



The impact of Brexit on the security of Northern Ireland. A case study.

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Abstract: The purpose of this article is to present the already observed and possible threats to Northern Ireland as a result of the United Kingdom's decision to leave the European Union. The analysis will focus mainly on the socio-political and potentially paramilitary/terrorist dimensions, and to a lesser extent on the economic dimension, although of course this factor is also very important here. The author will not present in detail the reasons for the referendum on leaving the EU by the United Kingdom or the positions of the major parties represented in Westminster, as this would exceed the size of a scientific article. It will focus strictly on Northern Ireland, and the positions of the central government in London, as well as the government of the Republic of Ireland, will be treated marginally, only to the extent necessary to understand the problem.

Keywords: Northern Ireland, United Kingdom, Republic of Ireland, Brexit

The purpose of this article is to outline the risks already observed, and possible risks, resulting from the UK's decision to leave the European Union for Northern Ireland. The analysis will focus on the socio-political and potentially paramilitary/terrorist dimensions, and to a lesser extent on the economic dimension, although of course this factor is also very relevant here. The author will not detail the reasons for the UK's referendum to leave the EU or the positions of the major parties represented at Westminster, as this would exceed the size of an academic article. The discussion will focus strictly on Northern Ireland, and the positions of the central government in London as well as the government of the Republic of Ireland will be treated marginally here, only to the extent necessary to understand the issue at hand. The primary sources for research into the above issues are statistical data, newspaper

articles and participant observation. The author has chosen to examine these independently, without reference to existing studies, in order to maintain the maximum research distance from the subject under study, which by its very nature is difficult to demand of authors who are directly affected by the events in which they, as citizens of the United Kingdom and/or Ireland, participate. The items of their authorship are, of course, known to the author and will be listed in the bibliography, but he has endeavoured to carry out the search independently and draw his own conclusions.

During the referendum campaign, Northern Ireland's main political parties were forced to take a position on this important issue, although to date, despite key differences, the largest parties have taken Eurosceptic or at best Eurorealist positions. Representing the republican (predominantly Catholic) section of the Northern Ireland population, the Sinn Féin party has as a core point of its programme the desire to unite all the counties of Ireland in one state - the Republic of Ireland¹. However, its left-wing, socialist agenda on social issues makes it critical of both Brussels and Dublin policies. However, when confronted with the need to make a case for what *de jure* future Northern Ireland remains, its leaders have chosen to advocate remaining in the European Union, seeing the status quo as a tool to foster the fundamental goal of a united Ireland. In contrast, the main party of supporters of Northern Ireland remaining part of the UK is the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP, a grouping representing radical Protestants)². This formation supported the UK's exit from the European Union, presenting the same 'sovereignty' argument used by Brexit supporters within the ranks of London's ruling Conservative Party. Significantly, the moderate unionist party, the Ulster Unionist Party (UUP), left the question of voting for or against to the discretion of its constituents³. Unsurprisingly, both parties did not present their voters with the true, real-world consequences of their choice, as even

¹ <https://www.sinnfein.ie/irish-unity>

² <https://mydup.com/policies/policy-consultations>

³ <https://www.uup.org/manifestos>



politicians in London would not be able to answer this question, as at this stage it was not defined what 'leaving the European Union' would practically mean: whether only leaving the political community or also leaving the customs union/common market. These questions were to be decided "later", which is one piece of evidence that, when deciding to hold the referendum, the then Prime Minister David Cameron... did not assume that the British people would decide to leave the EU. Nor did Brussels representatives at that stage address the impact of a possible Brexit on the situation in Northern Ireland. On 23 June 2016, a referendum was held in which 51.89% of the British people voted to leave the European Union. Relevant for further consideration are the results of the referendum in Northern Ireland: with a turnout of 62.7%, 55.7% of voters were in favour of remaining in the European Union and 44.22% were against. Only Scotland was more in favour of remaining in the EU, with 62%. The process of negotiating how Brexit will be implemented has been very protracted and has been the cause of the collapse of successive Conservative Party governments and changes in the position of Prime Ministers designate. A detailed analysis of this issue is beyond the subject matter of this article. Relevant for further consideration is the UK's decision to go ahead with Brexit (another referendum will not be held) and it will mean a complete severance of the legal ties that bind the UK to the European Union, in particular the exit from the Common Market and the Customs Union. This has been justified on the grounds of not accepting any jurisdiction of the EU Court of Justice over the UK. In practice, this means the establishment of a customs border between the UK and all countries in the European Union, as well as the European Economic Area. As UK citizens lost their EU citizenship at the same time, the 'political' border was also formally re-established.

