

Striving for Peace: Northern Ireland, from the Good Friday Agreement to Brexit (1998-2020)

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It's an open wound

Is créacht oscailte é

- Gloria Anzaldua

ABSTRACT

Europe has historically been a battleground for diverse communities, many of which fighting to achieve some form of power or sovereignty. Medieval battles between kingdoms lead to wars between empires and lastly to modern guerrilla based conflicts between armed organizations, which said to fight in the name of stateless nations, and their respective dominating states. These bloodsheds have drawn the geopolitical maps of modern Europe. The island of Ireland has not been exempt from this phenomenon. The lack of peace and political instability have caused numerous divisions in the Irish society, being even more profound in Northern Ireland. This paper argues the difficult Peace Process of Northern Ireland during the last two decades taking into account to do so the main clashing socio-political variables present in the area; The concept of modern state and national identities. First I will shed some light on the historical background of the Irish Peace Process emphasizing the importance of the Good Friday Agreement (1998). I will argue all the social work done in order to strengthen the foundations on which the Peace Process is built upon mainly focusing on social and the detrimental effects this has for the society. This paper points out the great influence of the last decades on the new historical chapter opened with the withdrawal process of the UK from the European Union. Lastly, I will try to note the great difficulties lying ahead in the near future for peace in Northern Ireland.

Key words: Northern Ireland, Peace Process, Brexit, Unionist Community, Nationalist Community, Loyalism, Republicanism.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

DUP	Democratic Unionist Party
EU	European Union
EEC	European Economic Community
IRA	Irish Republican Army
NI	Northern Ireland
OIRA	Official Irish Republican Army
PIRA	Provisional Irish Republican Army
SDLP	Social Democratic and Labour Party
UDA	Ulster Defence Association
UK	United Kingdom
UKUP	United Kingdom Unionist Party
UUP	Ulster Unionist Party
UVF	Ulster Volunteer Force

1. INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this paper is to shed light on the delicate peace statu quo of Northern Ireland and analyse the challenges that lay ahead on the near future. The withdrawal of the United Kingdom from the European Union, commonly known as the Brexit process, has shaken the foundations of a delicately established peace welfare state. Borderlands usually formed with the convergence of diverse communities, nationalisms and modern states are said to be areas of great social dynamics. Indeed, this is the case of Northern Ireland. The only country of the UK that shares a land border with another state, a territory of great social dynamics due to being formed by two main ethno-religious communities, as well as, distinct and clashing national perspectives.

Different approaches regarding the new historical path for the UK and especially for Northern Ireland have been argued. I will focus on how the withdrawal might affect to the current peace in NI to do so taking into account the past, present and the future of the peace process that NI is immersed into. I will try to deepen into the detrimental effects the withdrawal process might have on the social achievements made from the Good Friday Agreement (1998) onwards.

In order to understand the severe political situation Brexit might prompt in NI I will first analyse the foundations on which modern peace is based upon, specially focusing on the milestone of The Good Friday Agreement. In this analysis I will focus on a text analysis, as well as, the important role played by diverse political subjects, who made really possible the Irish Peace Process, such as, the civil society. Moreover, I will analyse the role played by the political entities in the field of institutional politics, for instance, the role played by the Republic of Ireland, the UK or the EU itself. I will then emphasize the challenges faced by the Peace Process in the last years, indeed, the strong social segregation and the consequent residential segregation, which symbolise a long lasting problem that seems to be impossible to eradicate.

Right now there might not be an ongoing conflict context in NI, as the political context differs from our common understanding and imagery of a 'war'. Although the quantitative decrease of the mere presence of violence in the last two decades, real peace will not be achieved until the two communities forming the society coexist together with absolute normality and tranquillity. To argue this I will look upon the extent of social segregation and the reasons behind this social dynamics to fully understand the social distancing between the two communities. Furthermore, I will deepen into the efforts made

in order to change this social dynamic by showcasing the work done by institutions, mainly in integrated schools, as I believe in the power of education in order to build a better and more human society.

After getting the whole picture of NI I will deepen into the problems Brexit might bring alone; I will try to shed some light on the phenomena known as the ‘border in mind’ and how such imagery can have a really big influence in the general public. Moreover, I will focus on the effects the process might have in the construction of national identities, as well as, the power of radical political dissidents and the hypothetical comeback of violence.

Before finishing this introduction a few words should be spared on the methodology I have used to conduct my research. I have tried to use both historical and sociological tools. This work could be considered as a sample of the History of the Present, which, as Josefina Cuesta (1983: 227-228) states, “it’s not defined by a chronological framework as a diverse conception of historical time, even the historical fact, which implies a specific methodology”. Mostly I have gathered information from academic journals trying to find different perspectives on the matter in order to analyse the whole spectrum. Moreover, I have had the possibility to contact with an Integrated School and obtain direct information from the NI executive office regarding the social programs. Lastly, I have analysed diverse official documents and manifestos made by different political groups.

2. THE IRISH PEACE PROCESS AND THE GOOD FRIDAY AGREEMENT

2.1. PEACE IN A DELICATE SOCIO-HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The Irish Troubles (1968-1998) were a long lasting violent conflict that took place in Northern Ireland with an estimated 3,700 death toll, many of which were non-combatant civilians. The conflict can be traced back to the partition of Ireland (1920). The island was split in two political entities: the Irish Free State, formally established in 1922 and from 1948 onwards called the Republic of Ireland, consisting of 26 Irish counties, and Northern Ireland, informally also known as ‘The Province’ or ‘Ulster’, consisting of 6 counties part of the UK (Arthur & Cowell-Meyers, 2020). The partition raised two political perspectives in Northern Ireland. Most of the Protestants wanted to remain in the UK and most of the Catholics aimed for the reunification (Doyle & Connolly, 2019).

The clashing national identities of Nationalists¹ and Unionists, the radicalization of political subjects in both political perspectives, as well as, the use of violence justified by the conquest of ‘sovereignty’ and ‘religion’ lead to a society immersed into a systematic ‘war’ context, mainly defined by cross-community violence. Republican paramilitary groups such as the IRA’s² (taking into account all its partitions) fought for a united and free Ireland, while loyalist paramilitary groups targeted the nationalist community in order to ensure the continuity of NI in the UK. As Steenkamp (2008: 159) clearly explains Paramilitary groups such as UVF³ and UDA⁴ used violence with political, sectarian, economic, social and territorial aims. Long story short, NI was profoundly marked by the use of political violence.

