

Policy report on the case of Northern Ireland

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Atsuko Ichijo
Kingston University

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Introduction

This report is produced according to the project specification of EUROREG, a European Commission funded research project on 'Changing interests and identities in European border regions' as a way of disseminate the main findings for the use of a wider community, especially of policy makers and civil society activists in Northern Ireland, and more widely in the United Kingdom.

The project started in October 2004 and the bulk of fieldwork was carried out between August and December 2005 mainly in Belfast. Based on the findings from the fieldwork as well as on-going desk search, a detailed case study report has been produced ('Regions, minorities and European integration: A case study on Northern Ireland') which is published at http://www.eliamep.gr/eliamep/files/Revised_Northern_Ireland_case_study.pdf. The current report is compiled based on the case study report and presents policy-relevant findings and analyses.

The report has three main aims:

- to provide an overall assessment of the minority-majority relationship (defined as the relationship between the Protestant/unionist community and the Catholic/nationalism community) in today's Northern Ireland;
- to identify the role of 'Europe' in the situation of Northern Ireland;
- to suggest some ways in which to exploit the opportunities presented by the 'European' interventions.

In accordance with these aims, the report first reviews the findings from the case study. This will be followed by a discussion of the role of 'Europe' in today's Northern Ireland and its relevance to the minority-majority relationship. The report concludes with suggestions as to how to make the most of 'European' interventions in today's Northern Ireland.

Findings

The succession of inter-communal violence since 1998

One of the most striking features of the minority-majority relationship in Northern Ireland today is the succession of inter-communal violence since 1998. Although the Northern Ireland Assembly, which was set up by the Good Friday Agreement signed and endorsed by two referenda – one in Northern Ireland and the other in the Republic of Ireland - in 1998, remains suspended as of November 2006, the level of inter-communal violence has remained low as reported by various authorities including the Independent Monitoring Commission. Although the level of paramilitary activity is said to be still alarmingly high, it is mainly an intra-communal rather than inter-communal affair, which marks a new phase of the minority-majority relationship in Northern Ireland.

One of the consequences of this is a growing awareness amongst civil society activists, in particular, of the emergence of a 'new' face of the minority-majority relationship, namely the discrimination and disadvantages suffered by the expanding ethnic minority communities in Northern Ireland. Given that less than 1 per cent of the

population has declared themselves as non-white in the 2001 census, and because of the violent nature of the 'Troubles' which is largely perceived as a problem between the Protestant/unionist community and the Catholic/nationalist one, not much attention, both scholarly and administrative, has been paid to the problems and issues ethnic minorities face in Northern Ireland. However, there have been some developments such as the extension of Race Relations Act to Northern Ireland in 1997 and the establishment of the Northern Ireland Council for Ethnic Minorities (NICEM) in 1994, which indicates ethnic minorities' presence has begun to be officially noticed. At the same time, the voluntary sector is actively responding to their demands as seen in the works of the Chinese Welfare Association funded in 1986. This tendency was mentioned by a number of interviewees during the fieldwork and it is fair to report, therefore, that the understanding of minority-majority relationships in Northern Ireland is undergoing some changes, and the policy community is expected to respond to these changes.

A degree of normalisation of the socio-economic status of the Catholic/nationalist population

Mainly due to the series of legislation introduced by the British government in responding to the grievances expressed by the minority, i.e. Catholic/nationalist population since late 1960s, a degree of normalisation of their socio-economic status has been achieved. Fair Employment (Northern Ireland) Act of 1989, for instance, introduced compulsory religion monitoring by employers and permitted some forms of affirmative action such as setting goals and targets for improving employment patterns. It also explicitly outlawed indirect discrimination. The latest extension of fair employment legislation in Northern Ireland came with the Fair Employment and Treatment (Northern Ireland) Order (FETO) of 1998 which makes it unlawful to discriminate against someone on the ground of religious belief or political opinion. This includes a person's supposed religious belief or political opinion and the absence of any, or any particular, religious belief or political opinion. The 1998 Order was amended in December 2003 to meet the requirements of the EU Employment Framework Directive. The legal framework to address the 'unfairness' in employment and elsewhere has therefore been firmly established in Northern Ireland.

