

Recent developments in immigration patterns: a case study in Málaga province (Spain)

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How to cite:

Larrubia-Vargas, R., Batista Zamora, A.E. & Natera Rivas, J.J. (2023). Aging of the society: the European perspective. *Bulletin of Geography. Socio-economic Series*, 61(61): 93-102. DOI: <http://doi.org/10.12775/bgss-2023-0027>

Abstract. Foreign populations play an important role in the Axarquía comarca in the province of Málaga, Spain, where in some municipalities they account for over 40% of residents. Many of these populations are very small and have come to depend on immigration to maintain population levels. In this context, the objective of our research is to assess the impact that both Brexit and the Covid-19 pandemic have had on immigration into these areas. We show how Brexit has led to an increase in the number of Britons registered with their Local Councils, in part due to the post-Brexit need to do so; and how the limitations in mobility resulting from the pandemic led to a reduction in immigration into the area to just a few arrivals from nearby areas. We end by showing that, just a year later, the migratory movements into the Axarquía had returned to normal levels.

Article details:

Received: 30 June 2023

Revised: 01 August 2023

Accepted: 20 September 2023

Key words:

demography,
Brexit,
Covid-19,
Axarquía,
Spain

Contents:

1. Introduction	94
2. Research materials and methods	96
3. Research results	97
3.1. The impact of Brexit	97
3.2. The influence of COVID-19	98
4. Discussion and conclusions	100
Acknowledgements	101
References	101

1. Introduction

The Axarquía is a *comarca* (sub-region) at the eastern end of the province of Málaga in southern Spain (Fig. 1); with a resident population of 224,373 people in 2022, the foreign population accounts for high percentages of total population (especially in the small, non-coastal municipalities) and is mainly composed of Britons. This confirms earlier research by Delgado & Sortino (2018), who indicated that, in the province of Málaga, immigrants from the European Union prefer to settle in inland areas of the province, in contrast with other foreign immigrants who tend to settle on the coast. On this question, Ghio et al. (2022) indicated that, at a European level, retired people are more prepared to migrate to rural areas than younger people, even when these rural areas may be less economically dynamic; a fact that contributes to a process which, according to Egidi (2020) implies the progressive enlarging of destinations from coastal places to locations in the rural countryside.

In this way, the British immigrants resident in the Axarquía, a population group with a high average age (Natera-Rivas & Batista-Zamora, 2019), have gradually “colonised” this rural space in a process that affects not only the scattered isolated settlements that extend across the western hills of the Sierras of Tejeda and Almijara, but also an important number of smaller villages, which once formed the second stage in the system of rural settlements in this area (Natera-Rivas et al., 2021). Fortunately, this process of “colonisation” is far removed from the model of residential developments linked to golf courses that have come to dominate inland areas in the west of the province and that have been described as “developmentalist” and perverse (Navarro, 2006). In this sense, and reaffirming the ideas put forward by Navarro (2006), research in the Valencia region on Spain's east coast has shown that there is no positive correlation between increased investment in tourist accommodation and restaurants and an increase or even maintenance of the population of the small rural municipalities in which this investment has taken place (Osorio-Acosta et al., 2019).

In line with its relatively high average age, the British contingent in the Axarquía is essentially residential: something that can be clearly seen when we find that, for example, the number of people registered as unemployed in this group is extremely low in relation with the total number of people registered (Podadera & Calderón, 2016). By way of example, in January 2010, when population levels were at a maximum, the number of people looking for work was just 1,600 out of a total registered

population of 75,000 (or just over 2%, at a time when unemployment in the province was very high at around 30%). And, as a collateral consequence of this process of residential relocation, this foreign elderly population has improved the quality of life of the elderly as a whole in the places where they live (Valero-Escandell et al., 2023).

