

Newsletter 7/2024
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Keir Starmer, the new British Prime Minister at the cliffs of Dover

A Channel Plan

Dear friends of ESI,

Since early 2019, 125,000 migrants have made the Channel crossing from the EU to the UK. In the first half of 2024, over 13,000 have made the crossing. This is a record for this period. *If crossings continue like this, it will be many more than 30,000 by the end of 2024.*

[New ESI paper A Channel Plan for London, Berlin and Copenhagen](#)

In May 2024, then Labour leader Sir Keir Starmer told an interviewer standing on the cliffs above Dover, with the Channel stretching out behind him:

“We shouldn’t have people crossing in small boats and arriving in this country. It’s a dangerous perilous journey. It’s a complete loss of control of the borders. It allows the gangs to determine who’s coming to the UK ... [I want, like everybody else, to end this vile trade.](#)”

Now, following his resounding victory in the recent UK elections, prime minister Starmer will need to be concrete. His government will need to show that it *has* a strategy that can bring those numbers down dramatically. That it can end “this vile trade.”

This is in fact a huge opportunity for a Labour government to address an issue that British voters have consistently wanted tackled, to do so early in its term, to remove a toxic issue from the agenda, and to do so in line with its values and electoral promises, which include respect for the European Convention on Human Rights. To succeed, the new UK government will need unprecedented cooperation with European partners. Starmer recognised this in already in November 2023, when he suggested that [a Labour government would seek a returns agreement with the EU](#), including a “quid-pro-quo” whereby the UK would also take some asylum seekers from the EU.

The far-right claims that only violence and suspending respect for human rights conventions can stop irregular migration. It would be invaluable to centrists and democrats everywhere to prove that the opposite is true, and to do so now.

In a new policy paper – [A Channel Plan for London, Berlin and Copenhagen](#) – we explain how such a returns agreement could work, and why it would be in the interest of Starmer’s new government, European partners and indeed anyone in favour of strengthening public support for human rights and refugee conventions currently under attack from populists and the far-right.

Outline of a breakthrough deal in the Channel



Irregular migrants headed for Britain

Let us envisage immediate negotiations between the United Kingdom and a group of interested EU-member states – within days of the new UK government in place – to reach the following unprecedented migration cooperation agreement:

A coalition of EU countries agrees to take in anyone irregularly crossing from the EU to the United Kingdom, starting from a set date X this summer 2024. The goal is to stop all crossings, so that after a few weeks only a few transfers would be needed.

The UK authorities issue inadmissibility decisions to irregularly arriving asylum-seekers reflecting the reality that its partners in the EU are all safe third countries. Anyone who wants to make an asylum application can do so in these countries.

After the day X set for returns, agreed between the UK and its European partners, the UK detains anyone arriving irregularly from the EU, and issues final asylum and deportation decisions within a few weeks.

The goal is to remove all incentives to try to cross to the UK irregularly, and to do so in compliance with international human rights law. The scheme works if it effectively demonstrates the futility of paying smugglers, getting into boats and risking one's life.

The UK agrees to accept annually recognised refugees or registered asylum seekers from these European partners. The target number might be set at 20,000 a year, for the next four years. To achieve this, the UK sets up a visa application scheme under which recognised refugees or registered asylum seekers can apply to get to the UK safely and legally.

The message of such an agreement is clear: **Crossing irregularly is futile and leads to return**; but there are safe, legal routes available for those interested in applying.

Controlling Channel crossings humanely and offering resettlement instead



An example for Europe: "Canada welcomes refugees"

In May 2024, 15 EU member states urged the European Commission in a [letter](#) for a new migration control approach, suggesting agreements with safe third countries. These states included Finland, Denmark, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Austria, Czech Republic, Poland, Romania, Bulgaria, Italy, Malta, Cyprus, Greece, and the Netherlands.

They called for “comprehensive, mutually beneficial and durable partnerships” with key countries along migratory routes to manage irregular migration and offer safer alternatives to perilous journeys. The letter stressed the importance of adhering to international legal obligations, including non-refoulement.

The Channel, though less deadly than the Mediterranean, remains dangerous. Germany’s debate on safe third countries has intensified, with the German Lander urging the Federal government to [propose solutions](#). The European People’s Party also supports safe third country agreements in its [manifesto](#).

The goal is to stop deadly crossings, destroy smugglers’ business models, and maintain refugee access to the UK. Legal routes are crucial for effective cooperation, inspired by Canada’s practices of safe third country agreements and organised resettlement. This vision seeks more legal resettlement and fewer irregular arrivals.

There are no good alternatives to such a plan



Nigel Farage – He has a plan and is looking for allies

By reaching a Channel agreement, the UK government and its European partners would seize a historic opportunity. Not doing this could be hugely detrimental to their interests. As Keir Starmer noted when presenting Labour’s plans to tackle Channel crossings in Dover in 2024: [“the biggest deterrent is that it’s a pointless exercise and you go back where you started.”](#) Without safe third country cooperation with European partners to deliver this deterrence, it is likely Labour will fail to reduce crossings.

In the run up to the election, Kier Starmer promised better law enforcement. But this approach has been tried and found wanting for years. Since 2018, Conservative governments in London

have signed five separate security agreements with France, costing hundreds of millions of pounds. They set up a centralised command response unit and appealed to France to help stop departures. Departures have not stopped. More of the same will not stop them either.

If Labour does nothing, this issue is likely to become the rallying cry for the Conservatives and Nigel Farage, diverting attention from other urgent issues.

European countries, arguing that safe third country agreements are beneficial for both sides, must also be prepared to be safe third countries themselves if they want to have a credible case in negotiations with countries outside Europe. By offering themselves as safe third countries for the UK, they can transform the European and global debate. It would also be an example of mutually beneficial cooperation.

The morality of a Channel deal

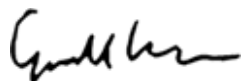
Reducing irregular migration, stopping Channel deaths, undermining smugglers' business models, and opening legal ways for refugees and asylum seekers from the EU to the UK is politically advantageous to centrist and progressive governments. It also advances a more moral system of managing migration.

Numbers matter. An agreement allowing 80,000 asylum seekers and refugees to reach the UK safely over four years contrasts with the UK's past decade average of 25,000 people per year (excluding Ukrainians), only a fifth through resettlement programmes.

With fewer irregular crossings and restored border control, a Labour government committed to refugee protection could increase admissions through safe routes, either via government-sponsored resettlement or private sponsorship schemes like the Homes for Ukraine scheme, which could be extended to refugees from other countries.

The big picture is clear: Dangerous, uncontrolled routes should be replaced by safe, legal ones. This solution to Channel crossings would enable a new Labour government to restore border control after five years of Tory failure, provide protection to more people than the historical average, and offer a successful example of humane, lawful, and effective border control for European refugee protection advocates.

Yours sincerely,



Gerald Knaus

Further reading:

ESI report: [A Channel Plan for London, Berlin and Copenhagen](#), 5 July 2024

ESI report: [A wise court – Rwanda, Safe Third Countries and a Channel breakthrough in 2023](#), 30 June 2023

ESI newsletter: [Safe Third Countries, Rwanda and a Channel deal](#), 30 June 2023

Deutsche Welle: [Britain aims to reduce English Channel migration](#), 4 April 2023

Prospect Magazine: [What Europe can teach Britain about asylum](#), 1 March 2023



*With ESI Senior Fellow John Dalhuisen,
working on humane borders in Berlin*

The European Stability Initiative is being supported by Stiftung Mercator

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