Zu den Reiseberichten

2022: A trip to Northern Ireland

(11 - 17 September 2022)

1: at the airport gate in Frankfurt

(2022-09-11, Frankfurt Airport)

I am once again at the gate of Frankfurt Airport, once again in the quiet time when the familiar surroundings of my homeland are already fading, but the foreignness of the destination has not yet been entered. Like the visit to Marseille 2018, I feel a trip to Northern Ireland completes my perspective. Ireland. So familiar, somehow - yet much time has passed since my last visit, many events passing over us. Even now we are in the whirlpools and currents of great upheaval.

I have never been to Northern Ireland - suddenly now this part of the island of Ireland is outside the EU. I am eager to hear what that means on the ground. And I am eager to look back from there to the „East of the West“, including the war in Ukraine and the fate of what I perceive as the European idea.

I want to keep in mind that Northern Ireland is seen by part of the population as occupied territory. Are there, or were there, similarities to today's Russian strategy of land grabs? Queen Elizabeth II has just died and Charles III has been enthroned. I want to look at this empire while reflecting on the other one desired by Putin (and the Russian people?).

2: The separation

(2022-09-13, Derry, Hotel)

I had not expected to find society here in Northern Ireland in such obvious and exclusive division. Yes - with festering hurts, vivid memories of hatred and grief, I had expected that. But not with segregated schools, a suspended government and sealed-off neighbourhoods.

In Waterfoot, in the very north of the island of Ireland, the English King Henry landed with an invading army in 1171. The rule of the English, however, remained superficial for a long time, actually only related to the area around Dublin. Until, in the time of Elizabeth I, the „Plantation“ was decided, the large-scale „planting“ of settlers from the kingdom, with their way of life. „Deserving“ Irish families who adopted this way of life were allowed to sit at the side table of this colonisation - the others were largely without rights and property.

The expectation and hope of the English side was that Irish civilisation would gradually die out. But that did not happen until today. There were historical moments when instead a blending seemed possible, a new, united Irish identity. In 1798, in the wake of the bourgeois liberal revolutions, Theobald Wolfe Tone led a common revolt. At the beginning of the 20th century, there was an expectation that there would be a common Republic of Ireland, independent of England. This was accomplished in 1921, but not completely. The island was divided politically, and in today's Northern Ireland, the heirs to the old separateness face each other helplessly and angrily in a sense of mutual siege.

The joint membership of Northern Ireland (UK) and the Republic of Ireland in the European Union was a new chance for healing. But that chance has been lost, the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement (ceasefire and a government making only joint decisions) is currently effectively suspended. This is because the Democratic Unionist Party („DUP“, supporters of union with the United Kingdom) has left government. Until the „Northern Ireland Protocol“ between the EU and the UK, in which they see a threat to their identity, is abolished. At least the ceasefire from the Good Friday Agreement is still being held, but the situation is muddled, communication is cut off, the fronts are hardening again. It is

a tragedy.

In Germany we are used to believing in a religious conflict in Ireland. This is not only a simplification, but a misunderstanding. It is about the confrontation between republican Irish and unionist Anglo-Irish, who have hardly reconciled or mixed over the centuries. The phenomenon of „Catholic versus Protestant“ is only one of the historical externals and is actually unimportant in itself.

In the late 1960s, riots began, peaceful demonstrations that were brutally put down by a colonial empire that had great global experience in putting down resistance. This is how the Irish republicans tell the story. I suppose the unionists tell of the terrorist attacks by radicalised republicans that had to be responded to. In the decades leading up to the Belfast Agreement, some 3500 people were murdered. By paramilitary organisations on both sides, by the police and by the British army. There was unpunished state terror by the British and bombings, murder and street fighting by both republican and unionist paramilitaries.

Right now, the British Parliament is about to pass a law banning the prosecution of the state terror investigations. Because the investigations are so successful, a human rights organisation here tells us.

Economically, Northern Ireland is also stagnating. Things are much better in the south, in the Republic. Through some special arrangements, many Northern Irish republicans have Irish passports. I hear of the hope that the benefits of full access to the Republic of Ireland will be an attraction to a new generation from the unionist camp.

3: Apartheid

(2022-09-14, Derry, Hotel)

The conflicts here in Derry, or Londonderry as the official British name is, lie just beneath the surface of everyday peace. Two societies exist here in parallel. Their members identify each other and stay out of each other's way. David (I think not his real name), whom I meet on the street in the Protestant residential area, wants to tell us strangers his truth. But we are not allowed to photograph him. He says that the paramilitary groups on both sides are still there, they still hold power, and everyone here knows how to behave in their respective neighbourhoods. Job, kindergarten place, school etc., everything depends on it. You can't be neutral, otherwise you'll have two enemies and no friends. If you want to live here, you have to come to terms with it and pray along with the propaganda, no matter how untrue it may be. No one tells the truth in public here in the city, says „David“.

