Cross-Border Cultural Cooperation in European Border Regions
Sites and Senses of 'Place' across the Irish Border

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ABSTRACT

The growing interaction between local cultures and international organisations suggests the need for peacebuilders to act strategically when trying to overcome cultural differences and build trust in societies long divided by bloody conflicts. This task is more difficult because the mental barriers that divide people and cultures are exacerbated by borders and walls. Through an analysis of the evolving role of the European Union (EU) in peacebuilding in the border region of Ireland, this forum contribution examines the potential of international organisations to enhance reconciliation by creating new cultural opportunities for cooperation. Existing scholarship focuses mainly on policy initiatives, strategies, directives and funding bodies, often failing to mention how theories are deployed by practitioners especially in the realm of cultural programmes.

With the window of opportunity arising in the aftermath of the 1994 ceasefires, which instigated a move towards peace in Northern Ireland, the European Union (EU) created the PEACE programme funding. The package was overwhelmingly concentrated on promoting peace and reconciliation between the mainly Protestant unionist/loyalist community and the mainly Catholic nationalist/republican community within Northern Ireland. The programme was conceived to complement the mainstream political efforts at peacebuilding undertaken by private actors, with the support of EU institutions, the British and Irish governments and cross-border, transnational policy networks. The objective was to provide a new and effective approach to tackle the transnational socio-economic problems of the Island of Ireland – often through building a cross-cultural understanding.

At the same time, the PEACE package constituted a means of creating a broader framework of cooperation initiating reconciliation not only between the two conflicting ethno-national communities in Northern Ireland, but also across the Irish border (Laganà 2017). Within this framework, the PEACE II Operational Programme covered the period 2000–2004. The programme focused on maintaining momentum to peacebuilding in the region, in particular in the context of facing the prevailing economic and social needs of Northern Ireland. PEACE II aimed to underpin, at the local community level, the institutions delivered by the 1998 Belfast/Good Friday Agreement (GFA). Indeed, PEACE II was also the first of the PEACE programmes to be developed and implemented within the changing political, cultural and institutional environment initiated by GFA.

The 1998 Belfast/GFA offered the opportunity to go beyond the historical dead-end debate regarding Northern Ireland's territorial sovereignty. Historically, the conflict between nationalists and unionists in Northern Ireland or more generally between those who identified as Irish or British was based on seemingly irresolvable differences of political and cultural identity and the territorial status of Northern Ireland, whether it should be part of the United Kingdom (UK) or a united Ireland (Walker 2012). These differences, based on political identities, were underpinned by religiously and culturally defined differences (Elliott 2009; Guelke 2015; Mitchell 2006). Based on the prescient vision of John Hume, who focused on redefining the relationships of those who lived in Northern Ireland (McLoughlin 2010, 2017), the GFA facilitated cross-border cooperation and cross-cultural relations among the two religiously defined communities in Northern Ireland. It established a set of institutions at three levels: within Northern Ireland, between the north and south of the island, and between east (Britain) and west (Ireland).

Recent scholarly attention has focused on the 'high politics' of the PEACE package, looking at the process of institution-building (Hayward 2006; Laffan 2005; Todd 2011); reflecting on the extent of the cooperation that brought about the GFA (Mitchell et al. 2018; Owsiak 2017; White 2017), or focusing on some of its contentious issues, such as its questionable long-term sustainability or its societal impact (Byrne 2001; Buchanan 2008; Lynch 2010). Much less has been said about how the PEACE funded initiatives have attempted to specifically moderate the conflictual territorialism of Northern Ireland politics and to move away from zero-sum conceptions of the ethno-national communal division by promoting a broader framework of

cooperation through cross-border partnerships, especially through the use of culture and heritage projects. One important exception has been the increased focus on the role of archaeology and heritage in the peacebuilding process (Horning and Breen 2018).

PEACE II specific initiatives aimed at reconciliation offer a unique and unexplored perspective in this regard. Accordingly, the objective of this short commentary is to investigate how the EU has attempted to provide for communities in Northern Ireland an escape from the legacy of the ethno-national conflict, which encouraged zero-sum territorialism and communal mindsets, by building new cultural places across the Irish border. Initiatives specifically funded by PEACE II are arguably more significant than those funded in the framework of other programmes, as they held a real cross-border focus and targeted specific cross-border policy networks.

A New Institutional Setting for Cross-Border Cooperation and Peacebuilding

Three different political and institutional processes occurred in 1998. First, the GFA made provision for an Executive within Northern Ireland and, in particular, for cross-border and cross-community implementation bodies on the island of Ireland. These included the Special European Union Programmes Body (SEUPB). Also, a North-South Ministerial Council (NSMC) was to bring together those with executive responsibilities in Northern Ireland and the Irish government to develop consultation, cooperation and action within the island of Ireland, including through implementation on an all-island and cross-border basis on matters of mutual interest (Belfast/Good Friday Agreement 1998: 12). The SEUPB was instead given responsibility for the management of cross-border EU Structural Funds programmes in Northern Ireland, the border region of Ireland, and part of Western Scotland. SEUPB could commission studies to identify and alleviate constraints affecting cross-border and cross-community cooperation, thus developing a role as an analyst and advocate of cross-border, cross-community, and all-island cooperation on behalf of the EU.

