



VPI BH RESEARCH INTERNSHIP

**„COULD
PRESERVATION
OF A FROZEN
CONFLICT BE
THE FINAL
SOLUTION OF
THE TROUBLE?“**

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Abstract

The Good Friday Agreement - which ended The Troubles among Unionists and Irish Nationalists - is now as vulnerable as it has ever been. The thirty - year long Northern Ireland Conflict has come to an end with the interference of the European Union (EU) in 1998. Since the United Kingdom (UK) has officially left the EU on February 1st 2020, many questions emerged regarding border, trade, peace and mobility issues. The EU has been one of the biggest security providers in that area, and now,,one of the main questions is how to preserve the peace. The first part of the study focuses on the impact and importance of EU membership for maintaining peace in Northern Ireland, and how it could be jeopardized by Brexit. By the end, the focus of the paper is on the possible final scenarios. In the long term, the main goal is to understand what the alternatives to a potential reignition of the conflict in this region are.

KEYWORDS:

- Northern Ireland,
- European Union,
- The Troubles,
- conflict,
- Brexit,
- peace

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Introduction

The second half of the 20th century marked a very difficult and bloody time for Northern Ireland. The island is divided between Northern Ireland – which is a constituent of the United Kingdom, and the Republic of Ireland – an independent state. They have an open border. (1) The Troubles is the term used to explain the period of war, death, blood and destruction there. The nature of The Troubles is both ideological and religious - Irish nationalists (Republicans) wanted Northern Ireland to remain as a part of republic of Ireland, while the Unionists wanted Northern Ireland to be a part of the UK. The second problem was among Christians and Protestants (Unionists) and Roman Catholics (Republicans). This conflict brought many social and political changes in the country but the consequences of it were human casualties with more than 3,600 people that got killed in the conflict (McVea & McKittrick, 2002). Twenty years after The Troubles were ended by the Belfast Agreement, the UK decided to officially leave the EU. This can make an undesired position for the Northern Ireland in the aspects of economy, political stability, migration, cultural and educative programs etc. thus the question is posed – will leaving the European Union cause potential tensions and conflict in that region?

Research methodology will include a qualitative analysis of newspaper articles, academic papers and reports on what benefits Northern Ireland had from the EU membership and how were those benefits used until now. The significance of EU and potential problems that could emerge in a peaceful Northern Ireland due to Brexit will be analyzed from official strategies and documents issued by the EU. Media coverage and news outlets will be used as sources of information on the newest developments in the UK regarding this issue. Interviews with experts will be conducted and analyzed to better understand what could become the end scenario and which would be the best one. One of the experts is Damir Kapidžić, Ph.D. (2) who provided an insight into why certain Brexit resolutions could be successful and why others may fail. His research is focused on ethnic conflicts, political parties and power sharing. The second expert is Dženeta Karabegović, Ph.D. (3) whose expertise was useful for explaining the role of Northern Irish diaspora in decision making processes. Karabegović also explained migration issues in this region caused by the Brexit. She has done consulting work with local and international

organizations focused on diasporas and development, returnees, civil society, education, and countering extremism. As this topic is still ongoing and the situation can still be transformed, it is too early to try and make a bold statement about how it will develop. One of the possible shortcomings of doing a live case study is that media outlets that provide news on the topic may be biased. Another potential limitation is when this issue gets resolved, the paper might be outdated.

Historical Background of the Conflict

To understand this issue, we must go back to the genesis of the issue. Although the history of the conflict dates back to late 12th century and the first British incursion on the island, it was not till the events of the 20th century that directly caused The Troubles. There were constant pressures on Ireland to implement the Home Rule. This meant that Ireland would get its complete independence – a new Dublin parliament that is under Westminster's authority. Unionists were opposed to it since they viewed it as a threat to the Irish union with Britain. Ending the Irish union with Britain would have led to a complete independency of Ireland, the loss of Britain's control and power in the country and most importantly, the end of Protestantism. Every introduction of the Home Rule Bill caused a stir and disagreement of the Unionists who did everything to protect their interests and values. Following that, in 1916 the Republicans staged an armed rebellion against the British rule in Dublin and this is known as the Easter Rising. Later on, by the end of the WWI, the notion and fight for Home Rule died down while the demand for Irish republic came to life. The new Irish Republican Army (IRA) started a violent movement against the Britain. As a result, in 1920, Westminster passed the Government of Ireland Act (McVea & McKittrick, 2002). Six Ulster counties were formed as a new political entity – Northern Ireland. Northern Ireland's parliament in Belfast made the country quite detached from the UK, even though it was a part of it. The Ulster Unionists feared the rule by Dublin government for many reasons: religious – they would be a permanent minority in a dominantly Catholic majority; economically – the industries of Belfast such as engineering and shipbuilding would be neglected because of agrarian industry; politically – they believed in

