Loyalists. No surrender. Northern Ireland

2018 marks the 20t h anniversary of the signing of Northern Ireland's peace accord which is referred to by some as the **Belfast Agreement**, and by others as the Good Friday Agreement. It also marks the commencement of Britain's exit from the European Union, with Northern Ireland providing Britain with its only land border into the rest of Europe. Both of these events are of considerable significance to those citizens known variably as Protestants, Unionist, and Loyalist living in two thirds of the province of Ulster that was formed in 1921 into the state of Northern Ireland. They wish to remain united with and loyal to a part of the United Kingdom as opposed to (re)-unification with Ireland – they are invariably Protestant.

With its attempts to address a range of historical inequalities across matters such as housing, employment and policing, the treaty triggered a range of structural legislative and policy developments directly impacting the status of sovereignty and system of Northern Ireland's government including complete restructuring of policing and criminal justice agencies including recruitment practices. Other provisions included the decommissioning of weapons and a raft of legislation in relation to civil and cultural rights. The result of this has been a considerable re-wiring of Loyalist 'certainties' and a narrative of 'loss' emerging within loyalist consciousness.

There remain uncertainties for loyalists in relation to their public displaying of identity, traditions and culture many of which they considered to have been curtailed and restricted as a result of new equality legislation. **Loyalist** fears of that which they value being removed from the public space came to a head in 2012 when Belfast City Council voted to restrict the flying of the Union flag over Belfast City Hall from the customary 365 days of the year to 18. This resulted in a region-wide flag dispute throughout Northern Ireland with over 2,800 ‘occurrences;’ reported by the Police on the first night and police figures indicating a peak of **10,000 protesters in Belfast** alone in the week before Christmas taking part in acts of resistance incidents. **It saw 160 police injuries and 362 files submitted to Public Prosecution Service.**

The Government response was to appoint in 2016 a Commission to consult regionally and report on the way forward in relation to flags, identity, culture and tradition in a divided society. The commission comprising 15 members appointed by the five largest political parties and experts from civil society and is due to report to the First and Deputy First Ministers in January 2018. “However the current hiatus and seeming impasse in the power sharing Executive means that in the absence of Ministers, the Report when completed may spend some months awaiting the return of Ministers to the Assembly.

About the photographer:

Mariusz Smiejek was born in 1978. His work is dedicated to expose issues of post-conflict territories and societies. He

lives in Belfast and has been documenting a long term project about the transition and everyday life in Northern Ireland during the peace process.Since 2017 he has been documenting a long term project about the daily life of refugees, asylum seekers and immigrants in Italy. He has been published by: National Geographic, The British Journal of Photography, Time, BBC, Die Welt (Germany), Boston Review (USA), Duzy Format (Poland), De Volkskrant (Netherland), Politico (Belgium), Le Temps (Switzerland), The National (UAE).

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