

“A country to go back to”: narrative analysis of the Plan of Return to Spain

***“Un país para volver”: análisis narrativo
del Plan de retorno a España***

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Abstract

A growing number of governments are introducing initiatives explicitly aimed at stimulating the return of their emigrants. In Spain, the state launched its first policy for return, the “Plan of Return to Spain”, in 2019. Taking this plan as a case study, the article examines the Spanish policy for return and places it in a broader context, both political and historical, in order to understand the limits and biases of this measure in the face of the diverse profiles of Spanish emigrants. Adopting the narrative policy framework as a theoretical-analytical perspective and content analysis as a methodological tool, the authors of this paper identify that, through the new narrative strategy, a paradigmatic change has been produced in Spain in the way of understanding, from the public sphere, the return of Spanish citizens living abroad. Instead of an assistance-based approach, a neoliberal (instrumental and utilitarian) perspective has been adopted, maintaining, however, a conception of “the return to the country of origin” that is closer to the predominant migratory theories of the 20th century rather than to contemporary social-scientific notions. A tension between the policy narratives of Spain and the European Union in relation to Intra-European mobility, and a gap between the state view and the current migratory realities concerning return in contexts of great economic and labor uncertainty have also been recognized.

Keywords

Policies, narrative approach, migration, return, talent, and youth, mobility, Spain.

Resumen

Cada vez más gobiernos lanzan iniciativas explícitamente dirigidas a estimular el retorno de sus emigrantes. En España, el Estado puso en funcionamiento su primera política para el retorno, el “Plan de Retorno a España”, en 2019. Tomando como caso de estudio este plan, el artículo examina la política española para el retorno y la ubica en un contexto más amplio, tanto político como histórico, con objeto de comprender los límites y sesgos de esta medida ante los diversos perfiles de emigrantes españoles. Adoptando el enfoque narrativo de las políticas como perspectiva teórico-analítica y el análisis de contenido como herramienta metodológica, identificamos que, mediante la nueva estrategia narrativa, se ha producido en España un cambio paradigmático en la manera de pensar, desde la esfera pública, el regreso de los ciudadanos españoles asentados en el extranjero. De una mirada asistencial, se ha pasado a adoptar una perspectiva de tipo neoliberal (instrumental y utilitarista), manteniendo, eso sí, una concepción de “la vuelta al país de origen” más próxima a las teorías migratorias predominantes en el siglo XX que a los conceptos científico-sociales contemporáneos. Encontramos, además, una tensión entre las narrativas políticas de España y de la Unión Europea respecto a la movilidad intraeuropea, and un desfase entre la mirada estatal y las realidades migratorias actuales en lo relativo al retorno en contextos de gran incertidumbre económico-laboral.

Palabras clave

Políticas, enfoque narrativo, migración, retorno, talento, juventud, movilidad, España.

Introduction¹

Since the end of the 20th century, more and more governments have incorporated policies (programs, plans, guides and/or online audiovisual resources) towards their emigrants and/or the descendants of their emigrants to promote, not only the maintenance of links with the community of origin and assistance in cases of need, but also the return to the territory (Délano and Mylonas, 2021; Hagan and Wassink, 2020; Délano and Gamlen, 2014; Tsuda, 2009). Spain, a European country characterized by both historical and contemporary migratory movements of income and discharge, is part of the countries in which this phenomenon is taking place (Pinho *et al.*, 2022; Fernández Asperilla and Alba, 2020; Ragazzi, 2014).

At the legislative level, the state interest in maintaining ties with Spanish emigrants, guaranteeing their rights and enabling their possible return is not new, but has been present since the return of democracy. Article 42 of the 1978 Constitution stated that "the State shall ensure [especially] the safeguarding of the economic and social rights of Spanish workers abroad and orient [it] its policy towards their return" (BOE 311, 1978) (Ripoll Gil, 2023; Calvo Salgado *et al.*, 2022; Fernández Vicente, 2015). Likewise, and with a view to strengthening this objective, the Statute for Spanish Citizenship abroad was adopted in 2006. In that text, Article 26 stipulated that the State would seek to promote the creation of a comprehensive and multilevel policy to facilitate the return of Spanish residents abroad, including among the latter not only those who were outside the country for working reasons, but also those who had left for political reasons during the Franco dictatorship (BOE 299, 2006).

