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The Troubles on the Brink of Recurrence: Northern Ireland in a Post-Brexit World

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Abstract

The Troubles were a difficult and trying time for Northern Ireland beginning in the 1960s. The subsequent decades were filled with turmoil and violence, mainly centered in Belfast amongst the Protestant and Catholic groups. In 1998, peaceful means to ending the Troubles were accomplished through the Good Friday Agreement. The accord established peace primarily through implementing a new power sharing government, ending direct rule by the British, disarming the paramilitary groups and creating a soft border between Ireland and Northern Ireland. The European Union was a critical asset in negotiating terms for peace. The aid of the European Union helped unite the governments in Dublin, Belfast, and London through not only a common set of policies and political space but through the mutual identity of Europeans. The co-cooperation all came to a crashing halt when the United Kingdom voted to leave the EU in 2016 without regard for Northern Ireland. Brexit poses a major threat to the maintenance of peace in Northern Ireland and goes against the principles laid out in the Good Friday Agreement. Long-term instability has persisted in Northern Ireland ever since, resulting in a renewal of sectarian violence on the one hand and calls for Irish unity on the other. However, it ultimately remains unclear what the outcome will be in this precarious situation. This paper addresses the complexities associated with Brexit in Northern Ireland and long term effects politically, religiously, and economically.

Keywords

International relations, Conflict, Brexit, Religion

Disciplines

Christian Denominations and Sects | European History | Political History

Comments

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Abstract

The Troubles were a difficult and trying time for Northern Ireland beginning in the 1960s. The subsequent decades were filled with turmoil and violence, mainly centered in Belfast amongst the Protestant and Catholic groups. In 1998, peaceful means to ending the Troubles were accomplished through the Good Friday Agreement. The accord established peace primarily through implementing a new power sharing government, ending direct rule by the British, disarming the paramilitary groups and creating a soft border between Ireland and Northern Ireland. The European Union was a critical asset in negotiating terms for peace. The aid of the European Union helped unite the governments in Dublin, Belfast, and London through not only a common set of policies and political space but through the mutual identity of Europeans. The co-cooperation all came to a crashing halt when the United Kingdom voted to leave the EU in 2016 without regard for Northern Ireland. Brexit poses a major threat to the maintenance of peace in Northern Ireland and goes against the principles laid out in the Good Friday Agreement. Long-term instability has persisted in Northern Ireland ever since, resulting in a renewal of sectarian violence on the one hand and calls for Irish unity on the other. However, it ultimately remains unclear what the outcome will be in this precarious situation. This paper addresses the complexities associated with Brexit in Northern Ireland and long term effects politically, religiously, and economically.

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Introduction

The Northern Ireland conflict also known as the Troubles was a harrowing time for the small region located at the top of the island of Ireland. The conflict spanned from the late 1960s up through the signing of the Good Friday Agreement in 1998. While often described as a war between Protestants and Catholics, to simplify it in this nature would be to overlook the deep historical and political roots of the conflict. Northern Ireland was created to be a Protestant majority region out of the six northeastern counties in Ireland in 1920 and remained a part of the United Kingdom when the Republic of Ireland became officially independent in 1937. Being a majority Protestant region, Northern Ireland remained loyal to the United Kingdom, giving its Protestant residents the name loyalists or unionists. Catholics on the other hand, while making up the minority, wished to rejoin the rest of Ireland and leave the United Kingdom, giving them the name nationalists. Over the years, the minority Catholic group faced discrimination from the Protestants in many areas, including housing, work, voting, and police harassment. Eventually, this led to the formation of paramilitary groups such as the Irish Republican Army (IRA) and Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF/UDA) and violence erupted, especially in Belfast, the capital of Northern Ireland. Over the course of the conflict, over 3,500 people were killed before the peace treaty was signed in 1998. In 2016, the United Kingdom voted to leave the European Union without considering Northern Ireland in the decision, threatening the Good Friday Agreement, which had established a fragile peace. Brexit threatens to renew the violence in Belfast and draw on the city's deep-rooted history in civil unrest.¹

Since 2016, Brexit has posed unique challenges in determining the status and identity of Northern Ireland in relation to the European Union. The common tie to the European Union and

¹ Victor Mesev, Peter Shirlow, and Joni Downs, "The Geography of CONFLICT and Death in Belfast, Northern Ireland," *Geographies of Peace and Armed Conflict* 99, no. 5 (2009): 893, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203723340-12>.

the stability it provided between Northern Ireland and England has now been severed. The importance of the European Union in promoting peace in the region should not be underestimated as some existing literature may suggest. In contrast, my paper will attempt to establish what the long-term effects of Brexit will be on Northern Ireland, specifically in the Belfast region. I will examine how London's abrupt leaving of the European Union has destabilized Northern Ireland and contradicted the Good Friday Agreement already established.

My research question centers around how Brexit undermines the Good Friday Agreement in Northern Ireland leading to the potential for a renewal of religious, economic, and political instability. My work will provide data, maps, studies and news stories to prove that Brexit is the primary cause of the revival of the tense environment in Belfast and calls for a united Ireland.

My findings will be presented as follows: first, I will examine the current state of literature on Brexit and what implications have already been noted and the relevant history in Belfast in relation with London. Then, I will assess how there is the potential for a renewal of religious, economic, and political instability that have yet to be seen. Once establishing the overarching impacts, I will look at possible solutions and outcomes to stabilize the region. The paper will conclude with the implications of a united Ireland down the road.



Map of Northern Ireland in relation to the Republic of Ireland for reference.²

Literature Review: Brexit and Northern Ireland

Since the British voted to leave the European Union in 2016, researchers, politicians, and all of Europe have sought to understand what this means for the British Isles. However, most of the attention has been diverted to London specifically and how this will impact the city as a global player. Many in the financial world had predicted a major fall in revenue in London or an impact in the job market. Many studies such as the one in the *New Political Economy* examined if the “city of London would continue to thrive as the world’s leading financial center or if the

²“Map of Ireland, Northern Europe,” *Nations Online Project*, accessed February 9, 2023, <https://www.nationsonline.org/oneworld/map/ireland-map.htm>.

bulk of its activity would move to rival hubs after departure from EU trading arrangements.”³ Luckily for London, evidence has suggested that the city withstood many of these predictions. Brexit had no significant impact on jobs, attracted new firms to London, and increased dominance in major infrastructure markets.⁴ London for the most part has remained a global power in terms of finance but is perhaps losing in other economic areas after Brexit according to the majority of current literature. While the world as a whole looked to London to see if it would be successful in leaving the European Union, the impact on Northern Ireland was not evaluated until problems arose once Brexit took place.