imperialism (Fraser, 2000). The Government of Ireland Act started the partition in Ireland. Many reasons led to the conflict itself but it was not until 1960s that it would emerge. In 1966, as the republicans celebrated the 50th anniversary of the 1916 rising, three people were killed by Protestant Extremists – the Ulster Volunteer Force. After this, many attacks happened, also the ones by the IRA (McVea & McKittrick, 2002). Many actors took part in the social movement: IRA, liberals, trade unionists, radicals etc. By 1973, the violence escalated further and many possible solutions were put on the table in order to unite Unionists and Irish nationalists, but none of them were successful. To this day there is no absolute peace in the region but it was not until 1994 when paramilitary ceasefires initiative was made, concluding with the 1998 Belfast Agreement (The Good Friday Agreement). The talks that lead to the agreement tackled the issues that caused the conflict during past decades. The goal was to create a new and devolved government where both unionists and nationalists would share power. By the agreement, Northern Ireland's rule is in the hands of locally elected officials.

Role of the EU after the Good Friday Agreement was brokered

In this section of the paper, the main actors in preserving security in the region after the GFA will be assessed. It will also focus on financial and political support that Northern Ireland received and the future plans for continuation of many programs that will ensure the stability. Since The Good Friday Agreement, Northern Ireland has been receiving significant financial support from the EU through regional policies and the International Fund for Ireland. This financial support has been administered towards reconciliation and maintaining peace, such is the Northern Ireland PEACE program, that promotes economic, as well as social progress not only in the country, but also the Border Region of Ireland. This program has four editions, the first one from 1995 until 1999, while the fourth one started in 2014 and ended in 2020. The program's goals focus on conflict resolution and peace preservation through and creation of balanced and cohesive communities, economic and social stability, shared education, creation of positive relations among people, youth assistance etc. The benefits that Northern Ireland reaps from the membership in the EU are contributing to its

normal functioning. The EU has been taking care of their domestic stability and peace for almost twenty years not only with regulations and agendas set to improve the interpersonal, economic and political relations, but also financially. In the period from 1995 until 2013, in which the three PEACE programs were active, the EU contributed with 1.3 billion euros. The last edition was worth 270 million euros. (4) Another example includes the pan-European cross-border INTERREG programs which provided 681 million euros from 2000-2020 (Giada Lagana, 2019). The PEACE program opened a path to dialogue and reconciliation process, funded many projects in areas of infrastructure and regeneration, immigrants and celebration of diversity. Nowadays, it is used as a pattern to be followed by all European countries in peacebuilding and peacekeeping policies. The referendum held in 2016, where majority of the UK voted in favor of leaving the EU, raised concerns for the peace situation in Northern Ireland. The participation in PEACE program was guaranteed until 2020. Following the referendum, the European Parliament noted that there is a need to safeguard the peace between Ireland and Northern Ireland. The European Union did not only provide security in the sense of conflict resolution but also by including Northern Ireland in the free movement of goods and labor. Security was also stabilized by removing the physical borders between Ireland and Northern Ireland. These two factors, besides the annual financial support, are preserving the peace in the region, Kapidžić claims.

Is the UK Ready to Negotiate?

