

## Paramilitary Violence and Policing in Northern Ireland

**By Branka Marijan and Seán Brennan**  
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*This blog post by Branka Marijan and Seán Brennan was originally published on the SSR Resource Centre in May 2015. This article analyzes the impact of paramilitary activity and violence on the legitimacy and practices of the reformed Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI). The authors argue that sustained efforts at relationship building between local communities and the PSNI are needed in order to guarantee that no gaps in policing are left that could be filled by informal security actors. The blog post provides a useful overview of current policing challenges and the role of non-state security providers in Northern Ireland and has therefore been republished here as a CSG Insight.*

It has been more than 20 years since the paramilitary ceasefires in Northern Ireland. While much has changed in the polity, recent events show that the issue of paramilitarism has not entirely been resolved. In late April 2015, images of two masked gunmen “patrolling” the streets of a housing estate in Lurgan, a small Northern Irish town, appeared on social media. The image seemed like a flashback to the period of conflict, widely known as “the Troubles.” Moreover, the gunmen are believed to be members of a “dissident” republican paramilitary group that does not support the ceasefires and the 1998 peace deal, the Belfast Agreement (also known as the Good Friday Agreement). Outraged by the incident and the paramilitary “show of strength,” local government

officials called on the police to act and to investigate the activities of dissident groups. These calls for police action are certainly timely. A few days after the images appeared, dissident republicans left explosive devices in Belfast and Derry. While a controlled explosion was carried out in Belfast, the bomb in Derry exploded before the police could evacuate the area where the device was left. No one was hurt in the explosion in Derry, but local businesses were damaged. Beyond the activities of dissident groups, remnants of paramilitary organizations in Northern Ireland have repeatedly been accused by the police of engaging in criminal activities and stirring up tensions in the post-conflict period. The continued presence of paramilitary elements is a wake-up call for police action.

### **Paramilitary activity and challenges to policing and police reform**

In particular, paramilitary activity presents a challenge for the reformed police service in the struggle to maintain its early success in gaining legitimacy across a still deeply divided ethno-political polity. The Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI), is more responsive to community needs and is seen as a much fairer and more legitimate service than its predecessor, the Royal Ulster Constabulary. Indeed, the reforms outlined by the Patten Report in 1999 have, over the years, been complemented with a community-oriented approach to policing by the PSNI. While it has not always been a smooth process, police reform in Northern Ireland is seen as a relative success by external and internal observers. Still, as recent events show, the broader political and social context continues to shape the success of the reformed service.

Indeed, the remaining challenges for policing involve addressing the legacy of the past conflict and further including marginalized sections of the community, particularly nationalist/republican actors, which have traditionally been excluded from the

police service. In terms of the latter, the PSNI has started to address its legitimacy gap in the predominantly Catholic, nationalist and republican areas, by engaging with these communities through the new Police and Community Safety Partnerships (PCSPs). What we are seeing now is the need to further ensure the PSNI's credibility by addressing lingering paramilitary violence and "paramilitary policing" of the local communities.

### **Paramilitary organizations, violence and informal policing**

Paramilitary organizations were key actors in the Northern Ireland conflict. A cursory glance at the history of the conflict provides a better understanding of the different paramilitary organizations. Most prominent, on the nationalist/republican side, has been the Provisional Irish Republican Army (PIRA), as well as a smaller group, the Irish National Liberation Army. On the unionist/loyalist side, the key groups were the Ulster Volunteer Force and the Ulster Defence Association. Since the signing of the 1998 Good Friday Agreement, many of the paramilitary organizations have faded from the limelight.

But this does not mean that they — or splinter organizations — have disappeared altogether. For example, the electoral success of Sinn Féin, a key republican political party, has diminished the role of the PIRA, which formally announced its disbandment in 2005. Indeed, even in the case of the PIRA, the length of time between the Good Friday Agreement and its official disbandment is telling of the slow withering away of these structures. Currently, republican/nationalist paramilitary presence openly pertains through "dissident" groupings, the most prominent of these being the so-called Real Irish Republican Army and the fringe Continuity Irish Republican Army. Some of these republican organizations have targeted the police and sought to discourage youth from republican areas from joining the PSNI. As such, these groups certainly do undermine the PSNI's influence in areas where it still faces issues with its legitimacy. But the issue of paramilitarism extends beyond the violence carried out by the dissident republicans, as remnants of loyalist paramilitary groups continue to be active as well. For example, the PSNI has stated that violence surrounding the Belfast flag protests, sparked by the decision to restrict the flying of the Union

flag on Belfast City Hall in 2012, was organized by loyalist paramilitaries.

Most importantly, republican and loyalist paramilitary organizations undermine the PSNI's influence by engaging in "informal policing," or monitoring of their own neighbourhoods and communities by, for example, carrying out so-called "punishment attacks" against individuals who are suspected drug dealers. It is important to note that this informal policing emerged during the conflict, as police were not well received, particularly in the republican areas. As such, paramilitary policing was a way to deal with issues of petty crime and disorder. However, these informal practices continued after the police reform, as there is still a certain level of mistrust between the republican communities and the police. Punishment attacks and beatings also occur in working-class loyalist areas and are a way for the loyalist paramilitaries to continue exercising control over their territories. Overall, according to the PSNI, 4,336 punishment-style attacks were reported to the police between 1990 and 2014, with 491 taking place in the last five years. These numbers reflect the reported attacks, however, many go unreported as victims are wary of the conse-

quences of reporting their attackers for fear of repercussions. In addition, the former paramilitaries still carry influence in their neighbourhoods. Few want to be labelled as "touts," the local slang for a police informer, and a term laden with history.

### **Paramilitary peacekeeping as a solution to violence?**

Interestingly, in an attempt to counteract attacks on its legitimacy, the PSNI has increasingly engaged in a strategy of promoting post-ceasefire paramilitary peacekeeping, where former combatants from those republican and loyalist paramilitary groups deemed to be on ceasefire are encouraged to join PCSPs, to provide stewards to marshall crowds at contentious parades or act as community leaders to minimize or restrain crowds clashing at sectarian interfaces.

At one level, paramilitary peacekeeping can be viewed as a positive and innovative solution to policing areas and communities that police agencies find hard to penetrate. Within processes of peace building, paramilitary peacekeeping can undermine "spoilers" and enable or encourage support for new police

services. At another level, paramilitary peacekeeping may undermine attempts to demobilize or reintegrate former combatants as part of a wider demobilization, disarmament and reintegration strategy. In other words, the promotion of paramilitary peacekeeping can encourage post-conflict paramilitary agency to be sustained beyond ceasefires. This can, in turn, be used to discipline and punish those deemed dissident, anti-peace or critical of the peace process, in return for peacebuilding funds or social capital that both validates and reifies paramilitary leadership in a post-ceasefire environment.

### **Conclusion**

So what can the police do? Including former paramilitaries in police and community partnerships and civil society work more broadly has been an interesting feature of the Northern Ireland peace process. Indeed, many of the former paramilitaries have played a positive role in peacebuilding activities. At the same time, some of these individuals do act as "gatekeepers" and are preventing access to their communities by state institutions, such as the PSNI. What is needed now are sustained efforts at relationship building between local

communities and the PSNI in order to ensure that no gaps in policing are left that would be filled with informal activities and actors. This process will need to move beyond gatekeepers and involve a wider range of ordinary citizens. The police will need to continue building trust and ensuring their accountability to the population. This will not be a cure for the issue of paramilitary violence, but it might go a long way in providing the PSNI with the type of everyday legitimacy that some paramilitary organizations currently hold in the most vulnerable areas.

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