

Impact of Brexit on the Development of Irish Regions and their Cross-Border Cooperation


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The United Kingdom (UK) and Ireland's common membership of the European Union (EU) aided both the peace process and regional development on the island of Ireland. On 31 January 2020, the exit of the UK from the EU (Brexit) saw the land border between Ireland and Northern Ireland (which is part of the UK) become an external border of the EU with a third country.

Main observations

EU membership was a catalyst for economic and regional development on the island and a crucial support for the post-1998 Agreement peace process. Direct funding, e.g. through INTERREG and PEACE, aided mutually-beneficial collaborative frameworks, mainly led by local/regional authorities. Regulatory alignment in the Single Market saw wider and deeper cooperation in different sectors.

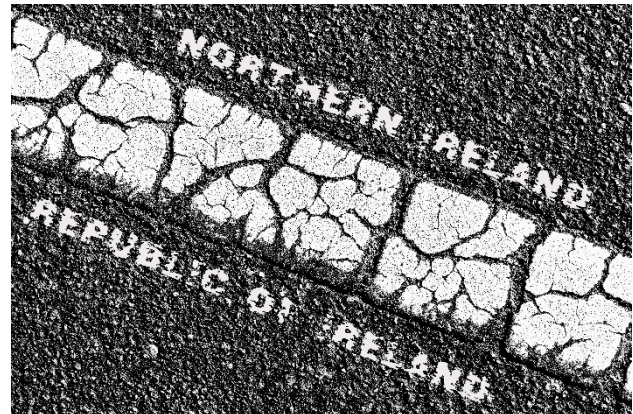
The study

explores the impact of Brexit on the development of Irish regions and their cross-border cooperation.

The immediate impact of Brexit has not been the tremendous disruption expected. In part, this can be attributed to the strength of regional and cross-border partnerships and collaborations that have been built up over the

last two decades. The Irish Government, together with local and regional authorities, the business community and civic society have been proactive in taking an all-island and cross-border approach to redressing what issues they can as they arise. However, the effectiveness of such actions is curtailed by other consequences of Brexit.

The effects of Brexit are complex and cross-cutting. While its ramifications will evolve over time, not least as the EU-UK relationship adjusts, impacts are already being felt across a range of sectors on the island of Ireland. Those most affected include tourism, transport and environmental protection.



The Protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland that forms part of the UK-Withdrawal Agreement has avoided the creation of a harder Irish border for the movement of goods, and it has also seen the UK and EU commit to maintaining cross-border cooperation. However, there is a lot that the Protocol does not cover, including services. This means that the potential for regulatory divergence between the UK and EU remains a key concern.

Cross-border cooperation on the island is no longer primarily covered by common EU single market membership but is facilitated by a complex set of legal agreements and policy arenas. There now are new regulatory 'borders' all around Northern Ireland for various sectors and agencies to navigate.

Brexit has given rise to challenges for freedom of movement and cross-border access for work, education and leisure purposes. These challenges and uncertainties have implications for sustainable growth and the future viability and vitality of the regions across the island of Ireland.

Other issues and concerns are expected to grow in significance, including labour rights, recognition of skills and qualifications, data-sharing and data protection, and access to research funding, where there are growing differences between Ireland/Northern Ireland.



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Uncertainty, strains on resources, and difficulties in long-term strategic planning are linked to the political context of the EU-UK relationship, which has been strained. The Windsor Framework (February 2023) offers hope that both parties will continue to seek agreed solutions to difficulties arising from Northern Ireland's unique position. However, it does not ameliorate the political sensitivities that persist and polarise in the region.

The destabilisation of community and cross-border relations that has occurred post-Brexit will take time to restore. The PEACE PLUS programme is key to the immediate continuity of cross-border funding and relationships. The Strategic Planning and Engagement Programme under PEACE PLUS is a welcome addition to the programme. With the ending of European Social Funding in Northern Ireland, however, the scale of the social problems to be addressed should not be underestimated.

Across the island, some regions continue to lag behind, including those along the border. The uncertainty arising from Brexit compounds fears that already-deprived areas will see a decline in economic and social indicators.

The role of the EU in addressing the impact of Brexit on the unique situation in Ireland/Northern Ireland is valued and acknowledged for showing flexibility and long-term commitment as necessary.

Conclusions and policy recommendations

- **Multi-stakeholder symposium:** There is a case to be made for convening a multi-stakeholder symposium to consider a long-term vision for the regions of the island of Ireland.
- **Economic corridors:** Greater commitment is needed to developing the potential of emerging economic corridors such as the Dublin-Belfast Corridor and the Atlantic Economic Corridor stretching from Derry to Cork.
- **Regional models of good practice:** There is a need for greater promotion of regional models of good practice, such as the 'Smart Region Initiative' in the Southern Region and the North West Strategic Growth Partnership in the North West.
- **Utilising existing institutions:** There is a strong case for better utilising the institutions of the Good

Friday/Belfast Agreement, across its three strands, to meet the challenges that are being posed by Brexit.

- **Information portal:** There is a need for an information portal on Brexit and the Protocol/Windsor Framework that is politically neutral and gives clear guidance on decisions made.
- **All-island database:** There is a growing need for an all-island database covering data as it relates to, for example, the economy, health, education, demographics, connectivity, and supply chains.
- **Long-term funding solutions:** Brexit will necessitate the need for new relationships/new collaborative structures to be established. This will require financial support. With the conclusion of programmes such as INTERREG Ireland-Wales, there is a need for long-term funding solutions which support inter-regional development as well as cross-border cooperation.



Source: CBC News

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