On 29 March, the United Kingdom is set to leave the European Union. EURACTIV.com’s on-the-ground reporting looks into the effects of Brexit on EU regions and, in particular, its implications for the relationship between Northern Ireland and Ireland.
Brexit will be painful for the EU27 too. This is where it will hit hardest
Northern Ireland – A cross-border economy at stake
EU is a driving force in supporting peace in Northern Ireland
Looking back to move forward: Building trans-generational peace in Northern Ireland
Brexit impact in Northern Ireland: When peace is at stake
As the deadline for the UK’s departure from the EU approaches, EURACTIV.com looked at how Brexit will impact the rest of Europe. Ireland, France and Germany are likely to be the most heavily affected.

If the United Kingdom crashes out of the EU without a deal, the country could lose up to 9.3% of its GDP. However, the economic consequences for the remaining EU member states could be hefty too, whatever the outcome.

Given the economic, social and political ties between the UK and the EU, Brexit will be painful for the whole of Europe, but some areas of the EU might see particularly significant trade disruptions, higher tariffs, or disturbance in their supply chains.

According to a recent study commissioned by the Committee of the Regions (CoR), an EU consultative body, Germany, France, Belgium and the Netherlands would be the most affected member states, together, of course, with Ireland.

The Republic of Ireland is likely to be the main collateral victim of Brexit, 14% of Irish exports go to Britain, which means the economic impact of Brexit could be as bad for Ireland as for the UK.

But for Dublin, there are additional social and political consequences, because peace in Northern Ireland is also at stake.

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FRANCE

In France, the regions of Hauts-de-France and Brittany are the main European gateways to the UK, both through the Channel tunnel and maritime connections. They are the two regions with the strongest socio-economic ties to Britain.

The impact of Brexit in these regions touches upon several sectors as the UK is one of the main foreign investors for companies in the area and an important client for goods and services providers.

François Decoster is vice-president of the Nord-Pas-de-Calais-Picardie Regional Council and Chairman of the Committee of the Region’s Brexit Interregional Group.

“In the regions closer to the UK, we are particularly worried about the uncertainty that might arise from 29 March,” he told EURACTIV.

Decanter also complained about the "schizophrenic" situation in which regions are now finding themselves. Indeed, regions need to prepare for a no-deal scenario while keeping an eye on a possible decision by the House of Commons allowing for an orderly withdrawal of the UK from the EU.

According to him, the two-year negotiation period laid down in Article 50 of the EU treaty has proven to be too short, although it seemed a lot when it was triggered two years ago.

The French economy will be also affected in sectors like agri-food, plastics – Auvergne is home to tyre manufacturer Michelin –, and the transport vehicles industry.

However, France also has the potential to attract companies that might leave the UK due to Brexit.

BELGIUM

Another gateway to Europe is situated in Flanders, Belgium, which has close maritime and commercial links to the UK.

A big part of Belgium’s GDP comes from exports and trade of goods transiting through Flemish ports. And a lot of those exports are going to the UK. But it also works the other way around: 78% of all British exports to Europe arrive at the port of Zeebrugge in Belgium.

With Brexit, Belgian ports will become an external border of the EU and commercial ties on both sides of the Channel would be endangered, as border controls and tariffs are expected. Brexit could also affect cooperation in fighting illegal migration.

Belgium will not only be hit in Flanders. Wavre, the capital of Wallonia’s Brabant region near Brussels, hosts the headquarters of Glaxo Smith Kline, a major British pharmaceutical company. Its future could be called into question after Brexit.

GERMANY

In Germany, the state of Hessen will be the hardest hit. The UK is Hessen’s third market, accounting for 7.5% of all its exports, but also one of its main import gateways.

A disruption in trade relations with the UK could have a major impact for one of the richest regions of the EU, particularly in sectors like the automotive industry, chemical and pharmaceuticals, electrotechnical products and machinery. Not to mention the strong financial exchange between The City and Frankfurt, Germany’s financial heart. However, Frankfurt could also benefit from Brexit and become more attractive than London as a financial services provider and international hub for multinational companies.

In Germany, the city of Stuttgart is home to global players such as Daimler, Porsche, Bosch, IBM and Hewlett-Packard and small and medium-sized enterprises that are highly export-oriented. Niederbayern hosts BMW’s largest production facility and the single biggest chemical plant in the world is located in Rheinhessen-Pfalz.

