

THE SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC IMPACT OF BREXIT ACROSS NORTHERN IRELAND:

REGIONAL AND SECTORAL PERSPECTIVES

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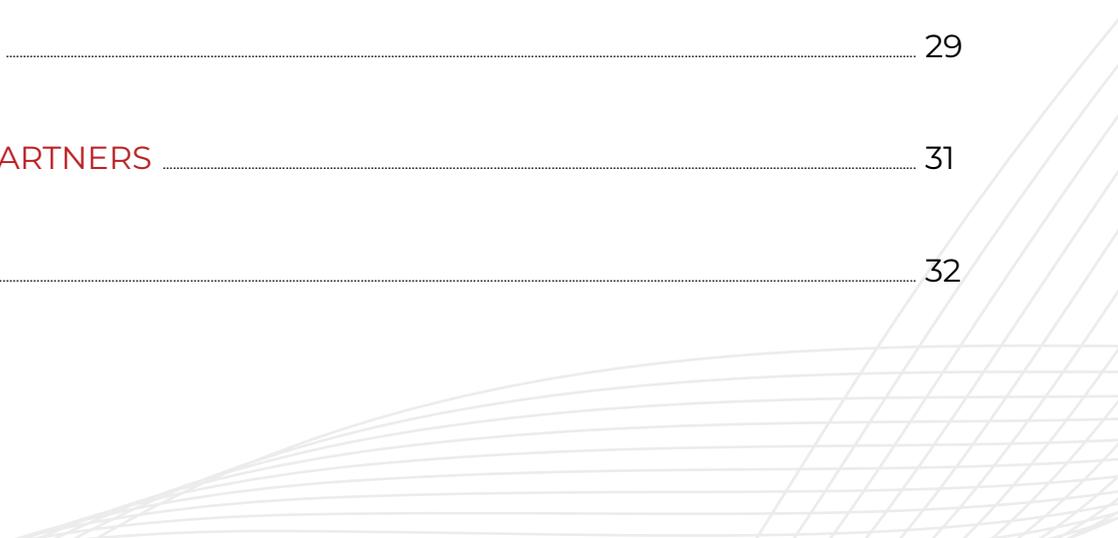
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Northern Ireland's (NI's) membership of the European Union (EU) reduced legislative barriers to trade, customs and immigration, as well as easing cooperation of economies and services between NI and the Republic of Ireland (ROI). The major framework documents on the NI peace process had assumed that the United Kingdom (UK) and ROI would remain EU members and both be under the jurisdiction of the European Court of Justice (ECJ). The EU has also played a significant ideational role in the development of what became the Good Friday Agreement/Belfast Agreement by facilitating a reconceptualisation of the meaning of national sovereignty and identity. Since the 2016 referendum, Brexit has dominated the political conversation in NI and has had profound social and economic effects on all sectors of society, ranging from access to public and charitable services, education and employment to identity and social cohesion. Using semi-structured interviews with 19 leaders from politics, civil society, and the public sector, this policy study explores the perceived impact of Brexit on service users and constituents in the period since the 2016 vote. Perspectives were nuanced, with key differences across sectors and regions. There was, however, a common focus on the impact of sustained uncertainty caused by political impasse and the suspension of the devolved NI government at Stormont. In addition, the necessity to articulate a positive future for NI, given its unique position under the Windsor Framework, was commonly articulated, raising questions as to what a future relationship between NI and the EU would optimally and feasibly look like.

INTRODUCTION AND CONTEXT

1 INTRODUCTION AND CONTEXT

After decades of expansion and deepening integration across Europe, the Brexit referendum in June 2016 marked the first time a state would choose to revoke its membership of the EU.¹ Northern Ireland (NI) has become a new boundary between the EU and a non-member state and, amidst numerous practical and legislative challenges, the withdrawal process has been dominated by its impact on the island of Ireland. From early on in UK-EU negotiations, both parties agreed that the “unique circumstances” on the island of Ireland in the context of the UK’s decision to withdraw from the EU (arising from the ROI/NI land border, alongside the provisions of the Good Friday Agreement (GFA)/Belfast Agreement (BFA) and the North-South co-operation it had facilitated) would require some sort of special accommodation.² The complexity of NI’s political status complicated and extended the negotiation of the UK’s exit from the EU.³ The eventual NI Protocol and Windsor Framework, finalised in March 2023 as an adjunct to the Withdrawal Agreement, has given NI a hybrid status, at once both *outside* the EU, as the rest of the UK, and *inside*, as it remains within the customs and tariffs union.⁴ Similarly, the region is firmly within the UK, but it is also somewhat apart, as its ports will be where customs checks are operated.⁵

