

Brexit borders' negotiations, Gibraltar and Spanish and British politics on sovereignty

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Up until now, Gibraltar has managed to keep a distinctive political agenda and identity, while being part of a planned and intentional political and economic integration process in the continent – the European Union. This could perhaps be a challenging goal, considering the geopolitics of the Strait and considering the referendum's result of June 2016 where Gibraltarians voted in large majority to stay in the EU (96%); Gibraltar's future relations with the European Union (and consequently, Spain) have become part of a complex negotiation process, where border politics will have a direct impact on the "Rock" on a daily basis.

This of course is not the only case of border politics in this referendum. The negotiations of a border between the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland will have a direct impact on the solution suggested for the border between Gibraltar and Spain. Gibraltar's weight within the British negotiating team is difficult to analyse, due to a lack of clear information; however, in the case of the European Union, the positions are clear. The same way the Republic of Ireland has a significant weight on the negotiations of its border with Northern Ireland, [Spain might have a say in relation to Gibraltar](#).

The impact of implementing a similar border on both Ireland and the Strait should be similar in relation to checks and movement of people. However, at political level, the impact might be different if we take into consideration how the tensions between Gibraltar and Spain have been dealt with in the last couple of decades. Some of the problems include but are not limited to: [Spanish fisheries activities in the region](#) (2012), [problematic checks at the borders between Spain and Gibraltar](#) (2013); [Surveillance of the Strait in relation to trafficking-related crimes](#) (2015), etc. It is likely that after Brexit, it could be more difficult to create cooperation in any of these areas between Spain

and Gibraltar if they are not satisfied with the outcome of the negotiations.

Moreover, since the referendum took place, the tension has reached a new level. The day after Brexit's referendum, Spain's Foreign Minister Jose Manuel Garcia Margallo openly explained his hopes after that outcome: ["It's a complete change of outlook that opens up new possibilities on Gibraltar not seen for a very long time. I hope the formula of co-sovereignty – to be clear, the Spanish flag on the Rock – is much closer than before."](#) The reaction of Gibraltar was immediate from the Chief Minister of Gibraltar Fabian Picardo, [who explained that they would not discuss that option](#). Three months later, the same politicians attended the UN General Assembly, and at its 4th Commission – [Special Political and Decolonization and Committee](#)– Picardo responded to the latest comments of Garcia Margallo with a clear ["No way, Jose! \[...Spain\] will never get its hands on our Rock"](#).

The tension reached its highest level when after Article 50 was triggered by the UK in April 2017, and the European Union announced the possibility of Spain having a veto power over the future of the relationship between the [European Union and Gibraltar](#). This provoked a list of comments on the British side demonstrating how politically speaking, the status of Gibraltar is for some members of the political sector a very sensitive topic. [For Lord Howard](#): "Thirty-five years ago this week, another woman Prime Minister sent a taskforce halfway across the world to defend the freedom of another small group of British people against another Spanish-speaking country, and I'm absolutely certain that our current Prime Minister will show the same resolve in standing by the people of Gibraltar".

By referring to the Falkland/Malvinas conflict, a political negotiation element of Brexit has started to be constructed as a security issue. In fact, other statements went as far as using the word ["war"](#), before other political actors asked for such rhetoric to be [toned down](#). In fact, the construction of a security threat over Gibraltar does not seem to be sustainable, as the expert on defence Peter Felstead referred to, explaining that [a war between both countries would not take place for many reasons](#).

The political discourse nonetheless seemed unchanged, even when the British monarchy received the Spanish monarchy on a State visit in July 2017 a few weeks after those comments were made. [At the House of Lords, King Felipe VI of Spain explained his position](#): “I am certain that this resolve to overcome our differences will be even greater in the case of Gibraltar, and I am confident that through the necessary dialogue and effort, our two governments will be able to work towards arrangements that are acceptable to all involved”. Conservative MPs had threatened to walkout if the King happened to assert any right on Gibraltar in his speech, thus rendering his words in the speech [very important](#).

In the meantime, Gibraltar representatives attended the DUP party conference in [November 2017](#). This event could be seen as significant, politically speaking, considering the outcome of the British General Elections of 2017 and the current role of the DUP in both domestic and regional politics, alongside the negotiations of the border with the Republic of Ireland. Gibraltar also had a presence at the autumn SNP party conference of [2016 and 2017](#). Though it is common for Gibraltar to have a presence at British political party conferences, they tend to deliver a presence at those of the largest parties (Labour, Conservative and Liberal Democrats).

Even though the negotiations on the border with Ireland seemed to have progressed enough to move to the next stage, it is unclear what kind of border is going to be implemented on that island, and consequently between Spain and Gibraltar. It will be unclear until the final outcome of the Brexit negotiations is announced. In the meantime, other parts of Europe might keep a close look at these negotiations since they do not only affect the Strait, Spain and the UK politically speaking. Considering the current affairs in relation to nationalist sentiments in Europe, both *the approach* taken for these negotiations– who participates, why, when, how and so forth- as well as the *final outcome*, could be important examples for other parts of Europe where there are pro-independence/separation political agendas, as in the case of Scotland, Catalonia, Kosovo etc. Regions with similar agendas tend to contribute to each other’s discussions and it helps to create more visibility for their agendas. The longer the period of uncertainty until the final agreement between the UK and the EU takes places, the longer the time they will potentially have to

create larger spaces to discuss border politics, nationalism and the possibilities for their independence.

Moreover, discussions over more creative and different approaches to domestic politics will continue even after the end of the Brexit negotiations, if we take into consideration how Westphalian arrangements seem to be less [obvious/clear](#) in this time and age. Also, given that more coalitions and minority governments are in power now in Europe than in previous years (Spain, UK, Iceland, The Netherlands, Germany etc.) it seems we are experiencing new types of societies that will require more innovative arrangements to deal with fractioned societies. Independently of the outcome of the negotiations of Brexit, some doors have already been opened politically speaking in Europe, and will be impossible to close without inventive political arrangements.

[\[1\]](#) The author is finishing a book on Gibraltar and Brexit that will be published by Emerald.