

Metagoverning strategic regionalism: the role of policy networks in the European Union (EU)
INTERREG Ireland-Wales programme

Dr Giada Lagana & Professor Daniel Wincott

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Introduction

The UK's Brexit 'transition period' ended on 31 December 2020. Some two months later the Irish and Welsh Governments published a Joint Action Plan. The Action Plan was unveiled on 1 March 2021 by Irish Foreign Minister Simon Coveney and Welsh First Minister Mark Drakeford. Announced on St. David's Day, Wales' national saint day, this 'first ever' Ireland-Wales Joint Action Plan was at once explicitly situated in the context of changes 'already brought ... to the Ireland-Wales relationship' and rooted in a 'flourishing of collaboration across the Irish Sea' in recent decades promoted by 'common EU membership and shared participation in EU programmes' (Coveney and Drakeford 2021: 2). Although they hold prominent position in the shared statement, remarkably little is known about the specific EU programmes in which helped to shape the relationship between Ireland and Wales. Despite a vibrant and growing academic literature on EU supported cross-border initiatives, the particular relationship between Ireland and Wales has attracted very little attention from researchers. This article offers a first contribution to filling this gap.

The shared statement seeks to establish a deep history to the Ireland-Wales relationship, based in a 'common maritime story'. 'The Irish Sea, the narrow strip of water which connects rather than divides us, has been traversed by our peoples over millennia.' The connections are contemporary as well as traditional – found in shared values of equality and sustainability as well as in the promotion of cultural heritage. A recent history – of Welsh devolution and the new 'East-West' institutions created by the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement, especially the British-Irish Council – is also invoked (Coveney and Drakeford 2021: 2).

Attending to the neglected history of Ireland-Wales co-operation under the auspices of EU regional – and particularly cross-border – policies, and we uncover a rather more prosaic reality. Instrumental responses to EU incentive and opportunity structures, including the invention of territorial units, dominate the history of collaboration between Ireland – itself dominated by the affluent and dynamic Dublin metropole – and Great Britain's poor western periphery. Only latterly, and to a limited extent, did cultural identities and shared political purposes emerge – arguably particularly in the aftermath of the 2016 Brexit referendum.

The EU, then, played a critical role in providing both the specific financial resources for Ireland-Wales collaboration a wider governance framework within which it could develop. Our purpose here is to analyse that role – which we identify as an instance of 'metagovernance' – in the case of the Ireland-Wales Interreg programme. We analyse the strategies and structures devised to elaborate and implement the programme, investigating the organisational and policy dimension of cross-border cooperation (Sohn 2014; Koch 2017;

Podadera Rivera and Caldéron Vazquez 2017) between Ireland and Wales and how these elements influenced the role of policy networks (Plangger 2018) in shaping the new space. A remarkable upsurge of research on cross-border cooperation addresses European state borders (Brenner 2004; Metzger and Schmitt 2012; Lagana 2017) and EU border-crossing processes (Deas and Lord 2006; Popescu 2008). Existing scholarship attends to dynamics, interests, strategies and negotiations around cross-border regions. However, little research has investigated the specific role played by policy networks in shaping new cross-border spaces. Moreover, while more than sixty cross-border regions have been funded under the Interreg programme¹ some, including the Ireland-Wales cross-border region, have yet to be studied. After the advent of European territorial cooperation (ETC) in 2007, these cross-border activities became known as the Ireland-Wales Cooperation Programme, or Interreg Ireland-Wales. The EU had clear strategic objectives for its cross-border initiatives, including this Ireland-Wales work. Equally, the Commission understood that the context within which it sought to achieve them would sometimes – perhaps often – prove impossible to micro-manage. Instead, it worked through networks of public and private actors, with which it shared resources. We find evidence of important contingencies at play in the development of the Ireland-Wales Interreg, as the programme developed and its strategic context changed. Over time, the cultural, identity-based and political aspects of the Ireland-Wales relationship grew stronger.

The Brexit process and the UK's internal scalar division of political power

Exit from the European Union (EU) is, at its core, a socio-spatial transformation of the United Kingdom (UK). Territorial ambitions - taking back control of money, laws and borders - are at the political forefront of the UK's aspirations after Brexit. On the one hand, leaving the EU has unveiled the ambiguous character of national devolution within the UK (Wincott et al. 2021), at least to some extent. On the other hand, neither the UK's territorial character, nor how it will change has been well understood yet. Indeed, some internal implications of Brexit are constitutional in character, as they relate to the unavoidable reform of scalar structuring principles for the territorial operation of the UK state after Brexit (Wincott et al. 2020).

