



advances made by the Nationalist community, by the perceived sense of neglect felt within most disadvantaged communities and by the continued presence of paramilitaries amongst these areas. The rioting that shook Northern Ireland for two weeks in April 2021, while mainly focused on the new customs checks to be performed in Northern Irish ports, has much deeper social and economic roots.



*Anti-Brexit graffiti, Belfast.*

## **The Border Conundrum**

The Northern Ireland Protocol is a 63-page long text which clearly details how Northern Irish ports will be performing checks on goods exported from the UK to EU countries and transiting through the island of Ireland. It was the only solution that was thought to finally circumvent the quandary which has dominated much of Brexit negotiations since June 2016: where should the border between the UK and its former EU partners be situated? The issue is thornier than it seems, as no one has the appetite for reinstating a frontier between the two parts of Ireland. While largely ignored, or at least undermined,

during the referendum campaign, it quickly became one of the major stumbling blocks between the two sides. The positions were further entrenched by the fact that the Republic of Ireland, backed by its EU partners, was steadfast in its opposition to any type of border on the island, and the Unionists were equally adamant that no border of any type can be contemplated between constituent parts of the UK.

The Protocol, however, gives Northern Ireland a hybrid status, placing it both outside the EU, as the rest of the UK, and inside, as it remains within the customs and tariffs union. Similarly, the province is firmly within the UK, but it is also somewhat apart, as its ports will be where customs checks will be operated. To make things even worse for Unionists and Loyalists, these measures were decided under a Conservative government's watch, testing the relationship between London and Belfast on a number of occasions over the past few years. In 2017, the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) successfully brokered a "confidence and supply" deal with then British Prime Minister Theresa May. The arrangement was predicated on both sides' continued support for the Union and for the Good Friday Agreement, signed in 1998 between the Republic of Ireland and the UK to consolidate and implement the peace process. To the DUP, supporting the union meant strongly opposing the idea of a backstop which maintained Northern Ireland within some aspects of the single market and provided for a customs union between the EU and the UK until an alternative was agreed. Accepting such a compromise was a "red line" that the DUP professed never to cross. They were backed by a sizeable faction of the Tories, including Boris Johnson, who lambasted the proposal as being too tepid. However, the solution that the newly elected British Prime Minister put forward, in the wake of the Conservatives' December 2019 landslide victory, was indeed more acceptable to hardline Brexiters, but threw Northern Ireland into a confusing situation and compounded the dilemma for Unionists. The Treaty agreed on December 2020 between the UK and the EU meant that a no-deal Brexit had been avoided, and as such, it was initially given a lukewarm welcome by the DUP. However, the party announced a few days later that it would not vote for the proposed arrangement in the House of Commons. The feeling of betrayal among Unionists was evident, as expressed by DUP Sammy Wilson: "We expect you [the government] to fulfil promises you've made to the people of Northern Ireland but you haven't done it to date, so don't expect our support."<sup>3</sup>

In the first few weeks of its implementation, the Protocol generated a level of disruption with supply chains, although these did not last. Threats against workers in ports were also reported as early as February 2021, but their credibility was dismissed by the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI). Nevertheless, an anti-Protocol momentum was obviously gathering pace, which escalated until it reached a peak on Good Friday 2021, when violent

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<sup>3</sup> McCormack, Jayne, "Brexit: NI MPs to vote against trade deal in Commons", *BBC*, 28 December 2020.

demonstrations broke up throughout the main urban areas of Northern Ireland and shook the province for almost two consecutive weeks.

Undoubtedly, politicians have their share of responsibility in the unrest. On the one hand, the DUP, while publicly calling for a scaling down of the protests, could not be found wanting on its defence of the Union, and engaged in a rhetoric that was at times quite inflammatory. It openly challenged the Protocol by launching a five-point plan to achieve its withdrawal, including an online petition which garnered more than 140,000 votes in a matter of days. The First Minister Arlene Foster met with the representatives of a more radical voice within loyalism, the Loyalist Communities Council, an umbrella group that represents former paramilitary organisations.<sup>4</sup> She justified the move by stressing the necessity to “hear their concerns from their community and listen to those shared concerns about the protocol, about the status of the United Kingdom, about the Belfast Agreement”.<sup>5</sup> Foster was criticised for engaging with representatives of former paramilitary groups who maintain a level of control over their communities, and who can also represent a potential risk to the stability of the region. Indeed, a mere two weeks after this meeting, the Loyalist Communities Council announced in a letter to Boris Johnson that it was withdrawing its support for the Good Friday Agreement. The ominous undertones of their statement left no doubt as to their willingness to torpedo the Peace agreement or at least to use it as leverage in their attempt to have the Protocol withdrawn: “Please do not underestimate the strength of feeling on this issue right across the unionist family... If you or the EU is not prepared to honour the entirety of the agreement, then you will be responsible for the permanent destruction of the agreement.”<sup>6</sup>

