

Border control and accident rate of irregular immigration in the route to the Canary Islands (Spain) during the COVID-19 pandemic

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Abstract

Throughout the first decades of the 21st century, the maritime borders of the European Union have witnessed a growing and increasingly complex mobility of an irregular nature. Moreover, the effects of the COVID-19 crisis on many African countries revealed the weakness of the maritime border and its permeability, as well as its increased danger. This research aims to study these irregular migration flows by sea during 2020 and 2021, through the Atlantic border between the Canary Islands and Africa. The so-called “Canary route” is one of the most dangerous maritime routes in the world due to the ocean conditions, the distances that must be covered and the way in which migrants move. Our analysis will therefore focus on one of the central aspects of this crossing, its danger and associated accident rate, which can be measured in terms of the number of shipwrecks, deaths, and missing persons. The objectives of this paper are: i) to show the spatial location of those wrecks; ii) to give an estimate of data on missing persons and deaths; iii) to focus on the study of those persons affected; iv) to delve into the underlying causes; and v) to analyse the border control actions developed during the pandemic. With this aim, information has been compiled from different national and international sources: official records, contrasted data provided by some NGOs and the IOM, and testimonies of the agents involved. This material is used to reflect on the normalization of border control as a factor that inevitably leads to deaths and disappearances. It suggests that this event should be a central element in European migration policy, contributing to designing border control actions that go beyond containment, thereby preventing the loss of human lives.

Keywords: irregular migrations, Atlantic maritime border, migration controls, accidents in migration routes, Canary Islands

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Introduction

For the last two decades, the Canary Islands have been one of the external borders of the European Union with a significant flow of irregular migration from northwest African countries. During the pandemic, coinciding with the increased immobility of the Spanish population, there was a growth in the arrival of irregular immigrants to the islands

(UNODC, 2022). The health crisis, which began in 2020, boosted the migratory processes due to the serious economic situation of the surrounding countries, the increase of difficulties in the repatriation processes, the decrease in the control of flows in the sending countries and the use of clandestine migration as a geopolitical tool, especially by Morocco.

The International Organization for Migration calls for promoting safe and

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regular migration (IOM, 2022a, b) in line with Sustainable Development Target 10.7 (to facilitate orderly, safe, and responsible migration and mobility of people, including the implementation of planned and well-managed migration policies); the target most explicitly and directly related to international migration of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (UNDP, 2023) and the Global Compact for Migration, forged in the UN member states' meeting celebrated in Morocco in 2018, which calls on states to save lives, undertake coordinated international initiatives on missing migrants and promote safe, orderly and regular migration (UN, 2018). However, the migration flows under study offer an opposite example because of the insecurity characterizing those from northwest Africa to the Canary Islands during the pandemic.

In this article we will focus on the analysis of these flows and especially on the study of the levels of accidents reached. Specifically, we are interested in knowing the magnitude of the phenomenon expressed through the number of incidents and the number of people killed and missing. It is also important to show cartographically its territorial distribution, represent its temporality, characterize who are those affected and deepen in the knowledge of the causes. The second objective of this article focuses on the analysis of the border control policies developed by Spain during the pandemic as a factor in the migratory process. Beyond the rescue actions, which have partially alleviated the number of victims, this article studies the relationship between the political action developed and the nature of the migratory model that seems to have included the accident rate as a variable to be controlled, but consubstantial to the migratory model.

In order to achieve these objectives, we will use data from various official and non-governmental sources, as well as opinions expressed by experts, immigrants and agents involved. The paper begins with a contextualization section on border control in the European Union and the northwest African border, to present,

after the presentation of the sources used, the main results of the study on the flows that have occurred during the pandemic and the political action carried out by Spain.

The framework of the research

European border control and migration

A frontier constitutes a territorial entity contributing to forge the nation's personality that must be preserved. Therefore, from the European perspective, strengthening border measures is seen as a remedy ensuring state security *vis-à-vis* external threats (JAKUBOWSKI, A. 2022) and, for this reason, the EU Member States continue to be dominant players in the border control policymaking, developing immigration controls at nation-state and supra-national levels (BASSA, L. 2009).

Consequently, the danger and accident rate affecting irregular migration in the Balkan route, or by sea on the Mediterranean and the Atlantic routes cannot be considered out of the framework of the securitization of European Community policy. As migration has captured the political agenda, the link between migration and security has been underpinned by a traditional military-political understanding of security (LÉONARD, S. and KAUNERT, C. 2022). It is a securitization framework that has contributed to the construction of the so-called "Fortress Europe", following the Schengen Agreement of 1985. This international treaty, one of the constituent treaties of the European Union, was designed to consolidate the free internal movement of citizens, based on the abolition of internal border controls in several EU countries, while strengthening border controls with third countries. Consequently, successive strategies were developed to implement the principle of control of the external perimeter of the Union and to reinforce the surveillance system directed at it.

The most outstanding action of this system was the creation of the European Border and Coast Guard Agency (Frontex) in 2004, as

well as the continuous initiatives for its progressive modernization and for the reinforcement of its operations. Both this instrument and the gradual use of sophisticated technology: radars and sensors, camera surveillance systems, unmanned aerial systems, and large-scale IT systems handling biometric data (DIJSTELBLOEM, H. et al. 2011; DOMÍNGUEZ-MUJICA, J. et al. 2016; GERSTEIN, D.M. et al. 2018), have been considered as a clear example of the so-called hard governance of the EU migration policy (RUIZ BENEDICTO, A. and BRUNET, P. 2018), a border control policy that continued to develop in 2020 and 2021, despite the expansion of the pandemic.

