# Cross-border Paradiplomacy in the Irish Sea: A Socio-spatial Analysis

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## ABSTRACT

Bilateral relations between the UK devolved administrations and Ireland are a neglected aspect of the 'totality of relationships' among the people of these islands. This is especially true for relations between Ireland and Wales. This article fills this gap by focusing on the paradiplomatic role played by subnational authorities within Ireland and Wales in the construction of effective socio-spatial governance solutions pursuing cross-border cooperation across the Irish Sea. It describes the Ireland–Wales cross-border region as a loose, multi-level structure of economic and political cooperation, and as a product of the interaction between strategies and structures. The article demonstrates that paradiplomacy is not just

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empowered by cross-border cooperation, but actively shapes it as an opportunity structure through metagovernance. Specifically, the article argues for a better grasp of metagovernance to keep Irish Sea cooperation alive post-Brexit.

## INTRODUCTION

Uneven modern state consolidation processes have meant that while certain states have stood against challenges to exclusive centrality, others have transferred administrative and political powers to the peripheries through models of federalism or processes of devolution.[1] Nonetheless, in cases in which the constituent sub-units of the state[2] hold considerable powers over the internal dimension of public policy, this has not necessarily translated into their obtaining equal competences over external dimensions of policies. This lack of legal capacity has stimulated sub-state authorities to search for alternative ways of engaging in international activity. Rohan Butler in 1961 first used the concept of 'paradiplomacy' to refer to this exercise as 'personal and parallel diplomacy complementing or competing with the regular foreign policy of the government'.[3] Paradiplomacy gained traction in the 1980s, as state decentralisation and EU integration stimulated the analysis of regionalism.[4] Increasingly, the notion has reflected Noé Cornago's definition, as:

> non-central governments' involvement in international relations through the establishment of permanent or ad hoc contacts with foreign public or private entities, with the aim to promote socio-economic or cultural issues, as well as any other foreign dimension of their constitutional competences.[5]

The emergence of a complex landscape of cross-border spaces supported both politically and financially by the EU integration process, in which state

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[1] Jim Bulpitt, *Territory and power in the United Kingdom: an interpretation* (Colchester, 2008), 10–25.

[2] R.A.W. Rhodes, 'From marketisation to diplomacy: it's the mix that matters', *Australian Journal of Public Administration* 56 (1997), 40–53.

[3] Rohan Butler, 'Paradiplomacy', in A.O. Sarkissian (ed.), *Studies in diplomatic history and historiography in honour of G.P. Gooch* (London, 1961), 12–25.

[4] Carolyn Rowe, *Regional representation in the EU: between diplomacy and interest mediation* (Cham, 2011).

[5] Noé Cornago, 'Diplomacy and paradiplomacy in the redefinition of international security: dimensions of conflict and co-operation', in Francisco Aldecoa and Michael Keating (eds), *Paradiplomacy in action: the foreign relations of subnational governments* (London, 1999), 40–57.

borders appear to lose their dominance in the organisation of political and economic life, has often been considered the suitable framework for paradiplomatic activity, in both academic and political spheres.[6] In this regard, it is interesting to notice how existing scholarship has illuminated the diverse interests, strategies and negotiations behind the creation and design of cross-border spaces. The literature has emphasised the role of national governments or the EU in this process,[7] rarely considering the strategic action of sub-national units behind the formation of cross-border spaces.[8] Moreover, peripheral spaces such as the Ireland–Wales cross-border region have been considered only marginally.[9] This article addresses both these gaps by investigating the genesis of cross-border cooperation across the Irish Sea, described as the product of the evolution of paradiplomatic relations between Ireland and Wales.

The Ireland–Wales cross-border region is a very significant case study. First, links between people and the nations around the Irish Sea have historically been rooted in culture, heritage and trade relations. The maritime border has functioned as a resource and as a symbol of identity[10] for the surrounding territories and communities. However, it has been transformed into 'the narrow strip of water which connects rather than divides us'[11] only through the working of EU-sponsored cross-border cooperation. Second, the area surrounding the Irish Sea has been structured through a wide range of institutional and governance arrangements. State-centric provisions include the UK and Republic of Ireland governments, and devolved and regional administrations. Beyond these traditional territorial forms of demarcation,

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[6] Francesca Dickson, 'Paradiplomacy and the state of the nation: a comparative analysis' (unpublished PhD thesis, Cardiff University, 2017).

[7] Michael Keating, 'Regions and international affairs: motives, opportunities and strategies', in Aldecoa and Keating, *Paradiplomacy in action*, 1–16; Neil Brenner, *New state spaces: urban governance and the rescaling of statehood* (Oxford, 2004).

[8] For a notable exception, please see Melanie Plangger, 'Exploring the role of territorial actors in cross-border regions', *Territory, Politics, Governance* 7 (2) (2019), 156–76.

[9] For a few notable exceptions, see Giada Lagana, Greg Davies and Daniel Wincott, 'The spatial framing of relations across the Irish Sea', in Paul Gillespie, Nicola McEwen and Michael Keating (eds), *Conflicting sovereignties across Britain and Ireland: linking identities, institutions and futures* (Edinburgh, forthcoming); Giada Lagana and Daniel Wincott, *The added-value of the Ireland–Wales Cooperation Programme* (Cardiff, 2020), available at: https://www.centreonconstitutionalchange.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2020-09/Ireland-Wales-cooperation-Brexit-policy-Report.pdf (18 December 2023).

[10] James Anderson, Liam O'Dowd and Thomas M. Wilson, *New borders for a changing Europe: cross-border cooperation and governance* (London, 2013), 20–3.

[11] Government of Ireland and Welsh Government, *Ireland–Wales Shared Statement and Action Plan 2021–25* (2021), available at: https://www.dfa.ie/media/dfa/ourrolepolicies/ourwork/Ireland-Wales-Shared-Statement-Action-Plan-Final.pdf (1 June 2023).