The research literature displays a broad consensus that in the long run Brexit will make the UK poorer because it will create new barriers to trade, foreign direct investment and immigration. However, there is substantial uncertainty over how large the effect will be, with plausible estimates of the cost ranging between 1 and 10% of the UK’s income per capita.⁶ Brexit threatens further negative economic consequences for NI. The implementation of the NI Protocol has introduced a degree of customs and regulatory checks between NI and the rest of the UK, leading to fears of potential trade barriers, delays and increased costs for businesses.⁷ There are fears that the agriculture sector will be especially negatively affected by changes in sub-

sidies and market access.⁸ A 2021 paper from the Economic and Social Research Institute notes that future supply-chain disruptions are a serious concern, with added administrative burdens affecting the timely delivery of goods, and that the uncertainty surrounding Brexit has impacted investor confidence, potentially influencing foreign direct investment in the region.⁹ Brexit also has implications for cross-border cooperation between NI and ROI, affecting joint projects and collaboration.¹⁰ The communities living on the border between NI and ROI, already some of the most economically disadvantaged communities across the UK and ROI, face added uncertainty in the wake of Brexit, with imminent practical concerns, including how access to healthcare, education and social supports (often accessed across the ROI/NI border) will be affected, and how any disruptions to cross-border movement will impact their day-to-day lives.¹¹

Seven years since the Brexit referendum, the political context in NI is one of stasis and frustration.¹² Throughout the intervening period, there has been sustained uncertainty about what exactly border arrangements would look like, depending heavily on the eventual negotiated economic relationship between the UK and EU.¹³ This uncertainty has run in tandem with the disruption of day-to-day politics in NI. The NI Executive, the devolved government of NI, was suspended from 2017 to 2020 with the Assembly resuming on 11 January 2020, shortly before the UK's exit from the EU.¹⁴ Elections were held for a seventh assembly in May 2022, with the nationalist Sinn Féin emerging as the largest party, followed by the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP).¹⁵ The DUP refused to assent to the election of a speaker as part of a protest against the NI Protocol, which meant that the assembly could not continue other business, including the appointment of a new Executive. Consequently, there was no sitting Executive between May 2022 and February 2024.¹⁶ In the absence of a functioning NI government, many important decisions that impacted the lives of citizens, including those related to healthcare, education, infrastructure, and social services, were left unaddressed.¹⁷

Beyond debate on the practicality of borders, trade and legislative arrangements for NI, the UK's withdrawal from the EU has had potentially serious implications for social cohesion and peace on the island of Ireland, destroying a hard-won and "fragile political equilibrium".¹⁸ Brexit is problematic for NI because it accentuates the long-standing division between the political identity groups of unionists and nationalists.¹⁹ Membership of the EU complemented the peace process, as it provided unionists and nationalists with a context that surpassed their ideological, political and territorial differences.²⁰ In particular, the "hard" Brexit championed by the Johnson administration (2019-22) and the perceived disregard for the concerns of the nationalist population has had a negative effect, both on British-Irish relations and on perceptions of the UK for NI nationalists.²¹ The EU's ideational role was crucial in shaping the principles and values underpinning the peace process; it provided a framework for peace, reconciliation, cross-border cooperation and the protection of minority rights.²² The Irish Sea border, as a consequence of the NI Protocol, constitutes an existential threat to the territorial identity of the UK for the unionist community,²³ and it is feared that the EU has also lost its position as a neutral arbiter in NI, with many unionists seeing the EU as siding with the goals of ROI and NI nationalists throughout the withdrawal process.²⁴

Brexit has had a profound impact on national identities in NI, introducing complexities that have reverberated through the region's social and political fabric. The Brexit referendum outcome highlights the ongoing divide between British and Irish nationality in NI, identifying cultural, ethnic and religious groups aligned with the referendum vote. While the majority of people who identify as Irish voted to remain, the majority of people who identify as British voted to leave.²⁵ These voting outcomes created new identity categories of leavers and remainers and poses the question of what the loss of a unifying EU identity will mean in this context. The decision for the UK to leave the EU, particularly how it unfolded, has exacerbated historical divisions and heightened the sensitivity of national identity in NI.²⁶ Brexit has resurrected historical tensions, challenged the delicate balance of the

peace process and fostered a renewed debate on the region's future within the broader context of the UK and the EU.²⁷ Certain conflict narratives resurged during the Brexit referendum (e.g., beliefs that illegitimate rule from Westminster and the partition of Ireland underpinned the Troubles).²⁸ In NI, there is evidence that political leaders have capitalised on Brexit by translating it into a vision of opportunity: to achieve a united Ireland for nationalists or to strengthen the union for unionists.²⁹ Beyond this, Brexit incentivises a resurgence in parties' conflict narratives, as border specifics "ultimately indicate whether the Northern Irish territory moves towards the UK or Ireland".³⁰ The complexities of identity, intertwined with political, historical and cultural factors, continue to shape the evolving narrative of NI in the aftermath of Brexit.

