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European networks, domestic governance and the second-order effects of Brexit

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Abstract:

This article explores the meaning of European network membership for state, sub-state and non-state actors in the UK. We adopt a comparative research approach to investigate how different UK-based actors use European structures to advance their domestic agendas, taking the Employment Committee, the Committee of the Regions and the European Women's Lobby's Observatory on Violence Against Women as case studies. We analyse new empirical data from interviews with policy actors to identify and explore resource dependencies between network actors. Our findings reveal a range of resource dependencies acting to bind actors within European networks, with the nature and significance of these dependencies varying across network/actor types. We argue that European network membership has notable implications for domestic governance which highlights a range of considerations for domestic governance in the UK post-Brexit.

Key words:

European governance; Networks; Multi-level governance; Brexit

Word count:

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Introduction

This article seeks to reveal the significance of European network membership for state, sub-state and non-state institutions in the UK and, in turn, the potential impact of Brexit. The starting point for our analysis is the less tangible and often overlooked governance dimension of European Union (EU) integration, as diverse actors and organisations ‘plug in’ to the European political system. With Brexit set to reconfigure this privileged access, a raft of questions have arisen about the role and significance of this less-visible dimension of EU membership. Indeed, however Brexit plays out over the coming years, gaining a better understanding of this complex multi-level system of governance has become an important focus of contemporary research and the primary objective of this article. As such, our research is organised around two questions. Firstly, how do different actors in the UK use their access to European networks? Secondly, how might Brexit reconfigure access to and participation within these networks, and to what effect?

Our research provides a cross-cutting analysis over three different types of networks which, in turn, capture different types of actors. As case studies, we have selected the Employment Committee (or EMCO, comprised of Member State officials), the Committee of the Regions (CoR, which captures sub-state actors from the European Regions), and the European Women’s Lobby (EWL) Observatory on Violence Against Women (‘the Observatory’, which sits as part of a civil society organisation and is comprised of Member State experts). These actors were selected based on their distances from the UK’s core executive: from UK officials (EMCO), to sub-state politicians and officials (CoR), to non-state actors (the Observatory). Through our analysis, we reveal the ways in which these diverse sets of actors have used their privileged access to the European political system in terms of the opportunities provided and the resources gained. To guide our analyses we situate our research in the governance approach and draw from Resource Dependency Theory (RDT). RDT provides a useful lens through which to analyse not only why actors form networks, but importantly for our case, the benefits they gain. RDT understands actors to establish and maintain links based on the mutually beneficial exchange of resource (e.g. information, money) (RDT, see e.g. Pfeffer and Salancik, 2003, Casciaro and Piskorski 2005). We use this theory to analyse new empirical data from semi-structured interviews with policy actors as well as data drawn from policy texts. In so doing, we gain valuable insight into the various meanings of European network membership and participation for different actors. In addition to generalisable findings which are applicable across Member State cases, in the case of the UK, this analysis is a crucial first step to grasp the potential governance implications as this privileged access is reconfigured in some way through Brexit.

Our article is organised as follows. To begin, in the first section we situate our research within the governance literature, outline our theoretical approach and present our methodology. In the next section, we address the first research question through analysis of our empirical data across our three case studies, revealing the range of ways that UK-based actors use their access to European networks. We close this section with a comparative look across the three cases, highlighting the similarities and differences between them with respect to membership, participation and how the impact of participation is understood by the actors involved. In the following section, we draw on these findings to explore the second research question, highlighting the potential for continuity and change in network access and participation in the context of Brexit, and the impacts of any reconfiguration. Our findings and analysis highlight that those with the most to lose from a loss of access (i.e. where there are higher levels of resource exchange and dependency) were those furthest from the core executive and who also operated at sub-state levels of governance. In this regard, the impact of the UK leaving the EU is likely to have profound implications on the established patterns of governance in the UK and specifically on the participation of certain UK based actors in the democratic process.

Governance networks and the EU

The emergence of the governance approach to EU studies is both well-documented and theorised (e.g. Hix 1994; Kohler-Koch and Rittberger 2006). The complexity of contemporary policy problems and the absence of a single 'ruler', combined with the electorate's rising expectations about what modern government should deliver, requires governments to look beyond their traditional capabilities and engage in cooperation and joint resource mobilisation with policy actors outside their hierarchical control. The modern policy process is one in which numerous different actors from both the public and the private combine to pool resources, identify common problems and find common solutions. Within this broader governance literature, scholars from the multilevel governance approach analyse the shift from government to governance in the context of the consequences for the traditional nation state (Marks et al 1996; Piattoni 2009). In the EU, politics and policies are the result of interactions between the EU institutions, the Member States, regions and interest groups. This transformation has eroded the sovereignty of the European nation state in several directions, most notably to the European level and the subnational level (local and regional). The result is a weakened nation state and strengthened European and subnational levels. While the multi-level governance approach was first introduced to capture developments within EU Structural Policy (which made the administration of the funds subject to partnerships between local, national and supranational authorities) it has been applied to a broader range of EU decision-making areas (Knill and Liefferink 2007; Smith 2004). The

