

# The Guardian



## Spain's right whips up fear as migration surge hits Andalusian shores

**New rightwing party leaders are convinced that immigration will be a vote-winner, but on the front line in Algeciras there is more frustration than alarm**

**Sam Jones** in Algeciras

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The fan that stirs the humid air in José Villahoz's small office does little to dissipate the heat, the fatigue or the frustration. Another summer is upon southern Spain and once again the perilous *pateras* (small boats) are arriving on a daily basis, once again the reception system is creaking under their weight, and once again, Villahoz says, the warnings of all the previous months and years have gone unheeded.

The only thing different about the summer of 2018 is the surge in the number of migrants and refugees arriving - 27,000 and rising, mostly by sea - and the political reactions that have greeted it. Thirty years after Spain was first shocked to find the body of a migrant washed up on its shores, and scarcely six weeks after the new government took in 630 people on the rescue ship *Aquarius* who had been turned away by Italy and Malta, some rightwing politicians have begun to talk of identity papers, more border controls and "millions of Africans" wanting to come to Europe.

In a country that has traditionally been pro-immigration and devoid of a significant far-right party since its return to democracy, their words have raised eyebrows and concerns. "The first

thing we need to be clear about is that there's a bit of unwarranted alarm over the arrivals we've seen over the past month," said Villahoz, president of Algeciras Acoge, the local branch of an Andalusian NGO that works to protect, educate and integrate migrants and refugees.

"In 2006, almost 40,000 reached Spain by arriving on the shores of the Canary islands and Cádiz. We've had lots of people arriving here for many years but it's only now the politicians are making a lot of noise and creating a lot of alarm. In 2003, it was about 20,000."

The politicians in question are Pablo Casado, the new leader of Spain's conservative People's party (PP), and Albert Rivera, who heads the rival Citizens party.

Rising migrant numbers and the recent storming of the border fence that separates Morocco from Spain's north African enclave of Ceuta appear to have persuaded both parties that immigration could be shaping up as an issue in the general election that must be held by July 2020.

"What Spaniards are looking for is a party that says, very clearly, that there can't be papers for everyone and that Spain can't absorb millions of Africans who want to come to Europe in search of a better future," Casado has said. "Because it isn't possible - we need to start saying it isn't, even though it's not politically correct."



PP party leader Pablo Casado speaks to a member of the Spanish Civil Guard during a visit to the harbour of Algeciras. Photograph: Jorge Guerrero/AFP/Getty Images

Rivera, meanwhile, accused Pedro Sánchez's socialist government of double standards when it came to the situation in Ceuta and the welcome afforded the Aquarius when it arrived in Valencia.

"It doesn't seem decent to me that the government says one thing in the port of Valencia when it's not here in Ceuta," he said. "We need to control our external borders if we want to travel around Europe without a passport."

The Sánchez administration is taking a rather different approach. Spain's foreign minister, former European parliament president Josep Borrell, has dismissed such suggestions, calling for perspective and pointing out that an ageing Europe needs new blood. "We're talking about 20,000 migrants so far this year for a country of more than 40 million inhabitants," he said last week. "That's not mass migration."

Despite the recent warning by José Ignacio Landaluce, the mayor, that Algeciras could become "the new Lampedusa" there are few, if any, signs of the migrant influx in the port city, with its hulking cranes, palm trees and occasional German or Chinese tourists. Most of the new arrivals are taken straight to the sports centres that have been pressed into service as makeshift police stations and then sent elsewhere in the province.

Nor, for the moment, is there any evidence of a curdling of sympathy among Andalusians, who are well used to the summer's habitual human cargo. "We've had more arrivals than ever this year, about 2,500 so far," said Miguel Molina, mayor of the town of Barbate, an hour's drive west of Algeciras. "That's not a Lampedusa is it? That's an exaggeration. There's an increase on other years but the people of Barbate are, as ever, showing their solidarity with these people who've made long journeys, some of which have lasted years."

But the question is how long that solidarity will last if immigration becomes a serious issue at the ballot box and if rightwing parties shift further to the right. Carmen González Enríquez, a senior analyst at the Real Instituto Elcano thinktank, argues that Spain's experiences and memories of the Franco dictatorship have so far served to inoculate it against the extreme right.