In this part I will focus on the importance of the UK's willingness to cooperate with Brussels on this issue. Northern Ireland is still a member of the United Kingdom so nothing can happen without the approval from London. There are many indicators of EU's willingness to keep the balance, example being their proposition that the free movement of labor and goods continues with customs checks in ports in Northern Ireland before entering other parts of the UK (The Guardian, 2018). This proposition was rejected by Theresa May as it was perceived as a „threat to constitutional integrity by creating a customs and regulatory border down the Irish sea “(Al Jazeera, 2018). Recently, anger has been rising in the Northern Ireland regarding this issue. Ms. Arlene Foster, Democratic Unionist Party leader, is

opposing the idea of a de facto trade border in the Irish sea and that the flow of goods from Northern Ireland to Britain would be „impeded by checks “(The Irish Times, 2017). Now that the United Kingdom has left the EU, London is the one negotiating on the Northern Ireland's side. The attitude of London plays an important role in how this problem may be solved. So far, the British government was not eager to make a consensus. According to Kapidžić, Brussels does not have any power nor authority over UK. There was no consent from the Northern Ireland Assembly nor the Northern Ireland Executive on this matter which shows the imperialistic behavior on behalf of London. The British government has so far shown no concrete actions, whereas the fear of a hard border returning to Ireland is rising. This does not only pose an economic threat. According to Kapidžić, there is fear from this situation being exploited in order to reignite tension and acts of violence.

Potential Conflict

In this part, the paper offers predictions and an analysis of possible scenarios for the ongoing situation in Northern Ireland. Barely anybody will openly say that they want conflict or that it will happen but some statements from certain politicians or former participants in the conflict can help us comprehend how different political followers have different standpoints on the topic. An interview conducted by The Irish Time in 2017, with three former republicans, shows a huge partition in their views for the future of Northern Ireland. One of the participants, Tommy McKearney, said that there are small chances for establishment of the hard border: “Certainly, I think we can rule out the idea of a hard Border with British troops on the Border. That was not to do with economics. That was a security situation. I don't think we are going to see that again” (Irish Times, 2017). He also added: “The reality of it is that after 25 years of armed conflict there is less possibility of an armed campaign of any significance.” According to him, there will always be someone with those tendencies, but as a community – there is not going to be anything similar to the past. This is also a point that Damir Kapidžić noted in the interview - he believes that, if any kind of conflict is to happen, it would not be anything like it was in the past, but rather economic and political instead of violent and physical. Still, when the topic of reunification emerges, using the threat of loyalist violence for ending that debate is a strategy that is already

been used. In 2017, a veteran unionist and a former top UUP (Ulster Unionist Party) Member of Parliament, Lord Kilclooney, stated that if Ireland was reunited by a narrow margin that it would cause a civil war. He follows: “You cannot force Northern Ireland out of the UK by one per cent majority. Can you imagine the loyalists in Belfast taking it quietly? I couldn't” (Belfast Telegraph, 2017). The narrative of conflict is still alive and mostly coming from unionists and even the polls showed that while 99 per cent of nationalists wanted a border poll, 53 percent of unionists voted that it never takes place. (5) The EU issue represents a threat to the interests of nationalists and even their discussions on Brexit shows the difference in views and positions between Unionists and nationalists which came to light even more after the Brexit referendum according to Mary C. Murphy (Giada Lagana, 2019).

Migration and diaspora

The importance and the impact of diaspora and migration in lobbying and securing the peace in Northern Ireland is to be discussed. The contributions of Irish and foreign nationals to society have always been significant. They have also played an important role in the peaceful resolution of conflicts on the island (Cochrane et al. 2009; Devlin Trew 2010, 2013; Wilson 1995). The neoliberal economic policies designed to rescue the state may dominate any future engagement with the North-South. In a post-Brexit scenario, these policies may force key issues onto the table sooner than might otherwise have happened. In terms of citizens abroad there are around 1.47 million citizens resident outside the state. There are 70 million people who claim Irish heritage all over the world. (6) Since the First World War, the English-speaking countries have become the main destinations for Irish emigrants. North and South Ireland were also shifted toward Britain after the First World War. Since the partition of Ireland, the emigrant cohort has become more professionalized. While the departure of young people from Northern Ireland during the mid-twentieth century was largely due to the skills shortage, it was also caused by the end of the Second World War. They became skilled and by the 1980s – university students and graduates. “Diaspora effects” is getting stronger and it has shown how its influence, emigrant remittances and investment, new skill and capital brought back home and diaspora's contribution may help rebalance the world system in favor of