Overlooked throughout the entire process, Northern Ireland has posed the biggest threat to the success of Brexit. The Boris Johnson administration in London continuously ignored the positive effects the European Union brought to Northern Ireland and ignored what the vote to leave would mean for the citizens of Great Britain living there. It was almost as if London forgot the turmoil in Belfast just a few decades prior. A database in the *Geographies of Peace and Armed Conflict* journal has since been created that “measures, maps, and analyzes the spatial distribution of conflict-related deaths between 1966 and 2007 across Belfast, the capital city of Northern Ireland, with respect to levels of segregation, social and economic deprivation, and interfacing.”⁵ The result of the new data set supported the idea that “sentiments are still present that uphold division and atavistic attitudes between spatially divided Catholic and Protestant populations.”⁶ This begs the question why if it was known that tension and divisive attitudes are

³ Manolis Kalaitzake, “Resilience in the City of London: The Fate of UK Financial Services after Brexit,” *New Political Economy* 27, no. 4: (2021):610.

⁴ Kalaitzake, “Resilience in the City of London,” 610.

⁵ Victor Mesev, Peter Shirlow, and Joni Downs, “The Geography of CONFLICT and Death in Belfast, Northern Ireland,” *Geographies of Peace and Armed Conflict* 99, no. 5 (2009): 893, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203723340-12>.

⁶ Mesev, Shirlow, and Downs, “The Geography of CONFLICT,” 893.

still present in Belfast, the main location of the Troubles, would the government in London not take more precautions with Brexit.

Current literature such as that in the journal of *Comparative and European Politics*, further details how Northern Ireland had benefited from European Union policy and created a common sense of unity amongst Catholics and Protestants due to the European identity it promoted. Brexit implies active de-Europeanisation which dismantles all European policy at the domestic level.⁷ This includes efforts made in education reform such as through the EU Bologna Process, land-use planning, and foreign policy assistance. The attempts and efforts that Northern Ireland has made to modernize, develop and meet economic goals have been reversed by London's unwillingness to see how the European Union has helped uplift the conditions in Northern Ireland since the Troubles. London's inattention to Northern Ireland's needs has reaffirmed particularly to the Catholics in Belfast that they would be better off if they left the United Kingdom. Catholic citizens in Northern Ireland would like to remain a part of the European Union as promised in the Good Friday Agreement. The accord, "grants all Northern Irish citizens an equal choice between Irish or British citizenship, or both, and ensures equal economic opportunities for all citizens."⁸ This removal of citizenship will prevent equality promised under the accord and has become a major pressing issue on the best way to move forward. Scholars such as Driscoll in the *International Law Journal* have discussed the implications for Northern Ireland if the citizens are prevented from gaining access to an Irish passport and in turn the European Union because of Brexit. It raises the question if the British are

⁷Barry Colfer, and Patrick Diamond, "Borders and Identities in Ni after Brexit: Remaking Irish-UK Relations," *Comparative European Politics* 20, no. 5 (2022): 544-45, <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41295-022-00295-4>.

⁸ Elizabeth E Driscoll, "Equal Treatment for the Identity: The Inequality of Irish and British Citizenship in Post-Brexit Northern Ireland," *BU Int'l LJ* 37 (2019): 211.

even allowed to proceed this way under the Good Friday Agreement and if it constitutes a breach of law.

Following Brexit, once attention shifted away from the event itself, scholars began to predict ramifications in Northern Ireland. Literature such as in the *French Journal of British Studies* researched by the scholar Carine Berberi, then focused on various different angles in which potential problems may arise such as how “Brexit could jeopardize the Common Travel Area (CTA), a special travel zone set up after the partition of Ireland in 1922.”⁹ Other literature examined Brexit through a religious lens and looked to see if ‘the Brexit climate where the contested rhetoric of ‘sovereignty’ is salient, the integrationist process of the GFA may reverse into re-segregation and ancient enmities between denominational groups.’¹⁰ European scholars further tended to look at the dilemma in terms of a shifting security agenda for the European Union and the need to prioritize Ireland in the process.¹¹ These articles all tend to take a very analytical approach to Brexit. Instead of displaying what is truly happening in real time on the ground in Belfast, they seek to provide evidence and data to reveal what could happen later amid doubts around the Good Friday Agreement. The lack of a clear set of current consequences makes these scholars unable to clearly reveal how Brexit is shaping the daily lives of those in Northern Ireland right now.

News websites and articles such as CNBC do a much better job at providing updates on areas other than politics and economics. They are able to provide up-to-date coverage on how tensions are rising in Belfast and links to Brexit. For example, back in 2021 violent unrest was

⁹Carine Berberi, "Northern Ireland: Is Brexit a Threat to the Peace Process and the Soft Irish Border," *Revue Française de Civilisation Britannique, French Journal of British Studies* 22, no. XXII-2 (2017):1-17.

¹⁰Ahmet Çoymak, and Emma O’Dwyer, "Does Brexit mean a return to sectarianism? Beyond ‘the border issue’, the future of social identities in Northern Ireland from a political psychological perspective," *Development* 63, no. 1 (2020): 74-78.