This policy study investigates the perceived effects of Brexit on service users and constituents since the 2016 vote by analysing semi-structured interviews with 19 leaders from politics, civil society and the public sector. The findings reveal nuanced perspectives, highlighting significant variations across different sectors and regions. The findings reveal a common emphasis on the impact of sustained uncertainty arising from the political impasse and the suspension of the devolved government at Stormont. Moreover, the interviews shed light on the shared concern regarding the need to articulate a positive future for NI, especially given its unique position under the Windsor Framework, prompting crucial considerations about the optimal and feasible nature of the future relationship between NI and the EU.

METHODOLOGY

2 METHODOLOGY

2.1 RESEARCH DESIGN

This policy study employs a qualitative research design, relying on semi-structured interviews conducted with 19 leaders from various sectors, including politics, civil society and the public sector. The use of semi-structured interviews allows for a nuanced exploration of perspectives, capturing key differences across sectors and regions. Additionally, the methodology incorporates a review of the literature spanning the period from 2016 to 2023, with the incorporation of existing quantitative data, including insights from the Northern Ireland Life and Times (NILT) survey. This dual approach aims to provide a rich and contextually grounded understanding of the perspectives held by key stakeholders in NI.

2.2 PARTICIPANTS

The selection aimed to capture diverse perspectives from individuals holding influential positions across different sectors, contributing to a comprehensive understanding of the issues under investigation. The study included a purposive sample of 19 participants, representing three distinct groups, as outlined in Table 1.

Table 1. Details of participants interviewed for this study.

Sector	Organisation type/political party	Region
Civil service	Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs	Belfast
Civil service	Department for Communities	Belfast
Civil service	Department of Education	North Down
Civil service	Department of Health	Belfast
Community/voluntary sector	Umbrella organisation	Belfast
Community/voluntary sector	Youth organisation	Foyle
Community/voluntary sector	Youth organisation	Belfast
Community/voluntary sector	Rural development organisation	West Tyrone
Community/voluntary sector	Older person's organisation	Mid Ulster
Community/voluntary sector	Migrant organisation	Foyle
Community/voluntary sector	Men's organisation	Belfast
Government	DUP councillor	South Antrim
Government	Sinn Féin councillor	West Tyrone
Government	Alliance councillor	South Antrim
Government	Independent councillor	Newry and Armagh
Government	Alliance Member of the Legislative Assembly (MLA)	Belfast
Government	Social Democratic and Labour Party MLA	Belfast
Government	Sinn Féin MLA	Fermanagh and South Tyrone
Government	Sinn Féin MLA	Belfast

2.3 DATA COLLECTION

All interviews were conducted remotely over Zoom. The virtual format facilitated access to participants, overcoming logistical and geographical constraints associated with face-to-face interviews. Participants were provided with detailed information about the study's purpose, methods and potential implications before obtaining their informed consent. Confidentiality and anonymity were assured, and participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the

study at any point. A semi-structured interview protocol was developed to guide discussions, while allowing flexibility for participants to share their perspectives in depth. The questions were designed to elicit information related to the research objectives, exploring themes such as economic inequality, access to services, identity, community cohesion and aspirations for the future.

2.4 ANALYSIS

All interviews were recorded using Zoom's recording feature and subsequently transcribed using Otter AI transcription software. Transcribed data were subjected to thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns, themes and key concepts. The iterative process involved coding, categorisation and interpretation of data to derive meaningful insights. The analysis was conducted manually by two independent researchers, enhancing the rigour and reliability of the findings. This study adhered to ethical principles outlined by the Sociology Association of Ireland and the British Sociological Association. Ethical considerations included informed consent, confidentiality and the responsible use of sensitive

information. To enrich the qualitative findings, the study incorporated analysis and cross-referencing with existing literature and quantitative data sources. Notably, the British social attitudes survey and the NILT survey were utilised to contextualise and triangulate qualitative insights, providing a comprehensive understanding of the issues explored.