The UK's exit from the EU is much better understood as a process, rather than as an event. This journey is to a poorly defined destination. A sharp fracture from the EU makes change inevitable for devolution, but in itself, Brexit does not determine the form that change will take. UK structures for intergovernmental relations are strikingly underdeveloped and weak (McEwen 2020). If EU membership was written through the statutes that established devolution, in the absence of well-developed domestic structures, the EU also provided an external scaffolding for the UK. These changes have unavoidable consequences for the UK's internal scalar division of political power, placing new pressures on its scale and territorial structures. Beyond these questions, Brexit also has variegated implications for different places, policy networks and partnerships that mesh them together (Jessop et al. 2008). Its impacts will range more widely across fields and structures of UK socio-spatial governance, removing the influence of the EU in the multilevel government of the UK territorial units.

Brexit also institutes basic changes to the UK's relationships with its near neighbors, including a state, the Republic of Ireland (ROI), which was part of the Union a century ago. The shape of these cross-border relations will also have implications for the territorial governance of the North Atlantic Archipelago (NAA) in which the UK and Ireland bulk large. Here, we attend to a feature of socio-spatial governance – the Ireland-Wales cross-border region – that has been especially thoroughly neglected, both academically and politically. To restrict the socio-spatial implications of Brexit to the UK territorial state is to leave out key aspects of the changes it will bring. The next session will explore the genesis of this cross-border region.

The genesis of the Ireland-Wales cross-border region

Historically, cross-border cooperation between Ireland and Wales has been built on a mixture of practices and discourses across different places and times. The Irish Sea maritime border is closely linked to hierarchical relationships between different levels of government (Koch 2017). Even so, mixed and overlapping cooperation practices include networked connections across governmental and non-governmental actors.

The Ireland-Wales spatial imaginary is not an either-or dichotomy (Hall 2008). The implementation of public, cross-border policies encompasses both public and private sectors. An enduring linkage pattern based on interdependence typifies relations between actors (politicians, bureaucrats and interest representatives). For example, when competing with other sections of the bureaucracy administrators need political support, legitimacy, information, coalition partners. They also require assistance in the implementation of policies. Interest groups desire access to public policy formation and implementation. These different needs have motivated and produced exchanges across the Irish Sea. Repeated exchanges became institutionalised in policy network structures. The EU, and its political milieu, mediated and fostered partnerships (Torfing and Sørensen 2011; Klijn and Koppenjan 2016).

In short, Ireland-Wales cross-border policy networks become a form of proto-, or a 'loosely coupled', organisation. They differ from formal organisation by the degree of formalisation and the type of coordination. Networks do not necessarily have a power centre. Coordination is not hierarchical (through exercise of authority or even top-down hierarchic consultation), but horizontal through bargaining. Once established, network structures constrained subsequent options open to the actors. In time they also influenced participating organisations' structures. Networks brought cooperation to a new level to the joint benefit of programme participants. Their development was slow and required particular institutional conditions. Eventually they were able actively to participate in the development and implementation of the Ireland-Wales Interreg programme, building its achievements, whilst also addressing gaps.

The Irish Sea Maritime Forum and the Central Sea Corridor were the first networks involved in fostering Ireland-Wales links to promote cross-border cooperation (interview with Interreg Ireland-Wales lead partner, 8 December 2019). Participation in a transnational framework potentially linked those working in similar sectors across the Irish Sea. It might thereby provide ideas and models of best practice in cross-border cooperation. Discussions were aided by access to consultative fora, such as the Committee of the Regions

(Wallace and Wallace 2000: p. 261), and a lobbying office in Brussels. Gradually Ireland and Wales came to articulate the strategic importance of economic and cultural links across the Irish Sea.

‘The [...] identity element as historical or widely adopted by the inhabitants of Ireland and Wales was fairly un-emphasised at this stage, as its construction was viewed as challenging. While it was acknowledged that such identity existed, it was the economic objective that was mainly stressed to EU bodies. So, yes... the region was institutionalised by the EU, through institutions and programmes that managed the cooperation and draw greatly on a transnational planning rhetoric.’