Possible disruption of trade relations with the UK would be a burden on these companies.

Lower Saxony also has strong economic ties with the UK and a number of British citizens live there. The government has asked them to apply for citizenship and requests have tripled in the past few months, according to Birgit Honé, the state’s Minister for Federal and European Affairs.

Although Brexit will affect a wide range of sectors in Lower Saxony, fisheries are one of Honé’s main concerns. “The areas in which fishermen from Lower Saxony can fish are in the UK border and those will not be accessible anymore in case of a hard Brexit, so their job is really at stake,” she said.

“A no-deal Brexit would be a catastrophe,” she told EURACTIV.

IRELAND

In Ireland, machinery, electronics, pharmaceutical and especially the agri-food sectors are the economic areas likely to be hit hardest by Brexit.

“Brexit is already having a significant economic impact,” said Michael Murphy, a councillor from Tipperary and the leader of the Irish delegation in the Committee of the Regions. The volatility of the Pound already has an impact on companies exporting to the UK, he told EURACTIV.

According to the CoR’s study, while Irish trade, in general, is less reliant on the UK than in the past, in some sectors the dependence has increased over time.

“But despite all of the concerns about the economic challenges,” Murphy said, “the greatest challenge

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of all is ensuring peace in the island of Ireland.”

Representatives on both sides of the border have voiced concern over the possible impact of Brexit for the peace process.

“We do not want to go back to the dark days of the past,” Murphy stressed. The EU has defended the backstop to preserve the integrity of the Single Market and avoid a hard border in Ireland, in spite of continued attempts from London to get rid of it.

“Europe won’t let Ireland down, I am confident of that,” Murphy insisted.

NO WINNERS IN BREXIT

From tourism in Spain and the thousands of jobs at stake in Gibraltar, the over a million Polish citizens in the UK, investments in Malta, the agri-food sector in Greece, fashion in Italy, electronics in the Czech Republic, regions and countries all around Europe will suffer to some extent from the consequences of the UK’s departure from the EU.

The results of the study by the Committee of the Regions revealed that “most regions would likely lose their current position in some sectors in terms of trade, direct investments or migration opportunities for workers, students or researchers” due to Brexit.

In other words, there will be no clear “winners”, it said.

However, for stronger regions, Brexit might be an opportunity to attract businesses leaving the UK to regain access to the EU Single Market. While for regions with less dynamic and less diversified economies, Brexit can present a much bigger challenge.

The problem is that even in case of an orderly withdrawal, it is still unclear what kind of relationship the EU and the UK will have in the future. The answer to that question will determine how hard Brexit will hit European regions and cities.

Because Brexit will not impact all areas in the same way, the European Committee of the Regions has demanded the European Commission include instruments in the EU’s next long-term budget to address this particular issue.

“We must take into consideration the situation of regions close to the UK are going to face also in the negotiation for the future Cohesion Policy,” François Decoster said.

Another possibility is to increase funds for member states that will suddenly become the external border of the EU, as was the case for countries whose border became an internal EU border after the bloc’s enlargement to new member states.

Michel Barnier, the former EU Commissioner for Regional policy, today is the EU’s chief Brexit negotiator.

“In any hypothesis, measures will need to be taken,” CoR President Karl-Heinz Lambertz told EURACTIV.

“When Brexit comes, the EU should prove its added value,” Lambertz said.
As the UK prepares to leave the EU, Northern Ireland will be severely affected as its economy is highly interlinked with the Republic of Ireland. Disruptions to the supply chain and access to markets are the main concerns for businesses.

The line that separates the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland will be the biggest land-border between the EU and the UK after Brexit. The outcome of the Article 50 negotiations will be crucial for the future of the island.

Up to 30,000 workers work and live on different sides of the border and 31% of the exports from the north have their destination in the south, which makes Ireland the largest international market for Northern Ireland exports.

The Republic, however, would not be affected as much because only 1% of its exports go to the north, although the UK is its main trading partner.

Northern Ireland will be particularly vulnerable though due to the loss of EU funding and the potential impact of tariffs and non-tariffs barriers for trade between both sides of the island.

