

# Post-Conflict Reconciliation in the European Context: The Cases of Northern Ireland and the Balkans

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## ABSTRACT

This paper asks how EU membership can impact the success of post-conflict reconciliation through an analysis of two cases: Northern Ireland and the Balkans. The two variables to measure reconciliation are cross-community relations and democratization. First, this paper evaluates EU-led cross-community projects. Regarding Northern Ireland, the EU Peace Fund II was met with mixed results and suggested that Catholics had an overall more positive view. Surveys conducted reveal that polarization persists in other ways. For the Balkans, the Regional Youth Cooperation Office's biggest challenge is a lack of funding. Surveys reveal that citizens have a desire for reconciliation and EU membership but are pessimistic about the prospects for both. Democratization was measured by assessing the stability of Stormont in Northern Ireland and the fulfillment of the chapters of acquis 23 and 24 by the Western Balkans. The constant suspensions of Stormont reveal the fragility of the Good Friday Agreement. For the Balkans, the promise of accession does lead to temporary gains in their democracy ranking. However, this diminishes when accession seems less likely. This paper also considers two important developments: Brexit and the accession of Slovenia and Croatia. Brexit revealed how ingrained EU norms were in the GFA and how the absence of the EU can reverse progress made. The accession of Croatia and Slovenia shows that the EU fails to hold member states accountable to standards of democratization and cross-community relations. The paper concludes that, while imperfect, an absence or lack of commitment from the European Union is worse.

Just as the 1992 Maastricht Treaty formally established the new European Union, conflict erupted in the Balkans. The breakup of Yugoslavia brought a brutal ethnoreligious war that lasted throughout the 90s. This also coincided with the 30-year-long conflict in Northern Ireland between Catholic Irish Nationalists and Protestant British Unionists. The EU did not have the necessary capabilities to prevent or mitigate these conflicts; however, the EU could and did play a role in reconstructing these two regions to ensure its founding principles of peace and stability. Thus, the central question of this paper is: *how effective has the European Union been in facilitating reconciliation in the post-conflict societies of the Balkans<sup>1</sup> and Northern Ireland, and what role does EU<sup>2</sup> membership play in the success of these efforts?*

This paper is focusing on Northern Ireland and the Balkans as these are the two most salient examples of the EU getting involved in inner-European post-conflict reconciliation. These two conflicts shared a lot of similarities in that they were spurred by nationalist, religious, and economic tensions. There are also salient differences between the two regions. However, the biggest difference this paper will focus on is each region's relationship with the EU. When the Good Friday Agreement was signed, Northern Ireland (by

way of the UK), was a member of the EU, while no Balkan countries were during the 1990s. Thus, this paper can compare these two reconstruction efforts based on this key difference, while accounting for some of the other factors that may lead to divergent outcomes.

It's important to have a consistent definition of reconciliation and the variables representing this term when comparing these two conflicts. Going by PEACE II's working definition, which was established by the EU, there are five components to reconciliation: "(1) Developing a shared vision of an interdependent and fair society; (2) Acknowledging and dealing with the past; (3) Building positive relationships; (4) Significant cultural and attitudinal change; and (5) Substantial social, economic, and political change" (The Peace Programmes, n.d. para. 22). This paper will further emphasize that reconciliation must be felt at the local level in that individuals must be able to live with the (former) enemy and not resort to violence to deal with problems. Thus, one clear way of measuring this is cross-community relations. The next variable, democratization, may not seem obvious at first. However, the handbook on "Reconciliation after Violent Conflict" states that "the best form of post-conflict government is a democratic one" because it is "clearly the most effective way of implementing those (democratic) principles - equality, representation,

participation, accountability and so on” (Bloomfield et al, 2003, p. 10). Democratic governance also enables the previously warring groups to engage in dialogue in order to build a representative society.

If membership can facilitate reconciliation, then it would be wise for the EU to continue to pursue the Balkans’ accession and show that the EU is still committed to the region. If membership has no impact or even a negative outcome on reconciliation, then the EU might want to reassess the ways in which it engages with these regions, if it still chooses to engage. My hypothesis is that the European Union’s approach to reconciliation in Northern Ireland would be more effective compared to the Balkans due to the region having EU membership. The literature on reconciliation is vast and complicated, and this paper hopes to contribute by assessing the efficacy of the role of the EU in this regard.

## Methodology

I will be drawing on distinct sources for the Balkans and Northern Ireland. For cross-community relations in Northern Ireland, this paper will examine the EU PEACE II Fund and a public opinion survey by the University of Liverpool. PEACE II was chosen as it focused more on cross-community relations than its predecessor, PEACE I, and it also had more literature about it. Additionally, there is survey data on how participants felt about the effectiveness of PEACE II. The University of Liverpool study surveyed about 100 electors “representing each of the 18 Northern Ireland parliamentary constituencies” (Shirlow & Tonge, 2019, p. 1). For the Balkans, this paper will examine the Regional Youth Cooperation Office (RYCO) with an interview with a Balkan representative, and public opinion surveys by RYCO and the Balkan Barometer. RYCO was chosen as it was the most salient case of the European Union supporting a cross-community organization. Additionally, RYCO conducted a “Shared Futures” survey on the youth’s perspective. The Balkan Barometer, which surveys over 6,000 citizens each year, was also used due to its prominence and funding from the EU (Balkan Barometer, 2021, p. 14).

Other methods for examining democratization is by examining the European Union’s Chapters of Acquis. Chapter 23: Judiciary and Fundamental Rights, and Chapter 24: Justice, Freedom, and Security of the Western Balkans when it comes to EU accession. This paper will also utilize the Economic Intelligence Unit’s Democracy Index. For Northern Ireland, this paper will examine the stability of Northern Ireland’s parliament, the National Assembly, or Stormont, and adherence to the Good Friday Agreement. This method was chosen because the National Assembly is

the first instance of true democratic representation being achieved for both Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland, and the GFA was the instrument that brought that forward. After examining these two main variables, this paper will summarize and compare the two cases. Then, this paper will also briefly consider Brexit and the accession of Croatia and Slovenia into the European Union. These two developments show real-life examples of what happens when a state leaves the EU (and thus loses access to reconciliation strategies) and when Balkan nations do join the EU.

