

Northern Ireland Five Years after the Good Friday Agreement: Again at the Crossroads?

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Thirty-five years ago, on 9 December 1968, the then Northern Ireland Prime Minister Terence O'Neill warned in one of the most famous speeches in Northern Ireland history that "Ulster stands at the crossroads" and asked his fellow citizens, "What kind of Ulster do you want? A happy and respected province in good standing with the rest of the United Kingdom? Or a place continually torn apart by riots and demonstrations and regarded by the rest of Britain as a political outcast?" History has shown that his appeal to the voices of sanity, though with a huge impact on both the Protestant and Catholic community, did not bear fruits: Northern Ireland descended in the months following his speech into a long and bloody civil war between Protestants/ Unionists/ Loyalists on one side and Catholics/ Nationalists/ Republicans on the other.¹ It was not before 1998 – thirty years afterwards – that the warring parties signed a comprehensive peace agreement, the so-called Good Friday Agreement.

However, today, five years after the signing of this milestone Agreement, the continuity of the Agreement and of the whole peace process is far from assured. Shortly after the end of crucial elections on 26 November 2003, it seems that Northern Ireland stands again at the crossroads: either to follow the rocky road towards a more peaceful future or to be thrown back into the dark ages of the conflict. Looking back at the last thirty-five years, the prospects of the peace process appear to be rather bleak: Seven attempts to end the violence have failed, most notably the Sunningdale Agreement of 1973. Already in 1976, Richard Rose, a distinguished professor of political science, lamented that "[t]he problem [of Northern Ireland] is that there is no solution."²

Nevertheless, and to the surprise of most commentators, a peace agreement was actually signed and has still not broken down – a remarkable success in Northern Ireland. Yet, the future success or failure will depend on favourable overall conditions and on the ability of the Good Friday Agreement, and the peace process as whole, not to repeat the mistakes of the past, i.e. not to address the root causes of the conflict. In total, four different problem areas exist: politics with the central question of sovereignty over Northern Ireland, the society and its communal divisions, the economy and its relation with the conflict and the international framework. All of these fields have a complex and often interrelated influence on the conflict and the peace process and the crucial question is: Has the situation in these problem areas improved in such a way that they underpin the peace process or has the situation actually worsened since the signing of the Good Friday Agreement?

The Evolution of the Northern Ireland Peace Process: A Rocky Road to Peace

Although the actual beginning of the peace process is disputed, it can be traced back to the Anglo-Irish Agreement of 1985, in which the government of the Republic of Ireland got for the first time a say in Northern Ireland affairs. Increasing Anglo-Irish cooperation followed, culminating in 1993 in the Downing Street Declaration, which was designed to convince the most important paramilitary organization, the Irish Republican Army (IRA), to declare a cease-fire. After intensive debates, it did so in August 1994.

The IRA cease-fire was, however, not only the result of the Downing Street Declaration, but also of various and more profound processes and developments: first, of an increasing war-weariness within the Republican community; secondly, of intensive talks between John Hume, leader of the constitutional Nationalist Social Democratic and Labour Party, and Gerry Adams, president of Sinn Féin, the political wing of the IRA; thirdly, of

secret talks between Sinn Féin and the Irish and British government respectively about possible ways forward; and fourthly, of the moderating influence by Bill Clinton, President of the United States (US).

After the IRA cease-fire, Loyalist paramilitaries declared a cease-fire of their own. Nevertheless, 1995 and 1996 did not see major political improvements in the peace process. Although the British government published together with its Irish counterpart the Framework for the Future document in February 1995, outlining a common agenda for future negotiations, preliminary talks between the warring parties became increasingly bogged down by the issue of decommissioning. The IRA hardliners became more and more disillusioned with the peace process – despite relaxing security measures and early prisoner releases – and in February 1996 it ended its cease-fire with a massive bomb in London killing two civilians. Five months later, Northern Ireland was shaken by major disturbances in the wake of a controversial march by the staunchly Protestant Orange Order.

The situation did not change until the election of a strong Labour government under Tony Blair in May 1997. The new government was free of direct pressure by Northern Ireland parties and added fresh impetus to the peace process. In July 1997, the IRA renewed its cease-fire and only one and half months later Sinn Féin signed up to the so-called Mitchell Principles, which committed them to the use of peaceful means, and entered the all-party talks that had begun earlier that year. As a consequence the radical, but powerful Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) left the negotiations and has ever since opposed the peace process. None the less, and even after several setbacks and stalemates, the Good Friday Agreement was signed by all other parties on 10 April 1998. In a subsequent referendum, seventy-one percent of the voters in Northern Ireland and ninety-four percent in the Republic of Ireland approved the Agreement.

However, problems and setbacks have also continued after the Good Friday Agreement. Only three months later, twenty-nine people – including two Spaniards – were killed in a bomb explosion by an anti-Agreement splinter group of the IRA in the small town of Omagh, Co. Tyrone. At the same time progress was very slow in the realm of politics. It was not before November 1999 that the parties in Northern Ireland began to translate the provisions of the Agreement into action by forming a power-sharing Executive. In December, for the first time since the introduction of Direct Rule from London in 1972, Britain devolved powers to the new Northern Ireland Assembly. But afterwards, the government has intervened four times to re-introduce Direct Rule: between February and May 2000, on 10 August 2001, on 21 September 2001 and since October 2002. In May 2003, the British government even suspended twice the first elections to the Northern Ireland Assembly since 1998. The most intransigent issues have been decommissioning and police reform and all intentions to break the stalemate have been fruitless so far, most notably the failure of a British-Irish Joint Declaration in April 2003 and a failed deal between Unionists and Sinn Féin in October the same year. On 26 November 2003, elections were finally held without any agreement.