In addition to these control and surveillance actions, some of the countries of the Union, such as Spain, have developed their own initiatives to implement political measures to control irregular immigration, not only through their own agents, but also through deterrence strategies, to prevent, contain and hinder the arrival and settlement of those immigrants who try to reach the coasts in unauthorized vessels (LÓPEZ-SALA, A. 2015). These actions have been defined by different scholars as soft governance measures: flexible structures, committees, and networks (DUDEK, C. and PESTANO, C. 2019; BA PALMQVIST, P. 2021). These are initiatives that are implemented through cooperation agreements with the governments of the countries from which migrants originate, in the form of aid packages to stop immigration at its source. In other words, the policy adopted by the Government of Spain to curb immigration combines the use of border control mechanisms (surveillance with human and technological means) and an active bilateral coordination and cooperation with transit and origin countries (GODENAU, D. and LÓPEZ-SALA, A. 2016).

In the latter case, Spain's bilateral agreements with several African countries also include the activation of sea patrol operations within the territorial waters of third countries, with the 18N parallel being the main control zone, the area over which most surveillance is carried out. These actions can be considered as extraterritorial strategies which extend

the interception powers of Spain to maritime zones under the sovereignty of other States, even though the authority of the States to intercept the type of vessels with no nationality used by migrants allows the application of the Smuggling Protocol under UNCLOS (United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea). "Therefore, their mere existence would generate a rescue obligation, which must be fulfilled irrespective of the legal nature of the waters where the boat is located" (GARCÍA ANDRADE, P. 2010, 315). However, the implementation of all these procedures has not prevented the continued occurrence of numerous irregular migration flows in the West African route, as well as the associated accidents and fatalities (shipwrecks with consequent disappearances and deaths).

The sequence of irregular immigration flows along the Atlantic route

The surveillance of a maritime area, as opposed to a line in the case of land borders, is much more complex (SPIJKERBOER, T. 2007). Surveillance actions, which aim to locate the small boats or *cayucos* carrying migrants in an irregular manner, act from two opposing assumptions: from the principle of security, which seeks to prevent these flows, and from the humanitarian basis, that of protecting migrants from possible fatalities (GODENAU, D. and BURASCHI, D. 2019). Whether we analyse migration control from the first perspective or from the second, it is confirmed that the expected results are not achieved. Many of the migrants reach the coast of the Canary Islands by their own means, without intermediate controls, while many others get lost in the Atlantic since, despite all the devices deployed to track migration in unauthorized vessels, the number of those intercepted is limited.

In relation to the flows, some authors have referred to three distinct phases of irregular immigration to the Canary Islands in the past (GODENAU, D. 2014; IDEMUDIA, E. and BOEHNKE, K. 2020): i) the initial phase, that of the first small boats that reached the

eastern coasts of the Canary Islands from Morocco, in the second half of the 1990s of the 20th century; ii) the second, that of 2000–2008, in which we presume that the number of fatalities increased significantly, given the considerable number of migrants coming from southern departing points (Mauritania, Senegal, Gambia, Guinea and Sierra Leone), and which had its epicentre in 2006, in the so-called “cayuco crisis”; iii) the third, in which irregular immigration flows decreased notably and, therefore, fatalities. These years coincided with a period of deep economic recession in Spain and also with increased surveillance and deterrence policy, based on agreements signed with emitting countries (PEREGIL, F. 2015). Since 2018, a slight upturn in irregular migration has been noticed, which acquired an unusual intensity during the pandemic (DOMÍNGUEZ-MUJICA, J. et al. 2022), to the point that we can speak of a fourth phase. In this phase, accidents and fatalities have grown very intensely, becoming one of the central elements that define this period. This is the focus of our study.

Sources and methodology

The two main sources used to know how many and who are the dead and missing are the Missing Migrants Project of the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and the reports of the NGO Ca-minando Fronteras. The former is a valuable source that reports on migrants who have died or disappeared at the borders of the European Union, including data on the date of death or disappearance, sex and status as a minor, if applicable, place of origin, cause of death, location of the incident, and the source and quality of the data. Therefore, it only takes into account a few demographic variables, in addition to the fact that it only computes a portion of the deceased and not deaths that occur in migrant detention centres, refugee camps or similar centres, after deportation of the migrant to his or her place of origin or after settlement at the place of destination. Also excluded are deaths

that occur within the countries of origin, even if they are part of an international migration process. In the case of missing persons, the information included must contain contrasted evidence. For all these reasons, it is a recognized source of information, but it includes some underreporting. In the present case, a large number of people crossing the desert and the Sahel area are not being counted, and a large number of disappearances at sea are not adequately recorded.

The other source used are the records and reports of the NGO Ca-minando Fronteras. This is an NGO that operates on the western Euro-African border and has, as one of its main objectives that of making visible the deaths and disappearances that occur in this area. To this end, they report on each of the tragedies that occur on the Canary route, including in their information the day and place of departure and shipwreck and the number of people affected. Not only do they carry out a monitoring task, but they also provide valuable qualitative information. It is not an exhaustive source, but it is of great testimonial value.

In addition to these two main sources, qualitative information was collected by consulting the testimonies of 20 agents, experts and migrants, through 18 semi-structured interviews. Specifically, six representatives and volunteers from the Somos Red, Red Cross, White Cross and Village du Migrant NGOs were interviewed. The interview, therefore, allows access to diverse profiles in order to obtain the broadest possible view from the daily practice of the reality surrounding the arrival and reception of irregular migrants. In addition, two teachers from the public education system were interviewed because of their dual role as teachers in contact with migrant minors and as volunteers in reception associations.

In addition, two members of the military personnel involved in search and rescue were interviewed. These were two officers who regularly participate in rescue operations and who also carry out coordinating functions. Their testimonies were therefore of great importance for a thorough understanding of border control policy.

