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The transformation of the Franco-British border in the context of Brexit: (cross)border planning in the Strait of Dover

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PHD ABSTRACT

The exit of the United Kingdom from the European Union (EU) on 1 January 2021 will lead to a change in the border and cross-border dynamics between France and Great Britain. The Hauts-de-France region is directly concerned by the socio-economic and institutional consequences of this change. This thesis aims to analyse the strategies for adapting regional action to this new reality, to respond to the challenges and opportunities that Brexit represents. If the Hauts-de-France region is the privileged field of this research, this case will be put in comparative perspective with other regions of the Channel/North Sea: Normandy, Brittany and English regions concerned. The aim will be to develop an analysis grid, using conceptual tools from different disciplines, notably spatial planning, political science, economics, history, and law. This grid will be used to understand the evolution of the border and its effects not only at the local and regional level, but also at the national and European levels, and to compare the situation and the operational responses in different territories: Hauts-de-France and other French and British regions. This research aims to provide a basis for reflection and recommendations in support of public decision-makers in regional action: regional council, State services, other local authorities, and organisations. It will integrate past and present analyses, which are sources of lessons, but will also provide a prospective and applied vision of the reconfigurations of regional action caused by Brexit.

KEYWORDS

Border – Brexit – Multiscale – Planning – European integration.

1. Crossing Border studies and Brexit literature from a territorial perspective

Though borders are not a new research object (Ancel, 1938), their ontology and epistemology changed in recent decades. In the 1960s, a renewal in Border studies led to a shift in meaning: the traditional line-based conception of the border turned into a border-zone one (Amilhat Szary & Hamez, 2020: 9). The border conceived as a place for controls and exertion of state jurisdiction handed over to practice- and community-based analyses. Globalization and European integration played a major part in this shift, due to transnational approaches aiming at placing borders at the centre of both public policy and new transnational spaces (Wassenberg & Reitel, 2020: 36-37). In the new European context, borders have turned into interfaces, and even “living spaces” (Reitel & Moullé, 2015), between intertwined territories, either national or local, rather than unsurpassable and reified limits. This “debordering” trend has never contested the existence and survival of borders as global structuring frameworks. It rather studies the ways and means of a “functional weakening” (Renard, 2010), and the opportunity for new territories to emerge through cooperation. If border and cross-border cities are major fields of research on contemporary borderlands transitions (Durand & Perrin, 2018; Medeiros, 2021; Reitel et al., 2002), multiscale approaches must be picked, for borders are a complex spatial object (Hamez, 2013; Pupier, 2021). Nevertheless, rebordering dynamics occur post-09/11 in Western countries with new governmentalities being implemented on borderlands (Van Houtum & Van Naerssen, 2002). Border spatiality tends to delinearise (Amilhat Szary, 2020), based on both a functional pixelization, that is border control points instead of traditional border walls (Rosière, 2017), and a reticular approach to those points, grafted on major nodes of global flows (Arbaret-Schulz, 2008). Contemporary Western governments introduce de-territorialised borders emphasising filtering functions rather than their usual physical shape. John Agnew’s “territorial trap” is therefore a powerful notion to study them (Agnew, 1994). Human flows are often addressed (Bigo & Guild, 2005; Kaufmann et al., 2021; Wassenberg, 2020), sometimes underlining personal- and sensitive-based approaches to borders: the “borderities” (Amilhat Szary &

Giraut, 2015). However, not much has been written on the cross-border experience of trade flows, particularly in the post-2008 crisis and post-COVID global contexts.

It may be hard to define precisely what Brexit is, particularly in terms of implications on UK and EU borders. We have identified three ontological dimensions of “Brexit”, understood as full dynamics rather than chronological steps. First, “political Brexit” refers to the setting-up of a general British framework in terms of internal and external balances of power on the European integration issue. This may comprise UK historical positioning in terms of foreign policy (Frank, 2018) as well as British parties positioning towards European communities (Baker & Seawright, 1998). In that sense, the Brexit referendum is the climax of this political Brexit temporality, as well as the UK joining the EEC in 1973 was another major event. Second, “legal Brexit” rather relates to all legal implications of the referendum, including both exit negotiations and the conditions for a future agreement on EU-UK relations. Legal Brexit gives body and firmness to a political referendum that has no real effect by itself. Political and legal aspects of this bilateral negotiations have been the subject of various works, either in France (Antoine, 2020), in the UK (Menon, 2021; Menon et al., 2022) or in Ireland (Berberi, 2017; Fabbrini, 2017). Despite its practical implications, legal Brexit gives us no clue on the way Brexit is managed at a territorial level. Indeed, interdependence with the UK may defer from an EU country to another, and even amongst local authorities. We call this “territorial Brexit”, the differential between all EU territories depending on the closeness of their relationship with the UK and their spatial proximity with Great Britain. This may be linked to Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye’s distinction between “sensitivity” and “vulnerability” (Keohane & Nye, 2012). Even though it has indeed been highlighted that some territories are particularly concerned about Brexit, like Ireland (Buttazzoni, 2016; Hayward & Komarova, 2021), Scotland (Keating, 2019) or Normandy (Fleury, 2022), not much has been said about the authorities on both sides of the Strait of

