

# Volver: The End of a Dream

by Flavio Fusi

Economically crippled Spain, once a promised land, is now encouraging tens of thousands of once-hopeful Latin and South American immigrants to return home.

Neli Sammuesa, 28, stands in Terminal Four at Barajas Airport in Madrid brandishing a ticket to Ecuador. “If I have to live badly,” she says, “then I prefer to live badly in my country.” Neli arrived in Spain in 2000, in pre-euro days. “Spain was much better with the peseta,” she adds. “I was 17 when I got here and I had all kinds of dreams about a better life. Had I known that times like this lay ahead I would have stayed in my hellhole of a country.”

For years, Neli’s life went relatively well. Her husband Alvaro worked in construction, a booming sector, and she worked as a maid. But the euro crisis plunged them both into near-ruin. Alvaro has been unemployed for four years and Neli can no longer find work, since the Spanish have cut their spending patterns and most can no longer afford a maid. The bank that gave the couple a loan to buy a cherished home has since been repossessed.

As a result, Neli and Alvaro will be going home empty-handed. And they’re not alone. Tens of thousands of Latin American immigrants who moved to Spain hoping to stake out a corner of the “European Dream” are headed home on one-way tickets, with little or nothing to show for a decade of labor.

It is a sad, resigned, nearly biblical exodus. It marks the end of a marathon that saw the immigrants endure unfriendly laws, cut through reams of bureaucracy, work to obtain subsidies, build a hopeful future, to then see it all end in failure.

In 2003, when the Spanish government enacted the so-called “voluntary return plan,” the law seemed more like a welfare state luxury than a way out for desperate families. Immigrants were doing well at

the time and in the early years only 604 took up the government offer and headed home on a prepaid one-way ticket.

In 2008 came another “voluntary return” plan, this one hatched by Socialist Party Labor Minister Celestino Corbacho. It was seen as a lifeboat in the event the crisis worsened, which it did. From November 2008 through April 2012, 18,265 immigrants, most of them originally from Ecuador, accepted tickets home, including some 2,500 in the last five months alone. The figures evidence a social and family catastrophe that will take years to put fully in perspective.

“It’s an extreme situation,” says Vladimir Paspuel, who heads up the Association Ruminahui, one 11



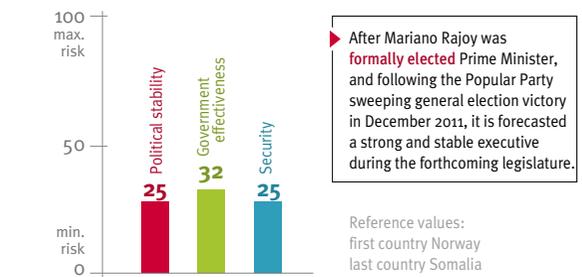
Two immigrants sleep in a vineyard outside Barcelona. It hosted more than 300 in July alone.



SPAIN

AREA	505,370 Km <sup>2</sup>
POPULATION	47,042,984 (estimates 2011)
MEDIAN AGE	40,5 years
RELIGIONS	Roman Catholic 94%, other 6%
FORM OF GOVERNMENT	Parliamentary Monarchy
SUFFRAGE	Universal (18 years)
CHIEF OF STATE	King JUAN CARLOS I (November 1975)
HEAD OF GOVERNMENT	Mariano RAJOY (December 2011)
GDP (nominal)	\$ 1,360 bn (estimates 2012)
INFLATION	1.6% (estimates 2012)

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Eiu, Onu, Wb, Wef, Heritage Foundation, Transparency International, Global Peace Index, Reporters without Borders, IPU

NGOs that help manage the voluntary return plan. “The people taking up the plan now come from the street, from shelters and from public dorms, sometimes have spent time begging. They’re absolutely alone, even though they worked so hard and helped out any number of Spaniards. For decades, immigrants have been a vital part of the economic development of this country. Today, with the crisis, the message they’re receiving is unmistakably stark: ‘You have to leave now. We don’t need you any more.’”

Worse still, the funds allocated for the voluntary return program have run out, putting some immigrants in no man’s land. The government is readying a new grant for 2013, which the labor ministry already says will only cover those people already on the waiting list.

What’s worse, the economic situation at home is little better, if not worse, than the ongoing woes in Spain. Ecuador started up a “Welcome Home” program, but it’s already out of cash.

Dominican Isabel Sierra went home but she hardly found a welcome mat. At 54, she’d been in Madrid for 17 years, a lifetime. “For a long time I sent €400 a month to my family. All was well. I remember that when first I arrived, I got a job in two days. Spain made me feel useful and productive. I worked assisting the elderly, earning up to €1,500 a month. But with this kind of crisis, and being over 50, you find all the doors closed. Now, even if things go well, I don’t make it to €400 a month, and I have a €200 a month rent, plus utilities.”

Crisis rules have been unsparing, and the poor, as always, have been forced to pick up the tab.

