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THE PROBLEM

OF GREAT BRITAIN IN NORTHERN IRELAND AFTER BREXIT

EL PROBLEMA DE GRAN BRETAÑA EN IRLANDA DEL NORTE TRAS EL BREXIT

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ABSTRACT

Brexit has been one of the most relevant events for British politics in recent times, given that its repercussions go beyond national limits, affecting to a certain extent the entire European Union. After Brexit, the problem of guaranteeing the security of the United Kingdom's territorial integrity became more pronounced and, of course, the biggest problems arose in Northern Ireland, a territory that had long been in conflict, because although in 1998 peace was achieved with the signing of the Belfast Treaty/Good Friday Agreement the territory has always remained in tension. Immediately after the Brexit referendum, the political situation in Northern Ireland changed and it remains a difficult problem for British politics to this day. Then, the objective of this work is to discuss the potential problems of Great Britain in Northern Ireland after Brexit and how this has evolved in the process of negotiations.

Keywords: Brexit, The Belfast Agreement, priority of interests, political rivalry

RESUMEN

El Brexit ha sido uno de los acontecimientos más relevantes para la política británica en los últimos tiempos, dado que sus repercusiones van más allá de los límites nacionales, afectando en cierta medida a toda la Unión Europea. Tras el Brexit, el problema de garantizar la seguridad de la integridad territorial del Reino Unido se acentuó y, por supuesto, los mayores problemas surgieron en Irlanda del Norte, un territorio que llevaba mucho tiempo en conflicto, pues, aunque en 1998 se logró la paz con la firma del Tratado de Belfast/Acuerdo de Viernes Santo, el territorio siempre ha permanecido en tensión. Inmediatamente después del referéndum Brexit, la situación política en Irlanda del Norte cambió y sigue siendo un problema difícil para la política británica hasta el día de hoy. Entonces, el objetivo de este trabajo es discutir los potenciales problemas de Gran Bretaña en Irlanda del Norte tras el Brexit y cómo ha evolucionado este en el proceso de negociaciones.

Palabras clave: brexit, acuerdo de belfast, prioridad de intereses, rivalidad política.

INTRODUCTION

The 2016 referendum in which United Kingdom (UK) voters opted to leave the European Union, known as Brexit, has undoubtedly changed politics in the UK. But its political consequences are still being understood. Political scientists have quickly accumulated much knowledge about the causes of individual support for Brexit, its electoral consequences, and implications for various domestic policies. However, the impact on territorial preferences has been less explored. As Brexit can be considered a major external shock to an existing political unit, especially to key regions within the UK, it provides an important case to test theories of when territorial preferences can change. One oft-quoted claim is that Brexit threatens the UK's territorial integrity, however, there has been little theorizing and specific evidence regarding whether Brexit scenarios affect relevant preferences in the regions where such issues have been a political cleavage (Daniels & Kuo, 2021).

Brexit did not emerge out of nowhere: it is the culmination of events that have been under way for decades and have historical roots stretching back well beyond that. The history of the nineteenth century has something to tell us about why British attitudes towards Europe evolved in the way they did. But the European Union also has a past that explains why it operates in the way that it does today, and this past naturally shapes the ways in which the Union has responded to the challenges posed by Brexit. And finally, there is Ireland, the member state (other than the UK itself) most affected by Brexit and a country where history continues to matter politically. Then, the issue of the Irish border is at the very heart of the Brexit negotiations (O'Rourke, 2019).

As highlighted by Connolly and Doyle (2019, p. 224) given the contradictions in the UK government's position, the nature of the border on the island of Ireland become the major issue which prevented an agreement between the UK and the EU that was acceptable to both sides. It was clear from the start of the process that unless there were special provisions for Northern Ireland, if the UK left both the customs union and single market, this would inevitably result in a closed border on the island of Ireland. In the Brexit discussions the solution that received the most attention involved either the whole of the UK remaining in the single market (for a limited time period) or Northern Ireland only remaining in the single market, with a de facto customs and regulatory border on the Irish Sea, between Northern Ireland and Britain.

All this process has caused discord within Northern Ireland, exposed the highly contentious Irish border to

fresh dilemmas, and strained Anglo-Irish relations more than any period since the 1980s. The UK's decision to leave the EU without adequate forethought as to its full implications spawned a tsunami in the manner in which negotiations have been conducted, and it could yet precipitate a meltdown in the fabric of the UK. Those realities keenly feel in Ireland, North and South (Fitzpatrick, 2021).

Ireland has historically shared a common travel area with the UK and abandoning this will be both politically and socially disruptive. A benefit of the common travel area, especially following the peace process, has been close trading and business links with the Republic of Ireland, Northern Ireland's largest 'export' market. Thus, the loss of the economic benefits of EU membership, including open borders, is likely to have a more severe impact on Northern Ireland than on the rest of the UK as its economy is still in a weak post-conflict condition (J. Doyle & Connolly, 2017).