Six journalists and academics specialized in the subject were also interviewed. These were two specialist researchers from the two public universities in the Canary Islands, others from Senegal and two journalists of recognized prestige, specialists in African issues and working in Africa for reputable Spanish media. This group of interviews included people with diverse backgrounds (journalists, anthropologists, sociologists, etc.) and allowed, above all, contextualization of the subject matter addressed, given the extensive experience and academic vision of the interviewees.

Finally, four immigrants residing in shelters were interviewed. These are people who arrived irregularly in the Canary Islands and have been residing on the islands for more than six months in shelters managed by non-governmental organizations and volunteers. These testimonies focused on the personal experience of their migratory process and their expectations.

Most of the interviews were conducted in person in the Canary Islands, but some via videoconference with the countries of origin. Some interviews required a translator. The interviews were transcribed after having been recorded.

The interviews addressed the issue of dangerousness and accidents within a broader approach. These testimonies have been used to confirm the generalized concern for a new accident prevention procedure, an idea unanimously expressed by all interviewees.

The quantitative information was integrated into a single database, and the information was filtered to avoid duplicating records regardless of their origin. A statistical and cartographic treatment of these data was carried out. For the latter, a territorial information system (GIS) was created from the geographical coordinates of the sightings.

Irregular migration through the Canary Islands route and underlying causes

After a prolonged period with reduced figures in the arrivals of irregular immigrants by sea to the Canary Islands, the data of arrivals have experienced a dizzying growth

during the pandemic. According to the Ministry of the Interior, in 2020, 23,271 people arrived to the islands in 759 boats, a figure similar to the 22,249 immigrants estimated by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). In 2021, still in the pandemic period, the total figure of the Ministry of Interior amounted to 22,316 people in 542 boats and, in 2022, the data, as of December 15, still inform us of the arrival of 15,466.

The relevance of the Canary Islands route during the pandemic becomes clear if we consider, firstly, that, previously, in 2018 and especially 2019, the values were only 1,307 and 2,698 migrants, respectively, in a context of growth with respect to previous years. And, secondly, that 55.3 percent in 2020 and 53.2 percent in 2021 of the immigrants arriving non-regularly to Spain by sea and land did so through the Canary Islands.

Most of the migrants arriving between 2020 and 2021 were young people from Morocco, Western Sahara, Mauritania, Senegal, Gambia, Guinea Bissau, Guinea and Mali, with an increase in those from Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana and Nigeria in 2021 (CEAR, 2022a). Around 15 percent of these migrants were unaccompanied minors in 2020 (Defensor del Pueblo, 2021) and, in 2021, women and children increased in number, becoming 28 percent of arrivals.

These are complex migratory flows in terms of migrant motivation. In all cases, migration responds to the search for a better life, but we can recognize different types of mobility: a) that of migrants fleeing the "structural" poverty of their areas of origin, increased in recent years by climatic factors and by the first signs of food crisis; b) people who are finding it increasingly difficult to earn a living due to the destruction of the resources that allowed them to subsist; c) migrants who have had to leave their homes as a result of the economic paralysis brought about by the pandemic or the recent increase in inflation; d) refugees fleeing armed and inter-ethnic conflicts or persecuted for various reasons (sexual orientation, political activism, etc.); e) people who migrate to join their spouses, children and family members, etc.

“Structural” and long-lasting poverty and the lack of job prospects are the main factors driving the northwest African population out of their places of residence. Most of those migrating for these reasons come from the countries of the Western Sahel, in many cases from rural areas, driven out by the drought of recent years, but also from other areas such as southern Morocco. There, the prolonged drought that began in 2017 and the lack of provision of alternative water resources have characterized the evolution of its economic sector, which accounts for between 13 and 20 percent of GDP, following the implementation of the Green Morocco Plan, which will be complemented by the so-called “Generation Green 2020–2030” (WAHID, N. *et al.* 2022), and which has favoured the migratory process from the most arid rural areas.

The destruction of resources is also a major emigration factor. The emigration of Senegalese, Gambians, Mauritians and Guineans, in addition to responding to the economic hardship generated by the pandemic, is also the result of local factors, such as the fishing conflict that the region has been experiencing for years and which is causing fishermen and employees of traditional fish processing industries to find it increasingly difficult to survive (BELHABIB, D. *et al.* 2019).

“Now there is no fish, there is nothing now (...) four hours sailing offshore, then you are there three or four days fishing and cooking and after three or four days you return (...) 90 kilometres and you catch nothing (...) Chinese boats, from Europe, they all come to Senegal to fish in big boats (...) they take it to other countries, nothing stays in Senegal” (Senegalese immigrant living in a reception centre in Gran Canaria).

Along with the arrival of large industrial fishing vessels in the area, the lack of management measures to regenerate the resources and the establishment of fishmeal and fish oil factories are resulting in a high number of people losing their traditional way of life. This situation has been compounded by the fact that, during the pandemic, fishermen and traditional factories have been restricted for health reasons. Consequently, clandestine boat

departures from the ports of St. Louis, Mbour and Ziguinchor in Senegal, Banjul in Gambia, Bissau in Guinea-Bissau or Nouadhibou in Mauritania more frequently include people directly or indirectly linked to the fishing sector (BENNETT, N.J. *et al.* 2020; CISSÉ, I. 2020).