## **“No One Is Listening”**

However, the resentment which is so manifest in loyalist communities is not solely linked to the Protocol. The genuine anger and frustration expressed in some areas, particularly urban, where the sense of loss runs deep, is anchored in a pervasive feeling that these communities have been left behind ever since the peace process started. As Trinity College’s David Mitchell put it, “This is the common criticism of the peace process: It was quite good

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<sup>4</sup> Namely the Ulster Volunteer Force, Ulster Defence Association and Red Hand Commando, the three largest Loyalist paramilitary organisations and who are responsible for 18% of all deaths during the conflict, possibly more as 4% of deaths are ascribed to “unknown loyalists” which could have been operating for the same organisations but under different names. See [Statistical breakdown of deaths in the ‘Troubles’](#) website.

<sup>5</sup> Halliday, Gillian, ‘DUP leader defends her meeting with loyalist group over protocol’, *Belfast Telegraph*, 26 February 2020.

<sup>6</sup> ‘Brexit: loyalist paramilitary groups renounce Good Friday agreement’, *Guardian*, 4 March 2021.

at stopping the violence, but it didn't do anything about poverty. It brought economic developments, but it didn't do so much for the poorer areas."<sup>7</sup> In this context, the progress achieved as a result of the GFA is viewed negatively, with a deep-rooted conviction that the process has largely benefitted the nationalist community to the detriment of Loyalism. The sentiment was already prevalent in 2012, when a decision by the Belfast City Council to fly the Union Jack only on designated dates, as opposed to every day, in line with the rest of the UK, led to weeks of street protests. At the heart of the matter was, again, the defence of Unionist identities and of their loyalty to the Crown. A Queen's University report published in 2014<sup>8</sup> highlighted how, particularly in under-privileged urban areas, a commonly-held perception framed the peace process as a zero-sum game, with any gain made by nationalists being equated with a loss for loyalists. Politicians both in London and in Belfast were felt to have neglected loyalist communities, leading to an overarching insecurity about their identity and their future. Respondents to the study cited, among other grievances, the feeling that their culture was being eroded by an increasing importance being placed on the Irish language and by the fact that they were no longer allowed to express their heritage as freely as they would have liked, citing as evidence the restrictions imposed on the Orange Order parades which take place every year and celebrate Loyalist culture and heritage.<sup>9</sup> They also resented the presence of former IRA members in the government, which at the time primarily referred to Martin McGuinness, Deputy First Minister who had admitted his involvement in the IRA during the Bloody Sunday events in January 1972.

Interestingly, Loyalists also felt that Nationalists had done better than them on the economic front. Indeed, the gap that existed for decades between the two communities in terms of access to employment has been bridged over the last 20 years. While Catholics represented 40,3% of the total workforce in 2001, this figure had risen to 49,3% in 2018, placing them almost on a par with Protestants (50,7%).<sup>10</sup> Undeniably, this means that advancement for Catholics in the past two decades has occurred at a faster pace, but this was necessary to achieve some balance between the two communities. Educational underachievement was another grievance mentioned by those who took part in the loyalist protests in 2012. Again, this is evidenced by statistics. A study showed that Catholics were more likely to continue into higher education than Protestants (45.8% against 40.2%), a situation that is compounded for young men (43.2% boys reach third level education compared to 56.8% girls). When social class is factored in, the imbalance is even more

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<sup>7</sup> David Mitchell, 'Will Northern Ireland's 'Peace Walls' ever come down?', *Courthouse News Service*, 28 June 2019.

