

A contested Brexit would be disruptive for Ireland, both North and South

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*Ireland's exposure to Brexit has been widely anticipated in political, policy and academic commentary and analysis. The resulting vulnerability – and the challenges and opportunities arising from it – have been confirmed by the dramatic events of the days following the vote to Leave. **Paul Gillespie** explains.*



Ireland is more interdependent with the United Kingdom than any other European Union member-state – constitutionally, politically, economically, socially and culturally. Northern Ireland is part of the UK, but the 1998 Belfast Agreement, a binding international treaty between the two states and registered at the UN, provides for “concurrent consent” there and in the Republic for Irish unification by two referendums. There is provision for dual British and Irish citizenship in the North, and a number of these rights are guaranteed by reference to European law and courts. And the 1949 Westminster Ireland Act declares that the Republic “is not a foreign country for the purpose of any law in force in any part of the United Kingdom”. That is reflected in the Common Travel Area between them.

Relations between the two states have evolved from the continuing post-colonial economic and political dependence of the 1920s to the 1960s into a much more complex and amicable interdependence within the setting of joint membership of the European Communities since the 1970s. They have matured into a much closer relationship economically, socially and culturally, balanced by the wider European setting. That EU framework was an essential condition for both states managing the violence in Northern Ireland from the 1970s to the 1998 agreement. Social and cultural relations between their peoples are even more intertwined than in the constitutional and political spheres.

This makes the UK's departure from the EU a real shock to Ireland, North and South. The challenge is described by one leading historian, Ronan Fanning, as the greatest to face the Republic's foreign policy since its neutrality in the second world war. Ireland has a deep interest to preserve its good political and economic relations with a Britain out of the EU, to maintain and develop the peace and improved relations between North and South of the island and to balance both of these with its continuing participation in the core areas of European integration which so helped to reconfigure the Irish–British relationship. The inherent asymmetry of size and power between the two states makes it difficult to compensate by political and legal means when such fundamental interests are at stake bilaterally. That is why Ireland will seek to inscribe in whatever agreement is reached between the EU and an exiting UK a special recognition and guarantee of this unique relationship.

A lot depends on whether the pending divorce is friendly or contested, pragmatic or competitive. Some EU members believe concessions to the UK, amid diminishing solidarity on the euro and migrants, will set precedents for fragmentation or disintegration. In that light a Brexit agreement would be very hard-nosed for fear of contagion. On the British side the Brexit's political victors are under great pressure to deliver on reduced migration as well as continuing trade and access to the EU single market. Those most loudly claiming the victory are English nationalists unreconciled to the post-sovereign world we inhabit and unwilling to compromise with it. The libertarian free traders are weaker in comparison, market forces are in favour of a compromise notwithstanding.

A contested and competitive outcome would be highly disruptive for Ireland North and South. The Irish border will be the only EU land one with the UK, threatening free movement of people and goods if it is hardened up. Ireland is confronted with the dilemma of seeking a favourable bilateral deal with a UK and struggling to minimise the disruptive effects on its relations with the EU. The Irish economy faces risks of reduced growth, competitive devaluation and falling trade amounting to 20 % in volume and value according to some studies; but this may be too

pessimistic and anyway depends a lot on sectors, so that domestic food exports are much more affected by UK trade than multinational companies. The scale of what is at stake is clear from the fact that the Republic is the UK's fifth or sixth trading partner in the world, with which it imports and exports more than with the whole Commonwealth or with China, India, Russia and Brazil combined.



With Brexit Ireland will lose a partner favouring open liberal policies in the EU. The EU's political centre of gravity is likely to move east, its economic policies may become more statist and in security and defence a weaker EU in global terms needing to support Nato more would impact on Ireland's own neutral but engaged positions. The Irish government is aligning itself with Germany, the Netherlands and Denmark to favour a more gradual and pragmatic approach in the negotiations on exit and future relations than with the more hard-nosed line taken initially by France, Belgium and Luxembourg. Ireland may also seek to play an interpretive or brokering game in the talks reflecting its role as the UK's closest neighbour and partner in the EU, without sacrificing the principle that access to the single market requires a commitment to free movement of people. That role would also express its concern not to antagonise Northern Ireland unionists, who voted disproportionately for Brexit and whose leading party the DUP supports that position, compared to the overwhelming nationalist support for Remain.

If the UK's dual sovereignty crisis involving its future relations with the EU and the survival of its own Union plays out with another independence referendum in Scotland resulting in a vote for secession the impact on Northern Ireland would be huge. Unionists there would be confronted with a weakened UK dominated by an England less willing to subsidise a weak periphery. As a result the question of Irish unity is coming on to the public agenda far faster than most Irish parties and people have up to this either expected or desired. Eventually unionists might look to Dublin for a better (federal) deal than they could expect from London. Initial indications that this is not unimaginable include the renewed interest in Irish citizenship among unionists who do not want to relinquish the European citizenship rights they would thereby acquire as these are lost to British passport holders.

For the moment such prospects are premature and many regard Sinn Fein's demand for a border poll now as an unnecessary and provocative diversion. More far-seeing Irish nationalists who support unification are playing a longer game, awaiting the working out of structural and political tensions in the British state which they expect to fall their way. Nonetheless the Brexit vote immediately raised scenarios of a united Ireland alongside an independent Scotland in international commentary, and this has fed back rapidly into the more cautious and surprisingly ill-prepared Irish public discourse.

Irish-Scottish relations have taken a huge turn for the better in recent years, expressed inter-governmentally as well as at popular level. Policy and academic analysts are drawn to the many parallels (and differences) between the two national stories, and to the possible linked compromises with an England working out its own future positions in Europe and within the UK. A Scottish special relationship with the EU short of full membership and running parallel with Westminster's would be of obvious interest in Northern Ireland. If that is not possible an independent Scotland

and Ireland would have a deep interest in moderating their respective hard borders with the UK, even as Northern Ireland worked out its fate either within such a diminished union or in a new relationship with the Republic.

This post represents the views of the author and not those of BrexitVote, nor the LSE. Image [credit](#).

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