Dover: the county of Kent and the Hauts-de-France region. Due to close trade links, spatial proximity, and border functions, this may be a pertinent area to study territorial implications of Brexit.

Hence our main research question: *how does Brexit lead to a reconfiguration of border-planning between France and the UK in a European multiscale perspective?*

2. The Franco-British border, a hybrid space and object to study

The border between France and the United Kingdom (UK) is a typical example of European integration impact on interstate debordering processes. Since the UK joined the European Union (EU) in 1973 and through the creation of the common market, cross-border goods and humans flows never ceased to increase. In the very end of the 2010s, they reached 4 million lorries, 4 million light vehicles and more than 25 million passengers. The Strait of Dover is the core link between Great Britain and mainland EU regarding flows: it shelters more than half of this trading. The French ports of Calais and Dunkirk (Hauts-de-France region), the British port of Dover (county of Kent) and the so-called Tunnel “fixed link” are the main gateways for inbound and outbound goods and tourists. This is directly related to the land proximity between French and English coasts in the Strait, but also to its unique position at the heart of North-Western Europe.

Local ports face a double challenge in terms of spatial planning. First, crossing the Channel natural discontinuity implies costly investments, for both maritime services and port infrastructures. The port of Calais, for example, led a € 863 million investment plan between 2010 and 2021 to modernise and expand. Second, most functions linked to the international border are in ports. For there are few of them, vehicles mass on roads around Channel ports, turning them into bottlenecks extremely sensitive to any traffic and border disruption. On the 1st of January 2021, the UK exited the EU, and the common market consequently. The border between France and the island of Great Britain turned into an EU external

border, implying controls to be implemented on cross-border goods and human flows. One of the major challenges caused by Brexit was the obvious contradiction between Franco-British rebordering and interstate interdependence in terms of trade.

The Franco-British border is rather peculiar, due to three main elements. First, the border itself historically switched between a space of peace and war, of cooperation and opposition (Buléon, 2002). The European economic community (EEC) introduced an unprecedented era of interrelations between France and the UK, with an increasing interdependence in terms of goods and services. What previously was a military border turns into an inter-governmentally securitised limit: with migrants coming to Great Britain through irregular routes, both countries cooperate closely to prevent them from crossing the border. This re-bordered space hosts a complex *dispositif* (Foucault, 2003) of infrastructures and personnel that wants to appear hermetic. The region of Calais is often referred to as a relevant case on rebordering and borderities (Bonnevalle, 2022; Guénebeaud, 2021; Lotto, 2022). Second, the Franco-British border is also a maritime border, even though it is not a “natural” one (Febvre, 2006). This means that the political-legal discontinuity (the border) comes on top of the topographic one (the English Channel). It induces specific challenges amongst which infrastructures and dedicated maritime services. A lot has been said of Dover Strait’s privileged position in this area (Barré & Joan, 1989; Joan, 1998), especially in the context of the Channel Tunnel’s construction in the late 1980s (Bruyelle, 1987; Vickerman, 1988). In a long-term perspective, French historian Renaud Morieux highlighted the human factor in the creation of a barrier- or bridge-based approach of the Channel in the XVIIth and XVIIIth centuries (Morieux, 2008). Third, the Strait of Dover is precisely a unique characteristic of the Franco-British border, mainly because of its hybrid status: both a link between two seas and a bridge between two lands. This status, *terraqué* in a French neologism (Segaud, 2002), favoured emerging cross-border cooperation (CBC) dynamics as soon as the late 1980s (Delebarre, 1998). The creation of the Transmanche Euroregion in 1987, followed by the first maritime cross-border Interreg programme around the Strait in

1992, underline its uniqueness. The Euroregion's end in 2005 (Maneveau, 2008) as well as Interreg preponderance in Franco-British CBC, mostly due to the attractiveness of European Community's fundings (Church & Reid, 1999), underline the lack of density and diversity in Channel CBC projects. Initiatives aside from Interreg's framework have emerged since the late 1990s but they couldn't properly succeed on the long term. In the 2000s, the Pas-de-Calais département and Kent County Council proposed a new approach to cooperation, based on a governance macroregion-based rather than strictly cross-border-based (Conseil départemental du Pas-de-Calais & Kent County Council, 2014, 2018).

