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Northern Ireland: 40 Years of EU Membership

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KEY DATES

A timeline of Northern Ireland in the EU.

Jan 1973	Accession of the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland to the European Communities
May 1974	Collapse of the Sunningdale Power-Sharing Agreement after five months; return of direct rule from London
Jun 1975	UK referendum on continued membership of the European Communities. In Northern Ireland the 'yes' vote is 52.1%. Turnout is 48.2%.
Mar 1975	European Regional Development Fund created
Jun 1979	First direct elections to European Parliament (EP): Ian Paisley, leader of the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) tops the poll; John Hume, deputy leader of the Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP) comes second; John Taylor of the Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) takes Northern Ireland's third seat.
May 1980	First Anglo-Irish Intergovernmental Summit led by Charles Haughey and Margaret Thatcher
Oct 1981	Irish Republican prisoners start hunger strike; Sinn Fein's political rise begins
Feb 1983	EP Political Affairs Committee commissions report on Northern Ireland
Mar 1984	EP adopts Haagerup Report on the Situation in Northern Ireland
Jun 1984	EP election: Paisley (DUP) again tops the poll; Hume (SDLP) again comes second; Taylor (UUP) takes Northern Ireland's third seat.
Nov 1985	Anglo-Irish Agreement and the establishment of the Anglo-Irish Intergovernmental Conference staffed by British and Irish government officials.
Oct 1988	Paisley (DUP) is ejected from the EP's Strasbourg plenary meeting after a protesting against the visit of Pope John Paul II, shouting 'I renounce you as the anti-Christ'.
Jan 1989	January Northern Ireland becomes an Objective 1 region under the EU's regional policy. EC Community Support Framework for Northern Ireland launched
Jun 1989	EP election: Paisley (DUP) tops the poll; Hume (SDLP) comes second; Jim Nicholson (UUP) takes Northern Ireland's third seat.
Mar 1994	Committee of the Regions established with two representatives from Northern Ireland

Jun 1994	EP election: 1989 result is replicated with Paisley (DUP), Hume (SDLP) and Nicholson (UUP) being elected.
Aug 1994	Irish Republican Army (IRA) announces 'complete' ceasefire
Sep 1994	As the EP endorses the IRA ceasefire, Hume's Socialist MEP colleagues initiate his nomination for the Nobel Peace Prize for his efforts to secure an end to violence in Northern Ireland.
Oct 1994	Loyalist ceasefire announced
Dec 1994	European Council agrees to establish €300m multiannual programme of financial assistance to support the burgeoning Northern Ireland peace process (initiated through joint-lobbying by all three MEPs).
Jul 1995	Special EU Programme for Northern Ireland and the Border Counties of the Republic of Ireland (Peace I) launched with funding worth €400 million
Apr 1998	Good Friday/Belfast Agreement signed. The agreement contained provisions on cross border cooperation and an international dimension (including the EU) for the new political architecture. Overall responsibility for foreign affairs is a reserved matter for the UK government but the regional administration in Northern Ireland is made responsible for ensuring the implementation of EU policies
Oct 1998	Hume (SDLP) and David Trimble (UUP) jointly awarded Nobel Peace Prize in recognition of their role in the making of the Good Friday Agreement. Hume stresses the European model of post-war reconciliation as his primary inspiration in accepting the award.
Mar 1999	European Council agrees to fund Peace II (2000-2004) programme
Jun 1999	EP election produces same result as in 1994: Paisley (DUP), Hume (SDLP) and Nicholson (UUP) re-elected
Dec 1999	Devolved powers granted to Northern Ireland Assembly
Jan 2000	Peace II launched with funding worth €597 million; Objective 1 status retained on transitional basis.
Jul 2000	European Policy Coordination Unit established within the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister
2001	Office of the Northern Ireland Executive in Brussels (ONIEB) opened
Oct 2001	Northern Ireland Assembly's Committee of the Centre launches an inquiry into Northern Ireland's relations with the EU
Mar 2002	Committee of the Centre publishes report: Approach of the Northern Ireland Assembly and the Devolved Government on European Union Issues