<sup>8</sup> Nolan, P., et al., *The Flag Dispute: Anatomy of a Protest*, Queen's University, 2014.

<sup>9</sup> Commemorations and parades are organised within both the nationalist and the unionist communities. While most of these are peaceful, some represent potential flashpoints because of the routes they take, particularly around the 12 of July, which is the celebration of the Battle of the Boyne when King William of Orange defeated Catholic King James II in 1690. In order to minimise tensions, a Parades commission was established in 1998 in order to monitor the most volatile situations and to place restrictions on some of the most contentious parades.

<sup>10</sup> Fair Employment Monitoring Report, 29, 2018.

striking. Catholic children from less privileged backgrounds who benefit from free school meals outperform their Protestant peers by a sizable margin at both A-level and GCSE: 45% against 36.6 for boys and 55.6 against 48.9 for girls. Consequently, young men from Loyalist backgrounds are more likely to leave school early and to face either unemployment or precarious employment. While Northern Ireland boasted the lowest unemployment rate for the whole of the UK, it also had the highest level of insecure employment,<sup>11</sup> with one in three workers concerned.

## **Living in the Shadow of the Walls**

Some of the Loyalist grievances reveal a mind-set where the imbalance that existed until the 21<sup>st</sup> century between the two communities was not questioned. The fact that both are now on a par should be a welcome development in terms of community relations. These have undoubtedly improved since the signing of the GFA, and countless projects have been implemented to enhance cross-community contact, some of which were facilitated by massive injections of EU funding.<sup>12</sup> But overall, this process has not necessarily trickled down to the most segregated areas of the main cities. The tensions between the two sides is still palpable in many local communities who live in close proximity but have, virtually, no contact with each other. These interface areas, as they are commonly called, are separated by walls or fences, of which there are approximately 100 throughout Northern Ireland. Most peace lines are situated in Belfast, and can take many forms: barriers that are open in the daytime, makeshift gates, but also, a 5 km, and in some places up to 6 meter high wall that separates the Republican Falls area from the Loyalist Shankill road. Built in 1969 to prevent further rioting between the two sides, what was meant to be a provisional structure is now the longest standing wall in Europe, which has even outlasted its Berlin counterpart.