The so-called 'hard Brexit' created a serious legal problem regarding the validity of the so-called Good Friday Agreement of 10 April 1998 (officially the Belfast Agreement, also known in the literature by its acronym GFA), ratified by a referendum held in the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland on 22

May 1998. The Agreement marked the start of a peace process, ending a conflict that had lasted intermittently and with varying degrees of intensity since 1922 between supporters of a united Ireland and Northern Ireland's majority supporters of remaining part of the United Kingdom as Unionists. At the height of the conflict (1972-98) it cost 3,720 lives and injured a further 47,541 people. More than 54% of the casualties were civilians, with the remainder British soldiers and police officers (Royal Ulster Constabulary) ⁴. These figures do not include casualties from terrorist attacks on the island of Great Britain and in the Republic of Ireland. The main parties to the conflict were the terrorist organisation Irish Republican Army (also using the name Provisional IRA), the UK armed and police forces and smaller Ulster Unionist terrorist organisations. The complicated peace process involved the establishment of a separate parliamentary assembly (Assembly) and a local government (Executive) which, under the treaty, would be formed by the two largest parties, representing both the Republican and Unionist sides. Significantly, if either party does not wish to enter into a local government, no local government will be formed and London will have the right to establish so-called 'direct rule' in Northern Ireland. Signed when both states: Republic of Ireland and the UK were members of the EU, the agreement was based on the premise that there would be no border between the two countries that would restrict the free movement of people, goods or services. Residents of Northern Ireland (i.e. according to the agreement "persons born in Northern Ireland and having one parent who is a citizen of the Republic of Ireland or the United

Kingdom) were given the right to hold citizenship of the Republic of Ireland, the United Kingdom or both citizenships⁵. The two states also agreed on the possibility of future Irish reunification by way of a referendum held in Northern Ireland (which may (but need not) be ordered by the UK Minister - Secretary of State for Northern Ireland) and the Republic of Ireland (according to the procedure under domestic law) simultaneously⁶. In return, Northern Ireland recognised the sovereignty of the United Kingdom over Northern Ireland

⁴ <https://everycasualty.org/remembering-the-victims-of-the-troubles/#:~:text=During%20the%20three%20decades%20of%20the%20Troubles%2C%203%2C720,deaths%20were%20people%20under%20the%20age%20of%2025>

⁵ AGREEMENT BETWEEN THE GOVERNMENT OF THE UNITED KINGDOM OF GREAT BRITAIN AND NORTHERN IRELAND AND THE GOVERNMENT OF IRELAND art. VI
https://wesleyjohnston.com/users/ireland/today/good_friday/full_text.html



(previously the constitution of the Republic of Ireland stated that its territory was the whole island of Ireland)⁶. It should be noted here that the premise of the abolition of land border controls between the Republic of Ireland and Great Britain in Northern Ireland was fundamental to the peace process. Prior to the Maastricht Treaty of 7 February 1992, British border posts were frequent targets of IRA terrorist attacks as symbols of the 'occupation of the island'. The process of abolishing the physical border (de-bordering), initiated as part of European integration, created new conditions for the island of Ireland and realised in practice one of the demands of the republican party, although the Maastricht Treaty itself did not, of course, refer to the Northern Ireland conflict. The implementation of a 'hard Brexit' without the conclusion of an agreement between London and Brussels on this issue (and thus in accordance with the Vienna Convention on the Law of Treaties of 22 May 1969) would have meant the restoration of the operation of border controls as they were known before 1992 and would have meant a de facto rupture of the Good Friday Agreement, including those provisions of the agreement that referred to the republican side's rejection of violence in the pursuit of Irish reunification and the disarmament of terrorist organisations (nota bene never fully implemented). This, in turn, could mean a resurgence of violence in Northern Ireland and in Britain, and arguably in the Republic of Ireland. In this way, the problem of resolving the issue of Northern Ireland's relationship with the Republic of Ireland in the context of the UK's exit from the European Union became an important issue not only for London and Dublin, but also for Brussels, which had set cooperation in the fight against international terrorism as one of its objectives. The Agreement on the Withdrawal of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland from the European Union and the European Atomic Energy Community, concluded after nearly four years of negotiations on 24 January 2020, was accompanied by the Protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland (known as the Irish Protocol)⁷. The preamble to the Protocol referred to the Good Friday Agreement, recognising its momentous role in the Northern Ireland peace process, the maintenance and continuation of which it considered of the highest value. The document envisaged, as a provisional solution, the maintenance of Northern Ireland's membership of the European