extent to which the EU is a genuine multi-level governance entity (beyond a few policy areas) remains an open question. However, even though it may not be a *fait accompli*, it is clear that as an emerging and evolving polity the EU has been moving towards a multi-level system of governance, within which Europeanisation has itself accompanied and intersected with regionalisation (e.g. Cole and Palmer 2011; López and Tatham 2018; Tatham 2018) and sub-state actors have been able to assert their distinct preferences at a supranational level (e.g.; Tatham 2018). A clear indication of this is the importance that regions place on engagement with Europe within the bounds of resource constraints. This engagement reflects the distinctive relationships that exist between the EU and EU regions, and are particularly pronounced in the case of the EU and the devolved nations in the UK whose devolution settlements have been shaped by the UK's EU membership (Hunt 2010). The relationships between Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland and the EU reflect the devolution settlements, but also their different financial relationships with the EU, their key industries and the significance of the Single Market and the Customs Union, their culture and their political preferences (Minto et al 2016). Even since prior to devolution, actors across the devolved nations (including but beyond government) have actively sought to engage with the European political system, recognising the potential of this engagement (Minto and Morgan 2019).

There is an extensive body of literature analysing interest group formation in an EU context (e.g. Mazey and Richardson 1993; Cohen and Richardson 2009). Broadly speaking, interest groups organise to influence EU institutions and move between different coalitions and different policy domains in an attempt to 'venue-shop'. Within this paper we adopt a broader lens to fully capture the dynamics and understand interest groups as being one of several political actors participating in EU governance. Therefore, EU political actors, understood as interest groups, bureaucrats and politicians, organise themselves at a supranational level in an attempt to advance their domestic agendas. The increased competences of the EU and changes in the distribution of power throughout the 1980s and 1990s (whereby policy decisions were increasingly taken at the EU level) have incentivised political actors to shift attention beyond domestic structures. The broader literature on networks conceptually frames the analysis by highlighting other factors pushing actors to participate in EU-level activity. Resource Dependency Theory (RDT) - coined in the seminal contribution by Pfeffer and Salancik (1978) - assumes actors are instrumental, rational and power-driven (James and Christopoulos 2018: 520). In function of imbalances in power and mutual dependencies between actors (Casciaro and Piskorski 2005), actors form voluntary ties to facilitate cooperation and collaboration for the purpose of mutually beneficial exchanges of scarce resources with the overall aim of bolstering their position and

advancing their agenda. This resource could be 'monetary or physical resources, information or social legitimacy' (Pfeffer & Salancik, 2003, p. 43). The overall result of these dynamics is a complex system of resource dependencies between actors. Today, networks are an institutionalised aspect of EU governance. Notably, access to these networks is related to EU membership, with political actors from EU Member States having privileged and often exclusive access.

Our research is organised around two questions. Firstly, how do different actors in the UK use their access to European networks? Secondly, how might Brexit reconfigure access to and participation within these European networks and to what effect? The responses to these questions expose the variety of different ways in which actors use their access to European networks and the subsequent consequences for domestic governance. The case studies in this research have been chosen owing to their distance from the UK's core executive: from UK officials (EMCO), to sub-state politicians and officials (CoR), to non-state actors (the Observatory). Our research draws on several sources of data, including official EU documents and texts from European civil society organisations (CSOs); the existing academic literature surrounding the three case studies; and 14 anonymous semi-structured interviews with policy actors from European, state and sub-national levels of governance. Interviewees were chosen owing to their direct involvement with and privileged perspectives on the three case studies. The triangulation of data was pursued to verify the research findings. The findings from the semi-structured interviews were verified against each other, and/or official documents and the secondary literature.

Findings

This section presents the findings from analysis, taking each case in turn: the Employment Committee, the Committee of the Regions and the Observatory on Violence Against Women.