The high British population to which we have been referring is a reflection of the idea put forward by Benlloch (2018), who claimed that there had been a democratisation in the phenomenon of residential emigration towards Spain (among other places) that meant that leaving the United Kingdom to live in a place with a better climate is no longer a privilege of the upper classes and has now become a sort of “universal right”. However, as Durán (2018) made clear, climate is not the only incentive leading immigrants of this kind to establish themselves in a particular area. Another reason for their decision is the accessibility of their new homes to airports, as well as the increase in the number of flights to and from their home regions in the UK and the reduction in the cost of air travel. There can be no doubt that, together with its excellent weather conditions, the Axarquía also offers its closeness to Málaga Airport, which has many connections to different destinations in the United Kingdom run by both flag-carrier airlines and low-cost operators. These inland areas of the Axarquía have high levels of accessibility that go further than one might think from a quick glance at the official road network. This is because it is also endowed with an intricate network of country tracks that extend like arteries across the whole *comarca* (Consejería, 2006). As a result, almost all these villages fall within a 60-minute isochrone from the provincial capital in the city of Málaga (Consejería, 2021). Thus, the main drawback in terms of accessibility – in this case, virtual – are the levels of Internet broadband coverage, which can be improved, as indicated by a study carried out by MINECO (Ministerio, 2020).

However, the unexpected appearance of Brexit created wide unease amongst the British colony outside the United Kingdom in general, and in Spain in particular. The conditions of their new status as residents in Spain were far from clear, although when the Withdrawal Agreement, which envisaged a transition period, came into force, it enabled all those British people capable of demonstrating residence in Spain prior to 2021 to retain their rights; the most obvious way of doing this was by registering with the Local Council as a resident in the town (*empadronamiento*), or by registering on the General Register of Foreigners (*Registro General de Extranjeros*). It is therefore not surprising that