In addition, on the same level, but not only in relation to emigrants but also to the Spanish diaspora (Brubaker, 2005), there have also been several laws approved in the last two decades. While these have been geared towards granting Spanish nationality to descendants of Spanish emigrants and not directly promoting their return, these are measures that make this possible. These initiatives include: the Historical Memory Law (Law 52/2007), in force between 2008 and 2011, aimed at exiles of the dictatorship and descendants

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(Izquierdo, 2011); the Law on granting Spanish nationality to Sephardim originally from Spain (Law 12/2015), operational from 2015 to 2019, aimed at descendants of Jews expelled from the peninsula between the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries (Aliberdi, 2023; Casas Cortés and Cobarrubias Baglietto, 2023); and the Democratic Memory Law (Law 20/2022), known as the Grandchildren Law, which remains active during 2024 and is dedicated to descendants of exiles, international brigadiers and women who lost their nationality due to marrying non-nationals before the entry into force of the 1978 Constitution (Míguez Macho, 2022).

Regarding policies specifically designed to promote the return of migrants, it is important to note that interest in promoting measures to favor the return of Spanish nationals from abroad did not initially arise at the national level, but did so at the subnational level.² The first governments to deploy specific policies aimed at the return of their emigrants and their diaspora were those of five Autonomous Communities: Andalusia, Asturias, the Canary Islands, Extremadura and Galicia (Rovetta Cortés, 2018; Cavas and Sánchez, 2007), and it was only after the last five years that the rest of the Autonomous Communities joined this trend.³

Until the 2019 Plan of Return to Spain was approved, the State limited itself to publishing successive “return guides”, intended to indicate the procedures that return candidates had to complete in order to return to Spain, offering some aid or subsidies for those who were in vulnerable situations, and, from the Spanish Office of Return, it was sought “to facilitate, guide and advise Spaniards who decide to return, with the objective of materializing their effective social and labor insertion in Spain” (BOE 299, 2006: Article III).⁴

It was in 2019 when, coinciding with the proliferation of regional policies to favor the return of co-regional migrants, the national state launched its first plan to stimulate the return of migrants to Spain: The Plan of Return to Spain. A plan with 50 measures approved during the government of the Spanish Socialist Workers’ Party in March 2019, which included the action

2 According to Segeš Frelak and Hahn-Schaur (2019), this multi-level nature of return policy is an element of Spanish return policy compared to its European counterparts.

3 List of regional policies for return available at: <https://bit.ly/3uM8R0s>

4 Generally speaking, state-implemented return aid has been scarce. The work carried out by returnee associations, such as the Spanish Federation of Associations of Emigrants and Returnees (FEAER), is an example of the government’s insufficient measures to promote the return of Spanish expatriates (Oiarzabal *et al.*, 2012).

of ten ministries, the involvement of local governments and other social organizations (unions, companies and associations of emigrants and returnees) with the objective of encouraging the return to the country of Spanish citizens residing abroad.

Taking as a case study the Return Plan of Spain, this article aims, on the one hand, to examine the way in which the State designed and implemented the policy to return to Spain and, on the other, to locate it in a broader context, both socio-political and historical. To do this we use the narrative approach of policies to interpret and understand how, through this policy, the Spanish migratory phenomenon is narrated today; who is identified as migrants whose return is worth encouraging; who are left out of the focus of this return story; and how this proposal fits into the history of state initiatives towards Spanish emigration.

The originality and contribution to the literature of this article focuses on the subject and on the theoretical-analytical approach, since research analyzing return policies in Europe is still scarce (Segeš Frelak and Hahn-Schaur: 2019; Lang *et al.*, 2016) and theoretical-analytical because the narrative analysis of policies has not been so far recurrent in the field of migration studies (Pierce *et al.*, 2014).