The armed conflict, which lasted over two decades, led to a hazardous political context with a deeply divided society mainly based on their national identity and religious preferences. The delicate historical context made it even harder to get out of the systematic violence and start with a real peace process. Indeed, the perpetuation of paramilitary groups is linked to the political antagonism of diverse antagonistic cultural and economic claims (Shirlow, 2001: 744).

Dixon & O’Kane (2014) contextualised the peace attempts that resulted on failure. From the 70 decade onwards a few attempts for peace were made, for instance, the power sharing experiments (1973), secret talks (1990-1993) between the UK Government, Sinn Féin⁵ and IRA and lastly IRA’s ceasefires (1975). The real framework for peace started in 1995. The British and Irish governments publish the document *Frameworks for the Future* (1996) and multi-party talks start. The disposal of the political subjects to partake in the multi-party talks shows the real willingness for peace. DUP and UKUP, withdrew from the talks (July 21) due to Sinn Féin joining them (Dixon & O’Kane, 2014)

¹ The terms ‘Nationalist’, ‘Unionist’, ‘Republican’ and ‘Loyalist’ are explained in the glossary of point 2.2.

² Irish Republican Army, the main paramilitary group, which split in 1969 into two factions- the Official IRA and the Provisional IRA. (Dixon & O’Kane, 2014: 3)

³ UVF: “Between 1969 and 1994, when its leadership signed the joint loyalist ceasefire, the UVF was the principal loyalist organization responsible for sectarian and political assassination in NI”. (Connolly, 2007: 564)

⁴ UDA: Loyalist paramilitary organization established in NI. During the mid-1970s and later, these activities played an important part, alongside republican violence, making more profound the level of residential segregation in Belfast and elsewhere Its leadership is dominantly urban working class and secular in tone. (Connolly, S.J., 2007, 590).

⁵ (Provisional) Sinn Féin: Political party linked to the PIRA and formed as a result of the split in the IRA in January 1970.(Dixon & O’Kane, 2014: 3.)

2.2. UNDERSTANDING THE MODERN SOCIAL STRUCTURE

The social organization is of great complexity in NI as it is mainly characterized because of being a society with deeply rooted sectarianism and polar or distinct political perspectives. The concept of identity plays a vital role in this social division; NI is mainly divided into two communities based on different identities which transcend from personal identities to communal identities.

These two communities are largely heterogeneous formed and conceptualised by different branches and understandings of their own identities. Thus, when talking about each community we need to bear in mind the presence of inner differences in each community. The two communities mentioned are divided the following way: Most Catholic citizens are linked to the Irish national identity and form the Nationalist Community; while most Protestant citizens are linked to the British national identity and form the Unionist Community.

In the analysis conducted by Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (2014) the individual's national identity and religious preferences were contrasted, obtaining the following data:

- Individuals who defined themselves as 'British only' were 81% Protestant or other Christian, 12% were Catholic and 8% other.
- Individuals who defined themselves as 'Irish only' were 94% Catholic and 4% Protestant.
- Individuals who defined themselves as 'Northern Irish only' were 58% Catholic and 36% Protestant and other Christian.

In order to get the full picture we need to take into account that 40% of the population of NI identified as 'British only', 25% as 'Irish only' and 21% as 'Northern Irish' only. Therefore, the data obtained in the social analysis corroborates the correlation between the religious preferences and national identity stated above and consequently the Nationalist or Unionist community.

Moreover we need to bear aware of the fact that the parallelism between national identity and religious preferences is not entirely stagnant, due to the fact that both phenomena are social constructions, thus, these can be constructed and deconstructed. Ergo, there are many individual and communal understandings of identities that are in constant change due to the redefining the community or the individuals themselves make of it. We could understand the concept of identity as a social construction which at the

same time is somewhat stagnant and fluid. If we take a closer look to the identities present in NI, we could find the following national identities:

Britishness: It is a British national identity which is more reinforced and patriotic in NI than in the mainland. The reason behind such strong sense of Britishness in the protestant citizens of NI is twofold; firstly, the feeling of political detachment from the mainland and secondly, the inner socio-political context of NI and the consequent opposing national identities (Southern, N., 2007: 73) reinforce the ‘British’ identity.

Unionism: Unionists favour the continuation of the ‘Union’ between GB and NI (Dixon, P. & O’Kane, E. 2014: 12). The Britishness of Unionists is a somewhat ‘sentimental hurdle’ (Southern, N. 2007: 71).

Loyalism: “‘Loyalists’ are Unionists who use or advocate more militant methods to defend the Union, at times including violence. Loyalists tend to be drawn disproportionately from the working class” (Dixon, P. & O’Kane, E. 2014:12). Ergo, they have a stronger and a more radical sense of nationalism and they share the social acceptance of using violence in order to protect their sovereignty. The royal family has a vital significance for them (Southern, N., 2007: 74).

“Ulsterness”: It is a variant of British national identity that reinforces more the idea of pertaining to Ulster. There are two types of Ulster national identities; Ulster British and Ulster Loyalist. Todd notes (1987) “ ‘Ulster British’ who primarily identify with things British and only secondarily with Northern Ireland; while the Ulster loyalist identifies first with Northern Ireland or Ulster, and has only a secondary identification with a wider British community” (Southern, N., 2007: 86).

Nationalism: “Nationalists favour the unity of Ireland but advocate the use of non-violent tactics to achieve this goal. (...) In NI nationalists are overwhelmingly ‘Catholics’ and tend to be more religious and politically closer to the Catholic Church than their more hard-line republican rivals” (Dixon, P. & O’Kane, E. 2014: 6).

Republicanism: It is a term used to describe a section of Irish nationalism known to be more intransigent and potentially violent in order to achieve Irish Unity (Connolly, S.J., 2007: 508). “There are a variety of strands within republicanism including traditional catholic nationalism, Catholic defenderism⁶, democratic socialism, Trotskyism and other varieties of Marxism.” (Dixon, P. & O’Kane, E. 2014: 8).

⁶An understanding of Catholicism originated in Armagh, NI. Its believers had strong links to the rural world and the old traditions. Once an again, Catholic defenders have used political violence to defend their believes.

Both Irish national identities could be understood as nationalisms based on the pan-nationalism as the both seek for a united ‘fatherland’, which in this case is Ireland, indeed, *Éire* in Gaelic. Moreover Irish nationalism as a whole is characterised because being an ethno-religious form of nationalism.