The increase in arrivals to the Canary Islands in 2020 and 2021 has also been interpreted as a consequence of the health crisis caused by the pandemic and its socioeconomic impacts on the migrants’ countries of origin (RODRÍGUEZ SALINAS, R. 2022). For example, in the case of Morocco, the pandemic sharply decreased international tourist flows (ATTAHIR, O. 2020), triggering workers, especially in informal activities linked to tourism, to try to reach the Canary Islands. Nor should we fail to mention the increase in mobility as a result of the inflationary processes experienced by some countries such as Ghana or Sierra Leone, which have been perpetuated by the current energy crisis (JACKSON, E. *et al.* 2020). In another sense, the idea has spread that the pandemic has reduced the adult population in Europe and that this generates job opportunities. A representative of the NGO “Village du Migrant”, which focuses on helping Senegalese returnees, expressed himself in this sense when he referred to the reasons for irregular migration:

“The first reason is the lack of employment. It is an economic-social and professional problem (...). The second reason is social pressure, if there is no work there is social pressure and the third reason is the pandemic. Europe has lost many adult lives and migrants want to leave to get work and replace these deaths in Europe.”

A part of the flows is associated with political reasons and the existence of armed conflicts and situations of social violence. The arrival of Malians since 2019 is the best example of forced movements. The grave war and inter-ethnic violence that this country has been suffering since 2012, especially in the northern regions, has led to the displacement of more than one million people (BRATTON, M. 2016), a part of whom have crossed the desert to embark in the ports of Senegal or Mauritania for the islands. In addition,

lately, interethnic violence has been spreading to Niger and Burkina Faso. In Burkina Faso, 682,000 people had to move within the country in 2021 according to the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDCM, 2021). Nor should we forget the increase in arrivals from Guinea, motivated by institutional repression, political instability and interethnic strife (ALAEJOS GARCIA, E. 2021).

Finally, the migratory upturn is related to an increase in smuggling and trafficking business and to the migratory policies developed by some countries around the Canary Islands as a tool for political negotiation. For example, in this regard it is worth mentioning the fact that, on the part of Morocco, the control of irregular migration to Spain has been used as a bargaining tool in relation to issues such as Spain's position on the Saharawi cause. According to CASSARINO, J.P. (2022), the intention of third countries to exert pressure on European countries through migration control is not a new phenomenon. What is unprecedented has been the explicitness of the Moroccan intentions to instrumentalize migration.

A dangerous migration route

Accident rates during the pandemic

Dangerousness and accidents are characteristic of the Canary Islands migratory route. Although the figures confirming this are always inaccurate, the IOM's Missing Migrants Project allows us to approximate the dimension of the phenomenon. According to this project, in both years, there were 141 incidents and the number of dead and missing in this period estimated at 1,986 people. In 2020, the number of deaths and missing persons recorded was 877, which was 4.5 percent of the total number of those rescued by Salvamento Marítimo (Spanish Search and Rescue) in that year. In 2021, the figure was 1,109 dead and missing, representing 6.1 percent of those rescued. This last figure is similar to that provided by UNHCR (2022), which counted 1,153 dead and missing in 2021.

The data on deaths and missing persons from the Ca-minando Fronteras NGO is higher. According to this NGO, in 2020 there were 1,851 dead and missing in 45 incidents. In 2021 the figure rose to 4,016, in 124 incidents. These magnitudes are so high that, if we put them in relation to the figures for people rescued by Salvamento Marítimo, they represent 10.1 percent in 2020 and 22.2 percent in 2021. This means that one migrant disappeared or died for every 10 rescued in 2020 and that, in 2021, this proportion rose to more than two. Ca-minando Fronteras has estimated a total number of 7,692 victims in the period 2018–2022 on the so-called Canary route.

The fact that there are no national records, that counting criteria may differ between different organizations, and that an indefinite number of vessels and people are not found, leads to a certain disparity in the figures. In this context, from the incident records available from different sources, we have created our own database which should be interpreted as another approximation of what is really happening. In our sample, the total numbers of incidents and of dead and missing persons reach intermediate values. In 2020, 88 incidents were included, accounting for 1,762 dead and missing migrants, while, in 2021, the total data amounted to 132 shipwrecks and 2,943 people. Disregarding the disparities in the figures, what is obvious is that the Canary Islands maritime border is characterized by the persistence of the accident rate, something that has increased during the pandemic period, especially in 2021 (CEAR, 2021).

Data from the Missing Migrants Project allow us to delve deeper into some of the characteristics of the incidents. Although the incident with the highest number of dead and missing, which occurred on 24 October 2020, involved the loss of 141 people, the majority of incidents, 61.2 percent were characterized as involving fewer than 10 victims. The number of dead and missing persons, on average, was 14 persons per incident. From a temporal point of view, most of the incidents were recorded in the second half of the year, from June inclusive, coinciding with the period in

which there is usually a greater transfer of irregular migrants to the Canary Islands (*Figure 1*). In terms of territorial location, the majority occurred on the high seas, in waters relatively close to the south and east of the coasts of the archipelago. However, a considerable number of incidents were also recorded south of the Port of Boujdour (Western Sahara), many of them in Saharan, Mauritanian and Senegalese coastal waters. *Figure 2* shows that in 2021 the incidents recorded with fatalities were concentrated between

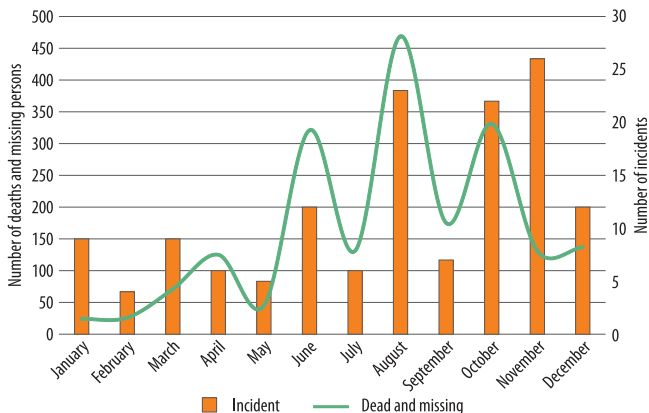


Fig. 1. Number of incidents, deaths and missing persons per month for years 2020 and 2021. Source: IOM. Authors’ own elaboration.