¹¹ John Doyle, and Eileen Connolly, "The Effects of Brexit on the Good Friday Agreement and the Northern Ireland Peace Process," in *Peace, Security and Defence Cooperation in Post-Brexit Europe: Risks and Opportunities*, ed. Cornelia-Adriana Baciu, and John Doyle (Dublin: Springer, Cham, 2019), 79.

occurring for weeks on end in Belfast. “Dozens of police officers were injured amid attacks with petrol bombs, vehicles and rocks.”¹² These riots were in response to the anniversary of the signing of the Good Friday Agreement and anger directed at London. The British prime minister, Boris Johnson, at the time was trying to figure out trade rules between the United Kingdom and the European Union and loyalists were upset at the ideas being promoted. Furthermore, violence also erupted between “the police’s decision not to prosecute senior lawmakers from the Irish republican party Sinn Fein for breaking Covid rules, in order to attend the funeral of high-profile former Irish Republican Army member Bobby Storey”¹³ This event was then used as an excuse to rejoin paramilitary groups and ignite the tensions that are consistently sitting right below the surface in Belfast. News stories and coverage on the day-to-day happenings in Northern Ireland provide sufficient knowledge on how Brexit is contributing to a renewal of violence.

Lastly, another wide set of literature focuses mainly on the renewal of the Irish question that was present during the Troubles. Two main concepts of a hard border and changing demographics make this situation prominent. Certain works by political scientists such as Cathal McPCall analyze the prospect of a hard border between Ireland and Northern Ireland. While this did not happen, increased security at the border has heightened tensions. The EU had funded cross border peacebuilding programs and, with Brexit, these initiatives are no longer in place.¹⁴ A harder border than previous years since the Good Friday Agreement has helped to renew calls to unite the two Irelands in order to preserve the shared border. Other works further dwell on the fact that Northern Ireland is changing in demographics and is now majority Catholic instead of

¹² Elliot Smith, “Violent Riots Have Broken out in Northern Ireland - Here's Why,” *CNBC*, April 13, 2021, accessed April 20, 2023, <https://www.cnn.com/2021/04/13/from-brexit-to-covid-rules-why-violent-riots-have-broken-out-in-northern-ireland.html>.

¹³ Smith, “Violent Riots.”

¹⁴ Cathal McCall, "How “Brexit” Could Destabilize the Irish Peace Process," *Cross-Border Review Yearbook 2016–European Crisis and its Consequences for Borders and Cooperation* (2015): 157-9.

Protestant as during the Troubles. Since Catholics tend to prefer to reunite with Ireland and leave the United Kingdom, this implies that, if put to a vote, Northern Ireland would choose to leave the United Kingdom. Brexit is already causing discord in the region and with the roll back of certain Good Friday Agreement promises, the key to peace is shaken. The call to rejoin Ireland and rejoin the European Union is strong in this aspect. Old time hatreds easily flare up when dramatic events happen like Brexit. Existing literature across Europe, including France calls on a need for the reworking of dialogue between the North and South in order to help reduce the opportunities for violence in Northern Ireland and promote peace amongst its citizens, especially in Belfast.¹⁵

The upcoming research presented here will contribute to the existing works above through revealing how Brexit is currently shaping economic, political, and religious issues in Belfast. It will seek to prove how British politicians did not take Northern Ireland into account during Brexit, which will ultimately come back to pose a direct threat to their sovereignty in the region. The paper will then turn to proposing possible solutions to the Northern Ireland dilemma and if a united Ireland seems to be eminent in the future. The subsequent research in the forthcoming sections will clarify previous arguments and seek to establish a working connection between civil unrest and Brexit in Belfast, the capital of Northern Ireland.

¹⁵Jennifer Todd, "The vulnerability of the Northern Ireland settlement: British Irish relations, political crisis and Brexit," *Études irlandaises* 40, no. 2 (2015): 61-73.

British soldier and a little boy during the Troubles in 1971.¹⁶



Importance of the Good Friday Agreement

As previously stated, the Good Friday Agreement was signed in 1998 and put an end to the Troubles centered in Belfast which had resulted in the death of nearly 3600 people. Recently, the Good Friday Agreement celebrated its 25th birthday, but the question remains if the accord will continue promoting peace for much longer due to the long-lasting effects of Brexit. Exploring the benefits of the peace treaty and how it set Northern Ireland up for harmony is imperative to understanding why Brexit is such a threat to the renewal of violence in the region.

The Good Friday Agreement accomplished peace primarily through implementing a new power-sharing government and ending direct rule by the British in Northern Ireland. The new legislature was to be set up with members from both sides of the conflict's respective political parties. The foundation of the agreement gave "the UK and Irish governments a stake in the governance of NI, giving legitimate voice to the historical claims of Nationalism and Unionism."¹⁷ It was essential to incorporate both sides into the new government or any

¹⁶ Alan Cowell, "50 Years Later, Troubles Still Cast 'Huge Shadow' over Northern Ireland," *The New York Times*, October 5, 2018, accessed April 20, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/04/world/europe/northern-ireland-troubles.html>.

¹⁷ Barry Colfer and Patrick Diamond, "Borders and Identities in Ni after Brexit: Remaking Irish–UK Relations," *Comparative European Politics* 20, no. 5 (2022): 544–45, <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41295-022-00295-4>.

agreement of peace would never be reached. Furthermore, the Good Friday Agreement sought to reaffirm the political borders of Northern Ireland. “While the agreement confirmed that Northern Ireland is a part of the UK, it stipulates that Ireland could be united if that was supported in a vote by majorities in both Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland.”¹⁸ This compromise satisfied both sides because it reaffirmed the British identity of the Protestants but also left the door open to joining Ireland like the Catholics wished for. The recognition that no one was going to win this civil war led to the meetings amongst all groups to commence and the eventual signing and adoption of the peace accord. “It was signed by the British and Irish governments, as well as four of the major political parties in Northern Ireland: Sinn Fein, the Ulster Unionist Party, the Social Democratic and Labour Party, and the Alliance Party. Among major parties, only the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) abstained.”¹⁹ In addition to the parties in Northern Ireland, some other notable people added their signatures such as British Prime Minister Tony Blair, US Senator George Mitchell, and Irish Prime Minister Bertie Ahern. All three men had worked for weeks to negotiate peace for the island.²⁰

One of the stipulations for peace in the accord was the disarmament of paramilitary groups. The IRA agreed to this new policy but in practice, it took a while to complete. As one can imagine, the IRA did not want to hand over all weapons and disarm completely. However, eventually the IRA committed to peaceful means and destroyed 1,000 rifles and 2 tonnes of Semtex. The disarming of the paramilitary organizations “has contributed to a sharp reduction in violence, and the annual conflict-related death toll, which peaked at 480 in 1972, has dropped to

¹⁸ Charles Lanlow and James McBride, “Moving Past the Troubles: The Future of Northern Ireland Peace,” *Council on Foreign Relations*, April 6, 2023, accessed April 21, 2023, <https://www.cfr.org/background/moving-past-troubles-future-northern-ireland-peace>.

