



# Freely Exercised: A Comprehensive Guide to Brexit and the Possibility of Reunification on the Island of Ireland

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# Methodology

Means and methods for collecting this information have relied almost completely on independent reading and analysis. Sources consulted have ranged from histories of Ireland and Europe, journals on the formation of ethnic identity and sectarianism, and contemporary news pieces from sources such as the Irish Times and The Herald. These secondary sources were used to bolster original analysis of peace and Brexit legislation with special attention paid to the text of the Good Friday Agreement of 1998. Historical background was provided by Dr. Andrew Wilson as part of his class on the Irish Diaspora in America.

Unfortunately, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the methodology for collecting this information had to be somewhat altered from the original proposed course of research. Not only were Brexit negotiations and processes themselves delayed for safety, but important summits and lectures meant to bolster this research were cancelled outright. As a result, the scope and scale of this research was altered dramatically. While I do believe that the research methods used to draw the following conclusions were sufficient, it is worth noting that these assertions will need to be supported by other forms of research when they become available.

The researcher would like to extend her thanks to Dr. Andrew Wilson for his support and guidance in the completion of this project. She would also like to thank Claire LeMonnier for her encouragement and insight.

“The dark shadow we seem to see in the distance is not really a mountain ahead, but the shadow of the mountain behind - a shadow from the past thrown forward into our future. It is a dark sludge of historical sectarianism. We can leave it behind us if we wish.”

- David Trimble, First Minister of Northern Ireland (1998-2002)

“Anyone born and bred in Northern Ireland can't be too optimistic.”

- Seamus Heaney, Poet

# A Brief History of the English Influence in Ireland



# The Good Friday Agreement (1998)

After more than 30 years of violent paramilitary warfare in NI, the Belfast Agreement (The Good Friday Agreement, GFA) brought an end to the Troubles. This landmark piece of legislation has been remarkably successful in controlling cross-community violence in NI in the years since its ratification. Unfortunately, the peace established by the GFA has been challenged in recent months by controversial Brexit decisions.

## Objectives:

- The creation of a power sharing government in Northern Ireland
- A cessation of violent attacks between paramilitary groups in Ulster
- Reaffirm the Union between GB and NI while creating a clear path to reunification
- A recommitment to peaceful and democratic means of governance across the Island

## Methods:

- Implementation of formal regulatory bodies including: Power Sharing Assembly in NI, A North/South Ministerial Council, Equality Commission, a British-Irish Council and a British-Irish Intergovernmental Conference
- Establishing formal processes for achieving reunification
- Formally define the rights and responsibilities of the English Parliament in the governance of NI
- Explicitly prohibit the establishment of a land border between NI and Ireland

## The Right to Self Determination:

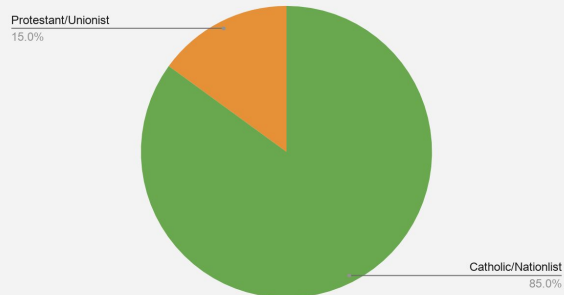
- (i) recognise the legitimacy of whatever choice is freely exercised by a majority of the people of Northern Ireland with regard to its status, whether they prefer to continue to support the Union with Great Britain or a sovereign United Ireland,
- (ii) recognize that it is for the people of the island alone, by agreement between the two parts respectively and without external impediment, to exercise their right of self-determination on the basis of consent, freely and concurrently given, North and South, to bring about a united Ireland, if that is their wish, accepting that this right must be achieved and exercised with and subject to the agreement and consent of a majority of the people of Northern Ireland.

- Northern Ireland Peace Agreement (The Good Friday Agreement), 2.1.(i-ii).