Second, the Commission, through its guidelines, altered the 'rules of the game' regarding PEACE II, by placing a particular emphasis on cross-border cooperation. Programmes seeking EU finance were expected to provide a joint strategy, joint priorities, and joint programming. In addition, the operations selected to implement the

programmes had to be clearly cross-border and cross-community in nature (EU Commission – Guidelines Interreg III 2000; PEACE II Annual Implementation Report 2000). In addition, the Commission underlined its well-established preference for partnership and a 'bottom-up' approach to develop the programme. It required a 'wide partnership' involving not only public partners but economic and social partners and non-governmental organisations. In practice, the Commission guidelines promoted a model of cross-border and cross-community cooperation supported by a capacity for joint planning and implementation of the programme following a participative and 'bottom-up' approach (Interview with Colgan 2016).[1]

The last component of political change to account for in this section is related to the Republic of Ireland. Prior to 1999, all of Ireland was regarded (for the purposes of EU regional funding) as an Objective One area, which meant that its GDP per capita was at – or below – the EU threshold of 75 per cent. In the lead-up to the negotiations on Agenda 2000, it became clear that Ireland would lose its Objective One status if all the state was considered as one unit for the purposes of structural funding. Following a heated and vigorous debate, the government decided to adopt a strategy of regionalisation. In opting for this strategy, the government was responding to demands from those regions in the west and border areas that were likely to benefit in financial terms from regionalisation (Boyle 2000: 740–744). Following the conclusion of the negotiations on Agenda 2000, the country was divided into two NUTS[2] II regions; the Border Midland and Western Region (BMW), and, the Southern and Eastern Region (Laffan and Payne 2001: 101). Two new regional authorities were established and PEACE II, on the border, was implemented in the context of the Border Midland and Western Region.

In 2005, also due to its popularity, PEACE II was extended to cover the years 2005 and 2006 (SEUPB 2005) and the measure 5.3 of PEACE II was introduced in this new context to develop 'cross-border reconciliation and cultural understanding' (SEUPB 2005). This brought into focus the relationships between the two communities in Northern Ireland and the need for cross-border cooperation between north and south. With the GFA in the background, it intertwined Strand 1 issues, which dealt with unionist-nationalist relations, with Strand 2, which focused on north/south relationships. The cross-border peacebuilding networks built during the period of PEACE I found the localised dimension of Measure 5.3 of PEACE II particularly suitable for creating a niche in which to foster their active participation

in the peace process, building – at least in theory – cross-border and cross-community social partnerships that could help prevent and/or ameliorate the Northern Ireland ethno-national conflict (McCall and O'Dowd 2008: 31) and promote cross-border cooperation.

New alliances and partnerships were established in the period of the PEACE programmes between the statutory, private, and voluntary/community sectors and between communities and groups at the project level. The social partnership structure for the implementation of the initiatives, at the insistence of the European Commission, provided for the application of local knowledge, skill, and effort at the level of local project organisers, through cultural activities, education, and training in small groups.

The PEACE II progress report estimated that the measure had involved 63,924 participants, the largest number of any measure, and that its seventy-six funded projects 'supported' 558 cross-border projects (over double the target number) (SEUPB 2005: 7–8). Measure 5.3 of PEACE II was at the ideological heart of the PEACE programmes (McCall and O'Dowd 2008: 31).

Cross-Border Partnerships and Cross-Border Cultural Cooperation under Peace II

Primarily, PEACE II developed new ways of thinking and working together across the Irish border on cultural issues. The projects funded under Measure 5.3 of PEACE II were predominantly engaged in a variety of cross-border educational and cultural exchanges, community arts training initiatives, multimedia projects, and recreational programmes. They were focused directly on increasing mutual understanding and promoting reconciliation, with organisers drawn from both unionist and nationalist communities (McCall and O'Dowd 2008 42). Some unionist project organisers, in fact, stated a preference for cross-border projects rather than cross-community work within Northern Ireland because the cross-border aspect offered the space to explore commonality and diversity outside the theatre of the conflict (Interview with Nicholson, 2015).

It is a fact that the Irish border has historically acted as an effective barrier between north and south, engendering a sense of estrangement between northern and southern co-nationals. However, this sense of separation seems to be weaker in the Irish border region (Interview with Taillon, 2015):

> It is important not to underestimate cultural ties, especially those ste-
> reotypes representing the Irish nationalist imagined community island-
> wide and beyond. . . . the Catholic Church, the Irish language, Irish
> traditional music, and the Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA) are the key
> cultural resources that continue to aggregate the Irish nation. (Interview
> with Taillon, 2015)

Furthermore, the GFA created the Tourism Ireland Ltd. for the pro-
motion of tourism on an all-Ireland basis.[3] On this premise, project
organisers of cross-border initiatives funded under Measure 5.3 of
Peace II tended to emphasise the exploration of cultural commonal-
ity and the promotion of cultural diversity as a prelude to building
trust, respect and understanding (NICVA 2004: 22–24).[4] To this end,
storytelling emerged as a key-activity of projects.