lower – class nations (de Lange, 2013). Diasporas contribute to home nations in many ways: individual and aggregate settlements; donations; venture; sharing information and stimulating advancement, frequently through country/diaspora associations; and adding to institutional and strategy improvement, including social and political change (Kuznetsov, 2012). Political or skilled oriented state – diaspora relations must be sustained with a care agenda with a dialogue on both ends. Irish government's diaspora strategy shows the understanding that the diaspora is both responsibility and an asset so respect and reciprocity is needed in order to preserve. Still, the deficiency of care is still evident when it comes to removal of practical social barriers for people returning such as the lack of voting franchise for emigrants. The Republic of Ireland is in a better position than Northern Ireland when it comes to path of diaspora engagement. A strategy of diaspora in Northern Ireland could be more difficult to achieve since it is quite limited in what it can offer to diaspora (for example not being able to provide access to citizenship nor does Northern Ireland have the freedom to remove setbacks to benefit access for returning diaspora). The fact is that many young people are addicted to drugs in Northern Ireland due to economic issues and these issues do not create peaceful surroundings according to Karabegović. She continues that the diaspora has been trying to get their voting rights from outside the country but Northern Ireland is running behind in enabling that. The interest of the people is high because many of them live abroad. Another diaspora issue is that a lot of people who emigrated felt like they could not get their rights in Northern Ireland. When it comes to mobility, Karabegović argues that it is solved pragmatically. The mobility question also rises since the EU passport is more mobile than the UK one. Mobility is solved for people with the EU passport. There are also cultural setbacks like: Erasmus Programs not being as frequent or relations among universities also not being as strong as before and this leads to unification narrative (MacDonald, 2017). All sides of Northern Ireland and Ireland must vouch for peaceful solutions and seek to lead peaceful politics (The Global Observatory, 2021).

Economical aspect of Brexit

In this part of the paper, the economy of Northern Ireland will be reflected on,

as it is already disrupted by Brexit. It is impossible to unravel the economic impact on Northern Ireland from the rest of the UK with Great Britain being their biggest trade partner (Economics Observatory, 2021). The UK and the EU outlined some special cases for Northern Ireland giving it a hybrid status. Northern Ireland Protocol implies that Northern Ireland will be a combination of both worlds – it still remains in the EU's system for animals and food products (SPS) and in its customs union. The EU has made some dispensations for Northern Ireland – goods moving from there to Great Britain will not need to file a declaration of export. It also ensured that most of the trade between the two is tariff – free by implementing The Trade and Co-operation Agreement. The NI Protocol is designed to avoid the customs duties and customs declarations that are often associated with trade between Northern Ireland and its European Union partner. Effectively, Northern Ireland is subject to EU rules on customs and regulation of goods. So far there have been quite some challenges especially about the goods moving from Great Britain to Northern Ireland. Businesses see the trader support service as overwhelmed and the UK government points out that many businesses did not produce the right paperwork needed which causes more complications in the trade. Businesses operating in Northern Ireland have bigger costs since the products coming from GB are being charged higher. Potential challenges for Northern Ireland may occur because of its hybrid status relative to both EU and GB. While it is still a member of the UK, Northern Ireland's position within the single market also means that the rules of the European Court of Justice apply to it. If the UK government chose to raise the rate of corporation tax and the Northern Ireland's government chose to keep the same tax, by following the European Court of Justice (ECJ) rules, Northern Ireland Executive would have to give a compensating amount of money from the UK government. Will Northern Ireland be able to enjoy the benefits of free trade agreements after the UK leaves the European Union? There is a good chance that the US will make any deal conditional on the rights of US food products to enter the UK. Once Northern Ireland no longer provides a base for accessing the EU's external funds, the loss of these funds has been estimated to have a negative impact on the region's economy. With the Scottish independence referendum coming up now that the SNP has secured majority in Scottish parliament elections, the chances of Scotland