## Background

### *The Yugoslav Wars*

The Yugoslav Wars were a series of conflicts that lasted from 1991 to 2001. For the purposes of this paper, only events that led up to the 1990s war will be examined. While Yugoslavia did enjoy better living standards compared to other communist countries, these benefits were not enjoyed equally. Because Croatia and Slovenia accounted for 40% of Yugoslavia’s economy (Glenny, 2021, p. 580), citizens there tended to live better. Additionally, republics that had a higher income were far less likely to want to “share the wealth” than poorer countries. This worsened tensions between these nations, as there was this perception that Serbia was being favored in terms of representation (Glenny, 2021, p. 580), despite not being the economic powerhouse of the region. The economic inequalities between the republics were exacerbated by ongoing ethno-religious tensions.

The president of Yugoslavia, Josip Broz Tito, suppressed any nationalist uprisings and instilled pan-Yugoslavism across the region. After his death in 1980, nationalist leaders, such as Slobodan Milošević for Serbia and Franjo Tuđman for Croatia, gained control and used nationalist rhetoric to further their power and divide the country. The fact that Yugoslavia was incredibly ethnically diverse, and many ethnicities lived outside of their “origin country” made the situation even tenser. Once Croatia, Slovenia, and Bosnia declared independence between 1991-1992, with Bosnia and Croatia having significant Serbian minority populations, war broke out as Serbia tried to preserve Yugoslavia. In the end, this conflict would culminate in genocide, ethnic cleansing, 140,000 deaths, and the displacement of over four million people (Transitional Justice, 2011).

The EU functioned more as a political-economic institution, and it had not properly developed its defense capabilities and was incapable of devoting the military resources necessary. Thus, NATO mostly dealt with the war. However, many NATO members were also part of the EU and did not want to see a resumption of conflict. Thus, one method

the European Union had for preventing another outbreak of conflict and reconciling this region was through European integration. If all of the former Yugoslav states were in the EU, then they would adopt EU norms and learn to live together. Thus, the EU has been engaged in this region since the 1990s with the goals of “peace, stability and economic development” through integration (Munter, 2021).

### *Northern Ireland*

The Troubles was a conflict that lasted in Northern Ireland from 1968 to 1998 and formally ended with the signing of the Good Friday Agreement. As with the Balkans, the history of this region and conflict is long and complex. The conflict was also spurred by economic, political, and ethno-religious tensions. Before proceeding further into the details, it is important to note that those who identify as Catholic often see themselves as Irish and identify as nationalists, while those who are Protestant usually consider themselves British and unionists. Catholic nationalists viewed the British and Protestants as their oppressors and wanted to either be separated from the United Kingdom or reunited with mainland Ireland. Protestant unionists, on the other hand, did not want to break away from Britain as they would then become a minority in the Catholic-majority Republic of Ireland (Cochrane, 2021, p. 83). Since the 1600s, the economy was slated to benefit Protestant settlers as the land was given to them by England (Cochrane, 2021, p. 47). This was significant as Ireland’s economy was agricultural and was the primary means of wealth accumulation. These early economic advantages would benefit Protestants politically in the future and would cement Catholic resentment. An example of this is that Catholics faced housing and job discrimination in the 20th century due to the power Protestants had over these institutions (Cochrane, 2021, p. 104). As a response to this discrimination, the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association (NICRA) was formed. Unionists saw this movement as a threat to Northern Ireland and any NICRA protests were met with counterprotests and police brutality, which would then turn to more widespread violence until paramilitaries were formed. As a response to the deteriorating situation, Britain returned power to Westminster through direct rule on April 1st, 1972 (Cochrane, 2021, p. 149). This region would continue to experience consistent violence until the signing of the GFA.

## **Cross-Community Relations**

### *Northern Ireland and the EU PEACE II Fund*

The GFA emphasized the importance of cross-community projects by stating that it “...particularly recognises that young people from areas affected by the Troubles face particular difficulties and will support the development of special

community-based initiatives based on international best practice” (The Northern Ireland Peace Agreement, 1998, p. 20). The European Union’s PEACE Funds were designed to foster these stated cross-community initiatives. PEACE I was criticised for lacking “distinctiveness” and appearing more like “a standard economic regeneration programme with a Peace label rather than a Special Programme for Peace and Reconciliation as had been promised” (The Peace Programmes, n.d. para. 6). Thus, the point of PEACE II was to better promote reconciliation and “provide evidence that it was being achieved” (The Peace Programmes, n.d. para. 7). PEACE II lasted from 2000 to 2006; from 1999 to 2004, the European Union invested 835 million euros and then extended the program to 2006 with an additional 160 million euros (Bush & Houston, 2011, p. 43). The stated goal of PEACE II was to intervene “in civil society to address the structural and social-psychological sources of the conflict” (Arnold et al, 2009, para. 6). These projects were focused “directly on increasing mutual understanding and promoting reconciliation, with organisers drawn from both unionist and nationalist communities” through a variety of “cross-border educational and cultural exchanges, community arts training initiatives, multimedia projects, and recreational programmes” (Lagana, 2021, p. 171). Additionally, PEACE II works in tandem with the GFA as it takes into consideration unionist-nationalist and South/North relations when conducting its initiatives (Lagana, 2021, p. 170).