There, the agri-food sector is particularly at risk as raw and

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processed products cross the borders several times before being ready for market. That will be much harder after Brexit. In case of no deal, almost impossible.

**SUPPLY CHAIN DISRUPTION**

“Everybody is worried about the consequences of Brexit, from farmers through the producers, the processors, and even the hospitality industry,” Michele Shirlow, CEO of the Northern Ireland Food and Drinks Association (Food NI) told EURACTIV.com.

The main concern is the possible disruption of the supply chain. “There are an awful lot of our food ingredients that come from Europe,” she explained.

“The food industry in Ireland is very integrated, north and south. Products at the moment can cross the border six, seven times before they end up as a final product. And I just don’t think that has been taken into account,” Shirlow regretted.

But producers are also concerned about potential implications for labelling, the loss of geographical indications and especially the disruption of trade and access to markets.

“I am not convinced that it has been listened to and I don’t know if politicians are fully aware of the pressure that it has been putting on the entire food and supply chain,” Food NI CEO explained.

The uncertainty surrounding the negotiations are already having an important impact on investments in the food sector in Northern Ireland. “Some people have been planning but it is very, very difficult to plan when you don’t really know what all the factors are and what the alternatives are going to be,” Shirlow stressed.

“My only consolation is that companies are very resilient and they often find the way through before governments do,” she said.

David Boyd-Armstrong, co-founder of Rademon Estate distillery, that produces Shortcross gin, said the disruption of the supply chain is also a major concern as they import some of their material from the rest of the EU.

“Our supply chain is intensively built across the EU so at the minute we just do not know. And because of that, we can’t really plan for what’s going to come to us,” Boyd-Armstrong told EURACTIV.

“Until we get clarity that there is going to be a deal between the UK and the EU, that risk isn’t going to go away,” he said.

But that is not their only concern. The alcoholic beverage sector is highly regulated, so as the UK leaves the Union, they will not have a say over any possible reform of the rules.

“We won’t be able to influence that so there might be some changes that could be detrimental to the business,” the co-founder of the distillery explained.

**CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES?**

“Brexit is already having an impact on the economy here,” Seanna Walsh, member of the Belfast City Council for Sinn Fein and chair of the Brexit Committee, told EURACTIV.

Walsh stressed the important economic links between the south and the north of the island. “The economy here has grown into an all-island economy,” he said.

Farmers who have animals in the north process their meat and dairy products in the south and then, ship them back across the border to some of the export companies, Walsh explained.

“The Ireland economy does not recognise the border simply because of the fact both the south and the north of Ireland were in the EU. You change that in any way, it creates major problems for agriculture, for the industry, for small and medium-sized businesses...” the Sinn Fein
representative warned.

The Democratic Unionist Party (DUP), however, does not agree and considers Brexit more an opportunity than a threat to the Northern Irish economy.

Although the majority of the people voted to remain in the EU, member of the Assembly of Northern Ireland (MLA) for the DUP Gordon Lyons defended that those who voted to leave are even more convinced now.

Their desire to leave the EU has only increased “because people see the opportunities that can come from Brexit”, Lyons told EURACTIV, “the opportunities that we have, to go into the world and not be tied back, as many feel they have been by being part of the European Union.”

Some exporters, however, do not feel the same way. Boyd-Armstrong, whose distillery exports to Canada, with which the EU has a free trade agreement, said that “there is a certain irony” to that argument.

“We are seeing trade deals with South Korea, we are seeing trade deals with Australia and New Zealand come through within the EU and we are going to walk away from the EU and just wait until we strike new deals,” he said.

The uncertainty of future economic relations with third countries remains an important issue for business on the island as well.

Lyons defended the need to make sure that the UK maintains “a close trading relationship with the rest of Europe”. However, the differences over how to resolve the question on the Irish border is still a concern for the DUP, a party on which UK Prime Minister Theresa May depends.

If the UK leaves the Union with a withdrawal agreement, the country would remain in the Customs Union and the Single Market during the transition period, intended to allow the parties to negotiate their future relationship.

To avoid a hard border on the island of Ireland in case the parties fail to conclude an agreement at the end of that period – December 2020 -, the UK and the EU agreed to include the so-called ‘backstop’.