Networking from the Core Executive: The Employment Committee

The Employment Committee (EMCO) originates from the 1997 Amsterdam Treaty changes. It was established with the purpose of supporting and advising the Employment, Social Policy, Health and Consumer Affairs Council as part of the European Employment Strategy (EES). The EES is the EU's system of governance which aims to encourage the Member States to reform their employment policies towards a variety of different policy orientations, such as the current target to increase the employment rate to 75% (European Commission 2010). The EES provides the prime example of a co-ordination mode of policy-making in an area where the EU does not have the power to create

harmonising legislation. As such, Member State activity is coordinated around mutually agreed frameworks through the use of soft policy tools, such as targets, indicators and benchmarks. The EES is an iterative governance process involving the adoption of common guidelines and the annual reporting of progress by the Member States to the Commission and the Council. In areas of policy weakness the European Commission and the Council can issue Country Specific Recommendations, which a Member State is required to act upon over the next annual cycle. The governance mechanisms were specifically designed to encourage cooperation between the Member States and to support their action in the field of employment through initiatives aimed at development exchanges of information and best practice (Copeland and ter Haar 2013; Trubek and Mosher 2003; Velluti 2010).

EMCO sits at the heart of the EES, as the key Member State network. The Committee was established to support and guide the EES through monitoring, knowledge exchange and policy learning. Since 2010 it has been absorbed into the European Semester, the EU's annual macroeconomic governance cycle that steers reforms across the Member States (Copeland 2020). Actors within EMCO form a relatively closed group of individuals drawn exclusively from central government. In accordance with the EU Treaties, the Member States are expected to send representatives to Committee meetings. Formally, the Committee monitors the employment situation of the Member States and serves to scrutinise and monitor the implementation of any Country Specific Recommendations (CSRs) that are issued in areas of policy weakness to individual Member States. The UK has always fiercely resisted EU interference in the field of employment policy (Copeland 2016) and research conducted by Mailand (2008: 358) demonstrates that UK civil servants had difficulty showing a single clear case of impact from the EES in the context of the CSRs. In this context the recommendations played more of a supporting role in guiding UK employment policy – they helped to keep issues on the agenda, but they did not put them there in the first place. Nevertheless, the UK has participated in the process of the EES and been an active member of EMCO (interviews 1; 2). Since EMCO's inception in 1997, a UK official has twice held the position of Committee Chair. This is an important coordination and steering role, indicating that the UK, and the other EU Member States, found some value in UK participation.

While UK governments have not used the framework of the Employment Strategy to justify and support a domestic reform agenda (Copeland 2016), the impact of Committee membership extends beyond this more formal and direct instrument of domestic reform. Indeed, there are important resource-exchange dimensions to the work and functioning of EMCO. Firstly, EMCO's indicators sub-committee has made significant progress in forging agreements between the Member States on harmonised definitions of employment indicators, in conjunction with Eurostat. This has been both a

technical and highly political process. However, now, when civil servants are comparing policy developments across the Member States, data harmonisation enables more accurate comparisons than can be done using other available datasets, e.g. Organisation of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) data. As one interviewee noted:¹

There is nowhere in the world where so many countries have harmonised their statistics. If stats are not harmonised [between countries], then comparisons become difficult. If you try to compare OECD countries beyond simply employment indicators, there are numerous footnotes because of the lack of harmonisation (Interview 2).

Another interviewee pointed to the example of the convergence on the measuring of youth unemployment across the EU (Interview 1). In 2013, the EU launched the Youth Guarantee, a programme designed to reduce youth unemployment, and at the time there were some significant variations in how the latter was measured across the EU. Through negotiations in the EMCO indicators sub-committee, Eurostat has been able to refine its data while Member States have adopted more harmonised definitions of indicators. Notably, access to this standardised employment data is not restricted to Member State actors; but is largely available to the breadth of actors involved in the governance of employment policy, including non-state actors. The data can be used to justify a policy action, evaluate proposed policy options, and/or to lobby for a policy solution. Crucially, it anchors Member States to each other through a comparative EU-wide dataset.

Second is the power of peer review and policy-learning. The Commission's Mutual Learning Programme is designed to feed-in to EMCO and is comprised of three different strands: A) peer reviews based on a proposed policy measure within a Member State, where a workshop will focus on its potential operation and comparisons with how similar policies operate in other Member States (normally six per year); B) learning exchanges in which representatives from several Member States organise a workshop for an in-depth discussion of a policy issue (normally six per year); and C) two conferences in Brussels featuring seminars on Member States and/or specific policies (Interview 2). The Mutual Learning Programme therefore serves as a forum through which participants can learn of developments in other Member States, as well as gaining valuable critical reviews of their own practices. Historically, the UK has been an active player in the Mutual Learning Programme (Interviews 1; 2) and between 2010 and 2018 it has organised no less than ten peer reviews (European Commission 2018). Beyond this, the regular contact between Member State officials through EMCO and the Mutual Learning Programme supports the development of personal relationships, making it

easier to pick up the phone to seek additional information as necessary. As one interview noted: 'If you read a report in Portuguese, you put it through google translate and you get a basic understanding, but then you need to ask questions. So knowing who to speak with in Portugal is much better than a paper based exchange system' (Interview 2).

