International and Internal Migration to Remote Rural Spain: Profiles, Drivers and Regional Impacts (2021–2025)

Gómez Giménez, José Manuel

Universidad Politécnica de Madrid

jm.gomez@upm.es

Abstract:

Many European regions are facing profound demographic change, characterised by population ageing, labour shortages and increasing territorial disparities between metropolitan cores and peripheral rural areas. In Southern Europe, and particularly in Spain, long-standing patterns of rural depopulation have generated structurally fragile territories with shrinking labour markets, declining service provision and limited demographic renewal. Yet the period 2021–2025 reveals emerging migration dynamics that challenge the narrative of irreversible rural decline in some of the most remote municipalities.

This paper examines the social profiles and regional impacts of new residents settling in remote rural Spain during this recent period. The analysis focuses on identifying the groups contributing to these population changes and assessing their differentiated effects on demographic sustainability across highly peripheral territories.

The study relies on quantitative analysis of municipal-level demographic data from official statistics, including annual population registers and residential mobility records. Special attention is paid to age structure, nationality, and spatial patterns of settlement across different degrees of rural isolation. By comparing recent population trends with long-term historical trajectories, the paper evaluates whether observed gains represent temporary fluctuations or structural demographic shifts.

The results identify three distinct profiles among new rural residents. First, retirement returnees who relocate to their municipalities of origin at the end of their working lives, contributing modestly to population figures but reinforcing ageing dynamics. Second, domestic “neo-rural” migrants, typically of working age, who relocate from urban areas and concentrate in relatively accessible rural municipalities, often within commuting distance of metropolitan regions. Third—and most significant for demographic renewal—international migrants of working age with ongoing family projects, who are settling even in the most remote and ageing municipalities. Unlike other groups, this profile shows a measurable capacity to stabilise or reverse long-term depopulation trends, particularly in areas previously considered demographically unsustainable.

The paper discusses the implications of these findings for regional disparities and labour market dynamics, highlighting the role of international migration in sustaining agricultural production, care services and local economic activity in peripheral regions. By distinguishing between internal and international migration flows and their differentiated spatial impacts, the study contributes to debates on migration selectivity, human capital redistribution and the capacity of migration to mitigate demographic and economic imbalances in peripheral European territories.

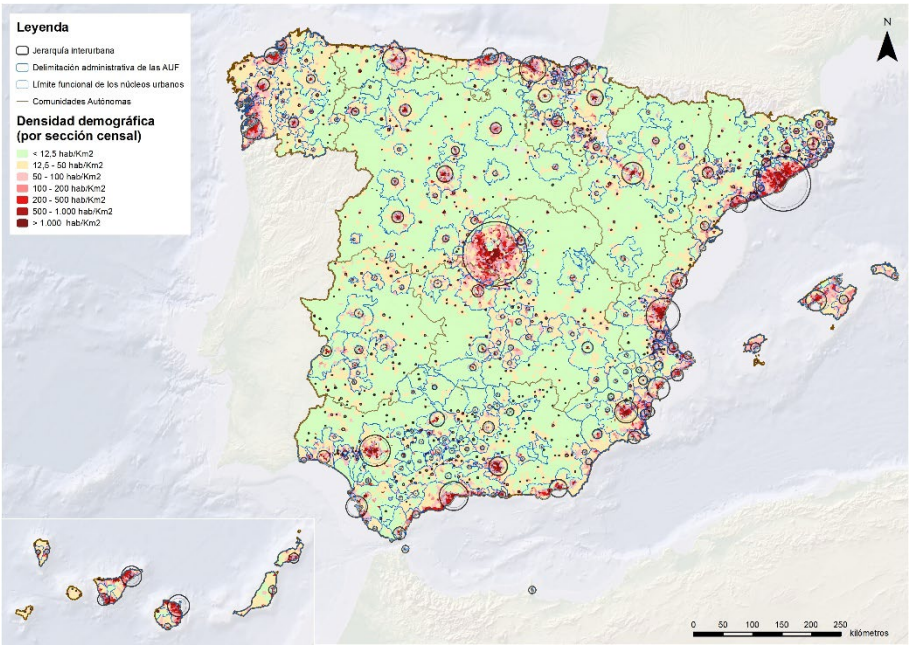
Keywords:

International migration; Internal migration; Rural regions; Demographic change; Labour shortages

1. Objective and Contribution

Large parts of inland Spain have experienced sustained rural depopulation since the mid-twentieth century, resulting in ageing, masculinisation, labour shortages and the progressive erosion of local services. These dynamics are particularly acute in the most isolated municipalities located outside Functional Urban Areas (FUAs), where low density, limited accessibility and weak labour market integration reinforce structural fragility. However, the period 2021–2025 reveals a moderate but measurable demographic recovery in some of these territories. This paper examines whether this recent upturn represents a structural shift or a temporary fluctuation, and, above all, who the new residents are and what their differentiated demographic impacts may be.

Figure 1. Population Density by Census Section in Spain (2021 Census). Source: National Statistics Institute (INE) and Spanish National Geographic Institute (IGN).



The study focuses on the most vulnerable inland macro-territorial area of Spain, here termed the Central Iberian Low-Density Area. This designation refers to an inland macro-region spanning parts of Aragón, Castilla y León, Castilla-La Mancha and La Rioja, characterised by very low municipal population densities and defined through a functional delimitation that excludes all municipalities integrated into Functional Urban Areas (labour markets centred on urban cores of more than 10,000 inhabitants with commuting rates above 15%). Within this macro-area, the analysis concentrates exclusively on the rural municipalities outside the four small urban centres (Cuenca, Soria, Teruel and Calatayud), where average density falls to approximately 4.4 inhabitants per square kilometre—well below the commonly cited European threshold of demographic desertification.

The main objective is to analyse the recent demographic rebound (2021–2025) in remote rural Spain and to identify the socio-demographic profile of new residents, with particular attention to the relative weight of international migration. Two broad research questions guide the analysis. First, are recent gains the result of diversified internal mobility processes—such as return migration or domestic neo-rural settlement—or is international migration the principal driver of demographic stabilisation in the most isolated territories? Second, what are the implications of these differentiated flows for demographic sustainability, labour market renewal and territorial resilience?

The contribution of the paper is threefold. Empirically, it provides a fine-grained municipal-level analysis of recent migration flows in highly peripheral rural Spain using annual official statistics. Conceptually, it integrates rural sociology, migration studies and territorial analysis through a functional definition of rurality that moves beyond simple demographic thresholds. Substantively, it demonstrates that international migration plays a structurally distinct and quantitatively decisive role in sustaining the working-age population in the most fragile inland areas, thereby challenging narratives that attribute recent rural revitalisation primarily to domestic neo-rural trends.

Figure 2. Location of the Central Iberian Low-Density Area (Celtiberia) within Spain. Source: Own elaboration based on functional delimitation of municipalities outside FUAs.