EU membership has stimulated the creation of additional, contextually defined, governance arenas in the form of cross-border spaces, networks and partnerships. As a consequence of this amalgamation of structures and institutions, agency has not been directly linked to institutional levels, but rather has crossed between levels.[12] This has facilitated the action of paradiplomacy as defined by interests, knowledge, resources and networking capabilities. Third, contrary to what had been predicted in the immediate aftermath of 2016, the commitment to the plurality and flourishing of connections among Irish and Welsh actors at different institutional levels has received a significant positive thrust from the Brexit process. The EU regional arena was one in which Wales had gained an established presence, legal recognition and some level of influence. Moreover, Wales was a net beneficiary of EU funding through the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) and the Structural Funds. Nowadays, its post-Brexit priorities are markedly different from those of the UK government. Since 2016, Wales has started to particularly look west, at its Irish counterpart, to find ways to articulate a new international position. Ireland has always responded positively to Wales's calls for finding new ways to articulate Irish Sea cooperation, thereby making the topic of Ireland–Wales relations worthy of greater academic attention.

To grasp both the strategic role of Welsh and Irish paradiplomacy and its interaction with contextual opportunities and constraints, this article employs the theoretical lens of socio-spatial *metagovernance*.[13] The notion refers to the government of governance occurring when several social forces—or policy networks—wish to rebalance modes of governance. Among various consequences, a change of the role that public and private actors play in the socio-spatial relations governing the polities, politics and policies of the state has been registered. Through this perspective, the Ireland–Wales cross-border region emerges as the result of strategies employed at several levels, including the sub-state one. These strategies interact in various ways with the context in which they take place. The resulting spaces do not provide uniform opportunities, but rather differential opportunities and constraints for different actors. Actors can seize these opportunities, but also actively interact with them, try to change them and attempt to impose their own logic

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[12] Jacob Torfing, B. Guy Peters, Jon Pierre and Eva Sørensen, *Interactive governance: advancing the paradigm* (Oxford, 2019).

[13] With the term 'socio-spatial' we describe interactions between governance structures and the society, assuming that the former operates as both a product and a producer of change. Torfing et al., *Interactive governance*; Christopher Ansell and Jacob Torfing, *Handbook on theories of governance* (Cheltenham, 2017).

on them. It is the strategies used by paradiplomacy, at different times and places, that have filled the Ireland–Wales cross-border region with its incredibly rich territorial and functional life.

The article proceeds in three steps. First, it discusses the literature on socio-spatial relations in cross-border cooperation.[14] Different approaches offer distinct insights into cross-border dynamics but adopt a passive view of paradiplomacy. Moreover, the existing literature deals with strategy or structure separately. Second, the article turns to the investigation of the genesis of the Irish Sea cross-border region, paying attention to the paradiplomatic relations of Ireland and Wales in the favourable contexts that represented both the process of devolution driven by political decentralisation in the UK and the regionalisation promoted by the EU. Third, this article turns to Brexit, not as a temporal critical juncture but as a spatial one that turned the previous framework upside down.[15] The concluding remarks synthesise the main approaches and findings of the analysis.

## THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES ON GOVERNANCE AND CROSS-BORDER REGIONS

The rise in the international activity and diplomatic practices of sub-state entities has stimulated a rich body of literature over the past 30 years. Before entering the theoretical discussion, a short terminological note is necessary. Scholars who work on regions and regional policy tend to emphasise specific spatial dimensions over others. They use the terms 'scale' and 'level' extensively. The two terms refer to similar dimensions. 'Scale' indicates a hierarchy of bounded spaces.[16] In political science, the term 'level' mainly describes territorially defined realms, where the focus lies on competences.[17] Both typically refer to the local, the regional, the cross-border, the national, the European and the global sphere.

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[14] Michael Keating, 'Regions and international affairs: motives, opportunities and strategies', in Francisco Aldecoa and Michael Keating (eds), *Paradiplomacy in action: the foreign relations of subnational governments* (London, 1999), 1–16.

[15] David Botterill, R. Elwyn Owen, Louise Emanuel, Nicola Foster, Tim Gale, Cliff Nelson and Martin Selby, 'Perceptions from the periphery: the experience of Wales', in Frances Brown and Derek D. Hall (eds), *Tourism in peripheral areas: case studies* (Bristol, 2000).

[16] Bob Jessop, *State power: a strategic–relational approach* (Cambridge, 2008).

[17] Lisbeth Hooghe and Gary Marks, *Multi-level governance and European integration* (Lanham, MD, 2001).

Theory-based studies allow the identification of three interrelated approaches to the study of paradiplomacy. A first strand has interrogated the role of sub-state regional diplomacy in the production of the region as a political unit.[18] Analysing the functional dimension of the external actions of sub-state entities, these works conceive the phenomenon as a functional by-product of multi-level governance or federal political systems.[19] Secondly, in carrying out a more conflictive reading of it, and pointing out that the concept explains the national antagonisms and the collision of political, jurisdictional, economic and territorial spaces between sub-state entities and central governments,[20] scholars have investigated how such practices have interacted with notions of national and local identity. Finally, others have examined the forms that non-state diplomatic practices have taken in constructing and challenging established modalities of international politics, such as the state monopoly on diplomacy.[21] However, among the existing contributions very few[22] have investigated the 'know-how' of paradiplomacy from a perspective that combines interactions between governance structures, levels of governance and societal networks in cross-border spaces. This article turns to networks to examine the structure of paradiplomatic links across the Irish Sea and how these have influenced cross-border policymaking.[23]

Socio-spatial relations and cross-border cooperation involve not just the ordering of scales or levels, but also the organisation of territories, places and networks. The term 'territory' grasps the segmentation of space; 'place' refers to the local embeddedness of actors, issues and strategies; and 'networks' captures the various cross-cutting connections.[24] These multiple facets

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[18] André Lecours, 'Paradiplomacy: reflections on the foreign policy and international relations of regions', *International Negotiation* 7 (1) 2012, 91–114; Zidane Zeraoui, 'Introducción: Para entender la paradiplomacia', *Desafíos* 28 (1) (2016), 15–34.

[19] Manuel Duran, 'Paradiplomacy as a diplomatic broker', *Diplomacy and Foreign Policy* 1 (3) (2016), 1–56.

[20] Stéphene Paquin, *Paradiplomatie et relations internationals: théories de strategies internationals des regions face à la mondialisation* (Brussels, 2004).