Lastly, I would like to mention that even though the term ‘Irish’ from ‘Irishness’ could be used to denote any citizen from Ireland it has become an uncomfortable term for the Unionists. As Rose (1971) indicates “‘Irishness’ gradually became associated with Republicanism, Roman Catholicism and Gaelic culture it lost its significance as a descriptive term of identity to the majority of Protestants who could not accept its political, religious and cultural connotations” (Southern, N., 2007: 94).

2.3. ANALYSIS OF THE GOOD FRIDAY AGREEMENT

The Good Friday Agreement (1998) also known as the Belfast agreement is a bill of extreme importance for the Irish Peace Process, even being a one of the most important milestone in the peace process. The formal structure of the text is constructed in the following order: Declaration of support, constitutional issues, three strands, safeguards and equality of opportunity, decommissioning and security. Taking into account the importance of the agreement, in this section I will thoroughly analyse the ‘declaration of support’ and the ‘creation of the Northern Ireland Assembly’ due to their big significance and the role played in the achievement of a real peace process.

Declaration of Support

The main point of the agreement is summarized in this part. Furthermore, as its name indicates it is a multi-party declaration trying to find the approval of the Irish society. The multi-party gives arguments on why the document should be accepted.

The *first paragraph* refers to the end of violence and the consequent new historical era that this brings. The end of violence is greatly emphasized, showcasing that the attempt made is not just another mere attempt bound to fail but a real opportunity. For instance, this can clearly be seen in the words made ‘historic opportunity for a new beginning’.

The *second paragraph* condemns the violence and the hurt caused by decades of systematic violence, it doesn’t specify a specific group or community by doing this the declaration alludes to all the hurt that might have been caused by distinct forms of

violence during the conflict. This is an important step considering that it was the first time for Sinn Féin to publicly ‘condemn’ violence.

The *second and third paragraphs* allude to the society in general, in fact, to the reconciliation of a deeply divided society. This is really important as real peace will not be achieved without a proper social cohesion. The *paragraph four* calls for a democratization of politics, as it clearly states ‘democratic and peaceful means for resolving differences on political issues’. Note that until this moment the violence with a political purpose was justified for many social sectors.

In the *fifth paragraph* the declaration accepts the presence of diverse political ideas in the political field. Consequently, it mentions the establishment of new national and international institutions in the NI working alongside the UK and Irish government.

Lastly *the paragraph six* calls for the involvement of the Irish civil society, both from NI and the Republic, as to take the bill forward the approval was necessary in the referendum to be held in 22nd of May, 2018.

Creation of the assembly

Apart from the declaration of support I would like to highlight the re-establishment of the renewed Northern Ireland Assembly, founded as a power-sharing political institution. Previous attempts of establishing governmental institutions were made which ended in being either suspended, prorogued or dissolved: Stormont Parliament (1921-1972), Northern Ireland Assembly (1973-1974) and Northern Ireland Assembly (1982-1986) (Dixon. & O’Kane, 2014: 15-18)

This institution enabled NI to have a constitutional new status within the UK, which was more decentralized from London. The new granted constitutional status led the Assembly and Executive to be formed by directly elected cross cross-community members (Hayward & Murphy, 2018: 280). This new power-sharing institution is believed to be one of the basis of modern peace, which should be based on a series of political arrangements to endorse cross-community interests; interests of both the Unionist and Nationalist communities promoting this way political equality (Shirlow, 2001: 745). This can be seen in “The Assembly - operating where appropriate on cross-community basis - will be the prime source of authority in respect of all devolved responsibilities.”

Historically Catholics had little to non-representation in the political institutions of NI. Therefore, we could say that the interests of the Nationalist community were not

taken into account as they did not have a say on their politics. The creation of the assembly guarantees that this doesn't happen again and a stratum of the NI society is not exempt from the institutional politics. In order to do this when politicians take their seats they need to specify their national identity; 'Nationalist', 'Unionist' or 'other' to ensure and measure if there is a real cross-community support in the Assembly. Furthermore, in political issues that might be offensive or have negative consequences for one of the communities, the approval using the votes of both national identities is needed.

Doyle and Connolly (2019: 80) maintain that with Brexit the future difficulties for the good implementation of the Good Friday Agreement as it will be both politically and practically challenging to respect the initial written agreement.

Involvement of the Civil Society in the Peace Process

The Good Friday Agreement was proposed by the government of the Republic and the UK, accepted in the multi-party talks and finally approved by the civil society in the plebiscite that took place in NI and in the Republic. Thus, it was a hierarchical peace approach but all political subjects were included, in other words, all the social stratum was considered.

Especially in NI the civil society had a real active involvement in the process. Not only did it turn in large numbers to vote and take part in the referendum, which in modern liberal democracy is of absolute importance, but the active involvement went further than just voting. Even though some traditional accounts for the peace process underestimate and oversimplify the work done by the civil society, it should be given the right amount of importance and value (Guelke, 2003: 61). The clearest example of this is the work done by volunteers in non-profit organizations, such as the Opsahl Commission⁷ and Women's Coalition (Guelke, 2003: 68). This work has been once an again downplayed and underestimated by both republican and unionist political parties.

I will now devote a few paragraphs to explaining the results of the referendum on the Good Friday Agreement both in the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland using the data provided by the Economic & Social Research Council (2001).

⁷The Opsahl Commission: It was an independent commission not attached to any government or state authority trying to give voice to 'ordinary people' (Elliot, 2013: 87).

Northern Ireland:

The wording in NI was “Do you support the Agreement reached at the multi-party talks on Northern Ireland and set out in Command Paper 3883?”. The turnout was 81.1%, the ‘yes’ obtained a 71.1% of the votes and the ‘no’ obtained a 28.9% of the votes. Seeing this, we may conclude that the big rate of participation and the clear win shows a clear disposal of the society in order to obtain real peace. Nevertheless, although the rate of approval was considerably high, DUP showed its non-acceptance to the treaty and there were many Irish nationalists who opposed to it creating new political dissidents coming from Sinn Féin.

Republic of Ireland:

The wording in the Republic of Ireland was “British-Irish Agreement / Do you approve of the proposal to amend the Constitution contained in the under mentioned Bill? / Nineteenth Amendment of the Constitutional Bill, 1998”. In the Republic the turnout was considerably lower 55.6% and the ‘yes’ obtained 94.4% of the votes. The participation rate of the Republic was considerably lower although the percentage of ‘yes’ was higher quantitatively.