# The Brexit Referendum in Northern Ireland

While opinions on the United Kingdom remain mixed across NI, feelings on the EU are relatively positive. A majority of this sentiment comes from support of EU peacekeeping measures which originally planned to infuse about €1bn directly into border communities that have been historically excluded from the bulk of UK relief funds. Additionally, Northern Ireland has received more than \$780 million in direct yearly support from the EU to aid in economic and agricultural development. These funds were abruptly halted on May 12, 2021.

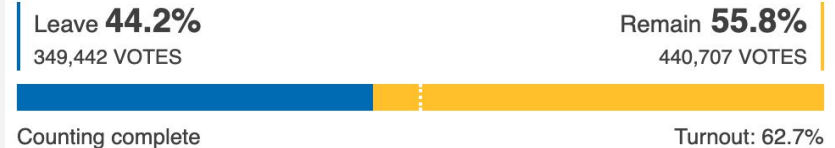
'Remain' Vote in NI



UK votes to LEAVE the EU



## Northern Ireland



Source: "EU Referendum Results." *BBC News*, BBC, [www.bbc.com/news/politics/eu\\_referendum/results](http://www.bbc.com/news/politics/eu_referendum/results).

According to a study by Queen's University Belfast, 94% of citizens living in Central Border communities reported fears that Brexit would impact their personal lives 'considerably' while 74% believed that Brexit would impact their communities 'to a great extent'.

# The Irish Sea Border

## Brexit Trilemma:

1. No hard border between NI and the Republic of Ireland
2. Disentangle the affairs and economy of the United Kingdom from the European 'single market'
3. Avoid a physical or symbolic border between NI and the rest of the UK

## Under the current NI Protocol:

- NI remains a part of the EU's Single Market for goods
- NI is subject to the UK's customs and border standards
- Certain goods flowing from the UK into NI are subject to port checks

While Unionist protests against the Irish Sea Border were largely symbolic during the first few months of 2021, recent violent clashes between loyalist protesters and the PFNI have escalated in the months since COVID-19 lockdowns have been eased. Loyalists fear that the symbolic border between the UK and NI will lead to even more alienation from the rest of British political culture.

As of April 2021, rioting along Belfast's Shankill Road has injured more than 8 police officers and left scenes eerily similar to those at the height of the Troubles. While the violence has been condemned by Unionists and Nationalists alike, the potential for NI to slip back into Troubles-level violence seems to be growing.



Photograph: Paul Faith/AFP/Getty Images



A burned out bus on Shankill Road after a night of rioting on April 7, 2021.

# Sectarianism Amidst COVID-19

While COVID-19 delayed Brexit negotiations in 2020, it escalated hostilities between Nationalist and Unionist communities. Tensions came to a head after the funeral of former IRA member and Sinn Fein leader, Bobby Storey. Unionist critics object to the crowds of unmasked mourners who gathered on the streets of Belfast to attend Storey's funeral procession. Participants in the procession itself included Deputy First Minister of Northern Ireland Michelle O'Neill and former President of Sinn Fein, Gerry Adams. The Public Prosecution Service has declined to prosecute any mourners for violating social distancing regulations in connection with the funeral. The decision stands as one of the most effective supports for Unionists who feel as if Nationalist voices, politics, and social events hold preeminence in Northern Irish society.



Sinn Fein leader Mary Lou McDonald (left), former party leader Gerry Adams (center), and Deputy First Minister of NI Michelle O'Neill (right) walk in the funeral procession of former IRA leader Bobby Storey on June 30, 2020.

Source: Sproule, Luke. "Why Was Bobby Storey's Funeral so Controversial?" BBC News, BBC, 30 Mar. 2021, [www.bbc.com/news/uk-northern-ireland-53275733](https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-northern-ireland-53275733).



# Modern Irish Paramilitaries

While the existence of paramilitary groups as highly organized political organizations has decreased in the years since the GFA, paramilitaries as criminal organizations are still very much active in Northern Ireland. Most notably, these groups have taken on the role of community policing. Fueled by a general distrust of the PSNI, especially amongst Nationalists, paramilitaries have stepped up as outlaw sheriffs. Most notably, their policies of punishment attacks including kneecappings, beatings, and nonlethal shootings have terrorized communities for over two decades. The rates of these punishment attacks is impossible to estimate but it is known that in 2018, more than 60 paramilitary-related assaults and 20 shootings were reported to the PSNI. It is doubtless that the actual number of incidents is much higher due to a reluctance to report paramilitary activities to authorities.