[21] André Lecours and Luis Moreno, *Nationalism and democracy: dichotomies, complementarities, oppositions* (London, 2010).

[22] Belgium is one of the few exceptions: David Criekemans, 'The case of Flanders (1993–2005): how subnational entities develop their own "paradiplomacy"', in Jovan Kurbalija and Kishan S. Rana (eds), *Foreign ministries: managing diplomatic networks and optimizing value* (Geneva, 2007); Jeroen K. Joly and Tim Haesebrouck, 'Belgian foreign policy: in Foro Interno, inferno?, in Jeroen K. Joly and Tim Haesebrouck (eds), *Foreign policy change in Europe since 1991* (Cham, 2021).

[23] Elin Royles, 'Small, smart, successful: a nation influencing the twenty-first-century world? The emerging Welsh paradiplomacy', *Contemporary Wales* 23 (2010), 142–70; Elin Royles, 'Substate diplomacy, culture, and Wales: investigating a historical institutionalist approach', *Publius* 46 (2) (2016), 224–47.

[24] Bob Jessop, Neil Brenner and Martin Jones, 'Theorizing sociospatial relations', *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 26 (3) (2008), 389–401.

allow the examination of how strategic efforts, concrete outcomes and the changing balance of spatial aspects interact in the shaping and construction of cross-border links.[25] They also permit an unpacking of the ambiguous term 'region'. Regions emerge and evolve in and through all four, and more, dimensions and as the product of socio-spatial relations.[26] The space bounded by the region becomes political in nature and maintains a reciprocal relationship with the society. In the case of cross-border regions, the space does not exist prior to relationships, but rather emerges from discursive articulations and interactions.[27]

Usually, a combination of territorial dimensions provides financial resources for partnerships and collaboration to develop between and across territories, together with broader governance frameworks within which the participation of sub-state governments in international relations—or 'paradiplomacy'—can flourish. However, key government policies have sometimes tended to encode and reinforce the activity of sub-state entities within the state. Scholars whose studies have focused on cross-border cooperation as an expression of the changing relationships between the supranational, national and subnational levels, and the public and private sectors, have employed three different approaches to describe structural opportunities and constraints arising from cross-border spaces. These are 'governance', 'multi-level governance' and 'networks'.

The term 'governance' refers to processes aimed at achieving common objectives among multiple coordinated and interdependent actors.[28] 'Multi-level governance' focuses more specifically on the increasing influence of subnational authorities and describes a 'territorial dispersion of institutional competences for authoritative decision-making'.[29] Finally, 'networks', an increasingly popular concept to examine cross-border relations, are not necessarily neutral and empowering structures, but differentially affect the ability of individuals to pursue their interests.[30]

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[25] Torfing et al., *Interactive governance*, 87.

[26] John Harrison, 'Configuring the new "regional world": on being caught between territory and networks', *Regional Studies* 47 (1) (2010), 55–74.

[27] Veit Bachmann, 'Spaces of interaction: enactments of sociospatial relations and an emerging EU diplomacy in Kenya', *Territory, Politics, Governance* 4 (1) (2016), 75–96.

[28] Eva Sørensen and Jacob Torfing, 'Making governance networks effective and democratic through metagovernance', *Public Administration* 87 (2) (2009), 234–58.

[29] Gary Marks, 'An actor-centred approach to multi-level governance', *Regional & Federal Studies* 6 (2) (2009), 20–38.

[30] Sørensen and Torfing, 'Making governance networks effective and democratic through metagovernance', 240.

Governance, multi-level governance and networks approaches shift attention to the opportunity structure[31] that follows various changes in policymaking, allowing analysis of the role of paradiplomacy in shaping new spaces. Cross-border regions appear as a realm where the focus on practical problem-solving, interdependence and coordination opens space for paradiplomacy. Furthermore, they are multi-level structures that imply a certain transfer of powers and autonomy from the national to the supranational and subnational levels. Network approaches complement this focus on opportunity structures with a differentiating element. Networks as structures of linkages empower some, while they disadvantage others. The focus lies on structures, but it disregards the needed emphasis on the role of paradiplomacy in guiding and managing socio-spatial constructions and cross-border governance solutions.

Partly in response to the limitations of a unilateral focus on structures, scholars developed the concept of 'metagovernance',[32] which has been defined as the art of governing governance. Although the concept of metagovernance is new, it helps us to understand practices of 'regulated self-regulation' that have played an increasing role in managing multi-level cross-border spaces and politics.[33] The approach emphasises the role of actors, especially networks, in shaping and managing socio-spatial governance arrangements. Its main value lies in recognising the changed role of governments in governance processes. Contexts of interdependence require indirect techniques and instruments that target the environment of the process. Therefore, the approach appears especially applicable in cross-border cooperation, where governments are challenged in imposing their will on a diverse range of actors and EU priorities. It also appears especially suitable to elucidate how, given that the UK government was usually very reluctant to formally relinquish power, stakeholder engagement in cross-border relations through paradiplomatic activities and networks appears to go further than an advisory role since the cooperation became eligible for INTERREG[34] funding, with the Irish

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[31] The term 'opportunity structure' refers to all opportunities and constraints influencing regional actors' and networks' interests and strategies and the realisation of their interests, facilitated by the EU framework. See Giada Lagana, 'Has the European Union empowered the regions? A pre- and post-Brexit preliminary investigation of the United Kingdom', *European Urban and Regional Studies* 28 (1) (2021), 34–9.

[32] Torfing et al., *Interactive governance*, 122.

[33] Torfing et al., *Interactive governance*, 123.

[34] The European cross-border cooperation programme INTERREG is the official initiative aimed at supporting cooperation between regions from at least two member states lying directly on the borders or adjacent to them.

and Welsh actors effectively 'ruling the game', thus enhancing their place in the EU policymaking system.

## THE GENESIS OF THE IRELAND–WALES CROSS-BORDER SEA REGION

Interests serve as a starting point for processes of cross-border regions formation.[35] In the Irish Sea space, the shared maritime border posed common challenges connected to water quality, biodiversity, and pollution resulting from urban development in rural and coastal zones. The area was also affected by environmental problems, which impacted the shipping industry negatively. Actors such as regional developers and planning institutions consequently perceived cross-border cooperation as an opportunity to solve some of the common existing problems based around the Irish Sea and decided to construct cross-border issues through processes of problematisation to present to the EU Commission.

