

Migration: A Shared post-Brexit Trajectory

Nicholas Hurtado

Europe's post-Brexit political landscape has changed a great deal since 2020. Four years on from the formal divorce, policymakers in the UK and EU appear to increasingly mirror one another in terms of their respective outlooks on an increasing number of issues. This extends prominently to the subject of migration. Recent developments on migration have highlighted how much the UK and EU have arrived at similar points regardless of political affiliation. Despite separating, the British and EU have followed charted mirrored political trajectories that have led them to comparable destinations.

Within the UK context, statements and policy pledges made by both the Conservatives and Labour have indicated that a more restrictive general thinking concerning legal and illegal migration has seemingly won out, albeit not entirely the same between the two. This month, the Conservative-led UK Government released its outline of recent changes that it has made to bring down levels of legal migration. The stated aim of these changes is to grow the UK economy and protect British workers from being undercut by cheaper labour while also bringing down overall the numbers of legal arrivals into the country. Such changes have included, but are not limited to, drastically raising the general salary threshold required for skilled workers. This means the minimum salary requirement has gone up from 26,200 GBP to 38,700 GBP, representing a 48% increase (I should know, this affects me, too).

Moreover, the shortage occupation list has now been done away with, which previously allowed foreign skilled workers to be paid less than their UK counterparts, being replaced instead by the new immigration salary list. Despite these changes being made by the present Tory-led UK Government, Labour has also indicated it intends to align itself with efforts to reduce legal arrivals. Labour spokesperson Darren Jones, while refusing to commit his party to a set migration target, stated the Party would pursue similar measures. This would include supporting the scrapping of the 20% Shortage Occupation List discount to lower the number of arrivals to the UK. Additionally, Labour leader Keir Starmer has also stated the 745,000 arrivals the UK received in 2022 were "shockingly high."

When approaching illegal immigration to the UK, the present UK Government under Rishi Sunak has pursued different policies to help stop new arrivals. One such policy was the passage of the Illegal Migration Bill, which received Royal Assent and became law last summer. This law made it so that, among other changes, that if an individual enters the UK illegally, they will either be deported or moved to a "safe third country" like Rwanda. This is on top of ongoing political and legal wrangling over the Rwanda scheme, which failed to pass Parliament before Easter recess. Similarly, while this has been criticized heavily by Labour, Keir Starmer does not remain completely closed off to the idea of pursuing a similar policy route should he secure the keys to 10 Downing Street later this year. Last year, it was reported that Labour was considering its own alternative to the current Rwanda plan, which would still have at least some asylum applications processed elsewhere, with Keir Starmer suggesting that he would "look at any scheme that might work."

Furthermore, the Labour Party has been reported as having a "red line" that illegal arrivals would not be automatically denied asylum in the UK, it has been stressed British officials would be tasked with overseeing the process of asylum claims for arrivals. While different to the Conservative approach, it not only still echoes a similar sentiment in its approach, but it shares

elements of a deal between Albania and Italy's rightwing government. This separate migration deal between Rome and Tirana allows for up to 36,000 yearly arrivals into Italy to be sent to centres built within Albania to process their asylum applications. Like British officials processing asylum claims, this deal would have these centres operate under Italian law with Italian staff. This is in addition to the Prime Minister Sunak and Prime Minister Meloni already having a close working relationship on the illegal migration issue, whether it be their jointly-authored article or statements indicating their continued shared commitment to tackling illegal immigration and criminal gangs engaged in human smuggling that is present in dialogue shared at meetings of the EPC or in a simple phone call.

Convergent thinking of politicians on both sides of the Channel on illegal migration has not simply been relegated to the UK and Italy, as it has also extended to the EU generally. Despite initial fears that Italy's rightwing government would be combative in its approach to migration in relation to the rest of the EU, the country has been at the forefront of recent migration deals the bloc has itself pursued. Contained within a press statement, Prime Minister Meloni stated that in a meeting with Von der Leyen, migration was discussed, and she thanked the EU Commission President for her all the work she did when the two worked together on resolving this issue over the course of several months. This relationship, like the one had with the current UK Government, has been present in the EU when it has pursued its own recent bloc-wide migration deals with third countries, with both women feature prominently in their signing ceremonies. For instance, it was announced last year that the "fourth pillar" of an agreement reached between the EU, represented by "Team Europe" of Mark Rutte, Von der Leyen and Meloni, with Tunisia was deicate to addressing migration, with 100 million euros allocated by the EU to Tunisian border management.

Brexit was, and still is, a great source of contention within the UK and between both unions. Initially, it appeared that the two were drifting apart in how they viewed their places and respective roles on the continent. Several years onward, they appear to be much closer not only in practical terms, such as the UK rejoining Horizon Europe, but also in their thinking on subjects affecting Europe, especially migration. While now divorced, they have seemingly agreed to share lenses through which they now see many issues that need resolving, for better or worse.