Research approach

For this research we use the study approach of the "policy narrative". This analytical perspective starts from the assumption that human beings are narrative animals, "*homo narrans*" (Jones *et al.*, 2014, p. 1), and although "political messages" can adopt different formats or structures, "in politics, narratives are the main means to define and dispute political problems" (Stone, 2012, p. 158).

According to Stone (2012, p. 158), "narratives", or "political narratives", differ from other types of political messages, such as chronologies, listings, memes or speeches, by the fact that they contain some kind of combination of the following elements: 1) problem, 2) scenario, 3) characters (heroes, villains and victims), 4) plot and 5) moral of history or political solution. They are similar to other communication formats in that they all seek to shape a political strategy based on a belief system regarding a certain social phenomenon.

According to Shanahan *et al.*:

There are two necessary conditions for a document in the public domain to be considered a political narrative. First, it must contain a political stance or judgment about policy-related behavior. (...) Secondly, it must include at least one character who acts as a hero, villain or victim. (2013, p. 457)

With this theoretical-analytical perspective, a combined and balanced view of the study between agents and institutions is presented. Thus, it is realized the degree of complexity that the studied phenomenon represents when analyzing a public policy process. In this regard, we highlight the interconnections, feedback and complementarities between the political opportunities (institutional and policy frameworks) and the interpretative frameworks. These overlaps are achieved through the narratives of identities as “complementarity contributes to the nexus between structures of political opportunities and the strategies of political discourse” (Alejo Jaime, 2013, p. 288). In this sense, we know that public policies are not “objective” and “self-evident” data for the actors. Actors (institutions, organized citizens, etc.) have “perceived opportunities” (Alejo Jaime, 2013, p. 305). In this way, there is a connection between public policies and the interpretation that agents have and develop strategically, leading them to the openings or obstacles that the agents conceive and build before their political agendas.

Since this approach allows to examine “explicitly and empirically the political narratives used by actors in the political process” (Pierce *et al.*, 2014, p. 27) and analyze both the design, procedures, application and/or results of public policies that are reflected in the strategically constructed narratives, in this article we use this approach to examine the construction of the narratives deployed in Spanish public policy aimed at promoting the return of Spanish citizens residing abroad.

Methodology

Based on a case study strategy, the discourses that feed the narrative of public policy of the Plan of Return to Spain are taken as a unit of analysis. To do this, we carried out a content analysis of the document (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005) that presents this plan and distinguishes the form and narrative content of Spain’s return policy. In addition, we contextualize the use of these policy elements and their narrative strategies in a broader political and historical scenario, in which Spanish citizens move with geographical loca-

tions, professional profiles and diverse generations. We have reviewed the existing literature regarding the study of return in a European environment with emphasis on Spain. In addition, for the analysis of the return plan, the web pages of the Secretariat of State for Migration, the Portal of Spanish Citizenship Abroad, the Volemos organization and the Journal of the Congress of Deputies were visited.

Following Stone's (2012) analytical strategy, our work followed the following analytical scheme.

Table 1
Analytical scheme

Problem	Clearly situate the account of the departure of the Spanish citizens that is set out in the Plan of Return to Spain.
Scenario	Identify the narrative strategy that promotes the Plan of Return to Spain in the face of the different problems faced by Spaniards abroad, especially those who plan to return to Spain.
Characters (heroes, villains and victims)	Recognize the role played by the actors involved in the implementation of the Return Plan from the same narrative offered by the plan itself (government, autonomous communities, parliament, migrant associations, companies, among others).
Plot and moral of history or political solution	Distinguish the opportunities, limitations and biases offered by the Return Plan to the different groups of Spaniards abroad.

Results

When analyzing the form or narrative structure of the policies of the Plan of return to Spain, we warn that the problem around which the story is built is the departure from the national territory of Spaniards, qualified as "new emigration". In other words, the departure of young Spaniards who left the country after the beginning of the 2008 economic crisis.