Thanks to the 1989 act, there is a wealth of statistical data that suggests that the gap between the majority (Protestant/unionist population) and the minority (Catholic/nationalist population) has narrowed in many areas including economy measured by economic activity rate, employment measured by the labour market participation and education as seen in the higher education sector and the highest level of qualification obtained. The analysis of the religious/community composition of occupation also shows that Catholic/nationalist participation in every sector of occupation has grown indicating that people with the Catholic/nationalist community background are no longer systematically prevented from gaining access to a variety of occupation.

Segregation at school and in housing, however, appears to continue. For instance, the 2002 Northern Ireland Life and Time Survey has found that 92 per cent of the Catholic respondents and 85 per cent of the Protestant respondents attended segregated schools, and that the majority of the respondents prefer to mix with people of the same religion. Continuing segregation does not necessarily mean the improvement of the socio-economic status of the minority, i.e. the Catholic/nationalist

community, is still hindered, and in fact, it may not have any significant impact on the minority's socio-economic status any longer. It has been, however, pointed out that continued segregation may have some effect on the forms of group identification in Northern Ireland in that it may encourage a more exclusive form of identification (i.e., Protestant/unionist only on the one hand and Catholic/nationalist only on the other) rather than an inclusive (i.e. Northern Irish/British).

One of the most vibrant community/voluntary sectors in the UK

Both communities have numerous community organisations. There is no precise statistics available, but according to Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Actions, they have more than 1,000 members and represent the interests of more than 5,000 such organisations in Northern Ireland. With approximately 1.6 million inhabitants in Northern Ireland according to the 2001 census, this works out as one organisation per 320 people.

An independent study carried out to examine local governance in Northern Ireland notes that 'the community/voluntary sector in Northern Ireland has been very active since the beginning of "the troubles", partly filling the political vacuum' (Harrison 2005: 48). This analysis concurs with observations put forward by many respondents. The study notes that several developments in the 1990s have invigorated the voluntary and community sector in Northern Ireland, one of which is the PEACE programmes. Because of its voluntary sector's vibrancy which partly draws from a history of activism in some communities dating from the 1970s, Northern Ireland is now 'seen in some quarters as a model of active citizenship' (Harrison 2005: 48). The strong and vibrant voluntary sector has been playing a major role in addressing the problems of ever-evolving minority-majority relationship in Northern Ireland and it is imperative to involve this sector in policy making in order to ensure policy's effectiveness.

The emergence of a European human rights regime

The development in legislation addressing the minority-majority relationship in Northern Ireland since late 1960s suggests the emergence of a European-wide human rights framework in the form of the operation of the European Court of Human Rights. The European Court of Human Rights was established in 1959 following the establishment of the European Commission on Human Rights in 1955, both institutions deriving their power from the European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms (signed in 1950, came into force in 1953). The UK government ratified the Convention in 1951, the first country to do so. In 1966, the UK government permitted UK citizens a right to petition the Commission directly in connection with any alleged human rights abuse. Both the Commission and the Court have been involved with the issues of Northern Ireland in relation to, most notably, the UK government's use of internment, the security force's use of plastic bullets and the hunger strike by the Republican prisoners in early 1980s. Although the Commission and Court did not have any effective method of enforcement of their conclusions and recommendations, they have played a symbolic role of publicising the problems of minority-majority relationship in Northern Ireland and of 'naming and shaming' of the UK government for its perceived lack of interest and care. Their contribution to the peace process as well as the general raising of awareness of human rights including those of ethnic minorities has been widely acknowledged by civil society activities.

The EU and PEACE (Special Support Programme for Peace and Reconciliation)

The effect of the European Union's involvement with the conventional minority-majority relationship in Northern Ireland has been mainly neutral. The Structural Funds from which Northern Ireland has been receiving financial support since 1989 is found to have provided a 'significant but small' addition to the Northern Ireland economy; and in relation to public expenditure, the contribution from the Structural Funds is estimated to be around 2 per cent for most of 1980s and 1990s, which then rose to around 3 per cent towards the end of the 1990s (Gudgin, 2000: 49). Its impact on the minority-majority relationship is perceived to be irrelevant by the majority of respondents.