¹⁹ Lanlow and McBride, “Moving Past the Troubles.”

²⁰ Jill Lawless, “As It Turns 25, N Ireland's Good Friday Agreement Explained,” *Associated Press*, April 17, 2023, accessed April 21, 2023, <https://apnews.com/article/northern-ireland-good-friday-agreement-explained-8165d2fb0d7537401047d5ff9ba1a39e>.

the single digits in recent years.”²¹ Not only did violence decrease greatly after the accord, but any paramilitary members who were jailed for violence were also set free. This aspect of the Good Friday agreement is not seen as a benefit by all within the Belfast community. The lack of justice for bereaved friends and family is something that keeps tensions high to this day.

Statistics on inmates at the Maze Prison in Belfast, reveal that they were “emptied of more than 400 inmates, both republican and loyalist, who had been responsible for some of the acts of violence which cost 3,500 lives during the Troubles.”²² The Good Friday Agreement legislation that involved the release of prisoners is still in effect today. People convicted of murder that took place during the Troubles only have to serve a 2 year sentence.²³ This leaves bitter resentment in the community and the sense that the justice system is failing the victims. Overall, the removal of weapons and the laying down of arms has reduced violence from the high levels during the Troubles but the release of violent offenders has continued to haunt the community of Belfast.

Lastly, the Good Friday Agreement removed border checks between Ireland and Northern Ireland. In addition to regulations promoted by the European Union, this allowed for people and goods to move effortlessly between the two regions with no additional security. Essentially, it removed the British military and their security measures previously operating on the border. The removal of a hard border across the Irish island was key in promoting peace and adding to the unity among both sides on not only Northern Ireland, but in the Republic as well. The return to normal security measures in Northern Ireland allowed for tensions to settle and economic activity to pick up again.²⁴ While distrust persisted in Northern Ireland, the transfer of policing

²¹ John Doyle and Eileen Connolly, "The Effects of Brexit on the Good Friday Agreement and the Northern Ireland Peace Process," in *Peace, Security and Defence Cooperation in Post-Brexit Europe: Risks and Opportunities*, ed. Cornelia-Adriana Baciú, and John Doyle (Dublin: Springer, Cham, 2019), 79.

²² Julian O’Neill, “Good Friday Agreement: Prisoner Release a Bitter Pill for Victims,” *BBC News*, April 10, 2023, accessed April 21, 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-northern-ireland-65164519>.

²³ O’Neill, “Good Friday Agreement.”

²⁴ Lanlow and McBride, “Moving Past the Troubles.”

power away from London and to Belfast allowed for Northern Ireland to resume economic activities within the European Union.

The success of the Good Friday Agreement in general can be considered to have a rocky history. Violence erupted again just four months after the agreement was signed when the IRA planted a car bomb, killing twenty-nine people.²⁵ However, the peaceful end to the Troubles aspect of the agreement can be considered an overall success. Both sides have worked to reduce measures of violence since and Belfast has become much calmer and orderly than previously. In contrast, politically, the government in Northern Ireland has failed to thrive and London has stepped in numerous times. The power sharing government has collapsed multiple times over the course of the past twenty-five years. A brief history of Northern Ireland's failed government is as follows: "while London devolved local powers in late 1999, political turmoil in Northern Ireland prompted it to reimpose direct rule in 2000 and again in 2002. London only restored the devolved government in 2007, with the breakthrough St. Andrews Agreement, signed by the UK and Irish governments and Northern Ireland's main parties."²⁶ As seen, Northern Ireland is not quite successful yet at running its own government. The major issue with governance in Northern Ireland is something to pay particular attention to regarding Brexit. The weak administration and lack of cooperation resulted in multiple collapses of government once Brexit was to take effect. The implications of Brexit on the political stability of Northern Ireland will be further examined later in the paper.

As seen, the Good Friday Agreement is key to providing stability in Northern Ireland.

The removal and changing of the mechanisms that allow for peace within the accord is

²⁵ Jill Lawless, "As It Turns 25, N Ireland's Good Friday Agreement Explained," *Associated Press*, April 17, 2023, accessed April 21, 2023, <https://apnews.com/article/northern-ireland-good-friday-agreement-explained-8165d2fb0d7537401047d5ff9ba1a39e>

²⁶ Lanlow and McBride, "Moving Past the Troubles."

troublesome for the agreement's future. In the next section, the paper will explore how the European Union strengthened the Good Friday Agreement and how accession into the EU promoted greater peace and understanding.



British Prime Minister Tony Blair, US Senator George Mitchell, and Irish Prime Minister Bertie Ahern after signing the Good Friday Agreement.²⁷

The Role of the European Union

Membership into the European Union by both Ireland and the United Kingdom helped promote a working relationship amongst all three regions during the 1970s even amidst all the violence. The European Union's policies and goals helped raise living standards in Ireland and catch the country up with the rest of Europe. It further allowed Ireland to be recognized as its own state with Dublin at the forefront. It gave rise to Irish identity and sovereignty which was key to negotiating the Good Friday Agreement. As scholars have pointed out, "shared membership permitted a diplomatic environment and 'habits of co-operation' to develop between British and Irish administrations that deepened the negotiation of the peace settlement"²⁸ The common relationship to the European Union by both the United Kingdom and Ireland built a

²⁷ Lawless, "As It Turns 25."