The backstop is an emergency solution that would see Northern Ireland staying aligned to some rules of the EU single market, while the whole British territory would be part of a customs union.

Unionists oppose this solution because it would mean separating Northern Ireland from Britain “constitutionally and economically”, said Lyons.

For the EU and the Republic of Ireland, the backstop is non-negotiable. But in Northern Ireland, some align with this position as well.

“We think there still can be a deal, and there must be a deal, but it has to be a deal that leaves Northern Ireland in the same trading relationship as the Republic of Ireland,” Colom Eastwood, leader of the Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP) told EURACTIV.

Eastwood went beyond defending that Northern Ireland should remain in the Single Market and the Customs Union “which will result in being no need for infrastructure at the border,” Eastwood noted, “that is why the backstop is so important.”

The leader of the SDLP has his constituency in Derry-Londonderry, an area that has seen important economic development thanks to the political stability over the past twenty years but it would be also one of the places most affected by Brexit.

“The economic situation could be very very difficult and it could be exacerbated by Brexit, which then leads into all the other social problems,” he warned.

The area was heavily affected by the Troubles and is only a few kilometres away from the border. In such places, the need to avoid a hard border is felt more strongly.
EU is a driving force in supporting peace in Northern Ireland

By Beatriz Rios | EURACTIV.com | video by Michael Ball

Peter used to be a policeman during ‘the Troubles’, while Tom served 13 years in prison because of his activities in the loyalist Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF), a paramilitary group. Now, both help former combatants reintegrate into Northern Irish society. A project like this would have been almost impossible without the EU’s support.

Peter Sheridan worked 34 years as a police officer in counter-terrorism, crimes, in the borders. He spent 34 years trying to stop the violence that blighted the province for decades. When he retired, he joined Co-operation Ireland, a charity for peace-building.

Co-operation coordinates the EU funded project ‘Open Doors’ and works with four organizations representing former Republican and Loyalist combatants and ex-prisoners: Charter NI, Teach Na Failte, EPIC and The Plough.

The initiative aims to build relationships between the former combatants themselves and with the community as a whole.

“The Open Doors project is looking at people who were former ex-prisoners from all of the communities in Northern Ireland and who have a useful contribution to make to rebuilding the society,” Sheridan explained to EURACTIV.com.

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A woman walks past an Irish Republican mural depicting the 1916 Easter Rising in west Belfast, Northern Ireland, 29 June 2017. [EPA/Paul McErlane]
Although the conflict has been almost completely inactive for almost 20 years, more than 30,000 people were imprisoned for crimes related to their involvement in the ‘Troubles’ and many are still serving. Integrating them in the reconciliation process is key to preserving peace in the region.

“Some of the most valuable assessments that we get are from people who were what we call former combatants or former prisoners, who want to see Northern Ireland progress,” he said.

Tom Roberts is the director of the Ex-Prisoners Interpretative Centre (EPIC). Roberts, a former member of the UVF, spent 13 years in prison himself. From EPIC, he helps others to find their place in society.

The EPIC office is located only a few steps away from Shankill Road, in west Belfast.

During the ‘Troubles’, ‘Shankill’ was a centre for paramilitary activity. Today, those days are present in the murals that decorate the streets of the neighbourhood, honouring the UVF and the Red Hand Commando, but the violence is long gone.

EPIC was originally established to help former prisoners to deal with practical issues such as housing or unemployment, but also to support reintegration and reconciliation.

“There have been significant changes in Northern Ireland over the past twenty years. The peace process has worked pretty well,” Roberts said to EURACTIV.

“Unfortunately the politics have not worked too well,” he said, referring to the inability of the political forces in Northern Ireland to form a government after the last assembly elections almost two years ago.

The decision of the UK to leave the EU has only increased the tension. Brexit, Roberts said, was “an unwelcome layer of complexity on the top of the complexities we already have.”

The Open Doors project was established thanks to the support of the EU through the PEACE programme. The programme was designed in the ‘90s to accompany the dialogue that eventually led to the peace agreement in 1998.

Its main aim was to help to build peace between the two communities.

“The EU funding was seen as neutral and that was very important particularly post-conflict,” Gina McIntyre, CEO of the Special EU Programmes Body (SEUPB), told EURACTIV.

