

EU cohesion policy support to 25 years of peace in Northern Ireland

SUMMARY

EU integration represents an inspiring example of conflict resolution. Some 30 years of violent sectarian conflict in Northern Ireland was brought to an end in 1998, with the signature of the Good Friday/Belfast Agreement. At the time, both the United Kingdom (UK) and Ireland were Member States of the European Union, having both joined the European Communities on 1 January 1973.

The EU's engagement in the Northern Ireland peace process materialised first through support for the International Fund for Ireland. As part of its cohesion policy, the EU then directed significant investment to Northern Ireland through building specific cohesion programmes into the framework of the UK's allocations. From 1995, EU funding was channelled through successive PEACE programmes, supporting peace and reconciliation and promoting economic and social stability in Northern Ireland and the six border counties of Ireland. The European territorial cooperation programme (Interreg) was a further EU cohesion policy tool playing a role in Northern Ireland.

Since the UK's withdrawal from the EU on 1 February 2020, the PEACE PLUS programme, the largest ever cross-border cooperation programme on the island of Ireland, has been agreed, and it will continue to support the process towards peace and reconciliation in Northern Ireland.

The European Parliament's support for the EU's financial contribution to the peace process has been constant, and Parliament expressed concern for the continuity and stability of this support after the UK's withdrawal from the EU. MEPs have also called for efforts to increase general awareness, and to raise the profile of the impact and necessity of EU funding in Northern Ireland.



The Peace Bridge in Derry/Londonderry, funded under the EU's PEACE programme.

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EU integration as a model of peace and cooperation

EU integration represents an inspiring example of conflict resolution: a cross-border peace project aimed at reconciliation between past enemies and based on cooperation and mutual understanding. On 1 January 1993, the [European single market](#) came into effect among the then 12 Member States – including the UK and Ireland, which had joined the European Communities in 1973 (along with Denmark). One of the consequences was the effective removal of customs posts along the Ireland-Northern Ireland border. However, given the then ongoing 'Troubles' in Northern Ireland, restrictions and a significant level of security checks continued to apply to that border. When in 2007 Bertie Ahern [addressed](#) a joint sitting of the UK Houses of Parliament at Westminster – a first for any *Taoiseach*, Ireland's prime minister – he recognised that, 'Our joint [EU] membership has served as a vital catalyst for the building of a deeper relationship between our two islands.

Europe forms a key part of our shared future. The European Union has acted as a potent example of a new political model that enables old enemies to become partners in progress.'

The Good Friday Agreement

The [Belfast Agreement](#) – widely known as the 'Good Friday Agreement' since it was concluded on a 'Good Friday', the Friday before Easter Sunday – was signed on 10 April 1998 by the UK Prime Minister, Tony Blair, and Ireland's *Taoiseach*, Bertie Ahern. The [agreement](#) aimed at fostering cooperation between communities to bring an end to 30 years of sectarian conflict in Northern Ireland ('[The Troubles](#)'), between violent extremists from among the predominantly Protestant Unionists (Loyalists), who want Northern Ireland to remain part of the UK, and from among the predominantly Roman Catholic Nationalists (Republicans), who want reunification with Ireland. Coordinated referendums held in both Ireland and Northern Ireland approved the Agreement, which has three strands, namely the 'Democratic Institutions in Northern Ireland', the 'North/South Ministerial Council', and the British-Irish Council.

EU cohesion policy: A tool for 'PEACE'

Even before the Good Friday Agreement was signed in 1998, the EU had shown its commitment to peace in the region by directing significant investment there: first contributing to the [International Fund for Ireland](#) (IFI, €349 million from 1989 to 2010), then through regional policy – in particular the PEACE programme. The latter came on top of regional programme funding for Northern Ireland within the basic [allocations](#) to the UK. This funding included €472.6 million for the 2007-2013 period – €306.8 million from the European Regional Development Fund ([ERDF](#)), €165.8 million from the European Social Fund ([ESF](#)) – and almost €1 billion for the 2014-2020 period – €308 million ERDF, €205.3 million ESF, €227.4 million from the Rural Development Programme (RDP), and €243.1 million from the Fisheries and Maritime Operational Programme.

The PEACE programme

The aim of [PEACE](#) has been to support peace and reconciliation, and promote economic and social stability in Northern Ireland and the six border counties of Ireland (Louth, Monaghan, Cavan, Leitrim, Sligo and Donegal). PEACE I was launched in 1995, following the paramilitary ceasefires of 1994, and covered the 1995-1999 period. PEACE II continued the previous programme and was eventually extended until 2006. PEACE III covered the 2007-2013 period, and the [PEACE IV](#) programme covered the 2014-2020 period. Despite progress, the European Commission considered it necessary to continue EU financial support for peace and reconciliation, as it saw that divisions between communities were still evident in low levels of inter-community trust and high levels of residential and social segregation, as well as in expressions of identity which often resulted in community tensions and increased polarisation. This led to recognition of the distinctive nature of the PEACE programmes, and provision for certain derogations from the general rules applicable to cross-

A bridge for peace

Opened in June 2011, the [Peace Bridge](#) links the two sides of the river Foyle, connecting nationalist and unionist districts in Derry/Londonderry, and it has become an iconic symbol of post-Troubles evolution. The pedestrian and cycle bridge, pictured on the first page of this briefing, was built with funding from PEACE III.

border cooperation programmes. The four main objectives of PEACE IV were: promoting shared education; helping children and young people; creating shared spaces and services; and building positive relations at local level.