Common Market and Customs Union and guaranteed the right of citizens of both parts of the island of Ireland to travel freely (unchecked), leaving the details of this arrangement to be agreed between Dublin and London under a 'Common Travel Area'. It also maintained the existing jurisdiction of the CJEU over the provisions of UK law that would apply in Northern Ireland. The result was that Northern Ireland did not have a customs border with the Republic of Ireland, but did have one with the rest of the UK (to be precise: the Protocol allowed free access of goods and services from Northern Ireland to the market of the rest of the UK, but imposed tariffs and other restrictions on goods from the larger island entering Northern Ireland). Symbolically, this can be described as the establishment of a customs border in the Irish Sea. This is unique in the world: constitutionally, Northern Ireland remains an integral part of the UK, but London's sovereignty (both in terms of domestic law-making and in terms of entering into international agreements that could have legal effects that infringe Brussels' powers over trade and related matters vis-à-vis Northern Ireland as part of the Common Market and Customs Union) has been severely curtailed (or more accurately: remained as it was prior to the UK's exit from the EU). The reception of this situation in Northern Ireland depends on the position taken by the political parties. For Sinn Féin, maintaining close economic ties and freedom of travel with the EU is a major step towards Irish reunification (by gradually weakening ties with the UK). Those in favour of Irish reunification are considering initiating a referendum process on the issue in the 'near future', and the transition period is nothing more than the realisation of the sovereign will of the people who voted overwhelmingly against Brexit, and therefore against restoring the border with the Republic and against leaving the Common Market. For the UDP, on the other hand, such an arranged relationship with Dublin (through the Brussels agreement) is an unacceptable loosening of ties with London, making the people of Northern Ireland "second-class citizens" and a kind of deception, since, after all, according to them, the people of the UK voted to "get out from under the guardianship of the CJEU", while Northern Ireland is still under it, although the constitutional position of this part of the state has not changed.

The impact of the implementation of Brexit and the Irish Protocol has been and is being felt by

⁶ The procedure is described in detail in Annex A of the Agreement

⁷ For the Polish text of the Agreement, including the Protocol: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/PL/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:12019W/TXT>



the people of Northern Ireland. First and foremost, the practical exclusion of this part of the country from the UK market is acute. This means making it difficult to import many types of products that are severely restricted or even impossible to transport across the Irish Sea. This applies primarily to certain types of food, but also to... seedlings and potted plants (home gardening is very popular in the UK). A long-term effect of this restriction is also the withdrawal of British retail chains from Northern Ireland, also observed in Poland. The vacuum left by British companies has of course started to be filled by Irish companies. However, this, in turn, is associated with rising prices in Northern Ireland, or more precisely their alignment with prices in the Republic of Ireland. Previously, people living in the south of the island would often travel north for their weekly shopping (just as Lithuanians and Slovaks do in Poland). This has now ceased to be viable, the effects of which are being felt by small Northern Irish entrepreneurs⁸. The sense of instability (the Irish Protocol was intended to be a stopgap solution in itself) did not encourage investors to open larger companies or relocate to Northern Ireland, and at the very least involved risk, in the face of unknown destination solutions.

Another effect of Brexit, signalled earlier, is the destabilisation of Northern Ireland's already complex political system. As mentioned earlier, it requires the participation of the largest political groupings of both the Republican and Unionist sides to form a local executive. A local Assembly election was held on 5 May 2022, which for the first time in Northern Ireland's history was won by the republican Sinn Féin party, with 29% of the vote and 27 seats. The radical unionist Democratic Unionist Party came second, winning 21.3% of the vote and 25 seats. The third force in the Assembly is the Alliance party, which won 13.5% of the vote and 17 seats. It is a liberal party with origins in the moderate unionist community, but is now also open to republican circles, maintaining a neutral stance on Irish reunification. It was followed by the moderate Unionist Party (11.2% of the vote and 9 seats) and the Social Democratic Labour Party (9.1% of the vote and 8 seats). Other parties won the remaining two seats. The Democratic Unionist Party refused to participate in the Executive, where its representative would for the first time in history only be a deputy First Minister (the name Prime Minister is reserved

for the head of central government in London). This has caused a major constitutional crisis, as the law does not provide for other parties to take the seat of the largest Unionist grouping in such a case, so a possible Alliance coalition with the Unionist Party would therefore not solve the political stalemate, although together they have one seat more than the DUP. The DUP justifies its boycott of the Executive by demanding a departure from the Irish Protocol, i.e. the de facto abolition of the border between Northern Ireland and the rest of the UK. The Government in London has not exercised its right to introduce direct rule (in which the powers of the Assembly and the Executive would be taken over by the Minister for Northern Ireland, who is a member of the Government in Westminster) until the end of 2023. This decision stems not only from a desire to force the DUP to reverse its decision and enter the Executive, but more importantly from a fear of escalating conflict with the republican community, particularly the radical section of it, who would see the takeover of Northern Ireland as a return to the 'occupation' prior to the Good Friday Agreement. As a direct result of the DUP boycotting participation in the Executive, there is no budget for the next two years, leading to the financial collapse of the public service sector. The system is operating on a 2022 budget, and this does not take into account inflation, which was 7.9% in 2022 and 7.9% in 2023 respectively. Republican circles, on the other hand, are using the constitutional crisis and accompanying severe financial problems to promote Irish reunification as the best option. They justify holding a referendum on the grounds that Northern Ireland is already de facto part of a common market with the Republic, and a political decision would only complete what they believe the Good Friday Agreement provides. However, with a UK general election looming, which must be held in 2024, it is unlikely that the government in London would agree to such an arrangement now. The Republic of Ireland will also have elections this year, so there too the ruling centre-right coalition does not want to introduce the topic of reunification into the election campaign.