²⁸ Colfer and Diamond, "Borders and Identities," 548.

deeper sense of trust and understanding which helped enable the Good Friday Agreement to be established and signed by those in London and Dublin.²⁹

The benefits of the European Union on Northern Ireland do not end with the role they played in negotiating peace during the Troubles. A key factor in the long lasting peace was the European identity given to all citizens in the United Kingdom (including Northern Ireland) and Ireland. To begin, the EU gave Ireland and the British a common identity and group to be a part of, regardless of other differences or sectarian identities. Even though the citizens of Northern Ireland were able to choose which identity of British or Irish to identify as, all citizens were considered European. The common identity allowed for differences to be put aside and politicians to negotiate and come together in the interest of the EU. "EU engagement afforded a 'neutral space' for politicians and civil servants across Ireland and the UK, enabling 'habits of cooperation.'" ³⁰ The need to work together promoted peace and a greater understanding of one another no matter which region a person came from. The citizens of Northern Ireland adjusted to the new European identity due to the need for protection that the United Kingdom could no longer offer. A common identity went a long way to allow peace to flourish in Dublin, Belfast, and London.

Lastly, being a part of the European Union comes with a multitude of direct benefits. The EU has provided policy in higher education for Northern Ireland, support for foreign policy coordination, and land use planning. These policies have been extremely helpful to further advance Northern Ireland and bring it into the international and European community.

Furthermore, the European Union has four established freedoms within their European Single Market which consist of the freedom of goods, capital, services and people. The free movement

²⁹ Katy Hayward and Mary C. Murphy, "The EU's influence on the peace process and agreement in Northern Ireland in light of Brexit," *Ethnopolitics* 17, no. 3 (2018): 276-291.

³⁰ Colfer and Diamond, "Borders and Identities," 544.

of goods does away with custom duties within the European Union and provides a common external tariff. Northern Ireland's economy was able to thrive once they joined the European Union's trading bloc. Another important freedom was the ability to leave your country visa free and seek work in another state. This provides new opportunities and ways for the Northern Irish to be able to find their footing after the Troubles and create a better life for themselves. In summary, the European Union has a large set of policies which helped boost the recovery of Northern Ireland and was successful in promoting peace through them.

The Good Friday Agreement was modeled off of the principles and policies of the European Union and with the influence of their values, peace was able to be reached. Not only did the stepping in of the EU allow for the restart of the economy and government in Northern Ireland but it also ensured human rights for all. "The incorporation of the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) through the NI Human Rights Commission provided 'safeguards' *'to ensure that all sections of the community can participate and work together.'*"³¹ The EU modeled the Good Friday Agreement in such a way that the common identity of Europeans would result in Northern Ireland and Ireland to work together to address EU policy. While the Good Friday Agreement is not perfect as found in the section above, with the influence of the European Union, much progress has been made in solving many of the issues of the Northern Irish through their input directly and indirectly.

Brexit's Impact on Destabilizing Northern Ireland

The Good Friday Agreement with the help of the European Union resulted in the reduction of political violence in Northern Ireland and set the economy up for greater success. However, even with the common European identity amongst all faction groups, identities of loyalists/unionists and nationalists remained strong. The Good Friday Agreement was a

³¹ Colfer and Diamond, "Borders and Identities," 550.

precarious document and teetered on the edge of failure many times over since its signing. For example “recurrent crisis erupted over arms decommissioning, policing, and the suspension of the NI Assembly.”³² Instead of addressing the underlying weaknesses of the document, Dublin and London were both distracted by internal affairs. “Dublin dealt with the aftershocks of the 2008 financial crash, austerity and the Eurozone crisis. British governments were preoccupied by the threat of Scottish independence and Brexit.”³³ In the absence of continued support, the Good Friday Agreement was bound to fail and it finally did with Brexit in 2016.

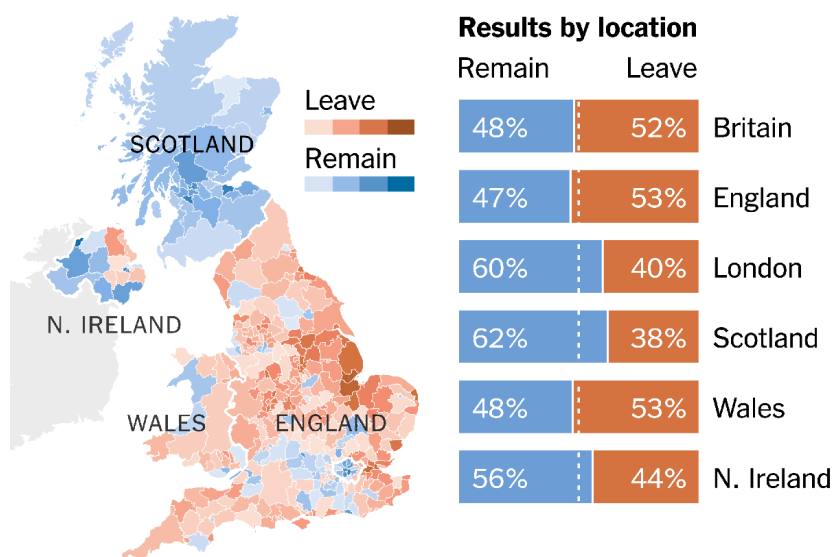
Brexit, referring to Britain's exit from the European Union was voted on by referendum on June 23, 2016 but then implemented officially in January of 2020. “On June 23rd 2016, 55.8 percent of the electorate in Northern Ireland voted in favor of the UK remaining in the European Union.”³⁴ As seen, the majority of Northern Ireland wanted to remain in the European Union but did not have this choice due to England’s overwhelming support to leave. The vote was along party lines with the nationalists choosing to stay and the unionists, following England, choosing to leave.³⁵ Not only did the split in vote ignited old tensions, but London overlooked the benefits the EU provided economically, politically, and religiously.

³² Colfer and Diamond, “Borders and Identities,” 550.

³³ Colfer and Diamond, “Borders and Identities,” 551.

³⁴ Anthony Soares, “Living within and outside unions: The consequences of Brexit for Northern Ireland,” *Journal of Contemporary European Research* 12, no. 4 (2016): 835 - 843.

³⁵ Cathy Gormley-Heenan, and Arthur Aughey, “Northern Ireland and Brexit: Three Effects on ‘the Border in the Mind,’” *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 19, no. 3 (2017): 497–511, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1369148117711060>.



