



## **Meeting with Co-Chairs of the Withdrawal Agreement Joint Committee to discuss implementation of the Protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland:**

### **Key issues for Centre for Cross Border Studies and Ad-Hoc Group for North-South and East-West Cooperation**

18 February 2021

- I am here in my capacity as Director of the Centre for Cross Border Studies, and as Convenor of the Ad-Hoc Group for North-South and East-West Cooperation.
- It is vital that this meeting should not be a singular event, and instead it must represent the beginning of a process of joint UK-EU engagement with civic society and community organisations, enabling them to speak directly with those involved in the implementation and monitoring of the Protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland.
- The Ad-Hoc Group for North-South and East-West Cooperation will in the coming days present its suggestions on how that process of engagement could be structured, particularly in relation to monitoring of the extent to which the necessary conditions for North-South cooperation are being maintained, as well as how East-West relations are being safeguarded. Given the nature and range of the organisations involved in it, the Ad-Hoc Group is ideally placed to provide those responsible for implementation of the Protocol with insights into how effectively it is operating.
- To this end the Centre for Cross Border Studies has also piloted a quarterly survey that will allow us to measure any changes to levels of North-South and East-West collaboration among civic society organisations, and which will be issued for the first time at the end of next month.
- Discussions over the last four years have been almost exclusively focused on technical issues around trade. Of course these are of importance to everyone, but relations between people, within and across these islands cannot be largely ignored, letting tensions between communities take hold and rise, leading to increased polarisation.
- Sustainable solutions will not be found if they are sought exclusively by speaking with one particular sector, nor will they be found by looking exclusively within Northern Ireland – Northern Ireland must not be isolated and seen divorced from the multitude of relations people here have with those in the Republic of Ireland, Great Britain and further afield.

- People need honesty and clarity on how implementation of the Protocol and the UK's exit from the EU is evolving, and what changes this is bringing about to their everyday lives and to their communities.
- The practical impacts on people living in the border region and especially those who cross the border regularly for employment, for schools, as consumers, are significant. There may not be a border for *goods* on the island of Ireland, but *there is an administrative border* for services, public and private, which even during joint EU membership presented challenges for families living here. Managing two social welfare systems, differing tax obligations and education systems is a struggle for many families in the border region. We need to ease these difficulties through the provision of honest and clear information, and we have the channels of communication to do that.
- Civic society organisations have been at the forefront of supporting communities during the ongoing Coronavirus pandemic. The same can be said in the brokerage and maintenance of a more peaceful society – civic society organisations have worked hard to maintain, support and develop relations during all of the political uncertainty over the past number of years. With the proper resourcing, they will again prove themselves as invaluable partners in the task of shaping the new context we find ourselves in so that it can properly accommodate all our hopes and aspirations and maintain positive relations within and across these islands.
- As they approach their tasks, decision-makers must continually recall the fundamental place of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement, and the totality of relations it encompasses. Protection of the 1998 Agreement must mean protection of all three strands, and no party should seek to protect one strand at the expense of the others.