



Beyond politics and economics, Brexit is a direct threat to peace

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"They [the Catholics] are not to be trusted. They do not belong here." Just back from Ireland, the voice of a mother resonates in my mind, pointing out just how fragile peace is in a place that once, not so long ago, was devastated by religious divisions and psychological borders. The mother has since changed her mind after participating in the EU-funded PEACE programme, but her words are a strong reminder that Brexit can reignite past discord. Any clumsy move is enough to set fire to the delicate balance of forces, which maintain peace in Northern Ireland.

Since 1995, the EU has provided more than €1.3 billion for peacebuilding and reconciliation within the two communities in Northern Ireland and the border counties of the Republic of Ireland.

Through the European Regional Development Fund, Brussels has promoted social and economic cohesion to ease the tension and help build positive relations between the two communities. However, society remains largely divided and a lot of issues still remain to be solved.

In Belfast, one cannot avoid but stand in front of murals depicting the region's past and present religious divisions.

In these areas, communities live separately, divided by walls and gates, which are prudently closed at night. Children grow up and go to de facto segregated schools, Catholics with Catholics, Protestants in state schools, not meeting kids of the other community until much too late. Childhood friends and memories are memories of "us" and "them".

It is a challenging situation for the different religious leaders in Ireland. Enniskillen. The name falls during lunch at Catholic Bishop Noel Treanor's house. I am told the story of Queen Elisabeth II who, during a visit to Enniskillen several years back, made the short walk across the street from the Anglican Cathedral's deanery, where she privately met seven survivors of the Enniskillen bombing, to St Michael's, filled with local community groups that had gathered to meet her. The Churches since regularly celebrate mass together. There is indeed healing, even in places of horror.

It is not a coincidence if the majority of citizens in Northern Ireland (56%) voted to remain in the EU, while their compatriots in England and Wales voted to leave. Most of those living in Northern Ireland know all too well that a departure from the European Union would have a negative impact on their regained peace.

With the Good Friday agreement firmly anchored in the European Union membership, Northern Ireland was able to turn the border from a battlefield into a source of opportunities and cooperation, from a barrier into a gateway.

As the UK is about to leave the Union, the Republicans in Northern Ireland feel they are being pulled away from Ireland. A no-deal Brexit could be disastrous in this sense, not just from an economic point of view.

The current PEACE programme has a total budget of almost €270 million and will run until 2021, when the transition period of the withdrawal agreement if there is one, would have already expired. Whether there is a deal or not, the EU has decided to keep the funding flowing, even in case of no-deal and even beyond Brexit. A new PEACE+ programme has been included in the next long-term EU budget for 2021-2027.

However, Brexit is still a threat to the work carried out by hundreds of EU-funded organisations over the past twenty years to build peace in the region.

Virtually all people I met were vocal about their worries about the impact of Brexit, both economically and socially. Peace is not only the absence of armed conflict, it is the presence of a sense of security and the possibility to plan the future with confidence - and this is clearly at risk.

We cannot change the past. But, we must construct the future together, with great sensitivity and compassion. We need to believe in a peaceful Europe.

Northern Ireland, due to its history and insights, could be beacon for this necessary learning process. This is why I believe we should further the initiative spearheaded by the EU institutions in 2008, for a Peace and Reconciliation Centre in Northern Ireland.

Background

Luca Jahier's trip to Belfast is the first of a series of visits on Borders and Peace in Europe, starting in Belfast and continuing on to Sopron in Hungary, to Germany for the 30th anniversary of the Fall of the Wall and the opening of borders between East and West and Nicosia in Cyprus, another divided island of Europe. The Irish border holds a particular position, due to its history of conflict and the sensitivity in the ongoing Brexit debates. The purpose of this visit was to reflect on the impact of such borders, both geographically and psychologically, on the European project, its economy, social tissue and cultures. Ways to overcome barriers, also through civil society involvement, were explored.

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

For more information, please visit: [EESC President Jahier to visit Northern Ireland to strengthen cooperation with civil society organisations and make sure that Brexit does not re-ignite tensions](#)