Regarding the plot, the policy narrative follows this sequence: in the wake of the global economic crisis and the conditions of the Spanish labor market, "hundreds of thousands of Spaniards emigrated in search of an opportunity to earn a living in another country" (Secretaría de Estado de Migraciones, 2019, p. 5). They did not leave because they wanted to, but because they faced situations of job insecurity and unemployment. Many of them had higher

education and gained even more “personal[s] and professional[s]” knowledge (Secretaría de Estado de Migraciones, 2019, p. 3) during their experience abroad. Given this circumstance, the State considers it its “moral duty” to intervene in order to recover this qualified population and thus obtain “economic, family and social benefits” that are associated with their return (Secretaría de Estado de Migraciones, 2019, p. 5).

Regarding the scenario or context in which the political narrative is placed, the Plan uses legal texts, such as the 1978 Constitution and the Statute of Spanish Citizenship abroad of 2006, as legal parameters, and the conclusions of studies carried out by other public institutions, such as the National Youth Institute to legitimize the proposal.

Based on the premise entailed by having lived a (unique) round-trip migration experience automatically, without any consideration regarding the conditions (legal, economic, social, political...) in the places of transit/destination, a personal and professional learning that can (and should) be put at the service of the Spanish economy, the authors of the Return to Spain Plan propose 50 measures whose focus is the economic/labor aspect. Emphasizing the value (or benefit) of regaining the presence in the territory of young people who can work in public and private sectors, such as employees of private companies, entrepreneurs, officials or scientists, the plan explicitly links return and economic development. In other words, returnees are represented as agents of development, as a resource for the country.

28 of the 50 proposed measures aim to facilitate the planning and reintegration into employment of returnees. In fact, approximately 21 of the approximately 24 million euro earmarked for the first two years of operation of the scheme were earmarked for this purpose. Out of these, €10.9 million were set to promote the return of scientists and €10.3 million to encourage the return of those seeking to enter the private sector (of which €2.2 million were for employees and €8.1 million for entrepreneurs). The rest of the expenses were designated to generate and maintain the “A Country to Return” website (€300,000), redesign the consular registry (€2.5 million) and promote access to the Network of Youth Information Centers (€35,000) (Secretaría de Estado de Migraciones, 2019, pp. 67-90).

A contextual element that is inaccurate is numerical. In this regards, the Plan recognizes that the statistical data available in Spain regarding the phenomenon of emigration are incomplete and that, therefore, the number of Spanish people living abroad published each year by the National Institute

of Statistics (INE) represents an underestimate of the total⁵. Notwithstanding this limitation, the document notes that between 2008 and 2019, there has been an increasing trend in both the number of departures and returns to the country, and on the former, it details that in 2019, there were approximately 2 500 000 Spaniards residing outside the country. Out of that number, about 1 million were in Europe and the remaining 1 and a half million were living predominantly in Latin American countries.

Following the proposed theoretical and analytical approach, we identify this group of emigrants as the main victims who must be assisted through the return policy. These are young people classified by the Plan according to their motivation degree towards returning to the country in four profiles. It distinguishes between: (a) those who are “in evolution”, (b) those who have their “eyes set on Spain”, (c) those who are “satisfied with their situation”, and (d) those who are “vital nomads” (Secretaría de Estado de Migraciones, 2019, p. 21).

While there is explicit preferential interest in directing the plan towards the second profile, those who “have already been away for a while and are clear that they want to return, they do not know how to take steps towards their return. Depending on their personal and professional situation, they plan to return in the short, medium or long term” (Secretaría de Estado de Migraciones, 2019, p. 21), and all the bearers of these profiles are included as potential recipients of the state measures contained in this return promotion policy.

One aspect that stands out when examining the narratives of these victims is that the narrative of policy places them predominantly in Europe. It is an identifiable location: (a) in the methodology deployed to carry out the design of the policy: surveys, workshops and meetings took place mostly in Berlin, London and Madrid,⁶ and (b) in the description of the work environments of origin and destination, since a wage difference between countries is presumed that is favorable to the countries of destination and work environments with more “conciliatory”, “modern and inclusive” “work methodologies” (Secretaría de Estado de Migraciones, 2019, p. 15). All this can be interpreted as an inclination not only to seek the return of young migrants

5 This assessment coincides with the results of research regarding the Spanish migratory phenomenon. See, for example: Mahía, 2018; González-Ferrer, 2013.