3. A qualitative multiscale approach based on an analytical triptych of border-planning.

As a multiform object, the Franco-British border must be apprehended through a complex grid of analysis. This may be replicated and applied on other border cases. In this research, we mainly focus on the planning dimensions of borders.

We propose an analytical typology for border-planning. First, "planning the border" refers to the boundary seen as a public policy outcome by itself. The spatiality and implementation of contemporary borders rests upon an aim-based approach of their control role. New forms of border territorialisation are undergoing, contesting the traditional linear approach of the boundary. In the Franco-British case, the focus is on policy trying to conciliate post-Brexit border controls and the preservation of cross-border fluidity. Second, "planning at the border" consists in considering the borderland as a space with its own dynamics closely intertwined with the border functions above-mentioned. With the boundary as a structuring limit, planning tries to get as more advantages as possible from this peripheral position. This relies on border differential taken as a resource and an opportunity for local authorities and private stakeholders involved in regional trade, but also on border as an additional challenge to most planning operations. Third, "planning on the border" refers to the creation of new (political) spaces exceeding the

legal boundary without necessarily contesting its existence. The issue at stake is rather the obliteration of the border as a mental separation between Us and Them, an attempt to create a new sense of belonging based on a non-state and a non-national approach.

Border understood as a geographical object must also be analysed through a multiscale grid. We propose here a scalar triptych. At the local level, the Franco-British border expresses itself through urban and port planning, that is the main gateways for cross-border trade and human flows. The ports of Calais, Dunkirk, and Dover, as well as Tunnel infrastructures in Coquelles and Folkestone, are our main places of interest. At an intermediate or macroregional level, the Strait of Dover should be studied. It consists in a system of actors and activities, which specificity is directly linked to its unique position. Its internal homogeneity and heterogeneity should be questioned, as well as the opportunity to develop new forms of cross-border cooperation and institutions. Third, at the interstate and European level, it is essential to give an overview of the Franco-British border regarding the situation of other French or British dyads to fully understand the uniqueness of the case we study.

To achieve such an analysis, we mainly rely on three tools. We have conducted more than forty interviews with stakeholders on both sides of the border: local authorities, national public servants, firms, experts, etc. This enables us to compare views and aims of institutions depending on their function at the border, but also to assess potential internal disagreements inside those organisations. We complete this approach with the analysis of French and British grey literature. A multiscale and transnational overview of spatial planning documents enables us to determine the importance of cross-border and Brexit issues in concerned borderlands. To finish with, we spent several months on both sides of the border and immersed in local environments to fully understand daily issues regarding Brexit. We led observation works in Dover, Folkestone, Ashford, Calais, Boulogne, and Dunkirk. We also had the opportunity to attend meetings organised by institutions studied in this research; this allowed us to see a border in-the-making, an empirical debordering/rebordering process.

4. Field work and main results: a rebordering without a continuously closed Franco-British border

In terms of planning the border, it appears that we hardly can speak of “a” Franco-British border, but rather of two contiguous national borders with their own temporalities and functioning. Almost no interstate concertation occurs during the Brexit negotiations phase, mostly due to the European Commission forbidding it. On the French side, the border apparatus was fully prepared on the due date, with no real blockage on the 1st of January 2021; border controls mainly focused on trade. On the British side multiple delays occur in the enforcement of border procedures on trade, with the UK strategy being published in summer 2023. Nevertheless, controls on passengers were enforced with no delay, underlying this topic importance for the UK government. To face the rebordering/fluidity paradox, new technologies and big data seemed to be the best solution to both countries: France created its own “smart border”, which is illustrative of how contemporary borders are managed. Private actors and border differentiations tend to gain power, diverting from the state-operated and undifferentiated controls on flows. In the UK, port digital twins are being created to prevent traffic disruption and avoid port towns congestion. Two border management models can be distinguished: the French one remains hierarchical and strongly linked to the centrality of state, acting as an overall supervisor; the British one is more horizontal, relying on local and private actors and fundings in the implementation of the national border strategy.

