

The EU and the transformation of the Irish border

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If you board the *Enterprise* train at Dublin Connolly station and take the scenic 170km journey up to Belfast, the only sign of having crossed a national border may be a text message from your mobile phone service provider to announce that you are now 'roaming'. But having disembarked in Belfast Central station, should you venture a little beyond the city centre, the 'border' soon becomes all too apparent.

The marking of local territory as 'Irish' or 'British' *within* Northern Ireland (characterised by the colouring of pavement kerbstones and the flying of flags from lampposts) remains the most visible sign of ethno-national division. While the actual state border has become a model of 'permeability' and 'invisibility' enabled by European integration, enduring internal boundaries illustrate the magnitude of the challenge posed to peacebuilding on the island. What difference can supranational integration make to such a conflict: one that is, in many ways, *about* a national border but not physically concentrated upon it?

The transformation of the Irish border as a physical and symbolic divide has been integrally connected to the role of the European Union (EU). At one level, the EU has indirectly helped to nullify the border's impact as a line of dispute between two states. At another, the EU has attempted to directly address the division caused by the border between two communities.

This article considers the extent of EU influence (and limitations on it) in cross-border peacebuilding in Ireland and what this can tell us about the potential of supranational integration to facilitate the transformation of contested borders elsewhere.



Association for the administrative boundaries. © EuroGeographics

The border and the conflict

The border between the 26 counties of independent Ireland and the six counties of Northern Ireland was drawn in 1921 as a purportedly temporary solution to the difficulty of granting self-determination to Ireland without causing civil war in the north, where a majority wanted to remain under British rule.

Over the course of the 20th century, development in the Irish border region was impeded by policymaking in Northern Ireland and in (what later became) the Republic of Ireland being devised with little cross-border correspondence or consideration. The consequent neglect of the peripheral border region was aggravated by the effects of conflict, which saw army checkpoints built beside customs posts and 'no man's land' turned into 'bandit country'. This worsened following the



British Army Border Patrol Base. Beleek, Co. Fermanagh, Northern Ireland UK. 1999. © jonathanolley.com

1956-62 'border campaign' of the paramilitary Irish Republican Army (IRA) – a counter-productive effort which led to an increase in the use of British security powers in Northern Ireland.

The border campaign was the last paramilitary operation to approach the problem as a straightforward 'border conflict'. The outbreak of republican and loyalist paramilitary violence in what became known as 'the Troubles' a few years later was not stimulated by desire for, or opposition to, Irish unification. Rather, it was a complex conflict over how power should be exercised, and by whom, within Northern Ireland. The majority of the Catholic population in Northern Ireland (and also in the south) saw the border as an artificial divide and had a nationalist (or hardline republican) political identity. In contrast, most of the Protestant population (which constituted the majority in Northern Ireland) viewed the border as necessary for maintaining Northern Ireland's distinction from the Republic and its embedded place in the United Kingdom, hence their unionist (or hardline loyalist) political stance.

The border was not the primary locus of violence during the Troubles, the direct effects of which were predominantly concentrated in Belfast (due in part to heavy paramilitary recruitment in working class areas where 'opposing' communities were closely juxtaposed). This reflected the fact that the inter-state and inter-community alienation and distrust underpinning the conflict was caused less by the material manifestation of 'the border' than by its exploitation in political rhetoric and cultural symbolism.

British-Irish relations and the EU

The British government's approach to the Troubles as a domestic concern of the United Kingdom contrasted with the Irish constitution's irredentist claim over the territory of Northern Ireland (although the latter was always more a gesture than an objective). In practice, the Irish government sought to 'internationalise' the Troubles, to bring the conflict out of the clutches of the British military.

It was in the context of such high-level disagreement that, urged on by nationalist MEP John Hume, the then European Economic Community (EEC) came at last to address what it euphemistically called 'the situation in Northern Ireland'. MEP Nils Haagerup's 1984 report for the European Parliament committee he chaired on the topic categorised the problem in terms of 'conflicting national identities' and concluded that the 'clue' to 'any lasting improvement' must be 'comprehensive Irish-British understanding'.