As expected, the Irish Protocol has been replaced by a new agreement, negotiated with the European Union by UK Prime Minister Richie Sunak and signed as the Windsor Framework on 27 February 2023. The content of this agreement is very

⁸ Participant observation and interviews with Northern Ireland residents during a research trip in October 2023.



politically significant, as it is part of a broader agreement to build a new relationship between the UK and the EU after Brexit. The arrangements adopted are intended to enable the seamless exchange of goods and services between Northern Ireland and the UK in a way that does not compromise the integrity of the European single market. This is to be achieved through the labelling of goods that will be transported to Northern Ireland and disposed of exclusively in the Northern Irish market. Only UK regulations will apply to these goods. In this way, using the so-called 'green line', goods that were not allowed to enter the Northern Ireland market will again be allowed to enter the Northern Ireland market. On the other hand, using the so-called 'red line', goods that can be sold without restrictions on the EU market will be allowed. The UK will have to set up a special computerised system to register both types of goods, which will be accessible in real time by EU Customs and Sanitary Authorities⁹. The solution adopted is expected to result in a significant simplification of the exchange of goods between Northern Ireland and the UK, primarily serving Northern Irish citizens who will regain free access to the goods and brands to which they have been accustomed. This is of great symbolic importance, as after all, chain store logos and merchandise on the shelves are one of the most important visible elements that distinguish the two parts of Ireland on a daily basis. On a practical level, the agreement will open up new opportunities for Northern Irish business, which will be able to enjoy unrestricted access to both the EU common market and the UK market (as well as other markets with which the UK may have relevant free trade agreements that the EU does not). Beneficiaries may include whiskey producers, who until now have had to import the grain needed for distillation from Ireland in the absence of being able to import raw material from England or Scotland. The agreement will end a period of uncertainty since 2016, which has not been conducive to business and has discouraged investment in Northern Ireland. The costs of implementing and operating the scheme will be fully funded by the government in London, so will not be a burden on the Belfast executive. Reaction to the agreement from Northern Irish parties has been mixed. Republicans and moderate unionists have welcomed it, for the reasons given earlier. However, the DUP is still not satisfied with it, with its

politicians advocating the restoration of the customs border with the Republic of Ireland, seeing it as a de facto departure from the Good Friday Agreement and removing the possibility of a referendum on island reunification, which they strongly oppose. Public opinion is similarly divided: 67% of those surveyed support the Windsor Protocol, with 27% holding the opposite view. There is a clear correlation between attitudes to the Protocol and political preferences: among Unionists, 50% are against and 38% in favour; among Republicans, 97% are in favour and 2% are against; 98% of Alliance party voters support and 2% have no opinion (no one is against)¹⁰. The signing of the LondonBrussels agreement has therefore not brought an end to the paralysis of the Northern Irish Executive. The next opportunity will be the Assembly elections, which are scheduled for 2024, as are the House of Commons elections.

The 2022 political stalemate in Northern Ireland poses a significant security risk in its traditional dimension as well. Until Brexit, both parts of the island of Ireland operated within the framework outlined in the Good Friday Agreement, which was widely accepted by the population. There was no border between the two parts of the island, republicans were guaranteed a seat in the Assembly and the potential possibility of a referendum on reunification, and at a symbolic layer they could reside in the UK territory of Northern Ireland, enjoying full citizenship rights. Unionists were guaranteed the political status quo as long as they could maintain a majority in a potential referendum. This state of affairs continued in subsequent Assembly elections, in which representatives of one of the largest Unionist parties (first the UUP and later the DUP) held the most seats until 2022. Sociological surveys of voter preferences, as well as demographic surveys of the religion of the majority of the population in Northern Ireland, showed a stable but diminishing preponderance of supporters of retaining membership of the United Kingdom. There has been a practical disappearance of terrorist attacks and a decline in the number of sectarian-political incidents. Thus, the Good Friday Agreement had fulfilled its purpose and the hopes placed in it: the conflict in Northern Ireland seemed to be consigned to history. The first generation of people in the region who had not personally experienced the atrocities of previous decades had grown up. Various initiatives were developing to integrate the two communities, such as

⁹ <https://www.politico.eu/article/eu-uk-windsor-framework-northern-ireland-deal-concessions-and-safeguards-brexit/>

¹⁰ https://024943a0-ce9e-4fe5-85a2-d9f4d3bc845d.usrfiles.com/ugd/024943_3fb149597d30439694b2eb9b0639f8cc.pdf



