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Divided by National Belonging and Joint Territory: Northern Ireland's National Identities

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Abstract:

This paper explores two contradicting sets of political identities, Protestant unionist and pro-British on the one side, and Catholic Irish nationalist and republican on the other, which shape the social and political sphere of Ireland. The aim is to describe the manifestations and transformations of these two identities in Northern Ireland. The concepts of contested identities, religion as an identity boundary and elements of nationalism provide the theoretical background. The conclusion indicates that Irish Catholic identity has gained in confidence, because it improved its political and social position in Northern Ireland. On the contrary, the Protestant unionist community perceives a loss in their status, which generates frustration and leads to disputes on cultural issues.

Keywords: Identities, Nationalism, Northern Ireland

1. Introduction

Two contradicting sets of political identities have shaped the social and political landscape of Ireland. These two identities, one labelled Protestant unionist and pro-British, with the other broadly described as Catholic Irish nationalist and republican, relate to either the devolved province of Northern Ireland or the Irish Republic in the South, respectively. Religion is a defining marker of the respective identities, hence Irish nationalism is occasionally used synonymously with Irish Catholicism, and unionism with Protestantism, but as this paper will show, such an approach simplifies complex realities. The conflict between the so-called Protestant unionists and Catholic nationalists in Northern Ireland is rooted in a long history of disputes, mistrust and discrimination, which was the result of political power struggles on the island throughout centuries. The independence

of the Irish Free State and the creation of the new statelet of Northern Ireland in 1922 shifted the problem to the north of the island. However, it did not solve the conflictual relationship between the Irish people and the British state, which negatively affected Anglo-Irish relations and worsened when the conflict ignited in Northern Ireland in the 1960s. The narrative of the history of this problematic relationship and the experiences by generations of people who suffered under the violence committed by one side or the other maintained the conflict, which was occasionally defined as a protracted, intractable and deep-rooted conflict. The aim of the paper is to explore the national identities of the two distinctive communities in Northern Ireland, their political and cultural manifestations and transformation. History and the legacies of political violence applied by both sides, either to maintain political power or to overcome the political *status quo*, can only be understood by exploring the dynamics of inter-group conflict and the mobilisation of communities along the cleavages of national identity. Once violence ended and the demands of equal political representation and anti-discrimination policies for all citizens were accommodated the conflictual relationship between the two communities shifted onto the level of cultural issues. This can be explained due to the perceived threat of the loss of a distinctive identity among the Protestant community and the strong push of the Irish community to further promote the Irish identity, especial the Irish language, in Northern Ireland. Identity issues are non-negotiable needs for individuals and for communities, but if these identities are antagonistic a foundation for a non-resolvable conflict exists. These divisions might aggravate due to the decision of the UK to leave the EU (Brexit), pushing Northern Ireland into contested space over its territorial sovereignty and reopening the discussion of a respectful accommodation of identities in a post-Brexit Northern Ireland.

Firstly, the paper provides an introduction into the historical context of the Northern Ireland conflict, i.e. *The Troubles*, and the peace process. Secondly, concepts and definitions are introduced to discuss the national identity, cultural and community affiliation, the dynamics of identity formation and the main "markers" of the Northern Irish identities. Divided societies, such as in Northern Ireland, are characterised by political parties and other organisations aligned alongside the societal divide. The article discusses the political, cultural and paramilitary organisations claiming to represent the respective communities, which reinforce the division of society due to their mere existence. Finally, the paper addresses the post-conflict developments since the signing of the Good Friday Agreement/Belfast Agreement (GFA/BA) in 1998 and gives an overview of the identity transformation since the implementation of the agreement. The GFA/BA was able to address some of the structural issues of the Northern Ireland conflict since the GFA/BA shifted onto cultural issues. Although Brexit opened up the constitutional discussion of Northern Ireland, the paper mainly addresses the manifestations and transformation of identity pre-Brexit.

2. Historical Overview

2.1 Origins of the Divisions (1171-1916)

The division of Ireland into two main identities dates back to even before the founding of the Irish Free State and the partition of the island in 1922 (Garvin 1988, 95). The British Empire's policy to subjugate Ireland under its reign was pursued more vigorously in some periods than in others. Officially, Ireland came under the control of the British crown after the Anglo-Norman Invasion (1169) and the establishment of a Lordship of Ireland by Henry II in 1171 (English

2006, 37-45). The first settlers from the British islands adapted to the local customs, spoke Gaelic and merged with the Irish population. These settlers later referred to as *Old English* also remained Catholic, even when British Kings and Queens took on the Protestant faith (Canny 1989, 99-103). Resistance by the Irish population and later the *Old English* against British rule was met with military force, and the land of participating clans and families was confiscated and allocated to loyal Protestant settlers. The policy of *Plantation*[1] was implemented during the sixteenth century, with the more decisive Ulster Plantation from 1606 onwards. These newly arriving settlers did not integrate into the local majority society, but stayed within their own groups, maintained their customs and religion, and – most important of all – were loyal to the British crown (English 2006, 59). The religious affiliation overlapped with political loyalty, while the role of the Protestant settlers was to protect British interests and secure the occupied territory. This became a "poisonous mix of sectarian and political division that was to shape and deform Irish politics for centuries" (Moloney 2002, 39). Religious affiliation became a label to distinguish the pro-British from the pro-Irish communities. The political and economic dominance of the Protestants was underpinned by the "penal laws", which legally discriminated Catholics and Presbyterians and favoured the Protestant state religion. As consequence a symbiotic relationship developed between the Catholic Church and different Irish movements, which fought to improve the situation of the Catholic people. At the time, when the "Home Rule" movement mobilised in Ireland to gain self-governance within the British Union at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century, the unionists defamed these advances as "Rome Rule", alleging that the Vatican would meddle indirectly in Irish affairs. At the turn of the nineteenth century, the ambitions of independence for Ireland overlapped with the interests of the Catholic Church. Due to the regional concentration of Protestants in the north-eastern part of Ireland, in the province of Ulster, the Protestant political identity was strong there and supported their demand to remain part of Britain.

The ideas of the American War of Independence (1775-1783) and the French Revolution (1789-1799) influenced the Irish revolutionary groups, such as the United Irishmen, which attempted to rise up against British rule in 1798 under the lead of the Protestant Theobald Wolfe Tone[2] (English 2006, 86-102). The United Irishmen rebellion of 1798, the 1803 rebellion led by Robert Emmet and the uprising initiated by the Young Ireland movement in 1848 all failed, and the leaders were executed. During World War I another attempt was made in 1916, which also ended in the execution of the rebel leaders but triggered a shift in public opinion turning against British rule.

2.2 War and Settlement in Ireland (1916-1922)

The difference in the 1916 rebellion, the so-called Easter Rising, compared to the other failed insurrections, was that the leaders declared an Irish Republic. It became a mysterious symbolic event for the Irish state because it is considered to be the first step towards an Irish Republic. The Irish political movement Sinn Féin won an overall majority in the elections of 1919 but did not take the seats in the UK parliament in London, choosing instead to establish an independent parliament in Dublin. The setting up of parallel political structures undermined the legitimacy of British rule and unavoidably led to an escalation of the conflict, which ended in a war.

[1] The early Plantation took place from 1556 until 1576, then the Munster Plantation started in 1586 and finally the Ulster Plantation from 1606 onwards, which was enforced by James I, who intended to "pacify" and "civilise" the rebellious Irish.

[2] Theobald Wolfe Tone is considered to be the father of Irish republicanism.

The declaration of the Irish Free State was the result of the brutally led War of Independence (1919-1921) between the British troops based in Ireland and the self-declared Irish Republican Army (IRA). The war was ended by the Anglo-Irish Treaty in December 1921 and the partition of the island of Ireland.

