Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on 'Proposal for a Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council in order to allow for the continuation of the territorial cooperation programmes PEACE IV (Ireland-United Kingdom) and United Kingdom-Ireland (Ireland-Northern Ireland-Scotland) in the context of the withdrawal of the United Kingdom from the European Union'

(COM(2018) 892 final — 2018/0432 (COD))

(2019/C 190/05)

Rapporteur-general: **Jane MORRICE**

Consultation	European Parliament, 14.1.2019
	Council of the European Union, 15.1.2019
Legal basis	Article 178 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union
Section responsible	Economic and Monetary Union and Economic and Social Cohesion
Adopted at plenary	20.2.2019
Plenary session No	541
Outcome of vote (for/against/abstentions)	102/1/0

1. Conclusions and recommendations

1.1. Continued EU support for Northern Ireland, particularly the PEACE and Interreg programmes, beyond the UK's withdrawal from the EU, is not only essential but also crucial, as indicated by the challenging nature of the debate on the UK/Ireland border in the Brexit negotiations.

1.2. The EESC wholeheartedly welcomes the proposal to continue the EU PEACE programme in Northern Ireland and the border counties of Ireland after the UK's withdrawal from the EU. Appreciating the priority given by the EU to supporting the peace process, the EESC recognises the significant contribution the PEACE programme has made to maintaining peace in the region. This is in accordance with the findings of the European Parliament in September 2018 [1], which describe the PEACE programme as a model for the rest of the world.

1.3. Furthermore, in light of the destabilising nature of the political, economic and social uncertainty caused by Brexit, it is vital for civil society actors that the EU maintains its commitment to doing its utmost to ensure Northern Ireland will not only remain conflict free, but continue its path to reconciliation using the EU's trade-mark 'bottom-up' approach to peace-building and conflict resolution.

1.4. The European Peace and Reconciliation Programme (PEACE) is the most valuable and successful peace-building instrument ever operated by the European Union in a conflict situation. Set up in response to the ceasefires in Northern Ireland in 1995, the PEACE programme has invested over EUR 2 billion in cross-community, cross-border and other reconciliation projects in the 24 years since its inception.

1.5. Heralded by all parties to the Good Friday/Belfast Agreement as making a significant contribution to the peace process, the PEACE programme is unique in that it goes above and beyond any other EU intervention within its own territory. It brings together British and Irish stakeholders under an EU umbrella with the sole purpose of protecting the peace process and promoting peace-building in the region and beyond.

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[1] President of the European Council Donald Tusk: *'We will not gamble with peace or put a sell-by date on reconciliation ... give us a believable guarantee for peace in Northern Ireland, and the UK will leave the EU as a trusted friend.'*

1.6. The urgency of the situation created by the Brexit process and the eventual UK withdrawal requires an EU response to safeguard the peace process which matches the new needs of the region in the post-Brexit context. In consolidating support for continuing the PEACE and Interreg cross-border programmes, the EU makes important strides in the right direction. While this is a commitment which, for obvious reasons, underpins a vital part of EU support for the region, there is more that can and should be done.

1.7. The more immediate needs, both during and after the Brexit negotiations, will become evident if community tensions rise and British/Irish loyalties diverge further at street level as well as at the border. A sign of 'goodwill' from the EU could include a commitment to increase EU PEACE funding in the next round and to the siting of a European Peace and Reconciliation Centre in Belfast, as proposed in previous EESC/EP/EC reports ([2]). This would be a concrete demonstration of the EU's long-term commitment to the peace process.

2. **Background**

2.1. Recognising the gravity and sensitivity of the situation in Northern Ireland, the first PEACE programme sought to create an all-inclusive instrument which attempted to break down barriers between hostile and divided communities. Set up in consultation with stakeholders from political, administrative and voluntary sectors, the PEACE programme is a bottom-up approach that actively engages the most vulnerable in society, including children, women, victims and protagonists of the conflict.

2.2. Through a series of interventions, grassroots organisations were established under PEACE 1 to work alongside 'others' by placing control and distribution of the vast majority of EU funding in the hands of local groups and councils. The PEACE programme incentivised projects addressing peace-building, conflict-resolution, shared understanding, trauma and legacy issues. Successes of the PEACE programme are numerous, and the contribution it made to laying the groundwork for the 1998 peace agreement cannot be understated. PEACE is now operated by the Special EU Programmes Body (SEUPB), a cross-border UK/Ireland organisation set up by the agreement through which all EU peace and cross-border funding operates.