(Interview with Interreg Ireland-Wales project officer, 28 November 2020)

Ireland-Wales cross-border region was formally institutionalised in 1994, when cooperation became eligible for Interreg funding (Zimmerbauer 2013: p. 1). Hence, institutionalisation occurred ‘top-down’ It reflected a balanced mixture of territoriality and the subordinations of scales. The Irish Sea provided the area’s defining physical feature. Cross-border cooperation relied on the assumption that shared common features, challenges, and issues would be handled more successfully on a cross-border basis. Policy networks started to establish themselves to ‘make sense’ of the space – such as disseminating awareness among local organisations (interview with lead partner, 8 December 2019) – to mobilise actors and to connect spaces and modes of interaction in their daily practices.

Existing territorial delimitations influenced who could participate and produced effects of inclusion and exclusion. Particular territorial claims were related to distinct, ideologically motivated, national projects. The region comprised the central Dublin/Dun Laoghaire-Holyhead corridor; the southern Rosslare/New Ross/Waterford-Fishguard/Pembroke Dock and Milford Haven sea corridor. Ports were envisaged as strategically important, forming vital links across the sea border. The Welsh counties of Carmarthenshire, Pembrokeshire, Ceredigion, Ynys Môn (Isle of Anglesey), Gwynedd, Conwy, Denbighshire and three Irish NUTS² III regions in Ireland, Dublin, the Mid-East and the South-East, were also involved. Dublin was the major urban centre. The Irish part of the region had higher population density (126 vs. 70 persons per sq. km) and considerably higher Gross Domestic Product (GDP) per capita than their Welsh counterparts (higher too than Ireland as a whole, and the EU).³

Interreg’s place-based approach⁴, here reflected in the centrality of the Irish Sea, was used to legitimate specific cross-border strategies aimed at a balanced compromise between different interests. Irish and Welsh authorities presented their case to the EU Commission in Ireland-Wales specific terms. They focused on enhancing sustainable growth through cooperation by maximising the potential of the natural and cultural assets of the maritime area, while connecting it to a specific EU regional policy discourse. A discursive emphasis on economic growth, innovation, and sustainable development sought to anchor local strategies to the EU agenda. On the other hand, this approach was also the outcome of a strategically selective EU discourse which informed local perceptions and discussions and responded to grassroots interests in an indirect but very pragmatic way.

Interreg and the changing institutional context in Ireland and Wales

Major institutional changes within the EU, Wales and the ROI changed the context for subsequent rounds of Interreg Ireland-Wales. In April 2000, the Commission issued guidelines establishing new preferences for the development, management, and evaluation of the programme (Laffan and Payne 2001: p. 84-86). The internal organisation of the Regional Directorate also changed, with a new, more specialised, Interreg division established specifically to assess programmes coming from different border regions of the EU (interview with Guus Muijzers, EU commission officer for the Interreg programme, 20 March 2020). EU officials could now compare the content of programmes and their development and implementation processes across the Community. This division started to learn from past mistakes (interview with Guus Muijzers, 20 March 2020). Joint strategies, joint priorities, and joint programming received new emphasis. In addition, a programme's implementation operations had to be clearly cross-border in nature (EU Commission - Guidelines Interreg III, 2000), with a preference for partnership and a 'bottom-up' approach. Interreg now required a 'wide partnership' involving not only public partners, but also economic and social connections with non-governmental organisations (interview with Guus Muijzers, 2020). This, in turn, legitimised policy networks' demands to participate more actively in decision-making processes over programme content and delivery.

Prior to 1999, the whole of Ireland was regarded (for the purposes of EU regional funding) as an Objective One area. This meant that its GDP per capita was at, or below, the EU threshold of 75%. In the lead-up to the Agenda 2000 negotiations it became clear that Ireland would lose its Objective One status if the whole state was considered as one unit for structural funding. Following a heated and vigorous debate the government decided to adopt a strategy of regionalisation. In doing so, the ROI was responding to demands from regions in the west and border areas likely to benefit from regionalisation in financial terms (Boyle 2000: p. 740-744). In November 1998, the government applied to Eurostat for a change in Ireland's single region status (Laffan and Payne 2001: p. 81-82). The change was eventually granted, but only after hard bargaining. Following the conclusion of the negotiations, the country was divided into two NUTS regions: the Border Midland and Western Region (BMW), and the Southern and Eastern Region (Laffan and Payne 2001: p. 101). Although prompted by the desire to maintain a high level of EU funding, regionalisation in the ROI also responded to 'bottom-up' demands from the West and the East (interview with a Regional Development Officer in the Southern Regional Assembly – Ireland - 2 December 2019) for a more devolved management of EU Structural Funds in Ireland (Boyle 2000: p. 750).