From 1922 onwards, during the years of state formation, the Irish elite cultivated a Catholic anti-imperialistic republican ideology in the Free State, whereas Northern Ireland was set up as a Protestant state, loyal to the crown, but a devolved entity within the United Kingdom. At the time, the logic behind establishing these two separate political entities – a state and a devolved province – was that the dispute would ease due to the physical separation of the two national identities by creating a territory where each of them have a majority. However, this territorial segregation ignored the newly created minorities within both states, who were meant to adapt to the majority culture, or leave. For a Europe emerging from the ruins of World War I, this was not an exceptional case, but rather a common occurrence on the continent at the time. However, the partition of the island accelerated the process of shaping these contradicting identities, as these were legitimised by the existence of the Irish Free State and the Northern Irish province, and vice versa.

In the province of Northern Ireland, the original division between the Protestant ruling class and the Catholic subjects[3], such as the political and economic dominance of the Protestant community, continued, and intensified after the partition. From the Protestant perspective, Catholics were disloyal to Northern Ireland and should leave and settle in the predominately Catholic Free State, whereas the Catholics still believed in the amendment of the borders in their favour, or even a unification with the Irish Free State. However, this did not happen.

During the 1930s, social and sectarian tensions led to violent clashes between the Protestant police and Catholics in Northern Ireland (Patterson 1996, 8). During World War II, Belfast became an important harbour for the British war effort, but also a victim of German bombardments, and in the 1950s a certain level of resignation among Catholics linked to their inferior societal status started to take hold of the Catholic population.

2.3 Escalation of Conflict in Northern Ireland (1960s-1980s)

The 1960s became a defining decade for change, not only in Northern Ireland but the entire world over. The political and social situation to the detriment of Catholics in the Northern Irish province created an atmosphere where social movements emerged to demand equal living conditions and political rights for Catholics in Northern Ireland. The Northern Irish Civil Rights Association (NICRA) acted as a mouthpiece for the discontented parts of the mainly Catholic population, and organised protests to put pressure onto unionist politicians to relent and grant these demands. Instead, these demonstrations were met with brutality from the Northern Ireland security forces. One explanation for this reaction is that the Protestant community and the political elite at the time feared losing control over "their state", and therefore dismissed the demands as unjustified and delegitimised the claims by depicting all Catholics as disloyal citizens. The consequence of the Protestants' perception that they themselves are a minority on the island of Ireland, creating a feeling of being "besieged" by an all encircled "enemy", triggered the rather violent reaction to defend Northern Ireland against the NICRA's

[3] Catholics, who after the partition of Ireland remained in Northern Ireland with British citizenship but considered themselves culturally Irish and in favour of an all-island Irish Republic.

demands. As the political attempts to initiate change in Northern Ireland failed, parts of the Civil Rights Organisation turned to violence. Due to the escalation of the situation, especially during August 1969 in London-/Derry, at the so-called "Battle of the Bogside" and in Belfast, the British government deployed troops on Irish soil in the same year. The war between the revitalised Irish Republican Army and the British Army started only after a short "honeymoon period", when Catholics hoped that the troops would protect and assist them in obtaining fair treatment. However, as it turned out, and as the Irish republicans argued, the troops secured the *status quo* of a discriminatory state. At the end of the 1960s, the conflict turned into "an intensely violent struggle in the name of conflicting nationalisms" (Todd 2011, 76). *The Troubles*, which prompted many Catholic men (and a few women[4]) to join the paramilitary organisations during the summer of 1969, intensified in the 1970s, and involved the British forces as the main target of the republican paramilitary groups. In 1971 in particular, when *Internment* was introduced, detaining mainly Catholics without a trail and clear indication of a release date, the relationship between the Catholic community and the British forces deteriorated. This created a situation where the predominately Catholic areas were closed off by their inhabitants and became a secure base for the Irish Republican Army (IRA) to operate from. To end this situation, *Operation Motorman* was initiated to remove the barricades which blocked the entrances to the Catholic enclaves, making them accessible again for the army and police to search for terror subjects. These activities were mainly directed against the Irish republican paramilitary groups, although Protestant paramilitaries started to become militarily active around the same time but were not perceived as a threat by the state authorities.

The following two decades (1970s and 1980s) were characterised by a war between the radical Irish republican groups, believing in the unification of the island, the radical Protestant loyalist groups, the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) and the British army, in defending the union with Great Britain.

2.4 Repositioning in Northern Ireland (1980s until 1998)

The situation changed at the end of the 1980s, when it became apparent that the conflict could not be solved militarily, and informal communication channels were opened to find a way out of the circle of violence. Two main events in the 1980s changed the course of history: The *Hunger Strikes* in 1980 -1981, which politicised the more radical spectrum of the Irish Republican Movement, and the Anglo-Irish Agreement in 1985[5], which indicated that the British Government was ready to give the Irish Government a say in the internal affairs of Northern Ireland. Additionally, the continued brutality and senseless violence made the Irish population turn away from their paramilitary organisations, and in some circumstances even challenged them. In 1994 a ceasefire was called by the IRA, which was followed by a declaration of ceasefire and apology for the victims of the conflict by the Combined Loyalist Military Command (CLMC), an umbrella group of loyalist paramilitary groups. However, the real opportunity for peace seemed to come after the British general elections in May 1997 when a Labour government under Tony Blair took office, and in the same year Bertie Ahern became Irish Prime Minister (*Taoiseach*). The success of getting the parties of Northern Ireland to sign the GFA/

[4] For further information on the role of women in the Republican Movement see Reinisch 2016; 2019.

[5] Joseph Ruane and Jennifer Todd claim that the Anglo-Irish Agreement had a "radical effect" on the conflict situation in Northern Ireland, as the British state in a "process of repositioning" worked jointly with the Irish government to find a solution to the conflict, even opposing the Unionists (Ruane, Todd 2007).

BA can be attributed to the excellent relations between the British and Irish prime ministers at the time, and their common goal to bring peace to the region. Moreover, then US President Bill Clinton, who had a personal interest in the Northern Ireland peace process, supported the political negotiations by appointing US Senator George Mitchell to assist in the peace process by advising the two governments and mediating the GFA/BF in April 1998.

2.5 From GFA/BA until Brexit (from 1998)

The difficulties in setting up the cross-community executive to govern Northern Ireland, which was part of the GFA/BA, became a challenge, and the executive was suspended several times. The assembly election of 2003 changed the political situation, when the more radical Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) and Sinn Féin became the strongest parties in the assembly, were asked to form a government. However, this became only feasible after the St. Andrews Agreement[6] with the DUP was signed in 2006, because the DUP had not supported the GFA/BA. Still, the devolution of powers to Northern Ireland was only completed in 2010, when the agenda for justice and policing was transferred to Belfast, and David Ford from the Alliance Party of Northern Ireland (APNI) was appointed Northern Ireland Minister of Justice. The assembly was suspended again due to conflicts within the executive from January 2017 until January 2020. Brexit, finally happening after a two-year transition period, and with the implementation of the negotiated deal accepting Northern Ireland special status within the EU's single market for goods, started a completely new discussion on a border poll, a referendum on the unification of Ireland. The GFA/BA sets out the rule that British Secretary of State for Northern Ireland is in the position to call such a poll, when he/she believes that the majority of the people in Northern Ireland do not longer want to be part of the UK (Duffy 2021).

3. National Identities in Northern Ireland: Unionism vs. Republicanism

This overview of national identity in the Irish context starts by exploring the elements that constitute the identities of unionism and nationalism in the Irish context[7].

