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Political and Social Complexity of the Irish Border: The Impact of a Post-Brexit Border upon the Lives of Irish and Northern Irish Citizens

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Political and Social Complexity of the Irish Border

The Impact of a Post-Brexit Border upon the Lives of Irish and Northern Irish
Citizens

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Abstract:

In this proposal, we are requesting funding to perform research in Northern Ireland and Ireland this coming summer. We will travel to several cities and towns across the region in order to investigate the role a post-Brexit Irish border will play in the lives of the Irish and Northern Irish people. Specifically, we intend to research residents' attitudes toward the uncertain future of the Irish border, which is the only land border between the soon to be separated United Kingdom and European Union. To further hone our craft as film students, we want to explore the environment of the border cinematically and allow the people of the island of Ireland to voice their relationships to the border through the interactive medium of documentary film. In our research, we will examine the political, economic, and social challenges, fears, and hopes residents face in the wake of a controversial Brexit vote through dialog with local politicians and residents.

Introduction:

Political borders are commonly understood as geographic lines that divide economic, political, social, and cultural landscapes. However, these divisions create a sense of, “‘us’ and ‘them’, ‘inside’ and ‘outside’, ‘include’ and ‘exclude,’” (McCall) for those on both sides of a border. Such distinctions have certainly played a role in the tumultuous history of the Ireland-Northern Ireland border, which is distinct for its alternating cycles of violence and amicable cooperation. Binary distinctions between a Catholic, nationalist Ireland and Protestant, unionist Northern Ireland were originally used to justify the formation of the border. In recent history though, these distinctions have become less volatile and the border has served as a bridge both economically and culturally (McCall). Irish and UK citizens travel unhindered across the border regularly, and the two Irelands have become economically and socially intertwined, especially in towns along the border. However, the recent departure of the United Kingdom from the European Union may threaten this relationship as the possibility of a renewed hard border could revive old tensions and jeopardize the livelihood of citizens who rely upon the border’s permeability.

The Irish border has been a contested boundary since the partition of Ireland into the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland in 1921. Even today, the border’s existence remains disputed in international law and within the Irish Constitution (Smith). Throughout the last century, the border has served as a focal point of conflict and cooperation between the people of the two countries. After the establishment of the Irish Free State (the Republic of Ireland) in 1922, the United Kingdom agreed to allow the free movement of persons across the border. However, this permeability was disrupted during the later half of the twentieth century by the

Troubles, an ethno-nationalist conflict in Northern Ireland between Republican paramilitaries, who wished to reunify with Ireland, and Unionists, who remained loyal to the United Kingdom. The Irish Republican Army (IRA) used the open border to attack British troops stationed in Northern Ireland and to move weapons and fighters in and out of Northern Ireland (Smith). The IRA's Border Campaign intensified the separation of the two Irelands as Northern Ireland fortified the border and established a border check system. Throughout the Troubles, the border acted as, "an obstacle to contact and communication, a hindrance, a nuisance, a hostile, unfriendly, defensive thing" (Anderson and Bort). The fact that people of Ireland and Northern Ireland were politically divided by Republican and Unionist paramilitaries and physically separated by a policed border heightened the animosity between the two countries.

In 1998, the Good Friday Agreement brought an end to the Troubles. However, citizens could not easily forget the violence that had occurred and this tension continued to divide the North and the South. In order to restore peace on the island, the British and Irish governments sought to redevelop the border areas as a symbol of working towards social cohesion between the two countries. They also officially recognized a Common Travel Area between the UK and Ireland for the first time. Today, this agreement is still in effect and the border presents no impediment to traffic in either direction. Furthermore, the EU has implemented the PEACE program to encourage cross-border cooperation and ensure economic and social stability in communities along the border (Galligan, McCall, McGowan, and Murphy). Due to these efforts, the Irish and Northern Irish regularly cross the border to shop and work in these growing border towns. Lastly, mutual membership in the EU prior to Brexit promoted a fruitful economic

relationship between Ireland and Northern Ireland, so 33.3% of Northern Irish exports and 27.2% of imports now come from free trade with Ireland (Durnford).

Background and Related Work:

While Northern Ireland initially voted to remain part of the European Union in the Brexit vote, the majority of the United Kingdom voted to leave. The choice to exit the EU creates uncertainty around the future of the Irish border as the last land border between the United Kingdom and European Union. Economically, Northern Ireland will no longer have access to the single market and thus will no longer be able to engage in tariff-free trade with Ireland. The United Kingdom's priority of restricting the movement of immigrants may also have economic repercussions that hinder the transfer of goods, services, and capital if the border policy changes (Hayward, Komarova, and Buttazoni). Furthermore, the greatest concentration of extreme material deprivation among the six counties of Northern Ireland lies in settlements with the closest proximity to the border (PricewaterhouseCoopers). The farming settlements stand to lose the most with separation from the EU; for every pound earned by Northern Irish farmers, 87 pence comes from the EU'S Single Farm Payment. That being said, commercial towns will also suffer with the loss of the EU PEACE program's structural funding for cross-border infrastructure projects and social programs (Hayward, Komarova, and Buttazoni).