Projects such as Open Doors, which bring together former combatants from both sides of the conflict, would have been impossible otherwise. “It might have been hard politically for some people to get involved with,” McIntyre insisted.

**EU FUNDS FOR PEACE**

Since 1995, the EU has provided more than €1.3 billion for peacebuilding and reconciliation within the two communities in Northern Ireland and the border counties of the Republic of Ireland.

Through the European Regional Development Fund, the Union has promoted social and economic cohesion between Northern Ireland and the border counties of the Republic to further ease the tension in the area too.

During the last twenty years, Northern Ireland has moved forward in building positive relations between the two communities. However, society remains largely divided and a lot of issues still remain to be solved.

The current PEACE programme has a total budget of almost €270 million and will run until 2021, when the transition period of the withdrawal agreement if there is one, would have already expired. Whether there is a deal or not, the EU has decided to keep the funding flowing.

“The European Union was instrumental in helping us achieve what we did in the Good Friday Agreement and has been with us the whole time in the European PEACE programme,” Jane Morrice, member of the European Economic and Social Committee and former representative in the Assembly of Northern Ireland told EURACTIV.

Although the peace process and the peace programme are two separate things, the second “underpins” the first, Gina McIntyre explained, “because it gives communities the resources to develop work that they would like to do in relation to peacebuilding and
“Northern Ireland, as you might have realised, is a very segregated community, both in housing, in schooling and in communities themselves. The PEACE programme has played a significant role in being able to bring people together,” McIntyre said.

“During the conflict, people could see what the rule was because they could see it in the television: bombs and bullets. But post the conflict, it is about building relationships with people who, in some ways, saw themselves as enemies during the conflict,” Peter Sheridan explained.

The European Commission is aware of the importance of EU funds in supporting peace in Northern Ireland and is committed to preserving the programme, even in case of no-deal and even beyond Brexit.

A new PEACE+ program has been included in the next long-term EU budget for 2021-2027.

“The PEACE+ programme is going to be a very important vehicle, and I sometimes like to refer to it as a bridge on Brexit, because it will allow those links to continue in a safe space,” said McIntyre.

However, Brexit is still a threat to the work hundreds of organizations benefiting from EU resources have carried out over the past twenty years in building peace in the region.

“The European Union provided a space for Irish and British to meet, whether it would be Brussels or elsewhere, and again, to get to know each other better, learn from each other,” Morrice, who was involved in the peace process, explained.

“Now, that is being removed and it is more than unfortunate. It is painful. I can’t even find the words to describe how bad it is.”
Shay McArdle is 21 years old. He lives in Dundalk, Ireland, and has no idea what a hard border looks like or what it was like to live through the ‘Troubles’. But he is committed to preserving the state of peace that he was born into.

Almost 21 years have passed since the Good Friday Agreement was signed, and 47 years since Bloody Sunday, which marked the peak of violence in Northern Ireland. A whole generation now knows only one thing – peace.

McArdle and 18-year-old Alyshia Jackson are both members of the Youth Network for Peace, a cross-border initiative supported by the EU that encourages young people to build cross-community ties in Dundalk, a town situated 10 kilometres away from the border.

Of course, young people in Ireland have inherited some of the problems resulting from the conflict, but they haven’t been exposed to the violence, which is still glorified in the streets of Belfast or Derry that were once battlefields.

Like Shay and Alyshia, more than 10,000 young people in Northern Ireland and the border counties work together to preserve peace.

The cross-community aspect of the Youth Network for Peace is key. “Most young people have the same issues,”

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he explained, “there is nothing really that divides us, it is just the history.”
“A lot of leaders in my locality would have experienced the Troubles, the bombings and the atrocities that happened,” McArdle told EURACTIV, “they can give us guidance on how the peace process came and then young people can build from that.”
“The peace process is a continuation, it is not a one-stop shop. Without that, I think the communities can continue further to divide,” the young peace leader insisted. But if you get young people together, he said, they will create connections.
“We have never seen other than peace growing up,” Jackson, who voiced her concern over the impact of Brexit, told EURACTIV. “All the work we have put into that… we would be devastated just to see that gone like that.”

