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A seven-year struggle comes to an end

The EU Commission and the British government settle key disputes over Northern Ireland. Still, Brexit remains an obstacle

It is now three years ago that, by signing the withdrawal agreement, the United Kingdom became the first member state in the history of the European Union to leave, ending a process that began on 23 June 2016 with the EU membership referendum. Or rather: almost ending. Because the country's promised complete extraction from the EU as the point of departure for a resurgent United Kingdom never happened. With the Northern Ireland Protocol as a central contractual clause of the withdrawal agreement, Northern Ireland remained de facto part of the customs union, and in doing so, it left an important Brexit promise unfulfilled.

Strictly speaking, there ought to have been a fixed border with customs controls between the Republic of Ireland, which is part of the EU, and Northern Ireland, which no longer is. This would, however, have jeopardised the hard-won and often fragile peace on the Northern Ireland border, with a real risk of renewed violence, as made clear once again by last year's unsuccessful bomb attack in Strabane, Northern Ireland.

Overcoming the stopgap solution

To prevent an escalation, part of the exit agreement had the border run down the Irish Sea between the island of Ireland and the rest of the United Kingdom. This demarcation was not, however, a permanent solution. It separated Northern Ireland from Scotland, Wales and England through border controls and disrupted the new political community with serious consequences. The Northern Irish unionist party DUP successfully used the Northern Ireland Protocol as a pretext to block the formation of a government in Belfast for months, giving the stability of the British Brexit consensus an ever-shortening half-life.

With the 'New Windsor Framework', the British government and the

EU Commission may now have removed the basis for this blockade. The framework simplifies imports and exports, especially between Northern Ireland and Great Britain, for among other things food and pharmaceuticals. Trade is monitored via a data-sharing agreement between the EU and the UK. Checks will be much less frequent in the future. Changes to UK VAT and excise duties made in the UK now also apply to Northern Ireland.

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In addition, with the 'Stormont Brake', the DUP will have an instrument allowing it to vote on EU regulations. This meets the unionists' demand for a resolution of the democratic deficit – but only within the framework of the existing power structures of the Good Friday Agreement. Conditions on the ground in Northern Ireland, however, actually speak against the DUP ever obtaining the necessary majorities for this, given the lack of support from the business community and civil society. It remains to be seen whether the Stormont Brake is a successful coup or whether the DUP is not rather handed a reason to vote against the agreement. What is certain, however, is that the DUP will find it difficult, in light of its declining poll numbers, to reject an agreement that basically bears its inherent unionist core in its name, the Windsor Framework being named after the royal seat in southern England.

The seven-year struggle to reach an agreement in the dispute over the Northern Ireland Protocol has left its mark not only on the island of Ireland. The constant change of prime ministers and governments in London has exposed Britain's – in principle – very resilient democracy to considerable stress. The relief at the recent negotiation success is thus all the more evident throughout Europe. The fact is that the unresolved Northern Ireland question tied up resources that Europe ought rather to have been directing at Russia's imperialist war of aggression against Ukraine.

However, the Windsor Agreement is not just a signal of European unity towards Moscow. It can be understood as a sign of Europe's strength and unity by all those who were happy at a weak and divided European community of states against an emerging trend towards global regionalisation and the associated threatening division of the world community into spheres of influence.

Using the momentum

In Europe, the compromise is also a reason for hope because the agreement was preceded by months of negotiations without anything leaking out. The trust that has been built between the UK Government and the European Commission stands in stark contrast to all the shrill tones heard from London and sometimes Brussels in recent years.

The momentum of the agreement between Brussels and London must now be used to make progress on future cooperation. In the course of Brexit, for example, the UK withdrew from the European Union's *Erasmus*+ educational exchange programme. With 'Turing', the British government has announced a follow-up worldwide exchange programme. This will, however, be available only to domestic students. The current proposals to base the legal framework of the programme on the EU regulation on *Erasmus*+, so as to give students on both sides of the English Channel mutual access to universities again, ought to be implemented as soon as possible.

Bilateral scientific cooperation also flourished until Brexit. Statistics from the German Rectors' Conference showed 1,661 official partnerships between Germany and the United Kingdom in 2019. On the British side, the British Council has been an important go-between for many years. There are also countless private initiatives in education, research, language exchange and journalism. The German political foundations, which are important for bilateral understanding, also form an indispensable basis for dialogue.

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However, there is no guarantee that all these programmes will continue to exist or that new institutions will be established after Brexit. Also after the end of the freedom of movement, we must make it easier for the above-mentioned intermediary organisations to work in our two countries. They are indispensable for us. Despite their rapid rise in importance, social media and online communication cannot replace public diplomacy.

Despite the agreement on the Windsor Framework, the jubilation must be limited. In fact, apart from the harmonisation of British domestic trade, little will change. Brexit is and will remain a major economic and political burden for Great Britain, but also for its neighbours and partners. Because despite all the hard effort put into the negotiations over the past few months, the damage that Brexit has caused will not be easily

repaired. If at all possible, then only with a fundamental policy change. So much depends on how policy makers in London and Belfast will in future make use of the Windsor Framework, or in other words: 'Windsor is what they make of it.'



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