Even after the Brexit vote, Northern Ireland still hoped to retain a certain level of EU benefits. However, Theresa May, the British Prime Minister, recently announced that the UK wants to make a hard break from the EU, thus leaving the single market and requiring a renegotiation of border policies from scratch (Castle and Erlanger). In the face of a hard Brexit, the UK and EU must consider a range of policies as they decide what type of border system to

establish. The least restrictive option is an elastic border system, while the most extreme option is a hard border system. If the UK chooses to join the European Economic Area or European Free Trade Area, they would possibly employ a system resembling an elastic border (Hayward, Komarova, and Buttazoni). The elastic border implies soft borders for goods, capital, and services, but a hard border for people to control immigration. In order to continue cross-border cooperation, the UK and EU would likely try to implement gradients of 'hardness' for different groups of citizens based on work permits and skills rather than nationality (Hayward, Komarova, and Buttazoni). However, this kind of system would require highly complex negotiations and Ireland would have to join the Schengen Area.

On the other hand, Britain seems to be moving towards a hard exit from the European Union, implying the desire for a restricted border. This could mean strict border controls on people and a greater limit of trade between Ireland and Northern Ireland. The UK may ultimately choose a hard border because it would support their new limited immigration policies and provide the UK with the opportunity to finally build an economy independent of any EU interference. Although migration and passport controls could still be coordinated bilaterally if Ireland is not in the Schengen Area, the inability to distinguish between business and personal travel may cause problems from the EU point of view. The EU may not want to have contrasting policies on each side of the border in which Ireland has softer border control than Northern Ireland (Hayward, Komarova, and Buttazoni). Ultimately, Ireland and Northern Ireland are in a position of uncertainty concerning the extent to which cross-border cooperation can continue economically and socially in the face of the uncertain climate around their border.

As demonstrated above, the work done by other researchers concerning the consequences of Brexit for the Ireland-Northern Ireland border provides a strong understanding of the large scale economic and social implications of the issue through the opinions of prominent figures, political parties, and governments. While it is still uncertain as to what changes to the border will be made, it is becoming clear that new border policies may have severe repercussions in Ireland and Northern Ireland that are complicated by the island's tense, sometimes violent history. That being said, there is a lack of research on what we desire to study: the personal impact, positive or negative, that different changes to the border would have on residents of the island and how this influences their opinions on Brexit and new border policies. The views of those who will be most affected by a changing border, individual citizens, are not being heard. Through speaking with these individuals, we can truly develop a complete understanding of the ways in which the open border currently promotes cultural cohesion and how a restricted border might change the lives and perspectives of the Irish and Northern Irish.

Methods:

We plan to travel to Northern Ireland and Ireland in order to examine how residents of differing geographic locations and social and economic statuses approach the uncertainty surrounding the border. Specifically, we intend to go to Belfast, Dublin, and various small towns to interview average citizens, economists, and politicians about their sentiments around this issue. These interactions will allow us to investigate different perspectives on the role the border plays in the homes of the Irish and Northern Irish people, particularly as it concerns the economic and cultural climate of each region.

The medium through which we will investigate this issue and present our findings, documentary film, requires an open-minded approach to research. As several filmmakers to whom we spoke, including Professor David Garden, have commented, the topic of a documentary film continually changes as research is conducted. Furthermore, the people we wish to speak to are those who are not being addressed by other sources because they are not prominent figures who are easy to contact. While this creates some uncertainty as to the product of our research and requires flexibility of our itinerary, there are measures that we will take to ensure we develop a thorough understanding of the current climate around the border.

Our research will begin before we even depart for Ireland. Specifically, we will begin by obtaining Institutional Review Board approval with the guidance of Dr. Jennifer Ramos. Not only will this provide credibility to our project, but it will ensure we conduct our research in an ethical manner. We will also speak to Dr. Victoria Graf and Dr. Dermot Ryan, who have both spent substantial time in Ireland, to develop interview questions that obtain our desired information in a way that is respectful of the challenging times faced by the Irish and Northern Irish people. Furthermore, we are in contact with several lawyers who will help prevent any legal issues that could occur from filming those with whom we speak. All together, these measures will prepare us to conduct our research in a professional, scholarly, and ethical manner.

