Sinn Féin in the EU:
The Evolution of Self-Determination Policy Post Brexit

Executive Summary

The European Union is the most ambitious regional integration project in the world. Yet, as the supranational entity has expanded, so have the number of minority nationalist parties seeking independence from their respective member states.

There is much discussion in the literature about whether these parties trend pro- or anti-European. Sinn Féin is a Northern Irish republican party that has undergone an evolution in its EU policy. Brexit, and the related negotiations, have brought forth the issue of self-determination in Northern Ireland and the role of the European Union, twenty-years after the signing of the Good Friday Agreement ended the Troubles.

This paper traces Sinn Féin's EU policy from 1973 to the present and finds that the party has moved from opposition to critical engagement and, now, to a more positive partnership. Sinn Féin's EU policy in the Brexit era shows the long-term impacts of the Europeanisation of the peace process, offering an altered framework for self-determination in Northern Ireland.

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Introduction

In 2012, the European Union won a Nobel Peace Prize for its efforts to promote peace on the continent. There has been no armed conflict between member states over the last 70 years, a notable accomplishment for a region decimated by two world wars. As it has expanded, the EU has sought to mitigate conflict beyond its borders, both on the continent, where accession is often used as a bargaining tool[1], and outward, through the European External Action Service. However, post-Cold War conflicts have increasingly been fought between state actors and non-state actors within a country, and within its own borders, the EU has no set recourse for this kind of asymmetric warfare (Harbom and Wallensteen 2009).

These internal conflicts are overwhelmingly grounded in struggle for self-determination, a particularly thorny issue for the EU. The Troubles in Northern Ireland are perhaps the best-known example of a conflict within EU borders that has transitioned to peace. However, the tensions that defined that conflict remain central in the Northern Irish political arena. Brexit has called attention to those issues and raised questions about the EU, its role as a peace maker, and the effectiveness of advocating for self-determination within the EU.

While there is much discussion about nationalist parties within regions of the EU seeking independence, from Corsica to Flanders to Catalonia, it is crucial to include political parties with connections to violence, who underwent to conflict transformation, to evaluate the effects of peace processes. Understanding how secessionist political parties conceive of, and interact with, the EU can create insight on how to effectively move parties from violent action to peaceful political engagement.

This working paper will trace the evolution of Sinn Féin's EU policy from the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland joining the European Economic Community (EEC) through Brexit and look at Sinn Féin's transformed EU policy in the present moment. This paper posits that Brexit has caused a unique re-examination of the EU's influence on Sinn Féin's quest for self-determination, grounded in the Europeanisation of the peace process twenty years ago. Though the EU does not interfere in internal conflicts, it can offer an alternative to regions seeking self-determination.

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[1] This has been the case in the Balkans, Turkey, and Cyprus.

Europeanisation and Minority-Nationalist Parties

The European Union is the most ambitious undertaking of regional integration in existence, and as such, has been extensively studied. Europeanisation, an imperfect term to describe the integration process, comprises "the emergence of a distinctly European polity" and "the adaption of national and sub-national political systems" (Vachudova 2005; Ladrech 2002; Hix and Lord 1997; Lynch 1996.; Raunio 2002; Hellström 2008; Hooghe and Marks 2009; De Vries and Edwards 2009). This relationship is neither inherently convergent nor harmonious but rather is constantly in flux as EU capabilities expand.

While much of the literature focuses on the state, the entity that compromises membership, there is a growing interest in the effects of Europeanisation on political parties (Vachudova 2005; Ladrech 2002; Hix and Lord 1997; Lynch 2006; Raunio 2002; Hellström 2008; Hooghe, Marks 2009; De Vries and Edwards 2009). In part, because national parties operate as "carriers of European integration," (Hix and Lord 1997) in various aspects of their political systems from policy to organization to competition to party-government relations (Ladrech 2002). However, continued or further integration is not uniformly desired by national parties and various studies have examined Euroscepticism in Western Europe (Taggart 1998), Central and Eastern Europe (Taggart, Szczerbiak 2004; Kopecky, Mudde 2002), party ideology (Aspinwall 2002), and its sources (Hooghe, Marks 2009).