FINDINGS

3 FINDINGS

3.1 IDENTIFYING AND ISOLATING THE BREXIT EFFECT

The existing body of literature on NI since the 2016 Brexit referendum recognises the challenges in disentangling the cause-and-effect relationship and comprehending the true social and economic impact of Brexit. The complexity of this assessment is compounded by the concurrent occurrence of a “poly-crisis”, encompassing the challenges posed by COVID-19, the war in Ukraine, and a broader cost-of-living crisis that has reverberated throughout Europe. Interviews conducted for this study consistently underscored the intricate nature of unravelling the distinct influences of Brexit within this multifaceted crisis context. A manager from a rural development organisation in West Tyrone aptly captured this sentiment, stating “It’s complex, to draw out exactly where it’s come from, the poly-crisis of Brexit, of climate change, of the pandemic that we have experienced in the last few years has changed everything”.

Furthermore, the interviewees highlighted divergent perspectives on attributing economic challenges solely to Brexit. A member of the DUP expressed concern that Brexit was unfairly shouldering the blame for a broader cost-of-living crisis, asserting

“

Things are being cynically blamed on Brexit that is down to the broader cost-of-living crisis that is happening just as much in the South [of Ireland] as it is here. We wouldn’t have escaped it if Brexit hadn’t happened as some people suggest.

”

This DUP councillor goes on to describe the frustration that the long period spent trying to finalise the Withdrawal Agreement has led to many other pertinent issues being left unaddressed: “It’s Groundhog Day every day. Everyone is so sick talking about it, but it must feature in every discussion; it distracts from things that matter to people in the here and now”.

One recurrent theme of the interviews is the disruptive impact of Brexit on everyday politics in NI, characterised by increased instability and economic hardship. A civil servant from the Department of Communities emphasised the tangible consequence: “The impact of Brexit is that Stormont isn’t sitting, that’s the real impact in Northern Ireland, and it’s not likely to end”. This disruption has led to the suspension of the NI Executive and periods of direct rule from Westminster, as noted by previous research.³¹ The absence of a functioning devolved government has resulted in the neglect of NI-specific concerns, exacerbating the challenges posed by spending cuts driven by policies of the UK Conservative government. An independent councillor from the Newry-Armagh region elaborated on this, stating

“

Many of these cuts to services and spending that we are seeing now are really because we are living under a Conservative and neo-liberal government, in whose decisions we essentially have no input. It may have been like this in any case, even if we had to be ruled by this Conservative government.

”

This underscores the broader implications of Brexit on the political landscape of NI, extending beyond its immediate economic consequences.

From the insights gleaned during the interviews, a prevailing sentiment emerged that the full impact of Brexit remains on the horizon, with its true cost yet to unfold. The trajectory of this impact hinges on several critical factors, foremost among them being the enduring repercussions of custom checks at NI's ports. Additionally, the termination of NI's eligibility to draw upon the European Social Fund stands as a pivotal determinant of the future landscape. Shelly et al. underscore the significance of these factors in shaping the post-Brexit scenario.³² A manager within the community/voluntary sector eloquently captured this ongoing process of transformation, stating "The destruction is still very much underway; we are at the stage where EU funding is only now running out in several areas". This candid observation emphasises the temporal dimension of Brexit's impact, suggesting that the ramifications are unfolding gradually, with the cessation of EU funding marking a palpable juncture in this unfolding narrative. The anticipation of future challenges underscores the complexity of assessing the true cost of Brexit, as the repercussions are not only contingent on existing conditions but are also interwoven with the evolving dynamics of policies, funding and regulations. Thus, a comprehensive understanding of the multifaceted effects of Brexit necessitates a nuanced examination of these ongoing developments and their cumulative influence on various sectors within NI.

3.2 ECONOMIC IMPLICATIONS

Brexit's predicted impact on trade, foreign direct investment and immigration dynamics, as outlined by Sampson,³³ set the stage for a complex economic scenario. An intriguing contrast emerged, as NI displayed superior economic growth compared to the rest of the UK between 2020 and 2022, a phenomenon initially attributed to the NI Protocol.³⁴ However, an alternative viewpoint posits that the disparities in economic performance cannot be solely attributed to the protocol. Rather, these differences are deeply rooted in pre-existing conditions. Notably,

NI's economy weathered the COVID-19 pandemic more resiliently than the rest of the UK due to its larger public sector, challenging the direct correlation between the NI Protocol's implementation and economic vitality. Further analysis of growth rates in Q4 of 2020, coinciding with the protocol's operation, reveals NI's growth (5%) lagging behind the UK average (6.6%), suggesting a more nuanced narrative.