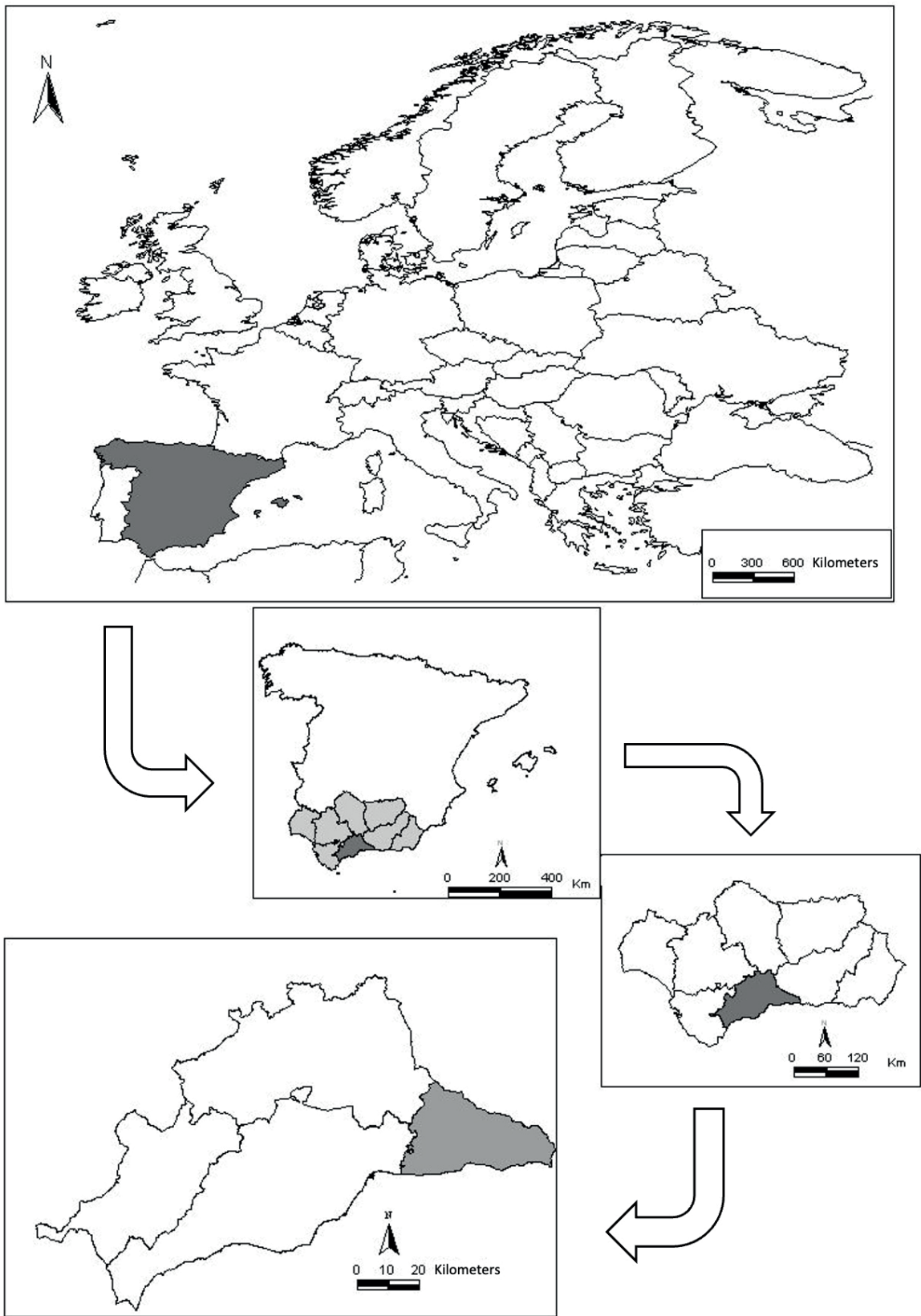


Fig. 1. Location map of the study area
Source: Authors' work

over two thirds of new residents who registered in the province of Málaga in 2020, the province with the greatest population increases in Spain that year, were British (Mármol et al., 2022).

Immigration trends were also dramatically affected by the Covid-19 pandemic and the associated periods of lockdown and restricted movement (González & Spijker, 2022); the closure of frontiers had devastating effects on international migration (IOM, 2020) which, as we have seen, is enormously important in the Axarquía, while in Spain as a whole migration from urban to rural areas increased (González-Leonardo et al., 2022). All of this probably changed, perhaps temporarily, migratory flows towards the Axarquía, whose low levels of natural growth make it highly dependent on immigration simply to maintain, let alone increase, its population levels.

The objectives of this research must be viewed within this context. The first is to assess the influence of Brexit on the numbers of British residents registered in the Axarquía; and the second is to assess the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on migratory flows in the comarca. The originality of this research lies in the scale of the study.

2. Research materials and methods

The comarca of Axarquía is made up of a total of 31 municipalities with a resident population of 224,373 people in 2022. There are striking contrasts between these municipalities: the largest, Vélez Málaga (83,899 inhabitants), is the traditional capital of the sub-region and contains an important tourist resort called Torre del Mar; other coastal tourist resorts include Nerja, Algarrobo and Torrox, while Rincón de la Victoria, which is also on the coast, borders on the city of Málaga and is now fully integrated into its metropolitan area. The other 26 municipalities have no access to the sea and have significantly lower populations, (the lowest, Salares, has 175 registered residents; the largest, Cómpeta, has 3,814), totalling 41,833 inhabitants in 2022. Many of these inland villages have large foreign populations (for example, in Cómpeta they account for 46.9% of the population and in Sayalonga 44.9%).

In this research, which is essentially quantitative, we have used two fundamental sources: firstly, the statistics from the Continuous Register of Inhabitants and secondly the Statistics on Residential Variations.

The Municipal Register of Inhabitants (*Padrón Municipal de Habitantes*) is an administrative register with a list of all the residents of each municipality

in Spain. Each Local Council is responsible for maintaining its own Municipal Register and keeps the National Statistics Institute (hereinafter INE) up to date with any changes that may occur. With this information, the INE draws up the Continuous Register, which offers the figures for the resident population in each municipality as of 1st January each year. The latest available information is for 1st January 2022. The figure for total population is also accompanied by other variables: sex, age, nationality, country of birth and place of birth/place of residence. The Municipal Register offers little thematic detail compared to, for example, the Census of Population but it has the undoubted advantage of offering a real total, counting all the citizens. The information does not come from a sample group, as happens with the Census, and therefore avoids the problems associated with extrapolating the results of a small sample group to a whole municipality, especially in villages with a very small population. In addition, we are aware of the problems of the Municipal Register as an effective record of retired migrants in Spain, many of whom, as they do not work, do not feel obliged to register with the Spanish authorities (Rodríguez et al. 2010). However, it is the only source that contains information at a municipal level about the nationality of the resident population (other alternatives such as the recent Census of Population and Dwellings of 2021 have problems arising from the sampling method when the spatial unit of reference contains a very small population, as happens in a very significant number of the municipalities in the study area).