The Tension between Integration and Sovereignty

A key factor contributing to Euroscepticism is the tension between European integration and national sovereignty. Some sub-state actors have argued that the EU is rendering obsolete the state as the central political entity, opening up the possibility of a post-Westphalian order (Anderson, Goodman 1995; Tierney 2005; Keating 2001). Questions of sovereignty are of particular importance to ethno-regional parties[2], characterized by sub-national divisions and distinct cultural identities, which seek to mobilize for the interests of their territorial collectives (De Winter, Tursan 1998). Typically, the goal is some form of self-determination or independence from the state (De Winter, Tursan 1998, p. 210; Connolly 2013). Though it is important to note that the demands of can range from protectionist parties (soft demands) to secessionist parties (strong or radical demands) (Dandoy 2008).

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[2] It is important to note that a variety of terms are used to describe similar parties including ethno-regional, regional, minority, minority-nationalist.

While the EU is aware of these demands and willing to mediate, the institution is wary of overstepping member state sovereignty to intervene in conflict without consent. As a supranational organization, the EU obtains power through the pooling of sovereignty of its member states, this allows for shared competences over areas such as the internal market. EU treaty law grants member states, on behalf of their people, the right to join the EU by which they then renounce some of their right to self-determine in exchange for consensus decision-making on certain areas (Ushkovska 2019). Essential state functions remain the sole responsibility of the state which, as defined in the Treaty on European Union (2012), includes "ensuring the territorial integrity of the State, maintaining law and order and safeguarding national security." Intrastate asymmetric conflict has typically been understood to fall within those bounds.

Though the European Court of Justice (ECJ) has previously ruled that the United Nation's right of peoples to self-determine applies to EU law, this was in the context of de-colonization and the European Union has continued to defer to states.[3] In a letter to the President of the Catalan Government, then-European Commission (EC) President José Manuel Barroso, framed Catalonia's self-determination dispute as "a

question of internal organization related to the constitutional arrangements in the member State" (Kochenov, van den Brink 2016). Similarly, of Northern Ireland during the Troubles, EC President Jacques Delors said the he did not think the Commission had "a duty to interfere in the internal problem of a country, of a province," but was ready to "follow with friendship and enormous interest" (*Irish News*, 4 Nov. 1992). This understanding of sovereignty leaves the EU with limited options, dependent on the member state's behest, for conflict resolution within its own borders.

One such option is framing the EU's role not as an actor, but a vital space for parties to articulate their demands and project nationalist claims – whether through embracing or criticizing the EU (Keating 2002; 2004). In particular, the 1979 shift to direct representation in the European Parliament gave smaller parties more visibility. However, the rate of EU policies and initiatives has "created a tendency for nationalist parties to trail behind developments in European integration, with parties continually cast as reactor in relation to European policy." (Lynch 1996, p.184).

The EU Biases of Ethno-regional parties

There is extensive discussion in the literature on whether minority nationalist parties have pro- or

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[3] C-104/16 P, Council of the European Union v. Front Polisario, ECLI:EU:C:2016:973

anti-EU tendencies. One argument is that fringe parties are Eurosceptic because they reflect historical cleavage. Marks and Wilson (2000), drawing heavily from Lipset and Rokkan (1967)'s theory of social cleavages, posit that the centre-periphery relationship defines nationalist parties' strategies. Views on European integration are integrated into those existing beliefs that oppose the centre (Marks, Wilson 2000, p.439). The underlying premise being that fringe parties, including ethno-regional parties, reject oversight and control on any level – both national and supranational.

Other studies make the opposite argument: that minority nationalist parties have trended pro-EU. European integration is still incorporated into existing platforms, but positively, in an attempt to "increase the legitimacy and validity of their movements,", such as the Scottish Nationalist Party's 'Independence in Europe' platform (Jolly 2007; p.145, p.113). The EU is seen as a sanctioned actor that can give "legitimacy to parties which might have controversial positions in the domestic political landscape" (Spirova 2012). This is particularly relevant for parties with strong secessionist demands. A few minority nationalist parties have formed a European-level party (the European Free Alliance) to promote cross-border advocacy of their goals within the EU (De Winter and Cachafeiro 2002).

There is a substantial body of work that adopts a more nuanced approach to this debate, accounting for internal dynamics as well. Elias (2009) presents four possible categories of EU bias for any type of political party: euro-enthusiast, euro-reject, euro-skeptic, or euro-pragmatist. A party's categorization is based not just on their view of Europeanisation, but also party ideology and the dynamics of party competition. Both euro-enthusiasts and euro-pragmatists support the EU, but these labels acknowledge different motivations. Similarly, Kopecky and Mudde (2002) highlight a distinction between diffuse and specific support for the EU: the former being support for the ideas of European integration while the latter is support for the EU itself.