The cessation of EU funding, particularly the substantial contributions from the PEACE funding program, has significantly impacted NI's socio-economic fabric. The PEACE program, having provided £1.3 billion since 1995, was instrumental in facilitating reconciliation efforts by operating in tandem with the principles of the GFA/BFA, considering the delicate dynamics between unionist-nationalist and South-North relations.³⁵ This initiative was grounded in the premise that economic aid could alleviate tensions stemming from "high levels of poverty and economic deprivation" among conflicting communities.³⁶ Crucially, the EU adopted a bottom-up approach, empowering local communities to autonomously determine the best utilisation of the funding, aligning with the ethos of grassroots empowerment and community-driven development. The loss of this funding has created a void in community-driven initiatives and reconciliation efforts, impacting various sectors and exacerbating existing socio-economic divides. The absence of these crucial resources not only hinders ongoing reconciliation but also disrupts the socio-economic balance, potentially contributing to increased tensions within communities. The repercussions of this loss extend beyond financial ramifications, permeating the very fabric of societal cohesion and collaboration, echoing the sentiment that the absence of such resources undermines the nurturing of sustainable peace and cooperation within NI.

The apprehension surrounding the imminent loss of funding in the wake of Brexit is vividly expressed by a manager from an older person's organisation in Mid Ulster. Reflecting on the pre-Brexit landscape, the manager notes, "Before Brexit, because once your operating streams were EU-wide, and there was specifically EU funding for cross-border work,

that was not just peace funding [...] there was also the capacity to work in other areas". This sentiment encapsulates the multifaceted nature of the funding ecosystem, wherein EU-wide operating streams facilitated diverse initiatives beyond peace funding, thereby enabling a broader scope of engagement and impact. NI has historically been a recipient of the highest amount of EU funding within the UK. A statement from a civil servant in the Department of Communities underscores the tangible impact of Brexit-induced funding challenges, stating "There has been real pressure to find funding to keep local authorities and other organizations running". This financial strain not only jeopardises the continuity of essential services but also cascades into the realms of innovation and growth. A civil servant from the Department of Environment and Rural Affairs further elaborates on the collateral damage, emphasising the loss of networking and collaboration opportunities:



You would have looked at practice across the EU, and people, you know, in NI, we're not going to have all the opportunities for networking exchange and meeting, which is really so important in the development of new initiatives and new responses to things.



The disruption in funding not only poses immediate challenges to the operational sustainability of local authorities and organisations but also stymies the potential for innovation and progress. The interconnectedness of funding sources and collaborative initiatives is underscored, emphasising the ripple effect that Brexit-induced funding constraints have on the intricate tapestry of community development and response mechanisms in NI. The testimonies from key stakeholders illuminate the profound implications of funding uncertainties, echoing

concerns about the broader impact on the region's socio-economic resilience and its capacity to navigate emerging challenges.

The implications of legislative changes and uncertainty following Brexit raise profound concerns for migrants residing in NI, with potential exacerbation of challenges related to cross-border travel.³⁷ The uncertainties manifest in various dimensions, ranging from difficulties in obtaining visas to instances of racial profiling and harassment at borders. The intricacies of Brexit-induced constraints are particularly evident in migrants' inhibited ability to travel across borders for essential medical procedures or emergencies, constituting a fundamental disruption to their well-being. Moreover, the constraints extend to the realm of social activities, with migrant children in schools facing impediments such as restricted participation in school tours, emblematic of the broader societal impacts of legislative changes. However, amidst these challenges, there emerges a paradoxical trend with the liberalisation of the visa system for high-skilled and medical workers. Campbell observes that this shift is attracting an increased influx of professionals from India and other Asian countries, reflecting a nuanced facet of the post-Brexit landscape.³⁸ While certain segments of migrants may benefit from these changes, it is imperative to recognise the disparities in how different groups within the migrant community experience the evolving regulatory framework. To capture the lived experiences of migrants amid this regulatory flux, a manager from an organisation in the Foyle region working with migrants provides a poignant perspective: "There is a lot of uncertainty around what rules are in place and what rules aren't. The stress for the migrant community is palpable; people feel 'other' in a way they wouldn't have for a really long time". This sentiment highlights the profound emotional toll exacted by Brexit-induced uncertainties on the migrant community, emphasising the importance of acknowledging and addressing these human dimensions alongside the broader policy considerations.