Storytelling has been identified as a particularly important mecha-
nism for reconciliation in identity-based conflicts (Weiglhofer 2014:
144-145). Developing a peacebuilding strategy based on local exper-
tise and storytelling enables it to become embedded across the local
community (McCall and O'Dowd 2008: 45). Storytelling took many
forms: bilingual storytelling – in the Irish language and English – for
primary school children; drama in carnivals; heritage, craft, writing;
art in public spaces; a multimedia project for young people with the
aim of producing a short film; and life stories by ex-prisoners (Inter-
view with McKeown, 2019).

Developing, managing and implementing storytelling initiatives on
a cross-border basis had the virtue of being 'less politically conten-
tious' (Interview with McKeown, 2019), as the south provided a more
beneficial space in which peacebuilding and reconciliation could be
addressed at the cultural level.

> In the South, the communities aren't as divided as they are in the North,
> and therefore perspectives are different. Developing projects on a cross-
> border basis definitively adds something to what you are trying to do
> . . . it creates a new place in which people seem more comfortable to
> exchange . . . This is the reason why I have always proposed projects to
> be developed across the border. (Interview with Dr Laurence McKeown,
> 18 February 2019)

Another project organiser in the western border region also welcomed
the lack of tension and the 'different atmosphere' associated with fes-
tivals in the south, whereas in Northern Ireland 'they would be likely
to end with a riot' (Anonymous 1, PEACE II project organiser focused
on youth work in an interface 09 July 2019). However, this respondent
also argued that this type of work needs to be long-term; must become

self-sustainable and there must be acknowledgement of the very heavy voluntary commitment involved in sustaining cross-border links. Furthermore, for unionist communities the most constructive progression was to begin work which looked at their own identities and which built community confidence (Interview with Nicholson 2015). Engagement with cross-border groups arrived second and, ultimately, also with the 'other community' within Northern Ireland (Interview with Colgan, 2016).

These examples are evidence of how, in addition to financial support, the EU attempted to promote the development of new ways of thinking about categories and responsibilities. PEACE II targeted specifically the socio-cultural resources present in the Northern Ireland conflict setting, fostering dialogue and a new understanding on a cross border and cross-cultural basis, as this held out the prospect of positive-sum politics, which were outward looking and capable of revealing existing and new areas of common interest and identity between the two parts of the island (Coakley and O'Dowd 2007: 878). These new cultural places, born under the aegis of the EU PEACE II programme, became part of the Northern Ireland 'infrastructure of peace', theorised by John Paul Lederach (1995: 26).

Conclusion

This Forum contribution illustrated the dynamic nature of cross-border, cross-cultural and peacebuilding interactions of PEACE II and the importance of the juxtaposition of institutional change and individual agency. It focused briefly on the micro-institutional and policy processes related to peacebuilding and cross-border cooperation, which bridged the post-GFA period. The PEACE II programme has clearly provided the impetus for the creation and development of multilevel, cross-border, cross-cultural partnerships. These partnerships were designed to address local, social and economic needs and advance peacebuilding. The cross-border dimension was integral to this approach, because it provided the scope for a broader framework of cultural cooperation that could help overcome the zero-sum logics of the Northern Ireland conflict and advance peace efforts from the bottom-up. Somewhat paradoxically, this framework proved to be attractive for project organisers, who found it easier to cooperate on issues such as heritage and identity with groups across the Irish border, instead of doing it 'across the street'.

The EU's role in attempting to build peace across cultural and differential territorial divisions on the island of Ireland after the GFA highlights its attempt to Europeanise the conflict by undermining historic communal tensions. By the early 2000s, the EU had already identified the need to use cross-cultural and cross-border initiatives as a means of defusing ethno-national cultural differences. This process was not without issues and successes were often limited by the unstable institutional environment and by the relatively embryonic form of the Special European Union Programmes Body and cross-border co-operation more generally.

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Notes

1. Interviews, additional information: Patrick Colgan, 16 May 2016; Jim Nicholson, Member of the EP for the Ulster Unionist Party, 27 January 2015; Ruth Taillon, former Director of the Centre for Cross-Border Studies Armagh, 10 November 2015; Interview with Dr Laurence McKeown, former IRA volunteer, former hunger striker and PEACE coordinator under PEACE I; II; III and IV, 18 February 2019
2. NUTS (Nomenclature of Territorial Units for Statistics) is a harmonised, hierarchical and nested classification of European territory at six levels (NUTS 0 to NUTS 6). Level 0 corresponds to the territories of the member states and the EFTA member states associated with this classification. The regional level is divided into three parts: NUTS 1 corresponds to the most extensive regional level; NUTS 3 is an intermediate level. For several countries, particularly the smaller ones, certain levels do not exist.
3. For more information, please visit: www.tourismireland.com/About-Us
4. For more information, please visit: www.nicva.org/sites/default/files/d7content/attachments-resources/story-of-peaceii.pdf

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