the creation of a joint Irish national rugby team, a sport popular in the British Isles almost as much as football (here, however, divisions are still evident: the traditionally republican Derry City club still plays in the Republic League, while other clubs with unionist supporters form their own Northern Ireland League, which should be borne in mind, as traditionally supporters' circles are politically engaged and quite radical, which can also be observed during matches)¹¹. The result of the referendum on Britain's withdrawal from the European Union had a significant impact on Assembly voting preferences. While it is true that Sinn Féin is the largest party there for the first time ever, it only received 1.1 per cent more votes than in the 2017 election. The biggest winner is the Alliance party, which received as much as 4.5% more votes than in 2017, becoming the third political force. The ultra-conservative Traditional Unionist Voice party can also speak of success, with 5.1 per cent more votes. In contrast, the biggest loser is the DUP, which lost a staggering 6.7% of voters. The Social Democratic Labour Party lost 2.9% and the UUP 1.7% fewer votes¹². According to Lucid Talk's electoral projections, in October 2023 Sinn Féin would vote 31%, the DUP 28%, Alliance 16%, UUP 8%, SDLP 6%, TUV 4%¹³. The results of the last Assembly election held before Brexit, in 2016, should also be reported: The victorious DUP gained 29.2%, Sinn Féin 24%, UUP 12.6%, SDLP 12%, Alliance 7%, TUV 3.4%. Thus, between the 2016 and 2017 elections, the DUP lost 1.1% of voters, Sinn Féin gained 3.9%, the UUP gained 0.3%, the SDLP lost 0.1%, Alliance gained 2.1%, TUV lost 0.8%¹⁴. Thus, analysing the electoral results immediately before Brexit and the subsequent ones already in the new reality, it can be seen that the biggest voter flows are between the unionist parties. The UK's exit from the European Union resulted in a significant increase in support for the Alliance party, which originated from a unionist background, but was liberal (not

raising religious issues in its programme, supporting community integration and the implementation of the Good Friday Agreement and, in the referendum, remaining in the EU)¹⁵. It is worth looking at a breakdown of how Brexit has affected polling support for Irish reunification:

2017 For - 33.7%, against - 55.4%, had no opinion 10.9%

2022 for - 41%, against - 48%, had no opinion 11%¹⁶

To analyse the results of these surveys, it is important to add data on the religion of the people of Northern Ireland. The last census was conducted in 2021. At that time, 45.7% of the population declared themselves to be Catholic, 43.5% Protestant, other faiths 1.5% and atheists 9.3%. By comparison, in 2001, Catholics were 43.8%, Protestants 53.1%, other faiths 0.4% and atheists 2.7% of the population. The survey also examined which religion's representatives had converted to atheist positions: Catholics 3.4%, Protestants 6.1% and others 0.2%¹⁷. It can therefore be concluded that Catholics now make up the majority of the population in Northern

Ireland, with the process of secularisation occurring more rapidly among Protestants. All residents of Northern Ireland eligible to vote were surveyed, i.e. those with citizenship of Great Britain or the Republic of Ireland or both, as well as residents (permanent resident immigrants). Immigration has some influence on the size of particular religious groups. The State Bureau of Statistics does not examine the ethnicity of residents, but it does examine their native languages.

95.4% of the residents reported English. Of the remainder, 1.1% speak Polish, 0.5% Lithuanian, 0.3% Irish, 0.3% Romanian, 0.3% Portuguese, 0.2% Arabic, 0.2% Bulgarian and 1.8% other languages¹⁸. In Northern Ireland, by contrast, there is a slight

¹¹ UK flags are flown by fans in the stands - participant observation from Glentoran Belfast - Glenavon match 21.10.2023

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<https://www.bbc.com/news/election/2022/northern-ireland/results>

¹³ <https://www.lucidtalk.co.uk/single-post/ni-tracker-poll-autumn-2023>

¹⁴ <https://www.eoni.org.uk/Elections/Election-results-and-statistics/Election-results-and-statistics-2003-onwards/Elections-2017>

¹⁵

https://www.allianceparty.org/2019_local_government_manifesto

¹⁶ <https://factcheckni.org/articles/is-there-no-growth-in-public-support-for-a-united-ireland-is-support-shrinking-instead/>

¹⁷

<https://www.nisra.gov.uk/system/files/statistics/census-2021-main-statistics-for-northern-ireland-phase-1-statistical-bulletin-religion.pdf>

¹⁸ ibidem



positive natural increase¹⁹. It can therefore be assumed that immigrants do not represent a large enough population in Northern Ireland to have a possible impact on either the outcome of the election or the referendum on Irish reunification. It is therefore possible to observe a reversal of the proportion of the population in favour of the Catholic community. If one juxtaposes these figures with support for Irish reunification, one cannot conclude that all Catholics are in favour of leaving the UK and therefore 'republican'. According to a poll conducted in 2020, although 65% of Catholics were in favour of reunification, a staggering 17% preferred to remain in the UK. Among Protestants, of course, the proportions look the other way: 6% and 83% respectively²⁰. Similarly, given the very good result that the Alliance party is getting at the next election (and will also, according to the referenced poll, get in 2023), it is not true to say that all Protestants are radical unionists, rejecting any agreement with the European Union and/or the Republic of Ireland. Thus, it is now difficult to conclude that using the description of the conflict in Northern Ireland as religious is no longer legitimate and is more historical than descriptive of the current social reality, because if 45.7% of the population identified themselves as Catholic and 41% of the population favoured Irish reunification, the difference is apparent. Brexit also makes it impossible to identify by passport held: 700,000 people born in Northern Ireland hold Republic of Ireland passports. However, as many as 200,000 of these only applied for one after Brexit, so these are people who probably wanted to retain the entitlements afforded by having European Union citizenship²¹. In one survey conducted in 2020, respondents were asked how they identified themselves in terms of nationality. The results were as follows: 19% identified themselves as Irish, 13% as more Irish than British, 18% as both Irish and British, 18% as more British than Irish, 23% as exclusively British, 7% as 'neither' and 1% did not know how to identify themselves²². It is also