After the Good Friday Agreement: Improvements and Set-backs

The Good Friday Agreement is neither the end nor the beginning of the peace process, although it is its major part. The main idea behind the Agreement is not to solve the conflict as such, but to establish democratic procedures and standards to deal with the conflict(s). Over time, it is hoped that the exclusive use of peaceful means and the rule of law minimises the mutual distrust and fear between the Protestant/ Unionist/ Loyalist and Catholic/ Nationalist/ Republican communities, thus harmonising community relations and opening up the possibility of a more stable and peaceful future. In order to achieve these aims, the

negotiators agreed to compromises on Northern Ireland's constitutional status, the future government and various smaller issues.

First, the Agreement recognizes that Northern Ireland is part of the United Kingdom, although its citizens can identify themselves as Irish, British or both. It also opens up the possibility of reaching even the most radical demands, in other words a united Ireland, by democratic means, while the Irish Republic drops its immediate constitutional claims on Northern Ireland. Secondly, the government of Northern Ireland is divided into three strands or dimensions, which had emerged during the peace process: Strand one deals with Northern Ireland and provides for a Northern Ireland Assembly and a power-sharing Executive with numerous cross-community checks and balances. Strand two addresses the relations between Northern Ireland and the Republic by establishing a North-South Ministerial Council. Strand three sets up a British-Irish Council with representatives from all parts of the British Isles. Thirdly, the smaller issues include the introduction of human rights legislation, security issues, social and cultural programmes and a British-Irish Agreement to replace the Anglo-Irish Agreement of 1985. But how have all these provisions and compromises worked out in reality?

From Guns to Government? Security Issues and Political Stability

The end of paramilitary violence and the establishment of a more stable and peaceful polity were the most important goals of the Good Friday Agreement. However, they have also turned out to be the most controversial areas. Not surprisingly, an in-depth analysis of Northern Ireland politics, including the development of paramilitary violence, since the Good Friday Agreement reveals rather mixed results.

Direct paramilitary violence has certainly decreased since the Agreement. In fact, the continuity of the cease-fires of the largest paramilitary groups is one of the most important achievements of the peace process in general and of the Good Friday Agreement in particular. However, having said this, violence as such has not disappeared and still haunts Northern Ireland in four different forms: first, in the form of 'ordinary crime', which has increased significantly; secondly, in the form of riots and street violence between Protestant and Catholic mobs; thirdly, in the form of violence by splinter groups such as the Continuity IRA, the Real IRA or the Loyalist Volunteer Force; fourthly, in the form of internal paramilitary violence: Both Loyalist and Republican paramilitaries still perform 'policing tasks' in their respective communities. This kind of violence includes not only punishment beatings of alleged drug-dealers or the murder of dissidents, but also internal feuds between various factions of paramilitary organisations, most notably among Loyalists, who have suffered from two very bloody feuds.

In general, these different kinds of violence have not had a major impact on the political process. Mac Ginty and Darby conclude in a recent analysis of the peace process that "[t]he variegated threat of violence during the peace process, was navigated with notable success by maintaining an uneasy distinction between political violence and other forms of violence."³ Nevertheless, these 'other forms of violence' have inflicted a lot of suffering on the affected Loyalist and Republican communities and demonstrate that the monopoly of power by the new Northern Ireland state is still not universally recognized.

In the field of politics the question of success and failure is even more diffuse. On the one hand, substantial improvements have been achieved: All institutions of the Good Friday Agreement – the Northern Ireland Assembly, the Executive, the North-South Ministerial Council and the British-Irish Council – were established and worked during longer periods. Most commentators even agree that the actual work of the institutions, particularly of the ministers in the Executive, was highly professional. Moreover, the DUP took an active role in

both the Assembly and the Executive despite its radical anti-Agreement stance. Another success was the establishment of further institutions such as the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission and the consultative Civic Forum formed by representatives of civil society.

However, on the other hand, one political crisis after another virtually paralysed the political process during long periods. Whenever a political crisis threatened the Good Friday Agreement, the British government stepped in and governed the Province again directly from London, in total for over one and a half years. At other times, crises were only solved by rather problematic measures. For example, in November 2001 members of the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition (NIWC) and of the Alliance Party re-designated themselves in the Northern Ireland Assembly as Unionist in order to secure the re-election of David Trimble, leader of the moderate Ulster Unionist Party (UUP), as First Minister, because he was not able to get the obligatory support of the majority of the traditional Unionist parties. Furthermore, the pro-Agreement parties and governments have had to choreograph, i.e. to previously plan, the course of political events in order to increase the desired effects. The problem is, however, that the use of choreography and other political skills bordered sometimes at the use of direct manipulation.⁴ But why has the peace process after the Good Friday Agreement been so crisis-prone at all? The explanation can be found in three overlapping problem areas: in the Good Friday Agreement itself, in the deep divisions of Unionism and, above all, in the relation between decommissioning and the functioning of the institutions of the Agreement.

