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Analysis of today
Assessment of tomorrow

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The British-French agreement on migration – the beginning of a functioning return policy

After months of negotiations and consultations, the UK and France signed a bilateral agreement on migrant returns in July, known as the "one in, one out" model.

The agreement stipulates that for each migrant the UK returns to France, the UK will accept one migrant who crossed the Channel illegally. It is the first agreement of its kind that attempts to combine humanitarian standards and border controls.

Unlike previous controversial attempts, such as the UK's deportation plan to Rwanda, this model relies solely on cooperation between two European countries and avoids the involvement of third countries, which often do not have sufficient legal or institutional guarantees for the safe and legal treatment of migrants.

The decisive change occurred on 5 August, when this agreement officially came into force.

The first concrete steps of implementation were already observed on 6 August, including the detention of migrants in Dover, the preparation of transports to France and the activation of the pilot model.

According to the British Home Secretary Yvette Cooper, this system is expected to accommodate up to 50 people per week in the initial phase.

This figure is modest compared to the more than 25,000 migrants who have travelled across the Channel by boat so far this year.

Article 8 and the controversy over deportations

The agreement provides for clearly defined criteria: only asylum seekers from countries with a high asylum approval rate (Afghanistan, Syria, Eritrea, Iran, and Somalia) and those with direct family ties to the UK will be accepted from France.

At the same time, all migrants who have arrived by boat on British shores and whose applications are deemed unfounded will be sent back to France on a reciprocal basis. Each country bears the transport costs.

In practice, the agreement is based on data from biometric systems and previous asylum applications.

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However, there is no standard digital system that enables automatic data exchange. This leaves room for error and downtime.

The UK is planning to set up dedicated inter-agency units to handle cases with additional staff from the Home Office and Border Force. France, on the other hand, has not yet determined the administrative capacity available to process the migrants it receives.

The initial reactions show how politically sensitive this model is. While Keir Starmer's government is presenting the move as a rational compromise that combines border security and the humanitarian minimum, human rights organisations are warning of its legal and ethical consequences.

The question of the application of Article 8 of the European Convention on Human Rights, which protects the right to private and family life, is particularly controversial.

Public confusion was caused by Minister Cooper's statement that people with active applications based on Article 8 can be deported, which contradicts the official text of the Convention.

A possible failure of the agreement

Organisations that provide legal aid to migrants held protests in London, Liverpool, Bristol, and Nottingham.

Their representatives claim that the detention of migrants at temporary centres near the coast violates basic human rights.

Some media have published images and reported inadequate hygiene and safety conditions in these centres.

The government has responded by announcing monitoring and the establishment of an independent body to oversee the implementation of the agreement.

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The Conservative Party, which has championed the controversial deportation plan for Rwanda in recent years, now finds itself in a paradoxical position—critiquing the government not for the content of the new approach but for its alleged ineffectiveness.

The dominant accusation, rather than an ideological debate, is the government's lack of determination in implementing the border controls.

At the same time, some MPs from the ranks of the Labour Party, particularly from constituencies in the south-east of England, are warning that a possible failure of the agreement could further strengthen far-right options and open up space for the radicalisation of public discourse on migration.

The UK-France agreement outside the Dublin System

France, although formally a partner in this mechanism, faces its own tensions. There have been protests in Paris, Lyon and Calais against the "British export of problems".

While some humanitarian organisations have called for the annulment of the agreement, police unions and asylum centre workers have warned of an overburdened system.

While President Emmanuel Macron has not made a public statement, he has said through the cabinet that strict adherence to the agreed quotas and legal standards is expected.

The UK is no longer in the EU, so the agreement is not in line with the Dublin rules.

The European Commission has agreed to the model as an "exception" under the bilateral solutions, although it is not a formal signatory.

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Analysts at the London School of Economics and the Institut Montaigne in Paris believe that the main problem will be sustainability. A system that works in a limited number of cases is not necessarily scalable.

There is also the question of deterrence: will migrants really stop trying to cross the Channel if they know they will be sent back?

Experience with similar programmes shows that such measures seldom lead to a reduction in the overall number of attempts.

A symptom of a broader problem

This model, when viewed in a broader context, represents a symptom of a larger issue - the fragmentation of European migration policy. The EU has not yet established a stable

common asylum system.

Each country tries to protect its borders through bilateral agreements, often without coordination. In this respect, the agreement between the UK and France is an expression of the weakness of the European response to migration, not its strength.

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If it proves workable, it could strengthen his position ahead of next year's local elections. If there is a stalemate, court injunctions and administrative chaos, it is likely to open up space for the return of a hardline migration policy.

The "one in, one out" model is currently the most ambitious attempt to tackle illegal migration across the Channel without abandoning basic legal and humanitarian standards.

However, its future depends on factors beyond logistics: political will, legal precision, administrative capacity, and, crucially, public confidence that neither the law nor human dignity is being toyed with this way.