

France-Britain Tensions Are Rising over Migration

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On Thursday, the US, Canada and their European allies expanded Belarus sanctions for ‘orchestrating’ the [Polish-Belarusian migration crisis](#). Meanwhile, Europe has its own refugee’s problem, as exemplified by the recent Franco-British developments.

In general, the relations between the UK and the EU are deteriorating. Aside from several points of contention pertaining to fishing rights and the issue of the Brexit withdrawal agreement and the [Northern Ireland Protocol](#), there is the English Channel crisis today. While much is talked about the Polish-Belarusian situation, this year alone over 25,000 asylum seekers reached Britain by means of small boats across the Channel. This has increased UK-France tensions.

On November 24, over 27 people drowned while crossing la Manche (as the French call the Channel), including a pregnant woman. This took place a few miles off the French port of Calais. Such tragedy prompted UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson to send [an open letter](#) to France’s President Emmanuel Macron proposing a series of measures to avoid such incidents. They included enhancing intelligence sharing and more joint patrols, as well as signing a bilateral return agreement.

However, Paris’ response was not friendly. French Interior Minister Gerald Darmanin, for instance, even barred his British counterpart Priti Patel from participating in a multilateral summit on the topic of migration at Calais. He described Johnson’s public letter as “disappointing” and “unacceptable”. Darmanin also urged Britain to open a legal route for asylum seekers so as to prevent them from crossing the Channel in small boats and thus risking their lives. According to him, UK immigration clerks can currently process asylum requests in an office in Northern France. However, tensions are high between the two countries and that makes any cooperation harder. According to the Canard Enchaîné newspaper, Macron even described Johnson as a “clown” in private conversations with his aides. The Twitter-published letter was seen as a lack of seriousness and respect.

Paris basically places all the blame on London, claiming the migrants are attracted by the British labor market, which allows one to work in England “without any identification” and

thus Britain would be more “economically attractive” to illegal migration. French European Affairs Minister Clément Beaune accused the UK of maintaining an “economic model of, sometimes, quasi-modern slavery” and states that “one of the engines of the English economic policy — not all of it, obviously — is to employ workers illegally”. This much is not completely unfounded, although a bit of an exaggeration, but such description in fact holds truth to a greater or lesser degree to most of Europe too. Last year, the EU received over 400,000 asylum applications, while the United Kingdom got 29,000.

French Prime Minister Jean Castex formally rejected Johnson’s proposal – for Paris to have British security forces personnel patrolling on the French side of the coast – describing it as an infringement of French sovereignty. He added that sending migrants back to France “is not an option” either.

The current crisis is partly caused by Brexit: basically the British have lost the leverage to persuade any EU country to cooperate in regards to keeping migrants away from the other side of the (sea) border. Some French politicians have argued Paris should withdraw from the Anglo-French Touquet Treaty so as to retaliate what they perceive as London’s violations of the EU-UK Withdrawal Agreement. The Touquet Treaty is a 2004 agreement that allows for reciprocal border controls of British and French officials in each other’s countries. Scrapping it would, of course, only make matters worse.

One possible solution to the quarrel, according to Lancaster University Management School scholar Renaud Foucart, would involve EU countries taking back some migrants from England, as already is so with the European bloc and Turkey – in the other direction. This is unlikely though, due to the current political climate between London and the European Union. According to this academic, a smaller bilateral deal between Britain and France is much more likely and it could involve the UK subsidizing French border police. However, Franco-British relations are at their lowest in decades, so the current crisis could go on for a while.

Beyond French-English tensions, there is in fact the European migration crisis today, with some European countries deciding to build walls along their borders to keep refugees and migrants out. Pope Francis this week described this state of affairs as a “shipwreck of civilization”. One thing that makes sharing responsibility difficult even within the EU itself is the fact that its member-states have different situations and different positions within the bloc, pertaining to their demographics and economics, as well as leverage and power – even though the EU works on the premise that all member-states are “equal”. The truth is that not all countries are on the same foot in terms of being able to welcome asylum-seekers and of migration management in general. The European system in fact protects its wealthiest nations against a too high migrant flow by means of handing over responsibility to southeastern and eastern European countries.

Whether on the Channel or at Poland’s border, a large part of the refugees come from war-ravaged middle-eastern countries such as Syria and the European powers – England included – can no doubt be blamed for such a situation since they have been [arming and funding terrorist groups](#) in that region. Of course Britain is responsible for its own humanitarian problems, but the fact that France and the EU currently blame the UK alone for today’s Channel situation reminds one of the way the bloc deals with the Polish-Belarusian migration crisis. It is basically a war of narratives and a blame game.

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