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Brexit and Andalusia

Less flag waving, more rights

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In June 2016, after a close referendum result, a slim majority of British voters supported leaving the European Union (EU), initiating one of the longest and most complex divorces in our recent continental history. More than four years later with British governments having fallen along the way, several elections, three negotiating extensions applied, and a transition period that culminates this 31 December, Brussels and London finally signed the trade agreement that will govern relations between the EU and Great Britain.

An agreement of more than a thousand pages that tries to lock down to the last detail of the future relations between the island and the continent, but which explicitly excludes Gibraltar at the expense of an agreement between the Spanish and British governments. [1] An agreement that must be closed before 1 January, 2021 or we will witness a hard Brexit on the rock that fundamentally affects the Campo de Gibraltar. [2] Despite the fact that this situation is going practically unnoticed by the public, it could have very negative effects for thousands of Andalusians, as 25% of the region's GDP depends in one way or another on Gibraltar.

In the end, if there is no agreement, Andalusia may be one of the territories most affected by Brexit. A situation very symptomatic of the institutional neglect to which Campo de Gibraltar, one of the most depressed regions of Spain and the EU, has historically been subjected and which has traditionally seen its problems covered with a flag. There are data that speak for themselves, La Linea and Algeciras are among the five cities in the Spanish state with more than 20,000 inhabitants with the lowest life expectancy according to the urban indicators of the European Urban Audit project. In addition, La Linea is the city with the second highest unemployment rate in the country and is among the municipalities with the lowest average annual net income per inhabitant. The metropolitan area of Algeciras is also among those with the lowest income. Likewise, Campo de Gibraltar has an unemployment rate of more than 29 percent which translates into some 40,000 unemployed people. For all these reasons we have demanded in all institutions from the autonomous community to the state and even European level, that both the EU and the Spanish government must address a specific aid plan that ensures not only that Brexit does not suppose a new weight on the inhabitants of Campo de Gibraltar, but rather that it sets in motion a change in the production model so that Campo de Gibraltar has a future.

We fear greatly that we will have to face a hard Brexit without being prepared. The central government with interior minister Marlaska at the head does not see beyond its anti-drug policy and has not fulfilled a single commitment of the 900 million euros allocated for a special plan in the region. While the government of the Junta de Andalucía has not lagged behind in its unfulfilled promises, beyond the cheap propaganda of the 112 measures, the reality is that Campo de Gibraltar has not received more than a pitiful 4 million euros to face the consequences of Brexit. This gives us an idea of the inability of the Andalusian right to take seriously the structural problems that the region suffers.

Another major issue to be resolved is the situation of cross-border workers. At the end of 2019 there were 14,500 cross-border workers in Gibraltar, of whom 11,000 reside in La Línea de la Concepción. Although certainly the cross-border workers affected by the Withdrawal Agreement will be able, beyond 31 December, 2020, to continue temporarily working in Gibraltar with the same community rights that they currently enjoy. It is essential to reiterate that rights cannot be transitory or have an expiration date. However, both the Gibraltarians who find work in Gibraltar and the Gibraltarians who work in Spain will presumably see these rights diminished. Of those who do not have any contract, the majority of women working in domestic service or care will undoubtedly be the most affected, since they will not appear in any agreement or exist in official discourse.

If an agreement between Spain and the United Kingdom on Gibraltar is not reached and the border is classified as an

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External Border, any disagreement between Spain and the United Kingdom may mean tightening the conditions for crossing the border, returning to the unfortunate spectacle of endless queues, with the victims and hostages of this situation being the thousands of cross-border workers. Those same workers who continue without the Spanish government recognizing them or resolving the issue of their future pensions. Workers who have paid contributions for more than thirty-five years in Gibraltar will only be entitled to a pension of just over 300 euros that is granted by Gibraltar law. Once retired, they have to request non-contributory pensions in Spain and still do not attain a decent pension. For all these reasons, it is essential that the Spanish government promote and include in any agreement a Cross-Border Worker Statute that ensures their employment and social rights.

Furthermore, any agreement must listen to and take into account the municipalities and inhabitants who suffer the consequences of the decisions made in Madrid and London. Gibraltar, La Línea de la Concepción and Campo de Gibraltar must be listened to and considered because they are the true protagonists and those who suffer these decisions most harshly. The coexistence of these peoples should be a priority for the negotiators and not an “extra” in the negotiation. The Gibraltar negotiation cannot once again be the war of flags to which we are accustomed; the rights of cross-border workers should be at the centre of the debate, as well as aid for particularly affected populations such as those in Campo de Gibraltar, aside from all the patriotic fireworks, flags and current accounts in tax havens.

31 December 2020

PS:

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[1] A last minute agreement was reached BBC News 31 December 2020 [“Brexit: Gibraltar gets UK-Spain deal to keep open border”](#). However how it will be implemented is not clear. *The Guardian*, 2 January 2021 [“Spain says it will have last word on Gibraltar border entries ”](#)

[2] Campo de Gibraltar is a comarca (county) in the province of Cádiz, in the southwestern part of the autonomous community of Andalusia closest to Gibraltar.