Lastly, in the UK, devolution transformed Welsh politics and policymaking. Prior to the establishment of the National Assembly in May 1999, public policymaking had largely been the preserve of civil servants in the Welsh Office, operating within a framework set by Whitehall. What scrutiny there was came from the forty Members of Parliament representing Welsh constituencies (McCallister 2000: p. 39). By introducing a

distinctive devolved policymaking arena, *inter alia* devolution altered the management of EU Structural Funds. As in Ireland, opportunities to pursue EU funding led to a change to Wales' NUTS administrative regional structure. In a process that started before devolution, a case was made for reclassifying the West Wales and the South Wales valley, as a NUTS region. The boundaries of this region were critically dependent upon re-appraising economic welfare disparities in Wales, especially relative to revisions of the European Commission's NUTS regional classification (Boland 2004: p. 251). A report was produced (Morgan and Price 1998), for the Institute of Welsh Affairs which came to be influential. It formed the research foundation for Wales' Objective 1 case. It argued that the historic north-south division in Wales was no longer empirically valid and that in fact Wales now suffered from a new division based on an east (largely prosperous) and west (largely poor and deprived) split. Indeed, the new map reflected existing research within the Welsh Office (Boland 2004: p. 251 - 252). What this translated into was an Objective 1 area that included 15 of Wales' 22 Unitary Authorities and contained almost 1.9 million, or two-thirds, of the Welsh population. Accepted by Eurostat, this change brought together the least affluent parts of Wales. Mirroring what happened in the ROI, it enabled an index of aggregate deprivation to be constructed for the first time. As a result, part of Wales was now delineated as sufficiently poor to qualify as an Objective One region. The Wales European Funding Office (WEFO) was made responsible for the management of Objective One initiatives implemented in Wales, with a bilateral relationship with the EU Commission and the Assembly and it was tasked to assist with the approval and appraisal of projects (McAllister 2000: p. 45).

In sum, changes in the Interreg guidelines, processes of regionalisation in the ROI, and devolution in the UK generated new regional practises in both Ireland and Wales. Regions were created within each country with a view to winning EU funds – with positive consequences for subsequent Ireland-Wales Interreg funding rounds (2007-2013 and 2014-2020). The interplay between the new Interreg requirements, new modes of partnerships and the changed institutional contexts in Ireland and Wales opened new opportunities for cross-border policy networks. They came to play an increasingly active role in Ireland-Wales cooperation (interview with a Regional Development Officer, 2 December 2019). Rather than one hierarchical centre of public policymaking, the system became more layered with different spatial areas involved in the planning and delivery of new cross-border cooperation initiatives. The availability of Structural Funds generated local mobilisation and increased the significance of the policy networks dimension. In addition, a variety of policy instruments evolved at the EU level, which were designed to foster local development. Gradually, the hold of central governments on EU Structural Funds weakened.

The new ETC Ireland-Wales Cross-Border Programme

In July 2006 the European Council and the European Parliament (EP) approved new regulations governing Structural Funds.⁵ They provided the legal and regulatory framework for a new generation of operational programmes. New opportunities emerged for Ireland-Wales cross-border networks – new modes of interaction enhanced their scope to mobilise strategically within cross-border space, at once exploiting and transforming

it. The new ETC aimed was to strengthen cross-border cooperation through joint local and regional initiatives, drawing on transnational and interregional cooperation. It also sought to support exchange of new Interreg Ireland-Wales 2014-2020 programme-related experiences at the appropriate territorial level institutions (interview with Interreg Ireland-Wales project officer, 27 February 2020). Cross-border networks started to engage across multiple levels - with sub-state authorities, as well as with governments where possible and with European institutions (interview with Interreg Ireland-Wales project officer, 27 February 2020).

Interactions and consultations in this framework happened 'front' and 'back' stage. The distinction is important because, when frontstage, actors are visible to the audience and have to stay in role. Public officials are observable and accountable as office holders in elected bodies and are constrained by established bureaucratic rules, codes of conduct and public scrutiny. On the other hand, the backstage dimension of consultation describes the world of complex decision-making where public officials, actors and interest groups are hidden from public scrutiny. They can engage in negotiations less constrained by formal rules. Backstage, actors can relax from their roles, step out of character and work within and across networks to prepare and negotiate strategically in order to gain a more active frontstage, policymaking role. During the preparations of Interreg Ireland-Wales 2014-2020, backstage consultations and regular meetings played an important role in facilitating interregional lobbying and fostered the influence that different actors had within their policy network (interview with lead partner, 8 December 2019).