6 Excepting an online survey whose geographical scope is not explicit, all other data collection tools were applied in European territory. Option that overshadows the experiences of those who are in other areas.

who left after the crisis of 2008, but of young migrants who chose to reside in another European country.

In line with this European geographical preference, the Plan identifies Spanish companies as secondary victims of the problem of emigration, since from meetings with Spanish entrepreneurs for elaborating the Plan, the following obstacles to the recruitment of returnees are distinguished: the distance between wages abroad and Spain, the period of notice that must be given to the companies where they are working and those who want to return, and the difficulties for returnees to join work in the short term.

As far as the villain of the story is concerned, it does not occupy a predominant place in the Plan's narrative. Although the economic crisis of 2008 and the temporary and precarious conditions of the Spanish labor market as forces that expel young migrants can be classified as villains, there is no detailed analysis regarding these political-economic circumstances, no large-scale institutional changes are proposed and no particular social actor is identified as responsible for the crisis, although the Popular Party is veiled for the cuts it made while in government in the years after the crisis, as these would have accentuated the phenomenon of emigration.⁷

Finally, the role of heroes of the political narrative is embodied, in the first instance, by the State, specifically by the Secretariat of State for Migration; in the second, by the private organization *Volemos*, in which the tasks of designing and developing the Plan were externalized; and, in the third, by the young Spanish returnees, since it is interpreted that all these social actors can identify and know the problem that emigration entails and can propose measures to mitigate and solve the difficulties that arise to those who wish to return to the country. As a representative of the State, the voice of Magdalena Valerio, Minister of Labor, Migration and Social Security, stands out between 2018 and 2020, who raises the intervention in favor of return in terms of "moral responsibility" (Secretaría de Estado de Migraciones, 2019, p. 3).

In relation to *Volemos*, this private organization created in Berlin between 2015 and 2016, presents itself as an entity made up of young Spanish people who at some point in their adult life resided in other countries of Eu-

7 On the Socialist Parliamentary Group's criticisms of the PP government's cuts in scientific policy and their impact on the emigration of young researchers, see: Sessions of the Congress of Deputies (DSCD), n° 222, September 24, 2014, pp. 7-8; DSCD, n° 20, February 23, 2016, pp. 22-23; Bulletin of the General Courts - Senate (BCG-S), n° 113, June 19, 2017, pp. 3622-3624. Texts available at: <https://bit.ly/450ajdq> and <https://bit.ly/3yFicsM>

rope, and it is their migratory experiences which enable them to assist other migrants who wish to return to Spain, placing themselves, and any Spanish person who resided outside the territory and returned to their homeland, in this narrative role. In his own words:

We know what it is like to seek life in a different country from our own and we have experienced the excitement of returning home. With this experience we started this exciting project to make it possible for brains escaped during the crisis to return home. (Back, 2020a)

Table 2

Who are the characters in Spain's Return Plan?

Character	Entity and characteristics
Victims	New migrants are the main victims who have had to leave their country. The plan presents a characterization of profiles of this group of emigrants. Spanish companies are victims of the challenges they face when hiring people back to the territory.
Heroes	Through the Secretariat of State for Migration, the State is recognized as a heroic entity that seeks to return Spanish citizens to Spanish territory, with dignified conditions, if they wish. Volemos is the organization of young returnees that has the function, designated by the government, of elaborating and monitoring the return policy of Spain.
Villains	Without explicit clarity about entities that play the role of villains, they are distinguished as such: the economic crisis of 2008, budget cuts and job precariousness in Spain.

Following the plot typology proposed by Deborah Stone (2012), this storyline includes and intertwines the decline and control plots. In other words, it proposes that, since the labor situation worsened and this meant the demographic loss of the active⁸ population (decline plot), it is necessary to recover that population and thus achieve stability and socio-economic well-being of the entire country (control plot). The moral of the political narrative is, the-

8 This narrative can only be understood from a strictly national (list) perspective, since (a) since the crisis began in 2008, the Spanish migration balance has been positive every year except for 2010-11 and 2013-14 (Instituto Nacional de Estadística, 2022; Mahía, 2018); and (b) the majority of immigrants (mostly from Eastern Europe, Africa and Latin America) are young people, in working age (Domingo and Sabater, 2013; Reher *et al.*, 2011).

refore, that it is imperative to implement a policy of promoting return to re-engage that population.