Reviewing “planning at the border” initiatives on both sides of the Strait of Dover enables us not only to consider borderlands as spaces suffering the border. These may also use it as a powerful resource in their economic development. On the French coast, logistics is at the core of post-Brexit planning in the ports of Calais and Dunkirk. Economic stakeholders may benefit from it in various ways, depending on what their interest is. British exporters tend to settle in logistics warehouses to store goods that may be

necessary to European businesses: on the French side of the border, they need no further border control or inspection delay and may be delivered as fast as possible to European firms. To mainland companies, establishing in Calais is the cheapest solution to keep a link with the British market even though just-in-time strategies are hardly affordable after Brexit. In the UK, border is not perceived as a resource but rather as a limit to be overpassed: the UK government's freeports initiative enables a new post-border and tariff-free era on the British territory. Brexit is presented as an enabler to such a policy. New maritime tendencies tend to arise with unaccompanied freight on ferries and the emerging of intra-EU alternative routes to Great Britain's landbridge, in the context of more complex inbound and outbound border controls. Though it may be a resource, the border remains a legal and political obstacle to flows.

"Planning of the border" questions the ways and means for new (political) spaces to arise in the Strait of Dover, despite the UK exiting the EU. We have focused our analysis on the Straits Committee's case, a cross-border network created in 2020 and gathering local authorities from France, the UK, Belgium, and the Netherlands. Brexit raised awareness of the importance of territorial cooperation in the EU, but it brought new issues onwards. The Committee questions the ontological approach to cooperation: by being actor-based rather than territory-based, it challenges the classical spatial perception of what the Strait of Dover consists of. This functional and networked approach of cooperation will not allow an institutionalised strategy, that could have supported a political plea at the European level. Some internal disagreements on the Committee's *raison d'être*, as well as a lack of fundings and a divergence in local authorities' jurisdiction, may explain the difficulty to draft a common strategy. Though it is considered a credible partner, and an inspiring one by some authorities like Wales or Brittany, it sorely lacks an international legal framework. Unlike French land borders, this maritime border has never experienced a Franco-British treaty on CBC. Post-Brexit transnational initiatives seem to be even more complicated than they were prior to the UK's exit.

5. Research that helps to understand border crisis management and foreign policy rescaling.

The Franco-British border underlines some of the specificities of contemporary EU external borders. The already mentioned rebordering tendency faces the challenge of interdependence in terms of flows and economic activities. Hence EU borders can no longer be considered either open or closed. We propose a new hybrid approach relying on a “controlled opening” or a “selective closure” depending on the way border regimes operate. This highlights the differences that may exist in the controlling of flows depending on their status, but also the legal and political gap from one border regime to another on the same dyad.

This research also contributes to a territorial and practical approach of borders, that is the way they are enforced on the ground. We do not consider them simply as institutional objects, but also as spatial artefact that may have a visual and ordering power in the places where they are located. This confirms the necessity to come up to border analysis through sensitive and field-based experiments (Hubbard, 2022). First and foremost, borders, including the Franco-British one, are objects evolving and moving constantly. Between France and the UK, controls and border regimes stability is still to be found seven years after Brexit referendum and almost three years after UK’s effective exit from the EU. Uncertainty is one of the main items that were raised in the interviews we led with economic stakeholders and local authorities.

Brexit and the Franco-British border also underline an existing “poly-crisis” era in which various disruptions fuel each other. It is very hard to identify how far cross-Channel traffic has been affected by Brexit specifically, or by COVID (Menon et al., 2021). To us, multi-factor crises tend to worsen their effects considered individually. Furthermore, interstate interdependence in Europe widens the spatial scope of

crises. Even though Brexit is a political and (partially) rebordering disruption, interdependence still exists and remains the major issue in EU-UK relations.

In conclusion, this research enables us to use a relatively new approach to foreign policy at various scales. Though being often considered at an international level, we propose a local analysis based on devolved authorities and decentralised state agencies cross-border strategies (Bezes & Le Lidec, 2016). This questions the hegemony of national governments in transnational matters, and the reconfiguration of international relations (Paquin, 2004). Crossed Channel and border approaches also enable us to examine the question of governance and macroregional perspectives of cooperation in Europe, from both institutional and action-based considerations.

Main issues in the research lie in the processing of qualitative data collected from various interviews and what those data may be used for (actor map, comparative table...). Furthermore, it is quite hard to cross information from the main patterns of border-planning mentioned hereinabove, particularly without having the same type and amount of data in each of these three aspects. The analytical part of the research may very well be the hardest one to come.

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