PEACE II was built on the premise that economic aid can facilitate reconciliation as “high levels of poverty and economic deprivation” can cause tensions between conflicting communities (Arnold et al, 2009, para. 10). In distributing this aid, the EU took a bottom-up approach by allowing local communities to decide how to best use the funding. These projects had to “demonstrate how they had a direct or indirect effect on one or other of the Programmes objectives” and “demonstrate this impact by reference to: (1) geographic areas that had been significantly affected by the conflict; (2) social and / or economic sectors that had been adversely affected by the conflict; and (3) groups within society that had been adversely affected by the conflict” (The Peace Programmes, n.d. para. 10). Additionally, “projects were also requested to demonstrate effectively how the project contributed to the development of reconciliation, mutual understanding, and respect between and within communities and traditions, in Northern Ireland and between Ireland and the border counties of Ireland” (The Peace Programmes, para. 11). Respondents to a survey in the “The EU Peace Fund” study stated that PEACE II allowed for creative projects to emerge that otherwise would have been financially unfeasible in these communities and that it did encourage contact between the different ethnicities and religions (Arnold et al, 2009).



However, despite the EU trying to take a bottom-up approach, there was still doubt that external forces could contribute to reconciliation and, instead, may cause individuals to become dependent on these institutions to solve their problems (Brück & Ferguson, 2018). This meant these projects were not sustainable in the long-term without EU support as “the two central (in Northern Ireland) administrations did not easily recognise that community development and innovation were not self-sustainable and cross-community projects, even the most successful, rarely had a mainstream budget line” (Lagana, 2021, p. 174). There is also another criticism that the funding did not reach the communities that needed them most. Since the communities themselves had to apply for funding, those with the least social cohesion were arguably less capable of identifying their problems and providing solutions to them (Brück & Ferguson, 2018). This was clear even to the managers of the project, as it became obvious that “those who were good at writing applications were more successful in getting funding” (The Peace Programmes, n.d. para. 15).

Public opinion should also be considered to assess whether or not these initiatives made a noticeable impact on the lives of everyday citizens and cross-community relations. A survey conducted by “The EU Peace Fund” shows that 63% of respondents believe that “economic integration assists in promoting peace and reconciliation in Northern Ireland” (Arnold et al, 2009, para. 39). However, there were disparities based on religion. Catholics were more supportive of these peace initiatives than Protestants. Catholics were also more likely to believe that these initiatives could facilitate reconciliation (Arnold et al, 2009). Some factors that could contribute to these results are the fact that Catholics got more funding compared to the portion of their population, with them receiving “an estimated 51.4% of the total, compared to a Protestant share of 48.6%,” despite them making up 45.2% of the population compared to the Protestant’s 54.8% (Lagana, 2021, p. 174-175). This was due to multiple reasons, such as “higher levels of deprivation in Catholic areas; a greater tendency by those living in those areas to apply; and higher levels of community-based activity in the Catholic community” (Lagana, 2021, p. 175). Despite this, Protestants felt they were still not receiving a fair share, and this furthered their disillusionment in the peace process (Lagana, 2021, p. 173). Another factor is the fact that the EU wanted more funding to go to border areas, which Belfast opposed as they felt this would be benefitting the nationalist-oriented councilors there (Lagana, 2021, p. 174). These results expose that a “zero-sum” mentality still exists in Northern Ireland, especially on behalf of the Protestant community in that efforts to support the Catholic community can be viewed as detrimental to their standing as British Protestants.

There seems to be a shift in opinion toward reconciliation in recent years. A 2019 survey with a sample size of 100 conducted by the University of Liverpool found that 58.1% of Sinn Fein voters would support a Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Once “no opinion” votes were removed, the number skyrocketed to 90.4%. For the Democratic Unionist Party, the figure was 49.1%, and, once “no opinion” votes were removed, it rose to 73.4% (Shirlow & Tonge, 2019, p. 2). However, despite these promising numbers, the survey also reveals a number of significant divisions between the two communities. The Irish Language Act was a point of contention and played a central role in the dissolution of Stormont in 2017. This Act would give the Irish language the same status as English in the region (Burke, 2018). 69.5% of Catholics supported the Irish Language Act versus 10.7% of Protestants. SF and DUP voters tended to also be less socially liberal and “inter-community” minded than other groups (Shirlow & Tonge, 2019, p. 2). While it is also important to note that SF and DUP voters tend to be more “extreme” than more moderate religious or non-religious voters, those two parties were in charge of Northern Ireland until February 2022 (Edgar & Flanagan, 2022). Probably the most striking difference between Catholics and Protestants is the state of the union. While slightly more respondents believed the Irish reunification would occur, 94.5% of Protestants wanted to remain in the UK in 2019 as compared to 90.3% in 2010, and 13.6% of Catholics wanted to remain as compared to 17.8% (Shirlow & Tonge, 2019, p. 3). These divisions point to barriers that still persist when it comes to achieving reconciliation.

### *The Balkans and RYCO*

Created in 2016 from the Western Balkan Summit, the purpose of RYCO, among other things, is to facilitate reconciliation between the Western Balkan countries. The premise of RYCO echoes the “Franco-German reconciliation process” facilitated by the EU in that it wishes to build “the shared narrative that shows the importance of dealing with the past is to go from reconciliation to deep, peaceful, and efficient cooperation” (Western Balkans Youth Forum, 2021, p. 2). Furthermore, RYCO was partially inspired by the EU Erasmus+ program which has facilitated student exchanges at a university level among EU countries (Western Balkans Youth Forum, 2021). Additionally, various RYCO projects are partially funded by the European Commission (Brakaj, 2022). The European Union recognizes that the “youth of the region” is an “important partner in making the region a better place, while RYCO has been recognized as a concrete mechanism for this change. Within the Strategy, RYCO was acknowledged as a part of the six flagship initiatives – specific actions that the EU will take over the next years to

support<sup>4</sup> the transformation efforts of the Western Balkans in areas of mutual interest” (RYCO Biannual Report 2018, 2018, p. 20). One of RYCO’s goals is to improve the perception of the Western Balkans in the eyes of the EU by “promoting cultural exchanges and the visibility of WB6 in the media to raise the profile of the Western Balkan region in European countries;” increasing “cooperation between Universities from WB6 and other EU member states;” and initiating “town twinning program between WB6 and other EU member states” (Western Balkans Youth Forum, 2021, p. 12). In this regard, RYCO is important in helping the Balkans move up in the accession process and rebuild friendly relations, which are both important goals for the EU in this region. Since then, RYCO has received “unequivocal support” from the region (RYCO Biannual Report 2018, 2018, p. 21). As national governments are the main sources of funding for RYCO, there is no doubt that a desire to join the EU plays an important role in their support for the organization. Thus, without the promise of EU accession, RYCO may not be able to operate.

