

# Irish Security Soundings

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## A SIGN OF BETRAYAL – THE POSSIBLE IMPLICATIONS OF A CUSTOMS U-TURN ON LOYALISTS IN NORTHERN IRELAND

In the context of hostilities in Northern Ireland (NI), the potential target of loyalist frustrations has historically been seen to be republicans and the Irish State. But could the UK's government's U-turn about the custom arrangements at Northern Irish ports be enough to divert frustrations to a new target, at least for the time being? Could loyalists view this as a public sign of betrayal; a betrayal by those whom loyalists have always, and often vehemently, given their allegiance. If so, could it be seen as an indication of a crack within the loyalist faction. If this is the case then what might this mean for the Republic of Ireland (ROI) from a security perspective, especially amid calls for consideration to be given to a poll on a united Ireland? Such questions challenge the often binary lens by which the conflict in the north is frequently viewed; loyalists versus republicans. However, like most conflicts, this narrow focus often ignores more complex dynamics that are at play, something all too well understood by those living within certain communities in NI. This sounding aims to examine how these dynamics might impact the ROI.

### Potential hostilities in the Loyalist Camp

Since the signing of the peace agreement, much of the narrative about the conflict in NI has focused on republican paramilitary activities and this has continued to be the case in the aftermath of the Brexit vote. Much attention has been paid to the potential threat of dissident republicans with little coverage devoted to the potential danger posed by loyalists. Moreover, discussions are even more limited as to whether certain loyalist groups pose a considerable risk in the ROI. While this is understandable to some degree given the continued threat of attacks in NI by republican paramilitaries, and limited, if any, activities by loyalists, the potential threat of loyalist paramilitaries should not be underestimated or ignored.

Despite a cessation of paramilitary style violence by loyalist groups, for the most part and in contrast, to republicans who continue their attacks, some loyalist or unionist groups turned their violent actions inwards, directing it towards their own members who act out of line. This was evidenced in 2018 by the PSNI, who attributed an increase in punishment beatings and a smaller number of punishment shootings to the group. In this vein, many have remarked that although some true loyalist paramilitaries remain, many have pivoted to criminality and use the loyalist brand to run their criminal groups, thereby limiting the risk. However, those who remain committed to loyalist causes may find the current environment too uncertain to remain quiet. It is worth mentioning that monitoring in-group activities of this nature is no less important, given that it might indicate testing of 'internal security', which is noteworthy in the context of a growing sense of discontent.

Within those who remain committed, and potentially others who gave up arms, and who generally supported the peace process, there is an apparent growing sense of disillusionment with the peace process, illustrated by increasing grassroots anger. These growing tensions, some of which have pre-dated Brexit, such as the collapse of Stormont, historical inquiries and the quest for justice from the time of the troubles, coupled with increased republican activity, are influencing the risk of increased hostilities. Adding Brexit to the mix has only

enhanced tensions further. This then begs the question; could these factors trigger the emergence of a more dangerous group of loyalists?

Such assertions are not without justification given that the political compromise agreed in the Good Friday Agreement which provided for a constitutional settlement giving equal recognition to Irish, British or both identities, has been put into disarray. While loyalists largely saw this as a final settlement, republicans appeared to view it as a provisional position, and given the turn of events, the latter may appear to have been a valid assessment. Moreover, an interesting element of these events are that some of these challenges emanate from existing allies. For example, historical inquiries and quests for justice being conducted may be viewed by loyalists as a direct challenge to their actions, which they perceived as necessary actions taken in defence of their communities, police and military. Given that these inquiries are being conducted by the UK government, they are likely to result in a strain on relationships. Secondly, Brexit while sold as UK and NI leaving the EU, NI is now being portrayed as the problem for the UK's smooth exit. Furthermore, the efforts being made by all sides to prevent the construction of a hard border between NI and the ROI, means that loyalists are being asked to accept that NI be treated differently from the rest of the UK, which is totally at odds with their position and that of the British Government, going into Brexit. In addition, their identity is also being challenged in a different way. For those in NI who identify as Irish, they will retain their EU citizenship post Brexit, and the benefits that this entails. However, this will not be the case for those who identify solely as British which may heighten tensions further as this creates a form of unwarranted discrimination and marginalisation, especially given that many loyalists in fact wanted to remain in the EU, indicated by the result of the referendum. In NI, only 44.2% of the electorate voted to leave, while 55.8% voted to remain.

## What are the likely implications & what might it mean for the ROI

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Given the trajectory of current frustrations, there might be an increase in loyalist peaceful protest as a demonstration of their frustration in the short and medium term. If these were to take place, it is unlikely that the current pandemic or other factors would deter those involved. This was recently evident in relation to the funeral of Bobby Storey. Such actions may be coupled with blockades at the ports to further illustrate. If this occurs, the UK and ROI might be impacted negatively. However, violence is unlikely to be their desired course of action, at least at this stage. In fact, there appears to be no real appetite for violence amongst loyalists at present. However, this may not be the case for long as indicated by former members.