Lynch (1996) suggests a similar grouping approach, outlining three potential positions that minority nationalist parties have towards the EU: incompatible (it undermines national sovereignty and political and economic autonomy), compatible (the EU and these groups have together contributed to the demise of the centralized nation state), and regarding the EU as an external support system which shares sovereignty in vital areas (Lynch 1996, p.17). Lynch acknowledges that this not a static space as parties are located in a nexus of continuous change and adopt various, evolving linkage strategies to align with their views.

Chaney (2014), in studying trends of minority national party manifestos in the United

Kingdom, echoes the centralism of pragmatism within party strategy, finding a shift in the UK towards "instrumental Europeanism." Parties have shifted from viewing the EU as the path to obtain autonomy to viewing the EU "as part of their efforts to attract electoral support and thus fulfill their constitutional goals" (Chaney 2014, p.465). The EU is no longer seen as the principle route to autonomy but, whether acting as a foil or a partner, it remains an active space from which to advocate.

The Political History of Sinn Féin

Since the partition of Ireland in 1921, the central goal of Sinn Féin, which translates to "we, ourselves" has been the reunification of the island of Ireland. This irredentist claim is central to Sinn Féin's campaigns in each of its political arenas, which include the Northern Ireland Assembly, the Parliament of the United Kingdom[4], the Dáil Éireann[5], and the European Parliament.

Sinn Féin has undergone a substantial evolution from political wing of the Irish Republican Army (IRA), a republican paramilitary, to an established governing party in devolved government. Its modern iteration came out of the provisional Sinn Féin faction of a 1970 organizational split. In the 1980s, the party began to focus more on winning political

representation, developing in conjunction with the IRA, an 'armalite and ballot box' strategy, seeking simultaneous military and electoral influence (Ushkovska 2019). The 1981 election of hunger striker Bobby Sands as a Member of Parliament for Fermanagh and South Tyrone, the party's first MP in Westminster since partition, marked an electoral turning point (McKittrick, McVea 2012). Throughout the latter half of the conflict, Sinn Féin also ran candidates for local office in Northern Ireland and for the Dáil Éireann with limited success ("Northern Ireland Election" 2020).

The 1990s saw a recalibration of the political problem by the British government, which affected Republican openness to negotiations, notably Northern Ireland Secretary Peter Brooke's speech that "the British government has no selfish strategic or economic interest in Northern Ireland" (McKittrick, McVea 2012, p.329) as well as the Downing Street Declaration. There was also dialogue within the nationalist community through the Hume-Adams talks. Following these new dialogues, the IRA called its first cessation of military action in 1994, a turning point that marked the beginning of the end of most large-scale violence in the conflict (McKittrick, McVea 2012).

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[4] Sinn Féin MPs follow a long-standing policy of abstentionism in Westminster

[5] the Lower House of the Irish Parliament

Any negotiations for peace were dependent on the cooperation of the British and Irish governments, but the process was also buoyed by international support, in particular from US President Bill Clinton who nominated George Mitchell as Special Envoy in 1995. Multi-party negotiations got under way, but they excluded Sinn Féin until the IRA, which had renewed military activity, called a second ceasefire. With a ceasefire in September 1997, Sinn Féin signed onto the Mitchell Principles (1996) which affirmed a commitment by negotiating parties to peaceful resolve political issues, disarm paramilitary organizations, and renounce violence and joined negotiations.

The eventual outcome of negotiations, the Belfast Agreement, also known as the Good Friday Agreement (1998), is made up of a multi-party agreement between Northern Irish political parties and an international agreement between the British and Irish governments. Strand 1 established the Northern Ireland Assembly, which would require cross-community voting on key issues, and the Northern Ireland Executive, a power-sharing executive. The Agreement also clearly defined self-determination on the island:

"…that it is for the people of the island of Ireland alone, by agreement between the two parts respectively and without external impediment, to exercise their right of self-determination on the basis of consent, freely and concurrently given, North and South, to bring about a united Ireland, if that is their wish, accepting that this right must be achieved and exercised with and subject to the agreement and consent of a majority of the people of Northern Ireland." - Article 1(ii), Good Friday Agreement (1998)

The agreement thus recognizes the right of the people of Ireland to self-determine but ties it to the agreement of both parts of the island as well as the consent of a majority of the people of Northern Ireland.