#### *RYCO’s Projects*

RYCO is an intergovernmental organization supported by the six Western Balkan states. Its main function is to give grants to projects and teach civil society about reconciliation. For the most part, these projects are supposed to inspire dialogue between previously warring regions. In an interview with an RYCO representative, she stated that RYCO encourages participants to step outside of their comfort zone and that these previously held prejudices should not be ignored. Noting that this may be contentious, she added that participants are told to speak about their prejudices in a careful manner (Brakaj, 2022). In terms of the efficacy of this strategy, she stated that her projects went well and that many friendships were formed. Even if young people still felt uncomfortable, they worked together to address that discomfort (Brakaj, 2022). A report surveying over 5,400 Balkan youth conducted by RYCO shows that “61-91% of young people agree that youth exchanges can have a positive impact on relations” (Shared Futures, 2021, p. 16). The youth will be the future leaders of these regions, so it is essential that reconciliation efforts include them and their opinions as well.

While there is a lack of quantitative information on RYCO, there is qualitative data about what it has accomplished so far. The RYCO representative noted that, with their incipient EU-supported Superschool project, which is centered around youth exchange, they had received 127 proposals and selected the 30 best projects aimed at supporting the peacebuilding and reconciliation processes and intercultural learning and dialogue among schools, students, and their communities (Brakaj, 2022). The 2018 RYCO biannual

report stated that, out of 421 applications, 34 were ultimately supported by RYCO (RYCO Biannual Report 2018, 2018, p. 17). In general, the number of projects supported by RYCO tends to be under 100, and their duration can last between a couple of days to a few months.

This is where it is important to keep in mind the role of the EU. The EU’s funding comes mostly in the form of grants (RYCO 2017 Annual Report, 2017). The RYCO Representative noted that two projects supported by the European Commission, in particular, were Enhancing Youth Cooperation and Youth Exchange in the Western Balkans and Western Balkans School Exchange Scheme (Brakaj, 2022). However, RYCO has noted in its reports that it has had challenges with funding, and this is due, in part, to the restrictive nature of EU grant proposals. “The challenge primarily emanates from the financial decision of the EC to grant RYCO with” 500,000 Euros “provided that it represents a maximum of 25% of the overall budget of the project proposal. Therefore, in order to be able to obtain this amount, RYCO has to present a budget of 2 million Euros, out of which its contribution is 1.5 million euro consisting of activity costs” (RYCO Biannual Report 2018, 2018, p. 5). Because this money was not released on time, RYCO had to operate under budget for a time.

#### *Balkan Public Opinion on EU Accession, Democratization, and Reconciliation*

The 2021 Balkan Barometer, which is co-funded by the EU, showed that Balkan citizens overwhelmingly support reconciliation, more than any previous year. There is also a strong underlying sense of solidarity “with close to two-thirds (59%) of all respondents focusing on what brings the region together rather than what drives it apart,” though this is less compared to 2019 (Balkan Barometer, 2021, p. 13). Support for EU membership is also high at 62% as compared to 59% in 2019 and 56% in 2018 (Balkan Barometer, 2021, p. 13). Additionally, “for the first time since the inception of the Barometer, the EU is perceived as the most preferred trading partner, with two-thirds advocating for further improvement of trade and investment links with it” (Balkan Barometer, 2021, p. 93).

While these are positive developments, Balkan citizens are still pessimistic about the actual possibility of joining the EU, “with only one-fourth of respondents remaining optimistic about EU accession by 2025” (Balkan Barometer, 2021, p. 15). In fact, North Macedonia and Serbia are neutral to EU integration while Bosnia now has a more negative view of it. Kosovo was the most supportive at 91% (Balkan Barometer, 2021, p. 44). Furthermore, Balkan citizens are discontent with the region as a whole due to unemployment and lack of economic development. However, there is a strong belief that regional cooperation

can assist in improving socio-economic situations. This view is most strongly held by Serbia (86%) then followed by Montenegro (82%). North Macedonia and Kosovo had a more negative view on reconciliation and its constructive power (Balkan Barometer, 2021, p. 41), which could be due to ongoing ethnic tensions in both regions between Slavs and Albanians.

Another interesting perspective to consider is the youth. RYCO conducted a study focusing primarily on the thoughts of young people in the region. As with the barometer study, there seems to be a trend toward regional cooperation. “42% of young participants expected regional relations to improve” (Shared FUTURES, 2021, p. 15). When it comes to the factors that can lead to reconciliation, “up to 47 percent of youth think the EU accession process is the most important factor in creating long-term peace and stability in the Western Balkans, although responses vary highly by ethnicity” (Shared FUTURE S, 2021, p. 15). The variations tend to match the ones seen in the Balkan Barometer, with Serbians and Montenegrins having a more optimistic view than those from Kosovo or North Macedonia. In any case, the support for EU accession is supported by what the RYCO representative said in our interview, that young people want to be closer to the EU and view it as an important partner (Brakaj, 2022). Other important factors were “a well-functioning democracy, teaching peace and tolerance, dialogue between leaders and economic prosperity” (Shared FUTURES, 2021, p. 15), which are factors that are also identified as important in this paper. However, as with the other survey, there are also dismal truths in the RYCO study, such as the fact that 52% of participants see themselves living abroad in the future, furthering the brain drain of this region (Shared FUTURES, 2021, p. 14).

