

Written evidence submitted by Xavier Bertrand, President of Hauts-de-France Regional Council (CHA0022)

Dear Members of Parliament, Members of the Home Affairs Committee,

On 6th August, your Committee launched an inquiry into Channel crossings, migration and asylum-seeking routes through the EU. The Hauts-de-France Region, which I have the pleasure and honour to preside since 2016, is directly confronted to migration challenges, as it hosts the Franco-British border. This border has been under pressure for several years now, first due to migration challenges, then because of Brexit, and now as a result of the numerous difficulties linked to the Covid-19 crisis.

This is why I wanted the Hauts-de-France Regional Council to provide a contribution to your inquiry, which you will find attached to this letter. Because it will bring a specific point of view to your work, but also because the inhabitants of the Hauts-de-France Region directly depend on certain decisions – or lack of decisions – from the United Kingdom. It is therefore in our mutual interest to solve this migration crisis once and for all, in order for our joint border to be a symbol of cooperation and *entente cordiale*.

I will obviously remain available to discuss in further details these issues which are so important for people on both sides of the Channel. My cabinet is at the disposal of your Committee staff to set this up.

Annex: Channel crossings, migration and asylum-seeking routes through the EU inquiry – Contribution from the Hauts-de-France Regional Council

This contribution focuses on topics for which the Hauts-de-France Regional Council plays a direct or indirect role.

1/ Actions taken by the French and British Governments

This part covers actions taken by the French and British Governments, the Hauts-de-France Regional Council and other local authorities.

From the French State's perspective, disbanding the Calais migration camp (the “Calais Jungle”) in 2016 substantially decreased the number of migrants, from more than 8,000 in 2016 to around 300 in 2019 (Source: Préfecture du Pas-de-Calais).

Direct intrusions materially decreased, on the Eurotunnel site (from 14,128 in 2016 to 70 in 2018) as well as on the Port de Calais site (from 1,241 in 2016 to 656 in 2018).

The number of migrants in trucks also decreased, from 17,622 in 2016 to 10,614 in 2018 on the Eurotunnel site; and from 32,773 in 2016 to 15,332 in 2018 on the Port de Calais site. It is worth noting that in 2018, an average 60% of migrants climbing into trucks were registered in Belgium.

The number of road blockades also decreased substantially, from 865 in Calais in 2016 to 26 in 2018.

In terms of actions against smugglers, the fight against these networks has also been successful: more than a hundred smuggler networks have been disbanded between 2016 and 2019. But these networks are increasingly mobile, and now work from Belgium and the Netherlands. The fight against isolated and opportunistic smugglers has also made some progress: more than 1,700 smugglers have been arrested between 2018 and 2019.

As of the summer of 2019, 239 public security staff from Calais were mobilised, including 3.5 mobile police force units (“CRS”), and 1.5 mobile units from the Gendarmerie, and 677 staff from the French Border Force (“Police Aux Frontières” – PAF).

In terms of actions taken to reduce the risk to life for migrants: since the beginning of the crisis, they have been provided with humanitarian assistance, water distribution points (51 taps, 14.5 litres of water per person per day for around 300 migrants in June 2019 for example), food (an average 1,371 meals per day in June 2019), healthcare, medication and showers (28 showers, accessible 5 days/week). The Administrative Court in Lille considered in July 2018 that the humanitarian scheme was appropriately dimensioned, and did not display any obvious shortcoming.

In terms of medical assistance, a local health centre was set up, with on average around 650 appointments monthly in 2018. Two Help Centres were set up to evaluate migrants' personal situation, and provide shelter to those under 18 years old.

In addition, the number of migrants who perished in Calais decreased materially, from 18 in 2015 to 2 in 2019. Migrant deaths are mainly due to road accidents.

But attempts to cross the Channel (whether successful or not) have materially increased over the past few years, from 12 in 2017 to 78 in 2018 (involving 586 migrants), 203 in 2019 (involving 2,294 migrants), and 342 in the first half of 2020 (involving 4,192 migrants).

The following actions were taken to stop this trend:

- Tight collaboration between the local French maritime authority, and coastguards in charge of rescue operations.
- Intensified control patrols along the coast by the French Gendarmerie.
- British financing (€470.913) to purchase equipment (4x4, all-road motorbikes, drones,

night-vision binoculars, thermal cameras, infrared glasses...).

- French Border Force use all situations to seek to detect smuggler networks.
- Enhancing the awareness of companies selling and renting boats along the coast, to seek to detect abnormal movements.
- Enhancing the safety and security of port sites.