The second source we used is the Statistics on Residential Variations (hereinafter SRV) and in particular the figures published by the Andalusia Institute of Statistics and Cartography. These statistics are based on the data for people joining or leaving the register due exclusively to changes in their place of residence and do not take into account changes due to Natural Movements in the Population (births, deaths and marriages). These statistics contain a lot of useful information for our purposes, such as the places of origin (provincial capital, other parts of the province, rest of Andalusia, rest of Spain and abroad) of the immigrants who came to live in the study area. The most recent information can be found in the detailed tables for 2021, which, as they come from the Municipal Register of Inhabitants, are not affected by the problems arising from sample-based methodologies. We have selected the last three years available from this source: 2019, the year prior to the declaration of the pandemic; 2020, the year in which lockdown was declared; and 2021, the last year for which data are available, and when there were virtually no restrictions on migratory movements.

3. Research results

3.1. The impact of Brexit

Twenty sixteen was a crucial year in the relations between the United Kingdom and the European Union with the referendum vote to leave the EU, a process that had become known as “Brexit”. In this context, the UK officially ceased to belong to the EU acquiring the status of a Third State from 1st February 2020, when the Withdrawal Agreement came into force. This established a transition period until 31st December 2020 when Britain’s exit became complete. Thanks to this agreement, British people resident in Spain maintained their right of residence. It also set out the process for obtaining the new residence cards that would be necessary from 2021 onwards. In this new situation, demonstrating that they had been resident in Spain prior to 2021 became a key requirement for those wishing to apply for residence in Spain in the new post-Brexit era. Those who were unable to accredit this would be considered just like any other citizen of a Third State and would be subject to the Law governing Foreign People and the Law on Entrepreneurs. Given that for those who do not have a residence permit, the maximum stay in Spain is now 90 days, and that most of the Britons in the Axarquía are residential immigrants, registration at the Local Council became a useful tool for solving problems arising from Brexit. As a result, the withdrawal of the United Kingdom from the European Union forced British residential tourists to register with the Spanish administration, thereby legalizing their situation in Spain (Castilla-Polo & Rosa-Jiménez, 2019). This boosted their numbers in the official statistics but not necessarily on the ground, in that many of the “new arrivals” were *de facto* already resident in Spain. In this sense, it is important to point out that, at least in the Province of Málaga, Brexit has not led to an increase in British people considering leaving the area, as revealed in a survey conducted by Durán (2022). According to this author, just a quarter of the British people who in 2020 declared that they intended to return to the UK cited Brexit as the reason. Another important issue post-Brexit was entitlement to public health treatment, which was now obtainable by registration on the Central Register of Foreign People rather than at the Local Council (Durán, 2021). However, this did not affect the local figures for those registered in each municipality, as the people who registered on the Central Register were then automatically

included on Local Council registers if they were not already on them.

Having described the context, we will now look at the population figures in more detail. The British population, the largest amongst the various foreign communities in the sub-region, accounts for a considerable percentage of all the people registered in the Axarquía, 4.61% in 2022. This percentage is lower in the coastal municipalities (2.72% in the same year), and much higher in the inland areas, in which British people account for 12.89% of all those registered. The percentage of British people has increased notably since 2003 when they made up 2.29%, 1.74% and 4.16% respectively. In consequence, the behaviour of this group of immigrants can have a very strong influence on trends in the total population of the small inland municipalities. In this sense, Fig. 2 shows how the number of British people registered at local councils underwent a systematic increase from 2003 to 2013, when a very sharp decline was noted. The reasons for this downturn, which was also noted in other areas with a large British community (Mantecón et al., 2014), include the economic crisis and the depreciation in the value of the pound with the resulting loss of purchasing power amongst this group of population, many of whom lived on pensions from the UK. In many of the small inland municipalities in the Axarquía, the fall in the British population led to a fall in overall population numbers (Natera-Rivas & Batista-Zamora, 2019). During the next three years, the number of registered British people remained stable before beginning to increase again from 2019 in the coastal areas and from 2020 in inland ones, a dynamic which was also detected at national level by Durán (2021) for retired elderly immigrants.

