

Northern Ireland

Brexit borderlands: the vulnerabilities of the Irish peace process

Katy Hayward

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EU on the Irish border and peace process, most recently authoring the report 'Bordering on Brexit: views from local communities in the central border region of Ireland/Northern Ireland'. She has presented widely to various audiences on the topic of Brexit and Northern Ireland/Ireland, especially with a view to the Irish border and the peace process. She has also given written and oral evidence before several parliamentary committees in both the UK and the Republic of Ireland.

'For a border community, the border impacts on every aspect of everyday life. When you get up in the morning, which road do you go out on? ...the border affects everything you think about and everything you do.'
County Monaghan resident

The Irish border runs for just under 500 kilometres across the northern part of the island of Ireland. It divides the independent state of the Republic of Ireland from Northern Ireland, which is a region of the United Kingdom (UK). It was the Government of Ireland Act (1920) that first divided the island into two separate jurisdictions, each with its own government and parliament. This act of partition was envisaged as a temporary answer to the island's contested sovereignty. It was intended to create straightforward majorities on either side of the border that reflect broadly different national identities: predominantly British and Protestant on the northern side of the border and predominantly Irish and Catholic in the south.

“The border was drawn with little consideration for local concerns: it divided villages, church parishes, farms and families. The Irish borderlands are typical of many such borderlands.”

The border was drawn with little consideration for local concerns: it divided villages, church parishes, farms and families. The Irish borderlands are typical of many such borderlands. The region has long suffered the consequences of being peripheral to the centres of political and economic

power in Dublin and Belfast. Partition further exacerbated the effects of underdevelopment, rurality and population decline. There are substantially sized towns and cities all the way along the border, but partition cut them off from their natural hinterlands. This effect became stronger over time as the border grew in significance first as a state boundary, then a customs barrier and then a security barrier. It forced people's decisions about where to work, trade and shop to be made on grounds other than convenience.

So, it was for practical reasons as well as ideological ones that the border was resented from the start by Irish nationalists, many of whom saw it as a crude manifestation of British colonialism. Those with a British identity who wished to see continued rule from London viewed the Irish border in very different terms: as a welcome line of defence and distinction from the Republic of Ireland. Inconvenience was a small price to pay, in their minds, for remaining in a close union with Great Britain.

These two broad views about the Irish border came into open conflict during the period of violence (known as 'the Troubles') that began in the late 1960s and lasted 30 years. The 1998 Good Friday (Belfast) Agreement that brought the violence towards a conclusion did not seek to weaken the identities or political ambitions of any community. Instead, it framed the border as a point of cooperation rather than division. The British and Irish governments agreed to work closely together in the interests of Northern Ireland, and cooperation across the border became formally institutionalised in several areas

Illustration (opposite): Key features in the border areas of County Armagh, Northern Ireland, and Counties Monaghan and Louth in the Republic of Ireland.

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THE ONLY INDICATION
OF CROSSING A BORDER
IS THE CHANGE IN ROAD
SPEED LIMIT SIGNS FROM
KM PER HOUR (IN IRELAND)
TO MILES PER HOUR
(IN NORTHERN IRELAND)