becoming independent are high. This will bring some economic costs to the UK as some sort of a trade border will be created and that means friction and that equals loss to businesses. Separation would be a drag on the UK growth since thousands of businesses currently operate in a market that is highly integrated. The UK's reputation would also come into question because a world power is slowly losing its members (Prospect Magazine, 2020). This is why staying in the union would be less than attractive for Northern Ireland. The loss for the UK also would be big in many aspects and especially economic. On the other hand, the potential for a new constitutional settlement in Northern Ireland following the next UK election is also beneficial for the economy. The harmonization of the corporation tax and the removal of the capital gains tax are two examples of how this environment will affect the business environment in Northern Ireland. It remains to be seen how the UK's financial services industry will fare after Brexit. For instance, the loss of passporting rights may be compensated by the UK's ability to set its own regulations (although this will need to be negotiated with the EU). The NI Protocol (7) is expiring in 2024 and until then there will be no legitimate long-lasting changes – whether the protocol will be changed, which privileges will there be or how will the borders look. Before anything else, the EU is a trading bloc and that makes it a big issue in how will the lobby groups work for changing the protocol. Karabegović also states that there could also be tensions around the UK's economical dilemma because it is a lot of money in question.

Independence or Reunification?

With all of these Brexit tensions rising, there will eventually be a way of solving them but the question is – how? One of the possible outcomes is a referendum for independence. When the topic of referendum starts, it is important to mention another actor which can push Northern Ireland towards a referendum and that being Scotland. Right after the UK left the EU in 2016, Scotland's first minister Nicola Sturgeon started openly calling for a second referendum (8) for independency. As reported by BBC, the referendum showed that majority was for remaining in the EU and also leaving the UK (BBC, 2021). The Scottish independence referendum (Indyref2) has not been delivered since the UK government has not granted the formal consent for the referendum thus making it illegal. As of

As of 2021, the polls are suggesting that the SNP (9) is on its way to win the majority in the Scottish Parliament which will make the independence process easier. Opinion polls are still in the favor of a new referendum (BBC, 2021). This situation may also reflect on Northern Ireland, but according to Damir Kapidžić, it is unlikely. Merely the reason being that London will not allow that. If the British government grants the right for a referendum of independence to Northern Ireland then it will be pressured to grant it to Scotland. The problem is that majority of Scottish population will vote for independence and that does not work in favor of Great Britain.

A much more realistic outcome would be the referendum for the unification of Ireland. A very helpful article by Joint Committee on the Implementation of the Good Friday Agreement (JCI) was published in 2017. The Committee repeatedly talks about unification of Ireland as a best option for the future of Northern Ireland and it points out recommendations for a successful unified Ireland. “Brexit means that the best future for the citizens of Northern Ireland could well be remaining in the European Union in a reunified Ireland. This option must be explored and examined “ (JCI, 2017). The Committee recommends the establishment of a New Ireland Forum (10) 2 to set a path in order to achieve peaceful reunification process. It also urges the Government to conduct an inspection regarding both constitutional and legal changes before and after the unification. “The Government needs to carry out an audit in relation to the legal and constitutional changes pre and post-unification “(JCI, 2017). According to Professor Brendan O'Leary, we must prepare for this scenario. In his article for The Irish Times, he states that many northerners have started taking out Irish passports in order to resume citizenship of the EU (The Irish Times, 2021). The demographics have also changed – once a cultural majority of Unionists and the majority of cultural Protestants are now minority. If we are to follow the polls, articles by the Journal, The Irish Times and Irish Examiner all show that the majority is in favor of a united Ireland. (11) Polls commissioned by LucidTalk for the The Sunday Times (12) have shown that majority of people support a border poll being held in the next five years and that there will be a united Ireland within the next decade (The Journal, 2021). While numbers say one thing, experts say the other. The former prime minister of Ireland Leo Varadkar (who is the

