

## The Gibraltar case on Twitter

**O**n March 29, an official letter from British Prime Minister Theresa May notified President of the European Council Donald Tusk of the United Kingdom's intention to leave the European Union. With the triggering of Article 50 of the Lisbon Treaty, the Brexit clock started ticking on the two-year negotiation process that should culminate with Britain formally exiting the Union.

One hot topic emerged abruptly in the immediate aftermath, namely the future of Gibraltar - a British overseas territory located on the southern end of the Iberian peninsula and a long-time argument in Anglo-Spanish relations, as the Spanish government has been claiming possession over this small peninsula since General Franco's era, and which was rejected by its citizens - over 30,000 people of different nationalities who voted twice (in the 1967 and in 2002) to remain under the British rule. Gibraltar enjoys some degree of independence from its motherland, although some policy areas, like defence and foreign relations, remain the responsibility of Great Britain.

In a [burst of declarations](#), both former Tory leader Michael Howard and Defence Secretary Michael Fallon expressed the view that Britain is ready to go to war to defend the sovereignty of Gibraltar. The situation is even more delicate when considering that 96% of voters from Gibraltar voted to remain in the EU during the Brexit referendum.

We examined online reactions to the Gibraltar case on Twitter, analyzing data from March 25 to April 11, and collecting all tweets containing a number of relevant hashtags, such as #gibraltar, #gibraltarwar and #brexit, thus gathering a total of 69,552 tweets.

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Given the nature of the Gibraltar's disputed status, it is not surprising that the language distribution of the tweets shows a predominance of tweets in English and Spanish.

*Figure 2: Temporal distribution of tweets*

As Figure 2 shows, most of the tweets were concomitant with the above declaration by Tory politicians, on April 3 and 4, peaking on April 5.

Interestingly, the hashtag #gibraltarwar appears more frequently in tweets in Spanish (1,920 out of 7,882), while it is scarcely used in English tweets (754 out of 58,114), as shown in the word clouds below (Figure 3).

*Figure 3: Most frequent hashtags by language - Spanish and English*

It appears that the territorial claim is still an hot topic among spanish commentators, which look at Brexit negotiations as a chance to solve this decennary issue in Spain's favor (evidence of this link has been found also [in a previous study](#)).

UK Independence Party former leader Nigel Farage, one of the most mentioned users in our sample of tweets, is the only politician who participated actively in this debate with, among others, 929 mentions and the following tweet, which was retweeted 606 times:

As shown in Figure 1, the third most used language is Catalan. We isolated the tweets in that language, the users of which are usually less visible on European issues, in order to highlight the presence of a connection between the Gibraltar case and Catalan separatism. We found a small--yet not negligible--number of tweets expressly referring to the Catalan separatism. This

shows that the Gibraltar case is an attracting factor for the Catalan audience, which joins UK's side in the fight against Spain's claims and might be using the case to restate and bolster their autonomist position. This also reflected at [EU institutional level](#), as during the last EU Parliament resolution on Brexit, the members of the "Junts Pel Sí" (the coalition that won the 2015 Catalan elections) promoted an amendment to include a specific reference to the Gibraltar case in the Brexit negotiations. However, EU parliament leaders of other spanish parties (PP, PSOE, Ciudadanos) rejected the motion and shut it down. Also at a European-scale level, the relevance of the Gibraltar case for the Catalan independentism does not seem to be ignored in the public debate, as a modest, but still important, number of tweets in English, Spanish and French (208) refer to it.

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