

EESC President Jahier to visit Northern Ireland to strengthen cooperation with civil society organisations and make sure that Brexit does not re-ignite tensions

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The President of the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC), Luca Jahier will visit Belfast and Bangor on 25-26 June to discuss the future of Northern Ireland beyond Brexit.

Mr Jahier is the only President of an EU institution to visit Northern Ireland since the 2016 referendum on UK withdrawal from the EU.*

With a particular focus on peace-building and the role of civil society, Luca Jahier will meet beneficiaries of the EU PEACE Programme, the MEP elect Naomi Long and the Lord Mayor of Belfast where he will stress the need to push forward the EESC proposal for a European Centre of Peace and Reconciliation in Northern Ireland.

He will also raise the issue of the Northern Ireland Civic Forum, enshrined in the Good Friday Agreement, and ensuring a strong voice of civil society.

Underlining the importance of the collaboration of all fields of society to drive a peaceful and sustainable future, the President's visit will also include meetings with the arts sector and church representatives.

"We must make sure that Brexit does not re-ignite tensions in Northern Ireland. Civil Society has a role to play to ensure continuous exchange, understanding, and joint cooperation and future-oriented solution making," said Luca Jahier explaining his concern over the impact of Brexit on the peace process.

The EESC President is convinced that the European Union is the most successful peace project in modern history and the EU was instrumental in the peace-building process in Northern Ireland and in achieving the Good Friday Agreement.

During his visit, the President Jahier will call for the implementation of two initiatives proposed by the EESC, which he believes they will enable Northern Ireland to continue benefiting from EU engagement whatever happens beyond Brexit.

The first, proposed in a 2008 EESC Opinion on the 'Role of the EU in the Northern Ireland Peace Process', calls for the creation of a European Peace and Reconciliation Centre based in Northern Ireland. Backed by two reports from the European Parliament and the European Commission, and convinced of the need for such a European Centre, particularly in the context of Brexit, Jahier said:

"The EU should continue to shine a light on its role in the success of the peace process and show, by example, what conflict zones around the world can learn from the Northern Ireland experience. Whatever its location, whether Londonderry, Belfast or elsewhere, a European Peace Centre would provide a focus for European peace-building at its best and recognise the value of grass-roots civil society involvement in conflict resolution."

The second on an EU-led Global Peace-Building Initiative, the so-called WhiteDoveWay, proposed in an EESC Opinion in 2019, aims to make tangible the impact of peace and borders in Europe, for example via a path of peace from Northern Ireland to Nicosia. This could follow in the original footsteps of Columbanus, who is described as the patron Saint of European Unity, and go beyond travelling through the Western Front and the Balkans, linking the two divided islands on either side of the European Union.

In a public meeting in Bangor Abbey, where Columbanus was a scholar, Jahier will describe the need for genuine citizen engagement in learning from the past and actively promoting peace throughout the EU.

"As the site of Columbanus' departure for mainland Europe in the sixth century, Bangor can be seen to symbolise a starting point of the European journey which has led us through the worst of world wars to the longest period of peace in modern European history. It is time we recognise this historic achievement and use it as a means to promote the true values of peace, justice, mutual respect and understanding which are the foundation on which the EU was built," he said.

The EESC President will also use the occasion of his visit to Northern Ireland to stress the importance of the role civil society plays in governance at the regional, national and supra-national level. With reference to the 'Civic Forum' established under the Good Friday Agreement, which is currently not operational, Jahier recommends considering the re-establishment of such a Forum as a means both to involve and engage civil society in decision-making in Northern Ireland.

"As President of one of the consultative EU body which advises decision-makers, I am committed to regular and structured dialogue with all parts of civil society from farmers, to business, to consumers to women, to

youth. I am convinced that Northern Ireland, particularly in the absence of an Assembly, would benefit greatly from the insight and expertise of people who have every day experience at the very grass roots of society as we do in Brussels.”

President Jahier will be accompanied by an EESC delegation, including Stefano Mallia (EESC Brexit group chair), Judy Mc Knight, Michael Smyth and Jane Morrice.

** Correction: Contrary to what has been initially reported, there has been another EU President who has visited Northern Ireland. [President of the European Committee of the Regions Karl-Heinz Lambertz visited Northern Ireland at the invitation of the Northern Ireland Local Government Association in May 2018.](#)*

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