The Irish Sea Maritime Forum and the Central Sea Corridor[36] were first, in the early 1990s, to see potential in establishing links across the Irish Sea, identifying clearly defined areas in Ireland and Wales in which the above-described issues occurred, and ways in which these could be jointly solved. However, it is important to note that interests are never completely reducible to subjective identities, but always relate to the contexts in which actors are embedded.[37] Governmental and non-governmental actors in Ireland and Wales did not display unitary views in any specific domains, but a balance of different perspectives coming from certain functional constituencies. The interests raised mixed personal and professional concerns of civil servants, politicians or leaders on the one hand, and pressures exercised by organised groups and the electorate as a whole on the other. The weight of these influences varied greatly and depended on persons, issues and political constellations.[38]

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[35] Plangger, 'Exploring the role of territorial actors in cross-border regions', 160.
[36] Giada Lagana, 'Has the EU Ireland–Wales INTERREG programme empowered sub-national networks? Pre- and post-Brexit challenges of cooperation across the Irish Sea', *Journal of Cross Border Studies in Ireland* 17 (1) (2022), 49–63; Laura McAllister, 'Devolution and the new context for public policymaking: lessons from the EU Structural Funds in Wales', *Public Policy and Administration* 15 (2) (2000), 38–52.
[37] Colin Hay, *Political analysis: a critical introduction* (Basingstoke, 2002).
[38] Bob Jessop, 'Territory, politics, governance and multispatial metagovernance', *Territory, Politics, Governance* 4 (1) (2016), 8–32.

Once these two cross-border networks perceived the Irish Sea cross-border region as an opportunity to realise common interests, they engaged in strategic action employing diverse strategies, chosen based on a subjective analysis of the context. Blatter identifies nine political arenas interacting with processes of cross-border regions formation.[39] Across the Irish Sea, we find relationships with the European arena, with the UK and Irish governments, between different levels of government, and between political parties. In this regard, it is interesting to note that the Welsh nationalist party Plaid Cymru has always made a very strong case for developing closer links with the Republic of Ireland, based on common Celtic roots.[40] Nonetheless, subnational authorities had to gain the assent of the UK and Irish governments to set-up an Irish Sea cross-border strategy. This made the diplomatic and paradiplomatic relationship between subnational networks and the national level a key determinant for successful cross-border mobilisation. That is, the interactions at different levels, sometimes limited to the scope of central governments and other times carried out in parallel tracks by constituent subunits, allowed the articulation of socio-spatial relations from which institutional configurations emerged. Particularly crucial has been the inclusion of the maritime area under the INTERREG programme in 1994. With this as the backbone, the overall economic gains coming from cross-border cooperation were clearer and it was easier to bring UK authorities on board.[41] While focusing on economic and social aspects was universally accepted, emphasising the environmental issues connected with the Irish Sea guaranteed that Ireland–Wales cross-border cooperation was placed high on the governments' agenda, underscoring that the physical border affected the allocation of money and collaboration as a whole.[42]

Applying for INTERREG's funds seemed the easiest way to reflect, through the programme's place-based approach,[43] the centrality of the Irish Sea. This

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[39] Joachim Blatter, 'Explaining cross-border cooperation: a border-focused and border-external approach', *Journal of Borderlands Studies* 12 (1–2) (2002), 151–74.

[40] Alan Meban, 'Plaid Cymru's Adam Price on Celtic working and European democracy', *Slugger O'Toole*, 10 July 2022, available at: https://sluggerotoole.com/2022/07/10/plaid-cymrus-adam-price-on-celtic-working-and-european-democracy/ (11 October 2023).

[41] Interview with Peter Ryland, Chief executive officer at Welsh European Funding Office, Cardiff, November 2022.

[42] Kaj Zimmerbauer, 'Constructing supranational regions and identities through branding: thick and thin regionbuilding in the Barents and Ireland–Wales', *European Urban and Regional Studies* 23 (3) (2016), 322–37.

[43] In a place-based policy, public interventions rely on local knowledge and are verifiable and submitted to scrutiny, while linkages among places are considered.

polity was used to legitimate specific cross-border strategies aimed at a balanced compromise between different interests. Irish and UK authorities used especially three bundles of strategies—framing, participation and lobbying—replicating what had happened at the national levels when sub-state networks lobbied for creating the cross-border region.[44] Existing territorial delimitations influenced who could subsequently contribute to the flourishing of the cross-border region and they therefore produced effects of inclusion and exclusion. The region comprised the central Dublin/Dún Laoghaire–Holyhead corridor and the southern Rosslare/New Ross/Waterford–Fishguard/Pembroke Dock and Milford Haven sea corridor. Ports were envisaged as strategically important, forming vital links across the sea border. The Welsh counties of Carmarthenshire, Pembrokeshire, Ceredigion, Ynys Môn (Isle of Anglesey), Gwynedd, Conwy, Denbighshire and three NUTS[45] III regions in Ireland, Dublin, the Mid-East and the South-East, were also involved. Dublin was the major urban centre. The Irish part of the region had higher population density (126 vs 70 persons per sq. km) and considerably higher Gross Domestic Product (GDP) per capita than its Welsh counterparts (higher too than Ireland as a whole, and the EU). For the Welsh and Irish governments, the sea was 'the narrow strip of water which connects rather than divides us … traversed by our peoples over millennia'[46] and the basis of a 'common maritime story'.[47] This is reflected in the following quotation, which however emphasises the strategic economic objective of actors and networks:

> The … identity element as historical or widely adopted by the inhabitants of Ireland and Wales was un-emphasised at this stage, as its construction was viewed as challenging. While it was acknowledged that such identity existed, it was the economic objective that was mainly stressed to EU bodies. So, yes … the region was institutionalised by the EU, through institutions and programmes

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[44] Interview with Peter Ryland, November 2022; interview with Samantha Richardson, Ireland Wales Programme Development Officer for the Southern Regional Assembly, online, October 2023.