### *Summary of Section*

Both regions have received support from the European Union for cross-community projects in some capacity. Northern Ireland received more funding for PEACE II than RYCO did. While PEACE II did lead to some improvements in relations, it was met with criticism, mostly that it did not reach the most vulnerable communities. Additionally, Catholics were more supportive of the project than Protestants, revealing the “zero-sum” mentality that persists in the region. Unfortunately, since RYCO is still new, the same in-depth data could not be gathered. Due to receiving less funding, RYCO could not tackle as many projects as the EU Peace Fund. “The PEACE II progress report estimated that the measure had involved 63,924 participants, the largest number of any measure, and that its 76 funded projects ‘supported’ 558 cross-border projects” (Lagana, 2021, 170) compared to RYCO’s 34. Indeed, funding is a continual problem for RYCO, especially with the initial

grant-based mechanism that the EU typically uses for such projects<sup>5</sup>. However, as with Northern Ireland, there seems to be support for reconciliation and these types of projects. Still, support does not mean that this change will occur, especially if the poor economic situation also means that the youth and future of the region are leaving, with most headed to EU nations anyway. The Balkan public opinion surveys seemed to have a more optimistic tone than their Northern Irish counterpart. This could be due to the fact that Northern Ireland has left the EU, while the Balkans still have the prospect of joining. The Northern Ireland survey revealed the persistent divisions that run deep into society, such as over the state of the union, despite support for a Truth and Reconciliation Commission. While there has been a more positive trend toward reconciliation in the Balkans in recent years, there are also some concerning elements in these results. Namely, the lack of faith in EU membership and certain countries having a more sour attitude towards reconciliation efforts. It seems that the countries less likely to join the European Union have a more negative appraisal than those who are more likely.

## **Democratization**

### *Northern Ireland and the Good Friday Agreement*

The Good Friday Agreement was signed on April 10th, 1998, and it dedicated itself “to strive in every practical way towards reconciliation and rapprochement within the framework of democratic and agreed arrangements” (The Northern Ireland Peace Agreement, 1998, p. 2). The GFA was built on EU principles and documents, such as the European Convention on Human Rights, the European equality law, and free movement provisions, and also the fact that the Republic of Ireland and the United Kingdom would remain part of the EU (McCrudden, 2017). The ECHR is mentioned multiple times and is a central document to the entire agreement. One of the safeguards for protecting communities is adherence to the ECHR; thus, any legislation breaching it will be rendered void (The Northern Ireland Peace Agreement, 1998, p. 7). The ECHR also serves as a basis for the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission (The Northern Ireland Peace Agreement, 1998, p. 18) and equivalent proposals taken by the Irish government (The Northern Ireland Peace Agreement, 1998, p. 19). Moreover, the EU is often cited as a binding force for the different states. For example, The North/South Ministerial Council, which focuses on cooperation between the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland, has to “consider the European Union dimension of relevant matters, including the implementation of EU policies and programmes and proposals under consideration in the EU



framework” (The Northern Ireland Peace Agreement, 1998, p. 14). The GFA even highlighted “EU Programmes such as SPPR, INTERREG, Leader II and their successors” as possible areas for cooperation and implementation (The Northern Ireland Peace Agreement, 1998, p. 15).

One of the fundamental principles of the GFA was power-sharing between the unionists and nationalists (The Northern Ireland Peace Agreement, 1998, p. 7-8). “There would be a first minister and deputy first minister, one from each community” and a “new 108-seat assembly was to be established” in Stormont (Cochrane, 2021, p. 362). Stormont would be a prime symbol of an ongoing reconciliation between these two groups in terms of transforming Northern Ireland into a democracy. However, Stormont would be suspended a total of five times during its short existence. In measuring democratization, this paper will cover these five suspensions and their implications for the EU-backed Good Friday Agreement.

### **1. February 11 - May 30, 2000**

The first suspension occurred after the IRA did not state when it would begin decommissioning. The IRA decommissioning their weapons was especially important to the UUP, along with the other unionist parties. The GFA also stated that paramilitary organizations on both sides would disband and decommission within two years of the 1998 referendum (The Northern Ireland Peace Agreement, 1998, p. 22). The failure to do so meant reconciliation could not move forward. Direct rule was again imposed until the IRA stated they would allow international inspections of their secret weapons arsenal (Guardian News and Media, 2001). On May 30th, power was returned back to the Assembly.

### **2. August 10, 2001 and September 22, 2001**

These suspensions were both only 24 hours yet they are still important as they revealed the issues Northern Ireland was facing with democratization. There were still disagreements about the IRA decommissioning. On July 1st, 2001, unionist First Minister David Trimble resigned in protest, with other UUP ministers following suit (History of the Assembly, n.d.). The assembly was suspended to deal with this crisis. Although these suspensions were short, and David Trimble was eventually re-elected, they do reveal the ongoing tensions between the two communities that the GFA still had yet to ameliorate. It would not be until 2005 that the IRA decommissioned its weapons (Cochrane,

2021, p. 476). However, by then, direct rule was imposed yet again.