Unlike other parts of the UK, Northern Ireland's historic experience has been marked by serious and violent conflict. The movement from conflict to peace over a protracted period of time culminated in the signing of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement in 1998. However, tensions between the parties continued to exist after 1998, and were particularly evident in relation to equality issues, language rights, and conflict legacy matters (Armstrong et al., 2018). Differences were also apparent in relation to a lack of progress on key issues, such as integrated education, welfare entitlements and shared housing (Gray et al., 2018). Since then, local politicians in Northern Ireland have encountered particular difficulties in confronting and reforming these highly sensitive policy domains. At the time of the calling of the EU referendum, Murphy (2018) identified the existence of a 'negative peace' in Northern Ireland epitomised by the ongoing polarization of politics. Then although a 'negative peace' environment is not unexpected for a region in transition from conflict to peace, it is nevertheless a precarious and tenuous moment for any conflict transformation process (Murphy, 2021).

Although since 2016 the possible consequences of Brexit for Ireland (Dooley, 2022; O. Doyle, 2022; Fitzpatrick, 2021; McCall, 2021), Northern Ireland (Cochrane, 2020; Hayward, 2020; Murphy, 2021; Murphy & Evershed, 2021) and the European Union (Baciu & Doyle, 2019; Dooley, 2022; Martill & Staiger, 2018; Wager, 2022) have been analyzed in the academic literature, the academic debate is still open and there are interesting aspects yet to be analyzed. Then, taking into account the above, the objective of this article is to discuss the potential problems of Great Britain in Northern Ireland after Brexit.

DEVELOPMENT

55.8% of the population of Northern Ireland voted for the UK to remain in the European Union. In Northern Ireland, as in Scotland, less than half of the population support Brexit. In general, Northern Ireland has from time to time been the center of the national liberation movement in the United Kingdom. After Brexit, this struggle began in a new quality. The largest union of nationalists was united around the Shinn Fein Charter, which advocated the unification of the country on a single island. The second active force in the country is the Unionists. Then, from the very beginning, they were united around the Unionist Democratic Party (YDP) where The Unionists chanted "Unity within the Union. "This slogan was uttered against the nationalists' slogan 'United Ireland'. In Northern Ireland, supporters of unification with the Republic of Ireland are also called 'Republicans'.

Unlike Scotland, Northern Ireland has always been one of the UK's most problematic regions. It is said the Irish prefer street fighting to negotiations. Events in Northern Ireland have not subsided since the United Kingdom announced its full secession from the European Union on January 1st, 2021. A new wave of such arbitrariness began on March 9th, 2021, in Derry. Along with Derry, police also spotted armed youth gangs in Belfast, Carrickfergus, Ballinacorney and Newtown. A week later, this escalated into a confrontation with the police. In Belfast alone, 60 police officers were injured. The riots were mainly attended by young people and most of the detainees were teenagers between the ages of 13 and 25.

Prior to Brexit, former British prime ministers John Major and Tony Blair warned that Britain's withdrawal from the European Union would destabilize Northern Ireland, "the demon will leave his bottle!" In Northern Ireland, the city streets were in turmoil for almost the entire summer. The turmoil of July-August 2021 had already made London think. The British government is already wary of the country's disintegration, and as Brexit rules are added to the Catholic-Protestant conflict, unrest in the region continues to grow. According to political scientist V. Kulagin (2021), if the British government does not take urgent political measures to prevent the developments in Northern Ireland, a very dangerous political vacuum will be created in the region, which would pose a serious threat to the territorial integrity of the United Kingdom. Tensions have prompted former ministers to turn to Prime Minister Johnson. They asked the prime minister to take action on the crisis in Northern Ireland. Today, de facto Northern Ireland is part of the European Union. Because on the island of Ireland there is almost no border between the Republic and the North. In this case, do not the citizens of the North gain

more rights than the citizens of other parts of Britain? This is one of the most problematic questions for British politics.

Sociologists estimate that if a referendum were held in Northern Ireland today to withdraw from Britain, 49% of the population would vote for the region to remain part of the United Kingdom. 43% would vote to join the Republic of Ireland and 7% would abstain. In the Republic of Ireland, 51% of the population is in favor of a single state on the island, and 27% in favor of Northern Ireland remaining part of Britain.

