

TEIN4citizens – Engaging civil society in cross-border regions for the future of Europe

What does it mean to be an EU citizen?

Human Rights, Civic Rights, Entitlements and Obligations

Which human and civic rights do I have as an EU citizen? Which EU institutions or instruments protect them? And what role do I think the EU should play in this respect in the future? These questions were discussed by representatives of civil society organisations, academics, citizens and representatives from government and public bodies at a conference held in Belfast (Northern Ireland) on 11.03.2019. Against the background of the current Brexit negotiations, the participants from the Northern Ireland-Ireland and other European border regions shared their ideas, fears and proposals for the future of Europe.

Overall, it became clear that, in the light of the historical context of the Northern Ireland Conflict, which ended with the Good Friday Agreement of 1998, the participants attribute great importance to the EU's role in supporting the peace process on the island of Ireland. Therefore, many participants were anxious and concerned about how their human and civic rights will be protected in the future, be it as an EU or non-EU citizen living in the Northern Ireland – Ireland border region.

1. Protection of EU citizens' rights in a future Europe

In a future Europe, imagined by the participants of the conference, human and civic rights of all EU citizens will be respected. On the one hand, EU law and European institutions play a crucial role in protecting these rights. The Court of Justice of the European Union, by interpreting the EU Charter of fundamental rights¹, but also other EU institutions such as the EU Parliament are important **guarantors for the protection of human and civic rights, which are underpinning European values and peacebuilding in Ireland and other European conflict regions**. On the other hand, the European Convention on Human rights² as well as the European Charter on Social rights³ drafted by the Council of Europe are useful instruments in this matter. Thus, the European Court of Human Rights' role in ruling on alleged violations of the civil and political rights set out in the European Convention on Human Rights is an integral part of the participants' vision of the future Europe.

“There's a need of a realisation that rights equal peace.”

However, participants also highlighted the need for the **EU institutions to look carefully at the implementation of their directives and rights on the ground**.

At a local level, the right to freedom of movement is an important value built into people's everyday lives. From the point of view of citizens living in the Northern Ireland-Ireland border region, it is therefore important to preserve the right to work, study and live in another EU country. Furthermore, **EU funding programmes have had a great impact on the Irish border region** and are therefore a core element of the future of Europe for many participants. **The EU Peace programmes and its underlying values, for example, were crucial to the Peace Process** on the island of Ireland. In the future, the EU should therefore continue to support these programmes. However, in order to guarantee the protection of citizens' rights, the proposed PEACE PLUS Programme should include specific support for

¹ Charter of fundamental rights of the European Union: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/charter/pdf/text_en.pdf

² European Convention on Human rights: https://www.echr.coe.int/Documents/Convention_ENG.pdf

³ European Social Charter: <https://rm.coe.int/168006b642>

a rights-based approach to peacebuilding. At the local level, **associations defending human and civic rights are said to have a strong role to play in defending the implementation of EU instruments and legislation** in applying a rights-based approach to social and economic issues.

2. Identified obstacles

When discussing human and civic rights protection at European level, the **poor visibility of the EU and its institutions** was identified as one of the main obstacles. The majority of the population does not understand the EU instruments and institutions and they are not aware that the EU is protecting its citizens' human and civic rights.

“Our framework of rights comes with the weight of the EU.”

From a local perspective on the future of Europe, the focus lies on the **Brexit negotiations, which constitute an obstacle and, depending on their outcome, a potential threat to the continuation of cross-border cooperation, integration and the peace process.** The discussions therefore focused a lot on the question of how to preserve the achievements brought about by the EU and the peace process. The participants also identified Brexit as a threat to the implementation of their rights as EU citizens, especially concerning the freedom of movement, access to healthcare and welfare, and workers' rights (i.e. cross-border workers). Moreover, the **rights under the Good Friday Agreement are at risk** as the EU might no longer be a guarantor for the framework of rights. The participants also expressed their concern that the **UK has not signed the European Charter of Social rights**, which had been used in the Republic of Ireland to effectively protect people's rights.

3. Ideas and propositions for a future Europe

The EU institutions should become more user friendly. Members of the EU Parliament should reach out to the citizens and inform people, thus be more visible and tell citizens about their plans. More communication is needed, maybe in more participative and innovative forms such as discussion rounds. In order to reach out to a larger number of citizens, the EU Commission, Parliament and Council should engage more women into politics. In general, the **interconnectedness of parliaments and other groups should be reinforced.**

The participants expressed their concern with regards to EU Foreign Policy. **A rights-based concept of “European values” should be reflected in EU foreign policy.** Current practices of policing the EU's external borders are excluding people from European values and rights.

At the Northern Ireland-Ireland border, the **EU should continue to support the Peace process, for example by ensuring the Good Friday Agreement is upheld.** For some participants it is very difficult to see how the peace and reconciliation process can continue in its current form outside of the EU and its underlying values of peace. The EU should also uphold the backstop and pressure for the protection of EU citizens remaining in a non-member state.

“People understand rights through issues, e.g. homelessness. We need a toolkit that can ask for, deliver and measure change.”

Appendix: Conference Agenda – Belfast, 11 March 2019

9.30am	Welcome & Introduction Ruth Taillon, Director, Centre for Cross Border Studies
9.45am	Conference Opening Les Allamby, Chief Commissioner, Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission
10.00am	European Perspectives on EU citizenship Frédérique Berrod, Professor of Public Law, University of Strasbourg
10.20am	Dr Hynek Böhm, Technical University of Liberec
10.40am	Irish Perspectives on EU citizenship Eilis Barry, CEO, FLAC
11.00	Daniel Holder, Deputy Director, CAJ
11.20am	REFRESHMENTS
11.40am	Case Study Emma De Souza, Rights & Justice Collective NI
12.00pm	SMALL GROUP DISCUSSION
1.00pm	LUNCH
2.00pm	Projects using European instruments and law locally Seán Brady, Participation & Practice of Rights Annmarie O’Kane, Border People Dr Claire McCann, Human Rights Consortium
2.40pm	How Human Rights have shaped European values and peacebuilding in Ireland and other European conflict regions Duncan Morrow, Ulster University
3.10pm	EU Peace-funded Human Rights Projects Michael Culbert, Building Positive Relations Brid McKewon, Crossing Borders Breaking Boundaries Mirjam Bader, Politics Plus- The Next Chapter
3.40pm	SMALL GROUP DISCUSSION
4.30pm	CLOSE

For more information:

<http://crossborder.ie/mean-eu-citizen-human-rights-civic-rights-entitlements-obligations/>

<http://www.transfrontier.eu/tein4citizens/>

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