In terms of resource dependency, the UK has a low-level engagement with EMCO, although British officials have utilised opportunities within the Committee and the Mutual Learning Programme to engage in policy learning and peer review. However, in the grand scheme of UK employment policy formulation, the UK is not dependent on the resources of EMCO.

Sub-state networking: The Committee of the Regions

The Committee of the Region (CoRs), the second case study, was established following the Treaty changes agreed at Maastricht (1992) and enjoys a formal role in the legislative process as an advisory body. Established in the heyday EU activity that was dubbed "EU of the Regions" (e.g. Elias 2008), it is comprised of 350 elected representatives (each with an alternate) from the local and Regional authority level across the Member States. Members are organised along party lines within their European Political Groups, with the importance of Group politics depending on the policy area (Interviews 3; 4). Representatives are nominated by their Member State government and organised through national delegations, with the UK's delegation consisting of 24 individuals.

Interviewees highlighted several ways in which Regional actors use their access to the CoR. The first centred on the formal role of the Committee in the legislative process. Although its legislative function is relatively weak, the Committee has been shown to exert some influence in the legislative process, particularly in the area of regional policy (Neshkova 2010). Also, comparatively-speaking, the CoR provides Members with an additional route to influence for actors from the sub-state level (Interviews 3; 4; 5; 6; 8). This is an important dimension for representatives from the UK. As one interviewee stressed, 'There's a consultative requirement, to consult with local and regional governments here [in Brussels]. We haven't got anything like that in the UK' (Interview 5). However, there is a notable difference between the processes of devolution in the UK and EU Regionalisation. Whilst the devolved nations of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland were indeed EU Regions, England comprised nine EU Regions. The value of this EU-level structure must be understood in the context of limited channels through which sub-state actors can influence state policy in the UK. Formal intergovernmental relations (IGR) mechanisms remain weakly institutionalised (e.g. McEwen 2017) and have been further

critiqued in the context of Brexit (see e.g. McEwen 2020; Hunt and Minto 2017). However, membership of the CoR provides representatives with a voice in policy areas for which there is a shared competence between the Member States and the EU or where the EU has exclusive competence.

While the CoR has a consultative role, it also serves as an access point to other institutions (Interview 5; 7; 8), including civil society organisations (Interview 3). This also allows Regions to influence the decision-making process in more subtle ways (Interview 3). As one interviewee noted, forging and maintaining relationships with representatives in other EU institutions is an important part of being in the CoR, for example:

... you've got key decision-makers in the Commission, in the Parliament, who through a particular piece of work you are doing on an area of social policy or economic policy or whatever, you will actually be able to engage with and talk with and then possibly get invited to attend or speak at [an event], etc. and participate in the formation of policy as it's beginning to develop... (Interview 8)

Beyond the formal role of the Committee within the legislative process and activity around European policy development, interviewees also stressed that the Committee served as a site for strong formal and informal networking for local and regional authorities, for the exchange of best practices and the creation of specialised networks for policy learning (Interviews 5; 8). The perceived potential for mutual learning was emphasised by several interviewees who noted the importance of learning how other regions have found solutions to specific problems. This mutual learning takes place within different 'networks' within the Committee of the Regions. These may develop, for example, within the six commissions (which are the policy-focused units organising the work of the Committee, each with approximately 100 members). A notable element of this network creation and participation is the investment and 'proactivity' required with interviewees highlighting that representatives 'get out of it what you put in' (Interview 8). The ability of CoR representatives to engage in mutual learning is therefore a bottom-up process that requires significant resource.

Regular contact between Members also enables opportunities to facilitate partnership building across the EU (Interviews 3; 4), as noted by one interviewee who stated, 'if you need to get three or four partners together for a bid for an EU project, much easier if it's someone that you have regular contact with on Committee of the Regions than if an officer back home is trying out of the blue to make a

contact somewhere else' (Interview 6). On a related point, this European-level networking activity includes the opportunity for intra-UK networking, which takes place at both a political level and at the level of the officials. This includes annual meetings of the UK delegation to the Committee, as well as meetings in advance of the plenary sessions. The Committee also provides profile-raising opportunities to Regions (Interviews 3; 5; 6; 8). In some cases, this is particularly significant as it supports domestic regionalisation agendas, as Regions use the European space to assert their distinctiveness (Hunt and Minto 2017).