Backstage discussions were focused on the programme guidelines, the views of potential beneficiaries and the preferences of the responsible authorities. The working routine included actions such as discursively setting the agenda and framing local perceptions. Subsequently, frontstage, joint papers and declarations⁶ were drafted and discussions focused on common Ireland and Wales issues for the programme to address. Next, the drafting of the partnership agreement expanded upon the areas that had been identified backstage as specific shared cross-border challenges. The extent of backstage consultations behind the elaboration of the Interreg Ireland-Wales 2014-2020 programme is evidence of how, this time, policy networks at the local level were allowed to shape the concretisation of specific cross-border issues to be addressed. These represented a mixture of personal and professional preferences held by civil servants and politicians, electoral pressures and proposals from non-governmental organisations. The wish of policy networks to use the talent, skill, experience and expertise within the Irish Sea region became an overarching theme for the Ireland-Wales Interreg It shaped how adding value to the economic and sustainable development needs of Ireland and Wales were conceived within the programme (interview with Interreg Ireland-Wales project officer, 28 November 2020).

The final priorities were broad. They encompassed almost all the issues that different authorities and networks involved had brought forward. Improvements in public consultation and decentralisation of policy processes enhanced interdependence between the various Irish and Welsh actors involved. They improved sub-initiatives delivery somewhat. Consultations and decentralisation also improved when the programme was brought in line with the WEFO IT system (interview with a Regional Development Officer, 2 December 2019).

The role played by policy networks is also reflected in the ETC Interreg Ireland-Wales programme's management structures. They sought to create a fluid administrative organisation of the cross-border region.

It encompassed representation across multiple levels of society, allowing networks to build interconnections and gain power. The role of Development Officers also evolved considerably. From a consultative function, Development Officers developed a regular presence on the ground, especially where policy sought to encourage local community involvement in project delivery. These Officers started to play an important role liaising between community level and the central bureaucracy. They could give voice to the needs and concerns of those involved on both sides. For the voluntary and community sector, Officers were an important source of information about possible co-funding and how to tackle different types of administrative hurdles (interview with Interreg Ireland-Wales Programme Manager, 8 January 2020). Given the Officers' broad experience, they became central in advising networks within the planning processes for sub-initiatives across various axes of Interreg Ireland-Wales. Finally, Development Officers sought to establish a common understanding of the other administrative structures and culture (interview with a Regional Development Officer, 2 December 2019). Such an understanding was essential to effective joint management and strategic planning of the sub-initiatives.

In sum, Ireland-Wales governance arrangements encompassed territorial and socio-political elements to varying degrees. These arrangements provide evidence of how a relatively small group of policy networks influenced the shape of an EU-based opportunity structure so that it served their distinct interests. At the same time, none could enforce its vision unconditionally. Member State governments also influenced Interreg outcomes. Elements of the governance architecture, discourses, and interpretations constrained, shaped, and informed policy networks' participation in public policymaking efforts.

Making sense of EU sponsored cross-border cooperation: suggesting a strategic-relational heuristic

The Strategic-Relational Approach (SRA – Bertramsen 1991) emerged initially as a theoretical analysis of the state. It was later applied to political economy and complex governance processes. The application of SRA to governance enables analysis of social relations and the differential strategic effects of those on social actors and policy networks in specific contexts. The SRA notion of 'structural strategic selectivity' (Jessop 1999: 47–48) helps identify a context's specific balance of forces and its differential effects on various political strategies and the relative privileging of some actors. Equally, the SRA also suggests that the exercise of state power ultimately results from interaction among strategies. The SRA framework enables us to investigate the different forces within and beyond the cross-border region. As well as the specific dynamics of Interreg Ireland-Wales, it allows us to encompass actors motivated by a variety of political purposes and their wider consequences for historical and geographical developments. In particular, we can shed light on the EU's *metagoverning* role, mixing different modes of interactions and empowering policy networks to take a more active role in cross-border policy processes.

