

Northern Ireland faces rebordering after Brexit



*For practical purposes, the border between Ireland and Northern Ireland no longer exists. Brexit will change that. **Cathal McCall (Queen's University Belfast)** explores what this 'rebordering' will mean and asks whether Northern Ireland should not be left out of Brexit – despite the DUP's opposition.*

In the superb travelogue [Border: A Journey to the Edge of Europe](#) Kapka Kassabova ruminates on the borders between Bulgaria, Greece and Turkey, observing that, 'an actively policed border is always aggressive: it is where power suddenly acquires a body, if not a human face, and an ideology' (2017, p. xvi). With Brexit, the possibility remains of rebordering Ireland with human faces. Such a sight would vividly re-dramatise the power dynamic and conflict between British and Irish nationalist ideologies that two decades of debordering have helped to calm.

Yet this is of no relevance for militant Brexiteers at Westminster, notably Boris Johnson and Jacob Rees-Mogg, as they push for Brexit Valhalla with Britain unbound and global superpower status restored. Indeed, referring to the Irish border post-Brexit, Rees-Mogg claimed that '[there would be our ability, as we had during the Troubles, to have people inspected](#)'. The 'bring back control' quest of such Brexiteers involves the creation of clear security borders to have people and cargo inspected. Should those 'Troubles era arrangements' revisit the Irish border, who or what would be doing the inspecting?



NASA image of Northern Ireland. Photo: [NASA Goddard Space Flight Center](#) via a [CC BY 2.0 licence](#)

In its current form the Irish border is all but redundant for inspection purposes. Indeed, two decades of Europeanisation and peacebuilding have rendered it barely perceptible. Post-Brexit, Ireland will continue as an EU member state and abide by its customs, regulatory and freedom of movement obligations. Therefore, it is prudent not to dismiss out of hand the possibility that the Irish border will be a site of rebordering.

When he was Parliamentary Under Secretary of State at the Ministry of Justice the current Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, Dominic Raab, confirmed that, '[if you're worried about border controls and security ... you couldn't leave a back door without some kind, either of checks there with any country or assurances in relation to the checks that they're conducting, obviously](#)'. However, apart from peacebuilding concerns, the reintroduction of Irish border inspections would be problematic from a logistical point of view because the border's 500km course is decidedly unruly.

[Officially, there are 208 cross-border roads on the island of Ireland: nearly twice as many as those crossing the EU's entire eastern external frontier.](#) Unsurprisingly, Irish border and road interaction is anarchic as a result. The border even runs down the middle of 11 roads, including a section of the M1 Dublin-Newry motorway. Main arterial roads can cross the border more than once. For example, the direct route from Cavan Town (in Ireland) to Dungannon (in Northern Ireland), through the Drummully Salient, crosses the border no less than five times.

Brexit rebordering could entail the reintroduction of customs and agri-food inspection checkpoints on Irish cross-border arterial routes, the closure of scores of secondary cross-border roads that were reopened in the 1990s and 2000s, and the establishment of a border security regime to support vulnerable customs and inspection officials and infrastructure in isolated border terrain.

Technology could be applied to the management of a post-Brexit Irish border. Devices such as motion sensors, scanners, infra-red and surveillance cameras, databases, and even drones have been mooted. [However, to suggest that technology would render a post-Brexit Irish border 'invisible' is dismissed as 'complete nonsense' by border technology experts.](#) In the absence of border guards with human faces, sensors, scanners, cameras and databases serve as little more than recording and counting devices of border crossings. Additionally, in the case of the unruly Irish border, technological infrastructure on cross-border roads would be vulnerable to destruction unless it was protected by human border guards.

The UK government's mantra is that it wants the Irish border to remain 'as seamless and frictionless as possible'. If this means a barely perceptible border with the free flow of goods and people across it then this aspiration clashes with the Brexiteers' greater desire: leaving the EU (including the Single Market and Customs Union) and 'taking back control' of the free movement of people. Since Brexit has been inspired by the desire to curb freedom of movement of labour from the European continent it does not seem plausible that the UK government could resist rebordering the Irish border.

An obvious alternative to such rebordering is to leave Northern Ireland out of Brexit: it is after all Britain's exit. The border of Britain is the UK border in the British national imagination. The border of Britain is an imagined border that is disseminated by the British media, conveyed by the political establishment at Westminster, and reflected in the British public opinion. There are historical precedents for bordering Britain, notably the suspension of Britain and Ireland's Common Travel Area between 1940 and 1952.

The political obstacle to the bordering Britain option is that the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) is vigorously opposed to it and, therefore, its adoption would quite possibly be calamitous for the DUP's confidence and supply arrangement with the minority Conservative government. Yet this option would be less costly and easier to establish than rebordering the Irish border. Border portals – seaports and airports – are already sites of people and cargo inspection and border security regimes. Bordering with human faces is long established and accepted in border portals and will continue in these spaces, no matter what transpires at the Irish border.

This post represents the views of the author and not those of the Brexit blog, nor the LSE.

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