It was stressed that the resource drawn from access to the Committee of the Regions is heavily dependent on how the individual Member uses his/her role, which is itself influenced by the capacity of individual members (who may be juggling multiple roles), as well as the level of support provided to individual delegations (Interviews 3; 4). There are generous financial incentives to attend Plenary and Commission sessions, but participation is otherwise non-compulsory. As such, there is a range of attendance levels, with some Members broadly absent, whilst others take a more active role within commissions, the Party Groups and in the informal networks that develop. The investment required was noted, with one Member stating that, 'it's quite complex and it does involve quite a commitment of your personal, social and political life into making that work, but it would be something that would be very disappointing to lose' (Interview 8).

In resource terms, the Committee offers the opportunity for regional actors to influence policy, access information for policy development and to raise their profile. While the value of these was emphasised by our interviewees, this is qualified by the ad hoc and inconsistent way in which some regional actors have engaged. However, two further points of observation can be noted. First, given the relatively closed nature of the Westminster system, the access to policy-making and a pathway to influence afforded by the Committee of the Regions is valuable to Regional actors. Second, in the context of capacity constraints at both the devolved and local levels of government (with severe budget cuts experienced at the latter level), opportunities for building capacity through policy learning from peers has gained in importance.

Non-State Networking: The Observatory

The third case study, the Observatory, comprises experts on violence against women (European Women's Lobby 2016): 30 national experts, five of whom (at the time of research) came from non-EU member states, i.e. the Republic of Macedonia, Iceland, Serbia, Turkey and Ukraine; and experts from

European associations, e.g. European Network of Migrant Women and the International Alliance of Women. The Observatory is hosted by the European Women's Lobby (EWL), which is recognised as the dominant women's civil society organisation in Europe. Established in 1990 with support from the European Commission (see Hoskyns 1991), the EWL is active across a range of policy areas, with its work in the area of violence against women a key strand of its activity. It continues to receive the bulk of its funding from the European Commission, with data for 2019 showing the Commission provides over 70% of EWL's budget.ⁱⁱ The EWL represents more than 2,000 organisations (EWL 2020), from the EU27, three candidate countries, the UK and Iceland (its first European Free Trade Area [EFTA] member), as well as European-wide associations; and is the biggest European umbrella network of women's associations. Although the Statutes of the EWL (2013, pp.2-3) stipulate that full membership is obtained from either membership of the EU, the European Free Trade Area (EFTA) or accession countries, the Terms of Reference for the Observatory (2016, p.1) also allow for the inclusion of 'neighbouring countries', e.g. Ukraine's participation through the Eastern Partnership. Furthermore, the EWL amended its internal rules in 2019 to effectively allow the UK to maintain its membership of the EWL post-Brexit (Article 2, European Women's Lobby 2020).

The UK is a founding member of the EWL and has been active and engaged in its Board and working groups (Interview 10). The UK's membership of the EWL is organised through the UK Joint Committee on Women (UKJCW) that selects the UK's expert on the Observatory. The UKJCW coordinates across the four territories of the UK: National Alliance of Women's Organisations (NAWO) from England; Northern Ireland Women's European Platform (NIWEP); Engender from Scotland; and Women's Equality Network (WEN) Wales (see UKJCW 2013; Minto 2020). Each of these are themselves coordinating bodies, which bring together various gender-focused groups, organisations and networks from across their respective territories. This territorially distinct approach to the representation of women's interests reflects the distinct approaches to advancing women's rights and gender equality across the UK; distinctions which have become increasingly pronounced since the launch of devolution in the late 1990s (see e.g. MacKay & MacAllister 2012; Chaney 2007). Although the Observatory expert is put forward by the UKJCW, the formal links between the expert and the UKJCW have varied over time. As such, it was noted that benefits from the Observatory have not been consistently diffused; however, more recently there has been active attention paid to capitalising further on the participation of the UK's Observatory expert (Interview 14).

A strong transnational feminist solidarity underpins the work of the Observatory (Interviews 9; 11), with the UN's Istanbul Convention serving as the principle legal instrument of interest to the

Observatory members. This transnational 'sisterhood' offered through membership of the Observatory was noted as a key benefit (Interviews 9; 11); both because European-level advocacy can be used to reinforce national-level advocacy activity and also because of the strength derived for individuals and organisations from a sense of solidarity. The transnational advocacy potential of this pan-European feminist organisation was highlighted by the interviewees (Interviews 9; 11). Membership of the Observatory (and the EWL more broadly) allows actors access to collective lobbying at the European-level. In the words of one interviewee, this afford members 'two-tier level exposure and campaigning' (Interview 9). For women's organisations from the UK's devolved administrations, the Observatory and the EWL have provided a third (not second) level exposure and campaigning (Interviews 11; 13). This direct access afforded to representatives from the devolved level is of particular significance for these actors. As one former Observatory expert stressed, 'It's a long standing ... mechanism for us to stay connected with places of power in Europe that were often very difficult if we went through London' (Interview 13).