Power sharing came into effect in December 1999 with the formal return of devolved government to Northern Ireland, with Sinn Fein winning 18 seats, though government has been suspended numerous times since due to breakdown in power-sharing arrangements (Whyte 2002). Demobilization of sectarian paramilitaries was a slower process and some fringe groups remain active (McKittrick, McVea 2012). While the United States was enmeshed in the peace process, the European Union, though referenced in the GFA, only became an active participant in the transition period. Primarily through the PEACE programme, which is in its fifth iteration and has contributed over €1.5 billion to Northern Ireland (Kolodziejski 2020).

In 2007, five years into the existence of the Northern Ireland Assembly, Sinn Féin overtook the Social Democratic and Labor Party (SDLP) to become the largest nationalist party and thus a governing party in the executive. Currently, Sinn

Féin has 27 seats in Stormont and governs through power-sharing with the largest unionist party, the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP). Sinn Féin has also steadily increased its seats in Westminster, where it now has seven MPs, and in the the Dáil Éireann, winning an unprecedented 37 seats in the most recent elections.

In 2004, Sinn Féin got its first Member of the European Parliament (MEP) elected, Bairbre de Brún for Northern Ireland, who held the seat until 2012 and was succeeded by Martina Anderson until Northern Ireland left the European Union as a part of Brexit in January 2020. Sinn Féin has also won European Parliament seats in the Republic of Ireland beginning with Mary Lou McDonald, now party president, in 2004 (Frampton 2005). The number of Irish Sinn Féin MEPs has fluctuated in subsequent elections and now stands at just one: Chris MacManus, who replaced Matt Carthy in March 2020.

Sinn Féin has evolved from the political protest arm of a paramilitary group to an established political party, winning representation in all four arenas that the party runs in as well as governing in Northern Ireland. The party's central goal of self-determination has remained, as have sectarian tensions, yet party messaging and strategy on how to achieve reunification have evolved immensely post-conflict most notably within the EU.

Tracing Sinn Féin's EU Policy

Post conflict, Sinn Féin has sought to distance itself from past connections to violence and further establish itself as a traditional political party, now running candidates from the local level up to a European-wide stage on a platform of reunification. Political parties evolve as benefits their political realities. Sinn Féin's EU strategy is a noteworthy example of this, moving from outright rejection to critical engagement. After an initial rejectionist policy, Sinn Féin has largely remained as a consistent, critical participant in the European project for the past twenty years. Brexit has profoundly changed that position, creating more positive incentive for seeking EU involvement, particularly in Irish reunification. Sinn Fein's goal of self-determination cannot be divorced from the process of Europeanisation.

The different eras of policy can be divided into three sections: pre-peace agreement, pre-Brexit, and post-Brexit. In the first two time periods, the party underwent a gradual evolution from firm rejectionist of the EU to critically engaged, while post-referendum, there was a shift towards a more positive understanding of the EU's role in Sinn Féin's goal of self-determination.

Previous works have detailed Sinn Féin's transformation from strong opposition to critical engagement (Doyle 2005; Frampton 2005).

These accounts were written a year or so after the election of Sinn Féin's first MEP, which marked a turning point for the party's EU involvement, but do not account for the past 15 years.

Pre-Peace to Pre-Brexit

Sinn Féin was vehemently opposed to the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland joining the EEC in 1973. Leading up to the Republic of Ireland's referendum on membership, Sinn Féin campaigned for a "no" vote against what it saw as an imperial power whose goal was to further exploit (Sinn Féin 1972). As a former General Secretary of Sinn Féin explained, the party was "very perplexed at the idea of surrendering sovereignty to an even bigger entity than Britain."[6] Though the referendum passed, Sinn Féin ran no candidates in the first few European Parliament elections as part of its rejectionist stance. The party's platform, as outlined in manifestos, called for withdrawal from the EEC, opposition to EEC economic policies which "reemphasized partition", and "for a national sovereignty, for a Free Ireland in a Free Europe" (Sinn Féin 1984). Likewise, the party campaigned against any move to expand the EEC and its capabilities further, such as the Maastricht treaty.[7]

This refusal to engage ended in the 1990s and was replaced by a period of critical engagement. This shift coincided with a few events: Ireland ratifying the Maastricht Treaty by referendum, Sinn Féin abstentionist candidates failing to gain traction, and the beginnings of the peace process (O'Mahony 2009). In 1993, at its ard fheis[8], members moved for the party to develop a Europe policy (Frampton 2005). This move towards more active engagement also coincided with calls for international involvement in the peace process (Adams 1993; Sinn Féin 1994). The party went so far as to establish an office in Brussels to explain to the EU, "the need for the international community to play a more active and political role in regard to Ireland if a just and lasting peace is to be achieved" ("International Sinn Féin" 1996).