As for the symbolic elements of the narrative, the recurring use of the “talents” label to refer to these young migrants is remarkable. It is presumed that those who left the country after the crisis are (all) people who have developed “new ideas, more open minds and desire to generate changes in our country”, knowledge regarding “other cultures”, “languages”, “entrepreneurial spirit” and “capacity for resilience, as well as humility, maturity, sociability and determination” (Secretaría de Estado de Migraciones, 2019, pp. 3, 5 and 20).

It should be mentioned that in the political narrative, victims deserve, because they belong to the national political community, access to administrative consultations and request for labor mediation. Instead, to receive psychological assistance they must pay for the service (Volemos, 2020b) and overcome a competition process to obtain entrepreneurial assistance (Volemos, 2020c).

Finally, the examination of public policies from the narrative approach allows to highlight that the strategies deployed in the Plan, on the one hand, have sought to mobilize the support of different social actors (representatives of public institutions, companies, unions, associations of emigrants, scientific organizations, universities...) to facilitate the return of those who choose to return to the country and, on the other hand, have used the political narrative known as “*angel shift*” (Stone, 2012), which consists of downplaying the “villain” (the crisis, cuts and socio-labor conditions) and emphasizing the capacity and commitment of the main “heroes”—in our case the Secretariat of State of Migration and the organization Volemos—to solve the problem.

Discussion

In accordance with the analysis of the narrative of return policies in the analyzed plan and the results identified, and to achieve the objectives proposed in this article, we resort to a discussion based on the historical evolution of the idea of return in Spanish emigration in to identify the orientation, biases and limitations evidenced by the return policy proposed by the Government of Spain.

Although its application was limited by the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic, the main interest of the narrative analysis made to the Plan of Return to Spain is the way in which it tried to redefine the return policy raised until

then from the national level. The orientation of the Plan constituted a paradigm shift in the way in which the return of Spanish citizens settled abroad was thought and narrated from the public sphere: proposing aid for Spanish emigrants who were in a vulnerable situation, the return of the "young talents" who emigrated with the crisis.

To carry out this delicate and risky return, the Ministry of Migration chose to outsource the elaboration of the Plan, leaving it in the hands of the private organization Volemos. The choice of Volemos for designing a Return Plan for Spain occurred in a context marked by the presence of two divergent narratives in relation to these outflows of young people as a result of the crisis: one that saw in this migratory flow a flight of talent or "brain drain" in a phenomenon that came to be called "the new emigration" — "new" as it broke with the traditional stereotype of the migrant with low professional qualifications that characterized the mass emigration of the years of Franco's development — and a second narrative that tried to dilute the migratory phenomenon into a phenomenon of "external mobility" with an individual and non-coercive character that sought to downplay these outflows (Romero Valiente, 2018; Lázquez Silva, Capote and López de Lera, 2020; Domingo and Blanes, 2016). The coercive and collective nature of the first narrative (condensed in *the famous "we don't leave, they kick us out"*) contrasted with the supposedly voluntary, unrestricted and individualized nature of the second (Vázquez Silva *et al.*, 2020; Domingo and Blanes, 2016), although both seemed to converge on the idea that those who left in 2008 were highly qualified young people (Oso, 2017).

In reality, this "new emigration" was not so new. It has been increasing in Spain since its entry into the European Economic Community, affecting mainly families with resources (Alaminos *et al.*, 2010). However, this seems to have intensified in recent years (Vázquez Silva *et al.*, 2020) as a result of the change in profile of a Spanish youth that has evolved in recent decades towards greater professional qualification.⁹

9 Since the years of the economic boom, Spain has become one of the European countries with the highest rate of university students with respect to the population from 18 to 25 years, generating an overqualification in certain age groups (Díaz Hernández *et al.*, 2015). Thus, in 2011 the percentage of people aged 24-34 with completed higher education was 44% for women and 34% for men (González Ferrer, 2013). However, this does not mean that we should leave out of this migratory flow of many Spaniards with medium or low qualifications who also chose to emigrate.