A study by John Coakley from 2007 listed a number of characteristics, which impact or shape identities in Northern Ireland and grouped them into three main sets of categories: "quasi"-objective background factors (religious denomination, community background, citizenship), more subjective characteristics (ethnic group memberships, national identity and communal affiliation) and finally more subjective markers (constitutional preference, political preference party support)[8] (Coakley 2007, 575-576). This part of the paper, in line with Coakley's categorisation, focuses firstly on the role of religion in the Northern Ireland context and its setting of

[6] The DUP refused to sign the GFA/BA in 1998, therefore additional negotiations were necessary for the DUP to finally accept the terms of the GFA/BA and the obligatory cross-community cooperation in the executive. The successful negotiations between the Irish and British governments and all political parties of Northern Ireland were held in St. Andrews in Scotland in October 2006. In the St. Andrews Agreement, the DUP accepted the GFA/BA on the basis that Sinn Féin officially participates in the Policing Boards, thereby officially recognising the legitimacy of the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) to serve both communities.

[7] The use of the terminology is problematic, as concepts are simplified and suggest that every Protestant in Northern Ireland is pro-British and wishes to remain in the Union with the UK. On the other hand, it suggests that all Irish Catholics are Irish nationalists and supportive of an all-Ireland Irish Republic or republicans.

[8] The categories were deduced from a number of surveys, which have been conducted in Northern Ireland since 1968, when researchers tried to identify various aspects of the conflict, such as ethno-national identity (Coakley 2007).

community boundaries due to people's religious denomination, which at the same time implies affiliation to a national identity group and even – in some cases – choice of citizenship. Secondly, the reinforcement of group boundaries and dynamics of group self-identification are touched upon before thirdly exploring the constituent elements of the respective national identities of unionism and nationalism. Finally, an overview of paramilitary and political organisations and communal affiliation with their respective constitutional preferences is given to demonstrate the link of cultural organisations to the national identity groups.

3.1 The Role of Religion in Shaping Northern Irish Identities

According to Coakley, the significance of religion can be elaborated by three concepts, the institution of the Catholic Church, a broader cultural understanding of religion, and religion as a "social label" (Coakley 2011a, 96).

Although the importance of the Church as an institution is diminishing, its impact on the denominational communities prevails in the Northern Ireland context. In connection with the Churches, their liturgy and their customs, the maintenance of own distinct culture was fostered over generations. Socialisation under the banner of the respective churches led to different ways of interpreting the world, it even developed a different worldview (McAllister 2000). The Churches, due to their organisational structure and because of their resources, have the capacity to provide various services for their respective communities, including education, social welfare and cultural events. Although these services and facilities are hugely important for the community, they build further on the divisions within the society. The Churches as institutions have an intrinsic interest in maintaining their power, their status and their authority within society, so Mitchell argues that the Churches, while speaking out against violence and even mediating between the different groups, are not to be considered neutral actors in Northern Ireland (Mitchell 2005, 6).

Religious denominations act as identity groups, defining communal affiliation by creating boundaries to other faiths. Furthermore, solidarity within one's own group is favoured (Coakley 2011a, 96). Linked to religion are social values (McAllister 2000, 853-855), a specific culture, and an understanding or interpretation of contemporary realities and historical narratives, which define national identity. Generally speaking, historical developments mean religious denomination overlaps with national identity. In the Northern Irish context, religion sets these boundaries of group identity, which are constructed and reconstructed by interaction with the other. According to Jenkins, group boundaries exist because people have "*individual knowledge*" of them, they experience these through *"practice and interaction"* and are embodied in institutions (Jenkins 2015, 14). The interaction between the groups reinforces the similarities of membership of one's own group and highlights differences to the other group (18). Identification with a specific group means that members are aware of their membership, assign value to it, and emotionally invest in this membership and their group (Tajfel 1982, 2). According to the Social Identity Theory, people voluntarily affiliate themselves to social groups and categorise other people into groups. This way, group-members creating the "we-group" (in-group) can distinguish themselves from the "the others" (out-group). Social categorisation, which means assigning people to a certain social group or institution, is a mechanism to simplify the complex social environment. Group affiliations are not only a "universal feature of human social life" but also "basic determinants of our social relations with others", which affect our attitudes, values, social norms, our societal roles and our behaviour (Turner 1984, 518). Polarisation is a consequence of competition between identity groups, which similar to intergroup conflict

evokes an increased identification with one's own group and emphasises its positive features (Tajfel, Turner 1979, 33), whereby group members assign negative attributions to the "other group". In conflict situations, where the antagonism is based on asymmetric or opposition of identities, the "respect of one identity involves disrespect for another", constituting a situation where "there will be no gradual incremental improvement through equal interaction" (Todd 2021, 56). Todd argues that in the light of Brexit mutual respect and recognition for both traditions has to be established through autonomous change within each identity, incited by an inclusive dialogue on the constitutional issues of Northern Ireland (77).

Due to the fact that the relationship between Protestants and Catholics was perceived problematic even before the outbreak of the conflict in Northern Ireland in 1969, people withdrew into their own "in-group", their respective religious community. The process of segregation, when socialising within one's own group and when relations to the "other" group are minimised, has characterised the political landscape of Northern Ireland and still has an enduring effect. In Northern Ireland, people live in separated areas and are therefore physically divided, sometimes even reinforced by so-called "peace walls". This separation applied not so much to the middle class, which even at the times of the conflict lived in mixed areas, but at the outbreak of the conflict, working-class people were even forced to move into their respective areas. Boundaries of the identity groups became manifest by painting street kerbs in the colours of the national flags the community affiliated with, or having murals on house walls evoking special events of the groups' history, or established places with references to their distinct identity (e.g. cultural centres, places of commemoration, museums). The separate communities developed and fostered their own distinct culture, which was linked to a set of values, traditions, religion and cultural elements, which also constitute national identity. Additionally, remembering history, respective historical experiences and narratives about the past contributed to preserving the group's own worldview. Religion, being "the central marker of ethnic origin" (Coakley 2011a, 98) and a social "label" in Northern Ireland became "intertwined" with ethno-nationalism (Brubaker 2012, 9). Other markers of ethnic groups such as language and ethnicity were not dominant. The Irish language was not able to fulfil the function as a decisive marker of national identity because of its decline and the spread of the English language among the Catholic community (Coakley 2011a, 97). Throughout history, which itself has left a legacy on the conflict, religion defined both groups and helped to distinguish them from one another (95). Religion therefore is one important element in constructing national identity in the Irish context. Moreover, cultural differences, economic disparities, political exclusion, different national alliances and historical narratives have assisted in maintaining and reinforcing the divide between the two identities.

In relation to the Northern Ireland conflict, McGarry and O'Leary reject the idea that religion is the main reason of the conflict, and claim that: "Conflict is indeed waged between two communities whose members are religiously differentiated, but they are also divided by broader cultural differences, national allegiances, a history of antagonistic encounters, and marked differences in economic and political power" (1995, 172).

In trying to resolve the antagonism of the relationship between the two identities the former Irish politician John Hume proposed a "Two Tradition Paradigm", propagating a pluralistic and equalitarian accommodation of the two existing national identities, which was adopted by the nationalist parties at the "New Ireland Forum" in 1984. Todd suggests however, that once equality was achieved this approach is difficult to maintain and therefore suggests a "New Ireland Paradigm", which "retains the values of accommodation, respect and recognition butsees them as values to be attained and sustained through iterative change in the meaning and values around identity" (Todd 2021, 56). The national identities need to show flexibility and

have to identify converging ideas to be able to maintain a peaceful existence, without the fear of losing out towards the "other" group.