Oct 2002	Devolved powers suspended; direct rule from Westminster returns
Jun 2004	EP election: Paisley is replaced by Jim Allister, but the DUP still tops the poll; the SDLP loses its seat to Bairbre de Brún of Sinn Féin (SF) as Hume retires; Nicholson (UUP) is again in third place
Jan 2005	Peace II extended
Oct 2006	Northern Ireland Executive launches Northern Ireland's first European Strategy: Taking Our Place in Europe
Jan 2007	Peace III (2007-2013) launched with funding worth €333 million
Mar 2007	Allister resigns from the DUP following its agreement to share power with Sinn Féin
May 2007	European Commission Task Force for Northern Ireland announced
May 2007	Devolved powers restored
Mar 2009	Northern Ireland Executive launches the first of a series of annual and biannual European Priorities documents
Jun 2009	EP election: de Brún (SF) tops the poll. Diane Dodds (DUP) comes second. Nicholson is again in third place, this time standing for a short-lived alliance between the UUP and the Conservative Party under the banner, Conservatives and Unionists – New Force (UCUNF).
Mar 2010	Memorandum of Understanding and its Concordat on Co-ordination of European Union Policy Issues sets out the mechanisms for dealing with EU business between the UK government and the devolved administrations.
Mar 2011	Members of the Barroso Taskforce visit Northern Ireland
May 2012	Martina Anderson takes over from de Brún as Sinn Féin's MEP

THE NARRATIVE

Since the United Kingdom and Ireland joined the European Communities (EC) 40 years ago, Northern Ireland has not only witnessed many of the darkest years of 'The Troubles' but also emerged from violent conflict as a more economically prosperous region with a broadly functioning devolved administration. The EU has often enjoyed a high profile, particularly as a source of funding. Successive European Parliament (EP) elections have been hotly contested as the region's four main parties have fought over the three available seats. Despite their clear political differences the three MEPs have generally demonstrated an uncharacteristic willingness to cooperate on matters of particular interest to communities and voters in Northern Ireland. Agriculture, fisheries and continued access to the Structural Funds have featured large. Objective 1 status in 1989-99 resulted in £1.7 billion of EU funding for Northern Ireland. Moves towards peace since the 1990s have been rewarded by the EU, notably with three dedicated Peace programmes.

As devolution has become an established reality, the Northern Ireland institutions – the Assembly and Executive – have gradually become more engaged with the EU and with EU policy issues. At the same time the EU, through the European Commission and most recently the Barroso Task Force, has continued to demonstrate its commitment to support peace, stability and improved economic and social well-being in Northern Ireland. This does not, however, translate into a heartfelt endorsement of the EU and further integration among voters in Northern Ireland. While they may look more favourably than voters elsewhere in the UK on the EU, there can be no mistaking the fact that the majority of political parties in Northern Ireland remain eurosceptic with most MPs taking their seats in Westminster supporting a referendum on the UK's withdrawal from the EU.

Positive perceptions

During 'The Troubles' European integration was for many people in Northern Ireland a policy issue of only marginal concern. The opportunities and restrictions created by the Common Agricultural Policy and the Common Fisheries Policy certainly found resonance with the farming and fishing communities. So too did receipts from the European Regional Development Fund. Specific EC-funded infrastructure projects such as URBAN and INTERREG, the Single Market project, the dedicated Community Support Framework for Northern Ireland and the creation the Peace Programmes from 1995 also raised general awareness of the EU and over time contributed to more positive attitudes being expressed towards the EU. In the 1975 referendum on the UK's continued membership referendum, however, only just over half of the electorate voted 'yes'; and there was a noticeable difference between the two main communities: the Protestant community being more sceptical towards European integration than its Catholic counterpart.

The difference reflected contrasting stances on British sovereignty and links with other European states. Nearly three decades on, perceptions of the EU have improved and the gap between the two main communities has narrowed. An academic survey in 2002 found that Northern Ireland voters displayed more positive views on participation in the EU and whether it brought benefits exceeded the UK average by 14 percentage points (although this was well behind views expressed in the Republic of Ireland). A Flash Eurobarometer survey in 2008 also presented Northern Ireland as the region of the UK most positive about the EU.