By focusing on this “new emigration” linked to the 2008 crisis and relating it to the departure of qualified young people, most of whom settled in the major European capitals, the Return Plan significantly restricted the profile of the migrants to whom the measures aimed at promoting their return to Spain should be directed. Only “young talents” or “entrepreneurial spirits” seemed to have a place in this Plan. The many retirees who during the first years of the crisis tried to return to Spain (González Ferrer, 2013), the Spanish with medium or low qualifications and the descendants of Spaniards (whose citizenship status was also included in the return policies despite never having emigrated) (Merino Herando, 2012) were outside the priority focus of this Plan (Fernández Asperilla and Alba, 2020; Domingo and Blanes, 2016; Narciso and Carrasco Pons, 2017).

The question not addressed in this plan is why a Plan that calls itself “Plan of return to Spain.” A country to return” ends up favoring the return of this “new emigration” of young talents installed mostly in the great European capitals. Nor does it include any allusion to the concept of intra-European mobility (Penninx, 2014) in its narrative strategy, but it merely uses the term emigration for any departure from Spain, which seems to indicate that the only level of membership explicitly recognized is national, not regional. In this sense, Spain’s return policy is not easily compatible with Europe’s prevailing political narrative about population movements on the continent.

We propose several elements to respond to these omissions. The first has to do with greater visibility, influence in the political sphere and the ability to mobilize this sector with highly qualified migrants mostly settled in Europe. Gathered in the Network of Associations of Spanish Researchers and Scientists Abroad (RAICEX), the interests represented by this group of Spaniards had greater means and formal channels to access to the formulation of public policies than other categories of emigrants, thus obtaining greater support for their demands.

The second could be related to the government’s desire to guide the return plan towards the return of “young talents”, breaking in practice from what was advocated in the matter by the two legal frameworks in which migration policy had been framed, namely: Article 42 of the Spanish Constitution of 1978 and Article 26 of the Statute of Spanish Citizenship abroad of 2006. As announced above, the Plan does not conceive return as a form of assistance from the Spanish State to its most vulnerable citizens – for whom the traditional assistance measures proposed in the different return guides continue to be applied – but as an asset that helps “to undertake a change of

productive model betting on the green economy, research, and social entrepreneurship, and not on the mere exploitation of cheap and unskilled labor” (Secretaría de Estado de Migraciones, 2019, p. 6).

With this approach, the return policy becomes a profitable and highly efficient policy – if considering effective policy as one that tries to obtain more with the same means (Stone, 2011, pp. 63-67), allowing it to have a broad consensus in the political aspect.¹⁰ Third, this reorientation of the Spanish return policy may have to do with the direction taken by most European return policies. Under neoliberal dogmas that demand that public policies be utilitarian and profitable, European Union countries that adopt a welfare-centered approach, i.e., in supporting migrants who find themselves in difficult situations abroad (traditional approach to return policies) are the least important, with this issue of the return of migrants increasingly being oriented along the path of global competition for talent (Segeš Frelak and Hahn-Schaur, 2019). The consequence of all this is that, although effectiveness and equity may not be antagonistic objectives of public policies (Stone, 2011), this Plan seems to opt for the former at the expense of the latter.

In a Plan that sacrifices equity for efficiency, one wonders whether the proposed approach is indeed conducive to the return of young talents who left to other European countries with the crisis. The great problem that the Plan suffers from is the way in which it approaches emigration as a round trip, departure and (possible) return, without thinking on the multiple and complex migratory dynamics that characterize the mobility of Spaniards during these last decades. For the Plan, rooting constitutes the main threat to the possible return of those who “had to pack their bags during the crisis” (Secretaría de Estado de Migraciones, 2019, p. 3).