[45] NUTS (Nomenclature of Territorial Units for Statistics) is a hierarchical classification of European territory at six levels (NUTS 0 to NUTS 6). The regional level is divided into three parts, NUTS 1 corresponding to the most extensive regional level.

[46] Government of Ireland and Welsh Government, *Ireland–Wales Shared Statement and Action Plan 2021–25* (2021), available at: https://www.dfa.ie/media/dfa/ourrolepolicies/ourwork/Ireland-Wales-Shared-Statement-Action-Plan-Final.pdf (1 June 2023).

[47] Government of Ireland and Welsh Government, *Ireland–Wales Shared Statement and Action Plan 2021–25*.

that managed the cooperation and draw greatly on a transnational planning rhetoric.[48]

Ireland and Wales wanted to have an equal voice in all decisions on the elaboration of the priorities, the initiatives developed and their strategies of implementation. This had to be reflected in the governance structures. Moreover, every geographical area included had certain issues to be tackled in a cross-border frame. For example, while the Welsh county of Carmarthenshire pushed for a prioritisation of economic growth and innovation, Dublin had an interest in improving its sustainable freight distribution framework. The EU context allowed discursive legitimation of all claims and enhanced bottom-up participation in the governance structures, with a reference to EU principles of subsidiarity and multi-level governance.[49] INTERREG created a flexible and fluid administrative organisation of the cross-border region, which represented all levels. Development officers were tasked with being regularly on the ground, particularly regarding policy measures that sought local communities to deliver projects. They started to play an important liaising role between the community level and the central bureaucratic level, giving voice to the needs and concerns of those involved on both sides. In the case of the voluntary sector, the officers were also a resource in terms of information about possible co-funding sources as well as how to tackle different types of administrative hurdle. They also facilitated a common understanding of the other administrative structures and culture. Such an understanding was essential in the real joint management and strategic planning of the sub-initiatives.[50]

The total budget of the INTERREG Ireland–Wales 2007–2013 was c.€70m over the period of its operation, with approximately €52m in grants provided through the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF).[51] Subsequent rounds of funds brought approximately €80m to the cross-border region.[52] All displayed a balanced compromise among the various interests brought

[48] Interview with Mike Pollard, INTERREG Ireland–Wales project officer, Cardiff, 28 November 2022.

[49] Welsh European Funding Office, 'Welsh Chapter of the UK Partnership Agreement' (2014), working draft available at: https://gov.wales/docs/wefo/report/131121draftwelshpartnerhipagreementen.pdf (8 October 2023).

[50] Lagana and Wincott, *The added-value of the Ireland–Wales Cooperation Programme*, 15.

[51] *Ireland Wales Programme 2007–2013*, available at: https://www.gov.wales/docs/wefo/publications/territorialcooperation/irelandwales/070925irelandwalesoperationalprogrammeen.pdf (14 October 2023).

[52] EU Funds: Ireland–Wales Co-operation Programme 2014–2020: summary document. Available at: https://irelandwales.eu/sites/default/files/2016-04/150315summaryirelandwales.pdf (14 October 2023).

forward at all levels of society, which had been facilitated by the interconnections generated through paradiplomatic activities and their networks.

## METAGOVERNING PARADIPLOMACY ACROSS THE IRISH SEA

The existence of contradictory and unintended opportunities and constraints provided by cross-border regions implies that their institutionalisation is just the first strategic step towards the realisation of interests. Actors may therefore engage even more in paradiplomatic activities within cross-border spaces, to guide public policymaking processes in a desired direction. Paradiplomacy in this context is not the exercise of new power, additional capacity or greater authority. Nor does it represent the result of a new layer of government, but rather a way of articulating and implementing the competences and powers that result from the need to establish relationships with other political entities and respond to the functional and normative imperatives of the current political–economic system.[53]

In Ireland and Wales, interactions were facilitated by changing political contexts in which different socio-spatial relations could be newly articulated. The advent of UK devolution, for example, has been a transformative moment for Wales's paradiplomacy. It has provided new institutions and intergovernmental structures aimed at deepening cooperation between the UK constituent territories, while, at the same time, offering to the devolved governments new frameworks to develop their own external relationships in the domain of devolved functions.[54] Indeed, the international activities of the Welsh Office before devolution and those of the Welsh Assembly government afterwards have differed in their scope of action.[55] Welsh paradiplomacy, constrained by path-dependency dynamics and affected by political critical junctures,[56] has since received a significant thrust in the development of a specific foreign policy agenda.[57] To this end, the Wales European Centre (WEC),

[53] Noé Cornago, 'On the normalization of sub-state diplomacy', *The Hague Journal of Diplomacy* 5 (2010), 11–35.
[54] Richard Wyn Jones and Elin Royles, 'Wales in the world: intergovernmental relations and sub-state diplomacy', *British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 14 (2) (2012), 254–6; Jo Hunt and Rachel Minto, 'Between intergovernmental relations and paradiplomacy: Wales and the Brexit of the regions', *British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 19 (4) (2017), 662.
[55] Royles, 'Small, smart, successful'.
[56] Royles, 'Substate diplomacy, culture, and Wales'.
[57] Rachel Minto, Carolyn Rowe and Elin Royles, 'Sub-states in transition: changing patterns of EU paradiplomacy in Scotland and Wales, 1992–2021', *Territory, Politics, Governance* (2023), https://doi.org/10.1080/21622671.2023.2203176.

which had been set up in Brussels at the initiative of the Welsh Development Agency (despite the reluctance of the Conservative government), started to actively represent the cross-border region within the EU, jointly with the Irish Permanent Representation in Brussels.[58] The mere idea of a representation of Wales in Europe had for years been considered taboo by Westminster,[59] reflecting its reluctance to cede powers in the field of foreign policy both to constituent subunits and to supranational institutions such as the EU. The Irish government, on the other hand, has displayed much more enthusiasm in engaging with EU matters.[60]

In the Republic of Ireland, paradiplomacy was further enhanced by the EU arena in the lead-up to the Agenda 2000 negotiations. It then became clear that Ireland would lose its Objective One status if the whole nation was considered as one unit for structural funding. Following a heated and vigorous debate, the government decided to adopt a strategy of regionalisation, thus responding to sub-state entities' demands in the west and border areas likely to benefit from regionalisation in financial terms.[61] The country was therefore divided into two regions: the Border Midland and Western Region (BMW) and the Southern and Eastern Region, which, although prompted by an instrumental desire to maintain a high level of funding, also responded to paradiplomatic 'bottom-up' demands from the west and the east for a more devolved management of EU Structural Funds.[62]