2.4. THE EU AND THE PEACE PROCESS (1973-PRESENT)

The Republic of Ireland and the UK joined the European Economic Community in the year 1973, from the very beginning both states joined the EEC many social sectors showed discrepancies for joining the EEC. On the one hand, the Irish Republicans perceived the EEC as another form of imperialism, the most common anti-colonial argument of Irish nationalists was ‘Why should Ireland swap British rule for rule from Brussels or Frankfurt? (Hoey, 2019: 83). On the other hand, there was great scepticism in Britain itself. It is said that the general public opinion in the UK has historically always been divided, euro-scepticism being widely present in the political field in response to the British strong national identity (Gifford, 2006: 854). The UK even held a plebiscite (1975) to reassure remaining in the union with a 67% of approval. The discrepancies present in the public opinion lead to the UK to held a plebiscite in 1975 in order to reassure whether remaining in the union or not. 67% of the participants of the referendum opted to remain in the EEC.

Initially, when the Republic and the UK joined the EEC the community cautiously did not interfere in the affair and considered the Irish Troubles to be an internal British affair. The year 1994 marked a change in the politics of the EEC regarding NI as this started having a more active role mainly carrying out socioeconomic programs entitled 'Peace Package' aimed to prompt reconciliation in cross border communities throughout Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland (Tannam, 2007: 343).

The active role of the ECC and later on the EU has been continuous from 1994 to these days. The most noteworthy program of the last years is the 'Northern Ireland Peace Programme' (European Parliament, 2013) prompted by the European Parliament. The program has two aims, firstly, the social cohesion of the communities affected by the conflict in Northern Ireland and secondly the economic and social stability of the Border county. Therefore, the program is centred in the cross-community social welfare by putting an emphasis on social cohesion and the economic stability of NI. In order to achieve these objectives the program carried out between the years 2014-2020 focused on shared education, helping children and young people, creating shared spaces and services, building positive relations at local level.

Northern Ireland benefits significantly from the EU funding and the UK's withdrawal raises concerns in the longer term of a range of sectors in Northern Ireland, as well as for the peace process and cross-border cooperation beyond 2020 (Northern Ireland is the only region of the UK that has a land border with another EU Member State: In practical terms, there is now an external border of the EU on the island of Ireland. (European Parliament, 2013: 3)

Hayward & Murphy (2018: 277) state "Common membership of the EU meant that both states, essentially, shared a common vision for their respective futures, (...); thus cross-border cooperation enabled Irish and British nationalism to be entangled without either one being eroded". Indeed, the EU was not important only for helping by promoting programs but mainly for an active role and symbolizing a common-ground for all.

3. PEACE ATTEMPTS IN A SEGREGATED SOCIETY (1998-2016)

3.1. COMMUNITY DIVISIONS: RESIDENTIAL SEGREGATION

The society of NI, as explained in the point 2.2, is divided into two main communities based on the national identity and religion preferences. This binary division is present to such an extent that it has evolved into social segregation and a consequent residential segregation due to adding the special variation to the already existent segregation. Starkly, Protestants and Catholics usually tend to live in neighbourhoods alongside others with same religious preferences.

The Census of Population is taken every ten years in order to check the real benchmark segregation and see the reality of community relations. (Lloyd & Shuttleworth, 2013: 57). Still to this day, the residential segregation can be visible by the remaining ‘peace walls’ dividing different faith neighbourhoods. (Lloyd & Shuttleworth, 2012)

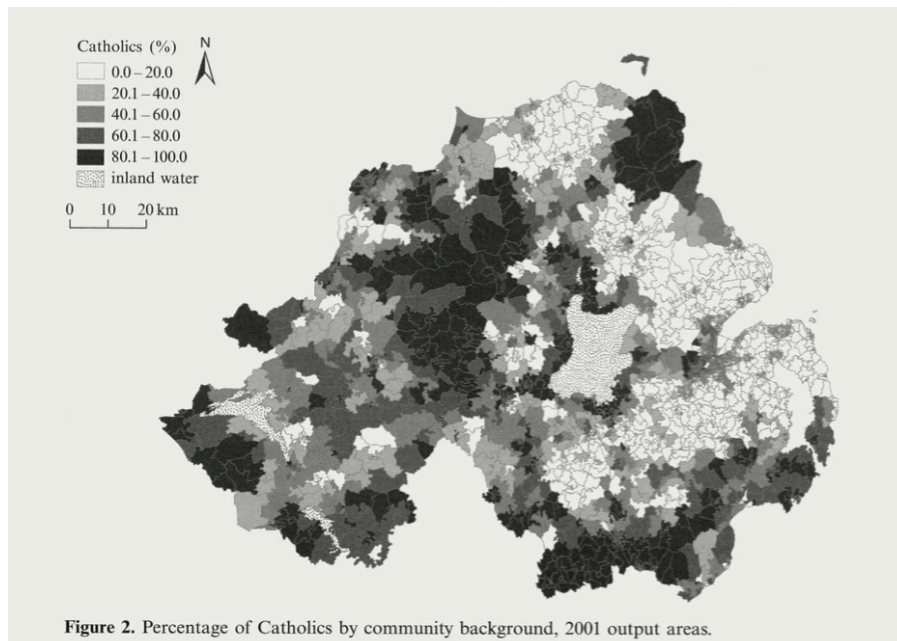


TABLE I: (Lloyd & Shuttleworth, 2012: 58) The big differences in colour show the real impact of the residential segregation in the year 2001.

Shuttleworth and Lloyd (2013) made a comparison of the data obtained in the last two censuses. In their words, “This is the first time that segregation has fallen since 1971 but with the longer-term historical perspective the results should not be surprising.” (Shuttleworth and Lloyd, 2013: 62). They note that recent evident suggests that more Catholics are living in traditionally Protestant neighbourhoods and that the incoming

immigration has had an impact in decreasing the residential segregation. Although the improvements, the data of 2011 quantitatively does not differ much from the data obtained in 2001. The next census that will be obtained in the years 2021 and 2031 will show if the decreasing tendency of residential segregation keeps on the right track. The data obtained will show whether the society of NI is finally leaving behind the old differences and coming together having a consequent reunification.