A rootedness to which, as shown by different studies, scientists and academics are more favorable (10%, according to Gaulé, 2011), individuals who have been abroad for more than five years and middle-aged people, with young people and retirees being the categories most inclined to return (Segeš Frelak and Hahn-Schaur, 2019; González-Ferrer, 2013). This politi-

10 As the representative of the Popular parliamentary group, Juan Bravo Baena, would say: “Ladies and gentlemen, the first question we ask ourselves before this Citizens’ motion [aimed at making Spain a pole of attraction for not only Spanish but also international talent] is whether any of the 350 deputies who are in this room can be against the return of talent. I think it is unanimous: we are all in favor of the return of talent. The only difference is how we do it.” Sessions of the Congress of Deputies (DSC), nº 37, March 14, 2017, p. 66.

cal conception of migration would justify the implementation of “active return policies in the medium term so that rootedness does not occur”, which seek to transform the “problem” of the return to the “duty” of attending the weakest to turn it into an “opportunity as a country to transform this migratory experience into a contribution to the professional performance of these young people and to the culture of the country¹¹” (Secretaría de Estado de Migraciones, 2019, p. 5; the underlining is ours).

Finally, it should be noted that by contemplating return as the last (and definitive) phase of the migration cycle, the Plan approximates migratory theories that were influential in the second half of the 20th century, specifically neoclassical and structural approaches, which conceived return as the closure of the migratory cycle (bidirectional and single), and the consequence of an individual and rational decision before macroeconomic and/or demographic, political and social causes, changing in the countries of origin and destination (Lang *et al.*, 2016; Massey *et al.*, 1993). In this sense, the adopted narrative moves away from the contemporary theoretical interpretations that tend to think of the return to the country of origin not as the end of a cycle, but as individual and/or group biography phases that can include more than one displacement (intra or international) based on different motivations, both personal and social (Riaño, 2023; Boros and Hegedús, 2016; Nadler *et al.*, 2016), which are not infrequently conditioned by the lack of job stabilization possibilities that occur due to the characteristics of contemporary liberal economies (not already national but global), in which labor markets are each time more precarious with short-term employment contracts.

Conclusions

This article has revealed that the new Spanish migration policy conceives young migrants and Spanish companies as victims; the economic crisis of 2008, budget cuts and job precariousness in Spain as villains; and the Secretariat of State for Migration and private organization “Volvemos” as heroes in the face of the problem of the “new” emigration. We have also noticed that, with this new narrative strategy, there has been a paradigmatic change in

¹¹ This avoided the risk that Spanish public opinion would consider a possible mass return of migrants of all kinds as a threat to the Spanish labor market, as happened during the seventies (Fernández Vicente, 2015).

Spain in the way of thinking and narrating, from the public sphere, the return of Spanish citizens settled abroad. From an assistance perspective, focused on proposing aid for the return of Spanish emigrants who were in vulnerable situations, the return of so-called "young talents" who left the country after the last global financial crisis has been prioritized.

In line with the neoliberal dogmas that demand profitable policies, the narrative of the Return Plan sacrifices equity (considering the right of all Spanish migrants to return) in favor of efficiency (stimulating the return of those who can contribute to resources and knowledge to the society of origin), ignoring, in addition, the concept of intra-European mobility with which it was sought to consolidate (politically) a community citizenship and (economically) a single labor market. On the other hand, the only level of belonging that the Return Plan seems to recognize is the national (Spanish), not the regional (European) one, also maintaining a conception of "the return to the country of origin" closer to the predominant migratory theories in the 20th century than to the contemporary scientific-social contributions.

Despite the limited implementation of the Plan due to the outbreak of the pandemic, we believe that the narrative on return established deserves further investigation. In this sense, we highlight that the government has recently launched a new policy proposal called "Plan of attraction and retention of scientific and innovative talent to Spain of the Ministry of Science and Innovation", specifically aimed at scientists and entrepreneurs. Finally, given that the regional governments in Spain also design their own policies for the return of migrants, we believe that it would be important for future studies to incorporate a multilevel perspective to identify whether this transformation in the way of conceiving emigration, distinguishing migrants among those whose return is worth encouraging from those whose return should not be encouraged, has been adopted at other scales in the country.

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