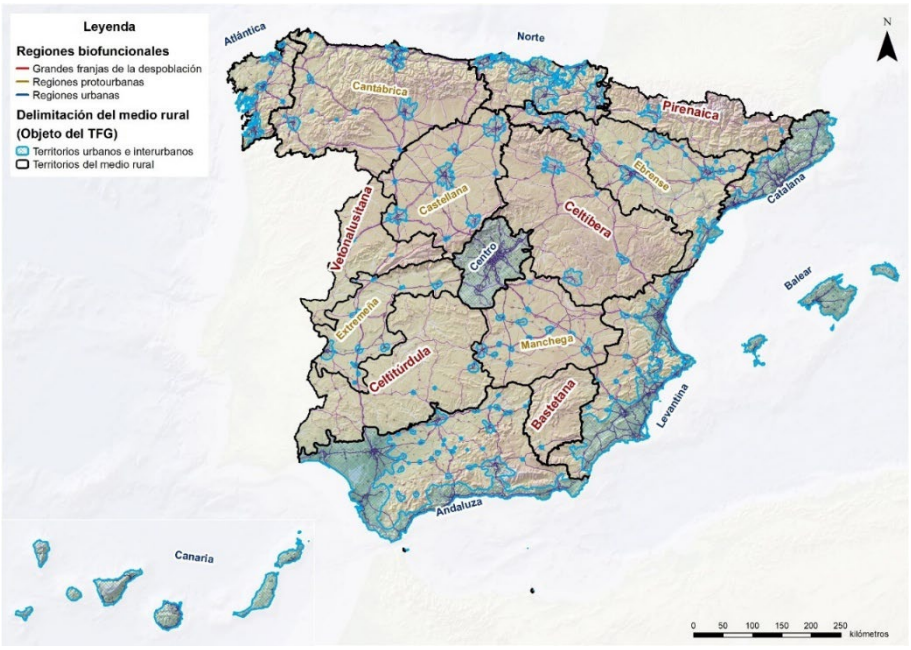


Figure 3. Population Structure of the Central Iberian Low-Density Area (Celtiberia) Compared to Other Rural Areas in Spain (2021). Source: Own elaboration based on Annual Census (INE).