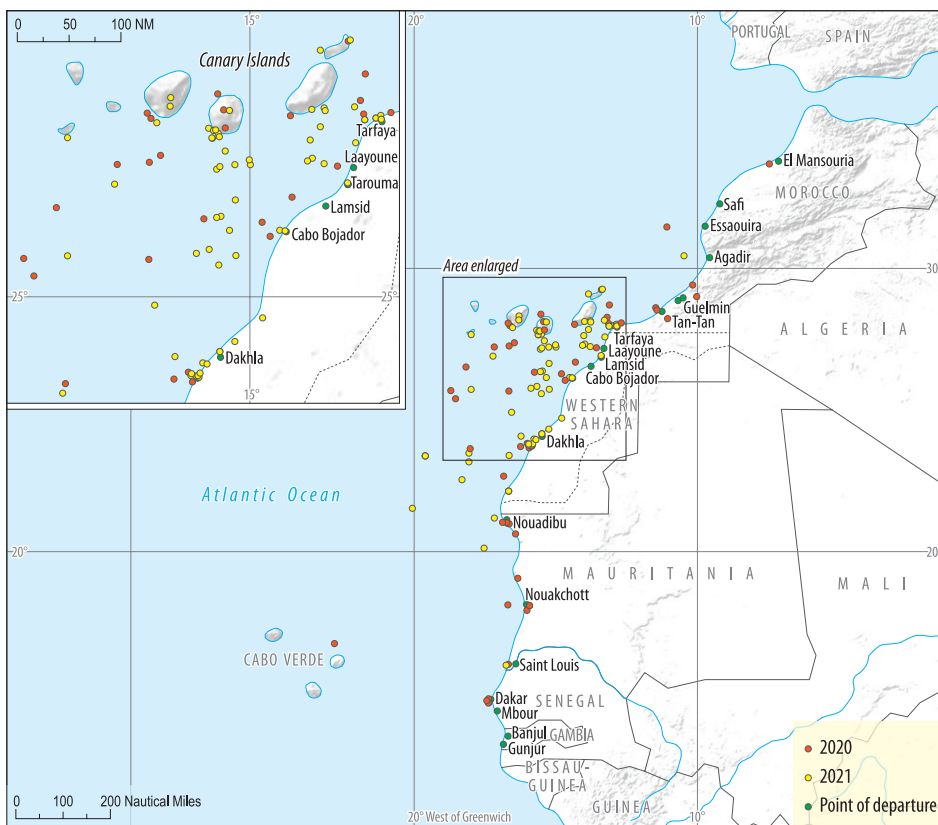


Fig. 2. Location of incidents recorded in 2020 (red) and 2021 (yellow) in which deaths and missing persons were reported. Source: IOM. Authors’ own elaboration.

the Canary Islands and Nouadhibou, north of Mauritania, while in 2020 the location was more dispersed, with some cases recorded off the coast of Dakar in Senegal, the island of Sal in Cape Verde and Playa David, near Mohammed in Morocco.

Invisibilized victims

With the imprecision that surrounds irregular migratory flows to the Canary Islands, we can affirm that most of the victims have the status of missing persons, despite the fact that, as CARLING, J. (2007, 330) points out, “migrant deaths at sea are particularly difficult to quantify because the bodies are often missing. In

most cases, estimates of presumed drownings are based on survivors’ accounts of the number of passengers”. Some non-governmental organizations, such as Ca-minando Fronteras, provide estimates of the number of missing persons, although this information is only available for the most recent period (2018–2022) (Observatorio..., 2022). Following these data, in 2020 and 2021 the number of missing persons accounted for most of the victims that occurred at the border.

Figure 3 shows a sample of episodes in which deaths or missing persons were recorded and for which the point of departure and place of interception are known. As can be seen, they come indistinctly from the different countries of Northwest Africa,