Spanish unemployment has reached a record high of 24 percent. Female unemployment is slightly higher, at 24.8 percent. Among immigrants, it’s been a massacre.

Some 40 percent of recent arrivals are jobless, their dream of a better life transformed into a trap they seek to escape at the earliest opportunity. Spain, which



L. Gene/AFP/Gettyimages

Spain is working to get send immigrants home. Here, African workers sit near signs saying, “We are not animals...”

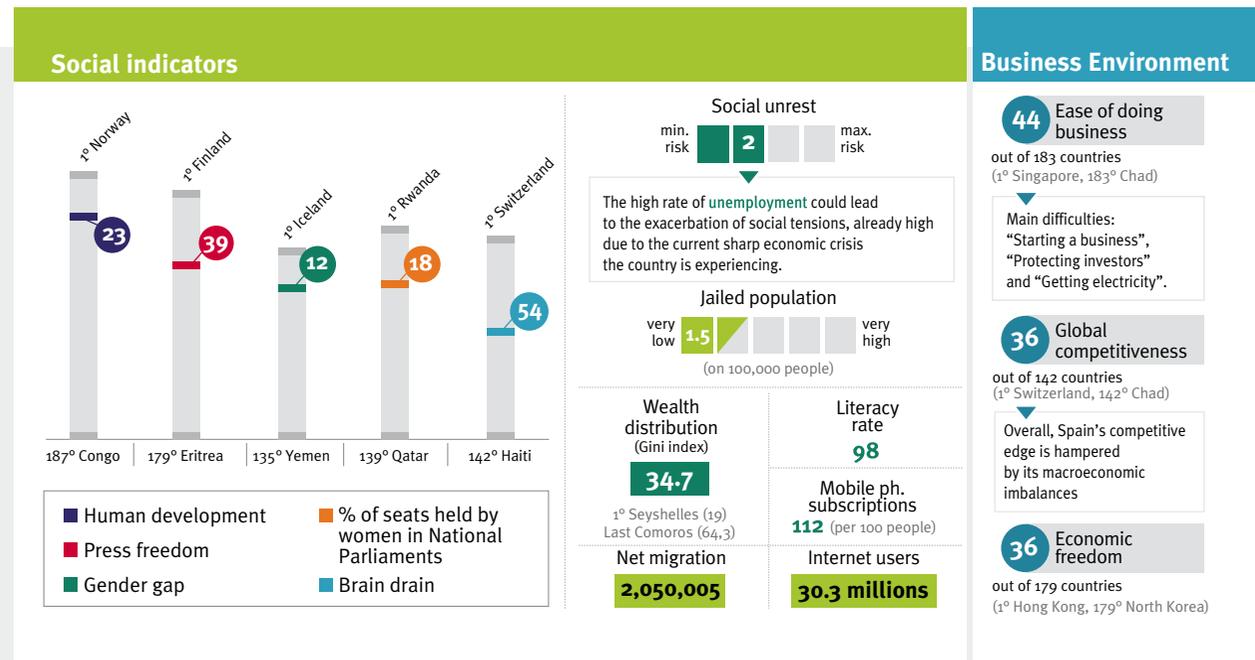
after the United States was once most welcoming to foreigners, lost 85,941 immigrants in 2011 alone.

The situation has also put extreme strains on the countries the immigrants left. Peru, Ecuador, and Colombia have long endured endemic economic shortfalls and profound social inequities. Nations traditionally known as “exporters” of labor are now being slapped hard by repatriation, which feels like a flood of reverse immigration.

As the crisis deepened, Spain’s voluntary return plan dried up fast, making the government literally unable to subsidize the exodus it advertised. In 2011, Estrella Rodriguez, who heads the integration office of the labor ministry, acknowledged that applications to leave had outstripped all predictions. Meanwhile, experts bashed the program as failing to meet its goals.

For many immigrants, most of them Latinos, Spain long ago lost its “Promised Land” sheen. Madrid’s immigrant community has plummeted since last January. The Spanish capital now numbers 1.047 million immigrants, down 56,000 people from a year ago. Last year alone, some 20,000 immigrants returned home using the voluntary return plan. While the number seems impressive, it represents only 10 percent of the total requests for homeward bound-ticket funding.

According to the projections by the country’s National Statistic Institute, Spain’s total population, which recently experienced a period of intense growth, will fall by more than half a million people. The loss is both quantitative and qualitative, since most of the foreigners now being forced out are young





D. Doyle/Bloomberg via Getty Images

Immigrant protests complaining about Spanish bank speculation.

and were once economically active, helping to spur the country's growth.

It's a bitter pill.

After 17 years, Isabel Sierra is returning home to her native Santo Domingo. "I've had Spanish citizenship since 1999," she says. "But I'm Spanish only as a statistic. When push comes to shove I continue to be a foreigner, a 'nigger.' What's happening in Spain is what happened in the Dominican Republic, where Dominicans stopped wanting to do certain jobs and Haitians took over for them. Immigrants to Spain took the work that Spaniards refused to do. But the crisis changed everything. Now, Spaniards are fighting for jobs, any job. Which means there's no more room for foreigners."