Many high profile deaths including that of journalist Lyra McKee in March of 2019, have been attributed to the IRA. Other low profile deaths and beatings of suspected drug dealers and community nuisances have also been credited to the IRA who claim that these punishment attacks were largely carried out by rogue agents acting on behalf of their communities.

Others have carved out a path to success in NI's poorest communities by selling illicit drugs and running elaborate extortion efforts against local business owners. Key Unionist groups including the UVF, UDA, and RHC have instituted wide-reaching networks of fear and intimidation backed by an arsenal of guns and drugs that allow these groups to operate with an astonishing level of legal impunity.

In recent years the latent politics of the UVF, UDA, and RHC have reemerged as a reaction against Brexit alienation. In a March 3rd, 2020 letter to Boris Johnson, leaders of the UVF, UDA, and RHC formally withdrew their support from the GFA. While they remain committed to peaceful political participation, the letter warned Johnson not to underestimate Unionist paramilitary groups' commitment to maintaining the Union by any means necessary.

“We could be living next door to your grandmother. And that’s why people fear us so much. Because we just come out of the shadows, do our deed, and go home.”

- Anonymous paramilitary group member on extrajudicial kneecappings

# Active Irish Paramilitaries

<u>Name</u>	<u>Affiliation</u>	<u>Confirmed Activity</u>	<u>Political Affiliation</u>
Provisional Irish Republican Army (PIRA)	Nationalist	Retributive shootings short of murder, abductions, exiling Currently inactive	Sinn Féin
Real Irish Republican Army (RIRA), 32 County Sovereign Movement (32CSM)	Nationalist	Planting incendiary devices resulting in death	Sinn Féin
Loyalist Volunteer Force (LVF)	Unionist	Shootings, murder of journalist (2001), drug dealing	None
Ulster Defense Association (UDA)	Unionist	Intimidation of citizens and businesses, extortion, murder, arson, drug trafficking, bombings	Ulster Political Research Group
Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF), Red Hand Commando (RHC)	Unionist	Punishment attacks, drug dealing, bombs charges, extortion, smuggling	Progressive Unionist Party

Data extracted from the 2015 joint report from MI5 and the PSNI entitled 'Paramilitary Groups in Northern Ireland.'  
Source: PSNI, MI5. "Paramilitary Groups in Northern Ireland." 19 Oct. 2015.

# Recent Devolution of Peace in Northern Ireland

In the late weeks of March 2021 and early April 2021, Northern Ireland has seen some of the most violent instances of civil unrest since the Troubles. As of April 10th, more than 70 PSNI officers have been wounded in rioting that the BBC has largely attributed to gangs of Unionist youths protesting the ever-widening divide between Northern Ireland and the UK.

Protestors have called for the Northern Ireland Protocol to be scrapped altogether but such action would not be possible until 2024 when the Protocol will up for review at Stormont.

While many prominent UK politicians have expressed disbelief at the rioting, the seeds of this unrest have long been germinating in NI. Brexit has only served to inflame existing sectarian tensions that were not adequately addressed by the GFA.



Unionists and Nationalists trade fireworks and petrol bombs over the peace wall separating the two communities at Lanark Way in West Belfast on Wednesday, April 7 2021.

Source: Morrison, Peter. "Northern Ireland Leaders Seek Calm after Violence Escalates." *AP NEWS*, Associated Press, 8 Apr. 2021, [apnews.com/article/northern-ireland-belfast-violence-mAyhem-brexite-d9f33e1989a0f81dc604288c5f054d7/gallery/62c68eae87e34e6c96fa7ad00438eb04](https://apnews.com/article/northern-ireland-belfast-violence-mAyhem-brexite-d9f33e1989a0f81dc604288c5f054d7/gallery/62c68eae87e34e6c96fa7ad00438eb04).