'Metagovernance' can be defined as the 'government of governance' (Jessop 2016: p. 13). It offers, we suggest, a fruitful framework for analysing the developing relationship between Ireland and Wales, including the history of Interreg Ireland-Wales (a neglected task to which we aim to make an initial contribution here)

as well as the wider study of cross-border regions in the EU and beyond. The metagovernance framework can encompass all activities in which governments and policy networks are heavily implicated, while offering a decentralised view of the state. Metagovernance can be performed ‘not only by state actors but also by various networks of public and private actors and a whole range of supranational, regional and local levels in the formal political system’ (Sorensen 2006: p. 102). The ‘government of governance’ definition implies that networks or other forms of governance do not simply emerge, but require reflexive choices, understanding, and management (Torfing et al. 2012: p. 130). Hence, policy networks are presented by the metagovernance approach as necessary and desirable, given the complexity of contemporary public problems: they offer new ways to incorporate private actors in public rule and lead to a decentring of political power (Torfing and Triantafyllou 2011). Metagovernance, some argue, should be employed by institutions, politicians, and private actors to address the democratic deficits of networks. From this perspective, metagovernance can provide a ‘democratic anchorage’ for governance networks by reconnecting them to elected politicians and public authorities (Sorensen and Torfing 2009: p. 5). Metagovernance is concerned with managing and ‘harvesting’ the positive aspects of networks (Torfing 2016: p. 530-531) as well as finding democratically legitimate ways to steer them without destroying the dynamics of network governance itself: ‘it requires a carefully calibrated combination of different metagovernance tools’ (Sorensen and Torfing 2009, p. 252). Metagovernance acknowledges the emphasis placed by geographical accounts of cross-border cooperation on conscious mobilisation efforts and territorial and scalar orders (Jessop et al. 2008) in cross-border regions. At the same time, it focuses on cross-border policy networks (Paasi and Zimmerbauer 2016). Interreg (or other EU programmes) has been analysed as a tool to empower active participation in public policymaking (Brunet-Jailly 2005; Ernste et al. 2009; Konrad 2015). Finally, metagovernance is concerned with the democratic anchorage of policy networks, respecting nation-state (or Member State) autonomy and national sovereignty. It allows us to grasp how interests (Jonas 2011) and politics (Goodwin 2013: p. 3), expressed and represented in the framework of EU cross-border initiatives in Ireland and Wales, were linked to the territorial polities involved. In the future, we believe that cross-border studies could provide test the metagovernance framework in valuable ways; while metagovernance might, in turn, contribute to the conceptual development of cross-border analyses.

The EU targeted Ireland and Wales policy networks’ through Interreg with the aim of empowering cross-border actors to shape cooperation as an opportunity structure. Interreg provided cross-border policy networks with a neutral arena in which to foster interdependence and backstage discussions. This neutral space also eased considerably the transition of strategies from backstage to frontstage policymaking. This process produced effects of inclusion and exclusion, subordination and connection, and horizontal relations empowering networks to take a more active role in policymaking processes. The SRA posits that these effects touch different actors and networks in different ways at different dimensions in cross-border spaces.

The example of the Ireland-Wales Interreg is explanatory of how the EU provides cross-border networks with ‘strategically selective’ (Hay 2002) structures that empower and disentangle them from the processes that have formed and shaped them. Interreg privileged some networks, resources, and strategies while

disadvantaging others (Jessop 1990: 10). Some actors profited from territorial borders, scalar hierarchies, sectoral differentiation, and vertical relationships. Others remained marginalised. Nevertheless, the ‘bottom-up’ approach adopted by Interreg and its interplay with major institutional changes at the national level were crucial in enhancing the centrality of policy networks in influencing and shaping backstage and frontstage cross-border cooperation. Therefore, the backstage and frontstage differential effects of EU structures are even more important, as structures do not only impact on the success of actors’ efforts but also on their interests and strategies.

An SRA analysis of the genesis of the Ireland-Wales Interreg programme demonstrates how various interests constituted the beginning of the Ireland-Wales cross-border strategy. For example, governmental and non-governmental actors perceived the chance to exploit financial or political opportunities to create new functional spaces (Plangger 2019: 167). They might also have seen the chance to enhance their say in the public policymaking processes through EU programmes, or the possibility to destabilise or undermine existing scalar hierarchies (Jessop 2003). A dominant feature of the Ireland–Wales cooperation was its shared maritime border, which posed common challenges in issues such as water quality, biodiversity, and pressures on the environment resulting from development in urban, rural, and coastal zones. The area was also affected by environmental problems which impacted the shipping industry negatively. Regional developers and planning institutions in Ireland and Wales perceived cross-border cooperation as an opportunity to solve some of the common existing problems based around the Irish Sea, and decided to pursue their specific interests connected to economic growth and shared cultural identity in the European framework.