This recovery in numbers was almost certainly a result of the new conditions imposed on this population group by Brexit, according to which, as mentioned earlier, the final situation as regards the type of residence permit they could obtain depended on their capacity to demonstrate pre-2021 residence in Spain. Official residence can be demonstrated by registering on the General Register of Foreign People: variations in which (people joining or leaving the register) are later incorporated into the municipal register. This suggests that the notable increase in British people in the inland municipalities in 2021 and 2022 was due to the transfer of information from the General Register. As a result, the increase in the number of people registered on the Municipal Register is probably due less to the arrival of new settlers (the increase coincided with restrictions on mobility resulting from the pandemic), and more

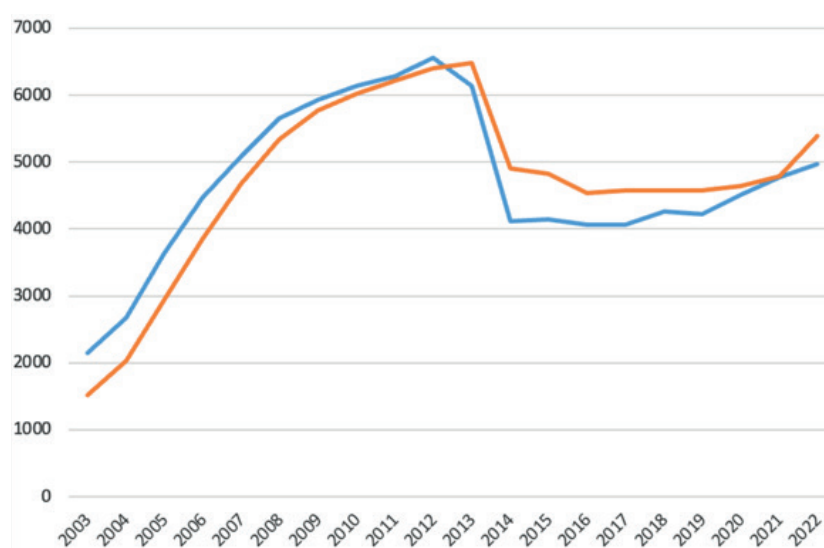


Fig. 2. . British people registered in coastal and inland municipalities in the Axarquía (2003–2022)

Source: Statistics from the Continuous Register. Drawn up by the authors

to the coming to the surface of a “hidden” group of residents, who until then had not felt the need to legalise their residential situation (as stressed earlier in references to the under-representation of residential immigrants in the Municipal Register of Inhabitants).

3.2. The influence of COVID-19

On 15th March 2020, the Spanish government announced the lockdown of the entire population due to the Covid-19 pandemic, a situation which continued until 21st June. Due to the particular characteristics of the homes in which many people had to spend lockdown, plus the fact that the pandemic hit towns and cities much harder than rural areas, there was a shift in preferences towards larger dwellings with open spaces situated in small towns and rural areas. This return to life in the country was also related to the idea of a less polluted, less crowded and generally healthier lifestyle (Ros, 2021). As a result, many people in urban areas began to appreciate the quality of life in small rural villages more highly, in some cases overturning the negative prejudices they had about the countryside (Llorente-Adán & Ruiz-Tricio, 2020).

It is important to remember that, when investigating the influence of the pandemic on immigration trends into the Axarquía, we consulted the information for people joining the register over two two-year periods (2019–2020 and 2020–2021) of the SRV. The comparisons are presented in

Tables 1 (2019–2020) and 2 (2020–2021). The tables show the changes in absolute numbers of the people joining the register between the first and second year. The percentages show the relative increase or decrease as compared to the absolute values for the first of the two years considered. The figures for these new arrivals are broken down according to their different places of origin. Positive figures indicate that in the second year under consideration (2020 in Table 1, 2021 in Table 2) more people joined the register than in the first (2019 in Table 1, 2020 in Table 2), while negative figures indicate the opposite situation.