ARMAGH

NORTHERN
IRELAND

FORKHILL BASE
DECOMMISSIONED
IN 2005

NEWRY

MONAGHAN

IRELAND

CROSSMAGLEN

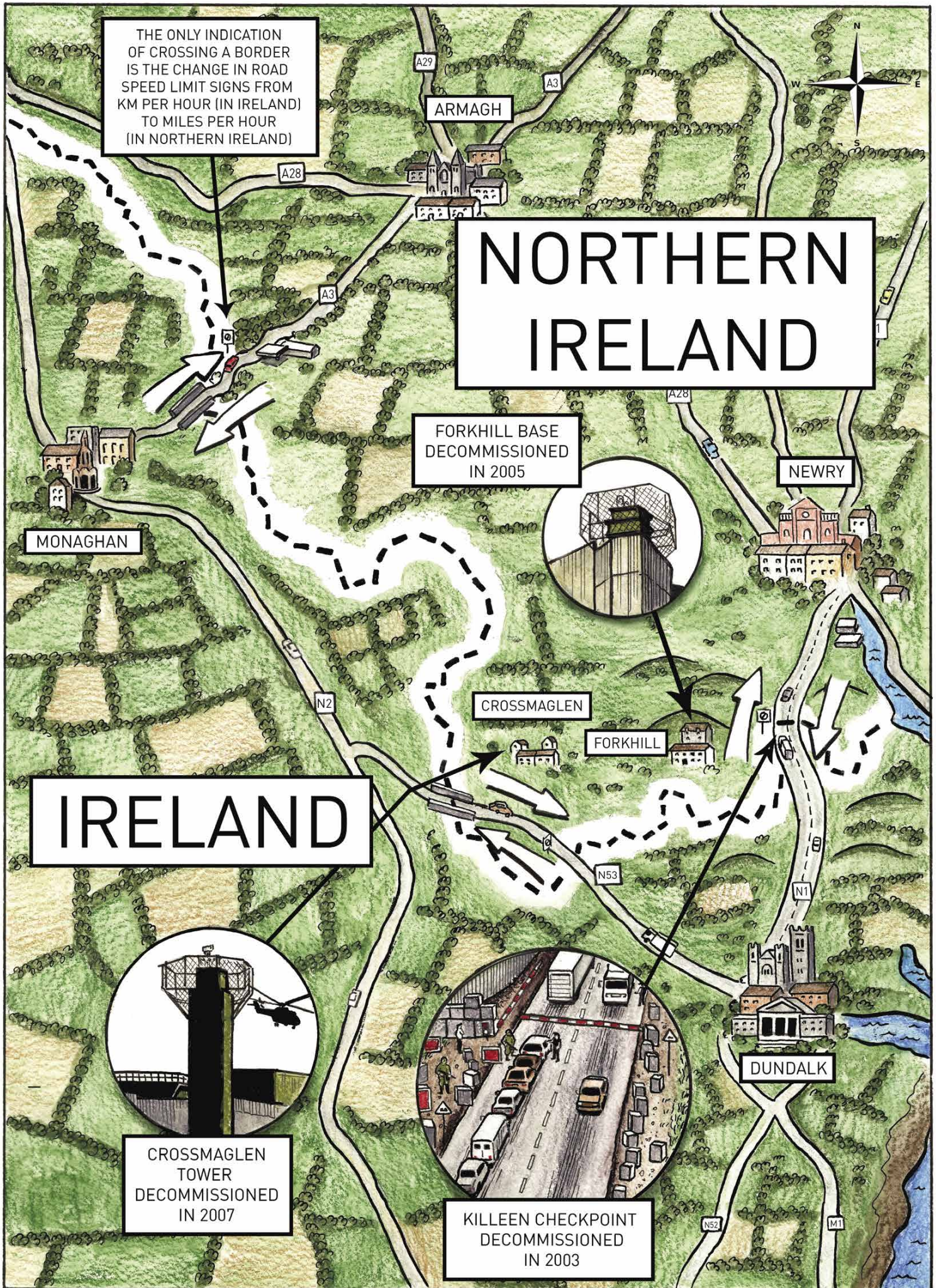
FORKHILL

N53

DUNDALK

CROSSMAGLEN
TOWER
DECOMMISSIONED
IN 2007

KILLEEN CHECKPOINT
DECOMMISSIONED
IN 2003



Map 1: Fermanagh, Tyrone, Armagh and Down Counties, Northern Ireland bordering the Republic of Ireland.



Map 2: Regional location of the border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland.



of mutual interest, including trade, access to emergency health facilities and transport.

As a result, the border as a divide in economic, social and policy terms became decreasingly significant. This soft integration was mutually beneficial but did not have constitutional significance. People of various identities could therefore support cross-border cooperation, with detachment from political ideology becoming absolutely essential to the success of the peace process.

This contribution to the Accord Insight seeks to explain the significance of European Union (EU) membership to ameliorating contention around the Irish border as part of the peace process. It is based on a study conducted by the author on behalf of the Irish Central Border Area Network (ICBAN) in 2017 – a year after the UK voted in a referendum to leave the EU (now called 'Brexit'). The purpose of the study was primarily to record the views of local communities in the central Irish borderland region who are 'bordering on Brexit' in a very literal way. Based on qualitative research, including interviews and focus groups, it explores local fears around the potential impact of Brexit on a still-fragile peace process.

BOX 8

Living in conflicted borderlands

The closure of most border roads during the Troubles had a dramatic impact on the everyday lives of people living near the border. Journeys to work, church, school, shops, or to visit family or friends were affected; farmers whose farms straddled the border constructed makeshift crossing points to get to their cattle. Patterns of collective support among communities of small farmers, Protestant and Catholic – helping at harvest, sharing machinery, helping in times of need – were destroyed.

Life along the border was also shaped by the presence of the army and paramilitary violence. Areas along the border experienced the greatest number of bombings, deaths and injuries outside of parts of Belfast. The attempt to seal the border depended on a very heavy military presence along the border in Northern Ireland: roadblocks, army patrols, watchtowers and checkpoints both responded to and provoked paramilitary violence. Civilians suffered repeated intimidation and harassment by security forces, and sectarian killings were common.

