Spanish diversion tactics on border with Gibraltar are pointless

Written by Julie Girling on 24 April 2015 in Opinion

Opinion

Julie Girling says Gibraltarians have 'fewer rights and protections' than other EU citizens when travelling.

Recent incursions by Spain into Gibraltar have put unnecessary strain on relations between the two countries. This is part of the ongoing incursions by Spain into Gibraltarian waters and the creation of lengthy queues at the border crossing.

While you would think these would be simple enough situations to resolve, it seems that lack of cooperation by the Spanish government and police is prolonging the dispute.

I visited Gibraltar in August 2013 when the border crossing issue was at its peak, with lengthy delays in scorching summer heat caused by the Spanish Guardia Civil. Having seen the problems first hand, it is a source of great frustration to me that border issues continue today.
I have been working directly with colleagues in the UK foreign office to try to find a solution, and many Gibraltarians keep me updated with the queue situation via social media. Despite the European commission raising this with the Spanish authorities, the problem has not been solved.

The British minister for Europe David Lidington visited Gibraltar last July to review the situation and called for upgrades to the border infrastructure and an end to this politically motivated problem. I have been assured that the UK government will maintain diplomatic pressure until this frustrating situation is resolved.

The commission assures me that Spanish authorities have said that the construction works at the crossing point at La Línea de la Concepción used by foot passengers and vehicles should be completed by the end of June.

In late 2014, there was a serious incursion into British Gibraltar territorial waters by a Spanish state research vessel. Freedom of navigation in international waters is a vital principle of international law and we must continue to uphold the sovereignty of British Gibraltar territorial waters through the use of the Royal Navy. Unlawful incursions into these waters are completely unjustifiable.

The behaviour of the Spanish vessels is often dangerous, something I have raised in the European parliament and the UK government has raised with Spain on numerous occasions. The most recent incident took place in March and saw a Guardia Civil patrol boat cut across the bow of a British nuclear submarine as it sailed from Gibraltar.

Spain is fully aware of the legal position around territorial waters, yet over the past two years has increased unlawful incursions by state vessels from around five per month to around 40. These provocations are unacceptable. It is important to note that incursions are a violation of sovereignty, not a threat to it.

They do not weaken or undermine the legal basis in international law for British sovereignty over Gibraltar, including British Gibraltar territorial waters. I have robustly defended the interests of Gibraltar in the parliament and will continue to do so.

Finally, there is the single European sky initiative. Europe's air space is among the busiest in the world and this initiative has been accepted by all EU governments apart from Spain. The Spanish government entered into an agreement with the governments of the UK and Gibraltar in 2006 under which they committed not to seek the exclusion of Gibraltar airport from EU civil aviation measures.

In 2011, the current Spanish government decided to ignore what had previously been agreed and broke the agreement by seeking the exclusion of Gibraltar airport from a number of measures.

Gibraltar is a part of the EU and its people are EU citizens. Spain is seeking the exclusion of Gibraltar airport from EU air passenger rights legislation. I have asked the commission if they would accept the

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discriminatory precedent this would set, resulting in fewer rights and protections than those travelling through other EU airports. I still await a response.

It is unacceptable that domestic difficulties for Spain's governing People's Party, currently mired in corruption scandals, should be allowed to affect the people of Gibraltar. This sabre rattling from Spain is a thinly disguised diversionary tactic that is fooling nobody.

I do believe there is an end to these problems in sight - it simply requires a willingness on the part of Spanish authorities.

I will continue to support my constituents in Gibraltar in parliament and work with colleagues in London to ensure the UK government continues to take whatever action necessary to uphold the interests of Gibraltar, its people, its security and economy. These issues will be resolved by political means through our relationship as EU partners, not through disproportionate measures.

About the author

Julie Girling (ECR, UK) is member of parliament's environment, public health and food safety committee and an MEP for south west England and Gibraltar

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Justice and Rights [4]
Transport [5]

Categories
International Relations [6]
Public order, justice and rights [7]
Transport [8]