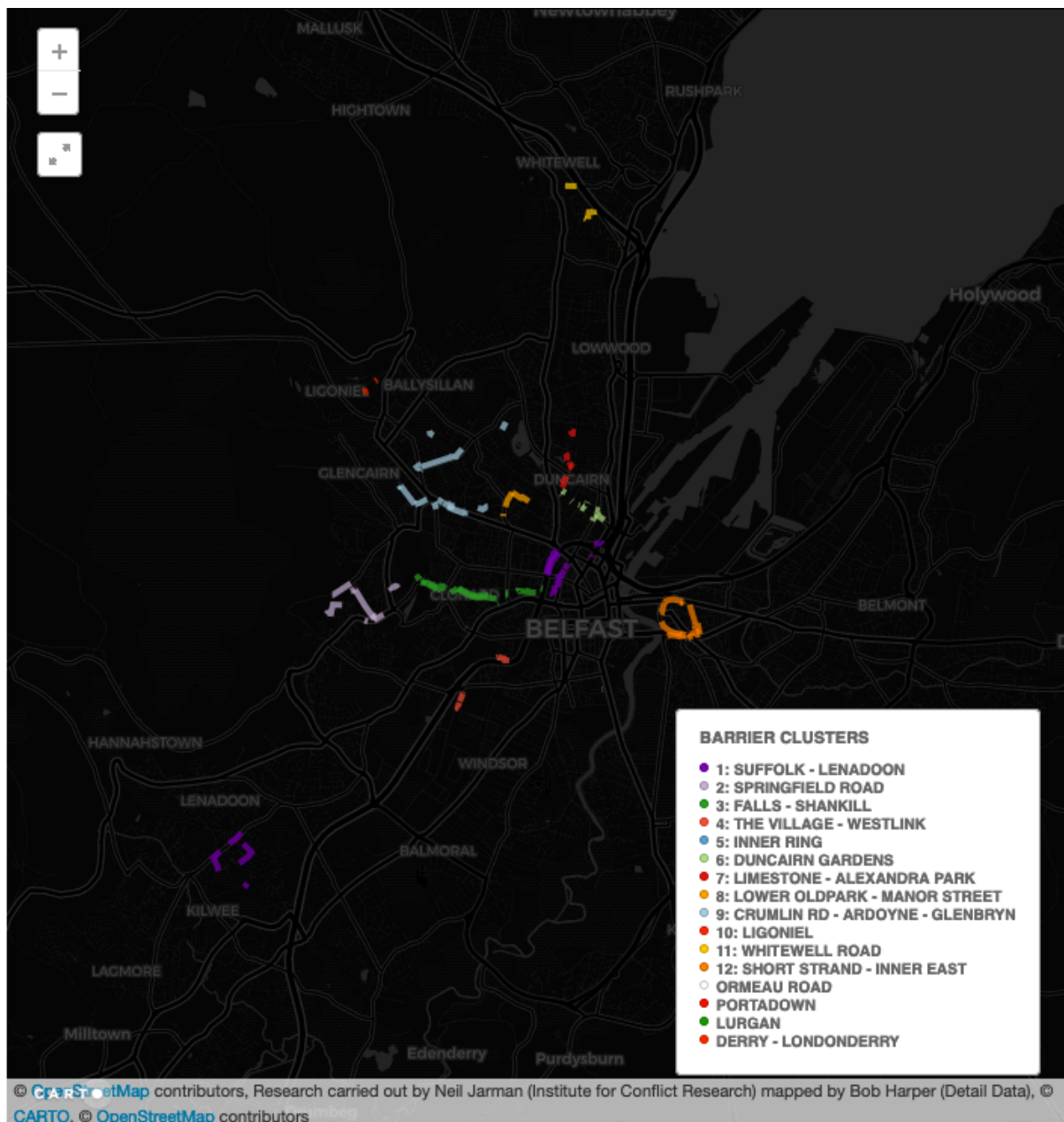
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<sup>11</sup> Those most at risk of ending up in insecure jobs are young people between the ages of 18 and 25, and women.

Gray, Ann Marie, et al., *Northern Ireland Peace Monitoring Report, 5*, Belfast, Community Relations Council, October 2018.

<sup>12</sup> Since 1995, four programmes, namely PEACE I, II, III and IV, have been implemented, amounting to 1,3 billion euros. These finance cross-community projects, investment into small and medium enterprises, and in victims support networks ([Northern Ireland Peace Programme](#)).





*Map of the Belfast 'Peace Lines'. Source: [Detail Data Project](#).*

The permanence of these structures, 20 years after the GFA, has a number of detrimental effects: they hinder economic development and prevent investment, they limit day-to-day movement and act as a deterrent for improved community relations.<sup>13</sup> However, studies have found that those living in the shadow of these walls are reluctant to see them removed. Among the reasons for these attitudes is a general apprehension that were the walls to come down, tensions between different areas would increase and would leave those communities defenceless. In 2013, The Northern Ireland Executive announced a plan,

<sup>13</sup> Dixon, J et al., 'When the walls come tumbling down': The role of intergroup proximity, threat, and contact in shaping attitudes towards the removal of Northern Ireland's peace walls'. *British Journal of Social Psychology*, 59: 922-944, 2020.

*Together: Building a United Community Strategy* which aimed at removing the walls, or “interface barriers” – by 2023. To date, however, these targets have not been met, as resistance within the communities continues to overshadow the process. For most, it’s about feeling safer. Community relations are still considered fragile, at best, and not helped by the political context in which they are operating. One resident summed it up clearly: “I think one day the walls will come down, but the way the current political climate is, it’s far too soon. Maybe in 10 or 15 years, yes, but before they come down you need to have a government up and running who agree with each other”.<sup>14</sup>