Brexit referendum vote results by region.³⁶

Section 1: Economic

The support of the European Union was essential in providing economic policies that were beneficial to Northern Ireland and coincided with the Good Friday Agreement. The vote to leave the European Union stripped away these policies and procedures that cushioned the Good Friday Agreement and kept it from failing. The first form of economic disaster came in terms of the Northern Ireland/Ireland border. Reiterating the sections above, the removal of a hard border between the two regions was key to establish peace after the Troubles. The joining of the United Kingdom and Ireland into the European Union allowed for an open border to be possible back in 1973. However, when voting to leave the EU, London gave little consideration for what this would mean for Northern Ireland with its relationship to the Republic. It was not until negotiations between the voting period and implementation process that solutions were discussed. Many various answers were considered to the dilemma of Northern Ireland remaining part of the United Kingdom's customary territory. A hard border was a direct violation of the

³⁶ Benjamin Mueller, "What Is Brexit? and What Happens next?" *The New York Times*, January 24, 2019, accessed April 21, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/world/europe/what-is-brexit.html>.

Good Friday Agreement and would “become the only region in the UK immediately placed at an external land border of the EU.”³⁷ If this form of border was introduced, surely sectarian violence would start up again. Therefore, an agreement was eventually decided on to go around the intricacies of the Good Friday Agreement. The compromise consisted of creating a border in the Irish Sea instead of on land with checks at its major ports. “According to the revised deal, the entire U.K. left the EU customs union upon Brexit, but Northern Ireland followed EU regulations and VAT laws for goods while the U.K. government collects the VAT on behalf of the EU.”³⁸ While in theory, this could seem like a practical solution, since implemented it has not been as successful as London thought. “According to the government, it has been a “source of acute political, economic and societal difficulties in the two years since it has been operating.”³⁹ The time in effort it takes to fill out the paperwork and the lengthy customs processes have resulted in the economy of Northern Ireland contracting significantly. Industries that are focused on goods are most affected by the slow turnover rate and are responsible for eighty percent of the economy’s contraction.⁴⁰ The worsening economic conditions and implementation of a border that the Good Friday Agreement sought to do away with, strike fear in people who have an understanding of the Troubles.

Not only is Northern Ireland’s economy struggling as a result of Brexit, but so is Ireland’s. “The country most affected economically by Brexit after the UK is Ireland. Total trade in goods and services between the UK and Ireland in 2020 was £53.6 billion, 16.1% (£10.3

³⁷ Anthony Soares, "Living within and outside unions: The consequences of Brexit for Northern Ireland," *Journal of Contemporary European Research* 12, no. 4 (2016): 835 - 843.

³⁸ Adam Hayes, “Brexit Meaning and Impact: The Truth about the UK Leaving the EU,” *Investopedia*, January 19, 2023, accessed April 21, 2023, <https://www.investopedia.com/terms/b/brexit.asp>.

³⁹ Geoffroy Duparc-Portier and Gioele Figus, “New Brexit Deal Will Be Better for Northern Ireland's Economy than the Protocol, Research Suggests,” *The Conversation*, March 8, 2023, accessed April 21, 2023, <https://theconversation.com/new-brexit-deal-will-be-better-for-northern-irelands-economy-than-the-protocol-research-suggests-200999>.

⁴⁰ Duparc-Portier and Figus, “New Brexit Deal.”

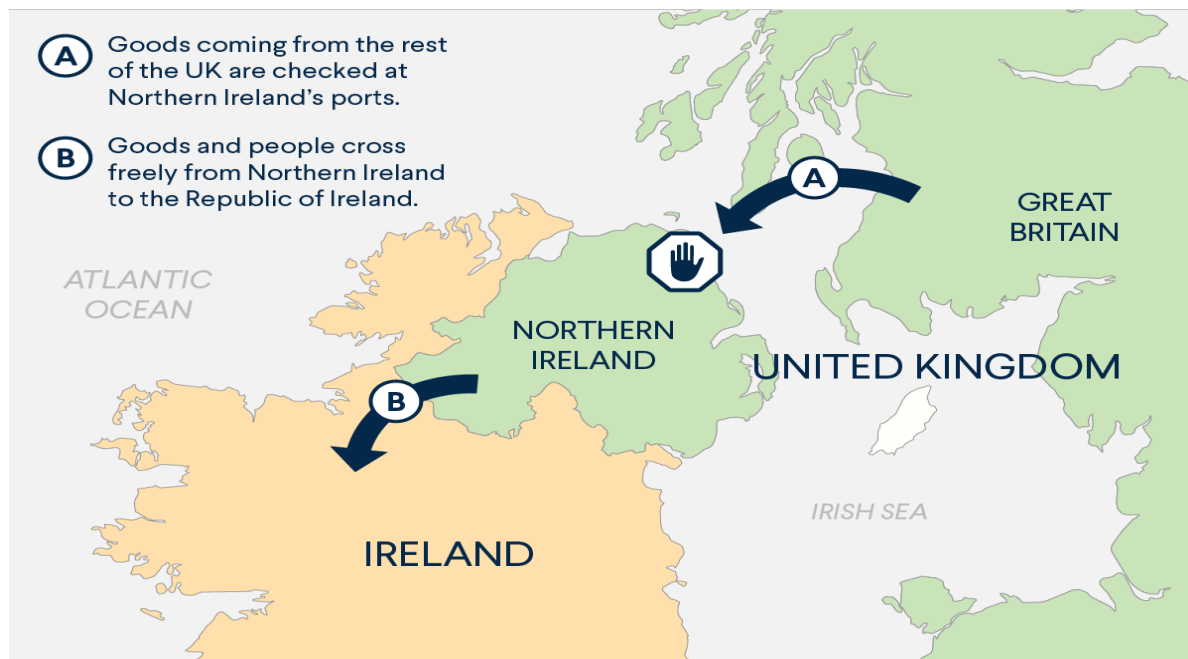
billion) down from the previous year.”⁴¹ The United Kingdom choosing to leave the European Union has had lasting economic effects on their biggest trading partners. Since tariffs have been reinstated, countries in the EU like Ireland are suffering and some are choosing to reduce trade with the UK. While in the long run, England will be able to support itself sufficiently, Northern Ireland will struggle. The economic impacts outside England were clearly overlooked when voting on Brexit.