3.2 INTEGRATED SCHOOLS

In order to ensure a real peace context all signs of segregation and sectarianism need to be dismantled (Nagle, 2009: 177). Many Shared Housing Programs developed by the Northern Ireland Executive aim to build new cross-community strategies and programs ending to a certain extent with the stagnant social phenomenon. For instance, the ‘Together’ social strategy is “a framework for the government action in tackling sectarianism, racism and other forms of intolerance while seeking to address division, hate and separation”(Northern Ireland Executive, 2019: 3).

Although the severity of the social problem, more and more young people who did not live the troubles first-hand are showing more liberal preferences living in not such segregated areas, as the International Herald Tribune (2008) clearly stated “They don’t want to live behind walls. And they don’t want to live in a place where they are judged by their faith or their family name.” (Nagle, 2019: 177).

The only way to establish a good welfare state and ensure the continuity of a real peace in the future is to strengthen the foundations on which the peace process is based upon. As previously stated social segregation and the consequent residential segregation play an important role blocking the peace process. This social dynamic is present in the education system of NI too as most families opt to enrol their children in the religious school that concords with the religious background of the family.

This social dynamic is another form for the continuity of social segregation so it should be granted with the importance needed. Schooling is one of the three main socialising agents, that is, a child from the moment is born will be socialized (made part of the society) mainly by three socialising agents; family, school and friends. In other words, if a child is born in an area with a pre-existing segregation he or she may not be able to make enough cross-community relations with others children and will most surely

fall in the stereotypes haunting the two communities due to the lack of natural cross-community relationships.

As Dyer (1999) claimed stereotyping is a form of ordering society. Ergo, as human beings we need to socialise to survive but in order to do this we need to understand the society surrounding us. Therefore, we use stereotypes, an imagery based upon not so clear facts to delimit and understand our society. In NI stereotyping takes a full new meaning as stereotyping is more reinforced and delimits human interaction. The mentioned stereotyping works the following way: Catholics stereotype Protestants and make an image of them and conversely Protestant stereotype the Catholics. (Hughes & Knox, 1997: 332).

Hughes & Knox (1997) bring forward the cross-community contact to prompt more positive attitudes regarding other cultural traditions and most importantly regarding 'others'. In NI the schools known as 'Integrated Schools' challenge social segregation and ensure that students from diverse backgrounds study alongside each other. The values the students obtain in school will help them in their future; students who socialise in a natural context with other students with different backgrounds they will not be likely to fall in the traditional stereotyping process and will be more open-minded. Aiming to learn more about it I had the absolute pleasure to discuss the matter with the principal of one the pioneering integrated schools located in Belfast, the 'Hazelwood Primary School', as she stated "our children are in contact both physically and online after school and so are their parents and families." (P. Murtagh, personal communication, April 20, 2020). Consequently, the school is not only a 'common ground' for social interaction in the school hours but it extends to other contexts symbolising a larger common ground for all students.

In the emails we shared Murtagh explained to me the success of the Integrated Schools as they have obtained great positive outcomes and more and more children are being enrolled in this type of schools. Despite the big achievements made, she was hesitant about the future and the proximity of Brexit as nobody knows what the withdrawal process might bring for the Irish society.

The world we live in NI is very different from the one that prompted our schools to be established in all the different ways that this happened -it was and is an amazing story of parent power of community action as the force for change. (...)
The future with reference to Brexit is of course is uncertain-we have seen some

families returning to Poland etc - we have some talk in the community's ref United Ireland referendum etc-there could to some extent be a reversion to the extreme community identities and subsequent voting patterns impacted- it is hard to tell and has somewhat been pushed into the background with issues of the current pandemic dominating everything. (P. Murtagh, personal communication, April 20, 2020)

In order to enclose this section I would like to highlight a couple of Paulo Freire's wisdom words (1972) "If education is oppressive the dream of the oppressed will be to become the oppressor". If the needed emphasis is put in today's education the future of NI will be brighter than ever. The kids do not understand the 'differences' with the other kids, they are still not toxified by the society surrounding them, thus, it is a real pity as parents to block this integration.

4. THE WITHDRAWAL OF THE UK FROM THE EU (2016-PRESENT)

4.1 POLITICAL PARTIES AND THEIR PERSPECTIVE TOWARDS BREXIT

It is interesting to analyse the institutional politics mainly to see the role played by the political parties during Brexit as the traditional dichotomy in the NI politics between the Nationalists and Unionists was broken.

Democratic Unionist Party: Nowadays it is the party with the largest political support in Northern Ireland. The DUP is characterised by strong conservatism, Euro-scepticism and Unionism, indeed, it is a right-wing party. It campaigned actively alongside the 'Leave campaign' under the slogan 'We can be stronger if we take back control'. This shows a clear emphasize and use of the Euro-sceptic idea widely present in the British society of Europe having too much political and economic control over the UK.

Even though it actively took part in the 'leave campaign', during the EU-UK withdrawal negotiations the party showed its hesitancy and refusal to accept any customs treaty where NI was treated with a different political status compared to the mainland.

The party has always opposed any suggestion of "special status" for Northern Ireland in the Brexit negotiations - arguing that any differences between Northern

Ireland and Great Britain could threaten to break up the United Kingdom. (BBC News, 2019)

Ulster Unionist Party: This party is known because of its strong conservatism, British Unionism and ‘Ulsterness’. Unlike DUP, they campaigned to ‘Remain’ in the EU. The UUP stated that to remain in the EU ensured more economic stability for NI and pointed out the importance of the EU due to the farming subsidies and the beneficial impact of the EU export market.