PEACING AGES TOGETHER

The Mid and East Antrim Council fosters cross-community social activities and transgenerational links to build peace, bringing together people old and young from deprived areas.
In exchange for young people spending time with the elderly, they get history lessons.
“They listen to the stories of the past, they listen to how things were different and how people lived before,” Sarah McLaughlin, project officer for Peacing Ages Together, told EURACTIV.
“We have three intergenerational groups that work under Peacing Ages Together. Those partnerships have proven to be so successful,” McLaughlin said.
“They don’t really comprehend it because they haven’t lived through the ‘Troubles’ but they are getting the opportunity to learn from what the past was like and to see what normality is now,” she insisted.
The project also has provided older people from different communities the possibility to share activities. They combat loneliness and isolation by teaming up with people they would have regarded as their enemy years ago.
“These older people have lived through the past 30 years, through the Troubles, they might have different preconceptions about other communities and other towns,” McLaughlin explained, “but I was blown away by how ready these people were to try something new, to make new friends, to have a new life in their third age.”
Patricia McCormack, 77, participates in one of these groups in Carrickfergus, where she takes part in drama classes, in the East of Northern Ireland. She admitted being a bit hesitant at the beginning.
“There is always this undercurrent ‘them and us’... but then, these cross-community projects they have over the years behind the scenes have made a tremendous impression on the out whole community,” she explained.
“I have been involved in other cross-community projects and I think we needed it in Northern Ireland, we need people to come together,” said Carley Anderson, another member of the group.

WOMEN’S VOICES

Kathy Wolf and Jackie Barrow are both members of The Next Chapter, an initiative that aims to empower women in Northern Ireland. The project brings together women from different backgrounds and classes and encourages them to help each other to lead the transformation of society into a more inclusive, equalitarian fair one. They sat down with EURACTIV.
“I think sometimes in post-conflict societies we tend to focus on the men who fought in the war. But there is a tendency to realize that when the men were fighting, there were women working hard as well,” Wolf said.
Although women played a fundamental role in the conclusion of the Good Friday Agreement and the Northern Ireland Women’s Coalition helped as a facilitator during the peace talks, women have often felt excluded in the post-conflict arena.
“The Women’s coalition party helped bring about the peace process, but after the peace process happened, the Women’s coalition was no longer there. That in itself, I think it has been put women to the back again,” Barrow said.
“We feel that women have a unique part to play, particularly in a region that is transitioning out of conflict, as it is Northern Ireland and the border counties,” Joanne Jennings, head of The Next Chapter, explained.
“We are just as important,” Wolf added.
Barrow, meanwhile, believes that Northern Ireland has a very much male-dominated culture, lagging behind in female representation in the public and private sphere.
“When you promote women in leadership, you bring the whole family along, you are bringing the whole community alone... We need more female-centric leadership roles in our society,” Julie Heeney, also a member of the Next Chapter, explained.
“We need to remember the family, the childcare issues, maternity issues... those are community issues, they don’t just belong to females.”
Time is running out as the UK is set to leave the EU on 29 March, and an orderly withdrawal is not yet secured. EURACTIV has travelled to Northern Ireland, where Brexit is more than a political or economic issue – it is a challenge for peace.

Even though Northern Ireland voted to remain in the EU, it will leave the bloc with the rest of the UK at the end of March. In a widely-divided post-conflict society, Brexit has only increased the polarisation.

For decades, Northern Ireland and the border counties of the Republic of Ireland were at the heart of a sectarian conflict between Catholic Republicans – defending the reunification of Ireland – and mostly Protestant Loyalists, in favour of remaining in the UK.

In 1998, the Good Friday Agreement put an end to the thirty years of conflict and provided the divided society with the possibility of choosing whether they felt British, Irish or both.

The agreement, together with the membership of the European Union, eased the tension and allowed the island to turn the border from a battlefield into a source of opportunities and cooperation, from a barrier into a gateway.

Now, Brexit has challenged that, particularly in case of a ‘no deal’.

“This isn’t just about trade and tariffs,” Peter Sheridan, a former police officer during the Troubles turned CEO of Co-Operation Ireland, a
peacebuilding charity, told EURACTIV, “This, here, in Northern Ireland, is about identity.”