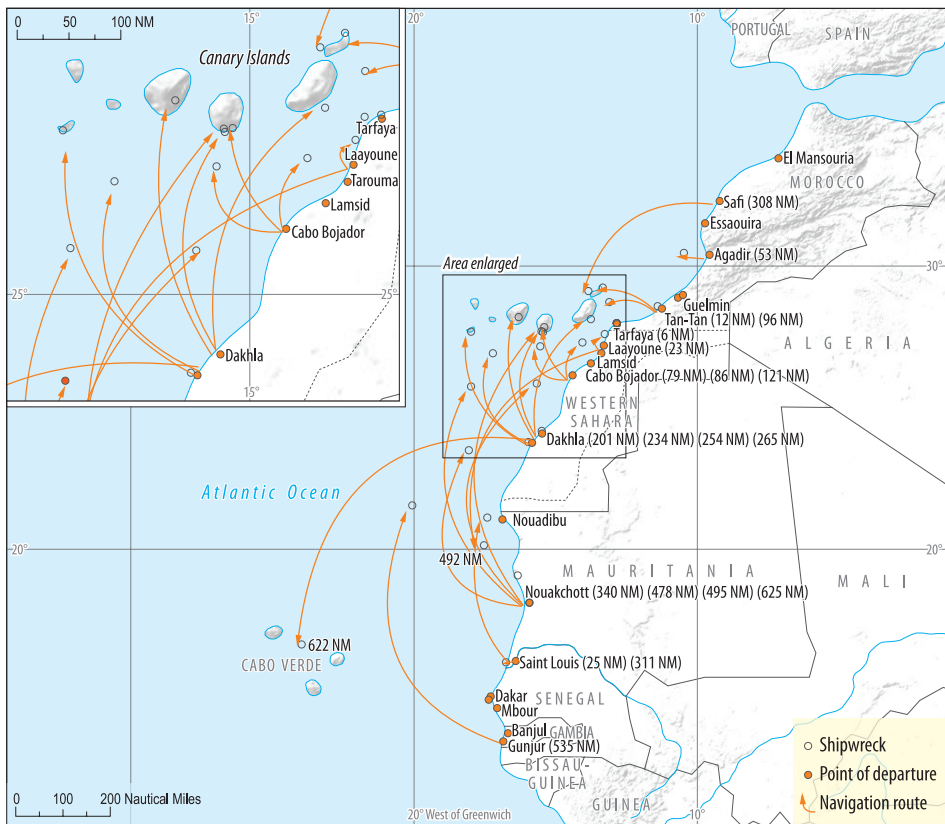


Fig. 3. Ports of departure and point of sighting of vessels in which deaths and missing persons occurred. Source: Ca-minando Fronteras. Authors’ own elaboration.

in many cases from places remote from the Canary Islands. It is estimated, based on the actions of family members and the NGO Caminando Fronteras, that 51 percent of the missing persons departed from the coasts of Western Sahara, especially from Dakhla, Laayoune and its port, Blaya; Cape Boujdour, Tarouma and Lamsid. Mauritania accounts for 16.9 percent of the missing, especially from Nouakchott and Nouadhibou; Morocco, 9.8 percent, especially from Tarfaya, Agadir, Tan Tan, Essaouria and Safi; Senegal, 8.7 percent, mostly from Mbour, Saint Louis and Dakar; and Banjul and Gunjur in the Gambia, 6.9 percent. Therefore, the invisibility of the victims is related to origins generally located to the southeast of the Canary Islands. Most of these accidents were found in route locations, but others suffered significant drifts. These are those of which, on occasions, there is no news at all. As one of the RCC Canarias coordinators we interviewed pointed out:

“In the humanitarian crisis of 2007–2008, I remember that they said that out of every 3 boats, one never arrived, that is, one was always lost, that’s what they said back then. I think that proportionally it is much lower, but well, it is clear that they are lost (...) at the moment they pass the vertical of El Hierro, there the maritime traffic is reduced a lot and unless they are lucky, it is complicated to find the boat.”

The case of a vessel that left Dakhla and was found near Cape Verde, after traveling 622 nautical miles, is a representative example of many others that were probably lost without trace.

Family members and Caminando Fronteras have tried to give a face to these unbound victims. From the record of their actions to recover the trail of these people, it is known that the majority are young men, although in 2021 the number of women and children grew considerably, in correspondence with the increase of both groups among those who arrived or were rescued (24% and 8.9%, respectively). Those of sub-Saharan nationality abound, although a part are Moroccans. They generally began their migratory journey as part of a family strategy

to improve their living conditions, and there is no lack of cases in which they are united by kinship. But this does not mean that family members know or plan the migration process. It seems that many make the decision individually, as several migrants interviewed pointed out to us:

“No, no, I don’t tell my mother anything because if my mother knows, she thinks a lot because, you know, a lot of kids die in the sea, a lot of boats sink in the sea, a lot of young dead kids. If I go to Spain, my family does not sleep peacefully (...), and when I arrive in Spain, I do.”

Causes of accidents

Environmental, technical, and human factors

The accident and mortality rates of the Canary Islands migratory route are directly related to the long duration of many of the journeys and to the presence of certain environmental, technical and human factors in the migratory process. Beyond these factors, the irregularity of the process is the main cause that explains the levels of accidents. We must not forget that this is a clandestine mobility involving organized groups operating outside the law and usually charging large sums of money for the transfers.

The physical or environmental factors of the crossings are given by the atmospheric conditions and the state of the sea. This last and the influence of the trade winds vary throughout the year around the islands, denoting a marked seasonality in the migratory processes, which is characterized by the concentration of trips in summer and autumn, when the sea is in better conditions for navigation (MESA-PÉREZ, C.U. and PARREÑO-CASTELLANO, J.M. 2020). This implies that migrants must endure high temperatures and strong insolation during their journeys. In addition, they are often affected by hypothermia, both because they cannot avoid getting wet, and because of the greater loss of human body heat at sea due to the contrast in temperatures between day and night. All this explains the high number of

people who die or arrive in poor health to the islands. Added to this is the fact that crossings often last several days, increasing the likelihood of changes in environmental conditions and the state of the sea, leading to an increase in the number of casualties.

The technical factors are those related to the vessels used, the navigation equipment and the expertise of the skippers. Most migrants make their crossings in vessels designed for short trips in waters close to the coast (*pateras*), for artisanal fishing (*cayucos*) or for recreational activities (inflatable boats) (MESA-PÉREZ, C.U. and PARREÑO-CASTELLANO, J.M. 2021). The typologies of the vessels are therefore not suitable for navigation in oceanic waters, especially in the case of trips of more than one day. This is compounded by the lack of experience of the skippers. These are usually people with knowledge of navigation, fishermen or migrants who hope with this responsibility to alleviate the economic burden that their own migratory process entails, but who, in any case, do not usually have sufficient expertise for navigation on the high seas.

It also happens that, on occasions, illegal trafficking is limited to payment for a place on a boat, but not for the accompaniment of a skipper, which forces some of the passengers to assume this role, without any knowledge of navigation, as we were told by migrants and aid workers in reception centres:

“In Senegal a lot of young people work, earn money for the boat. The family does not know anything. If a family member knows, you don’t go, you don’t take a boat. I paid 300 EUR leaving from St. Louis.” ... “Just people who, with their work, the employers, pay for the trip. Other people pay some money. We have always heard about one thousand or so EUR, and we have been told that with 300 or 400 EUR you travel, it may seem that it is little money, but getting 50 EUR in Senegal is not like getting it in Spain.”

