

Opinion – Brexit and the Continued Troubles in Northern Ireland

Written by Alexander Brotman

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ALEXANDER BROTMAN, APR 20 2021

Of the many pernicious and long-lasting side effects of Brexit, perhaps none is as tragic and devastating as that of Northern Ireland. Long the tinderbox of the United Kingdom, the streets of Belfast have erupted in violence once again that is both uniquely new and deeply interwoven into the psyche of generations. The Irish border, and Belfast's relations with the rest of the United Kingdom, has been one of the most contentious issues in Brexit negotiations with Brussels. Adherence to The Good Friday Agreement, a seminal document that has largely kept the peace since 1998, has been at risk throughout the long withdrawal period.

Since the vote in 2016, the UK was always in a position to survive economically and politically post-Brexit given its many opt-outs from an ever-closer union that made for a difficult relationship with Brussels to begin with. However, the disintegration of the UK's constituent nations, and the hard, vitriolic approach to Brexit has been a self-inflicted, and unnecessary casualty. As Belfast and other areas continue to simmer, Brexit's costs will have to be measured not just in economics, but in the blood and angst of disunion. A new generation of dissident republicans, and unionists have been brewing, buoyed by Brexit, and the apparent carelessness of public figures to uphold the peace.

In this next chapter, the Troubles are likely to continue in another form, now spurred by a prosperous Ireland as an EU member state, a UK outside the EU, and increased support for Sinn Féin and Irish nationalism. At the peak of the Troubles in the early 1970s, the UK had yet to join the EU, and the loss of empire, with its tragic consequences, and methods of pacification were still fresh. The case of Northern Ireland remained a post-colonial battle to retain the control and the allegiance of British subjects. Now, with Brexit, the reputation of the UK has diminished, and the UK is likely to be a middle power surrounded by a supranational entity and the respective nationalisms of its constituent nations. As a result, unionism risks being more of a nostalgic allegiance rather than one linked to a belief that Great Britain can still carry its weight in the world and survive on the strength of its union.

Perhaps the greatest difference on the island of Ireland since the Brexit vote is the role of the Republic. The Irish economy has recovered tremendously from the 2008 financial crisis, and Ireland is a prosperous, fully engaged EU member state that envisions a long future in Europe. The 2020 Irish general election also showed that Irish voters, mainly young voters, are willing to vote in greater numbers for Sinn Féin, the political party long associated with the IRA. Sinn Féin's growth as a cross-border party reflects newer voting blocs amongst the young but also enhanced Irish confidence in their place in Europe, particularly given the UK's relative decline. As such, Irish republicanism is now in favour of a reunification that is defined by survival and pragmatism rather than a rigid anti-unionist orthodoxy.

The unionist cause has been reenergized by the Northern Ireland Protocol and the increase in trade barriers between Belfast and London. For unionists, Sinn Féin appears to be winning the battle for hearts and minds, with demography and political headwinds in their favour. Northern Ireland's Catholic population is growing quickly, and is set to match or exceed the Protestant population in the coming years. As such, this new incarnation of the Troubles exists in an uneven playing field, with the UK and unionism weakened, and republicanism on the rise.

Sinn Féin may win the greatest number of seats in the Northern Ireland Assembly next year, allowing Sinn Féin to take the first minister's position and demote the DUP to second-tier status at Stormont. A Sinn Féin-led government

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in Northern Ireland would be a key step toward reunification and work to help legitimise the IRA's transition to a non-violent political entity that is disassociated from remaining dissident republicans. Sinn Féin leader Mary Lou McDonald's apology for the IRA's killing of Lord Mountbatten is a prominent example of the party's recent shift towards a more conciliatory approach.

Despite the near-term consequences in Northern Ireland, Brexit's effect on the UK's disunion may not be fully felt until 2024. In 2024, Northern Ireland will vote on the Northern Ireland Protocol, and a second Scottish independence referendum may occur. The UK has the potential to lose both Belfast and Edinburgh as Brexit's legal frameworks continue to be tested, and the weight of the UK in the world becomes more fully realised. Unionism's battle for survival may exist in a region spurned by nationalism and moving closer to the EU, and the supranational fealty and European identity which that relationship demands. As such, the unionist cause may become more existential and violent than the republican cause if power-sharing and other civic agreements are not respected.

The latest violence has also been driven by the us vs. them political polarisation of the Brexit vote. Brexit was pitched as a war: a war against neighbour and a war against undue influence and interference from Brussels. It was a grab bag of grievances that animated previously unforeseen forces in British politics. In Northern Ireland, Brexit has produced both opportunistic and legitimate means of contention and further segregation for both unionists and nationalists. The Good Friday Agreement may have set the peace, but it kept the walls up. The ultimate casualty of Brexit, witnessed so vividly in Northern Ireland, is the breakdown of community relations and the reinforcement of identity barriers, and thus segregation. In order to build back, Belfast's future must not be seen as a pawn in an ideological game, but as a bridge for unionists and republicans to chart their own future and erect more sustainable peace walls for the next generations.

About the author:

Alexander Brotman is a political risk and intelligence analyst with a focus on EU politics and security developments. He has written for Global Risk Insights and Foreign Brief, two political risk publications, and has provided direct research support to a leading scholar of Russia and Eurasia in Washington. Alexander received his MSc. in International Relations from The University of Edinburgh. He is currently based in Washington DC.

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