As can be seen in Table 1, the general context of the first 2-year period (2019–20) is one of decline in the number of people joining the register, both in the Axarquía as a whole and in the two groups of municipalities (coastal and inland) that make it up. In absolute terms, this decline is attributable in the vast majority of cases to the coastal municipalities where there was a decline in 2020 of 704 in the number of new arrivals compared to the previous year. A fact especially worth highlighting is that, in relative terms, the number of people joining the register in the small inland municipalities remained almost unchanged, with a fall of just -0.51%, compared to drops of -6% in the coastal towns. Not only that, in the table, one can also see a difference in the behaviour of the two groups of municipalities according to the origin of the people joining the register. Indeed, the group of coastal municipalities received a smaller number of arrivals from almost all the different origins with

Table 1. Changes in the number of people joining the register. Figures from the Statistics of Residential Variations, broken down according to the location of the municipality where they previously lived (2019–2020)

	TOTAL	Málaga (capital)	Rest of Málaga	Rest of Andalusia	Rest of Spain	Abroad
Axarquía as a whole	-717 -5.54%	17 0.65%	-79 -2.41%	51 4.43%	-3 -0.17%	-703 -16.94%
Inland municipalities	-13 -0.51%	36 14.40%	35 4.00%	16 11.59%	-5 -2.10%	-95 -8.90%
Coastal municipalities	-704 -6.79%	-19 -0.81%	-114 -4.75%	35 3.45%	2 0.13%	-608 -19.72%

Source: Statistics of Residential Variations in Andalusia. Drawn up by the authors

the exception of those from the city of Málaga and the rest of Andalusia. By contrast, in the small inland municipalities the situation was exactly the opposite. There were more people joining the register in 2020 from all the different places of origin. With the exception of those from abroad and those from the rest of Spain, it is important to make clear that the lion's share of the increase in the people joining the register was of people who had previously lived in the province of Málaga, divided equally between those who came from the capital city, Málaga, and those who came from other parts of the province. We should also indicate that the people coming from the neighbouring province of Granada increased by 41% and that the increase in the "rest of Andalusia" group was due exclusively to people from the province of Granada, more than compensating for the decline in the number of people joining the register from other provinces in Andalusia. This suggests that there was an increase in arrivals from nearby areas and that this could have had a suction effect bringing in other people from these areas forced by the need – or perhaps the opportunity (working from home) – to move to less-populated municipalities in the post-lockdown context, as indicated by the still-limited available literature (see Molina et al., 2020).

The end of the restrictions on mobility had a very significant impact on the numbers of people joining the register in the Axarquía (Table 2). Between 2020 and 2021, the overall figures were no longer negative, and the number of people joining the register increased by 11.96%, or 1462 more new registrations in absolute terms. The only negative trend was in migration from the provincial capital, the opposite to that observed in 2019–20. Indeed, while in the first two-year period, the inland municipalities had enjoyed a more positive population dynamic than the coastal ones; in the

second two-year period, this situation was reversed. It is true that in both groups the number of people joining the register was higher in 2021, but it is also true that the increase was much greater in the coastal towns – a difference that was especially pronounced in the case of the foreign population. It is also important to highlight the fact that although the number of people joining the register from outside Spain fell in 2020, just a year later they represented two thirds of all new arrivals in the comarca as a whole (66.14%) and in the coastal municipalities (67.38%) and over 60% (61.28%) in the small inland municipalities (61.28%). This suggests that the capacity of the Axarquía to attract foreign residents was not affected by the pandemic; in fact, quite the contrary – once the restrictions on free circulation of people had been lifted, the flows into the area of people from abroad returned rapidly to levels that were much higher than for people from the other possible origins.

The flows into the Axarquía from the rest of Andalusia also restarted with significant increases, especially into the inland municipalities. In addition, if we look at the province of origin of these new arrivals in detail, changes can be observed with regard to the pandemic era. At that time, as indicated earlier, the province of Granada was sending by far the largest number of immigrants to the Axarquía. In the 2-year period 2020–2021, when the flows into the area from all over Andalusia revived dramatically (although Granada was still the main source of immigrants into the comarca) it accounted for just 36% of these immigrants from the rest of Andalusia. In other words, the return to normal mobility led to the normalisation of inland immigration flows which in the previous two-year period had been reduced almost entirely to "proximity immigration" from very nearby areas.