Although the Good Friday Agreement is by any standard a historic compromise between the warring factions, its implementation has been very difficult. The central problem is the Agreement's so-called 'constructive ambiguity', i.e. some parts of the Agreement were written in such an ambiguous way that different parties can interpret them according to their own ideas, thus allowing all sides to sign the Agreement. Most strikingly, Gerry Adams declared after the signing of the Agreement that it leads directly to a united Ireland, whereas David Trimble assured his supporters that the Agreement is the best way to secure the union between Northern Ireland and Great Britain. Although it is not the intention of the Agreement to solve the sovereignty issue for good, its ambiguity allows both sides to insist on its radical positions. As a consequence, the unsolved sovereignty issue still overshadows the day-to-day work of the new institutions and stimulates further conflict. As Ruane and Todd put it, "if the Agreement resolved the issue of sovereignty at the formal-legal level, it did not do so at the political-substantive level, nor has it removed it from the terrain of active political struggle."⁵ Furthermore, 'constructive ambiguity' has been used with similar effects in other controversial fields such as decommissioning. In other cases, controversial issues have been transferred to independent commissions, for example the reform of the police, which allowed again parties with different opinions to sign the Agreement without actually agreeing on the issues. However, whenever the commissions reported on the issues in question, new controversies erupted, as different parties expected different results. In short, 'constructive ambiguity' and the use of independent commissions brought about the broadest support for the Agreement in the short term. In the long term, however, they have triggered off numerous crises.

These crises have been grist to the mill of the opponents of the Good Friday Agreement, in particular in the Unionist community, which has been already deeply divided between various strands and parties since the 1960s. In contrast to Nationalists and Republicans who almost unanimously support the Agreement, Unionists are deeply split between one half that sees the Agreement as the best way to save Unionism and the other that sees it as its end. The causes of Unionist opposition to the Agreement lie in the fact that, as Unionism used to be the dominant ideology in Northern Ireland, they had to concede more in the Agreement, particularly in the short term, than Nationalists and Republicans. Moreover, as

Morrow points out, “[t]o favour the Agreement is to begin, and as yet only implicitly, to acknowledge that the traditional Unionist state has failed and that the Britishness in Ireland must be negotiated not imposed.”⁶ Anti-Agreement Unionists basically regard the Agreement as a sell-out of Unionism to Republican terrorism and, therefore, they have used the crises to demonstrate that it does not work. However, it is the very pressure from anti-Agreement Unionists, which makes it increasingly difficult for pro-Agreement Unionists to arrive at compromises and solutions with Republicans and Nationalists in areas that have not been addressed sufficiently by the Agreement.

At the same time, Republicans, though less divided, face also the danger of splits-off by more radical elements and are consequently not able to grant major concessions. The outright opposition to the Agreement by Republicans is, however, more a question of the future, particularly if it does not – as most Republicans hope – lead to a united Ireland within approximately twenty years.

In the face of the weaknesses of the Good Friday Agreement and of the pressures on both Unionists and Republicans, it is hardly surprising that some special issues have been particularly problematic, though most of them have been solved in one way or another: The release of paramilitary prisoners, though very important for Republicans and Loyalists, has been a very hurting issue for the victims of terrorist attacks. Nevertheless, the issue has lost its significance after July 2000, when the last prisoners of the paramilitary organizations observing their cease-fires were set free. Demilitarisation, though controversial, has also proceeded with remarkable ease and shortly ago British military presence reached the level of 1970. Only the reform of the police has been more problematic, in particular because Unionists and Republicans could not agree on how far to reform it. Yet today, all parties except Sinn Féin support the reformed police service, whose name changed in 2001 from Royal Ulster Constabulary to Police Service of Northern Ireland. Its structure has been even changed in such a way that it has become one of the most modern and democratically accountable police forces in the world.

However, the most problematic stumbling block of the peace process has not been solved so far: decommissioning by the IRA. The major problem of decommissioning is that it has become a symbolic issue within the Unionist community: It is basically a means by anti-Agreement Unionists to demonstrate that the Unionists are in general the losers of the Good Friday Agreement. The issue has been inflated in such a way that now even a substantial act of decommissioning under the supervision of a truly independent commission under the Canadian general John de Chastelain is not sufficient. The anti-Agreement Unionists know that it has also symbolic significance for Republicans, as decommissioning, in particular public decommissioning, smacks of surrender. Moreover, as its political wing is part of the power-sharing Executive, decommissioning mainly focuses on the IRA and not on Loyalist paramilitaries or other smaller Republican paramilitaries. Therefore, the IRA is very reluctant to decommission.

In order to regain support from sceptical Unionist voters, pro-Agreement Unionists have linked the decommission issue with the continuity of the devolved government in Northern Ireland, summarized in their slogan ‘no guns, no government’. Although it is understandable that Unionists do not want to form a government with a party whose military wing still possesses weapons, Unionists have closed more and more opportunities to give the IRA the chance of face-saving acts of decommissioning. Now they even demand public acts of decommissioning, a clear statement that the war is over and institutional mechanisms to expel parties whose military wing does not keep its cease-fire. Republicans, on the other hand, demand further acts of demilitarization, even further reforms of the police service and the transfer of powers over security affairs from London to Stormont in exchange for decommissioning. A truly vicious circle.