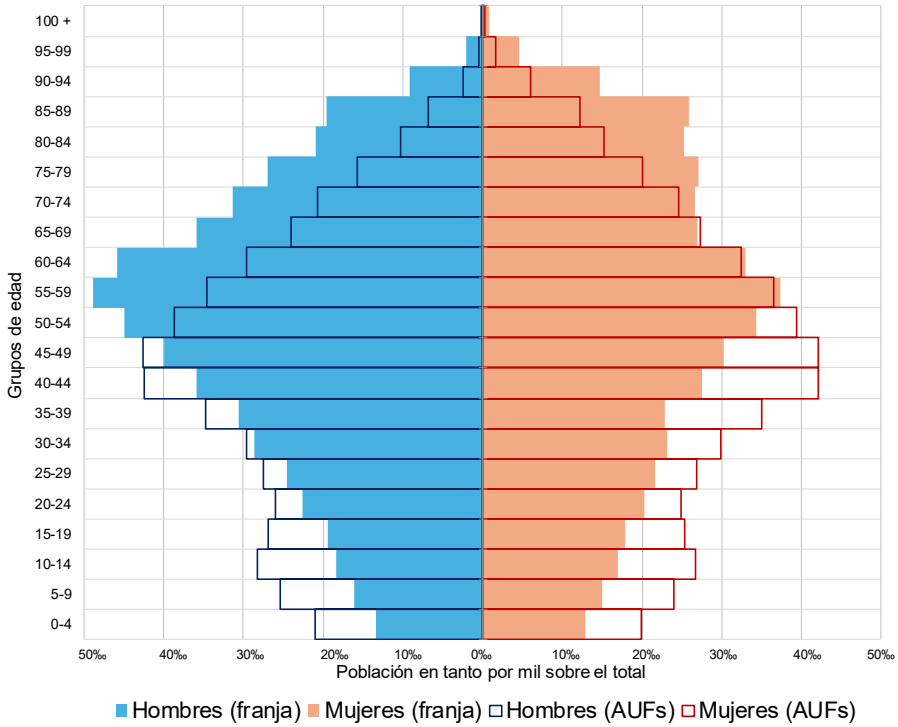
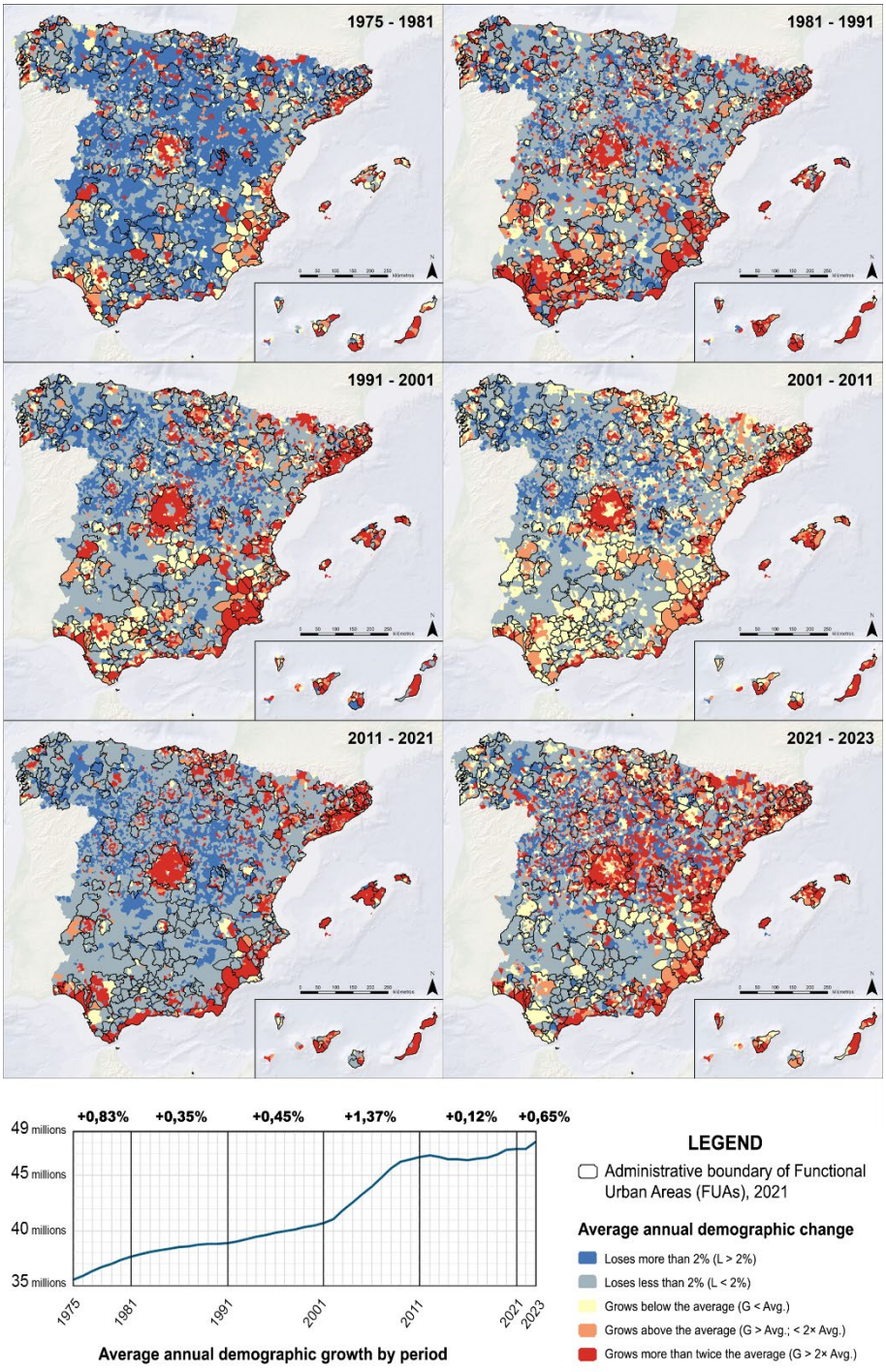


Figure 4. Population Change in Spanish Municipalities by Period (1975–2023). Source: Own elaboration based on historical municipal population series (INE).



2. Data and Methods

The research is based exclusively on official demographic data from the Spanish Annual Population Census (Censo Anual de Población) for the period 2021–2025. The data are disaggregated at municipal level by age, sex and place of birth (Spain vs. abroad), allowing for a detailed socio-demographic characterisation of recent population changes. Two complementary census tables are used to estimate both net and gross migration balances, thereby validating results through cross-checking procedures.