In addition to the work described above, throughout the months leading up to our departure, we will speak to film professors, including Professor Garden, about how to film a unique and aesthetically pleasing documentary. A visually appealing film will appear more professional, engage our audience, and allow us to present our research in a memorable, impactful way. In fact, we will have a chance to get a head start and begin the research process in

April since Dr. Graf put us in contact with fourteen educators from Northern Ireland and the UK who will be visiting LMU. Speaking to these professors will allow us to hear the perspectives of educated individuals from a broad geographic area who are focused on the future generations of the UK and Northern Ireland. We will ask all of the individuals we meet throughout the duration of our research what they believe the border will look like in two years, how such a situation would impact their lives, and what their hopes, fears, and concerns are surrounding the border. The people we interview will also be able to provide us with further contacts with whom we can speak when we arrive on the island.

When the time comes for us to go abroad, we will begin by first traveling to Belfast and then Londonderry/Derry. Both cities have been focal points of conflict throughout the history of Northern Ireland. Belfast still has walls that divide communities and people will often choose to call Londonderry/Derry just Londonderry or Derry depending on whether they have Republican or Unionist ties. Interviewing residents of these cities will allow us to see if living in environments with prominently violent histories and remaining visible reminders of conflict influences individuals' views on the uncertainty of the border. Furthermore, the political views of these cities are greatly divided, so we will be able to document diverse perspectives (Ramos).

After our work in Belfast and Londonderry/Derry, we will travel to the border towns of Strabane and Belleek, Northern Ireland, and Donegal, Ireland. Visiting these communities will provide an opportunity to hear the perspectives of individuals who are separated from the urban population. Our time in Strabane and Belleek will expand our research on the views of the Northern Irish and allow us to observe the impact of geographical variation on people's social and political views. Donegal, meanwhile, will allow us to begin documenting the perspectives of

people living in Ireland. Additionally, since these towns are close to the border, the research participants there will provide the views of those who interact with the border on a daily basis. Will the border's regularly visible presence heighten passions about the issue? Lastly, we will interview business owners to understand what they desire for the border and whether or not they fear new policies will hurt their revenue.

Next, we will proceed to Fermanagh County. There, with the help of family friends who live in the county and local farming organizations, we will reach out to politicians and farmers. Speaking to local politicians who cannot control border policy, but must still work towards their constituents' well being, will provide an understanding of what local leaders believe the impacts of a new border system will be and how they are preparing for such change. A dialogue with farmers, on the other hand, will give us insight into the economic concerns of those who may be most affected by limited trade and lost EU funding. In addition, as Fermanagh County is divided by the border, we will continue to hear the views of both the Irish and Northern Irish people along the border.

Finally, we will journey to Dublin, Ireland to study the perspectives of those living in a large Irish city. Like Belfast, Dublin is removed from the border, and thus, conversations with its residents may reveal unique views to compare to those of the individuals living closer to the border. Furthermore, by spending time at Trinity College, we can understand the border issue from the viewpoints of students who belong to a younger generation that may be removed from Ireland's tumultuous past. Being an urban center, Dublin will also be a prime location in which we can reach out to more economists and politicians. This will not be to understand their professional opinions on the implications for the nations, for, as shown above, the Centre for

Democracy and Peacebuilding, the Center for International Borders Research, and other organization are already conducting research from this angle. Rather, our dialogue with politicians and economists will help us understand the personal impact that the potential border changes will have on them through the lens of their specialties.

In conclusion of our methods, it is necessary to mention that this is not an all-inclusive list of the people we will speak to. Although, as demonstrated above, we have established numerous contacts in Ireland and Northern Ireland that will allow us to research the perspectives of diverse individuals, our study can only be comprehensive if we listen to the predictions, hopes, fears, and concerns of the average resident. We will contact some of these people through LMU faculty and family members abroad, but others we can only meet by immersing ourselves in the daily life of a town and respectfully beginning discourse with residents. This will also create a random interviewee selection process that ensures we do not have targeted, inaccurate research. Thus, while we will have planned meetings in each location prior to our departure, we will also leave the flexibility to simply spend time in town centers and local hubs like restaurants. Doing so will allow us to meet the average local and gather the perspectives that are not being heard in this critical time of change.

Expected Results:

Overall, by developing an extensive network of contacts and carefully choosing research areas, we have prepared ourselves to converse with a diverse group of individuals. Those with whom we speak will include economists, locals, politicians, educators, philosophers, and people of all different generations who have each grown up in unique environments. We have structured our time to capitalize on all of these resources while also allowing ample time in each location to

create the flexibility that is necessary for documentary film and for speaking to the average resident. Doing so will ensure our completed research compares a breadth of perspectives on the border. Ultimately, we will form an understanding of the many ways uncertainty around the border may impact the lives and perspectives of the average people of Ireland and Northern Ireland whose opinions have yet to be researched in depth. Using the footage we gather while conducting our research, we will present our findings in a fifteen to twenty-minute documentary. As the subject of our study is presently upon us, and thus time sensitive, our documentation will capture living history and provide faces to an issue that can often seem distant and inhuman. Hopefully, we can create an understanding of the human impact that government policies can have and begin to address the disconnect that so often divides policy makers and those who are most impacted by their decisions: the ordinary citizens of a nation.

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