



The Uncertain Future of the Calais Border

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Already strained, the negotiations over Brexit could get even more complicated should the issue of the border in Calais, the northern French port come to the fore. Whereas migration accounted for many votes in favour of Brexit, further development could take a strange twist of fate allowing more migrants to reach the UK shores than before. In reality, the agreement regulating the border crossing between France and Britain is a bilateral deal between the two countries concluded outside the EU framework. It was a deal cut between the former French president Jacques Chirac and the then British Prime Minister Tony Blair in 2003 in Touquet, enabling Britain to stop the flow of illegal migrants. Only that back then nobody could have imagined that the UK would opt for exiting the European Union and that the Calais border would become the EU external border. During the recent French presidential campaign a few candidates raised the issue of this so called Le Touquet treaty, among them Emmanuel Macron. Now, this new pro-European and pro-globalisation French president wants to put the deal back on the table, raising the prospect of yet another conundrum that may the agreement, Britain pays a considerable amount of money (around 12 million £) for the ruffle feathers in Britain and further complicate the process of its exit from the EU. Yet even under reinforced security, including wire fences, cameras etc., the French have good reasons to wish to renegotiate the treaty. After all, didn't the UK split from the EU because it wanted to regain its full sovereignty, the first condition of which is the sovereignty over its external borders? What's more, if Britain really wants a clean break, as it seems to be the case, keeping its border on a foreign country's territory sounds rather strange, to say the least.

Faced with the anger of the local population over the ever growing makeshift migrant camp and fearing a high score of the Front National in his own region, the then French president François Hollande set out a plan to demolish 'the Jungle' before the end of his presidency (still, Marine La Pen won almost 48% in the runoff against Macron). But soon after the camp was dismantled and its inhabitants were relocated to reception centres all over France, it started to reappear in a nearby location. According to the latest reports the camp is swelling again, although the current number of migrants remains unclear.

Calais has a long, troubled history as the place with a high concentration of migrants waiting to cross the English Channel. The recent camp was preceded by the Sangatte camp, closed in 2002, after recurrent riots, protests of the local population and French British bickering over who was responsible for the mess. But migrants didn't stop coming. Why is it they do not want to lodge an asylum claim in France, preferring to endure the appalling conditions while waiting for a highly risky transfer to the UK? Job prospects, family ties, non-acquaintance with the language, persistent asylum system differences and the absence of identity cards account for most of the reasons why migrants from Afghanistan, Sudan, Syria, Iraq, Pakistan and Eritrea refuse to stay in France, prepared to be waiting for months for the opportunity to cross the Channel. And despite formidable surveillance and security measures smugglers still manage to get them through, provided they can pay for the journey. The exit of the UK from the European Union seems to be welcome news to prospective migrants, as for the time being those who managed to get to Britain risked being deported back to a country where they have been first fingerprinted, according to the Dublin II Regulation rules. In principle, the UK will be bound by the Dublin regulation until it leaves in 2019, although foreseeing what will happen between now and then seems a risky enterprise.



But after the eventual withdrawal from the block these rules will cease to exist, which could raise prospects of a camp being set up on the British territory, most likely in Kent.

So, is Macron going to pull the trigger soon? If he sticks to the promises he made during the presidential campaign, i.e. to drive a hard bargain with Britain, he might be tempted to open the Calais file right away. Worth noting is that his newly designated prime minister Edouard Philippe was a close ally of Alain Juppé, the unsuccessful candidate of the Republican party who during the party's primaries pledged to scrap the Le Touquet agreement, if elected. Critics, however, advocate restraint and moderation, in the face of the potential danger of an inadvertent pull factor that could be created as a result of the prospect for easier passage. In addition, should the border move to the UK it will be the responsibility of the French navy (or Frontex) to save lives if smugglers' boats start crossing the Channel, putting the migrants in danger – as is now the case in the Mediterranean sea.

What seems to be the most likely scenario is that the Macron government will ask for a shared responsibility, requiring the UK to take more migrants (especially unaccompanied minors which make a big part of the group) – much to Theresa May's annoyance, even though she appeared to admit that the agreement is up for negotiations. The outcome may, however, compromise her party manifesto's pledge to reduce migration figures to a strict minimum.

Reaching an agreement over a new deal may soon become a diplomatic minefield in both countries, given the importance of a migration policy hamstrung by past failures and lingering risks of an uncertain future.