The UUP showed its hesitancy to the withdrawal and it shed some light on the detrimental consequences NI might have due to Brexit in the long future. This can be seen in their 2019 manifesto:

Since the **European Referendum in 2016** - Parliament, and our society, has become increasingly **divided**. **A nation** whose politics was once **defined by its pragmatism**, has become further **entrenched** and **polarised** with each twist and turn over the last three years. (...). And in the years following the referendum it became clear that for those who were determined to see Brexit done, no matter the cost, **that Northern Ireland would become the price**. (...) While Brexit and national politics continue to dominate, **our local services continue to suffer**.(UUP, 2019)

Sinn Féin: This party is known for being a republican and socialist party which aims to restore a united Ireland. They campaigned using the slogan ‘Éire Chun Cinn’, which in Gaelic means, ‘Putting Ireland First’. Its leader, Martin McGuinness, stated ‘It will be counterproductive to all the achievements, the vast majority people on the island of Ireland want access between North and South and don’t want to see a restoration of any checkpoints’ (Sinn Féin, 2016, 1:31). This was quite a populist idea, because from the very beginning the withdrawal process started the idea of the establishment of a hard border was always pushed behind by the UK government. It is interesting to point out how Sinn Féin, a majorly abstentionist party in UK politics, was forced to actively partake in this plebiscite as it directly concerned the Irish community and their final political aim of a united Ireland. It is also notorious the change of attitude of the Republicans regarding the EU, as the initial Euro-scepticism based on an anti-imperialist criticism regarding the EU has evolved in somewhat critical support to the EU

Social Democratic and Labour Party⁸: This is an Irish nationalist party defined by its strong social-democratic perspective. They have continuously condemned any form of violence for any political purpose. The political group campaigned to remain in the EU. The party implied that it was really important to vote due to the fact that Brexit was a crucial vote for the NI society as it will affect to the future. The slogan for the campaign was ‘Stronger In’ the party believed it was more beneficial to remain in the EU due to the ‘values of the EU such as diversity, inclusion and peace’.

Alliance: Alliance is a progressive, non-sectarian, internationalist and pro-European Party. It is the most important political party formed by members of both communities. This party campaigned to ‘Remain’ in the EU mainly due to economic stability, they stated;

Alliance is standing up for Northern Ireland and advocating for the best interests of the people of this region through maintaining political stability, defending the G.F.A. retaining open-borders throughout these islands, protecting our economy and enabling future exposes contradictions and ambiguities that are otherwise being managed through the G.F.A. (Alliance, n.d.)

After seeing this we can conclude that there was not a clear political perspective for the Unionists as they were divided regarding remaining or leaving the union, even having open political discrepancies by the members of their own political groups.

4.2 ANALYSIS OF THE PLEBISCITE

The withdrawal of the UK from the EU started with the plebiscite conducted on June 23, 2016, where citizens of the United Kingdom were questioned whether they wanted to leave or remain in the European Union. In this section an analysis of the official data obtained (The Electoral Commission, 2019) in the election will be provided.

The wording of the ballot paper was: “Should the United Kingdom remain a member of the European Union or Leave the European Union”. The total electorate of the UK consisted of 46,500,001 citizens with the right to vote and the turnout was 72.2%, which is considerably high. The ‘Leave’ obtained a 51.9% and the Remain 48.1%.

⁸ SDLP, nationalist political party, formed in August 1970. The largest nationalist party in Northern Ireland until over taken by Sinn Féin in 2003. (Dixon, P.&O’Kane, E. 2014: 6).

Therefore, it was not a clear win for the ‘leave’ and the dichotomy between remaining and leaving was evident.

If we look closely to the breakdown of the official results provided, all regions voted to ‘leave’ except London, Northern Ireland and Scotland (note the graphic below). A possible explanation for this quantitative difference in results was to a certain extent the product of the socio-political context and the consequent political variables present in each country. In London the ‘remain’ obtained 59.9 % of the votes, while ‘Leave’ obtained 40.1% of the votes. This could be attributed to the more diverse and international society of London. Moreover, it could be attributed to the need of economic stability as the as London is the largest city and the capital of the UK.

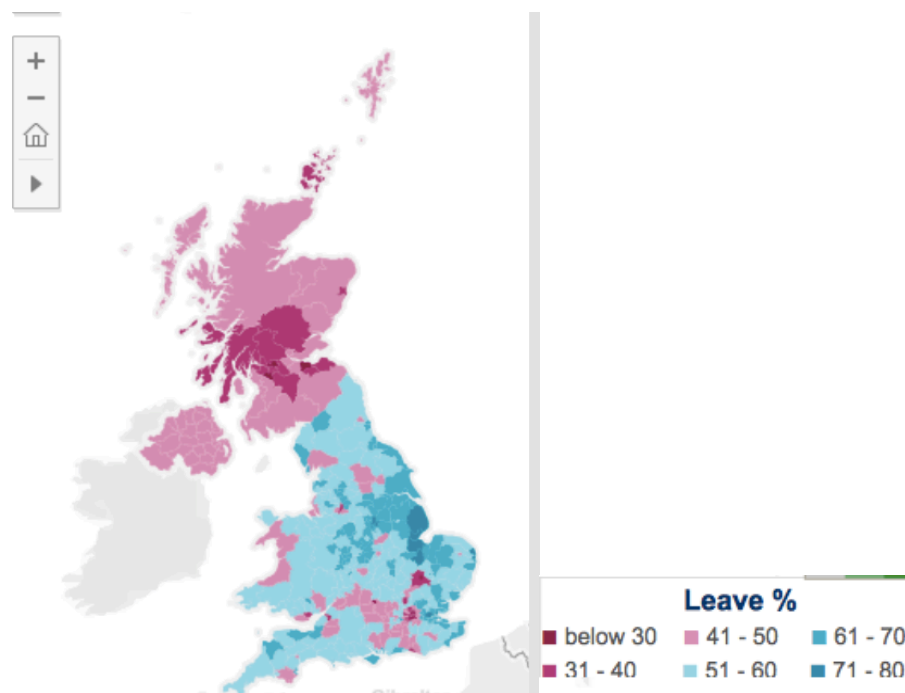


TABLE II: (The Electoral Commission, 2019)

Historic secessionist social movements present in the UK could be attributed with a great impact too, due to the fact that counties with a rather secessionist history, as it was the case of Northern Ireland and Scotland voted to ‘Remain’. On the one hand, Scotland opted to remain with 62% votes in favour while Northern Ireland also opted to remain with a 55.8% of the votes to ‘remain’ and with a 44.2% of votes to ‘leave’. This clearly shows that the secessionist or independence movements had an impact as in the other political counties this phenomena was not repeated. It is noteworthy the fact that in NI the percentages were really close showing once again the binary division of the NI society.

Although the secessionist movements may have had an impact on the last results I would like to highlight the case of Wales, where the results were 47.5% to Remain and 52.5 to Leave. Even though there have been strong movements of Nationalisms mainly in the 1920s and later on during the reign of Queen Elizabeth we could imply that the secessionist movement didn't have a real impact on the outcome. Thus, we could estimate that overall the nationalist movement is not as strong as it is in NI and Scotland.

