substantive cultural fragmentation.

V. Spain: civilization continuity and relative integrative advantage

Spain is a comparatively unique case in Western Europe for its greater relative integration capacity compared to migrants from Latin America.

The presence of a common language, shared cultural frameworks, majority religious affinity, similar legal traditions and a historical memory of belonging to the same civilizational community generate a degree of symbolic and institutional proximity that is difficult to replicate in other European contexts.

This continuity is also reflected in the legal plane: Spain offers preferential naturalization routes to nationals of Hispanic American countries, implicitly recognizing the existence of a differentiated historical and cultural affinity.

The comparatively more successful integration of these groups translates into lower levels of social conflict, less specific political rejection of such immigration and greater ease of entry into the labour market and civic fabric.

However, the increase in flows from Maghreb and sub-Saharan Africa could progressively alter this dynamic if the civilisation profile of the immigration received changes substantially.

VI. Strategic implications for European migration policy

The comparative analysis of these three cases suggests that migration policy cannot be designed solely on an economicist or universalist basis.

Comparative evidence points to several strategic conclusions:

First, cultural compatibility matters. Societies absorb more easily migration from culturally close environments than from significantly more distant civilizations.

Secondly, formal citizenship or legal residence do not guarantee real integration. Integration is a cultural, symbolic and generational process, not merely administrative.

Thirdly, migration selection by cultural origin or civilizational affinity is a rational tool of public policy, provided that it is articulated on objective criteria of potential integration and not on racial or ethnic categories.

Fourthly, Europe must abandon the fiction that all migration is qualitatively equivalent; not all flows produce the same social, institutional or political results.

Conclusion

The comparative experience of Spain, France and the United Kingdom shows that contemporary migration management is deeply conditioned by historical legacies, cultural affinities and civilizational continuities.

European migration policy cannot continue to be formulated under the implicit premise that all individuals, regardless of their cultural or civilizational origin, have the same potential for integration in any receiving society.

Civilizational factors matter. They matter for social cohesion, institutional sustainability, political stability and the preservation of functional national identities.

Recognising this reality does not mean abandoning democratic principles or adopting ethno-nationalist approaches, but simply incorporating into the design of variable public policies that empirical experience demonstrates relevant.

The great strategic lesson is clear: migration must not be managed solely on the basis of how many enter, but also of who enter, from where and to what degree of cultural compatibility with the receiving society.

Note

A more extensive and developed version of the arguments contained in this report was published by Juan Ángel Soto at the Danube Institute in August 2025 under the title *The Empire Strikes Back: Why Civilistic Aspects Matter in Migration Policy*. Available from:

[<https://danubeinstitute.hu/en/research/the-empire-strikes-back-who-civilisational-aspects-matter-in-migration-policy>](<https://danubeins>