The UK is currently facing a major challenge. On the one hand, strengthening its borders in connection with its withdrawal from the European Union is a legitimate activity. However, closing the border between the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland under the Belfast Agreement would violate the terms of that agreement. This would lead to renewed conflict in Northern Ireland and would destabilize the political situation. The Belfast Agreement was signed on April 10th, 1998, ending the Northern Ireland conflict that began in 1960. The Belfast Agreement included the development of cooperation between the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland and the establishment of transparent borders between them. The agreement was signed between the United Kingdom, Ireland and Northern Ireland and the negotiation took 22 months in Northern Ireland alone. Referendums have even been held in the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland to confirm the legitimacy of the agreement. Thus, The Belfast Agreement established the Assembly of Northern Ireland, which also has 108 members

After Brexit, the political situation in Northern Ireland became more complicated than expected. The Shinn Fein party has become active again. Northern Ireland's first deputy prime minister, Martin McGuinness, a member of the Shinn Fein party, has called for a referendum on who owns the region. Under the Belfast Agreement, such voting is only possible if the status quo is changed but favorable historical conditions were created for this, as Britain left the European Union. The most important problem is on the 499 km long border. Currently, this border is not noticeable, there are several farms and many families on both sides of the border. However, because of Brexit, Northern Ireland has been left out of the European Union and London has established border controls in the area to prevent migration.

What will be the result if Britain tightens border controls? This prospect has frightened the local population. "I think it's going to be a catastrophe, and if the borders are seen again, people will be very upset," said Kiron McKellen, a resident of Belka village since people have been fighting

for almost 100 years to remove these borders. The dynamics of events in the Republic of Ireland is being closely monitored. John Paul Philly, an Irish MP from the Fionna File party, said that separate agreements should be signed between the United Kingdom and all EU countries. People do not want to present passports or other documents when moving from one village to another, when members of the same family visit each other for example. Stephen Kelly, plant director in Northern Ireland, said: "One in four families in Northern Ireland is dependent on cross-border trade. This trade creates 50,000 jobs. It is necessary to avoid new barriers at the border."

One month after the end of Brexit, in February 2021, there was already a dispute between the European Union and the United Kingdom over Northern Ireland. This can be clearly seen in the letter of the Vice-President of the European Commission Maroš Evrecoviovi and the Co-Chair of the Joint Committee of the United Kingdom and the European Union Michael Gove. In the letter, M. Gove demanded that the European Union extend the terms of discounts on products coming to Northern Ireland from other parts of Britain. Otherwise, the letter said, the United Kingdom would violate international law. "If it is not possible to agree with our proposal, then the United Kingdom will have to change all the means at its disposal," Gove said in the letter. "At present, it is necessary to find political, not technical, solutions."

Brexit was an important factor in changing the situation in Northern Ireland, which voted against leaving the European Union. Because first of all, more than half of the population in England voted for Brexit. At the same time, the largest unionist party in Northern Ireland voted for Brexit. In Northern Ireland, the nationalists were more excited by the statement of the British Home Secretary. In a statement, the current interior minister threatened to soften relations with the South, urging the Irish to remember the famine that engulfed the country in 1840. However, the Minister forgot that at that time the whole island of Ireland was a British colony.

Currently, the Republic of Ireland has the highest trade turnover in the region. Thus, the Republic of Ireland retains membership in the European Union. Brexit has created an economic border in the Irish Sea between Northern Ireland and the United Kingdom. Now, despite several challenges for Northern Ireland, trade with the Republic of Ireland will be more profitable than trade with the United Kingdom. It is well known that Ireland's growing influence in the North is an undeniable fact. Today, the six counties of the North depend more on what is happening in Dublin than in London. Therefore, it is important for the northerners who will come to power in Dublin.

Thus, Brexit prepared a certain historical condition for the unification of Ireland. Political experts estimated that in 2021, during the next census in Northern Ireland, for the first time, Catholics outnumbered Protestants. The Republic of Ireland was more hospitable. London believes that all these facts are due to the growing views on the unification of the country in Northern Ireland.

According to political experts, in order for Northern Ireland to unite in the South, a vote must be held on its constitutional status. At the same time, another referendum is required in the South to amend the Constitution of the Republic of Ireland. The European Union has already stated that Northern Ireland can join the bloc under Ireland's membership. However, according to London experts, there are obstacles and uncertainties today. Thus, the success of Shinn Feyn can motivate several people in the North to unite. And Brexit will have less effect than expected in this context.

The British Secretary of State may use the gaps in the Belfast Agreement to postpone the referendum. Many British politicians believe that holding such a vote would cause administrative headaches and deeper problems. The Irish colleague in London is also seen as politically united, although they are in favor of unification. However, experts do not rule out that the unification of Ireland will be inevitable and unexpected. They say they are confident that the political path that Ireland, Northern Ireland and the United Kingdom began about twenty years ago will end in the unification of Ireland.