In this new institutional context, networks articulated through paradiplomatic relationships were given more freedom to shape Ireland–Wales cross-border cooperation as an opportunity structure. Following new Commission guidelines, at the time of the elaboration of the new INTERREG Ireland–Wales 2014–2020, interactions and consultations between paradiplomatic actors and institutions happened at formal and informal levels. The informal dimension of consultations denotes the world of complex decision-making where sub-state actors are hidden from public scrutiny and can engage in negotiations less constrained by formal rules. Backstage,

[58] Interview with Anonymous 1, (Irish) Department for Foreign Affairs, British-Irish Unit, online, 9 October 2023.
[59] Alistair Cole and Rosanne Palmer, 'Europeanising devolution: Wales and the European Union', *British Politics* 6 (3) (2021), 379–96.
[60] Giada Lagana, 'A preliminary investigation on the genesis of EU cross-border cooperation on the island of Ireland', *Space and Polity* 21 (3) (2017), 289–302.
[61] Michael Boyle, 'Euro-regionalism and struggles over scales of governance: the politics of Ireland's regionalisation approach to structural fund allocations 2000–2006', *Political Geography* 19 (2000), 737–69.
[62] Boyle, 'Euro-regionalism and struggles over scales of governance', 750.

paradiplomatic actors can negotiate strategically to gain a more active front-stage role. Between Ireland and Wales, backstage discussions were focused on the programme guidelines, the views of potential beneficiaries and the preferences of the responsible authorities.[63] Moreover, Welsh and Irish officials within the Committee of the Regions played an important role in facilitating interregional lobbying and fostered the influence that different actors had within their network.[64] The working routine included discursively setting the agenda and framing local perceptions. Subsequently, joint papers and declarations were drafted, which inspired the new partnership agreement. This expanded on the areas that had been identified backstage as specific shared cross-border challenges.

The extent of the paradiplomatic work undertaken backstage is evidence of how, this time, sub-state actors were allowed to shape the public policy environment of the programme, fostering interdependence and easing the transition of strategies from backstage to frontstage policymaking.[65] This empowerment can be framed as a metagovernance outcome, with the INTERREG programme becoming a metagovernance instrument.[66] While national governments may at least employ hierarchical means in their relationship to subnational authorities, paradiplomatic actors cannot impose order on a framework that consists of institutions beyond their territorial and legal control. Outcomes resulting from Welsh–Irish paradiplomatic relations could not directly direct and control EU policy-making processes, but could seek new instruments to shape, direct and frame cross-border cooperation and its governance mechanisms. They could shape not the process as such, but the environment of the process.[67] They strove to change the contextual elements of the cross-border region, circumventing the two central governments involved, to optimise the realisation of their strategies. These are metagovernance activities, which positively affected the goal-attainment of different networks in Ireland and Wales and changed the context in which the cross-border region operated.

Nevertheless, it is important not to paint a picture of two totally incapacitated governments rendered powerless by the advent of new forms of

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[63] Interview with Samantha Richardson, October 2023.

[64] Interview with Peter Ryland, 2022.

[65] Erik Hans Klijn and Joop Koppejan, *Governance networks in the public sector* (London, 2015).

[66] Similar instances have been explored in the Northern Ireland context. See Giada Lagana, *The European Union and the Northern Ireland Peace Process* (Basingstoke, 2021), 105–31.

[67] Sørensen and Torfing, 'Making governance networks effective and democratic through metagovernance', 241.

metagovernance. States have not been 'hollowed out' and many of their powers were still in place, with new powers developing in the face of the challenges from paradiplomacy, partnerships and international governance arenas.[68] Within the Ireland–Wales cross-border region, hierarchies did not vanish, and the concept of 'shadow of hierarchy' introduced by Scharpf is suitable to describe the relationship between hierarchy and governance arrangements in cross-border regions.[69] Governments determined priorities, objectives and rules, thus limiting the autonomy and flexibility of networks constituted through paradiplomatic interactions. Mechanisms relied on the threat of government interventions[70] or even on hierarchy and coercion as an omnipresent practice, which makes the Ireland–Wales cross-border region just another arena in the European political system.

The EU, through the INTERREG programme as a metagovernance tool, did not simply frame certain governance mechanisms of cooperation but mixed, ordered and altered different modes of governance, spatial dimensions and discursive backstage and frontstage forms. It then attempted to place paradiplomacy of and within Wales and Ireland in this context, empowering networks to actively participate in all the phases of the policymaking process. This confirms the statement asserting that metagovernors respond to complexity and failure,[71] but it also places the EU in an active metagovernance performative role. Ireland–Wales cross-border cooperation did not rely on new powers or even on alternative powers. Communities and local authorities were encouraged in taking part to cooperate following the principles of their legislation, which in turn set the powers, procedural principles and control of their decisions. Consequently, paradiplomacy across the Irish Sea can be understood as an extension of local policies of planning and development, based on an agreement between actors from both sides, national governments and the EU.

This coming together of functional and normative imperatives, which drove the vertical and horizontal axes of the Ireland–Wales cross-border region, was subsequently institutionalised in the new constitutional setting initiated by the 1998 Belfast/Good Friday Agreement. The new system had as

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[68] Torfing et al., *Interactive governance*, 132.

[69] Fritz W. Scharpf, 'Games real actors could play: positive and negative coordination in embedded negotiations', *Journal of Theoretical Politics* 6 (1) (1994), 27–53.

[70] Interview with Peter Ryland, November 2022.

[71] Jacob Torfing and Peter Triantafillou, *Enhancing public innovation by transforming public governance* (Cambridge, 2016).

its central tenets North–South and East–West cross-border cooperation and Anglo-Irish policy coordination on Northern Ireland, and facilitated territorial relationships between the UK constituent territories and the Republic of Ireland. East–West relations therefore became framed and articulated to respond to imperatives driven by the flows of contemporary global economy. Moreover, at a discursive level, they became more than ever sustained by the idea of the Irish Sea, articulated during the first constructive articulation of the Ireland–Wales cross-border region, as a space with its own features and governance arrangements, and not simply a gap between places.