The existence of partly contradictory and unintended opportunities and constraints implied that the backstage elaboration of the Interreg Ireland-Wales programme (as the first outline of the specific cross-border strategy) was just the first strategic step towards the realisation of Ireland and Wales policy networks’ interests in the EU framework. Through this elaboration, policy networks tried to guide the process in their desired direction. However, the Commission’s rules established that the two national governments were the only recognised legal authority. Hence, they were in charge of the transition from backstage to backstage, with a strong role to play in the implementation of the programme. While national governments may at least employ hierarchical means in their relationship to policy networks, the latter cannot revert to legal authority. They cannot impose order upon a framework that consists of frontstage institutions, often beyond their territorial and legal control (Harguindéguy and Bray 2009; Nadalutti 2012).

The strategies employed to qualify for the Interreg programme were chosen backstage based on a subjective and filtered analysis of the material framework in which diverse political arenas interacted (Nadalutti 2014; Podadera Rivera and Calderón Vázquez 2017). Among them were relationships with the frontstage institutional context, with other states, between different levels of government, between political parties or between different sectors of society (Blatter 1997: 155-156). Cross-border cooperation issues were constructed by processes of problematisation introduced backstage by policy networks and were subsequently articulated frontstage to the Commission by public authorities. As stated by Hay (2002: 211-213), it is the actors’ understanding of the context that formed the basis of the strategic cross-border action. Levels often

intermeshed in this process, demonstrating how backstage and frontstage dimensions are not neatly separated, but they are a continuum of the same process. Policy networks needed to account for all dimensions in a hierarchical way (Nelles and Durand 2014; Svensson 2015), as demonstrated by the following statement:

‘Private organisations and groups wanting to take part in Interreg first come to us and we then have to gain the assent of national authorities and the EU Commission to set up a cross-border strategy. This makes of the relationship between them and us a key determinant of successful engagement in initiatives between Wales and Ireland.’

(Anonymous 5. 2019.)

Nevertheless, policy networks in Ireland and Wales hardly had a complete informative picture of the context in which they acted, or of the possible consequences of their actions. None of them was able to impose a specific version of the cross-border region unconditionally. Furthermore, the realisation of backstage strategies depended on the strategies and strategic responses of others (Hay 2002: 210–211), which shows how the cross-border space did not serve as a simple strategic instrument. It, once created, offered opportunities and constraints that were not the same for all. In this regard, the notion of ‘strategic selectivity’ grasps the actor-specific effects on diverse contexts and diverse dimensions. The term implies that a certain structure will give different opportunities to actors who want to access it, influence it, or transform it (Jessop 2001: p. 9).

The role of the EU as a metagovernor was crucial in all the above-described steps. Networks that could not directly steer and command policymaking processes could nevertheless seek new instruments to shape, steer, and frame cross-border cooperation and the Interreg governance mechanisms (Gualini 2005). They could shape not the frontstage process as such, but the environment of the process (Sørensen and Torfing 2009) from backstage. They reflected upon the context and strove to change the contextual elements to optimise the realisation of their strategies. These continuous metagovernance activities affected the goal-attainment of different networks in Ireland and Wales and changed the context in which the programme Interreg operated.

Hierarchies did not vanish and, in this regard, the concept of ‘shadow of hierarchy’ introduced by Scharpf (1994) is suitable to describe the relationship between hierarchy and governance arrangements (Sørensen and Torfing 2009) in cross-border regions. Governments determined priorities, objectives, and rules, thus limiting the autonomy and flexibility of the governance mechanisms established in the implementation phase of Interreg (Van Bortel and Mullins 2009). Mechanisms relied on ‘the underlying threat of government interventions’ (Van Bortel and Mullins 2009: 208) or even on hierarchy and coercion as an omnipresent practice (Davies and Spicer 2015), which makes of the Ireland-Wales Interreg just another arena in a polyarchic European political system.

The EU, through Interreg as a metagovernance tool, did not simply frame certain governance mechanisms of cooperation but it mixed, ordered, and altered different modes of governance, spatial dimensions, and discursive backstage and frontstage forms. It then attempted to place policy networks in this context, empowering them to actively participate in all the phases of the policymaking process through

metagovernance. This confirms the statement asserting that metagovernors respond to complexity and failure (Torfing and Triantafyllou 2016) but it also places the EU in an active metagovernance performative role.