Beginning in early 2021, the British government is working to address the Northern Ireland problem created by Brexit. On March 3, Boris Johnson's government unilaterally decided to extend the simplified customs border between Northern Ireland and the rest of the United Kingdom under the terms of Brexit for another six months without waiting for EU approval. Immediately after this decision, on March 4th, the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Ireland, Simon Cowney, stated that "the European Union is negotiating with unreliable partners. Now the union is considering legal options and legal steps, which would be very serious negotiations."

Maroš Evrecovič, the Slovak vice-president of the European Commission in charge of relations with Britain, said that "London's decision violated the provisions of the Northern Ireland Protocol, which is part of Britain's withdrawal from the EU." The British government, in turn, expressed its dissatisfaction, saying that Britain had not violated any documents and that it had the right to act unilaterally. "Such measures will be available under other international agreements. That is why our people have

fulfilled their obligations under the protocol,” said David Frost, Britain’s Minister for EU Affairs.

Following the end of the UK’s exit from the European Union, customs inspections of goods and other means arriving from other parts of the United Kingdom have begun in the ports of Northern Ireland under the Northern Ireland Protocol. In other words, by common consent of the parties, Northern Ireland has in fact remained in the common market and in the customs space of the Eurozone. This situation did not satisfy the British government. Because such a situation could aggravate the situation in Ulster again. The British government was convinced that nothing would be ready in the near future, so it first called on the European Union to move to a simplified regime, and then decided to extend it unilaterally. However, the European Union did not remain indifferent to Britain’s move. “Such things are not mutually trustworthy,” said Marie McGuinness, the EU’s finance minister, who is of Irish descent.

The problem of Northern Ireland, as one of the most acute problems on the eve of Brexit and its course, remained not only at the same level as it was, but also, after the end of Brexit, has worsened. As long as the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland joined the European Union, border problems were almost non-existent. But Britain decided to leave the single market and customs space, and the parties began to act in favor of resolving border issues in their favor. On the one hand, the restoration of real borders will lead to a re-ignition of conflicts on the island and the reactivation of supporters of a united Ireland, on the other hand, the principle of a single border is one of the most important issues for the EU.

The option of a customs border between Northern Ireland and the rest of Britain has not been favorable to Prime Minister Theresa May. Brexit makers, including Boris Johnson, since the beginning of Brexit called it a conspiracy against the integrity of Britain at that time. Tensions between the parties will not subside in the autumn of 2021. On October 10, British Secretary of State for Brexit David Frost said that relations between the United Kingdom and the European Union could not improve without changes to the existing protocol on Northern Ireland. The Secretary of State acknowledged that there are tensions between the British government and the European Union. One of the approximate conditions for the improvement of relations is the change of part of the European conditions of Brexit in Northern Ireland.

Earlier, at a diplomatic event in Lisbon, David Frost said that it would be very difficult to establish a really good

relationship between the United Kingdom and the European Union. This is because the European Union will strive to maintain the existing trade rules between the United Kingdom and Northern Ireland. Referring to the political situation, Frost said that the rules set by the European Union pose a serious threat to the peace process in Northern Ireland, established by the 1998 Belfast Declaration. In addition, the Secretary of State for Brexit said that the position of the British government is that the jurisdiction of the European Court of Human Rights in Northern Ireland should be abolished.

Then, after Brexit, the British government face a real dilemma. On the one hand, Northern Ireland remained part of the United Kingdom but on the other hand, all products entering Northern Ireland from other parts of Britain are subject to strict customs control. This is one of the biggest obstacles to Britain’s sovereignty. Besides, if the British government takes any action against Northern Ireland, it will violate the terms of the Belfast Agreement, which will lead to a resurgence of ethnic conflict on the island.

For this reason, the British government sees a temporary solution to the problem in easing customs controls. They have repeatedly called on the European Union to ease this control. Branden Lewis, the British government’s minister for Northern Ireland, told parliament that London had asked Brussels to suspend the protocol for some time and to hold new talks to resolve the issue. Apparently, London’s proposals do not concern the European Union in this area. Thus, the European Commission excludes new negotiations. The European Union is urging London to abide by all long-term agreements and trade rules with Brussels after Britain leaves the union. London has yet to come to terms with such a situation.

CONCLUSION

The post-Brexit political situation in Northern Ireland, while seemingly calm, is much more complicated than the Scottish issue. However, currently, the socio-political processes and economic difficulties in Northern Ireland and the United Kingdom continue to aggravate the situation and reduce the hope that it will stabilize in the near future, albeit temporarily. The point is that in Northern Ireland, the British government must deal with border security issues as well as territorial security. Border problems also lead to several problems with the European Union. Today, everyone in Ireland is wondering if Brexit will separate Northern Ireland from the United Kingdom but only future political development will show this.

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