interesting to note the result of the survey as to whether respondents feel more republican or unionist. The former option was chosen by 19%, the latter by 35%, while as many as 42% do not identify with either option²³. So it is difficult to make a clear connection between accepting a Republic of Ireland passport and supporting the island's unification. It is also difficult to speak of a radicalisation of Protestant/Unionist sentiment. It is true that the influence of the extreme TUV party is growing, but it is still a marginal force. By contrast, the rise in support for the very moderate, pro-dialogue Alliance party shows the opposite trend: support for compromise is increasing. Polls show a significant advantage for the moderate option: 45% believe that the Good Friday Agreement and the Irish Protocol are the best basis for governance in Northern Ireland, but need little change. 23% felt that this legal basis is good and needs no change. Only 9% said that the Accord was not a good legal basis and needed major changes and 6% said that the Accord was never a good solution and should not have been made at all²⁴. Thus, it can be assumed that only 6% of those surveyed are radicals who reject any agreement. This group is represented by only 1% of respondents who declare themselves to be Catholics, 11% among Protestants and 4% among atheists. Also important is the support for the Good Friday Agreement and the British Protocol among different age groups. The number of supporters of leaving the agreement unchanged is highest among 45-54 year olds, reaching 30%. It is smallest among 18-24 year olds at 9%. The agreement is considered to be the best solution but sees the need for improvement by the largest group of 18-24 year olds: as many as 50% and the smallest group of 25-34 year olds with 39%. Only 9% of the youngest respondents consider the agreement formula to be outdated. Similarly, only 4% of young people say that the agreement should never have been concluded (this view is most popular among 55-64 year olds, but also reaches 10% here). It is apparent that there is a slight difference in

¹⁹ <https://www.irishcentral.com/news/northern-ireland-population>

²⁰ https://www.ark.ac.uk/nilt/2020/Political_Attitudes/REUNIFY.html

²¹ <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-northern-ireland-51287687>, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-47292347>

²² https://www.ark.ac.uk/nilt/2020/Political_Attitudes/UNINATID.html

²³

https://www.ark.ac.uk/nilt/2020/Political_Attitudes/UNINATID.html

²⁴

https://www.ark.ac.uk/nilt/2020/Political_Attitudes/VIEWGFA3.html



support for Irish reunification among younger voters: among 18-24, 38% were in favour and 40% against; among 25-34, 34-50%; 35-54, 31 and 53%; among 55-64, 26 and 58%; and among over-65s, 23 and 59%²⁵. It can therefore be seen that there is still a majority of those surveyed who would be in favour of remaining in the UK in the referendum, despite Brexit and under existing arrangements. There are no publicly available polls showing positions on these issues following the introduction of the Windsor Agreement, as it has not yet been implemented.

Despite the fact that, as indicated, the potential support for radicals is not currently very high in Northern Ireland, the experience of previous decades dictates caution and examination of what the terrorist threat is. One of the conditions of the implementation of the Good Friday Agreement was that terrorist organisations should disarm and cease their activities. In return, amnesty was offered to their members regardless of the degree of their past involvement or the crimes they had committed. The most notorious organisation of this kind was the Irish Republican Army (also known as the Provisional IRA, or Provos for short). It was widely known that the legitimate Sinn Féin party was in fact a political offshoot of the IRA, and that its leaders had at some stage of activity been members of the IRA. The Good Friday Agreement enabled them to carry out legitimate political activity without fear of possible prosecution or arrest. Political correctness, on the other hand, meant that the issue of the relationship between SF and IRA members was overlooked in the media and public discourse. Such an assumption, although morally contested (especially by the families of victims of terrorist attacks) nevertheless had a positive effect: terrorist activity in Northern Ireland decreased significantly. However, this did not mean that all IRA members accepted the new state of law. They formed an organisation called the New IRA (IRA), mostly using simply the name IRA. Due to its scant social base, it did not pose a comparable threat to its predecessor. The (n)IRA has had a political

wing since 2016, the Saoradh Party. This far-left political grouping calls for the reunification of the island and the creation of a new socialist state. The party has not participated in elections, nor is it included in official polls, so its popular support cannot be determined. Due to its radical, violent programme, it is of interest to the UK secret services and its leaders have been searched by the police on more than one occasion, as have party premises²⁶. In 2022, the Joint Terrorism Analysis Centre of the UK counter-intelligence service downgraded the threat of terrorist attacks in Northern Ireland from 'Severe' (second from the 'top' on a five-point scale, meaning 'an attack is highly likely') to 'Substantial' (third on the same scale, meaning 'an attack is likely').