In addition to this advocacy potential, experts participate in Observatory-related events as their time and expertise allows. This latter engagement offers Observatory members a route to extending their contact base which may contribute to advocacy activity, profile raising, partnership building and mutual learning (Interview 11). Indeed, in the context of this solidarity, the exchange of information between experts within the network was highlighted as a central feature of the Observatory. This takes place through more regularised moments for exchange (initiated by the EWL Secretariat) as well as through more ad hoc, bilateral or multi-lateral exchanges that take place 'outside of ... but because of' the Observatory' (Interview 11). There is an understanding within the Observatory that experts will work with each other when it is useful and participation within thematic working groups is determined by the preferences (and availability) of experts. The impact of this information exchange takes effect both in day-to-day activity at a domestic level as well as in the context of specific, focused-projects (Interview 11).

As part of this exchange and multi-level advocacy activity, European-wide data was stressed as a particularly important tool for participants, especially for advocacy organisations (Interviews 11; 12; 13). There were two elements to this. Firstly, harmonised data sets provide useful comparisons across the member states that can be used to highlight comparative strengths and weaknesses to governments in the UK. This is valuable both in terms of the definitions used, e.g. the UK has a good definition of [X] here and we must not lose it, as well as the data itself, e.g. 'this is where we [across the EU] are at and you're not there yet' (Interview 11). Secondly, and complementing this, as part of

advocacy work this data is trusted as valid and, as one interviewee stated, ‘it gives us a neutrality to pull on’ (Interview 11). Given the political nature of the subject area, ongoing contestation around definitions adopted and the challenges to data collection, the validity of data is subject to challenge, particularly if it has been collated by an interest group. As such, having an international data set from the EU’s gender equality agency and human rights agency – the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE) the Fundamental Rights Agency (FRA) respectively – can be used as a back-up to national data. This was heavily stressed by our interviewees, with particular reference to the potential loss of this data upon Brexit (Interview 13).

The relevance of the multi-level dimension to the UK’s participation in the Observatory was clearly visible. This relates, in no small part, to the organisation of the UK’s representation to the EWL through the UK Joint Committee on Women. The UKJCW was established in function of the UK’s EWL membership and was expressly designed to reflect a ‘four nations’ approach to the UK’s engagement with the EU (UKJCW 2013). It is based on a ‘partnership of equals’ approach, which serves to provide the smaller nations with a visibility that they are not usually afforded in intra-UK relations, given the dominance of England. Indeed, with the European backdrop serving as a key influence, ‘it was set up specifically to make sure that the representation from the UK wasn’t just another English body going to Brussels... because in other places that is the situation, that happens’ (Interview 11). This provides opportunities to actors from the devolved level of governance to use the European system to advance their own domestic agenda and to raise the profile of their work, independently from a UK-wide body (Minto 2020). Notably, the English CSO (NAWO) is the least well-resourced of the four CSOs (see NAWO 2018; Engender 2019; NIWEP 2019; WEN Wales 2019), which is at odds with the conventional dominance of Anglo-British organisations in intra-UK structures.

With respect to resource dependency, the Observatory is significant in terms of transnational advocacy, awareness-raising, information exchange and partnership building which have an important impact for CSOs representing marginalised interests which operate under capacity constraints.

Cross-cutting perspectives on European Networks

The rich empirical analysis shared above reveals the range of ways in which UK-based actors use their access to European networks. A cross-cutting appraisal of the findings highlights some notable similarities and differences between the three cases. In each of the three case studies, UK actors participated in the networks and plugged into the EU, but the significance of this varied depending on

the positioning of the actors and thereby the relationship of the network to the core executive. Actors based in EMCO did not use the opportunities provided by the governance processes to further particular domestic policy aims, rather the Country Specific Recommendations appear to have played a supporting role in the UK. In the CoR, actors used the opportunities provided by this advisory body to feed into EU policy-making. Even though the influence of the CoR on the EU's policy process may be limited, participants pointed to its importance in the context of weak opportunities to influence within the UK. Meanwhile, and again despite the limitations of the CoR in terms of policy influence, members of the CoR formed relationships with other EU actors, such as Members of the European Parliament, which provides an additional channel for influencing policy, albeit indirectly. Finally, UK actors within the Observatory are the most 'plugged-in' to their network, which was used for transnational advocacy, information exchange and relationship building. As with the CoR, participants noted that structures in place (at both the EU and within the UK) provided sub-state actors with a notable degree of access to lobbying opportunities and capacity building.