A BARRIER TO PEACE

Wherever you try to put a border – the Irish sea or in the landmark between Northern Ireland and the Republic – “you create the possibility in peoples’ minds of a semi-detached status for their community,” Sheridan pointed out.

As the UK is about to leave the Union, the Republicans in Northern Ireland feel they are being pulled away from Ireland. A no-deal Brexit could be disastrous in this sense.

Members of the Republican Sinn Fein have asked for a referendum on the reunification of Ireland. The provision for the vote is included in the Good Friday Agreement, intended as a potential solution for the constitutional issues that remain to be tackled between the two communities. However, in Dublin, there is no appetite for that debate as they do not think the conditions have quite been met.

The Irish government is aware that, while this is probably the only historic opportunity to carry on with the reunification, opening up that discussion would only increase the tension Brexit has re-created. They feel that preserving the status quo might be the best way to ensure peace.

Unionist, of course, agree. “The last thing we need at the minute given the current difficulties is a border poll, which will only further divide the communities,” Tom Roberts, director of the Ex-Prisoners Interpretative Centre, told EURACTIV.

Republican voices, though, claim that many Unionist would value their European citizenship over their British one if asked, now that the UK is leaving the EU. But Gordon Lyons, a member of the Northern Ireland Assembly for the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP), disagrees.

“People here will continue to be comfortable with the constitutional status quo, which is Northern Ireland as part of the United Kingdom,” Lyons said.

However, Unionists are concerned about the potential implications of Brexit as well. They claim the backstop is a threat to their own identity too.

The backstop is an emergency solution included in the current Withdrawal Agreement that would see Northern Ireland staying aligned to some rules of the EU single market, while the whole of Great Britain would be part of a customs union.

Although it would only be triggered if London and Brussels are unable to find an agreement on their future relationship by the end of the two-year transition period after Brexit, Unionists oppose this solution because it would mean separating Northern Ireland from Britain “constitutionally and economically”, Lyons argued.

LIFE AT THE BORDER

Belleek is a small village in Northern Ireland, in the westernmost corner of the UK, the final frontier, only separated from the Republic of Ireland by a small stone bridge.

The place was heavily affected by the Troubles – the Carlton Hotel in the town was the second most bombed site after the hotel Europa in Belfast – but for the past twenty years, Belleek has lived in peace and people crossed daily from one side to other, almost without realising.

However, villagers fear Brexit might change that.

“If there is a hard Brexit, it is going to be devastating; but even if it is what they call a soft Brexit, it is not going to be good for the people here living on the border,” said John Feely, a councillor for the Sinn Fein in Belleek.

Belleek is only one of the 208 crossing points along the 500-kilometre border between Northern Ireland and Ireland. During the conflict, police and military would patrol the area and bombs and shootings would regularly target the area.

When people in Northern Ireland hear someone in Brussels, London or Dublin talking about a “hard border,” that is what comes to their minds.

“If they bring back a hard border, they will bring back the guns,” a resident of Belleek who would rather not be identified told EURACTIV.

The concerns over a potentially violent reaction to Brexit are common, particularly in the border areas. In a post-conflict zone, characterised...
by a strong division between two communities, talking about bringing back the fences is a source of deep anxiety and nervousness.

During the conflict, the area was heavily militarised. Today, there is barely a sign that warns you of the border crossing. Whatever the outcome of the Article 50 negotiation, the consequences will be more strongly felt here.

"I would say that violence is not inevitable. It is a matter of choice by people. But having said that, the history of this place is that the border has always been a source of social conflict," Sheridan explained.

“We can’t build a policy on the basis of terrorism,” the former police officer insisted. However, he admitted, and here is the difficulty, that politicians need to avoid giving terrorists “any potential that allows them to grow their organisations”.

Here, avoiding a physical border is key. “You never start with the intention of having twelve army watch and helicopters basis but it is how security builds up, in response to events or attacks,” Sheridan explained.

“It is not now, or next year or the year after, it is how it looks in ten years’ time,” he stressed.

Colum Eastwood, a leader of the Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP) and representative for the Derry-Londonderry, once at the heart of the Troubles, shared this concern.

“What we saw during the Troubles was 20,000 British troops trying to secure the border. They couldn’t do it but they had a huge impact on the daily lives of people here. We just have to be very careful,” Eastwood said.