2.3. The continuation of the PEACE programme is vital to help ensure that the region does not slip back into conflict when facing the challenges of divided loyalties that could worsen post-Brexit, as tensions, evident during the negotiations, have indicated. The continuation of PEACE is now more pivotal than at any time since 1998. Commitment in Brexit negotiations to uphold the Good Friday/Belfast Agreement and ensure there will be no 'hard border' is welcome and PEACE can play a crucial role in supporting any transition. The Irish border issue will remain the most challenging aspect of Brexit beyond the current negotiations, which is why the PEACE and Interreg cross-border programmes and continued dialogue between the UK and Ireland are both essential and critical.

3. **General recommendations**

3.1. Improvement should be considered for renewal of the initiative from 2020, known as PEACE Plus. These can be categorised in five main areas.

3.1.1. Greater focus on promoting a shared society through genuine cross-community efforts. Increased support for integrated education and the promotion of media, cultural and sporting cross-border exchange should be among the priority areas. Also, as evidenced by the many 'peace' walls dividing segregated societies, work on community-led improvement to the physical and social environment should be prioritised.

3.1.2. Support for 'single-identity' projects should only be used to build confidence in segregated communities if it serves as a genuine stepping stone towards interaction with 'others'. The problem some PEACE funding has, according to one well-placed commentator, is 'too much carrot and not enough stick'.

3.1.3. Communication activities relating to PEACE fall short of essential requirements to ensure citizens are fully aware of the EU's role. Efforts are made by SEUPB, but more work should be done by the European Commission, government departments, influencers and others to acknowledge, explain and recognise the part played by the EU using the WhiteDove 'brand' to symbolise EU-funded PEACE projects.

([2]) See EESC opinion SC/029 — Northern Ireland peace process, adopted on 22 October 2008 (OJ C 100, 30.4.2009, p. 100).

3.1.4. Clear monitoring and evaluation processes to ensure outcomes are also measured according to their transformative nature and not only on the ability of experts to tick boxes. Some small community groups which are most in need of support have described EU funding as 'not worth the effort' and a great strain on precious HR that they can ill afford to waste.

3.1.5. According to a 2018 resolution adopted by the European Parliament ([3]), PEACE should be the EU model promoted to achieve lasting peace in other parts of Europe and worldwide. This fits with an EESC opinion proposing an EU-led global peace-building initiative, modelled on PEACE and creating a European path of peace from Northern Ireland to Nicosia. Known as the WhiteDoveWay, this would follow the path of the Irish pilgrim Columbanus, extending along the Western Front Way, through the Balkans, to link the two divided islands on either side of Europe ([4]).

3.2. While the main direction for improving certain aspects of PEACE may come from 'Brussels', the new 2020 PEACE Plus provides an opportunity to re-engage with civil society to enhance EU aims and values in Northern Ireland. This should not increase bureaucracy, but serve to build trust and understanding of the role of the EU in support of peace and reconciliation.

3.3. A consultation process, similar to that set up by former European Commission President Jacques Delors for PEACE 1 in 1994, should be undertaken as a means not only to increase community 'ownership' of peace-building but also to allow for shared learning. Replicating the task force set up by Mr Delors before he left office, this could be led by President Juncker, working with the three Northern Ireland MEPs and the secretary-general of the European Commission, working alongside the current Commission task force, in cooperation with the SEUPB and the heads of the European Commission Offices in Belfast, Dublin and London.

4. **Specific key recommendations for the post-2020 PEACE funding round**

— More weight should be given to projects that focus on integration of both 'single-identity' and cross-community engagements. Collaborative programmes are preferred.

— The life-span of the PEACE programme should be extended. Conflict transformation will take time and requires longer-term commitment than current funding cycles.

— Consideration should be given to recommending that future EU PEACE funded projects carry the White Dove symbol with the EU flag and the words 'financed by the EU PEACE programme'.

— PEACE programme monitoring bodies should continue to include representatives of civil society, but not only the most convenient or longest established actors. More effort is needed to assist actors inside communities to grow.

— Consideration should be given to the creation of local committees under the PEACE umbrella to liaise with councils, the Assembly and other decision-makers.

— Promoting the WhiteDoveWay concept, networking peace-builders throughout Europe, using real life 'story-telling' to increase conflict awareness and actively engaging citizens through the path of peace.

([3]) European Parliament resolution of 11 September 2018 on The impact of EU cohesion policy on Northern Ireland.
([4]) See EESC opinion on *The White Dove Way — Proposal for an EU-led Global Peace-building strategy*, not yet published in the Official Journal.

— Reaffirming the original commitment to a European Peace Centre in Northern Ireland with links to a centre in Nicosia as hubs for transferring real world practical peace-building within Europe and worldwide, ensuring the hard-won knowledge gained throughout the Northern Ireland peace process and elsewhere continues to benefit those in conflict and post-conflict societies.

Brussels, 20 February 2019.

The President
of the European Economic and Social Committee
Luca JAHIER