## POST-BREXIT CROSS-BORDER COOPERATION ACROSS THE IRISH SEA: ARE THERE ALTERNATIVE CONSTITUTIONAL FUTURES?

As already explored in this article, the literature has established UK devolution and regionalisation in the Republic of Ireland as the main events fostering paradiplomatic activities across the Irish Sea. However, many consider that Brexit has been a turning point. Hunt and Minto, for example, establish Brexit as the juncture from which to develop the analysis of a particularly dynamic form of Welsh paradiplomacy, as part of a clear strategy to make Wales's voice heard during the Brexit negotiations that were adverse to it as they strengthened the sovereignty of the UK in the field of foreign policy.[72]

From an Irish perspective, the re-establishment of the Irish Consulate in Cardiff at the height of the vexed politics of Brexit in 2019 needs to be seen as a sign of how the Irish Sea is perceived as a space for post-Brexit institutional empowerment, which could start with Wales and Scotland. The Irish Consulate in Wales had been closed in 2009, partly because of the financial crash. Bilateral relations had always been positive between Ireland and Wales, and especially 'built upon the achievements of the INTERREG Ireland–Wales programme'.[73] In the aftermath of 2016:

> it became clear that the UK government had not given any thoughts to the effects that Brexit would have on devolution …

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[72] Hunt and Minto, 'Between intergovernmental relations and paradiplomacy'.
[73] Anonymous 2, October 2023.

and the decision was taken jointly with our embassy in London to re-open the consulate in Cardiff to replicate what we had in Scotland; to figure-out our new relationships with the devolveds … but also to figure-out what the new role would be for the devolved administrations within the UK.[74]

This quotation conjures up an image of a UK that is distinctly pluri-national and constitutionally multipolar. Relationships between the Republic of Ireland and Scotland are historically stronger, founded on institutional channels, and dictated by a more solid form of devolution. In comparison, Wales is seen by the Republic of Ireland as more 'subsumed'[75] into the UK. The decision to deepen the connections with Wales was consequently taken jointly with the Irish Embassy in London, also as part of a political strategy that traditionally sees the Welsh first minister, Mark Drakeford, as 'an important ally'.[76]

In response, Wales was early to set out its ongoing commitment to Irish Sea cross-border cooperation. In 2017, it stated that cross-border cooperation with Ireland could become even more important post-2020. Subsequently, the Ireland–Wales Shared Statement highlighted the wish for the 'closest and deepest possible relationship between the UK and Ireland, and between Wales and Ireland'.[77] In addition, by building on existing policies and strategies, discussions with devolved governments and engagement with stakeholders from regions and nations around the Irish Sea space, outcomes from a symposium that took place in June 2021 have helped to build a broad consensus on the focus of possible future cross-border cooperation.[78] Three priority areas have been agreed upon, clearly inspired by the latest round of INTERREG Ireland–Wales funding: Life Sciences; Sustainable Blue Growth; Communities & Culture. The aim is to take forward complementary actions, which could include running events, establishing networks or even aligning investments,

[74] Anonymous 2, October 2023.

[75] Anonymous 2, October 2023.

[76] Jonathan Evershed, 'Rethinking relationships: Cork and Wales', in: Mary Murphy (ed.), *Cork and the Brexit effect* (2022), available at: https://www.ucc.ie/en/media/academic/government/FINALREPORTCorkandTheBrexitEffect20.06.2022-Edited.pdf (11 August 2022).

[77] Government of Ireland and Welsh Government, *Ireland–Wales Shared Statement and Action Plan 2021–25*.

[78] Gerard Green, 'Proposal for an informal framework for co-operation across the Irish Sea space: presentation to the Welsh Government', Irish Sea Cooperation Workshop, online, 24 November 2022.

and the potential for joint initiatives between regions and nations taking the example of the successful 2021 ScoRE Cymru call.[79]

More recently, the Welsh government has also signed a collaboration agreement with Cornwall.[80] This, based on a common Celtic heritage, encourages the two territories to share best practices and develop solutions for areas of mutual challenge. Beyond that purely utilitarian dimension, this agreement establishes a collaboration consolidating a horizontal working partnership between two peripheral regions of the UK that, as far as their relationship is concerned, bypass and/or avoid the central government, not so much functionally but symbolically. All these proofs of commitment have to be seen as Welsh attempts to (re)imagine old socio-spatial relationships and articulate new ones.[81] Efforts are modest in terms of financial resources, but they have a weight of support behind them. Crucially, they retain a level of contact between stakeholders, which links to the retention of key areas of the added value that come from territorial cooperation: the contacts and networks of paradiplomacy empowered by the Ireland–Wales cross-border region. However, despite these examples of how engagement happens, the process of recognising and pooling other opportunities is under-resourced and the main source of metagovernance—the EU—is out of the constitutional framework.

Other notable evidence of emerging approaches worthy of future study—and raising questions such as whether territorial cooperation is increasingly broad, as opposed to regional—is a proposal coming from the Atlantic Arc Commission.[82] In December 2020, members approved a political declaration asking the European Council to issue a mandate to the European Commission to create an Atlantic macro-region, in whose framework Wales and Ireland (but also Scotland and Northern Ireland) could keep cooperation alive. The Atlantic Arc Commission has worked hand in hand with the European Parliament, which supported this proposal in its report *Towards a*

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[79] The budget allocated for this call was £60,000, for projects looking at increasing cooperation between Ireland, Northern Ireland, Scotland and other jurisdictions/countries, provided the costs claimed are incurred by the Welsh partner. Please see, for more information: https://www.gov.wales/funding-score-cymru-html (1 June 2023).

[80] Cornwall Council, *Celtic Heritage – Cornwall-Wales Collaboration Agreement* (17 July 2023), available at: https://www.cornwall.gov.uk/the-council-and-democracy/your-council/celtic-heritage-cornwall-wales-collaboration-agreement/ (18 December 2023).