In addition, the absence of adequate navigation equipment for the crossing (lack of GPS or use of cell phones with little autonomy), the absence or insufficiency of rescue equipment inside the boats or the fowl of a roof to protect

them from inclement weather increases the likelihood of suffering some kind of accident.

Finally, the accident rate is related to the conditions in which immigrants travel. Generally, they have little or no training or familiarization with the marine environment, with the exception of those who work in fishing, so they tend to wear inadequate clothing for the cold, heat or humidity at sea and frequently suffer from seasickness or vomiting derived from the navigation itself. In addition, very often the crossing is made with insufficient water and food provisions, in overcrowded and unsanitary conditions. All this is especially relevant in the case of crossings by pregnant women, babies and children, whose number has increased proportionally in recent years.

Migration policy as a factor

Beyond the factors related to the migratory event itself, the levels of accidents and mortality that accompany this migratory process are related to the immigration policy that has been developed in Spain during the pandemic. This has focused, as far as border control is concerned, almost exclusively on maritime rescue, border control abroad and the fight against illegal human trafficking, something which is necessary and has undoubtedly contributed to the fact that the figures for accidents have not been even worse, but which is insufficient if the aim is to reduce the level of danger.

Maritime rescue oriented to the migratory flow, as an organized structure, began, in the case of the Canary route, with the arrival of the first small boats at the end of the 20th century. Supported by the signing, in 1979, of the International Convention on Maritime Rescue (SAR), which aimed to create an international search and rescue plan regardless of the place where it was necessary to act, and its entry into force in 1985, an organizational structure oriented to the search and rescue of vessels with irregular immigrants was developed. Until the adoption of this agreement, there was no international system for these op-

erations, although the obligation to provide help to ships in distress was regulated by the International Convention for the Safety of Life at Sea (SOLAS). This was supplemented by the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS, 1982), which stipulated that every state shall require the master of a ship flying its flag, whenever they are able to do so without serious danger to the ship, its crew or passengers, to render assistance to any person found in danger of perishing at sea.

According to the SAR Convention, states are obliged to ensure that measures are taken for the creation of adequate search and rescue services in their coastal waters and to enter into agreements with neighbouring countries, establishing international search and rescue regions, involving the joint use of facilities and the establishment of common procedures. In the case of the extensive SAR zone around the Canary Islands, which came to be controlled by Spain, at first the actions were carried out exclusively by the army, but since its creation in 1992, the rescue work has been progressively taken over by the Maritime Safety and Rescue Society (SASEMAR), while the army reserves for itself search actions. In addition to all this, Spanish operatives act with some frequency in other SAR areas when necessary, in accordance with the provision of the International Maritime Organization whereby states must adopt measures to allow the rapid entry into their territorial waters of rescue units from other countries (OMI, 2016).

The importance of search and rescue is evidenced by the fact of the approval of the Resolution of 18 April 2018, by which the European Parliament requested the development of search and rescue capabilities in all states and the recognition of the support provided by private agents and NGOs in rescue actions at sea and on land, and, in the case of the Canary Islands, by the high numbers of migrants who are annually rescued by SASEMAR. Despite all this, the number of shipwrecks, deaths and missing persons has been very high on the Canary Islands maritime route during the pandemic. The con-

stant need for more resources for rescue in the islands, the lack of resources and training in neighbouring countries, and the difficulties for international coordination all contribute to the fact that the results are not better.

Border control has been characterized during the pandemic, as has been the case since the beginning of the century, by the development of own surveillance systems and by its outsourcing to other countries. Spanish surveillance is carried out in the FIR zone (Flight Information Region) around the Canary Islands, but also off the coasts of Mauritania and Senegal, in order to hinder the exit. To this end, Spain has increased its naval and air resources in recent years, with several patrol boats, “*guardamares*” (search and rescue boats), tugboats, helicopters, airplanes and drones (Figure 4). Externalization, that is, the fact that the issuing and transit countries play a fundamental role in preventing irregular migratory movements, has been in place for the last 15 years, since the migratory crisis that occurred in 2006 around the Canary Islands. In return, these states receive economic compensation and trade concessions within a structure of formal bilateral and diplomatic agreements with Spain. Externalization includes the signing of forced readmission agreements with the sending countries and the control of departures and transit, receiving Spanish cooperation in this regard (GABRIELLI, L. 2017).

Finally, the third type of action is collaboration with the authorities and law enforcement agencies of the sending countries to dismantle networks and organized groups engaged in the smuggling of migrants. The smuggling of migrants by sea is a life-threatening crime punishable under both European and international law. In this regard, we just want to say that the European Union and its member states have been contracting parties to the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime (UNTOC) and its Protocols, including the Protocol against the Smuggling of Migrants by Land, Sea and Air, since 2000 (UN, 2004) and, that based on this international agreement, Spain has developed cooperative action to dismantle these criminal structures (BOE, 2007).