The territorial delimitation follows a two-step functional approach. First, rurality is defined negatively, as all municipalities located outside Functional Urban Areas. FUAs are operationalised as integrated labour markets centred on urban cores of more than 10,000 inhabitants and including surrounding municipalities with structural commuting flows above 15%. This functional definition recognises that the urban–rural divide operates along a gradient rather than a strict administrative boundary and avoids conflating peri-urban expansion with structurally isolated rurality.

Second, within the rural domain, a biofunctional regionalisation previously developed by the author is applied in order to distinguish consolidated urban regions, proto-urban regions and low-density depopulated belts. The Central Iberian Low-Density Area represents the most demographically vulnerable of these macro-regions, with densities below 12.5 inhabitants per square kilometre at the regional level and substantially lower values in its rural core.

The quantitative strategy proceeds in three stages. First, total population change between 2021 and 2025 is decomposed into natural change (births minus deaths) and migration balance. Given the advanced ageing structure of the study area, natural decrease is expected to be structurally negative. Second, migration balances are disaggregated by place of birth in order to distinguish between national and foreign-born populations. Third, age-cohort comparisons are conducted, focusing particularly on the "support generation" (20–59 years), which is central to labour market functioning, reproductive capacity and demographic sustainability.

By comparing cohort evolution across the four-year period, the study estimates whether observed increases in specific age groups can plausibly be attributed to in-migration rather than demographic inertia. This cohort-based method allows the identification of selective age patterns among both immigrants and emigrants and facilitates a comparison between the demographic structure of in-flows and the pre-existing population pyramid.

Although the original research design included a proposed qualitative extension (surveys, semi-structured interviews and participatory approaches in selected municipalities), the present paper focuses exclusively on the quantitative phase. The qualitative component is discussed only as a future research avenue for exploring motivations, integration processes and local perceptions.

3. Results

The results confirm that the Central Iberian Low-Density Area experienced a moderate net population increase between 2021 and 2025, despite a persistent and structurally negative natural balance. Without migration, the area would have continued to lose population due to ageing and low fertility. Migration therefore emerges as the decisive factor explaining the observed demographic stabilisation.

However, not all migration flows have the same demographic impact. The analysis identifies three distinct profiles among new residents, each with differentiated territorial and demographic effects.

First, retirement returnees—individuals born in Spain who return to their municipalities of origin at the end of their working lives—contribute modestly to total population figures but reinforce ageing dynamics. Their presence increases the absolute population but does not substantially alter the dependency ratio or labour force structure.

Second, domestic neo-rural migrants of working age relocate from urban areas to rural municipalities, often motivated by housing affordability, lifestyle preferences or improved teleworking conditions. Yet, these flows are spatially selective: they concentrate primarily in rural municipalities with better accessibility or partial functional integration into urban

labour markets. Their demographic impact in the most isolated municipalities of the Central Iberian Low-Density Area remains limited.

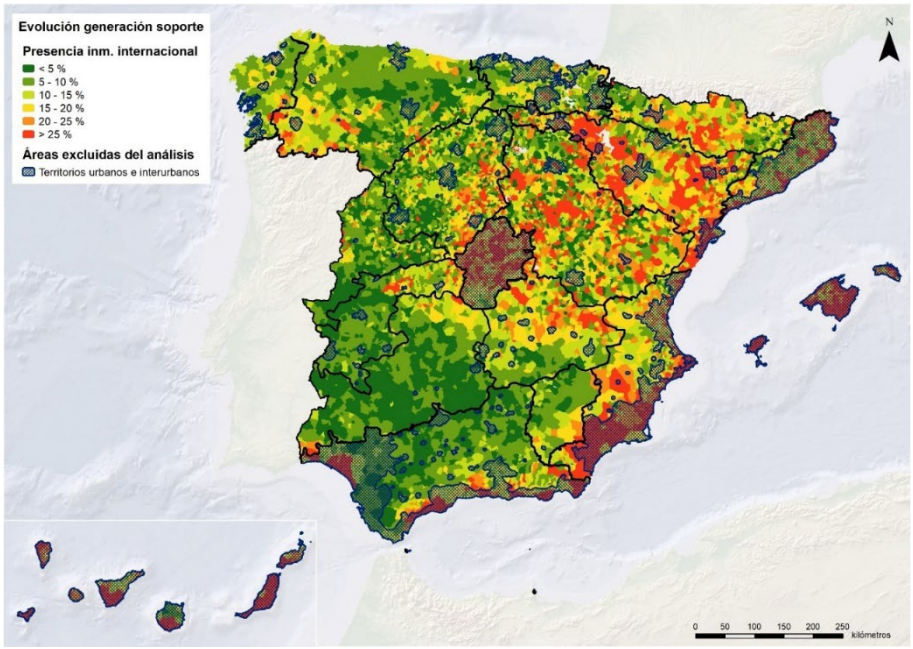
Third—and most significant—the foreign-born working-age population shows a clear and measurable increase across the most remote rural municipalities. While the national-born population continues to register net outflows or stagnation in key age cohorts, the foreign-born population displays sustained net in-migration. The cohort analysis reveals that gains in the 20–59 age group are overwhelmingly driven by individuals born abroad. In several municipalities, increases in this support generation offset both national out-migration and natural decrease.