[81] Welsh Government, *The Irish Sea framework: guidance* (21 February 2023), available at: https://www.gov.wales/irish-sea-framework-guidance (4 June 2023).

[82] This is one of the six geographical commissions in the Conference of Peripheral Maritime Regions of Europe along with the Baltic Sea, the North Sea, the Intermediterranean, the Balkan and Black Sea, and the Islands.

*new approach to the Strategy for the Atlantic.*[83] Following these contacts, the French, Spanish and Portuguese secretaries of state agreed to jointly analyse the benefits of the Atlantic macro-region, in a trilateral declaration agreed in November 2021. Such a comprehensive approach has encountered resistance from the EU Commission. Nor has the Council shown enthusiasm.[84]

A macro-region is a cross-border area bringing together several European countries, third countries and regions, around shared challenges supported by the EU in the framework of a jointly defined territorial strategy. It would be intended to optimise the funding already available in each country, and to pool and synergise initiatives for better integration of the territory. Potentially, such a macro-region would enable the common challenges of the Atlantic seaboard regions to be tackled more effectively and some of the difficulties caused by Brexit to be overcome. Moreover, it would allow improved alignment with existing regional, national and European funding programmes (e.g. Connecting Europe Facility (CEF), Horizon, European Maritime and Fisheries Fund (EMFF), INTERREG Atlantic Area).[85] Interestingly, studies coming from the Alpine Macro-Regional Framework show how such a framework has empowered the territorial ability of sub-state actors, even in a multi-level context, to develop strong metagoverning roles and shape geographical and thematic definitions, governance mechanisms and the relative weight of territory, place, scale and network within the Alpine area.[86]

In the case of the Ireland–Wales cross-border region, participation in this macro-regional strategy could act as a means of intensifying the political dimension of existing cooperation, and as a lever for action on the ground in relation to European political developments that impact the area. Partners have noted the importance of recognising and capitalising on the INTERREG Ireland–Wales 'soft' outcomes, retaining links and know-how and extending/embedding them in participating organisations.[87] Signatories of the declaration (the Welsh government, the Northern & Western Regional Assemblies in Ireland, the Irish government, etc.) that was approved during the first General Assembly in

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[83] European Parliament, *Towards a new strategy for the Atlantic*, policy report, 14 September 2021, available at: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2021-0369_EN.pdf (5 June 2023).

[84] Mark Wise, 'The Atlantic Arc: a macro-region in the making?', in Stefan Gänzle and Kristine Kern (eds), *A 'macro-regional' Europe in the making: theoretical approaches and empirical evidence* (Cham, 2016), 243–68.

[85] Wise, 'The Atlantic Arc', 250.

[86] Plangger, 'Exploring the role of territorial actors in cross-border regions', 170.

[87] The 2023 General Assembly of the CPMR Atlantic Arc Commission took place in Cardiff on 23 May. For more about the discussions, please see https://cpmr.org/cohesion/regional-leaders-commit-in-cardiff-to-more-and-better-cooperation-between-eu-and-non-eu-atlantic-regions/35821/ (5 June 2023).

Cardiff in May 2023 showed awareness that the apparently win–win relations generated around interregional and cross-border cooperation dynamics can be the object and cause of political dispute if questioned by central governments, as these perforate state sovereignty. Such awareness reflects the complexity of paradiplomatic practices, as well as their controversial ethos. This, however, should not be seen as a limitation. On the contrary, it is precisely because of the conflictive nature of relations between different levels of government, as well as between (re)territorialising and deterritorialising forces, that paradiplomacy and metagovernance are necessary as a practice of interaction and mediation.

CONCLUSION

The approach taken in this article builds on the conceptual idea that cross-border spaces, supported and sponsored by the EU, are suitable frameworks in which to develop and empower paradiplomatic activity though metagovernance. Networks of paradiplomacy can attempt to shape cross-border strategies to optimise the realisation of their interests. At the same time, they face differential opportunities and constraints in pursuing goals. The genesis of Ireland–Wales cross-border cooperation is therefore particularly revealing: the region, framed and institutionalised by the INTERREG Ireland–Wales, appears as the product of attempts by paradiplomatic actors to shape cooperation strategically to optimise the realisation of socio-spatial interests. Furthermore, it constitutes an emblematic example of how paradiplomacy can be empowered by the EU—through Structural Funds programmes as metagovernance instruments—in shaping new opportunities and constraints, while adapting to the context and trying to actively construct spaces and ways of jointly addressing common challenges.

This article also points towards areas in need of further exploration, most obviously the rearticulation of Ireland–Wales cross-border relations post-Brexit. Although regulatory frameworks are changing, it is reasonable to think that past examples of adaptation of paradiplomatic forms will continue in the future. It is therefore to be expected that stakeholders in both Ireland and Wales will actively pursue participation in future programmes and strategies. As sub-state entities on both sides of the Irish Sea have demonstrated, awareness of alternative territorially based forms of cooperation could be key to maintaining some form of momentum in cross-border efforts. Examples such as macro-regional strategies highlight, on the one hand, how there can

be flexibility through a range of 'entry points' for associations, formal programmes and mixed approaches involving forms of metagovernance exercised potentially by regional and devolved administrations, and no longer by the EU. Participants come and go, and arrangements can be formal or informal, and can lead to spin-off initiatives coexisting and working in complementary ways to the benefit of all partners. On the other hand, the relationships that the regions of the Atlantic slope are articulating with the objective of promoting the constitution of an Atlantic macro-region demonstrate how cooperation efforts change and evolve alongside changing paradiplomatic activities. This example is also emblematic because it shows that metagovernance is context-specific and complex, and changes over time and space. It can only be examined by observation and investigation.

Lastly, when one is looking at the processes and dynamics of metagovernance, erroneous ideas about the decline or death of the state in areas of international relations and/or governance are problematised. Although decentred and decentralised forms of policy interaction are expanding, traditional forms of command and control, such as Brexit, appear to re-emerging. Metagovernance, by working through the high politics of governments to balance state-centred and society-centred views on how society and the economy are governed, governs and at the same time empowers multiple voices from all levels of society. In the context of the Irish Sea, this means respecting the self-regulatory capacity of cross-border governance settings to preserve the commitment to paradiplomacy.

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