4. Identification with a National Identity

The roots of today's differentiation between the Catholic Irish republican and Protestant British unionist can be found in Irish history, as it is the common history and related narratives which have bolstered these two identities until today. The partition of Ireland (1920-1922) reinforced the two sets of identities and broadened the divide between them, as both new "states" encouraged the formation of these national identities to legitimise their existence. "Dispute of identity and over aims and the very nature of the conflict becomes endemic to the actors of the conflict: the very range of interests, identities, and repertoires of conflict provides a rational for almost all the population to take sides" (Todd 2011, 77). These two identities are not homogeneous either but can be further distinguished into a more militant and a constitutional strand, with a number of increments between these two poles.

4.1 Protestant, British Unionist and Loyalists

Within the Protestant unionist community – similar to the Irish nationalist/republican community – there is an internal division between militant and constitutional orientations. Loyalists represent the more militant version, and British unionists the constitutional strand of the Protestants' unionist identity. Todd (1987) distinguishes between an Ulster loyalist and Ulster British tradition within the Protestant community of Northern Ireland, while within the British tradition – similarly to McGarry and O'Leary (1995, 93-96) – she identifies a devolutionalist and an integrationalist political attitude (Todd 1987, 11). The loyalist tradition is shaped by the belief that the unionists have to dominate Northern Ireland, as otherwise unionism would be defeated and dead (3). Loyalist's belief presumed that the political accommodation of the two diverging ideas in Northern Ireland was not possible and had to fail. The loyalist tradition is rooted in a feeling of threat and insecurity, which derives its values from an evangelical fundamentalist religious tradition and is kept alive in the cultural organisation of the Orange Order and Orangeism (3-10). The British tradition, on the other hand, is less focused on the local situation of Northern Ireland; members identify themselves with Britain and the British way of life. The intellectual professional middle class, which believe in British values and have adopted a British lifestyle, belong to this tradition of Northern Irish unionism (11-12). Both strands experienced different developments as threats: The Ulster British tradition had closely watched the loss of the sovereignty of the empire, whereas the Ulster loyalist were more concerned with the increase of the Irish population in Northern Ireland (Coakley 2020, 369). The question of how to deal with the political situation in Northern Ireland, as some wanted to return to devolution with a majority rule or power sharing with Catholic constitutional parties and others preferred a deeper integration into the UK, divided the Protestant community (Todd 2011, 85).

Loyalism is still confined to the Protestant working-class communities, where paramilitary organisations are also rooted. In general, the paramilitary groups did not receive much support from mainstream unionism and were even held in poor esteem (Coulter, Murray 2008, 7). However, the role of the paramilitary organisations was crucial for the peace process because they developed political ideas for working-class loyalism, which favoured co-operation with Catholics to solve the conflict. The existing cooperation between ex-prisoners from paramilitary organisations on both sides of the societal division, to avert violent clashes between youngsters

at flashpoints in the bigger cities, shows that despite their ideological differences, there is a common understanding of their responsibility to their respective communities.

The two main strands within unionism are not on good terms. During the conflict loyalists were militarily active, as according to their understanding this was necessary to defend the union, as expressed by the middle-class unionist parties. However, when attacks were committed by loyalists instigated by the political rhetoric of the unionist politicians, these parties would turn their back on them. Since the implementation of the GFA/BA, the loyalist community feels the unionist parties do not represent their interests. This distaste of middle-class unionists by loyalism, according to Hearty, is based on two narratives: the "exploitation narrative" and the "abandoning narrative" (Hearty 2015, 163-168). Loyalists feel very much the losers of the peace process, as there are no political representatives to advance their demands and because republicans seem to be more successful in pursuing their interests. Coulter and Murray (2008) on the working-class unionists' dissatisfaction with the peace process:

> In the period since the cease-fires[9] were called it has become painfully apparent that working-class unionists have derived little benefit from the supposedly historic political developments unfolding around them. While rates of poverty in nationalist areas appear to be slowly declining, those of loyalist neighbourhoods are in fact on the rise. (Coulter, Murray 2008, 17)

What could be shown is that the Protestant community is not a static homogeneous group, but one which is internally divided on the constitutional and other policy issues. However, this diversity of opinions and political attitudes is also reflected in the Catholic community.

4.2 Irish Republicanism and Irish Constitutional Nationalism

On the Irish/Catholic side, we find two major manifestations of Irish nationalism: Irish republicanism and Irish constitutional nationalism. The republican strand has traditionally covered the more militant position, but as former Sinn Féin President Gerry Adams remarked: "There have always been three tendencies within the republican movement: a militaristic and a fairly unpolitical tendency, a revolutionary tendency, and a constitutional tendency" (Adams 1995, 16).

Irish republicans in general consider the use of violence a legitimate tool to achieve political objectives, such as the withdrawal of the British troops and the reunification of Ireland. However, the mainstream of Irish republicans, particularly the Sinn Féin party and its former military wing, the Irish Republican Army (IRA), declared to remove violence from the political sphere in 2005 and avail of political means to achieve their political objectives. Nevertheless, there are still some dissident republican groups which would consider the use of violence as legitimate. On the other hand, nationalists remained constitutionalists and tried to participate actively in the state's politics to improve the situation of Irish Catholics in Northern Ireland, thereby rejecting violence as a political strategy. The escalation of violence during *The Troubles* led to a situation when the nationalists had to temporarily cease political cooperation with unionists. Republicans stigmatised the nationalists as traitors of the Irish people, which in some cases led to attacks on constitutional politicians by the militant elements of Catholic society. During

[9] The first cease-fire was called by the IRA in August 1994, which was followed by a cease-fire by the Combined Loyalist Military Command (CLMC) in October 1994. The IRA 1994 cease-fire broke down in February 1996, but was re-instated in July 1997.

the peace process[10] and finally with the establishment of the cross-community executive at Stormont in 1999, the more militant republican parties shifted towards constitutional politics.

McGarry and O'Leary further distinguish the Catholic/Irish/nationalist tradition into a number of subcategories: civic constitutionalists, civic militants, ethnic constitutionalists, ethnic militants, neo-nationalists and revisionists (1995, 17). The main features categorising these groups are the concepts of ethnic vs. civic and constitutionalist vs. militant, whereas the neo-nationalist and revisionists cannot be easily assigned along these categories.

The civic constitutionalist's assumption of what the Irish nation constitutes relates to values of civic nationalism, secularism, territory and an importance of cultural (non-religious) elements, especially the Gaelic language (*ibidem*). The aim of constitutional republicans is to unify the territory of Ireland, which has to be achieved through diplomatic negotiations. Constitutionalists reject means of violence to achieve political aims. Civic militants demand the self-determination of Ireland over the entire territory of the island, and violence is a legitimate tool to reach this objective (18). Ethnic constitutionalists more or less strictly follow Catholic teachings and believe in law and order. The majority of ethnic constitutionalists reject the use of violence to achieve a united Ireland, although they would blame the British state for creating the conflict by culturally suppressing the Irish and by dividing the island. The ethnic militants on the other side want to "liberate" Northern Ireland by force. They are driven by the belief that democracy cannot be implemented as long as the Irish people, the sovereign of the nation, is divided. Neo-nationalists claim that they are the real republicans, demanding an Irish Republic to include all people of Ireland regardless of their identities. According to the neo-nationalists, the unification of Ireland depends on the consent of both identities in Northern Ireland (18-20). The Irish state moved to a neo-nationalistic position by signing the Anglo-Irish Agreement with Britain in 1985 and by changing the Irish constitution in 1998 to drop the territorial claim over Northern Ireland. Civic constitutionalists/nationalists have a similar outlook on the political elements of what constitute the Irish nation. The neo-nationalists, however, diverge on the cultural aspects as a prerequisite to be considered an Irish national. Finally, the revisionists reject the previous interpretations of Irish nationalism as misinterpretations of Ireland's past, and are even inclined to accept the partition of Ireland (20). These sub-categories are rather fluent and not strict or rigid types of Irish nationalism, and are based on the ethnic vs. civic and constitutional vs. militant dichotomy.