In all three case studies resource dependency features, but again this varies depending on the position of the actors within the EU/UK multi-level polity. As our findings highlighted, information exchange and policy learning take place both within and beyond the formal structures; with informal, ad hoc, bilateral and multilateral exchange highlighted. The bulk of this exchange is thematic in nature, and not restricted within the bounds of the EU's legislative and policy frameworks. Looking across the findings, compared to the other two case studies, members of EMCO are the least resource dependent. For members of the CoR, there is slightly more resource dependency than members of EMCO. In addition to policy influence through this access point for European Regions, the various networks of the CoR also provide Members and officials with significant information resource, although participation is heavily dependent on the individual in post. Of all three cases, resource dependency is the highest for actors in the Observatory, as it was understood to provide significant opportunities to bolster domestic capacity, notably at the devolved level of governance.

Brexit: continuity, change and impacts on domestic governance

Brexit has drawn the question of European networks and their significance into sharp relief. It forces academics and domestic policy actors to evaluate the meaning of European network membership as part of the EU's multi-level system of governance. The theorisation of Brexit – whilst vital from a British perspective – also provides useful information for a more profound assessment of the impact of the European level on domestic governance; indeed, Brexit foregrounds a number of previously

more obscure factors which deserve attention. Our findings and analysis highlight that those with the most to lose from a loss of access (i.e. where there are higher levels of resource exchange and dependency) were those furthest from the core executive and who also operated at sub-state levels of governance. In this regard, the impact of the UK leaving the EU is likely to have profound implications on the established patterns of governance in the UK and specifically on the participation of certain UK based actors in the democratic process.

We must stress that access to and participation within European networks matters for domestic governance, as participation provides actors and organisations with additional venues to influence policy change as well as develop capacity. Brexit will reconfigure this context of engagement and its impact will be uneven, not least because some networks are more open to non-EU members than others. EMCO is only open to Member States or Accession Countries and post-Brexit, the UK will no longer participate in the Committee and the network of officials that surround it. Given the limited participation of UK in the EU's Employment Strategy, it is unlikely the UK will seek to negotiate privileged access to the Committee. While participation in the network has had a limited impact on UK employment policy, the UK will lose the ability to engage in the sharing of best practice and policy learning with impacts over time. There is also the potential for UK data gathering and definitions on employment to drift from those of Eurostat, making comparisons of performance in a European context difficult to assess.

Meanwhile, UK-based actors within the CoR will also be exposed to these second-order effects of Brexit. Despite the selective engagement of some Members of the CoR, the impact of Brexit will be more pronounced than EMCO. Whatever the form of the EU-UK relationship there will remain a certain amount of cooperation between actors from the UK and the EU27. These relationships have been developed and curated over time and transcend the formal institutional architecture of the Committee. The access provided through these channels would certainly be inferior to that enjoyed now and, importantly, would diminish over time as individuals move on and ties are lost. Securing resource dedicated to any sort of physical presence in Brussels (particularly if it were more informal and ad hoc) will become more difficult to justify. Furthermore, actors from the devolved level will have a weakened ability to influence policy either directly or indirectly given the weakness of IGR mechanisms in the UK.

The impact of Brexit has the potential to be most profoundly felt in the Observatory. The UK's continued participation within the Observatory was secured by agreement at the General Assembly (6-9 June 2019) which amended the internal rules of the EWL to allow existing members to continue their membership in cases where the state's relationship with the EU changes. However, a potential problem for UK-based actors participating in such networks post-Brexit is that outside the EU, the UK will no longer share the same frames of EU legislative and policy reference; although international legislation (such as the UN's Istanbul Convention) will continue as a shared framework for feminist activity. Furthermore, the UK will fall outside EU-wide datasets and governments may elect to diverge from standard European norms and definitions. This potentially changes the 'value' of the resource provided by the Observatory and wider EWL (Minto 2020). The need for UK based actors to engage in EU transnational advocacy will be less pertinent, but a problem for such actors is the relatively closed Westminster system vis-a-via Brussels, meaning that just like for members of the CoR, the end of recourse to the EU-level will come as a loss. Another issue related to the context for engagement is that of resource. Practically speaking, even when governance structures are themselves open to non-EU Member States, the transaction costs borne by individual participants are significantly higher than for EU Member States given that the availability of European funding is restricted if not absent altogether.