Labour shortages are more prominent in hospitality (28%), education (22%) and healthcare (20%) – employers with hard-to-fill vacancies in these industries

note issues due to a lack of applicants. The effects of Brexit have contributed to the talent shortage in NI and across the UK (due to visa restrictions). It has forced companies to rethink their hiring and retention processes in a bid to adapt to the environment. It has provided a higher degree of uncertainty and risk to the future of business operations.³⁹ The loss of EU funding poses a substantial blow to groups dedicated to providing employment and training support to vulnerable segments of the population, as highlighted by Campbell⁴⁴ and reported by The Irish News in 2023.⁴⁵ This dire circumstance is echoed by a staff member from a men's organisation in Belfast, who notes:

“

It's hard to get funding now to support men who are out of work because on paper there are a lot of jobs but they are often for young men, and we work with a lot of older men who are really stuck and they are back of the queue for support.

”

There are struggles to secure continuity in funding. Employers report a loss of income has made it necessary to cut staff who are sorely needed, and paradoxically, it has been hard to fill vacancies in sectors such as hospitality, education and health-care due to a lack of applicants.⁴⁰

Employers grappling with these challenging vacancies note a significant hindrance owing to a lack of qualified applicants. These issues have been exacerbated by the effects of Brexit, which have contributed substantially to the talent shortage, not only in NI but across the entire UK, primarily due to stringent visa restrictions. In response to this evolving landscape, companies are compelled to reassess their hiring and retention strategies, navi-

gating through a landscape fraught with uncertainty and elevated operational risk. This phenomenon is succinctly captured in Lynn's findings⁴¹ and echoed by the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development.⁴² The confluence of these challenges paints a grim picture of the contemporary employment landscape, requiring strategic interventions and policy measures to address the multifaceted issues at play.

3.3 SOCIAL IMPLICATIONS

The shared membership of the UK and the ROI in the EU was initially perceived as a factor contributing to the reduction of intergroup conflict within NI.⁴³ Despite concerns about the potential for Brexit to reignite conflict in NI, there is limited empirical evidence supporting such assertions. Instances of violence, such as the riots witnessed in 2021, have been interpreted as expressions of dissatisfaction among those “left behind” by the peace process and discontent with the existing status quo and political leadership, potentially intertwined with broader tensions associated with economic inequality across EU member states.⁴⁴ Exploring nuanced perspectives on the ground becomes crucial in understanding the complex dynamics at play. According to a manager in the community/voluntary sector based in Belfast:

“

There is actually a huge appetite for collaboration. That's because there's been a vacuum: there's no political cohesion and no government. That doesn't mean that there isn't community cohesion. Community groups are finding ways to work together; to reach people and find out what they need.

”

This direct quote emphasises the noteworthy enthusiasm for collaboration at the community level, driven by the existing political vacuum. Despite the absence of political unity and government, community cohesion remains robust, with local groups actively collaborating to bridge gaps and address the needs of the people they serve. This observation underscores the resilience and adaptability of community structures, highlighting the potential for grassroots initiatives to play a pivotal role in maintaining social cohesion amid broader political uncertainties.

There has, however, been a marked polarisation of unionist and nationalist identities. According to NILT data the proportion of those who are 'neither' unionist nor nationalist has decreased significantly since 2016; 27% of those surveyed defined themselves as distinctly unionist in 2022 (up from 17% in 2016), and 26% defined themselves as distinctly nationalist (up from 18% in 2016).⁴⁵ Again looking at NILT data across this timeframe, the percentage of respondents who think the long-term policy for Northern Ireland should be to be in the UK under a devolved government (35%), has fallen dramatically since 2016 (when it was 54%). Irish and British people in NI have conflicting long-term political goals that are liable to be presented as fundamentally incompatible with one another in increasingly polarising political discourse.⁴⁶ Data from the NILT Survey for 2016 found that 64% of people in NI who voted to remain were in favour of being part of the UK; by 2022, this figure had dropped to only 37%.⁴⁷ A study by Canavan and Turkoglu found that younger citizens in NI, who have lived through a period of relative peace and stability, tend to have identities that are more malleable and are subject to change due to significant events, which affect the perception of group identities.⁴⁸ The results show that 20% of Protestants who did not experience conflict shifted from British towards Irish identity after the Brexit referendum.⁴⁹

NILT data underscore a pervasive lack of public trust in the NI Assembly, with only 17% expressing confidence in its functioning, a figure lower than both the UK Government (21%) and the EU (37%) as of