5. Communal Affiliation: Political Parties, Paramilitary Groups and Cultural Institutions

At the local level of the divided society, in the closely-knit communities, community affiliation is a rather strongly developed feature on each side of the divide in Northern Ireland. The Protestant community throughout history has lived with the threat of being "overrun" and "outbreed" by the Irish majority on the island, and developed a kind of "siege mentality". The Irish nationalists, a minority in Northern Ireland since 1922, grew up with the idea of the "unfinished business", meaning that the aim of a united Ireland free of British influence, as declared at the Easter Rising in 1916,[11] still has to be achieved. For the communities these ideas and fears became a defining element of their history, narratives, hence their identity.

[10] Sinn Féin signed the so-called Mitchell Principles in 1997, which obliged the party to renounce violence and disassociate themselves from applying any form of organised violence to achieve its political aims; hence it agreed to convince the IRA to "put arms beyond use".

[11] The Easter Rising was staged at Easter 1916 by republicans, who occupied a number of buildings in Dublin and declared an independent Irish Republic. The British army crushed the uprising and executed the leaders of the rising, who subsequently became the heroes of the Irish struggle for independence.

The unionist political forces supporting the *status quo* in Northern Ireland possessed an almost unlimited political power for a long time and had an interest in bolstering the superiority of the Protestant community. The constitutional Irish nationalists tried to represent the Irish population in the British institutions of Northern Ireland and in the Westminster Parliament; however, with the outbreak of violence, the republicans became the dominant force with the objective of destroying the political structures of the Northern Irish province. To assist the respective objectives and to strengthen the community affiliations on both sides, political and cultural institutions were established to promote the ideas and interests of the communities.

In divided societies such as Northern Ireland, political parties and other civil and cultural organisations are organised along dominant segmented cleavages (Guelke 2012, 3-4). Therefore, the Northern Irish party system is defined by the division between nationalists and unionists. One exception is the Alliance Party of Northern Ireland (APNI), which strives not to be affiliated to any of the communities.

5.1 Unionist/Loyalist Paramilitary Organisations

Loyalism, the militant strand of unionism, established paramilitary groups to defend their community from Irish republican attacks and to fill the perceived security vacuum which seemed to have emerged at the outbreak of violence at the end of the 1960s. These paramilitary groups claimed they were defending the existence of the Northern Irish state, but its members were imprisoned by the very same state for their "crimes". The relationship between the loyalist paramilitary groups and the unionist political parties is still one of mistrust. The paramilitary groups thought that they were acting in accordance with the politicians' wishes, but in the end, the political elite did not want to have any dealings with the militants (McAuley, Tonge Shirlow, 2009, 26-27).

The Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF), named after the organisation established in 1912, re-emerged in the wake of the first violent clashes during the election campaign in 1964, and the marking of the 50th anniversary of the Easter Rising in 1966, commemorated by the Catholic population in Northern Ireland. The Red Hand Commando (RHC), which was associated with the UVF, was founded in the 1970s. Around the same time, the Ulster Defence Association (UDA) and the Ulster Freedom Fighters (UFF), which actually constituted one organisation, established themselves as new loyalist organisations. These organisations were results of divisions within groups in the 1990s. The Loyalist Volunteer Force (LVF) split from the UVF in 1996 because of their criticism of declaring an end to the military campaign. However, in 1998 the LVF followed suit and called a ceasefire (Steenkamp 2008, 161). In the wake of the IRA's declaration of a ceasefire in August 1994, the UDA, UVF and RHC, jointly as the Combined Loyalist Military Command (CLMC), announced the cessation of their military campaign and issued an apology to the victims of the conflict. The CLMC's ceasefire was maintained even though the IRA returned to violence in 1996.

5.2 Unionist Political Parties

Some smaller loyalist political parties are affiliated with paramilitary organisations. The Progressive Unionist Party (PUP), founded in 1979, became the political arm of the UVF, while the UVF's Commanding Officer Gusty Spence played an important role in the politicisation of the movement and the founding of the party. The PUP had the advantage of having a number of important figures like Billy Hutchinson and David Ervin in the movement, who together

with Gusty Spence helped to build up a political structure and basis to actively engage politically in the peace process. The UDA faced a number of internal challenges in relation to organising politically and its decision to abandon military activities in 2007 (Moriarty 2015). In 1981 the Ulster Loyalist Democratic Party (ULDP) – renamed in 1989 as the Ulster Democratic Party (UDP) – was formed, which dissolved in 2001 and merged with the Ulster Political Research Group (UPRG). Even before the advent of the peace process, paramilitary ex-prisoners played a key role in transforming aspects of the conflict. However, according to the study by McAuley et al. (2009) on loyalist ex-prisoners the key ideological goals, the interpretations of the conflict and the perception of the "other group" have not changed in their main aspects (McAuley, Tonge, Shirlow, 2009, 23-24; 35). Loyalist ex-prisoners would still perceive the conflict to be unsolvable as it centres around irreconcilable constitutional preferences. However, for the time being, a consensus was agreed that only a majority of people in Northern Ireland would be able to change the constitutional status of Northern Ireland, if they so desire (McAuley, Tonge, Shirlow, 2009, 30).

For a long time, the main political party in Northern Ireland was the Ulster Unionist Party (UUP), which ruled the province from 1921/1922 until 1972 when indirect rule was introduced from London. Even after the local Stormont parliament was suspended, the UUP remained the most influential party in Northern Ireland. It represented the Protestant middle class and at times was even willing to engage in power-sharing arrangements with moderate nationalists, e.g. the Sunningdale Agreement of 1973 under the leadership of Brian Faulkner. However, when UUP-leader David Trimble convinced his party members to endorse the GFA/BA in 1998, voters withdrew their support and turned to the Democratic Ulster Party (DUP). Once the executive was set up in 1999, the implementation of the political settlement faced a number of obstacles and came to a standstill in 2002. A complete deadlock in relation to the re-installation of the executive was created by the assembly elections in 2003, where the moderate parties on both sides of the political divide, the Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) and the Social Democratic Labour Party (SDLP), were replaced by the more radical parties, DUP and Sinn Féin, as the strongest parties. The regulations of the GFA require that the strongest parties from both communities have to form a coalition government. In 2003 this seemed impossible. However, the DUP changed its position of non-cooperation with the republican Sinn Féin party, signed the St. Andrews Agreement in 2006, and formed the Northern Irish Executive in 2007. In 2010 the UUP nearly disappeared from the political scene in Northern Ireland, when it lost all its seats in the Westminster Parliament at the UK general elections the same year. In 2015 it regained two seats in South Antrim and in Fermanagh and South Tyrone, and received a ministry in the Northern Ireland executive. In 2017 the UUP again lost all its Westminster seats in the general election and was not able to regain any in the 2019-election (BBC 2019). In the early local elections in 2017 for the Northern Ireland Assembly the UUP won only 10 seats out of 90 (Assembly Election Results 2017).

The DUP, which became the main opponent for the UUP, was known for its infamous leader Reverend Ian Paisley, a moderator of the Free Presbyterian Church of Ulster and strictly anti-Catholic in his personal and political views. Paisley became prominent in the mid-1960s, when the then unionist prime minister O'Neill attempted to reform Northern Irish politics by improving relations with the Irish Republic and by addressing Catholic grievances. This was publicly denounced by Paisley, who mobilised against O'Neill, ending in his resignation in 1969. The DUP was founded in 1970 by Paisley, who remained its president until 2008. Whilst rejecting the violent campaigns of the loyalist groups, Paisley's DUP provided the legitimacy for their activities by asking for the defence of the union and established itself as the

mouthpiece of the loyalist groups (Shirlow, Tonge, McAuley, *et al.* 2010, 74). Despite Paisley's anti-Catholic stance throughout his political career and the rejection of the GFA/BA in 1998, he endorsed the St. Andrews Agreement in 2006 and consequently formed an executive with his archenemy Sinn Féin in 2007. In the 2017 assembly election the DUP barely remained the strongest party in the Northern Irish parliament with 28 out of 90 seats (Assembly Election Results 2017). In the general election of 2019 the DUP won 8 seats (BBC 2019), being the strongest party in Northern Ireland in relation to taking Westminster seats.