The border did indeed constitute an immense metaphorical barrier to 'understanding' between the British and Irish governments. The frosty intergovernmental relationship which characterised Ireland's first half century of independence had continued into Ireland and the UK's membership of the EEC in 1973. In an attempt to stamp the Irish Nationalist emblem on a move that would otherwise be seen as a betrayal of principles of sovereignty, the Irish government chose to present EEC membership as making Irish unification more likely. Yet the actual experience of membership had a very different effect overall. Rather than embedding greater separation between Britain and Ireland, as fellow EU members, the two

governments came to identify and build on common ground in many policy areas. This was largely a consequence of the normal functioning of the EU's institutions rather than any particular EU effort to build bonds between the two conflicting governments.

The EU generally necessitated and enabled a positive working relationship between the two governments even at times when it was difficult for the two to meet publically, let alone agree on matters concerning Northern Ireland. For example, the good relationship of trust built between British Prime Minister John Major and his Irish counterpart, Taoiseach Albert Reynolds – declared in joint statements issued from Brussels and Downing Street in 1993 – was essential in preparing the way for the paramilitary ceasefires the following year and multi-party talks thereafter.

The 1998 Agreement: addressing the multi-level impact of the border

The Good Friday (Belfast) Agreement (1998) that followed Northern Ireland's multi-party negotiations recognised the *multi-level* nature of divisions caused by the border and responded with a three-stranded approach. Strand One addressed the conflict in Northern Ireland as being between nationalist and unionist communities. The Executive and Assembly that govern Northern Ireland with powers devolved from the British parliament have been designed to ensure that power is shared between unionist and nationalist parties.

The second Strand of the 1998 agreement established north/south cross-border bodies to formalise cooperation between the government of the Republic of Ireland and the Northern Ireland Executive, as well as between civil servants in certain key areas. The remit of these north/south 'implementation bodies' are carefully non-contentious and function-oriented, such as trade, waterways, and cross-border EU programmes.

Strand Three of the agreement facilitates regular meetings between the two governments and between representatives from the governments and Executives from the various constituent parts of what are carefully referred to as 'these islands', ie including the Isle of Man and the Channel Islands as well as Britain and Ireland. This British-Irish strand is generally seen as a 'counter-balance' to the north/south strand as reassurance to unionists; nevertheless, its very institutionalisation indicates significant change not only in intergovernmental relations but also in sub-national governance within the two states. Such a move towards greater regional-level decision-making is one example of the indirect impact of the EU (with its support for subsidiarity and regional development) in changing the context for cross-border peacebuilding.

Cross-border peacebuilding

The Troubles had seen the border become the focal point for securitisation between the British and Irish states. To an extent, this reflected the constraints of a state military response to a complicated paramilitary conflict. Crossing the border consequently became more of a challenge and entering the other jurisdiction a less appealing prospect for all travellers. Although security in the region remained tight until the peace process was well established (the last British army observation post on the border was removed in 2006), some progress towards practical cooperation was made in the context of European integration.

Entry of both Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland into the EU's Single Market in 1993 brought some of the practical benefits of supranational integration, such as the lifting of customs barriers. The EU's Regional Development Fund also had a direct impact on socio-economic conditions (eg through funding major infrastructural projects) in and around the Irish border region, which had long suffered the consequences of conflict: neglect, under-investment, and low population density. Turning this contextual and structural support into peacebuilding, however, has been an immense challenge.

As a supranational body whose influence is mediated by national and regional institutions and agencies (as the bodies responsible for implementing EU directives), the EU's impact on relationships between unionists and nationalists in Northern Ireland has been necessarily constrained. A notable exception to this has been the way in which the strength of the EU as a monetary benefactor has been utilised in such a way as to have a direct effect on the context for peacebuilding in Northern Ireland and the border region.