Increasing engagement

A key event in the Northern Ireland's recent history was the return of devolved government in 1999. Although the area of foreign affairs was designated a reserved matter for Westminster, the Northern Ireland Assembly was tasked with ensuring the correct implementation of EU directives. Moreover, a 1999 (and recently reviewed 2010) Memorandum of Understanding and its Concordat on Coordination of European Union Policy Issues set out the mechanisms for dealing with EU business between the UK government and the devolved administrations. Previously, such business had largely been the preserve of specific departments, primarily Finance and Agriculture, the three MEPs and a small number of consultancies and interest groups. Awareness of EU issues amongst the new Assembly members (MLAs) was in most cases limited.

Devolution led to the creation of a special European Policy Coordination Unit (EPCU) within the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) and the establishment of the Office for the Northern Ireland Executive in Brussels in 2001. OFMDFM sought to play a proactive role in terms of Northern Ireland's engagement on EU policy issues producing, a 2006 consultation paper, 'Taking our Place in Europe' and,

since the launch of the Barroso Task Force in 2007, adopting annual and biannual European Priorities strategy documents focused on improving the region's economic competitiveness and creating sustainable employment opportunities. OFMDFM also organises an annual Opportunity Europe event in Belfast.

The Assembly too has sought to engage in EU issues, launching in 2002 an *Inquiry into the Approach of the Northern Ireland Assembly and the Devolved Government on European Union Issues*. In 2010 a further *Inquiry into Consideration of European Issues* was held. There is still more work to do to bring together an EU policy informed community to include the three MEPs, members of both the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions as well as a number of other interested parties (including interest groups, wider civil society and academics) but the devolved institutions and EU programmes have facilitated engagement and embedded Northern Ireland as a region deeper into EU than at any time before.

Northern Ireland's Three MEPs

The EU owes much of its profile in Northern Ireland to the region's three MEPs although EP elections have generally only added to the polarisation within society between the two predominant communities. From 1979 until 1999, Ian Paisley, leader of the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) topped the poll with a majority of unionist votes. John Hume of the Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP) received a similarly large mandate from nationalists. John Taylor of the Ulster Unionist Party secured the third seat. As in their views on Northern Ireland, Paisley and Hume represented very different attitudes towards Europe. Paisley's staunch opposition to the EC matched his hardline unionism, and reflected those in the unionist community who saw European integration as an additional threat to British sovereignty over Northern Ireland. By contrast, Hume – French-speaking and having previously worked as a special advisor in the European Commission – was unrepentantly Europhile, articulating the dominant view among progressive nationalists that European integration – diminishing the importance of borders, transferring political sovereignty, and reconciling previously warring populations – would help to ease the path towards Irish reunification.

The actions of Paisley and Hume in the EP also contributed to communal antipathy back home. Paisley's ejection from a 1988 plenary for protesting against the visit of Pope John Paul II may have delighted his evangelical followers, but offended many Catholics. Meanwhile, Hume's apparent influence among MEPs only heightened unionists' hostility towards him. With the SDLP a member of the European Confederation of Socialist Parties, Hume sat with the largest and most powerful political group in the EP. Moreover, as the group's treasurer he had a place on the front benches, a position Hume used to secure support to initiate a formal EC investigation into the Northern Ireland problem, culminating in the Haagerup Report of 1984. The investigation was opposed by unionists as unwarranted interference in Northern Ireland's affairs, even more so when it concluded by advocating a solution very much in line with SDLP thinking: power-sharing between the two communities and co-operation between the British and Irish governments in dealing with the problem. The report and Hume's lobbying within the EP, however unpalatable, arguably helped nudge Margaret Thatcher towards the signing of the Anglo-Irish Agreement in 1985. With this a first step in the peace process was taken as the British and Irish governments began to co-manage the Northern Ireland problem.

Though it often provided another arena for antagonism between nationalists and unionists, the EP did, at times, encourage co-operation between Northern Ireland's political representatives. Indeed, Paisley and Taylor were quite content to join in Hume's lobbying efforts when it came to the crucial issue of economic assistance for the region's conflict-damaged economy. Thus, throughout the 1980s, all three were eager to present a united front in order to maximise financial assistance from Brussels. This tendency

continued into the 1990s, by which time Jim Nicholson had replaced Taylor as the UUP's MEP, and led to the establishment of the Peace I programme in 1995.