So far, the IRA has decommissioned only three times, although it is not clear how many weapons exactly. Moreover, some sources claim that the IRA continues to recruit and train new members and still gathers information about potential aims. The last power-sharing Executive even broke down in October 2002 due to an alleged spy-ring of the IRA in the building of the Northern Ireland Assembly. At least even the IRA recognizes that in principle decommissioning has to take place.

Community Relations and the Peace Process

Northern Ireland has been a deeply divided society – religiously, culturally, politically, economically and often geographically. This has expressed itself in different residential areas of Catholics and Protestants, in distinct work places and, most importantly, in separated education systems. The relationship between the two communities has been dominated by sectarianism, i.e. mutual hate and intolerance. Although the degree of both sectarianism and the divisions in general varies from place to place, it has not decreased significantly since the Good Friday Agreement. In some areas the communal divisions have even increased; for example in North Belfast the number of so-called ‘peace walls’, which physically separate Catholic and Protestant areas, has more than doubled since 1994. This has been largely a reaction to the increasing interface violence. Moreover, attacks on the symbols of the other community such as schools or churches have become more common as well. Internationally, the most infamous case has been the blocking of a street to the Catholic Holy Cross school in North Belfast by Protestant residents. The protesters objected to the use of the street, which goes through a ‘Protestant area’, by Catholic pupils. Although this kind of protest is an extreme case – even by Northern Ireland standards – in general, both communities express increasing concern about the possibility of future social integration since the Good Friday Agreement. What explains these rather confusing tendencies in community relations since the Agreement?

Again the Agreement itself is a major problem: One of its crucial political arrangements is a devolved government in Northern Ireland based on the principles of a consociational democracy. This means that government is formed, in contrast to competitive democracies as in most Western European countries, by a power-sharing Executive consisting automatically of the four strongest parties in parliament. Moreover, each community, Unionist and Nationalist, possesses virtually a mutual veto due to the complex voting rules in the Assembly. In order to ensure a clear distinction between the Unionist block and the Nationalist block each party in the Assembly has also to designate itself as either Unionist, Nationalist or other. Besides the problem that these provisions discriminate against parties that are neither Unionist nor Nationalist, such the NIWC, the more fundamental flaw in these arrangements is the reinforcement of the communal divisions, as both Unionists and Nationalists are encouraged to stick to their respective block. In the words of Wilford and Wilson, “[t]he fundamental problem with consociationalism is that it rests on precisely the division that it is supposed to solve.”⁷

It have been, however, not only the provisions of the Good Friday Agreement that inhibited improvements in community relations. A general lack of community reconciliation after decades of mutual hostilities and grievances on both sides has also been a significant obstacle. Both sides still tend to stress their differences rather than their commonalities and still fear an eventual assimilation of the two communities. The major stumbling block of reconciliation is the victim issue. Both sides usually deal with it only as a single-community issue and fail to see the wider picture, in other words that all sides actually suffered during the Troubles. Catholics tend to focus on the innocent victims of acts by security forces, most notably in the cases of collusion between Loyalist paramilitaries and certain departments of

the police and security apparatus in order to kill unpleasant Nationalists such as the solicitor Pat Finucane who was murdered in 1989. Although the British government's Stevens Inquiry has already thrown light on the affair, its work has been made difficult by the lack of collaboration with some police and secret service officers and so far, it has not produced a final report. The shooting of fourteen unarmed civilian demonstrators by British paratroopers during a civil rights march in Derry on 30 January 1972 ('Bloody Sunday') is another incident of state violence that exercises enormous influence over the Catholic community. Although in 1998 the most expensive inquiry in British history (costing approximately one hundred and fifty million euros) was launched to investigate the case, it is still not clear if the inquiry will unearth all the truth behind the incident. Unionists, on the other hand, complain that they have not even got an inquiry, although they can point at numerous unsolved incidents such as the 'Enniskillen bombing' by the IRA, in which ten unarmed Protestants were killed during a Remembrance Day celebration. The IRA is not particularly helpful in clearing up unsolved cases. The only gesture has been so far a public apology to the *innocent* victims of their violence.

In total, more than half of the politically motivated crimes have not been solved. Yet, only in a very few cases do members of the two communities actually work together such as in the case of the Omagh bombing. Another recently widely published case is the fate of the so-called 'disappeared': In the 1970s, the IRA abducted and killed secretly alleged collaborators of the British army, both Protestants and Catholics. Although the IRA has agreed to reveal the secret burial places of these victims, only a few have been found.

The final obstacle to better community relations is the segregated schools. Since the establishment of Northern Ireland in 1920, Catholic children have gone to schools run by the Catholic Church, whereas Protestant children went to state schools, which have been virtually under the control of Protestant churches. By 2000, only two to four percent of all pupils in Northern Ireland went to so-called integrated or mixed schools. Even cross-community school projects such as the Education for Mutual Understanding programme have had only a limited impact.

However, in spite of all these obstacles mentioned above, community relations have also improved in certain areas. The most important development is the growth of civil society – ecumenical church groups, trade unions, business groups, NGOs or the NIWC. Civil society has been in fact the strongest supporter of the Good Friday Agreement and it is its support that has guaranteed the continuity of the Agreement. Although it has been growing since 1974, the peace process has boosted it even further, not at least because of generous subsidies from the European Union (EU).⁸ The growth of civil society has also a significant side effect: improvements in the situation of women in Northern Ireland's traditionally arch-conservative society. This development has been supported by the legal protection of women's rights in the Good Friday Agreement, most notably by adopting the European Convention on Human Rights, and by equality legislation afterwards.