Those neighbourhoods are, expectedly enough, those where levels of sectarianism and disadvantage are at their highest. The intersection between these two phenomena has been shown by a number of studies, one of which, published in 2019, concluded that in those areas, “there are persistent concentrations of poverty and contentious cultural issues. Paramilitary organisations appear to have an ongoing presence and there is evident competition over control of specific areas”.<sup>15</sup> Indeed, another issue that plagues those areas is the continued presence of paramilitary groups, on both sides of the divide, who are involved in organised crime, from drug trafficking to money laundering. According to some sources,<sup>16</sup> while not directly behind the rioting in Loyalist areas, they have nevertheless encouraged the targeting of members of the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) who have recently been clamping down on some of these gangs’ operations. On the nationalist side, there are a number of paramilitary organisations, generically referred to as “dissidents”. Some of them emerged in the 1990s as a result of splits within the IRA, who they claimed betrayed the Republican cause by agreeing to a settlement that did not go all the way – the reunification of the island. Others are either splinter groups of existing organisations or newly formed groups, such as the New IRA which first appeared in 2012. Their membership is relatively limited, but like their loyalist counterparts, they do control the areas in which they are based through so-called military-style attacks. Between April 1998, when the Good Friday Agreement was signed, and 2018, 158 people were killed by these groups, according to a 2018 report.<sup>17</sup> Since then, three more people have died, including journalist Lyra McKee who was shot at Easter 2018 during riots in Derry. The damage that paramilitaries inflict on their communities is high. The campaign [Ending the Harm](#) estimates that between 2016 and 2020, 389 people, mostly young men, were victims of what the paramilitaries term “punishment beatings,” which can go from aggravated assaults to shootings.

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<sup>14</sup> ‘Northern Ireland still divided by peace walls 20 years after conflict’, *The World*, 14 January 2020, t

<sup>15</sup> Murrow, Duncan, *Sectarianism in Northern Ireland: A Review*, University of Ulster, 2019, p. 14

<sup>16</sup> See for instance *The Irish Times*, 8 April 2021.

<sup>17</sup> This figure includes the 29 victims of the Omagh bomb in August 1998, the highest number of casualties in Northern Ireland in all the duration of the Troubles. The first cause of deaths was paramilitary style attacks (62 deaths, for which the rate of conviction was less than 2%), followed by internal feuding amongst Loyalist organisations (41 deaths) (The Detail, 23 April 2019).



## Unionism in Crisis

The challenges that Unionism is currently facing are multiple, none of which have simple answers. Ironically, this soul-searching process is taking place the year of the 100th anniversary of the creation of the state that they pledge to defend tooth and nail.<sup>18</sup> There are a number of reasons behind this unprecedented crisis. Brexit has contributed to the hardening of antagonisms between the two communities. As a deputy from the moderate nationalist Social Democratic and Labour Party” (SDLP), Claire Hannah explains, “The Good Friday Agreement was about focusing less on identity, on borders and sovereignty, and now because of Brexit and the collapse of Stormont we literally talk about nothing else”.<sup>19</sup> Moreover, Brexit has accelerated the conversation on the constitutional future of Northern Ireland, and more particularly the issue of Irish unity. While this does not necessarily mean that the possibility is closer now, it certainly feeds into the anxieties of the Unionist electorate which has been reassured, time and again, that this would never happen and that the conversation isn’t even worth engaging with. However, opinion polls on the prospect of reunification abound, and they all tell a similar story. This is now seen as a real possibility, which does not necessarily mean that it is gathering momentum in terms of support, but certainly that a majority now views it as inevitable, within the medium-term future at least. A recent *Belfast Telegraph* poll thus showed that 66% expected this to happen within the next 25 years. Interestingly, only 33% in NI would welcome the prospect, as opposed to 44% who would oppose it.<sup>20</sup> But what these figures show is that the narrative on Irish reunification has definitely changed, from one where it was only an aspiration to a realistic prospect, irrespective of whether it is welcome or not. Northern Irish opinion seems to be increasingly resigned to reunification happening in not too distant a future.

This momentum is visible in the different groups that have been created to lobby on the issue, such as a citizen’s group called Irish Unity. The Department of the Taoiseach (Irish Prime Minister) has set up a “Shared Island” unit which, while not advocating reunification, promotes an increased cooperation between both sides of the island. Sinn Féin, the strongest advocate of Irish unity, won the highest share of the vote in the 2020 elections in the Republic, its main opponent, Fianna Fáil, being only one seat ahead. The focus on Irish Unity is seen as a constant challenge to the Unionist position. This has been the case since partition, which was predicated on the artificial design of boundaries to ensure an in-built Protestant,

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<sup>18</sup> The 1920 Government of Ireland Act created two autonomous states on the island of Ireland: The Free State, with 26 counties, and the Northern Irish State, composed of the six north-eastern counties. It came into effect on 3 May 1921. From then on and until 1972, Northern Ireland was government by a local government and Parliament, which was dominated by the Unionist community as they had an inbuilt majority within the geographical area that had seceded from the rest of the island.