Conclusion

This study combined analysis of the emergence of policy networks in cross-border spaces with a broader conceptual framework for spatial and socio-political analysis. In conjunction with the theoretical framework of metagovernance, this article demonstrated the active role played by the EU in managing Ireland-Wales cross-border policy networks through the Interreg programme. At the same, the EU was studiously respectful of the centrality of the two Member States involved. It sought ways of steering cross-border networks with democratic institutions in the Interreg policy process as well as anchoring the former to the latter. Equally, it sought to nurture the dynamics of network governance. The EU developed a bottom-up approach to empower networks in Ireland and Wales to play a more active role in shaping the opportunities and constraints of cross-border cooperation. A mixture of strategic and spatial selectivity shaped the outcomes of Interreg Ireland-Wales.

By suggesting a SRA for the empirical study, the article seeks to contribute to the existing theoretical literature on the EU and on European cross-border cooperation. From a SRA perspective, the example of the Ireland-Wales Interreg sponsored cross-border cooperation illustrates how policy networks promise to overcome both the principle of separation that underlies territories and subordination within scalar and political hierarchies. At the same time, patterns and boundaries established by nation-state (or Member State) governments show how networks remain limited by and closely linked to democratic processes established at the European supranational level. Governments remained key actors in EU cross-border cooperation, networks neither replacing hierarchies nor threatening state boundaries. The concept of metagovernance emphasised nonetheless the specific role of the EU in aiding mixing different modes of interaction. While policy networks are important to link interdependent public and sub-state actors, they form only one element of the EU cross-border cooperation toolbox. The EU performs metagovernance in mixing networks, hierarchies and markets, using different techniques and programmes to control outcomes and cast a 'shadow of hierarchy' over processes encompassing different government and governance levels. For all these reasons, the EU deserves a space within the strategic-relational heuristic, because of its crucial metagoverning role.

What are the implications of Brexit for the future of Ireland-Wales relations? In itself, the loss of shared framework provided by EU membership complicates the relationship in a variety of ways. Adjustments made in response to Brexit changes – such as the development of new direct ferry routes from Ireland in order to bypass the GB 'land bridge' to continental Europe which take key business away from Welsh ports – add further complications. Equally, in contrast to the UK government, Ireland and Wales have both taken the East-West dimension of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement institutions seriously, committing the time of the most senior politicians to them. Even so, Brexit seems to have enhanced the appetite for a strong bi-lateral, high-level political relationship between the two polities. As well as the 2021 Joint Action plan, the re-establishment of

the Irish Consulate in Cardiff at the height of the vexed politics of Brexit in 2019 is a sign of this change. Dig beneath the general implications of losing shared EU membership, though, and the flourishing of Ireland-Wales relations may face a deeper risk. The specific character of EU metagovernance in convening Ireland-Wales Interreg programme created space for a wide variety of locally rooted relationships, connections and networks. For all the high-level political commitment to their relationship, it remains to be seen whether the Irish and Welsh governments can find ways to sustain the social, economic, cultural and local networks that Interreg has helped to engender – and that provided a foundation for the new politics of Ireland-Wales relations after Brexit.

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Interviews

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¹ Please visit <https://interreg.eu/about-interreg/> for details (last accessed on the 3/02/2020, at 1:00 pm).

² NUTS (Nomenclature of Territorial Units for Statistics) is a harmonised, hierarchical and nested classification of European territory at six levels (NUTS 0 to NUTS 6). Level 0 corresponds to the territories of the Member States and the EFTA member states associated with this classification. The regional level is divided into three parts: NUTS 1 corresponds to the most extensive regional level; NUTS 3 is an intermediate level. For several countries, particularly the smaller ones, certain levels do not exist (Wassenberg and Reitel 2015: p. 30).

³ For more information, please visit Ireland–Wales Operational Programme (2014–2020). Available at: <https://irelandwales.eu/sites/default/files/2016-04/150325citizensummary.pdf> (last accessed 03/01/2020).

⁴ A place-based policy is a long-term strategy aimed at tackling persistent underutilisation of potential and reducing persistent social exclusion in specific places through external interventions and governance. It promotes the supply of integrated goods and services tailored to contexts, and it triggers institutional changes. In a place-based policy, public interventions rely on local knowledge and are verifiable and submitted to scrutiny, while linkages among places are taken into account.

⁵ EC Regulations No 1083/2006 (Council Regulation) and 1080/2006 (Regulation of the EP and the Council).

⁶ See for example: ‘Welsh Sustainable Development Scheme’; ‘Wales: A Vibrant Economy’; ‘Making Ireland’s Development Sustainable – Review’, ‘Assessment and Future Action’.