Improvements have also been achieved in the field of culture: Cultural diversity has increased, as more and more people begin to see the wider picture. Both Irish and Ulster Scots, the traditional language spoken by Protestant settlers from Scotland, are nowadays recognized and heavily subsidised. But it is important to note that cultural diversity in the Northern Ireland context largely refers to the traditional ethnic identities. The cultural identities of new ethnic or social groups are usually not included. For example, the second most spoken language in Northern Ireland – Chinese – is not recognized in any way.

Closely related to the issue of cultural diversity are the controversies over parades by the Orange Order and, in the city of Londonderry, by the Apprentice Boys of Derry. Parades and marches have been a central part of both Unionist and Nationalist cultural identity, although their influence and significance is even stronger in the Unionist community. The crucial problem of parades "... is not simply the desire to walk on a particular road but part of

a wider territorial dispute.”⁹ Catholics see Orange parades as triumphalist and sectarian manifestations of a century-old Orange domination in Northern Ireland, especially if they are conducted in Catholic areas. Unionists, on the other hand, regard protests by residents as Republican conspiracies to attack Protestant culture and civil and religious liberties. Not surprisingly, parades led to widespread and widely broadcasted disturbances in Northern Ireland, in particular in 1996 and 1998. However, most of the Unionist parades have not been controversial at all, although they have increased significantly in number. The intensity of the parading issue in general has actually decreased since the Good Friday Agreement. Although the Agreement does not deal with parades in any part, the establishment of an independent parading commission, intensified mediation, better monitoring and stewarding and divisions within the Unionist community regarding the meaning and sense of parades have helped to reduce the intensity of the conflicts over parades.

These improvements in community relations are also underpinned by wider and more general factors: First of all of all, the mass media – Unionist, Nationalist, Irish and British – has been without any significant exception in favour of the Agreement. In fact, the media’s support has been a major factor that has prevented the break-down of the peace process. And secondly, as Ruane and Todd point out correctly, larger international tendencies towards secularism, liberalism, post-nationalism or individualization and consumerism have weakened the traditional coherence of the Protestant and Catholic communities, thus facilitating the modest improvements in community relations.¹⁰

From Peace to Prosperity? The Economic Context of the Peace Process

The British government often argues that the major advantages of the peace process and the Good Friday Agreement are actually the economic improvements for all citizens. However, has there really been something like a ‘peace dividend’ in Northern Ireland?

In fact, there have been clear signs of measurable economic improvements during the peace process: First, the unemployment rate has decreased from once seventeen percent to less than six percent in 2003. Secondly, the emigration rate has been reversed and Northern Ireland experiences today net immigration – a remarkable achievement for an area that suffered a long time from emigration. Thirdly, both the construction and tourism sector have boomed and, even more importantly for an economy that has been struggling for decades with the problems of de-industrialisation in the once dominant heavy industry, high-tech companies have increasingly invested in Northern Ireland. These improvements are to a large degree the result of the reduction of uncertainty for business investments due to the end of the violent conflict and of increasing financial support from abroad, mainly from Great Britain, the EU and the United States. For example between 1993 and 1998 alone, private US companies invested almost two billion dollars in Northern Ireland, whereas the US government added another twenty million dollars of subsidies each year. But it is necessary to point out that the economic improvements mirror also larger trends into the same direction in the United Kingdom, although it is questionable if this had been the case without the peace process.¹¹

In any case, recent analyses indicate that Northern Ireland’s economic situation is beginning to change:¹² First, the Gross Domestic Product is decreasing again. Secondly, the workforce pattern has not changed significantly: thirty-six percent of the workforce still works in public services, whereas only nine percent is employed in the banking, finance and business sector. Furthermore, the food processing and clothing sector is still the largest employer and not knowledge-based companies. Therefore, Northern Ireland’s economy will feel soon the competition from low-wage countries, for instance in Eastern Europe or East Asia. Thirdly, the low unemployment rate and the economic growth in general is still

dependent to a large extent on subsidies and government spending. Fourthly, mainly the middle and upper classes have profited from the economic improvements. Consequently, the social discrepancies between lower and upper classes have increased during the peace process: While many Northern Ireland citizens enjoy these days a relatively high living standard, the lower classes, particularly in traditionally Loyalist and Republican areas, face the harsh realities of social decline. Finally, Moltmann points out that in some poorer Loyalist and Republican areas an “economy of violence” has been established, which is based on structures similar to the Mafia and involves often (former) paramilitaries. In these areas, smuggling, drug-dealing and other criminal activities have become for many an economic and financial basis.¹³

The International Dimension

The international framework has been the only generally positive part of the Northern Ireland peace process. In total, four different external actors are discernable: Britain, the Republic of Ireland, the EU and the United States.

Strictly speaking, Britain is not an external force, as she is constitutionally linked with Northern Ireland. She is also an actor in the conflict, as the province has been directly ruled from London for over thirty years and British troops are stationed there. Mentally, however, Northern Ireland is regarded as a far-away country of no major importance by the majority of people in mainland Britain. Most strikingly, Northern Ireland citizens could not even join the British Labour Party until very recently. Consequently, British governments have been very careful to get embroiled in Northern Ireland affairs and have always sought possible ways out of the conflict. In 1990, the then Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, Peter Brooke, even declared publicly that Britain had no “selfish, strategic or economic interest” in Northern Ireland. This allowed British governments, both Labour and Conservative, to facilitate ways out of the conflict and to function to a certain extent as a balancing force from outside. British governments have been generally quite pragmatic about dealing with the Northern Ireland conflict during the peace process and have not had scruples ‘to talk with terrorists’. Only the Conservative government under John Major in the mid-1990s was restrained in its actions, as his majority in parliament depended at that time on the support of the UUP, with which the Conservative party is officially, though very loosely, linked.