In the morning we met two IRA activists, veterans of the civil war in the 1970s. They tell us about the beginnings and the street battle of „Bloody Sunday“ in 1972, the murder of 14 peaceful demonstrators, who were then framed by the British army as armed attackers. Since 2010, this has been official, admitted by British courts and in the British Parliament. That day radicalised Tom and John. Tom says before that he was a pacifist. There were many fighters like them both and many died as a result. In battle, shot in the back or died in prison on a hunger strike. And they paid back in kind. What was too much was too much. They would do it again today. And if their children or grandchildren decided the same, they would be sad, but they would not stop them. There was no help then, except their own. Church, courts, authorities - all let the enemy have his way or were enemies themselves. Only „We Ourselves“ was our friend, „Sinn Fein“. Now even that party may not be reliable. It has become ordinary, self-serving politicians. And (in the wake of Brexit) living conditions are deteriorating rapidly again, gradually reaching levels reminiscent of the post-war economic despair of the middle of the last century.

Recently, an Irish Republican family returned from a holiday. Police officers stopped them in the street and they had to spread out everything they had with them. Meanwhile, other policemen broke through the door of their house. They may as well have taken the key. A school was nearby, many children overheard. Tom approached a policeman about it. The policeman said, „The old fights were so long ago, the children don't remember that.“ And Tom: „They don't have to, they see it now.“ Tom and John are involved in making sure this story is not the spark that reignites the fire. Thoughtful, respected veterans. But it sounds like it's just a postponement.

I ask them both for advice on how to explain to my Ukrainian friend that the British army, a reliable friend for Ukraine, was the enemy here. In a fight for freedom that in many ways resembles Ukraine's fight for freedom against Russia. „One man's ally is another man's terrorist," says Tom, and John nods thoughtfully.

I ask for advice because I observe how the parties in the Ukraine war demonise and dehumanise each other. Not „army against army", but „people against people". How do you get away from that? „We never did" says John. „We were demonised and treated like animals, but we only ever fought uniforms, not people."

It's another one of those moments when I have to call myself to hope again inside. And I don't know what to say to the Ukrainian friend.

4: The South and the Pub

(2022-09-15, Derry, Hotel)

Today, you don't notice the border with the Republic of Ireland when you cross it as a traveller. Euro prices are suddenly displayed at petrol stations. There are no more England flags, like in the Unionist streets. If you didn't know better, you'd think not much had changed since Brexit.

It is the Northern Ireland Protocol's truce between the UK and the EU that the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) first supported. The advantages for Northern Ireland are obvious: as the only region, Northern Ireland has free access to both internal markets. Why the DUP has now decided to fight this with radical political methods is not entirely clear to me. I would like to hear it explained by a representative of this party. The DUP left government in February until the Northern Ireland Protocol is abolished or renegotiated. There should no longer be a border between Northern Ireland and the UK, even if that border is only the control of goods traffic. The „Loyalists“, a fundamentalist branch within the Unionists, reject this distancing from Great Britain, seeing it as endangering their identity as part of the British Empire. And (we are told) the DUP feels it cannot afford to alienate these right-wingers among the right-wingers. That is why they have put the country's administration into a slumber.

The country continues to be administered, but only with decisions that have already been taken. No new problem can be addressed, no new situation can be reacted to. Because the Good Friday Agreement stipulates: the largest nationalist party (currently Sinn Fein) and the largest unionist party (currently DUP) must sign everything together. Everything, every little government decision. And the DUP have been refusing to do that entirely for the last six months. Which, among many other things, means that £400 million available to Northern Ireland for aid to alleviate the plight of its people cannot be disbursed.