Table 2. People joining the register as set out in the Statistics of Residential Variations, according to the location of the municipality where they previously lived (2020–2021)

	TOTAL	Málaga (capital)	Rest of Málaga	Rest of Andalusia	Rest of Spain	Abroad
Total Axarquía	1,462	-160	176	325	246	967
	11.96%	-6.10%	5.51%	27.02%	14.07%	28.05%
Inland municipalities	297	-11	47	130	41	182
	11.62%	-3.85%	5.16%	84.42%	17.60%	18.72%
Coastal municipalities	1,165	-149	129	195	205	785
	12.05%	-6.37%	5.64%	18.59%	13.52%	31.72%

Source: Statistics of Residential Variations in Andalusia. Drawn up by the authors

4. Discussion and conclusions

In a context in which population dynamics are determined by migratory movements given the very limited input from natural growth, there have been two important episodes that have had a direct influence on immigration into the municipalities in the Axarquía, a comarca in the province of Málaga. Firstly, Brexit, which radically changed the status of British immigrants in the area, who until then had had little incentive to register officially as residents, a formality that had not been strictly necessary as they were citizens of the European Union; in this sense, as O'Reilly (2020) indicated, both UK and Spanish Governments were still treating them as "long-term tourists", so they were not getting enough support in the first stages of the Brexit in order to update their residential status. An extended approach was "to wait and see"; Britons would continue living in Spain, but, in the event they were no longer able to access the services they needed -such as medical care-, they would return to UK, or would search for an alternative location outside British Islands (Hall & Phillimore, 2020).

But from the moment the United Kingdom finally left the EU, British citizens wanting to continue living in Spain were required to demonstrate that they had been resident in the country prior to 2021. This involved a fairly simple solution of registering at the Local Council on the Municipal Register of Inhabitants or registering on the General Register of Foreign People (information that was then incorporated into the Municipal Register of Inhabitants). This could be seen as a way to maintain their residence status (with implications on rights, access to healthcare, entitlements, etc.), which was a concern for Britons already settled in the EU (Benson et al., 2022). Accordingly, Hall (2021) indicates that, British retired immigrants on Spain's Costa del Sol who maintain a property in the UK see returning there as an option in the event

that they need care and no system care is available for them in Spain.

In this sense, Brexit marked a change in tendency in the number of officially registered British people in the Axarquía: numbers had been falling until 2019–2020, when the situation was reversed in a trend that has continued since. It seems likely that the increase in the number of registered British people is attributable above all to an already resident, although officially undetected, population coming to the surface. This hypothesis could be confirmed when the registry data for the year 2023 become available, in that, by now, the temporary leap in numbers produced by the legalisation of existing residents has tapered off. It will be interesting to see whether the comarca remains attractive for potential new British residents. If not, the numbers for 2023 should show a stagnation or even a fall, indicating that the important role that the British community has played in offsetting the decline in the local Spanish population will have come to an end.

As regards the effects of the pandemic on migration into the area, the statistics indicate that this was only temporary. Indeed, the fall in the total number of new arrivals noted in 2020 and their concentration in "proximity immigration" had come to an end just one year later. In 2021, the volume of new arrivals had increased notably, and the only negative tendency was in those arriving from the city of Málaga. The increase in arrivals from abroad was particularly important. This could indicate in relation to the previous point that the Axarquía remains a very attractive residential destination for this group of people. At the same time, there has been a return to normal in the immigration from the rest of the province of Málaga. This return to normal can also be observed in the arrivals from other parts of Andalusia, in which the predominant role played by the province of Granada during the year of lockdown has waned considerably within

the context of a fall in the importance of proximity immigration into the Axarquía.

Acknowledgements

This research has been financed by: ERDF/Regional Government of Andalusia - Department of Economic Transformation, Industry, Knowledge and Universities / Project (B-HUM-460-UGR20) Andalusian rural territories in the face of depopulation and ageing. Challenges and opportunities.

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