

Brexit's implications for Northern Ireland may be destabilising, but not fatal

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Brexit created specific uncertainties in Northern Ireland, a post-conflict region where 55.7% of voters (and 85% of Catholics) voted to remain in the EU and where a land border is shared with Ireland.

*There are fears that Brexit will undermine the 1998 Good Friday Agreement (GFA) and jeopardise the peace process in Northern Ireland. In this post, **Etain Tannam**, argues that some of the most commonly proposed fears are based on false assumptions, but that Brexit's implications for Northern Ireland are clearly destabilising, requiring continued prioritisation from the UK and Irish governments and the EU to limit damage*



Will Brexit damage British-Irish intergovernmental cooperation?

For some observers, British-Irish relations were '[strengthened from that of wary strangers to close allies through 40 years of working together in Brussels](#)'. Therefore, Brexit implies that 'the two countries could drift apart and issues between the two could become irritants without the "steadying effect" of the European Union' (ibid). The argument that Brexit will damage British-Irish governmental cooperation is based on two key assumptions.

The first assumption is that British and Irish membership of the EU in 1974 was crucial to the evolution of British-Irish intergovernmental cooperation from the 1980s onwards. However, other factors coincided with UK and Irish cooperation not least the increased incidence of paramilitary violence from the 1970s and the entrance of Sinn Féin into electoral politics in the 1980s. The EU was not necessarily a causal factor in the emergence of intergovernmental cooperation. The opportunity for British-Irish 'corridor talks' in the EU and the EU's consensual model created new opportunities for British-Irish cooperation and therefore helped cooperation, but it is difficult to substantiate that the EU *caused* cooperation.

The second assumption is that because EU membership coincided with cooperation in 1980s, it is equally crucial to cooperation now. However, British-Irish cooperation is far more embedded and institutionalised than in the 1970s and 1980s. The UK and Irish governments have maintained close communication since June 2016 and Theresa May's Lancaster House speech in February is seen as a significant sign of that cooperation, where the Common Travel Area between Ireland and the UK was explicitly [mentioned](#). Therefore, even if the EU was *the* cause of cooperation in the 1980s, which is itself contestable, it does not follow that Brexit will damage cooperation now.

However, Brexit could still damage British-Irish governmental cooperation in other ways. The absence of clear information from the British government about its approach to Northern Ireland, the need for the Irish government to preserve its relationship with the UK, but not to take sides with it in EU negotiations, the impact of various possible 'hard' Brexit outcomes and the overall uncertainty and possibility of unintended consequences, could all weaken British-Irish cooperation. Also, the UK's daunting bargaining agenda could mean that Northern Ireland and British-Irish relations slip down its list of priorities.



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Brexit will undermine the Strand 2 and 3 of the GFA and require the GFA to be rewritten

Strand 2 of the GFA deals with cross-border relations and Strand 3 with Human Rights provisions. References to the EU in Strand 2 have led to some [speculation](#) that re-writing of the GFA will be required. The argument that the GFA may have to be re-written rests on the assumption that references to the EU in Strand 2 are integral to the GFA's implementation and that Brexit means that the UK will abandon the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR).

However, references to the EU in Strand 2 are not frequent and are not necessarily integral to its provisions for cross-border cooperation. For example, Strand 2, paragraph iii states that 'in an appropriate format to consider institutional or cross-sectoral matters (*including in relation to the EU*) and to resolve disagreement'. EU policy implementation is not Strand 2's sole function and EU policies may still be discussed, given that there will be externalities attached to specific EU policies implemented on the Irish side of the border. The argument here is not that Brexit will not undermine cross-border cooperation, but that Brexit will not necessarily require a re-writing of Strand 2 of the GFA.

The EHCR was an important guarantee for nationalists in the GFA after decades of human rights abuses. Memories can resurface easily if there is any doubt over Strand 3. However, the ECHR is a Council of Europe provision, so it is not necessarily undermined by Brexit. Whether the UK government decides to pull out of the ECHR is another question.

By hardening the Irish/Northern Irish border, Brexit will accelerate calls from nationalist parties for a united Ireland, aggravating sectarian tension in Northern Ireland

There is a fear that by casting doubt on a 'soft' border Brexit will '[imperil good relations between unionist and nationalist communities, because the notion of shared sovereignty underlying the Belfast \(Good Friday\) Agreement was supported by the UK and the Republic of Ireland both being members of the EU](#)'.

After the referendum result, Sinn Féin [called](#) for a 'border poll' to be held on Irish unification. Fianna Fáil also [announced](#) that it was preparing a 12-point plan for Irish unity. Sinn Féin's huge electoral gain in the March 2017 Northern Ireland Assembly elections also placed Irish unification on the political agenda, highlighting the possibility that a majority in Northern Ireland may support Irish unification.

It is difficult to distinguish between political posturing and genuine agenda-setting. For example, Fianna Fáil competes with Sinn Féin for votes in Irish elections. So, Fianna Fáil's blueprint for unification can be seen in this light. Moreover, Sinn Féin itself must be careful to maintain support from its more extreme nationalist voters.

In practice, Sinn Féin has supported the GFA and participated in it. The joint cross-border North-South Ministerial

Council held in September 2016 was reported to be one of the most productive ever. Arlene Foster, head of the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP), and the late Martin McGuinness, then head of Sinn Féin in Northern Ireland, issued a joint [statement](#) about minimising the negative impacts of Brexit on the Northern Irish economy. In addition, in 2015, only a minority (32%) of Catholics wanted [Irish unification](#) and only 14% of the total population supported. So, it is unclear if a majority would support Irish unification if there was a border poll.

However, the prospect of a final exit from the EU may shift public opinion in Northern Ireland towards unification, as well as the existence of a hard border post-Brexit and the salience of Scottish independence. These factors could well increase Sinn Féin calls for a united Ireland, damage cross-border cooperation and undermine unionist security in the Union, contributing to more hardline behaviour.

Overall, whatever their public rhetoric, Northern Irish politicians are likely to adopt a pragmatic approach, given their support for peace and for the GFA. Although Spain is sensitive about any implications for Catalonia, the EU is also likely to be sympathetic to the Irish/Northern Irish case, given its post-conflict status and the EU's role in the peace process. Therefore it is likely that the EU will agree to certain British-Irish proposals for caveats for Northern Ireland and Ireland. However, even with such caveats, in removing a common framework that few expected to vanish, the psychological impact of Brexit has created a new and uncertain environment. Some negative predictions of Brexit's impact may be overstated, but there are many other negative issues that could cause problems for the peace process if they are not managed carefully and intensively by both the British and Irish governments and the EU.

This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Brexit blog, nor of the London School of Economics.

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