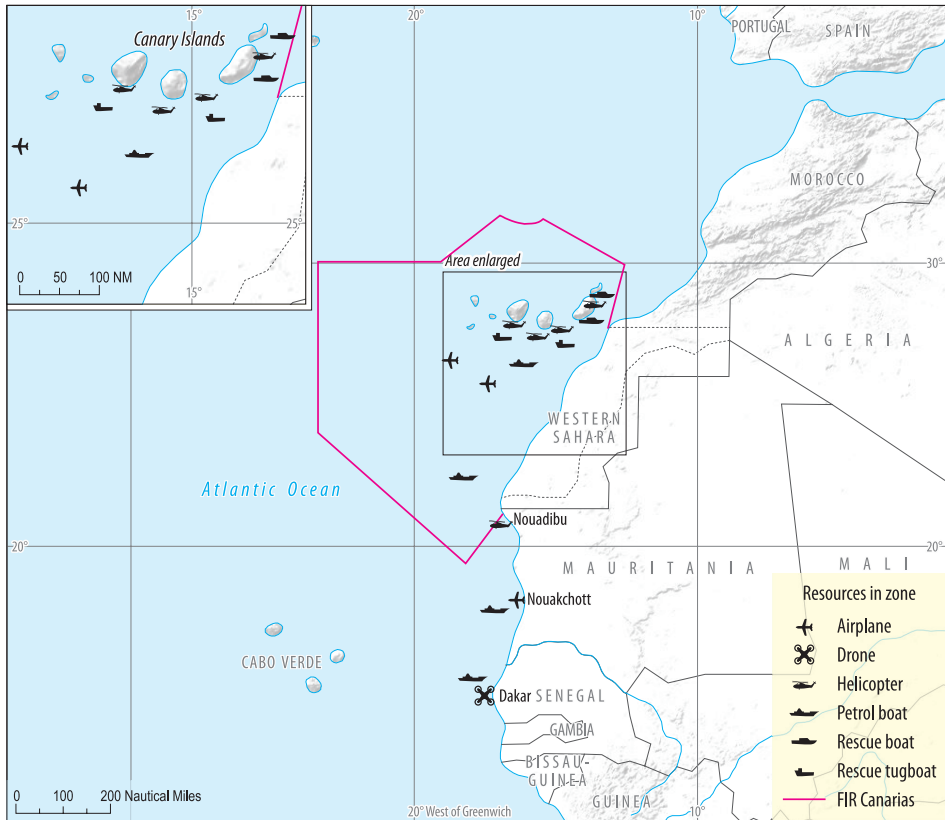


Fig. 4. Spanish FIR area around the Canary Islands and means used. *Source:* Guardiacivil.es-salvamentomarítimo.es-defensa.com-exteiores.gob. Authors' own elaboration.

Therefore, Spanish immigration policy has focused, during the pandemic, on border control through direct surveillance and externalization of borders, police control and humanitarian rescue actions, but has neglected actions aimed at alleviating the effect of the causes that explain the migratory event itself or the regulation and management of the process. This model of action, which leads to a high accident and mortality rate, has led some organizations to describe Spanish immigration policy as “necropolitical” because it assumes the existence of deaths and disappearances as something consubstantial to the intervention model, following the terminology of the philosopher Mbembe, A. (2006).

Conclusions

The accident rate is an intrinsic characteristic of the maritime migratory model of Northwest Africa, the so-called Canary route, with an increase in the number of migrants killed and missing at sea during 2020 and, especially, in 2021.

Shipwrecks have occurred at all times but have been more frequent in the second half of the year, coinciding with the period when environmental conditions are conducive to navigation. From a demographic point of view, most of the dead and missing are men, although in 2021 the number of women and minors grew.

The incidents have been distributed over a wide geographical area. In some cases, they have been located close to the ports of departure, in others during the crossing, near the island coasts and some at more distant points, due to the drifting of some vessels. Most of the vessels involved in the accidents had departed from the coasts of Western Sahara, especially Dakhla, from the ports of Nouakchott and Nouadhibou in Mauritania, and from Mbour in Senegal. The distance to the destination makes the crossings dangerous and the likelihood of an accident greater. However, other factors relating to the environmental conditions, the characteristics of the vessels and the circumstances in which the passengers are traveling explain the high number of victims.

Behind the accident rate is the way in which migrants are forced to make their ocean crossing, with the frequent involvement of organizations engaged in human smuggling and the difficulties and limitations of law enforcement and search and rescue services to operate more effectively.

But any effective action should consider the causes of the migratory process and, consequently, facilitate an orderly, regular and safe one, complying with the sustainable development objectives approved for 2030 and objective 8 of the Global Compact for Migration. We believe that it is the European Union's own migratory model, applied in Spain, which contributes to the fact that an orderly migratory policy has not been developed for the countries of Northwest Africa. Even in the case of asylum seekers, the results are far from optimal. In 2021 only 10.5 percent of the resolutions were favourable, compared to 35 percent on average in Europe (CEAR, 2022b).

Similarly, the Spanish migration model has not been oriented to solve, at least partially, the causes that provoke irregular migratory flows. A good example of this is that, although Spanish official development aid, which is directed in part to sub-Saharan countries, has grown in recent years, in 2021 it was only 0.26 per cent of GDP, compared to the European average of 0.49 percent and in any case, far from the com-

mitment of 0.7 percent, according to data from the Development Assistance Committee (OECD, 2022). The foreseeable approval of the new Law on Cooperation for Sustainable Development and Global Solidarity may help to remedy this situation, but the above-mentioned precedents lower expectations.

On the other hand, Spanish policy has been based on the externalization of border control. It does not seem to be an effective control system, in view of the flows that occur and the number of deaths and disappearances, and this without taking into account how questioned this system is in terms of the rights of immigrants. Besides, the impermeability of the external borders established in third countries depends on continuous negotiation, which turns irregular immigration into a geopolitical tool or weapon (GARCÉS MASCAREÑAS, B. 2021).

Finally, beyond the factors that explain what has happened on the Canary Island migratory route, it should be noted that the accident rate and loss of life have become a naturalized element of the migratory model, by the authorities and even by Spanish society, when it should instead be a central element that stimulates reflection and debate on the possibility of a different intervention model.

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