member of Fine Gael) (13) argues that a border poll would be defeated unless all of those who voted for unionists parties now vote for a united Ireland (Time, 2017). The referendum would, according to Varadkar, lead to further polarization and nationalism because it would certainly fail. Muiris MacCarthaigh also agrees: „... then you would have a referendum in the North and similarly in the Republic. It's not clear exactly what the terms of the referendum would be, so on the legal constitutional side, the pathway to a united Ireland is a little bit fuzzy about how it would come about “(Time, 2020). Damir Kapidžić also claims that the scenario of a united Ireland is very uncertain. According to Karabegović, reunification is a long – lasting and complicated process. It is a question of a dual foreign policy issue – the first one is that Northern Ireland supports the EU and the membership but there is still a percentage of people who supported Brexit. On the other hand, it is also a matter of Ireland and will the matter of logistics improve the conditions in the country because of the financial burden that reunification would cause. Whether the unification happens or not still remains to be seen. Irish government is not quiet about the topic either – it has published several articles on maintaining peace on the Island and respecting the EU's core values. „Brexit: Ireland's Priorities “ published on Irish Government News Service (14) is a very concise article about the challenges of Brexit. It acknowledges how Brexit may harm the Northern Ireland Peace Process and give out their priorities for preserving peace. “Our Brexit priorities for Northern Ireland and the Peace Process: protect all provisions of the Good Friday Agreement, maintain EU support for the Peace Process, avoid a hard border on the island and support continued North-South cooperation” (Irish Government Publication, 2017). Ireland must vote for unification also, there will be a lot of mediation and lobbying needed (The Irish Times, 2020). Indeed, many actors will have their influence in this, claims Karabegović. So far there has been division among parties and citizens as well as the mobilization of many different actors by the EU (Giada Lagana, 2019).

Conclusion

There are many possible outcomes and resolutions of the Northern Irish problem in the light of Brexit. Certainly, there is a need for alternative mechanisms for keeping the situation as stable and calm as possible. There is still

evident disagreement on how the problems should be tackled while still respecting the Northern Ireland Protocol and the Good Friday Agreement. The main values of the EU are democracy and peace so it is unquestionable that the institutions will pursue those beliefs in solving this matter. The reunification referendum will most likely have to wait since Dublin, Belfast, London and Brussels have to find a solution that would work for all. With Scotland announcing the referendum for independency soon, the doors could open for Northern Ireland to make action and propose a referendum on its own. Brexit has affected every sphere of people's lives including reduction of free movement for creative and cultural industries, severe impact on sectors that get funded by the EU as well as higher education losing access to EU funds for mobility, research and strategic intercultural collaborations. The most favorable situation would be a peaceful and productive consensus on resolving Brexit consequences – but the question on whether that will be possible remains.

Endnotes

- [1] <https://travelaroundireland.com/ireland-vs-northern-ireland-difference/>
- [2] He currently works as a professor of comparative politics at the Faculty of Political Science, University of Sarajevo in Bosnia and Herzegovina
- [3] He is currently working at the University of Salzburg
- [4] Provisional Irish Republican Army
- [5] Good Friday Agreement <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/factsheets/en/sheet/102/northern-ireland-peace-programme>
- [6] <http://www.northernslant.com/lucidtalk-poll-should-there-be-a-referendum-on-irish-unity/>
- [7] <https://www.dfa.ie/media/dfa/alldfawebitemedia/newspress/publications/ministersbrief-june2017/1--Global-Irish-in-Numbers.pdf>
- [8] Northern Ireland Protocol - aims to protect the EU's single market while avoiding "hard borders". It helps prevent checks along the land border between Northern Ireland (in the UK) and the Republic of Ireland (in the EU).
- [9] Another name - indyref2
- [10] The Scottish National Party - the largest political party and government in Scotland. Left / central and social democratic oriented.
- [11] The New Ireland Forum was established in 1983 at which Irish nationalist political parties discussed how the problems in Northern Ireland could be alleviated. In particular, it sought stability and peace, as well as possible new structures and directions for achieving them.
- [12] More at: See for more: <https://www.thejournal.ie/majority-in-northern-ireland-would-vote-against-united-ireland-5415947-Apr2021/>
- [13] More at: <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/northern-irish-back-border-poll-within-five-years-6ndbkz80s>
- [14] Liberal-Conservative and Christian-Democratic political party, center-right / right More at: https://merrionstreet.ie/merrionstreet/en/euuk/key_irish_documents/%20%20%20.html#read%20online

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