It was, however, not the British government alone that has facilitated the peace process from outside, but also its counterpart in the Republic of Ireland. Similar to Britain, the Republic is not strictly speaking an external force, as she claimed until 1998 that the six counties of Northern Ireland are an integral part of her territory (former Articles 2 and 3 of its constitution). Yet *de facto* the Republic of Ireland has always respected the integrity of Northern Ireland as a part of the United Kingdom. Nevertheless, it has kept its interest in Northern Ireland affairs. With the Anglo-Irish Agreement of 1985 it got finally an official say in Northern Ireland affairs and ever since, British and Irish governments have slowly intensified their collaboration in order to find solutions for the Northern Ireland problem. In fact, it has been the co-operation between the two governments that has been the engine of peace process. Since the early 1990s, almost all outside initiatives have been common Anglo-Irish actions such as the Downing Street Declaration of 1993, the Framework for the Future document of 1995, the Good Friday Agreement of 1998 and several other initiatives to break the deadlocks of the peace process. Although both governments have slightly different interests and priorities, they have always acted as joint guardians of the peace process. They are also the guarantors of the Good Friday Agreement. It was exactly this joint guardianship that allowed the parties in Northern Ireland to gain trust in the peace process, as both

communities had potentially sympathetic external powers involved in the peace process, the British government in case of Unionists and the Irish government in case of Nationalists.

British-Irish co-operation was partly made possible by another international actor: the EU. Though the EU's influence is more indirect, its impact has been substantial, particularly in the Irish Republic. As one of the poorer EU members, the Republic has received considerable structural aids, which have helped, especially in the 1990s, to transform her into a more prosperous and modern country. A side effect of these developments has been the dilution of the narrow forms of Irish nationalism in the Republic. This consequently freed her governments of the traditional irredentist pressures, aimed at the full integration of Northern Ireland into the Republic, and has allowed the active collaboration with their British counterparts. The framework of a supranational institution as the EU, of which both the United Kingdom and Ireland are part, also helped to spread post-nationalist or regionalist ideas, which provide more flexible alternatives to traditional 'either-or forms' of nationalism, and thus offered more creative solutions for the Northern Ireland problem. The North-South Ministerial Council and the British-Irish Council are concrete expressions of such regionalist or post-nationalist ideas, which may also inspire similar projects in other parts of Europe. Finally, the common EU membership of the United Kingdom and Ireland has also made the borders between the two countries, and consequently between the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland, more porous. Today, the border between the two countries – as between other EU countries – is in many respects a mere line on a map. As a consequence, the traditional conflict between Unionism and Nationalism is losing its practical significance.

Besides the EU, there exists only one further actor outside of the British Isles: the United States. But US influence has been rather indirect as well. In the judgement of Mac Ginty and Darby, "[t]he most significant political contribution from external actors, in the main the United States, came in the ability to inject momentum into the peace process."¹⁴ During the presidency of Bill Clinton (1992-2000), the first president who did not regard the Northern Ireland conflict as a pure internal affair of the United Kingdom, specific and often symbolic (i.e. low-cost) interventions by the President – such as granting a controversial visa to Gerry Adams before the IRA cease-fire in 1994, phone calls to party leaders during the crucial time of the negotiations to the Good Friday Agreement or several trips to Northern Ireland – helped to convince the leaders and their followers of the necessity of the peace process in general and the Good Friday Agreement in particular and demonstrated the strong support by presumably one of the most powerful men in the world. When George W. Bush took over the White House from Bill Clinton, he continued the Northern Ireland policy of his predecessor, although not with the same vigour, particularly after 11 September 2001, when his foreign policy priorities changed fundamentally. But the President has with Richard Haas still a special envoy in Northern Ireland. Paradoxically, it has even been the foreign policy of the Bush administration that has strengthened the peace process in Northern Ireland: First, as a reaction of 11 September 2001, the US administration has become very sensitive to anything that smacks of terrorism and thus also to the IRA, particularly when alleged links between the IRA and rebels of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia and *Euskadi Ta Askatasuna* in the Basque Country became public. As the IRA is dependent to a large extent on vital financial links with Irish America, it was forced to change its more hard-line policies towards decommissioning in order to avoid its illegalization in the United States and to secure the support by Irish Americans. Therefore, it comes as no surprise that the IRA's major acts of decommissioning have occurred after 11 September 2001. The continuing American 'war on terrorism' will put the IRA under further pressure to decommission, thus helping to remove one of the most notorious stumbling blocks of the peace process. Secondly, the Anglo-American war in Iraq, which is supported by Unionists, contributed to a more favourable view towards the United States among the Unionist community, which had been traditionally very sceptical about US involvement in the 'internal affairs' of Northern Ireland.

At the same time, the intensive, though often contradictory, links between Nationalists and the United States have been weakened due to Nationalist opposition to the war in Iraq – again a problematic development for the IRA.