### **3. October 14, 2002 - May 7, 2007**

On October 4th, 2002, three Sinn Fein party members were arrested on spying charges (History of the Assembly, n.d.). The UUP made it clear that they would leave if Sinn Fein remained in Stormont. To prevent another government collapse, direct rule was imposed during this controversy. With the IRA decommissioning its weapons, and the St Andrews Agreement being reached to continue the GFA, the government was ready to be restored in 2007. From 2007 to 2012, there was finally some government stability in Northern Ireland. However, despite progress being made, there were still complaints about Stormont that reveal the deep-rooted issues still not being addressed. Sinn Fein and the Democratic Unionist Party were the two major parties in charge, and they were both accused of compromising their beliefs (Cochrane, 2021, p. 483). This reveals the zero-sum mentality still rooted in the minds of citizens in Northern Ireland. Furthermore, the effectively two-party system diminished the voices of other parties and continued playing into the sectarianism that still existed in Northern Ireland. These issues would play a role in the eventual collapse of the government for the fifth time.

### **4. January 9, 2017 - January 11, 2020**

The cracks in Stormont started to expose themselves in 2012. The first was the failure of the Renewable Heat Initiative (RHI). This initiative was supposed to encourage businesses to switch from fossil fuels to renewable energy. However, RHI ended up being incredibly expensive and revealed the dysfunctions of Stormont (Cochrane, 2021, p. 499). Another issue was the lack of implementation of the new Irish Language Act. This upset Sinn Fein, and they accused the DUP of not following the GFA. These various factors led to the resignation of nationalist Deputy First Minister, Martin McGuinness, in 2017 and the suspension of the National Assembly yet again. During this time, direct rule was not imposed, and the civil service undertook daily administrative tasks without making policy decisions (Sargeant, 2020).

It took three years, but power was returned to Stormont yet again in 2020 after various compromises were made on

the Irish Language Act and other issues. The new decade was met with the New Decade, New Approach Agreement. This agreement promised necessary reforms, such as ensuring a fairer multi-party system and that the withdrawal of a party does not lead to the immediate collapse of government (Haughey, 2020).

As seen above, Stormont has been besieged with issues and instability since its inception. Interestingly enough, both sides have accused the other of violating the GFA. Therefore, there still exists this idea that the GFA is this ideal that has yet to be properly achieved. However, the good-natured promise of power-sharing in the GFA has led to a larger issue of ministers weaponizing this guarantee to try and get what they want instead of utilizing Stormont as an area for healthy debate. On February 4th, 2022, First Minister Paul Givan resigned due to disagreements with the Northern Ireland Protocol which meant that Sinn Féin's Deputy First Minister Michelle O'Neill also lost her governing duties (Flanagan, 2022).

Stormont is functioning without an executive, which is allowed under new legislation passed by Stormont to prevent suspensions and direct rule (Flanagan, 2022). Even when the National Assembly was in charge, regular people believed that their needs were not being met (Cochrane, 2021, p. 464). Thus, the EU's promises of democratization have not been met in Northern Ireland and, with the EU now gone and Brexit, new challenges have arisen to further challenge the GFA and Stormont.

### *The Balkans' Complicated Democratization*

The Western Balkans have had difficulties democratizing and fulfilling the European Union's criteria. Serbia and Montenegro have progressed the furthest so far, with Serbia beginning negotiations in 2014 and Montenegro in 2012. When these countries began negotiations and forged closer ties with the European Union, their democracy rankings improved, especially Serbia's. However, after many years and accession still being out of sight, their democratization has deteriorated. These breakdowns are due, in part, to the failure of these countries to implement the necessary reforms to close chapters 23 and 24. European membership is the goal and is seen as a means of reconciliation but there is no motivation to implement the reforms necessary. In 2020, the European Union reinvigorated the accession process to address long-standing concerns. Among these reforms included better communication on both sides and more political accountability. The change relevant to this topic was with the negotiation process. Instead of going chapter by chapter, negotiations would now be organized into "thematic" clusters, and "negotiations on each cluster will be opened as a whole – after fulfilling the opening benchmarks" (Enhancing the Accession Process, 2020, p. 4). A big part of

this change is the emphasis put on chapters 23 and 24 as the benchmark chapters for the Western Balkans as they address the main areas of reform needed for the region. Serbia seems to have recognized this and, on January 16th, 2022, held a referendum to strengthen the independence of the judiciary. While this is a step in the right direction, reforms have often fallen short of expectations and are seen as merely a way of reaching the benchmarks to close chapters. Therefore, until the EU demands actual progress, it will be hard to see an actual change in Serbia and Montenegro's democratization.