4.3 POLITICS OF IDENTITY AND PEACE

The advances made in the Irish Peace Process and the current peace status quo most surely will be challenged with the withdrawal of the UK due to the fact that this might prompt new social dynamics. Gomley-Heenan and Aughey (2017: 501) clearly acknowledge "There is no guarantee that the delicate structure will not fall apart. There is no ideological mortar-common national identity holding things together".

We need to bear in mind the fact that NI shares the only land border of the UK with the Republic of Ireland and consequently this can be defined as a borderline area. Generally, borderline areas are characterised because of having a big number of social dynamics as many social variables come together in the same place. Komarova (2017) claims borders to be elements that delimit the edges of a state and redefine its territory, this not always being in forms of common imagery 'curtains' nor 'walls'.

Brunet-Jailly (2010: 9) asserts that in order to understand the phenomena a border might provoke in an area, the understanding of the local culture and local political clout of borderland communities is fundamental to understand the real framework. As previously seen NI is characterised because of having a society divided by social segregation based upon the national identity and religious background, as well as, two pan-national national identities that politically clash with each other and are totally incompatible. After bearing this in mind we could estimate that the role of identity, specially national identity, will be of extreme importance in the new historical chapter and will once again take a new meaning.

The fact that the UK leaves the EU adds another variable to the understanding of the borderline area mentioned, opening at the same time old discussions and bringing to the forefront the topic of nationalism. The concept of territorial belonging challenges modern borders (Brunet-Jailly, 2010: 6), indeed, they are of great incompatibility and to a certain extent it is impossible for the modern borders to be in concordance with all

nationalist approaches. Thus, this incapability of the understanding of the nation or the fatherland is then reinforced due to the nonexistence of the common-ground the EU represented.

In the new political context, Irish nationalists might feel more detached from the Republic of Ireland and Unionists might experience even more detachment from the mainland due to not being treated equally by the UK government. Consequently, this could reinforce both Irish nationalism and Britishness, reinforcing once again the differences between the two communities. A clear example of this was the case of the establishment of the special political institutions for NI in the Anglo-Irish Agreement in 1985 as this evolved into a great resentment from the Unionists due to the fact they did not feel equal to the Brits of the mainland (Southern, 2007: 71).

Both communities born and bred in NI have the concept of belonging to NI, however, the understanding of this idea, as well as, the understanding made by both nationalisms regarding the ‘sovereignty’ of the land is not compatible in any shape or form. The rise in nationalism the Brexit might bring can be seen for instance in the recent and historic win of the republican party Sinn Féin in the general elections of the Republic of Ireland (February, 2020) obtaining 37 seats as the republican party took the political field by storm as nobody expected such clear win.

4.4. THE THREAT OF A NEW LAND BORDER

As previously mentioned above the Brexit process has brought back the effect of the ‘the border in mind’ (Gomley-Heenan & Aughey, 2017: 500). It will most surely not become a ‘hard border’ organized with old checkpoints and walls but in the imagery of some of the social stratum ‘the border in mind’ is making the effect of a border imagery (Gormley-Heenan & Aughey, 2017). This could prompt with great force the reinforcement of national identities mentioned above.

“The very fact of Brexit, no matter how sensitively handled, creates the risk of a significant psychological, cultural and legal barrier along the border” (Humphreys, 2018: 73). The UK government will have to handle the concept of the border and consequently the economic and immigration matters with great care; negotiations between the EU and the UK are still ongoing with NI gaining special focus (2016-2020).

Regarding the possible new border Doyle & Connolly (2019: 90) claim “The reimposition of a land-border that has potential to set up negative dynamics that will

undermine the progress that has been achieved since 1998 and potentially lead to renewed violence.” they continue on to emphasize “The opening of a border was one of the most powerful symbols of the peace process. The-rebuilding of costumes would be a powerful symbol of reversal and failure.”

Immigration: This border is the only land border of the UK. If it is not properly organized it could become another mass-immigration route parallelly to today’s ‘illegal’ route from France-Dover, which is used in great numbers. This could be controlled by a soft border, as well as, a hard border. It is needless to say that the EU has a large number of immigration, mainly coming from East Europe. “An estimated 3.6 million EU-born migrants lived in the UK in 2018 making up 5.5% of the UK population” (Vargas. C & Fernández. M, 2019), it is interesting how they point out “EU immigration rose sharply in the years leading up to the EU plebiscite in June, but declined since 2016(Vargas. C & Fernández. M, 2019).

The populist topic of immigration and its detrimental effect are present in the British society. Indeed, “The political debate centred on two issues: the fiscal burden of the EU membership and the exposure to the European immigration since the enlargement of the EU in 2004” (Becker, Fetzer, &Novy, 2017: 605). More specifically, “immigration has been at the forefront of the public debate ever since, especially in the tabloid press.” (Becker, Fetzer, &Novy, 2017: 614). We could say that immigration was rather a populist argument for the leave campaign making use of the fear masses might have. Even though it could be another route for mass-immigration there is already a mass-immigration going on so the influence would not be so catastrophic for the economy as some mention.

Economy: August Loesch, in the economics of location (1945) asserted that neoclassical economic, borders have a cost being barriers to trade and free trade, or the free flow of good skills. Ireland has historically been a poor country, with large numbers of outward-migration, this is the only historical period where there has been an economic prosperity and a consequent inward-migration to the country. It is estimated that between the years 1801 and 1921 8 million inhabitants left the country (Connolly, S. J., 2007: 179).

Trade in Northern Ireland has a big importance “Ireland is the UK’s fifth largest export and imports more from the UK than any other country. The UK accounts for 30 percent of imports into Ireland. In 2014, exports of goods and services from the UK to Ireland totalled £27.86 billion.’”(Department for International trade, 2016) The largest

industry being the agri-food industry is the most important sector accounting a 7% of the GDP (Department for International trade, 2016).

Throughout the negotiations special attention was put in the customs border post-Brexit as it came clear that the requirements of the customs union and single market could lead to the imposition of some kind of a border on the island. Many options were toddled, for instance, the ‘Irish sea border’.

The Draft Withdrawal Agreement sets out a framework to avoid any checks on the Irish land border, involving initially a transition period to the end of 2020, during which time all the EU single market and customs rules will continue to apply to the UK whole.(Doyle & Connolly, 2019).

The ultimate agreement was not seen with good eyes by the Brexit lobby, who argue that the treaty ties the UK indefinitely into a customs union with the EU (Doyle & Connolly, 2019). Consequently it will not still be economically free and will be dependant to the EU. The economic development of NI and the economic impact the customs hold great uncertainty and the real effects will only be visible in the long future. Truth be told, both entities are granted with the economic stability provided by the EU and the Commonwealth. Still to this day final negotiations between the EU and the UK are ongoing.