Despite welcoming international involvement in the peace process, the party's skeptical posture continued post-conflict as all political parties in Northern Ireland recalibrated to the new political environment. The party's 1999 manifesto recognized the EU as a "key terrain for political struggle" and categorized its engagement as one "in a critical manner" (Sinn Féin 1999). Sinn Féin still had no representation in the European Parliament though Northern Ireland and the border region of the Republic of Ireland began to receive substantial EU funding,

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[6] Mitchell McLaughlin, interview by author, Derry/Londonderry, February 28, 2020.

[7] Martina Anderson, interview by author, Belfast, March 10, 2020.
[8] annual party conference

€667 million between 1995 – 1999, as a part of the PEACE programme (Bush, Houston 2011). Yet, despite the EU's support for peace, Sinn Féin continued to oppose any form of EU expansion – campaigning for "No" votes on referendums for the Treaty of Amsterdam and the Treaty of Nice (Crowe 1998; Sinn Féin 2001).

Sinn Féin's 2004 EU manifesto, titled "an Ireland of equals in a Europe of equals," called for the EU to "take a role in ensuring the speedy end to all occupations and enforced partitions" around the world "but especially at home" (Sinn Féin 2004). The party saw its "just call for an end to the British military occupation of a part of our island and for Irish reunification" as the next logical step for the EU after "endorse[ing] the peace process in our country." Sinn Féin won seats in the EP for the first time in the 2004 elections, one each in the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland. The party joined the European United Left-Nordic Green Left (GUE/NGL) political group, which consisted of other leftist parties who sought EU reform.

Once in office, Sinn Féin MEPs continued to critique the institution and the party campaigned for a "no" vote on the Treaty establishing an EU constitution, criticizing it as a step towards a superstate that further took away from national sovereignty (McDonald 2004; Sinn Féin 2003, 2004, 2015). Though even while campaigning for a "no" vote, the party stressed that voting "no" to the treaty did not mean

voting "no" to the existence of the EU and it would remain a member regardless – a far cry from past calls to leave the EEC entirely (McDonald 2005). Sinn Féin also continued to call for EU support in Irish reunification, launching a document in 2006 on the topic, and hosting an "international inquiry into Irish unity in Brussels which considered the role the EU could play in the reunification of Ireland" (Sinn Féin 2006, 2014). In office, Sinn Féin's platform broadened beyond reunification to identify more specific left leaning policy concerns within the EU such as economic governance and the eradication of poverty (Sinn Fein 2003).

Sinn Fein's 2009 and 2014 EP manifestos further built on the 2004 manifesto, stating that "Ireland's place is in the European Union – but the European Union needs to change" and also to "build support in Europe for Irish reunification". The 2014 manifesto listed Irish unity as one of its top five key priorities in the EU (Sinn Féin 2009, 2014). Sinn Féin also commended the EP for passing a resolution that supported furthering the Northern Irish peace process (Anderson 2014a, 2014b). In both of these elections, Sinn Féin sent back representatives and its work in the EU continued to expand, though calls for Irish reunification were consistent, the party developed policy on all levels from youth unemployment to the Common Agricultural Policy.

Brexit Leadup

Sinn Féin was one of the last parties in Northern Ireland to declare its campaign intentions for the Brexit referendum, in this case for the "Remain" vote. The majority of the party's action centered around vague statements by current MEPs and party leadership about the EU's "huge contribution" and "benefits" and a warning that "withdrawal would be disastrous" (Morrow, Byrne 2016; Anderson 2014c; McGuiness 2015; O'Neill 2015). The statements were broad, but the party tried to maintain a balanced narrative that it supported EU membership, "but that support d[id] not translate to unconditional approval for the EU's direction" (Boylan 2019). Though removed from its earlier calls for complete withdrawal, the party had been an active, and vocal, critic of the EU. Campaigning for Brexit, while not erasing these criticisms, did refocus on the positives of EU memberships and according to Sinn Féin leadership, "strengthened the relationship with the European Union[9]". EU membership was important for its "potential to provide a bridge towards the greater integration of Ireland, north and south" a key benefit that the party did not want to forego despite other criticisms (Adams 2015).

When the "leave" vote won, Sinn Féin's pro-EU position was now on even more familiar ground: a British government that was going against Northern Irish dissent. Sinn Féin thus found itself in an unexpected alliance with the European Union, which had been much quicker to grasp the potential disastrous consequences of Brexit for Irish peace.