This was the first time this had happened since 2010. This condition persisted for a year, when it was restored. This compares to a statewide threat level of 'significant' in January 2024 and still 'serious' in Northern Ireland²⁷. Whilst the threat level does not look particularly serious against the backdrop of the state, there have been a number of serious assaults. On 18 April 2019, journalist and LGBT activist Lyra McKee was shot dead during a riot in Creggan (County Derry). According to footage, the perpetrator was a masked man. In a statement issued, the Saoradh party apologised to the victim's next of kin, stating that she was an accidental victim of fighting with 'occupying forces'²⁸. The crime has been met with widespread public disapproval in Northern Ireland. In 2012 and 2016, IRA terrorists murdered two prison guards²⁹. On 19 April 2021, police foiled a bombing allegedly carried out by a police officer and her accompanying daughter. Letterbox bombings were also foiled at several train stations and London airport, and at Glasgow University³⁰. A bombing outside a courthouse in Londonderry was also foiled³¹. On 22 February 2023, IRA terrorists assassinated John Caldwell, an investigating police officer who, among other things, was investigating the murder of the aforementioned Lyra McKee. The assassination occurred after his service³². In the same

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https://www.ark.ac.uk/nilt/2020/Political_Attitudes/REFUNIFY.html

²⁶ <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-northern-ireland-53851675>

²⁷ <https://www.mi5.gov.uk/threat-levels>

²⁸ <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-48018615>

²⁹ <https://news.sky.com/story/what-is-the-new-ira-what-the-group-has-done-and-where-it-sits-in-the-iras-history-12817687>

³⁰ <https://news.sky.com/story/northern-ireland-man-arrested-in-derry-in-connection-with-activities-of-new-ira-after-explosive-device-found-12419584>

³¹ <https://news.sky.com/story/what-is-the-new-ira-what-the-group-has-done-and-where-it-sits-in-the-iras-history-12817687>

³² <https://www.politico.eu/article/northern-ireland-leaders-condemn-shooting-detective-chief-inspector-john-caldwell/>



year, an attempt on the life of US President Joe Biden, who was visiting Belfast for the anniversary of the signing of the Good Friday Agreement, was foiled³³. The continued presence of paramilitary groups who effectively control the situation in working-class neighbourhoods in cities such as Belfast and Derry/Londonderry is also a serious problem³⁴. The problem affects both Republican and Unionist neighbourhoods and circles, whose militias number several thousand volunteers³⁵. Their activities are often linked not only to politically motivated violence, but also to typically criminal forms such as drug trafficking and extortionate 'protection' of entertainment venues³⁶. Observing the streets of Belfast, or Londonderry/Derry, one can notice a specific acquiescence to the presence of radical political activism in public space. This is represented by distinctive political murals, painted on the facades of buildings. Some of them refer to historical events (such as the Easter Rising in Ireland, the Battle of the Boyne, the First World War, the Republican Hunger Strike at the Maze prison). Others explicitly include the symbolism of terrorist and paramilitary organisations: IRA, UDA, UVF. Even those referring to seemingly neutral contemporary events are in fact strongly rooted in conflict: commemorating the death of Queen Elizabeth II or the coronation of Charles III in Unionist neighbourhoods, or protests against the actions of the Israeli armed forces in Republican neighbourhoods. Completely apolitical paintings, such as those associated with the popular footballer George Best or commemorating the victims of the sinking of the Titanic ship, are in a distinct minority. Attempts to replace murals politically involved on one side of the conflict with apolitical, purely artistic works have generally failed. Like the so-called 'peace walls' separating Republican and Unionist neighbourhoods, they have become tourist attractions, viewed and photographed by visitors to Northern Irish cities³⁷.

Britain's departure from the European Union did not derail the peace process initiated by the Good Friday Agreement. It has certainly complicated its continuation, creating new peoples by activating some previously resolved problems. Here, the serious risk of reintroducing border controls and customs

duties is a case in point. The problem of arranging a new relationship not only (as was obvious from the outset) with Dublin and Brussels, but also with London, has created a serious constitutional crisis in Belfast, now in its fourth year, the resolution of which still seems unlikely. Although Northern Ireland's constitution is formally governed by an Act of the British Parliament, its tenets and foundations are guaranteed by the Good Friday Agreement. The correct assumption that the Executive was to be co-constituted by the major Republican and Unionist parties worked when they were moderate forces. When the situation arose where it would be Sinn Féin and the DUP, a stalemate was created from which there is no straightforward way out under the current system and there is little sign that a new election will change this. The attempt to democratise the system creates a real danger that some form of unionist 'cordon' coalition could emerge, unless a coalition government of Sinn Féin and moderate unionists with the Alliance party could then be formed, but it is difficult to imagine a renegotiation of the Good Friday Agreements allowing for such an entirely new political arrangement. At the same time, we are seeing an internal leadership crisis among the traditional unionist parties, with the DUP and TUV racing to radicalise the republicans and the rather distant but real prospect of a reunification referendum. On the other hand, Sinn Féin is 'not helping here', although it holds the 'soul government' in the republican community and there is no threat from smaller parties. SF has become 'hostage to its own success', for it is not only the strongest political party in Northern Ireland, but also has the opportunity to replicate that success in the Republic of Ireland, and with a result that will make the formation of a government in Dublin impossible without its participation. The prospect of a reunification referendum, which the party has in its programme manifesto, would destabilise the internal situation in Northern Ireland even further, as the pre-referendum campaign would arguably reestablish the polarisation of the political scene around the question of remaining in the UK or uniting with the Republic. Whatever the final outcome (but probably in favour of the status quo), a large number of voters would be