In addition, the case studies bring to fore the role of the EU in supporting the development of regionalisation across the UK. This territorial dimension is often underplayed in analyses of the UK's relationship with the EU, including Brexit. Indeed, as our analysis illustrates, for non-state and sub-state actors, European networks provide a valuable route to visibility, access to decision-making and domestic capacity building. These European structures have provided UK-based actors from across the four nations with various opportunities for engagement and exchange that they would otherwise not have had; in turn, supporting processes of Europeanisation and capacity building at the sub-state level. As devolution has unfolded in the context of the UK's EU membership, the UK's withdrawal from the EU presents new challenges to the constitutional make-up of the UK. As such, the complexity of the UK's multilevel system of governance is drawn into sharp relief and calls for renewed thinking about the future of intra-UK structures and governance to accommodate a post-devolution UK post-Brexit.

Conclusion

In focusing on European networks and UK participation, this article has shed light on a 'second order' effect of European integration and, in turn, the UK's withdrawal from the EU. European networks are a ubiquitous part of the European political system and they offer key routes for diverse actors from multiple levels of governance to 'plug in' to the EU. Our analysis of how state, sub-state and non-state actors use their access to such European structures highlights notable resource dependencies of UK based political actors - understood to be monetary or physical resources, information and/or social legitimacy. This finding has strong parallels with the broader set of literature on new governance within the EU, whereby its significance and effects are often hidden from view, but are nevertheless an important component of contemporary governance processes (Barcevičius *et al* 2014; Graziano and Vink 2013; Hamel and Vanhercke 2009, Zeitlin 2005). EU governance processes, such as the European Employment Strategy, are unlikely to produce programmatic shifts within the Member States i.e. changes to policies and programmes, such as new legislation or regulations (Barcevičius *et al* 2014: 11). They are more likely to result in new issues being placed on political agendas (agenda shifts), changes in governance or policy-making arrangements (procedural shifts), and changes that occur within the mental frameworks of domestic political actors (cognitive shifts) (Barcevičius *et al* 2014; Hamel and Vanhercke 2009, Zeitlin 2005). In the context of UK networks, EU-based actors have used their access to resources to bolster their position. Importantly, our research highlights the multi-level dimension to such processes within a UK context and their importance to the UK's evolving governance structures and devolution. Notably, it was those actors who are further from the core executive – the sub-state and non-state actors – who gained more from participation in European networks.

In the context of Brexit, the effects of reconfiguring access to the European political system are set to be felt by state and non-state actors from multiple levels of governance as they are unplugged, either partially or completely. In this article, we demonstrate that, while no actors are immune from these second order effects of Brexit, those who are further from the core (actors from the devolved level and civil society organisations) are at higher risk of exposure in resource terms. Also, without the European underpinning that has served as the backdrop to devolution in the UK, questions around intra-UK governance arise. Taken together, the findings in this article highlight the nature and extent of the transnational co-operation and exchange that takes place within the European political space. Research on Brexit must therefore acknowledge the 'value' of this engagement, as well as the Europeanisation that takes place through participation within such networks, to appreciate more fully the complexities arising from the UK's withdrawal from the EU. In addition to its more immediate

contribution to the theorisation of Brexit, our research also has wider application to the field of European governance in providing a cross-cutting account of how different actors engage with and use the European political system.

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Appendix 1: Interviews

Interview 1: European Commission official (02/03/2018)

Interview 2: National official the Employment Committee (28/02/2018)

Interview 3: Official (European Political Group) working at the Committee of the Regions (01/03/2018)

Interview 4: Official (European Political Group) working at the Committee of the Regions (01/03/2018)

Interview 5: Official supporting Members from the UK delegation (01/03/2018)

Interview 6: Official supporting Members from the UK delegation (02/03/2018)

Interview 7: Official supporting Members from the UK delegation (02/03/2018)

Interview 8: Committee of the Regions Member (UK delegation) (09/03/2018)

Interview 9: Civil society representative (European) (28/02/2018)

Interview 10: Civil society representative (European) (26/10/2018)

Interview 11: Civil society representative (UK-based) (09/03/2018)

Interview 12: Civil society representative (UK-based) (11/07/2018)

Interview 13: Civil society representative (UK-based) (18/09/2018)

Interview 14: Civil society representative (UK-based) (18/10/2018)

ⁱ All direct quotes from interviewees are presented in quotation marks.

ⁱⁱ Data for the financial year ending 31st December 2019. Last accessed on 24/04/2020, available here: <https://ec.europa.eu/transparencyregister/public/consultation/displaylobbyist.do?id=85686156700-13>