The European Parliament has been showing active interests in the issue of Northern Ireland as seen in the publication of the Haagerup report in 1983 which called for a power-sharing administration with an integrated economic plan. Northern Ireland's MEPs also credit the European Parliament as important and useful in bringing attention to the needs of Northern Ireland. Given its largely consultative status, however, the Parliament's impact on Northern Ireland remains largely symbolic and normative.

However, the PEACE (Special Support Programme for Peace and Reconciliation) funding initiated by the European Commission to support the current peace process has had an unexpected impact on the minority-majority relationship in Northern Ireland in that it has allegedly triggered intensified mobilisation on the part of the Protestant/unionist community. The concern over the alleged inequality in the distribution of funds to two communities under the PEACE programme was widely shared to the extent that the Special European Union Programmes Body commissioned a report into the issue. The report has found, by using the postcode as proxies for religion, that Catholic communities have received more PEACE funding relative to their population size than the Protestant communities (SEUPB 2005). This finding has been highlighted by a number of unionist politicians as evidence of alleged discrimination against the Protestant/unionist community. The PEACE funding has therefore been an exception in the history of the European intervention in Northern Ireland in that it has led to a tangible change that many local actors have noticed and acted upon.

'Europe's role in the minority-majority relationship in Northern Ireland

As the major findings have shown, the role of 'Europe' – either as the EU or the Council of Europe – in the evolution of the minority-majority relationship in Northern Ireland has been largely symbolic. Nonetheless, the respondents contacted during the fieldwork as well as some scholars specialising in the issues of Northern Ireland agree that 'Europe's role in Northern Ireland, especially in relation to the minority-majority relationship, cannot be entirely neglected. 'Europe' is typically used as a political symbol by various actors in Northern Ireland in order to put forward different agendas. Some perceive Europe as a space where the problems of Northern Ireland are taken seriously and various grievances of the local people are heard sympathetically ('Europe has always been good to us'), and therefore can serve as a stick to beat the UK government with because of the latter's perceived indifference to the 'real' issues

of Northern Ireland such as economy; it is also a space where idealistic thinking is encouraged and a new framework for solutions can be sought ('unity in diversity'), and some respondents are convinced that without European involvement which prizes diversity, the peace process in Northern Ireland would not have made this much progress; 'Europe' is also a practical help by providing prime-pumping for further investment – it has paved the way for regeneration by showing confidence in Northern Ireland by providing initial funding; 'Europe' is a bureaucracy which, however, civil society cannot do without. Evaluations vary across the sectors and from the actor to another, but the importance or usefulness of 'Europe' is widely acknowledged. Although the tangible impact of 'Europe' is hard to quantify, it is seen as having a capacity to serve as significant political resources in different kind of situations.

The controversy surrounding PEACE funding is case in point. Ostensibly PEACE was launched as the EU's recognition of the progress of the peace process and its support for it. Some respondents evaluate this as an expression of international solidarity with people of Northern Ireland and appreciate it, and in this regard, 'Europe' is used rather abstractly as a foundation to build a new, positive and inclusive future for Northern Ireland on. Or PEACE is seen by some actors as presenting an ideal third-party intervention scenario in a conflict situation, and they welcome the initiative and strive to make the most of it to reduce the tension between the two main communities. On the other hand, as seen earlier, some Protestant/unionist politicians regard the distribution of PEACE funding as unfair and use the grievances against PEACE programme as a new catalyst to mobilise the Protestant/unionist community by demanding a fairer distribution and more community workers to redress the weaknesses of their community infrastructure which is perceived as weaker and less effective than the one in the Catholic/nationalist community. 'Europe' therefore is far from an irrelevant entity but is extensively used by various actors in Northern Ireland to promote different ideas about Northern Ireland and political agendas. The usefulness of 'Europe' derives from the fact that it is largely seen as a symbol rather than a concrete policy or administration.

