

The European Union and Northern Ireland

The European Union has played a key role in assisting Northern Ireland's recovery from decades of conflict and division. The political support of the Commission, and the channelling of EU funds to Northern Ireland, has helped pave the way for several key projects aimed at improving cross-community cooperation and economic development. The Commission and Parliament continue to engage actively with the main political players in Northern Ireland in order to ensure that the peace process remains on track.

Background

The 1998 Belfast Agreement (or Good Friday Agreement) led to a devolved assembly including both unionists and nationalists. After a difficult beginning, during which the new institutions collapsed on several occasions, a 2007 agreement removed the final hurdles to power sharing. The DUP (non-attached in the EP) agreed to go into power with Sinn Féin (GUE/NGL). Powers over policing and justice were subsequently devolved in April 2010, adding to those devolved earlier in other fields, such as for health and education.

The Northern Ireland Task Force

Building on a decade of EU support, Commission President José Manuel Barroso set up the Northern Ireland Task Force in 2007. Operating under the Commissioner for Regional Policy, the NITF has sought to bring all relevant DGs together with Northern Irish authorities, in order to identify ways in which the Northern Ireland Executive can better engage with EU policy-makers, and in earmarking funds for essential projects in the region. In 2008 the Commission published a report setting out a number of areas where funding could be allocated to improve community relations, cross-border cooperation, tackle environmental problems and increase private investment in the region. Commissioner Johannes Hahn said at the launch of the report, 'Northern Ireland is one of the regions that stand out in my mind because of the additional challenges that it has been facing, compared to the other regions, in seeking to overcome a history of conflict and promote peace and reconciliation, stability and prosperity.'

Cohesion policy and Northern Ireland: The PEACE programme

Key to the recommendations of the task force was the setting up of the PEACE III Programme (2007-2013). It has a total budget of €333 million, of which €225 million comes from the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF). The programme has two priorities: *Reconciling Communities* (aimed at supporting projects for conflict resolution) and *Contributing to a shared Society* (including the regeneration of urban, rural and border areas, aimed at tackling the separation of communities along ethnic lines).

PEACE IV and INTERREG programmes 2014-2020

The next tranche of funding for Northern Ireland will come from both the PEACE IV and Cross-Border Territorial Cooperation (INTERREG) programmes. The EU contribution to the PEACE IV budget will be €229 million (including an additional €50 million from the UK government taken from its overall European Territorial Cooperation budget). The EU will contribute €240 million to the INTERREG programme. Additionally there is a requirement for €42 million of 'match funding', resulting in an approximate total programme allocation of €282 million. On 3 November 2014, the Commission published a report entitled '[Northern Ireland in Europe](#)', highlighting the progress that has been made since the NITF was set up in 2007. The report states that a 'relationship of confidence between the Commission services and the Northern Irish administration has been established', which has led to a number of important outcomes for the region. This has been complemented by close cooperation between NITF and the EP, particularly the three MEPs elected in Northern Ireland.