Another economic sector outside of trade that has seen negative consequences was the energy sector. “The UK's exit from the EU has plunged Ireland's all-island energy market into a democratic deficit with decisions on Northern Ireland's energy supply no longer in the hands of its citizens and government.”⁴² Since the island of Ireland operates on an all energy market, this means that the European Union still controls Northern Ireland's energy supply. Great Britain is no longer in charge of this and Northern Ireland lacks representation of its own in the EU.⁴³ This is particularly problematic for the future of Northern Ireland's energy sector because they lack control and a voice in the process, giving opportunity for problems to arise. Overall, the European Union was an asset to Northern Ireland economically but also in the political sense which will be discussed next.

⁴¹ Colfer and Diamond, “Borders and Identities,” 559.

⁴² “Northern Ireland Has No Voice in Managing Its Energy Supply Post-Brexit, New Research Shows,” University of Aberdeen, December 5, 2022, accessed April 20, 2023, <https://www.abdn.ac.uk/news/16582/>.

⁴³ Michael G. Pollitt, “The further economic consequences of Brexit: energy,” *Oxford Review of Economic Policy* 38, no. 1 (2022): 165-178.



How the Northern Ireland Protocol works with new borders in the sea.⁴⁴

Section 2: Political

The British government had made the mistake in thinking that the “Irish question” was resolved after the Good Friday Agreement was signed. “The sustainability of the peace process was simply taken for granted.”⁴⁵ The EU’s supporting measures helped deceive the British into thinking everything was politically sound in Belfast. For example, “following the calling of paramilitary cease-fires in 1994, the European Commission (1995) moved quickly to create the *Special Support Programme for Peace and Reconciliation in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland* worth €400 million for the period 1995–1999.”⁴⁶ The key role of the EU helped promote political stability. “This blind spot was glaringly revealed in 2018 by then Secretary of State for Northern Ireland Karen Bradley who admitted to not realizing that political divisions in Northern Ireland tended to split along community lines and that *‘people who are nationalists*

⁴⁴Lanlow and McBride, “Moving Past the Troubles.”

⁴⁵ Colfer and Diamond, “Borders and Identities,” 552.

⁴⁶ Mary C. Murphy, “Northern Ireland and Brexit: where sovereignty and stability collide?” *Journal of Contemporary European Studies* 29, no. 3 (2021): 405-418.

don't vote for unionist parties and vice-versa''⁴⁷ Brexit has resulted in the collapse of the Northern Ireland government in Stormont. Differences starting in 2017 due to Brexit resulted in a new election in which the unionist's party, the DUP fell to just having a one-seat advantage over the nationalist party, Sinn Fein. This highlighted the changing demographics in Northern Ireland and the widespread disagreement for Brexit. Further conflict amongst parties led to the government collapsing and remaining that way for three years until 2020. Eventually, compromise was reached and a new government led by two women was instated. However, this was also short-lived and the first minister "stepped down in April 2021 after facing pressure over new trade checks on goods traveling to Northern Ireland from the rest of the UK."⁴⁸ Political strains were further raised when the now Catholic majority debated the question of Irish unity. "Sinn Fein established themselves as the main opposition (and government in waiting) in the Republic."⁴⁹ The government was then unable to operate until 2023 due to Brexit and the lack of compromise surrounding the new policies and the divide in support.

The European Union was essential at keeping the government in Northern Ireland afloat. The lack of understanding of the deep political divides in the region by the British caused Northern Ireland to be overlooked during Brexit. The result of this was the revival of old hatreds and fighting against opposing political parties. The government has since been dissolved and unable to formulate a compromise due to issues related to Brexit. This has ultimately left the citizens of Northern Ireland with no effective government and no voice for years on end, causing further tensions and political hatreds to simmer.

Section 3: Religious

⁴⁷Colfer and Diamond, "Borders and Identities," 552.

⁴⁸ Lanlow and McBride, "Moving Past the Troubles."

⁴⁹Colfer and Diamond, "Borders and Identities," 554.

The impact of Brexit is not only being felt on the political and economic scale but also at the social level. The religious identity of Catholic and Protestant plays a big role in everyday life, especially in Belfast. It determines what neighborhood you live in, what schools you attend, where you shop, what language you speak and who your friends are. The segregation of communities by religion is a very accepted way of life, with neither side seeing the need to change. A stark example of this is in Belfast where, “some neighborhoods still remain segregated by so-called peace walls as high as 45 feet that keep mutually inimical communities apart.”⁵⁰ These peace walls as seen below are a signal that total peace is still yet to be found in Northern Ireland’s capital, even if violence is reduced. Furthermore, since Brexit, the peace walls have been shut at six pm nightly which is earlier than previously at nine pm. This reveals that the people who live in Belfast can feel tensions are on the rise and wish to keep the otherside out for most hours of the day.⁵¹ Segregation is not on the mend in Northern Ireland, and especially not after Brexit.

The effects of Brexit could be directly seen amongst the religious communities in April of 2021 on the 23rd anniversary of the Good Friday Agreement. Violent riots broke out for weeks, injuring many police officers with petrol bombs and rocks in response to new trade deals between the UK and the EU due to Brexit. “The origins of the protests have been attributed in part to resentment among the British loyalist community at the Northern Ireland Protocol – part of the treaty that saw the U.K. leave the EU.”⁵² A majority of the protesters happened to be

⁵⁰ Alan Cowell, “50 Years Later, Troubles Still Cast 'Huge Shadow' over Northern Ireland,” *The New York Times*, October 5, 2018, accessed April 20, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/04/world/europe/northern-ireland-troubles.html>.

⁵¹ Steven Grattan, “Northern Ireland Still Divided by Peace Walls 20 Years after Conflict,” *The World from PRX*, January 14, 2020, accessed April 20, 2023, <https://theworld.org/stories/2020-01-14/northern-ireland-still-divided-peace-walls-20-years-after-conflict>.