Adapted from *The Irish Borderlands* project,
www.irishborderlands.com/living/index.html

Brexit and the Irish border

The UK and Ireland's membership of the EU made the cross-border approach to peace possible – in its simplest terms, EU membership entails forging integration and cooperation across national borders. Much of the momentum behind Brexit arises from opposition to this trend. While a slim majority in the UK as a whole voted to leave the EU in the June 2016 referendum, a majority in Northern Ireland voted to remain; strongly so in the constituencies that run alongside the Irish

border. Immediately after the result was announced, the Irish government raised concerns about the protection of the 1998 Agreement and the future status of the border.

When the UK leaves, the Irish border will in effect become an external boundary of the European Union. What this means in practice is subject to both the terms of British withdrawal from the EU and the nature of the future UK-EU relationship. A so-called 'hard Brexit' would mean the Irish border would be a frontier to the free movement of people, goods, services and capital that is a feature and condition of EU membership. In addition to economic costs, there would be growing divergence in experience on either side of the Irish border. This will have material, political and psychological consequences in the Irish border region – a region devastated by conflict and where 20 years of cross-border cooperation have slowly brought much-needed change.

EU membership from the perspective of the Irish borderlands

In economic terms, UK and Irish membership of the EU Single Market has removed customs tariffs, harmonised regulation and indirect taxation, and created a more level playing field for trade across the border. Cross-border trade is of growing importance to the Northern Ireland economy and has become a particularly important stepping stone for the development of its domestic private sector. Economic growth has been aided by EU financial contributions to major cross-border infrastructural projects (such as the Belfast-Dublin rail and road corridor).

EU membership has provided benefits for citizens that have been far more extensive than those that were possible through typical bilateral UK/Ireland arrangements. Alignment of standards and regulations between EU member states do not just facilitate trade but also enable more effective environmental protection, food safety, electricity supplies and commuting across borders. If, after Brexit, UK regulations differ significantly from those of the EU and, therefore, the Republic of Ireland, the difficulties for cross-border cooperation and trade will be most keenly felt in the border region.

“ **The failure of governments on both sides to address the unintended socio-economic consequences of the 1921 drawing of the border was worsened by decades of neglect.**”

The failure of governments on both sides to address the unintended socio-economic consequences of the 1921 drawing of the border was worsened by decades of neglect – the effects of which were most acutely felt by the communities living closest to the border. Yet the socio-economic impact of the border pales in comparison to the human cost of the violent conflict. The legacy of conflict resulted in a lopsided process of borderlands integration. When combined with



Protestors attend an anti-Brexit demonstration on the Londonderry/Derry – Donegal border at Bridgend, County Donegal.
© George Sweeney/Alamy Stock Photo

the centralised nature of governance and administration in Ireland and Northern Ireland, it is clear that local cross-border cooperation has continually had to work against the flow.

'This is a deprived area: socially, in terms of infrastructure, and of course because of the Troubles.'
Resident of County Londonderry/Derry

It is a testament to the remarkable success of the peace process that those who live close to the Irish border no longer see it as a barrier but a gateway. Crossing the border is now a means to access wider markets, new employment, education and social opportunities. In truth, many of these benefits derived from EU membership – but they could only be properly enjoyed once the peace process was established. Prior to that, security controls on the Irish border prevented the full realisation of the benefits of the EU's more open borders.

Cross-border connections have become a means of overcoming the dual challenges of underdevelopment and geographical peripherality. Economies of scale, small-step exports, social enterprise, cross-community projects, tourism initiatives, even bargain hunting – the past 15 years has brought habits of cross-border movement that have carried evident and practical gain.

Cross-border cooperation and peace

Residents of the border areas feel that EU membership has made cross-border connections and cooperation 'normal'. Regardless of identity, it has become possible to separate politics and ideology from the day-to-day experience of the border. This is a powerful change from the days when the border region saw some of the worst violence of the Troubles. Communities remember well what it was like to see border posts, customs officials and police officers targeted by paramilitaries, to see border roads blocked and cratered by British soldiers to reduce cross-border movement, and to experience the fear, paranoia and trauma associated with violent conflict in which neighbours became perpetrators.

The most striking finding of the ICBAN research was the deep anxiety provoked by the prospect of the border coming back to the fore as a line of division between the UK and Ireland.

'The UK leaving the EU will plunge my life into uncertainty. ...I also worry about the threat of violence [from paramilitaries] if a hard border is imposed as a result of Brexit.'
Resident of County Fermanagh

Although the ease of trade and cooperation across the border is thanks largely to EU membership, it is notable that people in the border region tend to associate these benefits first and foremost with the peace process. Specifically, the Good Friday Agreement is credited with fundamentally changing people's experience of crossing the border.