2023.⁵⁰ The disillusionment with the political apparatus is further emphasised by an overall increase, reaching 38%, of Northern Irish citizens feeling that they lack influence in decision-making processes between 2016 and 2022.⁵¹ This trend is particularly pronounced among young people, where only 10.5% agree that politicians in NI are doing a good job.⁵² A stark reality emerges, as 54.8% of the youth express uncertainty about a positive future in NI, with 41.8% contemplating leaving for work or further study elsewhere.⁵³ This phenomenon contributes to a unique pattern, distinct from the ROI, where a significant number of those who leave NI never return, indicating a potential drain of talent and workforce from the region.⁵⁴

The concerns of younger people extend beyond aspirations for the future to immediate worries about the rising cost of living, with 82.4% identifying this as their foremost concern.⁵⁵ The impact of Brexit on young people's opportunities is highlighted by a Sinn Féin MLA, who observes "Some of the things lost will affect young people more than anyone, the freedom to work and travel... with Erasmus, it's not going to be the same." Additionally, a civil servant from the Department of Education notes the detrimental effect of Brexit on how young people perceive their prospects, stating

These insights collectively paint a picture of a disillusioned and uncertain youth population in NI, grappling with the impact of past political decisions on their present and future well-being.

The process of de-Europeanisation raises crucial questions, prompting reflections on the profound implications across various dimensions. As articulated by Murphy, the complexities of this process are encapsulated in the inquiry: "What does the full process of de-Europeanisation entail?"⁵⁶ Reflecting on the intricate layers of this inquiry, an Alliance councillor emphasises the intricate task of disentangling from the EU, highlighting that, while there is now a roadmap for the legal and economic aspects, the profound question remains: "What does it mean for identity to be an ex-EU state... or a semi-EU state... or whatever we are?" This sentiment underscores the

challenges of renegotiating identity in the aftermath of EU departure, pointing to the need for a comprehensive understanding that transcends legal and economic dimensions.

Looking forward, the establishment of a future relationship between the EU and NI looms large, raising uncertainties about its nature and structure. A DUP

“

There is a definite shift in young people, seeing that they are living in a country that is moving forward and looking to the future, that's not how it seems anymore. Now they feel they are living in a country that is stagnating and has little to offer to many of them.

”

councillor sheds light on the prevailing concerns within the Unionist community, stressing that the perceived threat to the union with Britain and the position within the UK becomes a pivotal factor in any dialogue concerning a future relationship with the EU. This perspective underscores the intricate interplay between political identity, national allegiance and the evolving geopolitical landscape. As NI navigates its post-EU future, grappling with the implications for identity and relationships, these perspectives highlight the need for a comprehensive and inclusive approach that considers not only legal and economic dimensions but also the intricacies of social and political identities in this complex transitional phase.



CONCLUSION

CONCLUSION: THE FUTURE RELATIONSHIP OF NI AND THE EU

This policy study delves into the intricate social and economic ramifications of Brexit on NI, focusing on regional and sectoral perspectives. NI's historical membership of the EU played a pivotal role in reducing barriers to trade, customs and immigration; fostering economic cooperation; and influencing the ideational foundations of the GFA/BFA. However, since the 2016 Brexit referendum, NI has been at the forefront of complex negotiations and evolving political dynamics.

The policy study highlights the unique challenges posed by the Brexit process, particularly in the context of NI's distinctive political status. The NI Protocol and Windsor Framework, finalised in 2023, position NI both outside and inside the EU, creating a hybrid status with implications for customs, tariffs and regulatory checks. While there is a broad consensus in the literature that Brexit will make the UK economically poorer, the specific impact on NI introduces concerns about potential trade barriers, delays and increased costs for businesses, particularly in the agriculture sector. The disruption of supply chains, uncertainties surrounding Brexit and changes in subsidies pose serious economic challenges for the region. Moreover, the policy study emphasises the profound social implications of Brexit, accentuating the long-standing divisions between unionists and nationalists. The ideological divide is exacerbated by the Irish Sea border created by the NI Protocol, impacting national identities and contributing to heightened political tensions. Finally, the EU's role as a neutral mediator in NI has been called into question by unionist leaders, who perceive the EU's aims and concerns throughout the withdrawal process as aligning with those of the nationalist community and the government of the ROI. Brexit has not only reignited historical tensions but has also led to a resurgence of narratives surrounding conflict, thereby shaping the evolving discourse on NI within the broader contexts of both the UK and the EU. This development further complicates the intricate dynamics of the peace process.