Post Brexit

The repercussion of the unexpected success of the "Leave" vote and resulting Brexit negotiations have had the greatest impact on Northern Irish-EU relations since the signing of the Good Friday Agreement, highlighting the legacy of the Europeanisation of the peace process. In response, Sinn Féin has shifted its political strategy towards the European Union. Though still critical of the institution, the party has, throughout the negotiation period, emphasized the EU's understanding and support of Northern Ireland, highlighted the cost of leaving the EU, and endeavored to positively link self-determination to EU membership.

While Brexit occurred on January 31, 2020, the transition period will last through the end of the year as both sides seeks seek to negotiate the details of the exit and avoid a "no-deal" Brexit. In June, at the mid-year meeting, the UK government rejected any negotiation extension even as Northern Ireland continues to be a

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[9] Mitchell McLaughlin, interview by author, Derry/Londonderry, February 28, 2020.

sticking point (O'Neill 2020). With or without a deal on the future of the UK-EU relationship, the transition period will end on December 31, 2020. For Sinn Féin, the European Union will continue to be a viable electoral arena through the Republic of Ireland.

EU Involvement

While the decision to leave the European Union was made by voters in the United Kingdom, the referendum was of obvious importance to the EU who, like Sinn Féin, wanted the UK to remain a member. Now the EU is seeking a Brexit deal that protects crucial EU interests, such as the single market (European Council 2016). Within the EU, the Republic of Ireland, as a member state, border country to the United Kingdom, and a signatory to the Good Friday Agreement, stands to be disproportionately affected by Brexit. To ensure its best interests, the Irish government campaigned in Northern Ireland for a "Remain" vote and, after that loss, won reassurance from the EU that it "will stand fully behind" the Republic of Ireland in negotiations (Wintour 2016; Carroll 2019)."

Due to Sinn Féin's policy of abstentionism in Westminster and the numerous breakdowns of Northern Ireland devolved government, most recently for three crucial years of Brexit negotiations, the EU, specifically the European Parliament, has offered a consistent,

sympathetic platform, for Sinn Féin to advocate for its interests. Prior to the referendum, the EU was notably quicker than the British government to grasp the unique difficulties that Brexit could present for Northern Ireland. The British government, including then-Secretary of State for Northern Ireland Teresa Villiers, dismissed any concerns as "highly irresponsible" (Burke 2016; Morrow, Byrne 2016; O'Toole 2017; *Belfast Telegraph* 2016).

Conversely, the EU has experience with many of the key points of tensions specific to Northern Ireland, including maintaining a border between an EU member state and a non-member state, reunifying a country within the EU[10], and overseeing the continued implementation of peace agreements. After the referendum, the European Parliament commissioned a study on the GFA and the challenges posed by UK withdrawal (Phinnemore, Hayward, 2017). The EC's Head of the UK Task Force Michel Barnier has repeatedly spoken on the difficulties for Northern Ireland as the "part of the UK most impacted by Brexit" (Michel Barnier 2020). Yet, to this day, the British government continues to sideline Northern Irish concerns and make false statements about the realities of implementing Brexit at the end of the year. Most recently, the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee in

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[10] German reunification was an enlarged continuation of former West Germany within the EEC.

Westminster condemned the British government for its "unclear and inconsistent communication" and "lamentable lack of engagement" on the Northern Ireland Protocol (Northern Ireland Affairs Committee 2020). Sinn Féin, alongside other pro-Remain parties and the EU, has called for the EU to re-establish a diplomatic presence in Northern Ireland - a request that the British government has rejected (McClements 2020).

The Cost of Leaving

Brexit has pushed Sinn Féin to articulate the benefits of EU membership for Northern Ireland, including in its fight for self-determination. In contrast to Vote Leave's campaign to "Vote Leave, Take Control,"[11] Sinn Féin has endeavored to communicate the benefits that Northern Ireland loses by leaving the EU, including funding, open borders, and citizenship rights. The party sees Brexit as threat to peace in Northern Ireland and to the implementation of the Good Friday Agreement which covers all of the aforementioned issues.

The EU has contributed extensive funding towards peace in Northern Ireland. The region has received over €1.5 billion through the EU's PEACE programme which former Sinn Féin MEP Martin Anderson said, "has made a huge impact in terms of building and strengthening communities and promoting reconciliation" (Anderson 2017a). In 2017, Sinn Féin published a paper on how to fight the negative economic impact of Brexit including granting Northern Ireland special status and continuing EU funding (Sinn Féin 2017). The party has also warned that loss of these funding streams would "cripple the North," which already has a weak regional economy compared to the rest of the United Kingdom (Anderson 2015; FitzGerald 2019). While Sinn Féin has campaigned for, and secured, an EU commitment to main Interreg and PEACE funding through 2027, there is no guarantee beyond that, though the party has expressed its interest (Sinn Féin 2019a).