<sup>19</sup> Carswell, Sinon, Banners, flags and ‘f\*\*k you’ bonfires - Northern Ireland’s ‘cultural war’ rages, *The Irish Times*, 12 July 2019.

<sup>20</sup> “Centenary Poll”, *Belfast Telegraph*, 1 May 2021.

and therefore Unionist, majority of two-thirds, meaning that one third of the population did not deem the new political entity legitimate. NI was from the outset a territory to defend, in the eyes of many. Brexit has accelerated this sense of insecurity. As succinctly put by playwright Jonathan Burgess: “Of course we feel our identity is under threat because we’re always questioned about it, always asked about a united Ireland. It’s constant, constant, constant.”<sup>21</sup>. Moreover, the demographics have profoundly transformed the overall landscape. The 2011 census showed that the gap between the two communities was closing, with a ratio of 45% Protestants to 42% Catholics, and the 2021 census is poised to confirm the rising numbers in the latter community which could become the majority. But this in itself is not a good indicator of how mind-sets and attitudes are changing on the ground. For some, continuing to see the situation in such binary terms is in fact engaging in “sectarian counting” which is anything but helpful, as an increasing number of people, estimated at 20%, do not claim either identity. The changing demographics obviously translate into changing voting patterns and has seen the rise of parties that are neither nationalist nor unionist, such as the Alliance Party or the Greens. This is a further challenge to Unionism, which could be overtaken on both sides. On the more moderate side, a significant number voted against Brexit and could align with such parties. On the more radical side, more and more voters are contemplating casting their vote for alternative parties such as the Voice of Traditional Ulster, which a January opinion poll credited with 10% of the vote in the 2022 Northern Ireland Assembly elections, to the detriment of the DUP (Lucid Talk).<sup>22</sup>

## Conclusion

The recent riots in Northern Ireland point to high levels of dissatisfaction among those who feel neglected and sidelined, not only by the peace process but, worse still perhaps, by their own political representatives. The focus on the Northern Ireland protocol is thus only the tip of the iceberg, as the grievances expressed by many are as much about social and economic deprivation as they are about Brexit. The resignation of Arlene Foster as First Minister and leader of the DUP on 28 April 2021, closely followed by that of Steve Aiken, the leader of its main rival, the Ulster Unionist Party, shows that Unionism is indeed undergoing a major crisis. Edwin Poots, new DUP leader, was elected on the basis that he would remove the Protocol, although he has not yet been in a position to offer a viable alternative.

The uncertainty that seems to be looming over the fate of the Unionist community is compounded by the recent electoral successes of the Scottish National Party, which could further accelerate the conversation on a United Ireland. Demands for a referendum on the

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<sup>21</sup> “Northern Ireland at a crossroads as partition centenary underlines division”. *The Irish Times*, 3 May 2021.

<sup>22</sup> LucidTalk Northern Ireland, Quarterly « Tracker » Poll, Winter 2021.

other side of the Irish sea could benefit those who have been lobbying the British Secretary of State to apply the clause of the GFA that allows for this possibility. The government in London needs to keep Unionism on board. The announcement, in May 2021, that a statute of limitation would apply to British army soldiers involved in crimes during the Troubles triggered a level of unrest among politicians of all sides. Unionists have been asking for members of the security forces not to be prosecuted, and this has been supported by London on more than one occasion. However, nationalists are insisting that no such status should be implemented as this would mean that a number of victims' families would not get closure. Ultimately, this measure could also generate an amnesty for all perpetrators, including members of paramilitary organisations, which would be unacceptable to Unionists but also to some within Nationalist circles. The issue of victims, as many other "legacy" issues in Northern Ireland, is still highly sensitive and contentious. The approach on these and other matters could also trigger tensions between London, Belfast and Dublin and pose further challenges to the fragile status-quo in Northern Ireland.

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