5.3 Irish Nationalist Paramilitary Organisations

Various political parties and paramilitary groups originated within Irish nationalism. The radical groups linked to paramilitaries either adopted a left-wing ideology, thereby proclaiming to be secular, or referred to traditional national aspects of their respective ethnic group. Although the IRA and its political arm Sinn Féin (SF) defined themselves as left-wing movements, their members were more nationalist than socialist. This became apparent during the split between the Official Sinn Féin (OSF) and the Provisional Sinn Féin (PSF)[12] in 1969/70, whereas the Official Sinn Féin seemed to move ideologically towards Marxism, the Provisional Sinn Féin remained more conservative on political issues. The same happened to their respective armies, which split on ideological and tactical grounds. The Provisional IRA (PIRA) developed into the dominant force within the Irish Republican sphere, as it attracted more supporters and managed to keep the movement together. However, policy changes brought further disagreement and new groups surfaced. The Continuity IRA (CIRA) was founded in 1986, when Provisional Sinn Féin decided to actively participate in politics and drop the strategy of "absenteeism", which meant that the elected representatives participating in elections would start taking their seats in the parliaments and local councils. Republican Sinn Féin (RSF) was established as the CIRA's political wing. The next split occurred in 1997 at the time when the PIRA considered renewing the ceasefire of 1994, which broke down in 1996. A group of hard-core members decided to reject a new ceasefire and declared themselves as the Real IRA (RIRA), and the 32-County Sovereignty Movement (32CSM) later became its political arm. After the 1969 split, the Official IRA/SF-Movement was faced with similar frictions and disagreements. The Irish National Liberation Army (INLA) split in 1974 from the OIRA because of their military inactivity in the conflict. The Irish Republican Socialist Party (IRSP) became its political wing. A number of other groups and factions, mainly centred around personalities, emerged throughout the years and even attacked each other, e.g., the Irish People's Liberation Organisation (IPLO), which split away from the INLA (Hanley, Millar 2010, 512), or the Official Republican Movement (ORM) (594-595), the Republican Left and the Irish Socialist Network.

Due to the moderation of the former radical organisations and their engagement in mainstream politics, a number of political and militant radical parties split from their parent groups. The Real IRA split into two factions, and one adopted the name "Óglaigh na hÉreann" (ONH) (Independent Monitoring Commission, IMC 2010, 6). The Republican Action Against Drugs (RAAD) is a paramilitary group, whose sphere of activity is located around Derry and Strabane; it is involved in criminal activities (IMC 2010, 9) and seemed to have merged with the Real IRA in 2012 (McDonald 2012). A number of various republican dissident groups and the Real IRA, as well as the CIRA, are militarily active.

[12] The Provisional IRA and Provisional Sinn Féin became the mainstream republican movement after the 1969/70-split, therefore the prefix "Provisional" is often dropped and these organisations are simply referred to as IRA or Sinn Féin.

5.4 Irish Nationalist Political Parties

One of the oldest and politically most important all-Ireland party is Sinn Féin, which was founded in 1905 (Rafter 2005) and became prominent after the Easter Rising of 1916, despite not being the most active organisation in the insurrection. It was successful in the elections in 1919 and set up a separate parliament in Dublin, but refused to send its elected representatives to London to take up their seats in Westminster. After the signing of the Anglo-Irish Treaty in 1919, two factions within Sinn Fein emerged, one would accept the treaty and the other – due to the partition of Ireland – rejected it. The Civil War was decided by the pro-treaty faction. Sinn Féin as a party was marginalised in the new Irish Free State and in Northern Ireland. During *The Troubles* it gained some relevance as the political arm of the much more predominant IRA. However, internal ideological differences led to the split of the IRA and consequently of Sinn Féin. In the early 1980s a political strategy was developed in the wake of the *Hunger Strikes,* because the Irish republican movement[13] realised that a military campaign had to be accompanied by a political movement. Sinn Féin gained further importance under the leadership of Gerry Adams and Martin McGuinness, who at the end of the 1980s wanted to find a way out of the spiral of violence by political means. Sinn Féin managed to convince the IRA to abandon its fight, dump their arms and "assist the development of purely political and democratic programmes through exclusively peaceful means" (Sinn Féin 2005). For a long time, Sinn Féin was the second strongest Irish nationalist party in Northern Ireland, until 2003 when it overtook the SDLP. At the last local election Sinn Féin became the second strongest party in the Northern Ireland Parliament with 27 seats, just one behind the DUP (Assembly Elections Results 2017). In the 2019 Westminster elections Sinn Féin won 7 seats (BBC 2019), traditionally the elected representatives do not take their seats in London.

The Social Democratic Labour Party (SDLP) is a representative for constitutional republicanism in Northern Ireland. The party, which was founded in 1970 by members of the NICRA, was the dominant political party for Northern Irish Catholics and nationalists until 2003. One of the most prominent and influential politicians of the SDLP, was John Hume, who was essential in bringing the conflict to an end; when in the late 1980s he started talks with the leader of Sinn Féin Gerry Adams to work on a political solution. Hume was politically active for years as a member of the Northern Ireland Parliament, the UK Parliament and the European Parliament. During that time he was able to establish good contacts with personalities and politicians in the United States who supported the peace process. The SDLP won 12 out of 90 in the local elections in 2017 (Assembly elections 2017). In the 2017 general election the SDLP lost all Westminster seats, but regained two of them in 2019 (BBC 2017, BBC 2019).

Beside the main parties, a number of smaller newly founded parties, mainly rejecting the GFA/BA, have been established during recent years. On the republican side, the Republican Network for Unity (RNU), an active political network of republicans, which opposes the implementation of the GFA/BA and the St. Andrews Agreement. In 2006 Éirígí was founded as a socialist Irish revolutionary anti-imperialistic political party, which contested the local elections but failed to win any seats in either the Republic of Ireland or Northern Ireland and 2016 also Saoradh – The Irish Revolutionary Republican Socialist Party was founded (Saoradh 2020).

[13] From the mid-1970s onwards the Provisional Movement constituted the most relevant element of the Irish Republican Movement, hence the "Provisional" designation – used at the time of the 1969/70 split of the movement into the Official and Provisional factions – was dropped and the affiliated organisations were only termed as Sinn Féin or IRA.

5.5 Cultural Organisations

There are several cultural organisations on both sides of the communal divide, but here only some the more relevant and older organisations are introduced as examples representing the Irish/Catholic/nationalist and unionist/British/loyalist cultural expressions.

The Orange Order, a Protestant cultural organisation, is closely linked with the political leaders of the UUP and other unionist political parties. The objective of the Orange Order is to maintain and celebrate the cultural heritage of the unionist community in Northern Ireland, providing and maintaining an important element of the unionist identity. However, as the cultural manifestations of the Orange Order are sometimes perceived by the Catholic population as provocative, and a display of political dominance towards the Catholics, tensions emerge, especially during the parade seasons, when the Orange Order parades pass through streets mainly inhabited by Catholics. The Northern Ireland Parades Commission established in 1998 is charged with reviewing, recommending or approving routes of the parades to minimise the violent clashes connected with these parades, or in cases of dispute, with mediating a solution acceptable for both sides (Parade Commission 2017).