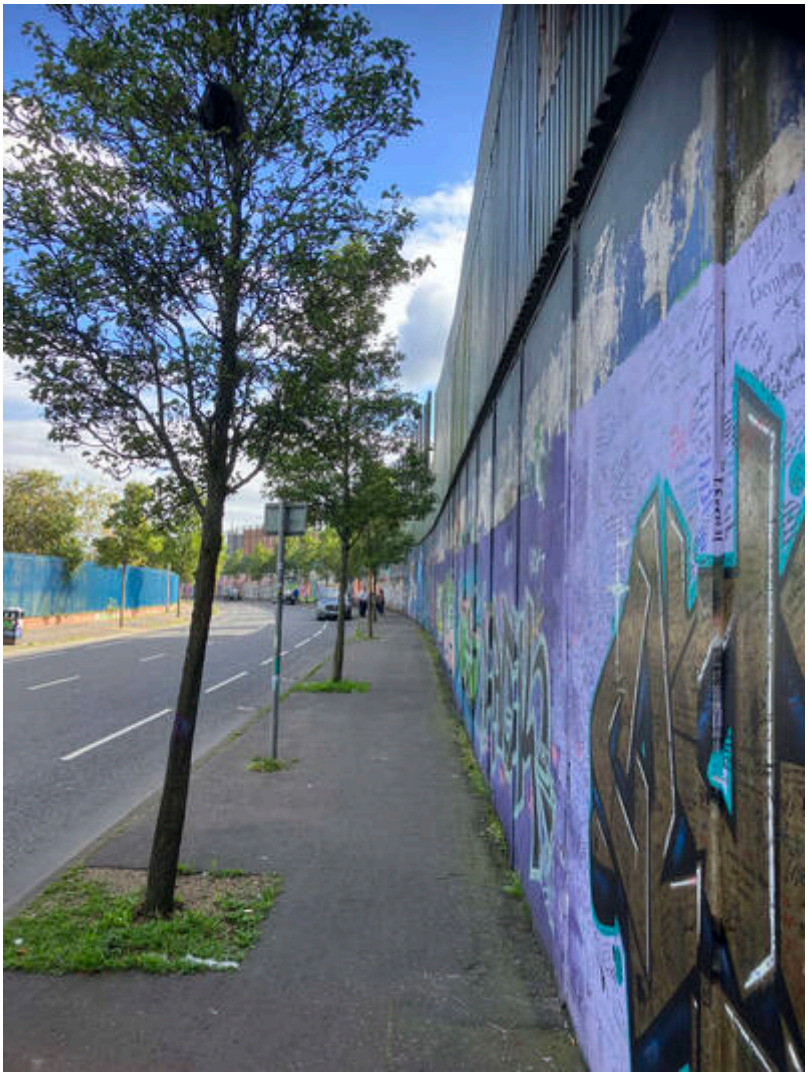
It seems so crazy to me that I suspect: there must be some other reason for this. Some calculation on the part of the DUP that the many republicans we speak to do not make clear to us. And once again I regret that we will not meet a representative of that party.

And then in the evening: traditional music in the Irish pub in Derry. There is an exuberant, friendly noise around the delicate music. Laughter and shouting and dancing and I think, „this can only happen in Ireland!“ This great conviviality where everyone is in each other's arms and all differences end. Or so it seems. Even though some of the songs that everyone sings along to with fervour are war songs. Heroic stories of victories and defeats against the unionist enemy. I can't imagine that in the peacefully celebrating anarchy here, a unionist is also secretly taking part. But: who knows? And besides, the temptation is really too great to contemplate the problems any further.

5: Peace Walls and Sinn Fein

(2022-09-16, Belfast, Hotel)

The Europahotel in Belfast is the most bombed out in Ireland. So we hear several times, like something to be proud of. During the Troubles, (the unrest or civil war between 1960 and 1998) the city was transformed into a walled patchwork of segregated residential areas and spheres of influence. People kept records: there were this many murder victims in this pub, and that many in that street. Paramilitaries fought each other, the military and police stations became fortresses secured against missiles. It looked like the images of the borders between Israel and Palestine.



It still looks like that. The walls are disappearing only slowly, if at all. But they are old by now. The stories around them are old. Admittedly, new ones keep coming, stories of riots and marches, but there have been no more deaths in these stories for a long time and hardly any bombs.

Today's police are no longer party to the clashes, but are democratically controlled. So Pat and Sean from the Sinn Fein party tell us. Both are veterans of the IRA, Pat was 18 years, in prison, 55 days of it on hunger strike, at the end of which he weighed 40 kilos, was almost blind, his skin yellow because of a failing liver. Today he is „Whip“ (parliamentary secretary) of the Sinn Fein parliamentary group in the Northern Ireland parliament. A long way. Sean negotiated the surrender of arms for the IRA in 1998, he too was in prison and on hunger strike, but we only find that out later. Today he works full time for Sinn Fein and volunteers in the neighbourhood social work office where we meet.

Are these the out-of-touch politicians that ordinary supporters of Irish unity can no longer trust? I don't get that impression. I see two sensible and confident shapers of a united Irish society, which they believe in - and which they believe will be achieved in 10 years at the latest. You still have to arm yourself against the political manoeuvres of unionists and the British government, they say. A people's referendum must be well prepared and not be held too quickly; it still needs time to develop. But already the unionists' fears of unification with the Republic of Ireland are fading and general support is growing. Irish unity would come, yet violence in Ireland would not flare up again, they say. Sinn Fein, already acting as a common party for the whole of Ireland, would soon lead both parts of Ireland first and then unity. I want to believe it, but remember like a warning whisper the voices from Derry. Tom, John and David too. I tell myself you have to be careful with politicians. They can be very persuasive, regardless of whether their representations match reality.