The age structure of international migrants differs substantially from that of the pre-existing population. Whereas the rural population pyramid in the study area is top-heavy, with pronounced ageing and a deficit in younger adult cohorts, the foreign-born population exhibits a more balanced and labour-oriented age profile. This selective inflow contributes to stabilising school enrolments, sustaining local labour markets—particularly in agriculture, care services and low-skilled sectors—and partially correcting gender imbalances in some municipalities.

Importantly, the analysis shows that net population growth at the aggregate level masks contrasting internal dynamics: while national-born cohorts often register net negative migration balances, these are more than compensated by foreign-born inflows. Thus, the demographic rebound is not the result of a broad-based rural renaissance but rather of a selective and territorially differentiated process in which international migration plays a structurally central role.

These findings lend strong support to the hypothesis that international migration constitutes the principal driver of recent demographic stabilisation in the most isolated rural areas. The alternative hypothesis—that diversified domestic return or neo-rural flows represent the core engine of repopulation—receives only partial and geographically limited confirmation.

Figure 5. Share of Foreign-Born Population within the Working-Age Cohort (20–59) across Spanish Municipalities (2021–2025). Source: Own elaboration based on Annual Population Census (INE).



4. Conclusions

The recent demographic gains observed in some of Spain's most remote rural municipalities do not signal a generalised reversal of long-term depopulation trends. Instead, they reflect a selective migration dynamic in which international migrants of working age play a disproportionate and structurally significant role.

The findings suggest that, in highly peripheral inland territories characterised by advanced ageing and functional isolation, domestic neo-rural migration alone is insufficient to ensure demographic sustainability. While such flows may revitalise accessible rural areas, they do not reach the most remote municipalities at scale. In contrast, foreign-born migrants demonstrate both a greater territorial dispersion and a stronger concentration in working-age cohorts, thereby contributing directly to labour market renewal and demographic support ratios.

From a territorial perspective, this implies that international migration is not merely an urban phenomenon but a central component of rural resilience in low-density regions. In the Central Iberian Low-Density Area, demographic stabilisation is inseparable from the presence of foreign-born populations. Policies addressing labour shortages, service provision and territorial cohesion must therefore recognise the structural contribution of international migrants to rural sustainability.

Future qualitative research will be necessary to explore the motivations behind settlement decisions, patterns of social integration, local attitudes and the long-term trajectories of migrant households. Nevertheless, the quantitative evidence presented here demonstrates that the demographic sustainability of the most fragile rural territories in Spain currently depends, to a significant extent, on international migration flows.

In sum, rather than signalling the end of rural decline, the period 2021–2025 reveals a reconfiguration of demographic dynamics in which migration selectivity and human capital redistribution reshape the population structure of peripheral regions. Understanding these processes is essential for interpreting contemporary rural change in Southern Europe and for designing policies capable of addressing both demographic imbalance and regional inequality.