# Possibility of Reunification

As civil unrest continues to plague major Northern Irish cities, new polling data seems to hint that a border poll is right around the corner. Unionists fear that a rising birth rate amongst Catholics as well as the economic consequences of Brexit may push the country closer towards unification in the next 10 years. Sinn Féin officials have clashed with high ranking members of the DUP who warn that calling a border poll would have disastrous consequences on NI's ability to combat rising COVID infection rates and contain sectarian rioting. It is unlikely that a formal border poll will be held before renegotiations on the Northern Irish Protocol can take place in 2024.

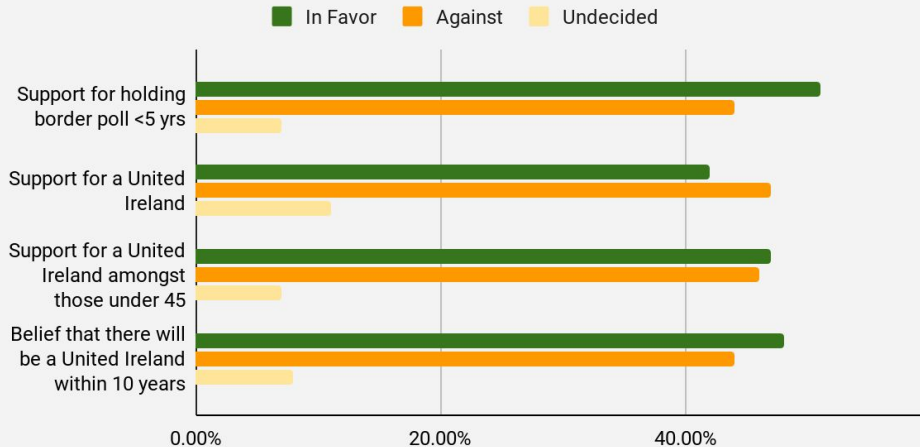
"The majority of the people in NI still fundamentally believe in the Union... Rationally and objectively there is no argument for a United Ireland. It is fundamental; as someone who is British, I do not want to go into the Republic of Ireland."

- Arlene Foster, First Minister of NI, DUP

"There is an unstoppable conversation underway on our constitutional future. It is time for the Irish Government to step up preparations. We can overcome the barriers of partition and build a new Ireland."

- Michelle O'Neill, Deputy First Minister of NI, Sinn Féin

Opinion Polling on Reunification (Jan 2021)



Data courtesy of The Sunday Times



# Conclusion

It is clear that Brexit has not only weakened the tentative peace established by the Good Friday Agreement, but also introduced new points of contention and sectarianism that threaten to plunge Northern Ireland back into civil war. The possibility of peaceful reconciliation is remote and unlikely. While the governments of Northern Ireland, the Republic of Ireland, and the United Kingdom remain fiercely committed to democratic peace, the reemergence of armed paramilitaries coupled with civil unrest and rioting point towards a chaotic next four years. Until the Northern Ireland Protocol can be renegotiated in 2024, Unionists will continue to be alienated from the United Kingdom by trade borders and economic sanctions. Nationalists will use the growing divide to further the cause of a United Ireland. These factors, combined with a high rate of unemployment and drug addiction amongst young men in most of Northern Ireland's biggest cities will continue to fuel paramilitary recruitment on both sides of the conflict.

While the outlook may seem bleak, there is still some hope for a democratic solution. The Northern Ireland Protocol is up for renegotiation at Stormont in 2024 and a border poll may be right around the corner. It is now up to the governments of Northern Ireland and the UK to recommit to peace and infuse communities with much needed economic and social aid. There can be no peace unless the United Kingdom replaces the now expired EU cross-culture initiatives and relief funds. The Good Friday Agreement must be upheld by concrete action instead of by promises and weak trade agreements. While the path to peace may be rocky, it can be navigated. But until that the two communities are willing to take that journey together, Northern Ireland is facing a new era of violence and unrest.



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The above resources include those cited in this presentation and do not reflect the full breadth and scope of research conducted in support of the completion of this fellowship. A full bibliography is available upon request.