⁵² Elliot Smith, “Violent Riots Have Broken out in Northern Ireland - Here's Why,” *CNBC*, April 13, 2021, accessed April 20, 2023, <https://www.cnb.com/2021/04/13/from-brexit-to-covid-rules-why-violent-riots-have-broken-out-in-northern-ireland.html>.

children, some as young as thirteen years old. This reveals that the sectarian divide is now reaching the children who did not grow up during the Troubles. Brexit is renewing the old hatreds post Troubles which could have been eliminated in just a few more generations. Furthermore, schools after Brexit are now more segregated than previously which will further indoctrinate the children. The schools are now ninety-three percent segregated and calls from politicians mainly in Dublin to reduce this are frequent. The president of Ireland, Michael Higgins states that segregation is not limited to “the schools they attend, but also by the languages they speak and the sports they play: where some schools offer Gaelic football and hurling, others provide rugby or cricket, usually exclusively.”⁵³ The reduction of segregation is essential to forming connections amongst youth in Northern Ireland that will continue peace on for more generations. In summary religious divides are seeping into the youngest generations raising the fear that the Troubles could repeat itself sometime in the near future.



Violent riots in Belfast in April 2021, a bus was lit on fire. ⁵⁴

⁵³ BBC News, “Irish President Criticizes Segregated Education in Northern Ireland,” BBC, February 17, 2022, accessed April 21, 2023. <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-northern-ireland-60241606>.

⁵⁴ Smith, “Violent Riots.”



Example of a peace wall in Belfast facing the Catholic side.⁵⁵



Peace wall separating communities in Belfast on the Protestant side.⁵⁶

⁵⁵ CBCnews, "The Peace Walls of Belfast: Do They Still Help Keep the Peace? | CBC Radio," *CBC/Radio Canada*, April 10, 2023, accessed April 20, 2023,

<https://www.cbc.ca/radio/ideas/the-peace-walls-of-belfast-do-they-still-help-keep-the-peace-1.5262640>.

⁵⁶ Madison Feser, Tien Phan, Daniel D'Amico, and Sophie Ulm, "Focus on Walls: Northern Ireland," *The Diplomatic Envoy*, January 22, 2021, accessed April 20, 2023.

<https://blogs.shu.edu/thediplomaticenvoy/2019/02/12/focus-on-walls-northern-ireland/>.

Irish Unity as a Solution?

Now the question remains how to put an end to the rising violence and return balance to Northern Ireland like the European Union once did before history repeats itself. The population of Northern Ireland is now majority Catholic. If put to a vote, it is likely that Irish unity would win out. The Catholic majority of Northern Ireland would like to rejoin the European Union and sees this referendum as a good way to do so. The Republic of Ireland seems on board with Irish unity as well. “In 2020, the Government launched its ‘*Shared Island Initiative*,’ pledging 500 million euros for cross-border projects.”⁵⁷ The Irish government has further performed studies to figure out the best method to gauge Irish public support on the matter. Ireland is also economically strong enough to take on the weaker part of Ireland ever since its membership into the European Union. Even some of the English do not totally hate the idea of letting Northern Ireland go and view it as a price to pay for Brexit.

However, while support may be widespread with the governments of Belfast, Dublin and London, proposed Irish unity would be certain to start riots and violence by the Protestant side in Northern Ireland. While a minority, they still make up over forty percent of the population and their opinions can not be counted out. As per the Good Friday Agreement, the Secretary of State in Northern Ireland can call for a referendum and both Northern Ireland and the Republic would have to have a majority vote for unity to pass. However, there have been concerns if the people of Ireland actually want Northern Ireland to join them or they simply just support the idea of it. When asked, most people in Ireland do not want to make any economic sacrifices to take on the weaker part of their island. Therefore, it is uncertain if the vote would end up in favor there.⁵⁸

⁵⁷ Colfer and Diamond, “Borders and Identities,” 555.

⁵⁸ Colfer and Diamond, “Borders and Identities,” 555.

An alternate solution, however less likely, would be for London to break the Good Friday Agreement to “dismantle each dimension of Europeanisation in reclaiming sovereignty.”⁵⁹ This would result in the total removal of the United Kingdom from the European Union. However, breaking the Good Friday Agreement is not a probable outcome due to its success in reducing violence. It is holding the community together in Northern Ireland by a thread and it is unlikely that the United Kingdom would seriously pursue this path and very few scholars give any merit to this solution. Ultimately, this leaves the two solutions as either being Irish unity or doing nothing, and leave Northern Ireland where it is and watch for long term effects of Brexit.

Conclusion

The Troubles were a trying time for Northern Ireland, filled with turmoil and violence mainly centered in Belfast. In 1998, peaceful means to ending the Troubles were accomplished through the Good Friday Agreement. The accord established peace primarily through implementing a new power sharing government and ending direct rule by the British in Northern Ireland. It further disarmed the violent paramilitary groups and created a soft border between Ireland and Northern Ireland. The joining of the European Union by the Irish and the British in 1973 provided a foundation for these goals to become a reality. With the support of EU policies, life was able to move forward in Northern Ireland and put the violent days of the Troubles in the past. The joining of the European Union helped unite the governments in Dublin, Belfast, and London through not only a common set of policies but the identity of Europeans. This all came to a crashing halt when the United Kingdom voted to leave the EU in 2016. Brexit removed these key components for peace the EU provided and resulted in instability in terms of religion, politics, and the economy to plague the island again. The complex nature of Brexit has heightened tensions and increased the prospect for violence. Solutions for a post-Brexit Northern

⁵⁹ Colfer and Diamond, “Borders and Identities,” 558.

Ireland are complex and will be difficult to negotiate moving forward. The question now remains what the best move going forward is and if Irish reunification is the answer to Brexit. On the one hand, it looks as if Northern Ireland would vote to leave the United Kingdom based on demographics. On the other hand, it can be assumed that based on the violence amongst Protestant and Catholic groups a repeat of the Troubles would be imminent if this were to occur. The Republic of Ireland also can not be factored out when considering Irish reunification. The Irish must agree to have Northern Ireland merge with their state, and with the harrowing economic conditions in Northern Ireland, this seems unlikely. As for now, the current solution regarding handling Northern Ireland in a post-Brexit world is unknown. Only time will tell what the fate of Northern Ireland will be and if Irish unification will be the ultimate outcome.

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