Spain's decline is also measurable in terms of the mobility of its own citizens. In 2011, as the crisis deepened, the country saw a population drop of 130,000 people, the first such dip in decades. From January to September, an estimated 50,000 young Spaniards left

the country in search of work elsewhere in Europe or in the United States. Many also headed for Brazil, the South American giant whose boom has gone against the trend and acts as a magnet for migration flows. The Spanish exodus grew in the first six months of 2012, with 40,000 people leaving the country (a 44.2 percent jump over 2011).

**T**he first to go usually represent the weak links in the labor market, mostly people who came to Madrid during the golden age of the capital's construction boom, a time when growth potential seemed infinite.

"The day I finally got my identity card was a wonderful moment," says Arnold Mangamba, who came to Spain from Senegal. "I could finally walk the streets and not fear for my status. I could start a new life." Mangamba belongs to the what might be called the third category of crisis victims, with the first numbering immigrants forced to return home, the second young Spaniards in search of work, and finally

the immigrants who, now jobless, literally have no place to go.

Mangamba obtained his legal documents at the end of 2010, after two years in hiding. Now, he's unemployed, doesn't have a cent to his name, and feels overcome by hopelessness. "Spain is longer a paradise," he says. "But my country is the same hell I left six years ago. Before I got here, I thought: Spain is Europe. I thought I'd stop here, lead a dignified life, and finally return to Senegal as an old man, with a pension that would allow me to live decently. Now, when I talk to friends from Senegal, I try to convince them not to come here. I tell them that Europe is not a paradise."

Father Antonio Diaz, director of Karibu, an NGO that assists with sub-Saharan Africans in Spain, paints yet another bleak picture. "Some of these immigrants have lived here for 10, even 15 years, and now they've lost everything, including their jobs, their homes, even their documents. They're desperate. They came to Spain to maintain their families at home. Now, they carry the weight of failure, not to mention that their families remain far away. Many lapse into depression."

The new "wretched of the earth" now seek a life raft anywhere they can find it. Some leave Spain and seek work in France, Great Britain, or Germany. The stampede often means they enter and leave Spain illegally. The Spanish exodus thus becomes a kind of second migration, from scratch, based on despair and hope.

At the root of this social and human catastrophe is what's known in Spanish as the "burbuja inmobiliaria," or the housing bubble. No story better represents the bubble's cruel illusion than what happened in Valdeluz, a residential area in the suburbs of Madrid once peddled as a "paradise for families," but since transformed into a ghost town. The idea was to create a housing complex for some 30,000 people with its own high-speed rail connection futuristic station, at a cost of €18 million. But the crisis intervened. The station was never completed, the train never ran, 9,000 completed apartments remain empty, thousands more were never finished. Some 2,000 people call this unfinished housing nightmare home.

The housing bubble that exploded in Valdeluz's

face spread to residential areas throughout Spain. In 2007, at the height of the building frenzy, experts predicted the construction and sale of 800,000 homes annually. A year later, real estate sales had fallen by 25 percent (42 percent in Catalonia alone). According to recent survey conducted by Studio R.R. de Acuna Asociados, there are some 358,000 stalled housing projects in Spain and more than a million drawn up projects there were never started. Moreover, the country has some 1.34 million housing units for sale with no buyers in sight. Spanish territory now contains a record 3.6 million vacant homes and apartments.

The collapse of the housing bubble has had crushing effects on countless small towns and communities that lived off the building boom. Take Lucena, in Andalusia. The city of 40,000 inhabitants was known for its more than 500 carpentry workshops. In Lucena's heyday, some 40 Argentine immigrant families lived in the city. More than half have since gone home.

The story is a constant throughout Spain. The Argentine community deserves its own crisis chapter. Argentine immigrants in Spain were victimized by two separate collapses, first at home, then in Spain. According to the newspaper "El Pais," Argentines fled to Spain "by the tens of thousands in the first years of the 21st-century, when Buenos Aires was itself stricken by crisis. More than 250,000 people moved to Europe between 2000 and 2005, most of them settling in Spain. Now, thousands are headed home, fearing they're about to relive what they already know."

In 2002, 56,000 Argentine immigrants arrived in Spain, a number that rose to 109,000 a year later. Then came the first hints of a slowdown and reminders that what happened at home could also occur in Spain. Banks stopped loaning; unemployment rose; street protests grew common.

But the Argentine exodus represents a "silent return," says Matias Garrido, secretary-general of La Casa Argentina in Madrid. "Buenos Aires has provided no support. There's a key segment of Argentine society that sees us as traitors because we weren't at home to deal with our own crisis. They see us as people who ran away. So now, their attitude is, 'Don't ask for help in trying to get back.'"