

BREXIT - SPAIN AND BRITAIN ARGUING ABOUT GIBRALTAR



Gibraltar has been enjoying a privileged position within the EU, until now. The small headland has been exempt from certain taxes, responsibilities and legislation. However, now, despite Gibraltarians having voted against Brexit, Great Britain is set to leave it and

Gibraltar is to go too.

In early April, the European Council set up guidelines amongst member states to be followed throughout the Brexit negotiations. These guidelines state that future agreements between the EU and the UK will not apply to Gibraltar without Spain's consent. Therefore, **Spain has the right to veto any decision regarding Gibraltar.**

This decision has outraged some British political figures. British foreign minister Boris Johnson has accused Spain of exerting "unacceptable pressure on Gibraltar's future involvement in the Brexit negotiations", while defence minister Michael Fallon has expressed his intention to protect Gibraltar "to the last consequences".

Gibraltar's chief minister, Fabián Picardo, has also expressed his unwillingness to accept these guidelines, branding them as a tool of "harassment from Spain".

British tabloids have also joined, particularly the Sun are using an aggressive tone with regards to the Spanish. Sun columnist Kelvin Mackenzie even called for boycotting Spain as a tourist destination and closing off air space to Spanish flights along with expelling Spaniards working in the UK.

This has, on the other hand, awakened shock on the other side of the barricade. There are 125,000 Spaniards working in the UK. Spain is also a popular destination for British tourists. Annually, the Iberian Peninsula is visited on average by 12 million Brits.

Spain calls for calm but some are irritated

Spain's foreign minister Alfonso Dastis was surprised by comments coming from the United Kingdom about Gibraltar. "There is no reason to lose one's cool over Gibraltar," Dastis said at the beginning of April in Madrid.

Some Spanish journalists have been left outraged by the British stance. Juan Chicharro, columnist of Republica, wrote a very aggressive article with a headline "The English lose their nerves" in response to Johnson, Mackenzie and co. Chicharro labelled these British representatives as "perfect fools and thugs in the purest style of drunk hooligans".

The columnist also urges Gibraltar to accept Spain's offer of co-sovereignty and names it "the only remaining option if Gibraltar doesn't want to become a ruin". Others have also slammed Britain's arrogance and ignorance in this respect and are calling for the Brexit to happen as soon as possible

Dispute somewhat exaggerated

It is an unpleasant issue, however in reality the situation is probably somewhat exaggerated. The fact is that the relationship between the two countries is much less tense from the perspective of

mutual inflow of people. A clear example are the figures from the European Commission on Erasmus student programs in the 2014-2015 academic year. According to the data, out of 36,842 Spanish students, 4,381 chose the United Kingdom. This flow also works in reverse, as the British islands were the fourth issuer with 3,299 of the total 42,537 students who travelled to Spain in the same period.

In terms of travelling, Spain is undoubtedly the favourite British destination. In 2016, 17.8 million British visited Spain. This is an increase of 12.44% compared to 2015. The number also represents 23.6% of the total number of tourists who visited Spain. **In this sense, the relationship is mutually beneficial, as 2.2 million Spanish visitors chose the UK as their holiday destination in 2015.**

Overall the forecasts for this year are more than positive. The exchange rate between the pound and euro is favourable, which should encourage further growth in mutual inflows. In this sense, it seems that all is well between the countries. For now, it remains to be seen how this diplomatic dispute will be resolved. The hope is obviously that this aggressive rhetoric does not grow into something more than just a war of words, but that seems unlikely as of now.

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