Conclusion

Even five years after the signing of a comprehensive peace agreement, the Northern Ireland peace process is still far from over. From a positive point of view, this means that the process has not broken down yet – in face of the development of other peace processes such as in the Basque Country a remarkable and at same time the most important success. From a negative point of view, however, the conflict itself has not ended either and many alarming developments accompany the peace process. Consequently, a discussion about the achievements and set-backs of the peace process easily ends up in a dispute about if the glass is half full or half empty. In fact, as McCartney concluded recently, “[t]he Northern Ireland peace process is hard to judge because there are tangible benefits but at the same time obvious and real obstacles.”¹⁵

The benefits and achievements may slightly outweigh the setbacks: After all, the Good Friday Agreement, a major building block of the peace process, still exists and the cease-fires of the major paramilitary groups have not broken down. Devolved government has also been established and Northern Ireland has seen a major police reform and significant acts of decommissioning. Furthermore, civil society has expanded, human and in particular women’s rights have been strengthened, cultural diversity has been increasingly accepted and even the notorious parade controversies have abated. Economic improvements, though not necessarily a result of the peace process, are also an important benefit. Finally, the international framework – formed by the British and Irish governments, the EU and the United States – has been generally a supportive factor of the peace process.

However, several setbacks and stumbling blocks have damaged these benefits and achievements: Devolved government has not worked properly for most of the time since its first introduction in late 1999. Both police reforms and decommissioning have not been sufficient for the more extreme parties and have been a continuous source of discord. Furthermore, various forms of violence still haunt the streets of Northern Ireland. Community relations have not improved in a significant way either and deep divisions between Protestants/ Unionists/ Loyalists and Catholics/ Republicans/ Nationalists persist. To a considerable degree the Good Friday Agreement itself is responsible for these developments, as it actually entrenches the separate identities in Northern Ireland. But also the lack of reconciliation and of a more open handling of the victim issue is partly responsible.

If the Northern Ireland parties do not address these deficits and shortcomings early, the peace process may well break down sooner or later. Anti-Agreement parties, particularly in the Unionist community, are as strong as ever. What is actually needed now are reforms of the Good Friday Agreement, if possible even with anti-Agreement forces such as the DUP, in order to make the political arrangements workable, e.g. reforms of the voting system or the abolishment of the party designations in the Assembly. Republicans will have to accept the police reforms and concede further acts of decommissioning – something more likely since 11 September 2001 – while Unionists must accept the ways how the IRA wants to decommission and must be prepared to share government with Sinn Féin. The British government, on its part, must sooner or later jump into the cold water and actually concede the full devolved powers to the Northern Ireland Assembly, in other words, it must give up its powers to re-introduce Direct Rule whenever the peace process is bogged down. It is likely that a joint initiative by the British and Irish governments will offer both Unionists/ Loyalists and Republicans/ Nationalists a comprehensive compromise involving the issues mentioned

above. But the parties in Northern Ireland have to learn to walk the rest of the way to peace on their own. It is also time to concentrate again on bread and butter issues such as the increasing social discrepancies in both the Protestant and Catholic community. Like this, reconciliation and better community relations will develop step by step. After all, the chances for such developments have never been better at any time in Northern Ireland's long and bloody history. But again Northern Ireland stands at the crossroads and it will be the decision of the citizens and their leaders to choose which way to go.

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Further Reading

- ALONSO, Rogelio: *Irlanda del Norte: Una Historia de Guerra y la Búsqueda de la Paz*, Editorial Complutense, Madrid, 2001. Most thorough historical study of the Northern Ireland conflict in Spanish. Includes a chapter about the Basque conflict.
- ARTHUR, Paul: *Special Relationships: Britain, Ireland and the Northern Ireland Problem*, Blackstaff, Belfast, 2000. Well-informed analysis of the changing Anglo-Irish relations in regard to Northern Ireland.
- BEW, Paul, GIBBON, Peter and PATTERSON, Henry: *Northern Ireland 1921-2001: Political Forces and Social Classes*, revised and updated edition, Serif, London, 2002. Influential analysis of the development of Northern Ireland.
- COX, Michael, GUELKE, Adrian and STEPHEN, Fiona, editors: *A Farewell to Arms? From Long War to Long Peace in Northern Ireland*, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 2000. Collection of articles about different aspects of the Northern Ireland peace process such as policing, gender issues or the international dimension. Includes a chapter about the Basque peace process.
- DIXON, Paul: *Northern Ireland: Politics of Peace and War*, Palgrave, Houndmills, 2001. Comprehensive introduction to the Northern Ireland conflict.
- FRASER, T. G., editor: *The Irish Parading Tradition: Following the Drum*, Macmillan, Houndmills, 2000. Collection of essays about Northern Ireland's parade disputes.
- GURRUCHAGA, Íñigo: *El Modelo Irlandés: Historia Secreta de un Proceso de Paz*, Ediciones Península, Barcelona, 1998. Journalistic account of the process leading to the Good Friday Agreement. Includes a comparison with the Basque Country.
- MAC GINTY, Roger and DARBY, John: *Guns and Government: The Management of the Northern Ireland Peace Process*, Palgrave, Houndmills, 2002. Most current and comprehensive analysis of the Northern Ireland peace process.
- O'LEARY, Brendan and MCGARRY, John: *Explaining Northern Ireland: Broken Images*, Blackwell, Oxford, 1995. Standard work explaining the Northern Ireland conflict.
- WHYTE, John: *Interpreting Northern Ireland*, Clarendon, Oxford, 1990. Classical work about the different interpretations of the Northern Ireland problem.