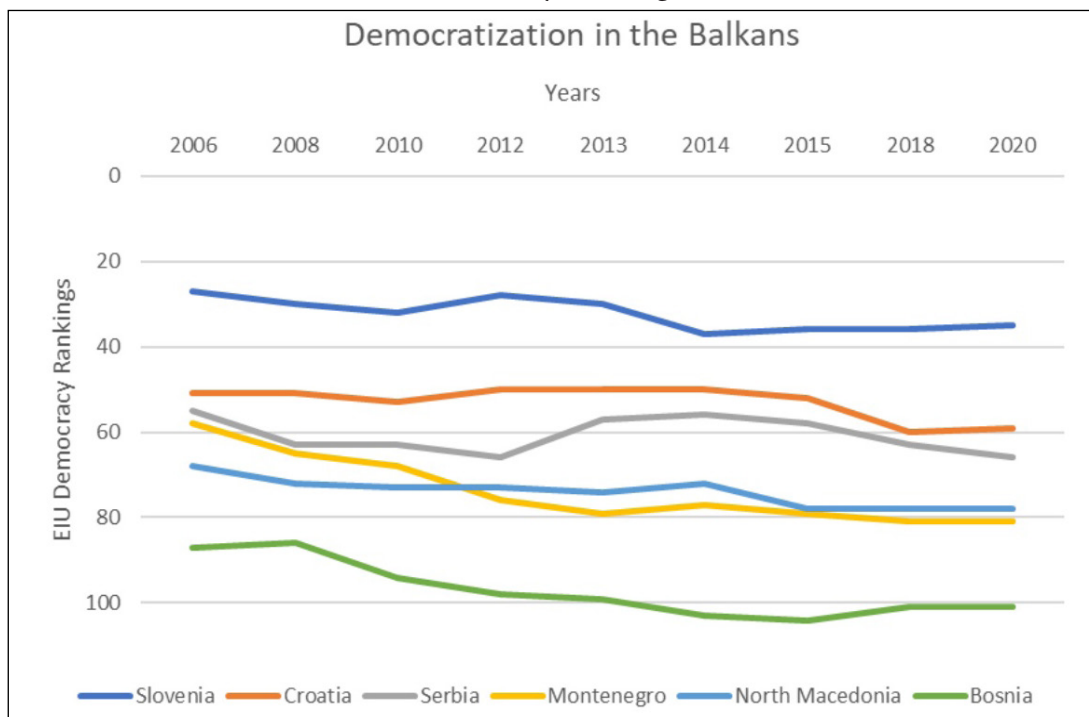
Democratization is even more complicated for the countries that have not even begun negotiations. North Macedonia has not made any real progress in fulfilling chapters 23 and 24. Bosnia and Kosovo, which are both only potential candidate countries, have not even begun negotiations (Press Corner, 2021). This adds to the ironic situation in that forging ties with the European Union was supposed to encourage democratization, yet all of the Balkan nations are less democratic than they were 20 years ago, as seen in Figure 1.1. There are times when democratisation does improve, most notably in Serbia after 2012, and this could be due to trying to Europeanise and begin negotiations with the EU. However, this trend does not last long before democratisation lapses again. EU reports state that Bosnia's political institutions are still polarized and that "the blockage of the State institutions and the calls to roll back reforms are of deep concern" (Press Corner, 2021). With Kosovo, progress is stalled until its relations with Serbia can improve, a stipulation that has also frozen Serbian accession. This points to this confusing progress where some reconciliation and democratization has to have occurred before accession can take place yet EU membership is supposed to be the means of achieving reconciliation.

### *Summary of Section*

Neither region has had a straightforward path to democratization. Although the GFA had good intentions in ensuring equal representation for nationalists and unionists, its constant suspensions and collapses reveal the deeper issues still rooted in society. When Stormont does manage to run, its citizens are still dissatisfied. This points to another problem with the GFA in that it can be interpreted as sectarian in and of itself. It asserts power-sharing between Catholic nationalists and Protestant unionists when there are many people who identify themselves as both or neither. It is also important to note that hostilities between Catholics and Protestants in this region have lasted for centuries and that the 30-year-Troubles are still fresh in the minds of many. Therefore, it may still be too early to accurately state whether or not the GFA has been effective. There is also nothing to compare the new Stormont government against, as Northern Ireland was under the UK's direct rule from



**FIGURE 1. EIU Democracy Rankings of Balkan Countries**



*Note: The source data for this figure did not include Kosovo. Data is from the Economist Intelligence Unit.*

1972 and, when it was autonomous, the Catholics were often excluded. The fact that the GFA was able to create some form of democratic government and win support from unionists and nationalists is still a tremendous feat for the European Union. Even still, it is not perfect, and Northern Ireland has changed since 1998. Thus, reforms would be necessary to reflect this change and ensure the stability of Stormont.

Unfortunately, it seems that democratization has remained unchanged or even gotten worse in the Balkans. When the prospect for EU membership is highest, democratization appears to be at its best. However, as the process drags on, democratization also begins to decline. The European Union has made attempts to show its dedication to the Balkans, such as by revising the accession process to hopefully streamline it, but it has come a little too late. And, even when these countries do join the EU, there is no guarantee that democratization will improve.

### **Other Dimensions: Croatia & Slovenia and Brexit**

Whereas some Balkan countries are now part of the EU, Northern Ireland has effectively left the EU. Given the unique situation of Northern Ireland, the Northern Ireland Protocol was put in place to allow goods to still travel freely to Ireland, an EU member, and checks on these goods would occur between Northern Ireland and the rest of Britain

(Edgington & Morris, 2022). This protocol is controversial for many reasons. It effectively creates a border in the Irish Sea and further separates Northern Ireland from the rest of Britain, which has upset unionists. The recent resignation of First Minister Paul Givan was due to the DUP's upset with having an Irish Sea border. However, creating a border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland could also cause tensions amongst nationalists and potentially undermine the GFA. Thus, while the shared EU membership of the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland (along with the rest of the UK) made the GFA possible, the lack of EU membership could now negatively affect any reconciliation achieved. However, it will be interesting to see how the recent Windsor Framework may impact this.

Brexit also challenges the very fabric of the GFA. The GFA is built on the assumption that the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland would remain in the EU, thus, rights "deriving from the EU" serve as the main basis for the GFA (McCrudden, 2017, p. 4). For example, the human rights protections of the GFA are based on the European Convention on Human Rights. Other rights afforded to the people of Northern Ireland under the EU include "the European Single Market's four freedoms (free movement of goods, capital, services, and people), and rights such as EU equality law" (McCrudden, 2017, p. 4). EU law is also superior to domestic law; therefore, any British or Irish law that contradicts the EU is rendered null and void, which would help ensure equality under the GFA. In this regard, the

EU also monitors domestic law and any possible violations of the GFA. With the EU gone as a mediator, this can lead to a change in interpretations and implementations of the GFA. After Brexit, EU law supremacy will disappear, the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights will become irrelevant, and EU law's general principles, including the EU's fundamental rights jurisprudence, will also be rendered void (McCrudden, 2017). Thus, instead of following the EU model and norms, Britain will effectively be the main adjudicator for the GFA.

This all points to why it was important for the EU to get involved in the first place. Westminster's failure to protect the rights of both unionists and nationalists equally led to the need for the GFA. Without the EU and its focus on rights, it may be harder to sustain the GFA and uphold its guarantee. It is through leaving the EU that Northern Ireland realizes how important the organization was for maintaining peace.