In addition, there are always risks of possible escalation of peaceful protests into violence, if others see them as an opportunity to capitalise on. One such group may be the youth, most of whom, it should be said, were not alive during the troubles but who may see violence as an attractive option. Secondly, and potentially more worrying, is that if certain actions, for example, building customs infrastructure do go ahead at ports into NI, some more radical loyalist supporters might feel they don't have an option but to stand up to the UK to feel somewhat in control of their future, protect the union, their identity, and what they have fought for in the past. The fact that infrastructure is going up at ports in NI (between NI and the UK) may be perceived as a clear indication of a crack in the union. This may be further deepened by the fact that no physical infrastructure is going up along the border between NI and the ROI, which may in turn be viewed by some as a republican win. Any sign of national triumphalism on the side of the republicans may provoke loyalists who see their own inaction as condoning such a position. Therefore, the changing environment may be enough to motivate and ignite hostilities in NI, especially if the right charismatic leader were to emerge to lead this.

If tensions do evolve to this level, the ROI is likely to become a more attractive target again. Specific targets such as critical infrastructure, and sectors such as agriculture and tourism may be affected. Loyalist display of lethality in the ROI in 1974 when they orchestrated bombings in Dublin and Monaghan where thirty-three civilians were killed and about three hundred civilians were injured, reminds us that we should not take peace for granted in the ROI. As a result, it would be remiss not to investigate and assess what might stimulate or influence in a shift of activities further south.

## Identifying the opportunities to mitigate risk

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Notwithstanding the need for a Strategic Threat and Risk Assessment, we must also build on the emerging opportunity by moving beyond such assessments of capacity, capability and opportunity. Weapons are available these days to anyone who wants them, and one also does not have to look too far for examples of large scale unrest and disruption with low tech equipment. Waiting for evidence is often what puts us on a back foot. Therefore, the time now is to be proactive, and by that we don't mean be proactive in identifying indicators of the potential for violence alone, rather we need to look for opportunities to mitigate the risk before escalation begins. The willingness and commitment of loyalists to the peace process, the results of the Brexit referendum and Arlene's Foster recent statements on 12 July 2020, all indicate there is opportunity for rebuilding where necessary, any emerging breakdown in the peace agreement, by building NI in a manner that ensures a shared future for all, rather than one built along existing fault lines; a NI that provides for stability and prosperity for all. The ROI could significantly help in this regard, but unlikely from the position of a united Ireland at this time.

In the ROI one direct action that could be taken would be to reduce rhetoric around a border poll, as one must be mindful of its potential for heightening tensions. The former Taoiseach's acknowledgement that such a poll would be 'far too divisive at this stage' was timely in this regard. That said, it is worth moving beyond such recognition to something more constructive. Another positive approach, which might help to reduce frustrations and alleviate fears might be to openly make efforts towards better understanding loyalist grievances, views and opinions, which could then be used to inform approaches to loyalism in the ROI. Loyalist's inclusion in such processes needs to be encouraged as side-lining them only hardens opinions. Furthermore, from a strategic point of view, inclusion of all sides may provide for an early opportunity to identify emerging narratives that might be used to justify attacks both in the ROI, and/or in NI. Early identification of such narratives would help in informing effective responses.

The lack of such inclusion to date may be indicative of a bigger problem, and that is a lack of understanding of loyalism in the ROI, something highlighted by Senator Ian Marshall. While speaking at the annual conference of the UCD Institute for British-Irish Studies (2019), he warned that ignoring the views of loyalists in the conversation on Irish unity could stir violence against the ROI. The appointment of Senator Marshall to the Seanad in April 2018 was a positive stance in this regard, as he was the first unionist member elected to the Oireachtas since the 1930s. However, his loss of seat in 2020 was a step backwards. This could be conceived as an indication that the views of the loyalist community in NI are not important. While it is worth noting that loyalists in the north are not homogenous and one person on the Seanad could be considered as tokenism rather than inclusion, a complete absence of loyalists is much more symbolic. Mark Daly echoed similar sentiments, to Senator Marshall, on the foot of research he had carried out on the prospect of a united Ireland. He asserted that it was the responsibility of the Irish Government to address loyalist concerns. This warning should not go unheeded. When a group feel like their voice is left out of a discussion pertaining to their future, some may feel like their only resort is violence. In this regard, Irish unity is a pertinent question to both Republicans and Loyalists and something that requires both sides collective engagement.

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