The Apprentice Boys of Derry define themselves as a "historical and cultural organisation committed to maintaining the spirit of courage and liberty displayed by the Defenders of Londonderry in 1688-1689" (Apprentice Boys of Derry 2017). This quote referred to the historical event of the "Siege of Derry" in 1688/1689, when Protestant Apprentices prevented the opening of the city gates and the surrender to the Catholic forces, which besieged the city. The Apprentice Boys are organised in several clubs, arrange parades and the annual celebration of the events of 1689 in August, and run a museum, where objects of the organisation are collected, recovered and maintained to keep the tradition of the organisation alive.

For the Irish population in Northern Ireland the Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA) acts as a community organisation supporting traditional Irish sports hurling and Gaelic football. Recently, attempts were made to open up the organisation to the Protestant community as well. The learning of the Irish language, Irish dancing and Irish music are associated with the Irish way of life. Children are encouraged to take up courses to learn the language, Irish dancing or play the tin whistle or the Irish Bodhrán.[14] Cultural centres, such as the An Chultúrlann McAdam Ó Fiaich in West Belfast or the Cultúrlann Uí Chanáin in Derry are institutions providing space for Irish culture and for people to meet (Cultúrlann McAdam Ó Fiaich 2017; Cultúrlann Uí Chanáin 2017).

Although, the GFA/BA managed to build the foundations for a peaceful co-existence of the two communities, which ended the physical conflict, the disputes over identity issues have moved to the cultural sphere (Tonge, Gomez 2015, 277). More conflicts over the parades of the Orange Order, the removal of British flags from public buildings in Northern Ireland, as seen in Belfast in December 2012, and the use of other national symbols will erupt as long as the division in society persists and no attempt is made to agree on joint symbols of shared identity, as suggested by Tonge and Gomez.

6. Identities in the Post-Conflict Situation in Northern Ireland

The political and cultural context shapes identities, therefore the post-conflict situation and the political integration of the Irish Catholic community in Northern Ireland consequent-

[14] Bodhrán is a hand drum played by hand with tippers.

ly impact on both identities. Unfortunately, the societal divisions remain, they just manifest themselves differently.

The main achievement of the GFA/BA signed in 1998 was that violence as a political tool was removed from politics in Northern Ireland. This was accepted by Sinn Féin when they accepted the "Mitchell Principles" in 1997[15], though it was not possible to engage all political parties and paramilitary groups in the peace process at the time. The main problem was that the groups which shifted and moved to a more moderate position had to cope with dissidents and – in worst-case scenarios – with splits within their ranks. The more radical new splinter groups in particular continued to commit attacks, which increased the number of victims even after the GFA/BA was signed and endorsed by the population of Ireland in an all-island referendum in May 1998.

The transformation of the political context and the shift in actors accepting political realities started to take place during the 1980s, when the Provisional IRA and Provisional Sinn Féin realised that a political strategy is needed beside the military campaign to address the issues of the conflict and to mobilise the Catholic community. During the 1980s and early 1990s the paramilitary groups lacked the legitimacy to speak for their people, but some members became politicised during their imprisonment, who after their release established political parties to represent their interests within the respective communities. As a consequence of the Sinn Féin's political success and the continuing paramilitary violence, the British and Irish government agreed to closer cooperated on security issues. The Anglo-Irish Agreement, signed between the Irish *Taoiseach* Garret Fitzgerald and British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher in 1985 was implemented by the British government even against the opposition of the unionist population. It further acknowledged the "Irish dimension" in Northern Ireland and thereby "repositioned" the British state in relation to the unionists (Ruane, Todd 2007, 450). Another reason for a transformation of the political actors was that the paramilitary groups and the British Army had come to the conclusion that the "war" could not be won by military means. It could be argued that the conflict ended for both sides in a "mutually hurting stalemate" (Zartman 1991, 16), which made the actors look for alternatives in bringing the conflict to an end. There is also the counterargument that not only the "mutual military stalemate" led to the shift in actors' mindsets, but the asymmetric perception of the military success by the loyalists too – believing that their activities kept Northern Ireland within the Union – and the overestimation of transformative changes achieved on the republican side (Shirlow, Tonge, McAuley, *et al.* 2010, 22). Politicisation of loyalist and republican prisoners, learning about their own history and analysing the perspective of the "others" introduced a change in the thinking of these groups, resulting in political strategies and finally in engaging with each other to end the conflict in Northern Ireland (62).

Once the republicans announced their ceasefire, the loyalists followed, as the original reason for defending the Protestant community from republican attacks no longer existed. Moreover, the population would not support the political wing of the military organisations if they had continued their military activities. Sinn Féin had to reconsider its combined strategy of "Armalite and ballot box", which was propagated at the start of the 1980s and combined the military campaign with politics. Since more and more civilians had become victims of their military campaign, the population forced the movement to end it.

[15] The Mitchell Principles obliged the parties to renounce violence and disassociate themselves from using any form of organised violence to achieve their political aims. When Sinn Féin signed the Mitchell Principles, which was preceded by intense discussions within the Irish Republican Movement, it agreed to convince the IRA to "put arms beyond use".

While unionist politicians resisted British pressure to accommodate the needs of the Catholic population for some time, the loyalists were more inclined to accept the fact that the conflict could only be settled by working with the Irish nationalist parties. The improvement of Anglo-Irish relations between the British and Irish states from 1997 onwards changed the context of politics in Northern Ireland. Due to the close cooperation and personal appreciation of the two prime ministers at the time, Bertie Ahern and Tony Blair, it was no longer possible for the unionists to avert an agreement. The unionist parties, especially the UUP, had to accept the new realities of these positive Anglo-Irish relations.

The actors on both sides changed their mindsets insofar as the republicans accepted the existence of a unionist identity and their right of self-determination, while the unionists acknowledged that the Irish political parties needed to be integrated into the running of Northern Ireland. In the GFA/BA it is stated: "We acknowledge the substantial differences between our continuing, and equally legitimate, political aspirations. However, we will endeavour to strive in every practical way towards reconciliation and rapprochement within the framework of democratic and agreed arrangements" (GFA 1998, paragraph 5) The reality of the two distinct identities in Northern Ireland was recognised and institutionalised in the GFA/BA, creating a situation where democratic institutions and procedures are built upon the divisions of society, and reinforcing them for the foreseeable future. The GFA/BA requires cross-community cooperation at the level of the executive to be functional. Although the implementation of the GFA/BA and the devolution of powers to the Northern Irish executive could not be considered very successful at the outset[16], it functioned without any major interruptions from 2007 until 2015. A new crisis emerged in August 2015 though when the UUP left the executive, as evidence emerged that members of the former Provisional IRA were involved in the killing of ex-IRA-volunteer Kevin McGuiganin the same month. The DUP attempted to solve the dispute over the issue of the paramilitary activities of republican groups once linked to the Provisional Sinn Féin, but failed, and therefore DUP leader Peter Robinson stepped down as First Minister of Northern Ireland (McDonald, Watt 2015). This example showed how the legacies of the violent past still impact on the politics of Northern Ireland today. The murder of Kevin McGuigan kicked off a discussion about whether the Provisional IRA still exists or not (Kelly 2015, 2; Moloney 2015). The executive survived this episode, but the newly appointed interim leader of the DUP, Arlene Foster, was allegedly involved in the mismanagement of public funds. Sinn Féin therefore demanded her resignation as First Minister, but because of her refusal, Martin McGuinness stepped down as First Deputy Minister in January 2017, the executive dissolved and new elections had to be called. The election outcome reduced the gap between the DUP and Sinn Féin to a one-seat difference, which meant that both parties are required to form a coalition government. The executive was re-installed with DUP's Arlene Foster and Sinn Féin's Michelle O'Neill in January 2020.

