
AT NORTHERN IRISH BORDER, BREXIT RISKS HARD-WON PEACE

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In Belfast's Alexandra Park stands a very hard border. A three-meter high wall cuts through the hilly green meadow, separating the republican Catholic and the unionist Protestant communities.

It is the only park in Europe divided by a wall. When built in 1994, it served as a swift solution to separate locals, thus curbing violence in an area that has seen running battles.

It took Ciaran Shannon until 2011 to put a gate in the wall linking the two communities following the Good Friday agreement in 1998 that helped to end the armed conflict and ushered in Northern Ireland's devolved system of government.

As the manager of Duncairn Community Partnership, Shannon works to make the two communities come together in the volatile part of North Belfast which saw the last flurry of violence as recently as 2007.

The idea of the gate came from a local resident, after the EU gave funding for work to be done in the park.

"It is about making people get to know each other, to see each other as neighbours, not as targets," Shannon said of the painstakingly slow process of peace building.

Brexit, and the looming question of how to avoid a hard border on the island of Ireland, threatens to rip open old wounds, and create mistrust once again among communities.

"It has the potential to unravel an awful lot," Shannon said. "Political uncertainty is always difficult, and Brexit adds to the uncertainty," he added.

Avoiding a border

Alexandra Park's wall is a painful reminder of what's at stake in the fragile peace process in Northern Ireland, as British prime minister Theresa May struggles to come up with a workable and credible solution to avoid a hard border between the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland after Brexit when the 500 km long line will become a new EU external border.

May needs to come up with something that has never been done before: create a customs border without a border.

Her latest effort, to set up a "customs partnership" with the EU - under which the UK would have mirrored the EU customs rules and would have collected tariffs for Brussels - was defeated by her more eurosceptic ministers last Wednesday (2 May).

May needs to find a way out of the conundrum by the June European Council, otherwise the entire withdrawal agreement and the transition period could be at risk, and the UK might stumble out of the EU next March. The issue could topple her and her government.

May is certain to disappoint.

Dublin and republicans in Northern Ireland will be upset with a hard border on the island of Ireland.

For unionists, it is unacceptable to have a customs border in the Irish Sea between the island of Ireland and mainland Britain, which would happen if May follows through with her agreement to the EU's preferred fallback option, the backstop of Northern Ireland staying in the customs union and align itself with EU rules.

But eurosceptic Tories will not agree to align the entire UK with EU customs and regulations.

Irish officials warn that even remaining in the EU's customs union will not suffice to avoid a hard border: regulatory alignment and legal supervision, with possibly the European Court of Justice in charge, would also be necessary.

As UK Brexit minister, David Davis will try to push the Irish issue to the very end of the long list of issues Britain still needs to sort out for after Brexit, hoping it could be resolved in the future relations agreement with the EU. Ireland will continue to push for an agreement by June based on what the UK has already agreed to last December, including the backstop.

And there has been no indication so far that the 26 other EU members would not stand by Ireland all the way.

Not only the integrity of the EU's single market is at stake at the border, but livelihood of traders on both sides, and a hard-won peace.

Small businesses that work across the border have no alternatives once a hard border is reinstalled. For 51 percent of Irish exporters, Northern Ireland is the destination for more than half their exports. And for around 25 percent of Irish firms, Northern Ireland is the destination for more than 95 percent of their exports, data from the InterTradeIreland, a cross-border trade and business development body, set up after the 1998 peace deal, shows.

Small and midsize businesses account for 80 percent of the trade value between Northern Ireland and the republic of Ireland. Business experts on the ground say these SMEs don't have the margins to cushion themselves from the Brexit fallout.

Only eight percent of cross-border traders have business plans for Brexit.

"Nobody thought about us, when Brexit happened," said one official who requested anonymity to be able to speak freely on the sensitive matter.

"If there is a pole with a camera on it on the border, it will become a target. It also makes people not trust the peace process," added the official.

Personal peace

In Belfast and all along the border area, it becomes evident how personal any changes to the status quo would be for the people living there. For them, the border issue threatens to roll back the peace process, even if for now the daily struggle worries them more.

"It [Brexit] creates unease, and could be damaging to our relationship, people worry about it, but a bigger concern are the daily issues," Rab McCallum, a republican ex-prisoner who is now a community worker said in Houben Centre, a community centre with two entrances, one from the catholic side of town and the other from the protestant side.

Brian McKee, another community worker at the centre added that when the community needs stability, Brexit adds an "unwanted uncertainty".

Northern Ireland voted strongly for Remain. However, in the absence of a devolved power-sharing executive in Belfast that fell over a year ago, the fiercely pro-Brexit Democratic Unionist Party □ supporting May's government in the Westminster parliament in London □ is the loudest political voice coming from Northern Ireland.

Brexit threatens to polarise the nationalist and unionist political forces within Northern Ireland, making agreeing to a new executive even more challenging. It could also make any meaningful political reconciliation among the two communities very distant.

The conflict has not ended with the Good Friday agreement □ it continues in many minds. The bloodshed has left deep mental scars that are carried through generations.

More people died in Northern Ireland of suicide since the 1998 Good Friday agreement than what is euphemistically called 'The Troubles', when 3,500 people were killed between 1969 and 1997, officials say.

"If we get a hard border, we would go back to The Troubles," said plainly Margaret, an elderly lady in the Northern Ireland town of Newry.

"It's a disaster," said John Lynch at a local menswear shop in Newry, adding "if the border goes up, it'll help bring back violence."

The white-haired man with a thick accent wondered out loud what is it all good for, saying Britain could be strong and be an EU member at the same time. "Germany is a strong nation, and it is not leaving the EU," he said.

Nevertheless, only a ten minute drive from Newry, the current near-invisible borderline seems bound to harden.