As previously mentioned, the Irish border has emerged as one of the largest stumbling blocks in Brexit negotiations. Sinn Fein Vice President Michelle O'Neill has said that EU membership created "seamless trade" and employment in "key sectors" across an open border (O'Neill 2019). The party has called for continued "freedom of movement" and "seamless all-island commerce" after Brexit (Sinn Féin 2019b). Though Sinn Féin, and many other parties, successfully pushed to avoid a hard border on the island, as detailed in the Protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland in the Withdrawal Agreement Bill, there will be an Irish sea border, meaning goods that cross from the United

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http://www.voteleavetakecontrol.org/why_vote_leave.html

Kingdom to Northern Ireland must go through customs checks. Sinn Féin has demanded that the EU ensure "the full and timely implementation of the Withdrawal Agreement," specifically the Irish protocol ensures avoidance of a hard border (MacManus 2020). Yet, the only guidance that has been made available so far by the UK government lacks specifics (Prime Minister's Office 2020). As a global pandemic limited the availability of both sides to meet in person, Sinn Féin, alongside other pro-Remain parties, called for an extension of the negotiations period, which the UK government rejected (O'Neill 2020). The Specialised Committee on issues related to the implementation of the Protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland, one of six specialised committees, met for the first time on April 30 and included only one representative from the Northern Ireland Executive (Cabinet Office 2020).

Sinn Féin has also raised concerns that Brexit will deprive Irish citizens of their rights. The Good Friday Agreement grants Northern Irelanders the right to choose Irish, British, or dual citizenship. Former MEP Martina Anderson spoke before the European Parliament and warned that Brexit would deny those with Irish citizenship in Northern Ireland their right to representation in the EU (Anderson 2018a). Earlier on in the Brexit negotiations period, Sinn Féin advocated for a special Ireland North Consistency to be established in the European Parliament, giving the North 2 MEPs after Brexit. Sinn Féin submitted a report to the EU Constituency Commission making its case (Sinn Féin 2018). However, instead, the European Parliament gave the two additional seats to the Republic of Ireland (EP Liaison Office in Ireland 2020). Sinn Féin also supported the case of Emma DeSouza, an Irish citizen born in Londonderry/Derry who brought a case against the UK Home Office for rejecting her application, in which she identified herself as an Irish citizen, because it considered her a British citizen (Ó Donnghaile 2019, Adams 2019). In May 2020, the UK government conceded that those born in the North would be considered EU citizens for immigration purposes, but only until the scheme closes in June 2021 (McCormack 2020).

Self-Determination and Brexit

While consistently a plank of Sinn Féin's platform, Brexit brought the issue of self-determination back to the forefront of the party's EU work. Though self-determination refers to the right of a people to nationally self-determine, Sinn Féin's goal of self-determination is intertwined with its right to determine EU membership. Supranational institutions, like the EU, require a form of collective determination that asks members to give up some sovereignty to join. The 'Leave' campaign framed Brexit as a way to protect, and gain back, the UK's sovereignty as an

independent country; Sinn Féin's support for EU membership, and the right to choose that membership, was linked to its goal for a united Ireland (Grayling 2016). Documented grievances aside, for Sinn Féin, "the relationship with Europe is much more positive, and less kind of dominating, then the relationship with Britain."[12]

Sinn Féin has repeatedly called on the EU to respect Northern Ireland's Brexit vote as a means to support the Good Friday Agreement. In the European Parliament, MEP Martina Anderson called for the EU to support, stand up for, and respect the Northern Irish vote to "Remain" as a way to protect the peace agreement, a document which defines the right to self-determination in the north (Anderson 2019a, 2018b, 2017b, 2017c, 2017d, 2016). Sinn Féin also hosted a European Parliament conference titled "Post Brexit: Towards A United Ireland?" that sought to explore with a European audience what the future could look like (Sinn Féin 2019). Sinn Féin's 2019 European manifesto was titled "all Ireland in Europe" and while it cited the consistent need for EU reform, it also held the position that Northern Ireland should not be "dragged out" and pointed to the need to build support for a unified Ireland in Europe (Sinn Féin 2019).