But maybe this time the truth lies in the middle? Or it lies on several sides, even if they contradict each other? Such things exist.

6: Who protects whom?

(2022-09-17, Belfast to Heathrow)

Vernon is a taxi driver and drives us to the meeting with the Policing Board, the oversight body of the Northern Ireland Police, which was profoundly reformed after the Troubles. Loreena, the woman there for public relations, explains to us a transparent structure of policing that is now exemplary for many countries in the world. Northern Ireland wants to build trust in the executive into and across the divided communities. Traditionally, police officers have been Protestants, i.e. Unionists. Even today, it is difficult to attract republicans to the police service (30% today). Nevertheless, the Protestant community no longer feels safe with its police, while the Republican side still does not really trust the very same police. A lot is going very well, says Loreen, but one mistake and its enormous reverberations in social media quickly destroy all the trust that has been painstakingly built up.

The various paramilitary groups are, from the police's point of view, criminal organisations. They are involved in anything that brings money. „Drug dealing“ and „money lending“ are highlighted by Loreen. Some of the uneducated youth from the poorer parts of town are easily impressed with the status symbols of quick money.

This sounded very different to Tom, the republican IRA veteran at the beginning of the trip. For him, „we“ keep order and if a youth goes astray, he first has to deal with „us“.

Vernon doesn't care much for the police either. Their job would be to enforce law and order, but instead they behave like social workers. Vernon does not feel protected (any more). He is currently mourning the deceased Queen. A report is playing on the radio in his taxi: the unionist community in Northern Ireland is wondering whether, after the death of the Queen, you can just carry on with life as you did before.

A Catholic taxi driver in Derry had said about the Queen's death, „who cares?“.

Talking to Vernon, I feel I am leaving the Northern Ireland of our tour group and interlocutors and entering a very different Northern Ireland. It is seen, without any doubt, as a part of the United Kingdom. Here, English people are at home! Recently, one of these „English people“ came back from a visit to London and was not allowed to do duty-free shopping at the airport. The other English people were allowed, but he was not, because of the Northern Ireland Protocol. This is just one of the many much-discussed examples among unionists of the encroaching consequences of this protocol. Vernon is fully behind the DUP's decision to boycott government work until the protocol is gone. One way or the other.

Vernon doesn't strike me as a hothead. I think in him I meet the other half of Northern Ireland's reality. He is surprised when I tell him that we met mainly republicans on our trip. I think he regrets that we didn't get to know the real Northern Ireland. I say that you have to get to know both sides in order to get a picture as a foreigner, and Vernon freely agrees. I don't have time to ask him about it, but I think Vernon would think it an absurd misunderstanding: the impression of an imminent all-Ireland unification that has spread through our tour group. Already the Northern Ireland protocol gives Vernon a feeling as if he came to the door of his own house, found the lock changed and was told he had to ring the bell from now on. This is not at all acceptable to him.

I now understand better: the Plantation heirs (Unionists) do not want separation from England, the Irish (Republicans) do not want separation from the Republic of Ireland. Anything „Irish“ is of no interest to the Unionists - and anything „British“ not to the Republicans. Not in the least, and no alleged or real advantages either. In the EU, both had the most important of what they wanted. No border with Britain and none with Ireland.

A wound that had been festering for centuries was beginning to heal. The damage from Brexit is economically high in Northern Ireland, but for the development of a reconciled society, Brexit is a devastation.

7: The East of the West

(2022-09-17, Heathrow to Frankfurt)

Now I want to return to my initial questions and to the East of the West.

In 2018 in Marseille, I saw how the idea of European unification had evolved from a rousing vision to one of the marginal conditions of everyday life. A feature of reality that everyone tries to exploit according to his or her own interests. Even if, in the process, one may personally mourn old raptures.

In Northern Ireland, the European idea still has vitality. The EU allows and supports its minorities, especially the indigenous inhabitants with their languages, cultures and desires for self-organisation. For Northern Ireland, the EU was a great opportunity that was taken away by the Brexit that was unwanted in Northern Ireland.

I think that Northern Ireland belongs in a sense to what I mean by „East of the West“: the European values (above all the principle of „subsidiarity“, of „rule from below“) is vision and promise here. Freedom from oppression. The hope for a way of life that one longs for and strives for, even at the risk of one's own life.

The „West of the West“ (to introduce this term as an antithesis here), that is, many of the people in the countries that have enjoyed Western freedom from oppression for a long time, have become accustomed to it and take „freedom“ for granted. As Agnieska said soberly in Poland, „you don't risk anything for it anymore.“ And that is why she is losing respect for us.

The East of the West is reminding the West of the West of the value of freedom these days. Let us be shaken up and carried away by it!

Zurück zu den „Reiseberichten“

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