On the Internet

- Amazon UK, <http://www.amazon.co.uk>. All relevant books can be bought here.
- CAIN (Conflict Archive on the Internet) Web Service, <http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/index.html>. Standard web service with a vast amount of information, sources and publications.
- Democratic Dialogue, <http://www.democraticdialogue.org/discussionpapers.htm>. Current publications by one of the most influential Northern Ireland think tanks.
- El Mundo en especial, *Irlanda del Norte: Camino de la Paz*, <http://www.elmundo.es/especiales/2001/10/internacional/irlanda/index.html>. Introduction to the Northern Ireland conflict by the daily newspaper El Mundo (in Spanish).
- Institute for Conflict Research, <http://www.conflictresearch.org.uk/publications>. Current publications by a Belfast-based research institute.
- Newshound, <http://www.nuzhound.com>. Daily updated links to articles about Northern Ireland in the most relevant English-speaking newspapers.

Consulted Journals

Accord: an international review of peace initiatives; Capital and Class; HSFK Standpunkte: Beiträge zum demokratischen Frieden; International Affairs; Peace Review; Political Studies; Studies in Conflict and Terrorism; Survival.

¹ The use of specific denominations in the Northern Ireland context is sometimes rather confusing. Unionists are those citizens in Northern Ireland who identify themselves as being British (but not English) and who support the union between Great Britain (i.e. England, Scotland and Wales) and Northern Ireland within the United Kingdom. Unionists belong usually to one of the Protestant denominations, although a minority is also Catholic. Loyalists are basically Unionists who advocate the use of more radical and violent means to 'defend' the union. Nationalists, on the other hand, are those citizens who identify themselves as Celtic and/or Irish and who favour a 'united Ireland' consisting of the twenty-six counties of the Republic of Ireland and the six counties of Northern Ireland, which had been partitioned in 1920 after the creation of a largely independent Southern Ireland (after 1949: Republic of Ireland). For over 200 years Nationalists have been almost exclusively Catholic. Similar to Loyalists in the Unionists community, Republicans are basically more radical Nationalists who support or use violence to reach their aims. Both Nationalism and Unionism, but in particular the latter, are, however, deeply divided between different strands. Moreover, significant class distinctions exist. The Unionist-Nationalist dichotomy is, therefore, merely a device to simplify the complexities of the conflict. It is important to note that in the Galician/Spanish context nationalism and republicanism (in small letters) have largely different meanings and connotations.

² ROSE, Richard: *Northern Ireland: A Time for Change*, Macmillan, London, 1976.

³ MAC GINTY, Roger and DARBY, John: *Guns and Government: The Management of the Northern Ireland Peace Process*, Palgrave, Houndmills, 2002, p174.

⁴ See DIXON, Paul: "Political Sills or Lying and Manipulation? The Choreography of the Northern Ireland Peace Process", *Political Studies*, 50, 2002, pp725-741.

⁵ RUANE, Joseph and TODD, Jennifer: "The Politics of Transition? Explaining Political Crises in the Implementation of the Belfast Good Friday Agreement", *Political Studies*, 49, 2001, p936.

⁶ MORROW, Duncan: "Nothing to Fear but...? Unionists and the Northern Ireland Peace Process", in MURRAY, Dominic, editor: *Protestant Perceptions of the Peace Process in Northern Ireland*, Centre for Peace and Development Studies, University of Limerick, 2000, <http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/events/peace/murray/murray00.htm>.

⁷ WILFORD, Rick and WILSON, Robin: *A Route to Stability: The Review of the Belfast Agreement*, Belfast, Democratic Dialogue, 2003, http://www.democraticdialogue.org/working/agreview_files/agreview.pdf.

⁸ See MAC GINTY and DARBY, op. cit., pp141-145 and MCCARTNEY, Clem: "The Role of Civil Society", *Accord: an international review of peace initiatives*, 8, 1999/2003, <http://www.c-r.org/accord/ireland/accord8/susjudge.shtml>.

⁹ JARMAN, Neil and BRYAN, Dominic: *Parade and Protest: A Discussion of Parading Disputes in Northern Ireland*, Centre for the Study of Conflict, University of Ulster, Coleraine, 1996, <http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/csc/reports/parade.htm>.

¹⁰ See RUANE and TODD, op. cit., p927.

¹¹ See MAC GINTY and Darby, op. cit., pp134-137.

¹² See for example KERR, James: "NI's Economic Future 'Fragile'", *BBC News*, 17 September 2003, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/northern_ireland/3115538.stm.

¹³ See MOLTSMANN, Bernhard: "*Es kann der Frömmste nicht im Frieden bleiben...*" *Nordirland und sein kalter Frieden*, HSFK-Report 8, Hessische Stiftung Friedens- und Konfliktforschung, Frankfurt, 2002, p29, <http://www.hsfk.de/downloads/rep0802.pdf>.

¹⁴ MAC GINTY and DARBY, op. cit., p121.

¹⁵ MCCARTNEY, Clem: "Suspending Judgement: The Politics of Peacebuilding in Northern Ireland", *Accord: an international review of peace initiatives*, 8, 1999/2003, <http://www.c-r.org/accord/ireland/accord8/susjudge.shtml>.