A positive development of the GFA/BA is the accommodation of Irish identity into the political and constitutional structure of Northern Ireland; therefore, the Irish-Catholic population feels more comfortable declaring themselves Irish (Tonge, Gomez 2015, 294-295). On the other side, young Protestants are more likely to accept a regional Northern Irish identity,

[16] The first NI Executive was established with the SDLP and UUP as the main parties, which appointed the First Minister and the First Deputy Minister in 1999. Conflict arose between the UUP and Sinn Féin due to the perceived lack of decommissioning activities by the IRA and the accusation that Sinn Féin does not sincerely support a non-violent political path. During 2000, 2001 and from 2002 the powers of the executive were revoked several times and London introduced direct rule. From 2002 until 2007 the executive was not active at all. Only from 2007 was it possible to establish a stable executive. The crisis in autumn 2015 showed once again the lack of cross-community trust at the level of the political parties.

then older Protestants, who lived through *The Troubles* (284). In the post-GFA/BA phase the Irish community no longer appeared attached to the idea of Irish unity. However, Brexit has led to calls from Sinn Féin to hold a border poll and initiated discussion on a unified Ireland. The Unionist parties have been advocating Brexit (Coakley 2020, 361-365), although this political stance has consequently even weakening the Union with Britain. The DUP after the 2017 general election entered into a confidence and supply agreement with the British government, assuming that it will be to the benefit of the Union. But again, the British government had "sold out" the Unionists and agreed to the Northern Ireland protocol with the EU, which makes is necessary to check some food products coming from the UK to Northern Ireland (Edgington, Morris 2021). Brexit has opened up the discussion on the constitutional status of Northern Ireland, with the re-alignment of positions between the two respective identities at its core.

As showed in this paper the divisions of society trace back over centuries and are entering now into a new phase, which requires some new approaches to overcome the antagonism of the two traditions and a respectful inclusion of the Protestant traditions into a prospect unified Irish Republic (Todd 2021). To overcome the origins of the conflict, rooting in the competing national-identities and the contest over control of the territory, a common identity should be constructed (Tonge, Gomez 2015), jointly developed and accepted by both communities. However, this requires a change by the two main political parties in Northern Ireland, the DUP and Sinn Féin, which are interested in maintaining the two different identities, as their electoral success depends on being able to mobilise their respective communities (290). The political parties have for now no interest in fostering a common identity with common symbols in Northern Ireland. For example, the use of symbols in the socio-political context, especially flags, can lead to conflict. The decision by the majority in the Belfast Council in December 2012 not to fly the Union Jack all-year around, but only on 15 designated days, was met by angry demonstrations from the unionist and loyalist communities. The rather aggressive reaction against Belfast Council's political decision has to be seen against the backdrop of continuing dissatisfaction with the peace process within the Protestant community and its fears of marginalisation of British identity in Northern Ireland. Sinn Féin especially is accused of removing aspects of Protestant culture and heritage from Northern Ireland's public sphere and even waging a war against unionist identity (Hearty 2015, 160).

There is a sense among Protestants that the peace process did not benefit the unionist/loyalist population in the same way as the Catholic community, consequently, this perception of the political and societal situation creates frustration. The first indication of some dissatisfaction with the peace process on the Protestant side was the result of the referendum on the GFA. The referendum on the GFA/BA, although overwhelmingly supported by the Irish-Catholic population in the north and south, received only a small majority from the Protestants, which left a bad taste with the overall success of the peace settlement (Doyle 1998, 11; Coulter, Murray 2008, 4). Now the outcome of the Brexit negotiations addressing the special case of Northern Ireland must have reaffirmed the feeling that the Protestant community is on its own and losing out, triggering a type of "siege mentality". As the physical war was replaced with a cultural war, issues related to identity became very sensitive as their preservation is seen as a symbol of cultural survival. Apart from the subjective fear of cultural dominance by the Irish Catholic population, the Protestant community observed a decline of numbers in terms of religious affiliation. In the 2011 census, 42 percent labelled themselves as Protestants, whereas 41 percent of the population declared themselves Catholic, 17 percent designated themselves as non-religious and 8 percent professed other religions. Since 2001 the Protestant community has decreased by about 4 percentage points. (Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency 2011a).

In relation to national identity, a different picture emerged, as 40 percent described their identity as only British, 25 percent as only Irish, 21 percent as only Northern Irish, and 14 percent as other identities and combinations of British and Northern Irish. By contrast, 58 percent of Catholics and 36 percent of Protestants use the Northern Irish identity category (Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency 2011b). With regard to national identity the figures seem to indicate that people might shift away from their British or Irish identity to a Northern Irish one, but at the moment, the majority of Protestants, 42 percent of the population, associate with a British nationality (40 percent), which is perceived to be under threat. In recent years the Protestant community has "seen their size reduced, their once-unassailable position of cultural dominance eroded, and their traditional position of economic dominance being reversed" (Coakley 2011b, 15). Now the question of territorial sovereignty and personal belonging, a question apparently successfully addressed in the GFA/BA, re-surfaced and is challenging a very much divided Protestant community. These developments create uneasiness with the current political situation and frustration within the Protestant community.

7. Conclusions

When the new "state(s)" were established at the beginning of the 1920s, the intensification of "national" differences between the respective identities was seen to be a necessity at the time as clear, distinct borders – not only territorial – had to be established. Though this led to polarisation around two identity concepts, a worsening of relationships between the related states, and finally ended in a violent conflict. While the GFA/BA managed to bring the political representatives of the main paramilitary groups to the table to agree on a political solution to the violent conflict, it was not able to overcome the societal divisions between the two contesting identities, on the contrary, it reinforces them. The structures laid down in the GFA/BA "froze" these societal divisions, as the political system is based on the two designated national identities. Moreover, the political parties compete for votes within their community, but not across the communal divide, so there is no interest from the parties to adapt a more "neutral" position. Despite the cross-community cooperation prescribed in the assembly, the executive and other political institutions, there has been no transformation of the key ideological objectives of the parties. The strategies were adapted to the political realities, but not the ultimate objectives. The positive outcomes of the GFA/BA were that Sinn Féin accepted that a majority of people in Northern Ireland must decide on the constitutional positioning of the state and the unionist parties approved the right of the nationalist community to be integrated in political participation and in the administration of the provinces.

For the Catholic community, the GFA/BA seems to have contributed positively to their daily lives as the Irish identity was upgraded to an official recognised political identity with rights and obligations within the Northern Irish political system. The Protestant community, however, is mainly disaffected with the peace process and fears about being outbid by the republican parties in politics and in cultural areas are prevalent. Additionally, the intra-communal division between working-class and middle-class Protestants seems to have widened, which can be interpreted as a consequence of the prevailing disadvantages of working-class loyalists in Northern Ireland. With Brexit these tendencies might intensify, however time will tell, what impact this new situation has on the Protestant identity and how the Irish society will react to these changes.

Political violence to achieve political aims was largely removed from Northern Ireland, but violence on a smaller scale within society to vent frustration and as a reaction to the transfor-

mation processes still exists. The conflict between the two identities manifests itself nowadays in the area of cultural issues, such as parades of the Orange Order, flags and other symbols. In future the success of the Northern Ireland peace process will no longer be assessed on the issue of equal integration of the nationalist/republican community into the Northern Irish state, but on whether the agreement can be as beneficial for the unionist communities as for the Catholic community. Further discussion will have to deal with the question, if and how a prospect united Ireland is able to provide the same rights to the Protestant community, as the GFA/BA did for the Catholics in Northern Ireland.

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