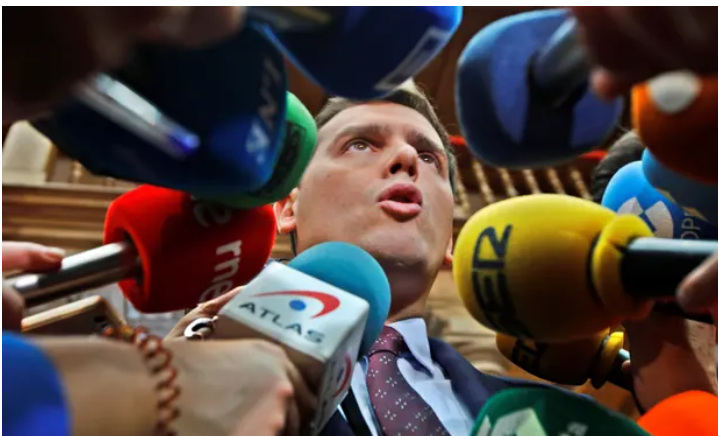
"Far-right nationalist and xenophobic parties need to focus on the differences between 'us' and 'them', with 'us' being Spaniards and 'them' being everyone else," she said. "But that doesn't exist in Spain; that feeling is very weak because the common Spanish national identity is weak. That's mainly down to historical reasons and the legacy of the Franco regime, which spent 40 years talking about national identity, the exceptional character of the Spaniards, and using symbols, flags and anthems the whole time."

After the transition, she added, that nationalist discourse was rejected. While acknowledging that tensions exist in some areas that could give rise to a xenophobic party, González Enríquez said that the group that most closely fitted the bill - the tiny far-right Vox movement, formed five years ago by disgruntled former PP members - would struggle to attract enough votes to get into parliament were a general election held right now.

Pablo Simón, a political scientist at Carlos III University in Madrid, saw parallels between the current situation and the events of 2006, when another PP opposition attacked another socialist government for failing to manage immigration as thousands of people arrived in the Canaries.

He also saw the recent rhetoric from Casado and Rivera as part of the public skirmishes between the PP and Citizens as each party tried to establish itself as the bona fide voice of the Spanish right.

"What we don't know yet is whether this is part of a temporary positioning to criticise the government - in which case it'll vanish from the media map in September or October when the Catalan issue comes round again - or whether it's a strategic turn by the PP that Citizens will also react to," he said.



Albert Rivera of the Citizens party has accused the Spanish government of double standards over its attitude to migrants.  
Photograph: Alberto Morante/EPA

Amparo González, a migration researcher at the Spanish National Research Council and a member of the group Economists Against the Crisis, was not surprised by this year's numbers. "Last year, there were 28,000 people and in 2016 it was half that," she said. "This has been the tendency over the past 20 months and it's no surprise to anyone who follows this." She attributed the surge to the good summer weather; the closure of other European routes, and a lax approach from Moroccan authorities who were keen to get the measure of the new Madrid government.

González also criticised Casado for his comments, noting that government figures showed that only around 500,000 Africans have settled in Spain over the past decade.

"There's a competition between the two rightwing parties and the climate in Europe is helping," she said. "Casado's remarks have caused a lot of alarm and I think that was pretty irresponsible."

By the autumn it will be clear just how many people reached Spain during the peak arrivals season - and whether the numbers will have enduring political consequences.

"You probably won't get the kind of popular feeling that could give rise to a far-right party because of 20,000 people," said González Enríquez. "But perhaps you could if there were 500,000. It's a question of degrees."

Like most of those who work to help migrants and refugees in Spain, Villahoz is depressed by successive governments' refusal to engage with the reality of the situation and to treat the issue as a humanitarian imperative rather than a policing challenge. If the Sánchez government could welcome the Aquarius and its passengers into Valencia, he said, why couldn't it do the same on the south coast, where "we have Aquariuses every single day"?

The mayor of Barbate also thought a change of perspective was needed. "It's not a question of being fed up with the situation," said Molina. "The fact is we've been living with the issue of immigration for thousands of years. This area isn't the periphery of Europe; it's the centre of two continents."

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