As the Irish border becomes an external border of the EU, the psychological impact of building any form of a barrier for a population that was devastated by decades of armed conflict, is incalculable.

For many people, any physical facility would be “a 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,” a study of the Queen’s University of Belfast revealed.

Brexit: A Threat to Peace?

Whoever has walked down the streets of Belfast or Derry-Londonderry would have seen the legacy of the conflict that remains visible.

The memories of the Troubles are carved in the walls painted with murals that honour the members of the Independent Republican Army (IRA) in the Catholic neighbourhoods, or the paramilitary loyalist groups in the protestant hoods.

The fences that used to separate the Protestant from the Catholic neighbourhoods are still partially in place, physically but also psychologically. In spite of the efforts of the past twenty years, Northern Ireland remains a divided society and Brexit has come as a threat to the fragile equilibrium.

“The polarisation of society into British and Irish, as a result of Brexit, could do harm to all that has been done until now,” said Jane Morrice, member of the Economic and Social Committee and former member of the Assembly for Northern Ireland, who contributed to the peace process.

The current political situation is a reflection of that polarisation as two years after the elections, the political forces in the Assembly have been unable to form a government.

Brexit has come as “an unwelcome layer of complexity on top of the complexities we already have,” said Tom Roberts, director of the Ex-Prisoners Interpretative Centre and former member of the Ulster Volunteer Force, a loyalist paramilitary group.

“The peace process is all about momentum and moving forward, not looking back. And unfortunately, Brexit has that chance of making us move back,” Joh Feely (Sinn Fein) said.

Some in Northern Ireland feel abandoned by London and accuse British politicians of underestimating the impact of Brexit on peace in the region. They thank the EU and Dublin for their commitment to preserving the Good Friday Agreement.

Others, however, accuse the Irish government of being ‘hardline’ in their defence of the backstop and claim they have fallen under the pressure of the Sinn Fein, whose ultimate objective is a united Ireland.

Even in their perception of the Article 50 negotiation, Northern Irish
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people are divided.

**THE FEAR OF VIOLENCE**

More than 3,000 people were killed and thousands were injured during more than thirty years of the Troubles. As recently as in January, there was a car bomb attack in Derry-Londonderry, luckily, without victims.

"None of us believes we could ever go back to those days," Jane Morrice said.

"The conditions that led to the conflict back in 1969 and 1970 no longer pertain," Sinn Fein councillor and former member of the IRA, Seanna Walsh, said, "that whole sort of background has changed completely."

While Walsh considered that there are some issues related to the conflict’s legacy that still need to be solved, he does not believe the conditions are there to justify an armed response, “but who can say what’s going to happen in the future?”

Tom Roberts, director of the Ex-Prisoners Interpretative Centre and former member of the Ulster Volunteer Force, a loyalist paramilitary group, has a similar position.

“I don’t see any pieces of evidence, certainly within the Unionist-loyalist community, of an appetite for a return to violence,” Roberts told EURACTIV. "Having said that, it is wise not to be complacent because, when I was a young man, many years ago, I didn't think we would slide into violence either,” he pointed out.

“We need to be careful about how we deal with the current situation.”

The threat of a violent response in case the circumstances change as a result of Brexit remains a possibility, not only because of a ramped up polarisation in the society but also because of the change to the status quo that would come with the UK leaving the EU.

“I think it is up to the politicians to make sure it doesn’t happen again... And that takes strong leadership and maybe we don’t have strong good leadership,” said Cathy Wolfs of the women’s organisation the Next Chapter.

Violence is always a possibility, Councillor Feely admitted. “It is going to be up to people like myself and other community leaders to ensure that no matter what kind of Brexit comes, we keep a lid on it,” he agreed.

“The peace process took a very long time to build,” Colum Eastwood recalled, and Brexit threatens to bring it all back. "We don't want to overstate that, but it is a possibility. And why would we even risk it?" Eastwood wondered.

Patricia McCormack, a resident in Carrickfergus, was brought up Protestant and forced to move out of Belfast during the Troubles. She is now part of a cross-community organisation in her town of residence and defends the need to keep the peace that has been built over the years.

“We’ve come so far in 15 years... We don’t want to go backwards. We want to move forward.”