Whilst Hume was continuously rewarded by nationalist voters for his efforts to secure EU support for Northern Ireland, this loyalty did not extend to his party. When Hume retired in 2004, the SDLP immediately lost to the Sinn Féin challenger, Bairbre de Brún. By contrast, when Paisley stood down in the same year, his DUP colleague, Jim Allister, again topped the poll. Though Allister subsequently resigned from the DUP following its agreement to share power with Sinn Féin, Diane Dodds retook the seat for the party in 2009. With Dodds, de Brún and Nicholson all representing parties with various shades of eurosceptic thinking, Northern Ireland since Hume's retirement has lacked a prointegration voice in the EP. With Nicholson in 2009 following British Conservative MEPs into the European Conservatives and Reformists grouping, Northern Ireland also lost its last representative in any of three largest EP groups. Nicholson's move also meant that he was unable to secure reelection as an EP quaestor, a post he had held since 2004, being re-elected in 2007.

The European Union in Northern Ireland – contributing to conflict transformation

Prior to EC membership relations between the United Kingdom and Ireland were often strained. A 'Cold War' over Northern Ireland existed. EC membership, however, facilitated a transformation of the British-Irish relationship since the EC offered neutral political spaces in Brussels and Strasbourg where British and Irish government ministers, parliamentarians and officials could build a new relationship unsullied by economic dependence, political antagonism and mutual suspicion. Their priority was dealing with the escalating ethno-national conflict in Northern Ireland. The new interstate relationship gradually became characterised by co-operation to that end.

A key development resulting from the transformed intergovernmental relationship was the 1985 Anglo-Irish Agreement which drew on EC-inspired notions of transnational governance in that it gave the Irish government a role in the public affairs of Northern Ireland. Thereafter, any fruitful negotiation on the future governance of Northern Ireland would require a transnational dimension leading to the establishment of transnational institutional structures. These structures were made manifest in the 1998 Good Friday Agreement. The territorial Northern Ireland Executive, Assembly and Civic Forum (Strand 1) were matched by a transnational North/South Ministerial Council and its Implementation Bodies (Strand 2), as well as a transnational British-Irish Council and British-Irish Intergovernmental Conference (Strand 3). The importance of the North/South arrangements was highlighted by the mandatory nature of the Implementation Bodies and by the clause, on paper at least, that linked the fate of the North/South Ministerial Council to that of the Northern Ireland Assembly. The Implementation Bodies concentrated on the specifics of cross-border co-operation in the areas of food safety, minority languages, trade and business development, aquaculture, waterways, and EU Programmes, with an all-island company established to communicate abroad Ireland's tourism potential.

The provision of the Special EU Programmes Body (SEUPB) was of particular significance, not least because this implementation body was given responsibility for managing EU programmes. Meanwhile, the North/South Ministerial Council, involving ministers with sectoral responsibilities for education, health, transport, agriculture, the environment and tourism, would meet to discuss wideranging cross-border co-operation. These institutions bear testimony to the effects of Europeanisation on the realisation of post-conflict, post-sovereign state institutional arrangements for the island of Ireland.

Though the EU was not a transnational diplomatic player in negotiations leading to the Good Friday Agreement its presence was felt in a number of ways. Many key actors in the peace process saw the agreement as one derived from many European sources, including the principles and treaties of the EU. Moreover, the EU, particularly through the European Commission, provided crucial and sophisticated support for the process at the local community level through its Peace programmes. Peace I (1995-1999), Peace II (2000-2006) and Peace III (2007-13) represent a sophisticated and sustained example of a 'peace-building from below' strategy. Europeanisation describes the tenor of the work undertaken in that the promotion of cross-border, inter-cultural dialogue, with a view to the acceptance of difference and the recognition of commonality, is central.

This communicative potential has been an important aspect of the cross-border, cross-community co-operation experience of local-level projects funded under the EU Peace programmes in Ireland. Project leaders have spoken of their positive experiences, for example, through engaging in discussions on history, participating in storytelling, and in organising cross-border, inter-cultural musical events or leisure pursuits for young people. It is also claimed that it was an important stepping stone on the path to improved cross-community relations in Northern Ireland. For others, benefit was gained from the simple relief of escaping the cage of territorial conflict in Northern Ireland, however briefly, and glimpsing another way of life.

The EU Peace programmes for Ireland have engaged public, private and third sector organisations on both sides of the Irish border and many cross-border partnerships for conflict transformation have been established. The issue of their sustainability is a major concern, however, as Peace III ends in 2013.

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