### *Croatia and Slovenia*

Croatia and Slovenia were the most economically developed Yugoslav republics, which can explain why they were able to join the EU relatively quickly. Even still, lingering animosity between the states almost prevented Croatia from joining. Slovenia tried to block Croatia's accession multiple times, with the first time being in 2009 due to territorial disputes that began with the Yugoslav wars (Slovenia Blocks Croatia, 2018). After that issue was referred to international arbitration, Croatia's bid was blocked again in 2012 over a bank dispute that also went back to Yugoslavia. While these issues were resolved, this does show how local issues can be weaponized to preclude further European integration. Croatia has also done the same to Serbia due to their own animosities. In 2016, Croatia brought up reservations about opening chapters 23 and 24 for Serbia. They did not see progress being made with the rule of law, especially in regards to "the lack of Serbian cooperation with the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY); the mistreatment of the Croatian minority in Serbia; and the universal jurisdiction of Serbian courts over war crimes committed in other parts of the former Yugoslavia" (Kmezić, 2016, para. 2). The EU stated that these were mostly bilateral issues and that opening the chapters could even lead to a resolution of these controversies (Gotev & Poznatov, 2016). Relations between Slovenia and Croatia have been friendly since Croatia joined the EU, but Croatia and Serbia have a much more complicated and violent relationship. Since Serbia is not a member yet, it is hard to assess whether relations will ease; however, the fact that tensions exist at the accession process points to the continued animosity between the nations and the failure of the EU to remedy the situation.

Additionally, despite Croatia and Slovenia being the

most advanced Balkan nations, they have also had mixed results with democratization. According to figure 1.1, both countries were their most democratized right when they joined the EU. However, the graph also shows that democratization substantially worsened in both countries years after joining the EU. This all points to a larger issue within the European Union. While the EU may encourage democratization as part of the accession process, there seem to be no checks afterward. Therefore, it is easy for countries that already had a fragile foundation of democracy to relapse and turn authoritarian again. While that has not been the case for Slovenia and Croatia, as they still have fairly good democracy rankings for the Balkans, that could be an issue for any other Balkan country that joins the EU. Thus, while the EU may encourage democratization, there is still the question of whether or not they can sustain it.

## **Conclusion**

Answering the question of how EU membership affects reconciliation in previously warring regions is tricky. In the wider scheme, these case studies show that there are genuine efforts being made by the international society to bring about reconciliation in post-conflict societies. It also shows that, overall, these societies are receptive to these efforts and that there is a want to reconcile. However, it takes more than just a desire for change to bring about change. As seen above, the results of European intervention have been mixed. For Northern Ireland, the implementation of the GFA has been imperfect, and Stormont has been suspended or collapsed multiple times. The effectiveness of EU-led peace projects, such as the PEACE II, is also called

into question when considering if it reached the communities that needed it most. Additionally, public opinion surveys reveal that, while there is a want for reconciliation, society is still divided, especially among ethno-religious lines. This created a catch-22 where the disillusionment in reconciliation "reinforced the need for EU programmes...but at the same time minimised the successes of EU cross-border and cross-community initiatives in the region" (Lagana, 2021, p. 173). Still, Brexit also shows the problem of removing the EU as a mechanism for reconciliation. With the EU gone, it is seen just how ingrained its values and norms are into the principles, implementation, and oversight of the GFA. Also, while the peace projects are imperfect, they still have reported some success in bridging gaps in communities.

On the other side are the Balkans. Of the seven former Yugoslav countries, only two have joined the EU. Although the five other countries have worked with the European Union for almost two decades, accession seems less and

less likely (Fraenkel, 2016). Democratization has either stagnated or decreased in the Western Balkans due to this reason. Even Croatia and Slovenia, who have relatively good democracy rankings, are seeing a decrease in democratization despite being members of the European Union. This reveals a lack of accountability on behalf of both the EU and member states to uphold democratization. Without a healthy, functioning democracy, reconciliation is harder to achieve. Surveys conducted by RYCO also prove this point. The fact that RYCO exists reveals that there is a positive trend toward reconciliation, and there is strong support for regional cooperation in both the RYCO and Balkan Barometer studies. However, the fact that accession has taken decades has left many Balkan citizens disillusioned and can de-incentivize them from helping to improve democratization and cross-community relations.

The issue of reconciliation is gaining renewed attention. The EU and UK are currently undergoing debates about the Northern Ireland Protocol. Any changes can lead to backlash from either the nationalists or unionists. This issue, along with the resignation of First Minister Paul Givan, will certainly play a role in the upcoming Northern Ireland elections. In Bosnia, Milorad Dodik is stoking ethnic tensions amongst Bosnian-Serbs and Bosnian-Croats have also begun calling for independence, eerily similar to what occurred in the 1990s (Sito-Sucic, 2022). While the European Union can no longer play a central role in Northern Ireland, it can still have an impact on the Balkans. If it wants to fully engage, it must make greater progress in finally granting the Balkans membership or, at least, providing more long-term, steady fundings to reconciliation projects in the region. However, it is their decision on whether to fully engage or not.

## Endnotes

- 1 When referring to the Balkans, this paper means the seven countries of the Former Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. These include Serbia, Croatia, Bosnia & Herzegovina, Slovenia, Montenegro, Macedonia, and Kosovo (not fully recognized).
- 2 This paper was written in 2022 and may not be up-to-date with current developments (e.g. the impact of the Ukraine war on Balkan politics).
- 3 The Western Balkans refer to Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia, and the disputed territory of Kosovo.
- 4 These initiatives include: (1) the rule of law; (2) security and migration; (3) socio-economic development; (4) transport and energy connectivity; (5) the digital agenda; and (6) reconciliation and good neighbourly relations.
- 5 To read more on EU funding, go to [EU Funding for Beginners](#)



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