³³ <https://nypost.com/2023/04/09/ira-terror-plot-foiled-in-n-ireland-ahead-of-biden-visit/>

³⁴ <https://www.politico.eu/article/northern-ireland-violence-brexit-clear-present-danger-experts/hps://www.poli.co.eu/ar cle/northern-ireland-violence-brexit-clear-present-danger-experts/>

³⁵ <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-northern-ireland-55151249>

³⁶ <https://www.ft.com/content/7e83e463-0c45-46a6-a6a0-12668cb65dc9>

³⁷ <https://www.euronews.com/2017/03/29/the-changing-faces-of-northern-ireland-s-murals>, participant observation by the author October 2023



dissatisfied with it, which, with hopes of success raised, could result in the radicalisation of public opinion, which (as shown earlier) is now both tired of years of civil war and content with a fragile and flawed, but nonetheless compromise. The current authorities in Dublin and London, as well as those in Brussels, realise the gravity of the situation and have devoted considerable effort to developing a legal platform to preserve the principals of the Good Friday Agreement. However, both countries will hold elections in 2024, which will most likely lead to the replacement of the current rulers with the opposition. The new governments will have to take a position on the highly conflictual Northern Irish issue even if it is not the subject of national election campaigns. Social peace in Northern Ireland also depends very much on the economic situation, and this depends both on the global economic situation and on how the 2023 agreement in Windsor works out in practice. If it proves to be a success, Northern Ireland could then become the sole beneficiary of Brexit. If, on the other hand, it is a failure, unemployment and rising prices could spark social discontent, fostering extreme political movements and radicalising methods of struggle, including a return to violence and terrorism. If this is the case, Northern Ireland will be the loser of Brexit, most notably those Northern Irish people who support dialogue and are happy with the direction towards reconciliation and cooperation so far. A particular problem facing Northern Ireland today is the state of health care. The free and universal NHS (National Health Service) is failing to meet the needs of patients. This is particularly the case for the diagnosis and treatment of mental and nervous problems (there are statistically more people suffering from these types of ailments than in the rest of the UK, and this has to do with living in a state of constant danger during times of conflict). Waiting queues for appointments or hospital places for planned treatments are the longest in the country. The current constitutional stalemate and the associated budget crisis and loss of funds flowing from Brussels makes any attempt to improve the situation impossible. Possible reunification with the Republic will not only not eliminate this problem, but will create a new one, related to the fact that medical care is essentially paid for in the Republic (reimbursed by private, non-compulsory insurance). It is worth noting at this point that Sinn Fein's election programme in the Republic refers to the introduction of an NHSlike system.

The source of the problems for the Northern Ireland peace process may be the generally deteriorating domestic situation in the UK, linked to the weakness of the current Conservative Party

government and the economic crisis caused by Brexit, among other things. Pre-election polls indicate that Labour will have to try to deal with these problems. It remains to be seen what balance of power will emerge in Westminster and, in particular, Edinburgh and Cardiff. What is at stake here is a discussion about the further devolution of the system and how far it will go. It is rather clear that the rise of separatism in Scotland and Wales will threaten the peace process in Northern Ireland, where the process of leaving the UK theoretically seems simpler than for the other two constituent parts, as this would immediately give Belfast the support of Dublin and Brussels. Scotland and Wales would only have to negotiate their accession to the EU, and this would certainly be a long and complicated process (although easier than the one Poland, for example, had to go through, as UK legislation is still very compatible with European legislation). Whether the new Labour government will succeed in stopping the decomposition of the UK remains to be seen. What is known, however, is that the change of monarch is causing a fairly widespread feeling that Charles III does not have the integrating power that Elizabeth II had, and it is unclear whether he will be able to develop such authority.

Attention should also be drawn to the external threat to the situation in Northern Ireland, which is the potential involvement of third countries. On the one hand, the United States has consistently supported the peace process, as demonstrated by President Biden's anniversary visit to Belfast. On the other hand, Russia has a long tradition of supporting Northern Irish terrorism and the current relationship surrounding London's involvement in the war in Ukraine can be described as hostile. In these circumstances, the possibility of destabilising the UK by supporting separatist movements, particularly violent ones, becomes real and attractive to the Kremlin.

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