The EU's special funding programme for peace and reconciliation (PEACE) was originally intended as a 'carrot' to be offered in the early days of the peace process. Its support for, among other initiatives, cross-community and cross-border activities aimed at realising (loosely defined) goals of peace and reconciliation, enabled substantial growth and professionalisation in the voluntary sector. The first two PEACE programmes (1995-2006) together funded over 22,000 diverse projects, from women's groups and child care provision to family literacy and youth training schemes. Such needs and gaps were particularly acute in the border counties, north and south.

The legacy of the EU's peacebuilding role

Another significant impact of the EU is less easy to trace but has the potential for a lasting legacy for peacebuilding on the island of Ireland, namely its facilitation of multilevel

cross-border networks. The conditions placed on EU funding, including PEACE, have required the establishment of effective and meaningful partnerships between multiple public agencies, often working on a cross-border basis. These networks have centred around meeting the conditions for effective use of EU funding and have incorporated umbrella organisations from the community and voluntary sector, county/district councils, public agencies and government departments.

That said, the current trend is towards growing state-sector ownership of the process. The third (and final) PEACE Programme (2007-13) has seen a pruning of the number of bodies involved in managing the funding, concentrating it instead in 'clusters' of county councils on either side of the border – perhaps in an attempt to begin to address the outstanding issue of the sustainability of this peacebuilding work.

The PEACE programmes will have invested some two billion euros to address the legacy of conflict in Northern Ireland and the border region. The substantial EU contribution to grassroots peacebuilding perhaps allowed the two governments and the Northern Ireland Executive to have been rather slower to take responsibility for addressing the causes and consequences of conflict in the border region than they might otherwise have been.

While actors at the community level and in the European Commission look instinctively towards the state sector to mainstream some PEACE-funded work, the likelihood now of any major public funds being diverted into 'peace and reconciliation' activities (particularly if they are cross-border) looks increasingly remote in the context of economic recession. Yet the prospects for peace across borders can neither be measured nor secured by the amount of money available for cross-border projects.

Public awareness of the cross-border work supported by the EU is generally low, and fewer still would make the connection between the EU's role and the wider task of peacebuilding. Ultimately, the most significant input of the EU to building peace in Ireland will have centred on the steady, functional work of normalising cooperation for mutual benefit across state borders. Whether such progress helps to embed peace across inter-community boundaries *within* the contested territory can only be determined at a level somewhat closer to the 'ground' than supranational EU policymaking.

Lessons

We learn from experience in Ireland that the EU is, at best, a *facilitating* peacebuilder, with a unique capacity to enable cooperation at various levels between different types of actors.

There are four main lessons to be drawn from the experience of the EU's role in transforming conflict around the Irish border:

1. *EU integration can provide a propitious context for improving intergovernmental relations and aiding cooperation between neighbouring states*; common membership of the EU as a 'forum of equals', for example, built confidence in the relationship between Dublin and London
2. *EU integration can provide both a model and an incentive for practical cross-border cooperation that meets common needs*, not least through its Single Market, which facilitates freedom of movement for people, goods, services and capital
3. *EU integration can make multi-level, multi-agency approaches to peacebuilding more feasible and acceptable* by, for example, requiring formalised cooperation between various partners in the administration of EU-funded initiatives
4. *The capacity for cross-border cooperation and peacebuilding at 'grassroots' and national levels can be enhanced by EU integration*, by both direct means, such as funding for community-based projects, and indirect means, such as normalising inter-regional policy networks

Conclusion

On 12 July 2010 republican protests at loyalist Orange parades crossing an internal 'boundary' in a northern town overflowed into an attempted hijack of the *Enterprise* train as it passed the vicinity *en route* from Dublin to Belfast. The train's capture was a violent subversion of one of the most lauded means of cross-border cooperation into an attention-grabbing display of local sectarianism.

The incident exemplified the enduring symbolic power of the Irish border and its easy susceptibility to inter-community antagonism. But the riotous youths were rapidly dispersed by respected local community workers – testament to the courage of individuals willing to take a stand for peace. And the trains have continued to run, with commuters, tourists, families, bargain-hunters and business traders on board – demonstrating the determination of many to reap the benefits of the 'permeable' border made possible by the EU. Such courage and determination remains critical to building peace across borders at all levels on the island of Ireland.

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