The PEACE programmes have been managed by the Special EU Programmes Body ([SEUPB](#)) – formed in 1999 under the [British-Irish Agreement](#) – which was also responsible for Interreg (see below). The total financial contribution for the first three PEACE programmes amounted to €1.3 billion. The first two programmes received funding from all the [structural funds](#); PEACE III was funded exclusively from the regional fund (ERDF). The total allocated for the PEACE IV programme (2014-2020) was €270 million: 85 % from the ERDF (€229 million) and the remaining 15 % (€41 million) match-funded by the Irish Government and the Northern Ireland Executive. Local partnerships and non-governmental organisations were in charge of the programme's implementation.

The PEACE programme offered opportunities for participation and dialogue, bringing decision-making and responsibility for community development closer to the people. It funded a wide range of projects, including projects to support victims and survivors of the violence, young people and SMEs, infrastructure and urban regeneration projects, and projects in support of immigrants and of celebrating the ethnic diversity of society as a whole. The programme also offered an example of peace-building policy that can be shared throughout Europe and beyond.

The Interreg V A programme

The EU also promotes economic, social and territorial cohesion through [European territorial cooperation](#) programmes. Since 1991, the Interreg programme has channelled approximately €1.13 billion into an area encompassing Northern Ireland, the six border counties of Ireland and south-western Scotland. In the 2014-2020 programming period, [Interreg V A](#) – UK–Ireland (Northern Ireland, Ireland and Scotland) – continued EU assistance to help create a more prosperous and sustainable cross-border region. The programme had four core objectives: research and innovation for cross-border enterprise development; environmental initiatives; sustainable transport projects; and cross-border health and social care services. Of the total [€282.8 million](#) budget, the ERDF provided €240 million, while a further €43 million was match-funded by the Irish Government and the Northern Ireland Executive.

Post-Brexit EU support

The UK formally withdrew from the EU as of 1 February 2020, giving rise to concerns for the future of the peace process and cross-border cooperation, since Northern Ireland is the only part of the UK with a land border with an EU Member State. The [EU-UK Withdrawal Agreement](#) includes a Protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland, which aims to safeguard the Good Friday Agreement by avoiding the need to put in place a hard border on the island. Under the Protocol, Northern Ireland remains in the EU single market for goods, as well as the UK's internal market. However, practical implementation of the Protocol has been marred by rising tensions and political challenges, owing to the requirement for customs controls between Northern Ireland and the rest of the UK (an 'Irish Sea border'). The February 2023 [Windsor Framework](#) is designed to facilitate trade for Northern Ireland, overcoming the problems and, it is hoped, opening a new chapter in EU-UK relations.

Against this backdrop, in July 2022 the Commission adopted [PEACE PLUS](#), the largest ever cross-border cooperation programme on the island, to strengthen peace and reconciliation within Northern Ireland and cross-border cooperation with Ireland. It combines the previous Interreg and PEACE funding strands in a new programme for the 2021-2027 period. The EU is to invest €235 million from the European territorial cooperation allocation of the ERDF. Together with UK funding and additional national co-financing from Ireland and Northern Ireland, this will result in a total investment of €1.1 billion. The programme will target investment in six key thematic areas: building peaceful and thriving communities; delivering economic regeneration and transformation; empowering and investing in young people; healthy and inclusive communities; supporting a

sustainable and better-connected future; and building and embedding partnership and collaboration.

European Parliament support for peace in Northern Ireland

The European Parliament (EP) has been constant in its [support](#) both for the EU's financial contribution to the PEACE and IFI programmes, and for the continuation of the PEACE programme following the UK's withdrawal from the EU. In April 2017, in its first [resolution](#) adopted in the wake of the UK's formal notification of EU withdrawal, Parliament expressed the need to take into account the Good Friday Agreement in the withdrawal agreement to be negotiated, in order to mitigate its effects on the border between Ireland and Northern Ireland. Members insisted 'on the absolute need to ensure continuity and stability of the Northern Ireland peace process and to do everything possible to avoid a hardening of the border'.

In its September 2018 [resolution](#) on the impact of EU cohesion policy on Northern Ireland, Parliament underlined the contribution of EU cohesion policy to Northern Ireland, not least in terms of assisting the recovery of deprived urban and rural areas, tackling climate change and building cross-community and cross-border contacts in the context of the peace process. Recognising the importance of the PEACE programme for sustaining the peace process, as it fosters reconciliation and inter- and cross-community and cross-border contacts, Members called for greater general awareness, and efforts to raise the profile of the impact and necessity of EU funding in Northern Ireland, in particular by informing the general public about the impact of EU-funded projects on the peace process and the economic development of the region. Parliament also suggested Northern Ireland should be able to participate in certain special EU programmes, such as PEACE and Interreg VA, arguing that ending such participation could endanger cross-border and inter- and cross-community trust-building activities, and potentially jeopardise the peace process.

John Hume, MEP

A central character in the Northern Irish peace process, [John Hume's](#) engagement won him the Nobel Prize for Peace in 1998 together with David Trimble. Hume was a Member of the European Parliament for five terms (1979-2004). During this time he was almost uninterruptedly an active member of the Committee on Regional Development.



Bust of Hume unveiled in the European Parliament in Strasbourg, June 2022.

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