The qualitative research design, incorporating semi-structured interviews with 19 leaders from various sectors, provides nuanced perspectives on the perceived effects of Brexit. The findings underscore variations across sectors and regions, with a common emphasis on the impact of sustained uncertainty resulting from the political impasse and the suspension of the devolved NI government. The policy study contributes to a deeper understanding of the challenges faced by NI and prompts crucial questions about the future relationship between NI and the EU within the Windsor Framework. The study reveals that the full impact of Brexit is still unfolding, emphasising the ongoing nature of transformation and the temporal dimension of its consequences. The termination of EU funding, especially the PEACE programme, has significantly affected NI's socio-economic fabric, leading to disruptions in community-driven initiatives and reconciliation efforts. The loss of funding not only poses immediate challenges but also hampers innovation and collaboration, impacting the delicate balance of societal cohesion within NI.

Economically, the policy study highlights a contrast in NI's growth compared to the rest of the UK, with nuances in attributing this to the NI Protocol. The cessation of EU funding and the subsequent challenges in securing funding for local authorities and organisations have far-reaching implications, affecting essential services, innovation and growth. The regulatory changes post-Brexit raise concerns for migrants, creating uncertainties in various dimensions of their lives, from healthcare access to social activities. Socially, Brexit has contributed to the formation of new social identities, intensifying unionist and nationalist identities. Public trust in political institutions has shifted, with a rise in feelings of powerlessness among participants. The study reveals a paradoxical trend in youth perspectives, with concerns about the rising cost of living and uncertainties about the future in NI.

The establishment of a future relationship between the EU and NI emerges as imperative, particularly given that NI citizens will retain rights to Irish, and thereby EU, citizenship. However, the absence of a framework or precedent for such a relationship poses a significant challenge. The current situation is exceptional and delicate, potentially warranting the adoption of extraordinary measures or an unconventional approach to ensure stability and coherence in the relationship between the EU and NI. The following points are grounded in the findings of this research and function as an initial framework for delineating this relationship:

1. Establish a structured framework for the NI-EU relationship: given NI's unique hybrid status post-Brexit, it's crucial to develop a structured framework for its relationship with the EU. This framework should address customs, tariffs, regulatory checks and other issues arising from the NI Protocol and the Windsor Framework Agreement. Utilising existing mechanisms, such as the Committee of the Regions, while tailoring them to NI-EU relations could provide a starting point.
2. Promote political dialogue and reconciliation: the ongoing political deadlock in NI, exacerbated by Brexit-related disruptions, must be addressed to enable effective governance and decision-making. Political leaders from all sides should engage in constructive dialogue aimed at resolving differences and rebuilding trust in the political process. This may involve revisiting aspects of the GFA/BFA and prioritising NI-specific concerns in discussions.
3. Utilise changing electoral landscapes: the shifting electoral landscapes in both ROI and the UK present opportunities for reshaping political dynamics in NI. As attitudes towards national identities evolve, political parties should adjust their strategies to reflect changing voter preferences. Engaging with younger demographics, who exhibit more flexible identities and may be more open to cross-community collaboration, could be particularly beneficial.
4. Enhance socio-economic resilience: acknowledging the socio-economic challenges exacerbated by Brexit, efforts should be made to mitigate its impact and support vulnerable communities in NI. This could involve securing alternative funding sources to replace lost EU contributions, fostering innovation and collaboration, and addressing labour shortages in vital sectors such as healthcare and education.
5. Foster community cohesion and grassroots initiatives: despite political divisions, community cohesion remains strong in many areas of NI. Building on this resilience, grassroots initiatives should be encouraged to bridge divides and address local needs. Facilitating collaboration between community groups, supported by local authorities and civil society organisations, can help foster a sense of unity and solidarity.
6. Prioritise youth engagement and empowerment: given the disillusionment and uncertainty among young people in NI, efforts should be made to engage and empower this demographic. Creating opportunities for meaningful participation in decision-making processes, addressing concerns about the rising cost of living and limited opportunities, and investing in education and training programmes can help build a brighter future for the next generation.

Navigating the optimal and feasible future relationship between NI and the EU post-Brexit requires a delicate balance of pragmatism and cooperation. As we envision the path forward, it is evident that a collaborative approach focusing on economic integration, regulatory alignment, and political understanding is crucial for fostering stability and mutual benefit. A harmonised economic framework that facilitates trade and minimises barriers is essential for both NI and the EU. Striking a balance between preserving the unique identity of NI within the UK while acknowledging its proximity and historical ties to the ROI is a delicate but necessary task. This necessitates a commitment to open and constructive dialogue, with an emphasis on flexible solutions that address the specific needs and concerns of the NI-EU relationship.



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Since the 2016 Brexit referendum, Northern Ireland has found itself at the center of profound political, social, and economic transformations. As the only UK region sharing a land border with the European Union, Northern Ireland's unique position has given rise to complex challenges and new opportunities.

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