But beyond these actions, the policies adopted so far remain insufficient to structurally solve the migration challenge in Calais. At the start of 2020, due to the lack of sufficient mobile police forces and confronted with several acts of violence and incivility, the Mayor of Calais Natacha BOUCHART had to deploy the City's own local police forces for round-the-clock static surveillance, in the Dunes area of Calais. The City is therefore forced to do the Government's security-enforcement job. In addition, genuine disbanding operations which consist in planning for "national solidarity" areas (i.e. away from Calais) are very rare, despite the fact that they are the only ones which allow for temporarily releasing the pressure on local inhabitants, and managing the problem in a timely manner.

From the British State's perspective, a number of actions were taken. Following the Franco-British agreement in 2014, the United Kingdom provided 15 million euros to contribute to securing the port and ring road around Calais in 2016. More recently, new security roadworks were launched, to set up fences and cameras, clean up the area and plant trees, for around one million euros around the Dunes industrial area in Calais. This was all financed by the City of Calais and the Greater Calais Authority, who are still awaiting confirmation for UK participation to finance a substantial share of that.

In terms of coastal surveillance and actions against smugglers, a joint information and coordination centre was launched in January 2019 by the French and British Ministers for Home Affairs, as well as a new Franco-British Operational Research Unit in July 2020.

But beyond these announcements, the Hauts-de-France Regional Council only has relative visibility on the actual means mobilised and concrete actions taken by British authorities to stop migration flows through the Channel, which does not facilitate cooperation.

In terms of means mobilised, it is very unlikely they will suffice. All the inhabitants of the Calais area agree on this point: one cannot fence the coast to infinity. The area is far too extended, and until today actions taken have merely displaced the problem to alleviate pressure on areas most affected (the Lande and Dunes areas) but the problem stretches across the local territory. In addition, the economic impact is substantial and permanent. The Cité Europe also suffers from this migratory pressure, the ring road around the port is regularly stormed, and Eurostar services are sometimes disrupted.

To sum up, since the Treaty of Le Touquet came into force in 2004, the United Kingdom outsources the protection and surveillance of its border with France, in exchange for funds which are insufficient and do not allow for a long-lasting solution to migration challenges. Confronted with this situation and in the context of Brexit, the need to renegotiate this Treaty has become very serious.

2/ Demands to solve the migration challenge

A/ Structural factors which favour migrations

Several factors explain the increase in legal and illegal immigration. Some of these structural reasons are legitimate and ought not to change: language, links between communities established in the United Kingdom and across the world, or even demand for labour. But other factors appear much less legitimate: British labour law allows for illegal work more than in other countries. As long as the Government fails to intensify controls and apply rigorous rules, illegal migrants will continue to seek to reach the United Kingdom, and inhabitants in Calais and along the French coast will suffer the consequences.

In addition, the absence of compulsory identity cards is another weakness which favours

illegal work, and attracts illegal migrants to the United Kingdom. On 7th August 2020, the UK Home Secretary Priti PATEL pledged to make the English Channel “unviable” for illegal crossings. One of the most efficient measures she could take to fulfil this promise would be to create a system of compulsory national identity cards.

B/ Operational solutions to reduce migration risks

To reduce migration risks requires setting up surveillance forces much more significant than those currently mobilised. In August 2018, the President of the Hauts-de-France Regional Council Xavier BERTRAND asked for a joint Franco-British maritime brigade to be created. This brigade would allow for much more efficient surveillance operations along the coast and the English Channel, with actions much better coordinated than they currently are. But as of today nothing was set up, whether on the French or British side, to respond to this demand.

3/ Proposals

The first observation is to recognise that the current situation is untenable. Around 20 years have passed since the first migration camps in Sangatte, and no structural solution has been found. The inhabitants along the Hauts-de-France coast are exasperated with this situation, and deserve to be listened to as they are on the front line.

Some solutions could be found within the current framework of the Treaty of Le Touquet, which establishes the Franco-British border on the French coast. But this would require at least an increase in British operational and financial means mobilised to perform these controls, and a much better coordination – at a political as well as operational level – of French and British forces mobilised to control the coast. Another solution would consist in allowing asylum-seekers to ask British authorities for asylum before they arrive in the United Kingdom, as suggested by Pierre-Henri DUMONT, Member of the French Parliament for Pas-de-Calais. Following the same logic, France and the United Kingdom would mutually benefit from better cooperating at the international level to encourage the creation of hotspots in the Mediterranean to make asylum-seeking procedures more secure, facilitate returning migrants to their home country and jointly managed plane evictions.

If no progress is made, the Hauts-de-France Regional Council will ask that the French Government denounces the Treaty of Le Touquet, in order to completely revisit the organisation of the Franco-British border. The 1st January 2021 Brexit date makes this option increasingly likely. France can no longer accept having to organise the British border if the United Kingdom is unwilling to take its part in securing and stabilising this border.

September 2020