'I travel more now. It's much easier to cross now than when I was growing up. The Good Friday Agreement changed all that immensely.'
Resident of County Armagh

Another focus group participant elaborated on the importance of the peace process for border crossing:

'I wouldn't be living here if it wasn't for the Good Friday Agreement. I moved in 2000 to the border area. I am back and forth [across the border] every day and the idea of a border in the north is just terrifying.'
Resident of County Cavan

A survey respondent concurs:

'I have lived on the border for several years. Peace in the community and easy daily access are reliant on an almost non-existent border. The introduction of a hard border would create agitation, annoyance and dissent.'
Resident of County Monaghan

We see in such extracts the connections made between the 1998 Agreement and the ease of moving and working across the border now – and anxiety at potential disruption to this

calm state of affairs. A number of respondents talk about the divisive communal 'them versus us' attitude that contributed to the conflict and which would be exacerbated by the existence of a hard border. One focus group participant goes further:

'The "them and us" complex could be very quickly re-established if there is difficulty and restrictions on movement. That movement starts with the social and extends into business. ... cross-border forums have broken down barriers and personal relationships have established as a result of this.'

Resident of County Tyrone

The psychological effects of a renewed divide

Reflecting the legacy of a violent past, a number of respondents connected the expectation of restrictions on cross-border movement with resonances of conflict. One resident of County Leitrim described the impact of Brexit on her personally as being a 'sense of fear and intimidation'. For residents in the borderlands, the very concept of a 'hard border' is one that conjures up memories and fears of a militarised, securitised border. One respondent explained this vividly:

'I grew up a stone's throw from the border. I remember 22-mile detours to go four miles up the road. I remember the militarisation of border crossings and the closure of roads. I remember how few services we had and how difficult it was for people to survive. We were completely terrorised by the British military. I never ever want to see that again and we should never go back to that.'

Resident of County Fermanagh

Any renewed physical or material manifestations of border controls are undesirable on several levels. First, they would disrupt the 'normal' activity of cross-border movement, trade and integration that has been so closely connected to the peace process. Second, such border controls could become targets for paramilitary activity (as they were at the start of the Troubles). Moreover, their very existence would serve as grist to the mill for mobilising resentment and distrust among local residents towards the UK government – something which only those opposed to the peace process would welcome. Finally, they would stand as a stark reminder of painful, traumatic experiences and as a symbol of regression in cross-border relations and, more broadly, in relations between the UK and Ireland. One resident of Monaghan, in the Republic of Ireland, described the effect of Brexit as follows:

'It places barriers between our county and the rest of the six counties. It raises old wounds and attitudes that were prevalent during the Troubles. It is not good for the peace process.'

Despite UK Prime Minister Theresa May's reassurances that 'no one wants to see a return to the border of the past', participant responses on both sides of the border repeatedly expressed the fear that a hard border would propel the borderlands back to a situation similar to that experienced during the Troubles:

'Mentally, [the border conflict] has had a huge bearing on the identity of the people. Cavan, Louth, Donegal –

500 yards to your right could be danger, but to your left, you're ok. That constant warfare mentality wears you down.'

Resident of County Cavan

'There was a fear when you got to the checkpoint – you didn't know if you were going to get hauled out of the car. When people think of the border, that's often where they go in their minds.'

Resident of County Armagh

Such psychological aspects are understandable in a post-conflict context and they need to be handled with sensitivity. It is for these reasons that Brexit may have ramifications for the peace process itself; the peaceful, unremarkable border crossing has been a hugely important part of conflict transformation. One focus group participant explains this well:

'Particularly [after] 10 years working together, people [in the borderlands] have seen what life is like for normal people and they don't want to lose that. People are annoyed, concerned, confused and getting angry.'

Resident of County Monaghan

This quote reiterates the point that cross-border contact has a rare quality in the Irish border region – something quite different to contact across the English Channel. Contact is part of a process of 'normalisation' – one that has been facilitated by EU membership. This is not to say that this cannot be continued after Brexit, but the importance for the peace process of those social, personal contacts, the ones that don't have an economic value or material presence, is clear.

“Contact is part of a process of 'normalisation' – one that has been facilitated by EU membership.”

Conclusion

There seems to be a paradox in the contemporary Irish border: crossing the border is both unremarkable and extraordinary. In some ways it is non-existent, completely irrelevant; in other ways it is ever-present and at the centre of politics, economics and peace. This makes it difficult to explain and anticipate the effects of Brexit on a border that is currently so open. EU membership has been a vital context for this openness, although most respondents associate the open border first and foremost with the success of the 1998 Agreement.

Accordingly, any 'hardening' of the border is seen as a negative sign for peace and stability in the borderland region. Most specifically, the legacy of violent conflict is apparent in the fears that people have about the impact of Brexit on the border. For many respondents, the very term 'border control' is one that conjures images of a securitised border and recalls deeply negative experiences and community tensions. Our respondents referred to the 'emotional' and 'psychological' aspects of the border being reawakened as a result of the Brexit referendum. As one participant described it: 'We're still on the path to reconciliation and [Brexit] is like opening a wound.'