For voters who might not feel strongly about reunification on the island of Ireland but do feel strongly about the benefits of EU membership, Sinn Féin has highlighted re-unification as a practical way to regain EU membership (Adams 2020; McDonald 2020). The European Council, came to the conclusion in 'EUCO XT 20010/17' (2017) that "in accordance with international law, the entire territory of such a united Ireland would thus be part of the European Union". Thus, if Ireland, under the requirements outlined by the GFA, re-united, then the entire isle of Ireland would automatically acquire membership as one entity. This differs from the often cited case of Scottish independence where the EU has said that if Scotland becomes a country, independent of the United Kingdom, then it would not automatically become a sperate EU member state but would have to re-apply for membership and go through the ascension process (Salamone 2020; Anderson 2019b). Thus, Sinn Féin has argued Irish unity is the solution to Brexit. Generally, as a way "back into the EU for citizens in the North", but also as a way to solve technical problems, arguing that "resolving the issue of partition, resolves the issue of the border and the fiendishly complicated trading arrangements that they're going to have to make" (Adams 2020).[13] Reuniting Ireland is not just a republican goal,

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[12] Mitchell McLaughlin, interview by author, Derry/Londonderry, February 28, 2020.

[13] Mitchell McLaughlin, interview by author, Derry/Londonderry, February 28, 2020.

but a practical answer to the complication caused by Brexit.

Conclusions

As opposed to earlier efforts to promote Irish unification within the European Union, Brexit clearly reoriented and refocused Sinn Féin's political strategy to more explicitly lay out the capabilities and experiences of EU partnership, the cost to Northern Ireland of leaving the EU, and re-framing self-determination as both an EU issue and a solution to EU issues. Brexit, perhaps conversely, has created new connections between remaining in the EU and pursuing self-determination. For Sinn Féin, there is no united Ireland that is not a part of the European Union.

While absent from negotiations, the EU's contribution to the Irish peace process was to provide a common framework for the British and Irish governments to act within, as well as extensive funding throughout the post-conflict period (Morrow, Byrne 2016). The two countries saw themselves "as partners in the European Union" and their EU membership guaranteed that whether Northern Ireland remained a part of the UK or reunited with the Republic of Ireland, the region would remain within the EU. If Europeanisation is understood as the process in which groups interpret the EU, then there is a clear Europeanisation of the Good Friday Agreement which is underpinned by "the common framework of European Union law and

Union policies" (Phinnemore, Hayward 2017). This includes the right of the people of Northern Ireland to self-determine which is defined, and protected, in the GFA.

Brexit has become a reworking of the peace process or, at the very least, a test of the agreement's stability without the structure of European integration. Though Brexit is the disintegration of the UK as an EU member state, it is also a shift in the relationship between the UK and the Republic of Ireland, which disproportionately affects Northern Ireland. All parties have reaffirmed their commitment to upholding the agreement, but the major stumbling blocks in negotiations continued to be related to issues covered in the agreement: the border, citizenship, and the right to self-determine (Phinnemore, Hayward 2017). All of the concerns engendered a clear change in Sinn Féin's approach to see more support for the EU's role.

Though it is a challenge for Sinn Féin to balance continued criticism of the EU with praise for its Brexit stance, it is not incongruous. Sinn Féin has affirmed in recent years that it wants to stay within the system and seek the necessary change from within. The EU has not changed its stance on intervening in internal conflict or supporting self-determination effort, but its support of Northern Ireland during Brexit has reframed the issue for Sinn Féin. Brexit has created a binary that did not exist before:

Northern Ireland can be in the UK or it can be in the EU, upon reunification with the Republic of Ireland.

When a conflict is about self-determination then the peace cannot be separated from self-determination. One of the defining aspects of the GFA was that it defined how legal reunification could occur, and it tied together self-determination with the consent of the majority in both the North and South. For Sinn Féin, a party whose central goal is self-determination and the reunification of the island of Ireland, any change to the conditions of self-determination are impactful. Though Brexit has not changed the requirements for self-determination in Northern Ireland, it did change the surrounding circumstances. Self-determination for the North of Ireland is now also a choice of being in the EU or not.

List of Abbreviations

DUP – Democratic Unionist Party

ECJ – European Court of Justice

EC – European Commission

EEC – European Economic Community

EP – European Parliament

EU – European Union

GFA – Good Friday Agreement

GUE/NGL – Cofederal Group of the European United Left - Nordic Green Left

IRA – Irish Republican Army

MEP – Member of the European Parliament

MP – Member of Parliament

SDLP – Social Democratic and Labor Party

UK – United Kingdom

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