Opportunities to be exploited

Europe's involvement in Northern Ireland has provided a number of opportunities to be exploited by local actors.

Promotion of human rights

That the European human rights regime has acquired a high symbolic value in the politics of Northern Ireland suggests that 'Europe' has created ample room for local actors to promote human rights in general in Northern Ireland. In fact, some civil society actors have already successfully exploited this opportunity in negotiating the extension of Race Relations Act to Northern Ireland in 1997. The Act as extended to Northern Ireland specifies the Travellers/Gypsies as an ethnic group unlike its mainland counterpart, which is seen as a victory of the general human rights discourse over the conventional way of law making by civil society actors. It was possible in Northern Ireland because, according to these respondents, the human rights discourse is more well-established in Northern Ireland. Given that it is also acknowledged that

'human rights lived at the margins of Northern Irish political life' prior to the Good Friday Agreement' (Kavanagh 2004: 957), the enhanced profile of the European human rights regime in Northern Ireland could be exploited more by actors who are concerned with the further promotion of human rights in Northern Ireland. Human rights would also provide a more comprehensive framework to address the new challenges the changing minority-majority relationships in Northern Ireland is posing, including the issues of ethnic minority communities.

Protestant/unionist community mobilisation

The unexpected mobilisation of the Protestant/unionist community in response to PEACE funding is another opportunity Europe has brought about for local actors to act upon to address two issues: weak community infrastructure of the Protestant/unionist community and the rehabilitation of Loyalist ex-prisoners. That the Protestant/unionist community has weaker community infrastructure than the Catholic/nationalist community has repeatedly pointed out by the respondents. A heightened sense of communal solidarity and cohesiveness in the Protestant/unionist community triggered by the grievances against PEACE funding provides an ideal environment in which the issue of community infrastructure is tackled. For a further institutionalisation of support for the community, the local authorities could look into providing more community workers targeting specifically the needs of the Protestant/unionist community and also more support to networking among the community organisations. The issue of community workers are typically linked to the issue of ex-prisoners in both communities, and this may provide a venue to address the problems of Loyalist ex-prisoners who are reported to have more difficulties in being reintegrated into the community than Republican ex-prisoners. Offering training to ex-prisoners as community workers and encouraging their participation in community-building might be a practical way of encouraging re-integration of ex-prisoners which would also add to the stability of the communities.

Local Strategic Partnership

Moreover, the Local Strategic Partnerships which have been established as a requirement for PEACE II fund distribution could be developed further and even exported to other parts of Europe and the rest of the world where conflict situations may be hindering general development of the area. Many respondents appreciate the works by the LSPs, and the fieldwork shows that the Belfast LSP is seen as a success in tapping into a wide range of capacities available in the city. LSPs are therefore first and foremost an effective means of developing and regenerating a particular area. They are also seen as a good alternative governance structure when the formal and conventional politics are suspended just as in current Northern Ireland. Some respondents evaluate the LSPs as a good way of bringing 'ordinary people' to politics by which a general apathy towards politics can be overcome. The LSPs are also seen as a pragmatic and productive way of encouraging co-operation between communities whose relationship to one another is tensed but whose interests overlap as seen in the need of regeneration. The LSPs, because of their emphasis on inclusion, are seen as a facilitator of co-operation between communities focusing on common interests. The LSP model is frequently mentioned by the respondents as one thing that Northern Ireland can export to the wider world. The LSPs have potential to be a significant contributor to the realisation of a fairer and more peaceful world which bears the mark of 'made in Northern Ireland'.

Conclusion

The case study has shown that 'Europe' does play an important role in the minority-majority relationship in Northern Ireland as a potent political symbol. As such 'Europe' has brought about new opportunities for local actors to exploit in order to achieve further development of Northern Ireland and reconciliation of the two main communities. These measures will also contribute to make 'Europe' more relevant to the citizens of Northern Ireland.

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