Overall, the concept mentioned ‘the border in mind’ summarizes the fears of modern NI society; the border may or may not exist but by bringing forward the imagery of the old border and all the hurt this still beholds has reopened old ‘wounds’ that were not entirely ‘cured’. As a matter of a fact, even though the border will most surely not be a physical border, as the concept itself exists in the social imagery, the border ‘exists’. I would even go further and describe the border as a kind of monster that is still lurking in the minds of NI citizens.

4.5. THE NORMALIZATION OF VIOLENCE: A THREAT FOR PEACE

Neuman (2002: 116) describes the Irish peace as “It is not a perfect peace: If it were, there would be no need for a peace process”. Although this statement was made four years after the GFA it can still be used to describe the status quo of NI, as the peace process is still a continuous process that has not achieved its final goal ‘real peace’. Truth be told

the political violence has quantitatively descended from the late 90's, however, the political violence is still existent this being cross-community or intercommunity wise.

In other words, the institutional politics has not fully taken over 'the power' the cross-community and intercommunity violence has. Ergo, still to this day the NI does not fully believe in the NI political and judicial system, thus, it takes the matters into its own hands to a certain extent. This use of violence that was previously justified with the conquest of sovereignty and religion is now justified by the 'normalization' the society has given to it, due to the normalization the society implies it is 'normal' to punish other subjects of society and so on. It is needless to say that this phenomena is present not in the whole spectrum of society but only in some of the social stratum

Parallely to this, with the new social dynamics and the possible reinforcement of the nationalisms due to Brexit, dissident political subjects either these being Republicans or Loyalists could gain momentum if properly organized and structured. Nevertheless, during the last years Republican dissidents have gained a considerable visibility.

The most important dissidents are the modern Republican ones, commonly regarded and named using the umbrella term "Irish Republican Dissident Movement" mainly known due to the new paramilitary group 'New IRA'. 'It is a republican paramilitary group created in 2012 to unify and gain political powers by the merging of paramilitary groups

The Real Irish Republican Army (RIRA), Republican Action Against Drugs (RAAD) and other smaller independent republican dissident groups (Stanford University, 2019) There are others dissident groups, such as Saoradh, this is associated to be the legal political wing of the New IRA (Stanford University, 2019).As previously stated the legitimacy of violence is still present in some parts of the social stratum, for instance, in a YouTube video dealing with the so called Irish Drug War, a male member who has been judged numerous times, openly states:

When you talk about terrorism, what is terrorism? You know the people here who were accused of being terrorists are members of this community, they live in this community, they are lucky they work in this community, they socialise. (VICE, 2014, 3: 50).

We need to take into account that this statement was made publicly, thus, this shows a strong belief or acceptance of the armed conflict for the Irish purpose. If we take

into account the previously discussed reinforcement of national identities and the political power the dissidents behold, as well as, the remaining acceptance of the violence could put peace, as well as, all the achievements made from the GFA onwards in serious risk.

Although this could be an extreme political context, we need to be realistic and bear in mind the modern context. The Guerrilla tactics might be useful sometimes, as it was the case of Derry Car Bomb attack, however, the modern political context is not the ideal one for a social uprising as there would be a lack of external support:

The flux in republicanism reflected the chaotic restructuring of wider global ideological structures: the decline of communism, the left and social democracy and the advancing primacy of neoliberal economics and globalisation meant there was little ideological legitimacy for the Marxist republican left. (Hoey, 2019: 78).

5. CONCLUSION

I started this paper by quoting Gloria Anzaldua's words 'It is an open wound', which she used to describe the USA-Mexico border, in order to describe and make a parallelism with the borderline that divides NI and the Republic and all the social dynamics that occur due to the border.

I have argued that the social phenomena that occur in this area are to a certain extent the product of the ongoing Irish political conflict, mainly based upon different beliefs regarding nationalism and religion. Truth be told, many times the understanding of nationalisms and the concept modern 'states' cannot be compatible for all.

The borderline of NI and consequently NI in general has become a secularized political entity where the social structure is characterised due to having a strong social segregation and the consequent residential segregation. As I have mentioned once and again this segregation is a step-back for the welfare of the community in general as the relationships between the citizens are limited due to their nationalist approaches and religious beliefs. As noted above diverse political institutions have taken the matter into their own hands and have tried to promote different social housing, as well as, education programs in order to tackle this problem, however, there is still a lot of work to be done.

The Irish Peace Process and specially the GFA set the foundations for a real peace context, consequently, the modern status quo cannot be understood without taking into account all the previous work done. Although all the work done, Gomley-Heenan and

Aughey (2017) cautiously imply 'there is no guarantee that the delicate structure will not fall apart', Brexit opens a new historical chapter where the continuity of the peace status quo obtained will most surely be put into strain in a society where there is no 'common ideological' mortar holding things together.

With the withdrawal of the UK from the EU loyalists, as well as, unionists might experience a feeling of detachment from the mainland once again reinforcing their 'Britishness'. Similarly, republicans and nationalists might feel more detached with the Irish community of the Republic as the EU symbolised a 'common ground' for all. Therefore, national identities could be even more reinforced prompting political clashes in the NI society. Taking this into account, the UK government will have to put special attention and work hard in order accept the multiculturalism and heterogeneity of the NI society. Parallely, the imagery of the 'border in mind' widely present in the NI society is bound to open old wounds.

The new historical chapter for NI could open new doors for the Irish Secessionist Movement or for the Irish Nationalists. If this social movement is properly and democratically structured it could become a new 'mass movement' that could bring new opportunities for a possible 'united Ireland'. The new historical path could at the same time be a new opportunity for the Irish secessionist movement. If this is properly structured in democratically as a mass movement could bring new opportunities for a possible 'united Ireland'. At the same time, if there is an extreme radicalization of the Republicans or the Loyalists, paramilitary groups could have a potential activation along the increase of political violence, this way, putting peace at stake.

Nobody knows what the future keeps in store for NI. Most surely the withdrawal of the UK from the EU will be bound to shake the delicate foundations in which the Irish Peace status quo is based upon. The detrimental effects Brexit process might behold could make the 'wounds' of a not so cured society even more profound, parallely, being a huge step back for all the effort made.

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