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The Role of European Union (EU) Metagovernance in Supporting the Voluntary and Community Sector in Northern Ireland

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ABSTRACT

This article argues that European Union (EU) peacebuilding scholarship can benefit from organizational research on the socio-spatial dynamics of policy implementation. It introduces a strategic-relational heuristic to address two key gaps: the marginalization of grassroots agency in spatial analyses and the separation of strategy from structure. Drawing on the Strategic-Relational Approach (SRA), the paper examines EU peacebuilding as a form of metagovernance. Using Northern Ireland as a case study, it shows how voluntary and community groups not only respond to but also shape metagovernance as an opportunity structure. Key dimensions—geographic reach, thematic focus, governance mechanisms, and spatial elements like territory, place, scale, and networks—are central to this process. Yet, persistent shortcomings reveal tensions where policy and politics intertwine. The article concludes that metagoverning peacebuilding is a dynamic, context-specific process shaped by diverse actor strategies and overlapping territorial influences, requiring an understanding of both strategic tools and opportunity structure.

1 | Introduction

For 75 years, since the end of World War II, the European Union (EU)[1] has been a driving force for peace, democracy, and human rights around the world. Under the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP), the EU has taken a leading role in peacekeeping operations, conflict prevention, and the strengthening of international security. This has brought peacebuilding to the fore of the EU's comprehensive approach toward crisis management. In 2012, the award of the Nobel Peace Prize was a further reminder of the EU's role in transforming and reunifying the divided European continent, as well as strengthening its position as an international political player. Subsequently, the 2016 EU Global Strategy has aimed to improve the previous mechanisms by setting up new peacebuilding instruments and by strengthening the synergy across governance levels via partnerships and legally binding commitments.

However, in a contemporary global context dominated by the intensification of brutal Israel/Palestine tensions, by the Russia/Ukraine war, and with EU leaders racing to repair the growing divides caused by the politics of the new USA administration, it has become difficult to talk about peace. The devastation of violence has left people with little appetite for compromise, and few are thinking about peacebuilding. Moreover, the idea of cooperation and the reconfiguration of spaces from hard security barriers to an expansion of free movement now increasingly

appears naïve (Newman 2006, 181). While academic commentators agree that EU peacebuilding should matter now more than ever, scepticism on its effectiveness is widespread.

The literature has examined the failure of EU interventions in conflicts, and the diverse spectrum of peacebuilding approaches implemented through a variety of macro-comparative, institutional, political, and cultural lenses (see, e.g., Ortega 2001; Kmec 2015; Juncos and Blockmans 2018; Poopuu 2019; Lagana 2021; Doyle 2022; Bergmann 2023). The prevailing critique describes the EU as not able to connect its supranationally designed policies with an emancipatory form of peace reflecting the interests, identities, and needs of civil society (Richmond 2010, 26). While a limited body of work has acknowledged the technocratic dimensions of EU peacebuilding as a potential challenge for practice (Krieger 2006; Donias 2009; Goetschel and Hagmann 2009; Ginty 2012), few studies have adopted an organizational framework for analysis. Although many have offered organizational recommendations, they rarely ground these in a systematic organizational approach (Herrausen 2007; Lipson 2007, 2012). This is the gap we aim to address in this paper.

We argue that a comprehensive understanding of the many factors influencing the effectiveness of EU peacebuilding requires a theoretically informed, socio-spatial organizational approach. The term socio-spatial refers to the interactions between multi-level governance structures and society. Theoretically, this article bridges the field of EU governance with the analysis of cross-community relations in contested societies and the implementation of post-conflict policy across multiple levels. To this end, we propose applying the Strategic-Relational Approach (SRA) (Jessop 1990, 2008) to the study of EU peacebuilding. This approach facilitates a broader examination of how the role and functions of the state(s) are reformulated within peacebuilding processes, as well as the practical challenges that emerge in the EU context (Dias et al. 2022, 468). Furthermore, the SRA provides a framework for examining the theoretical and conceptual assumptions underpinning governance, addressing its "grassroots," "multi-level," and "territorial" spatial dimensions (Peters et al. 2022a, 960).

Named by Rene Bugge Bertramsen in 1991, the SRA emerged to resolve tensions related to the theoretical analysis of the state. Later, it has enabled scholars to focus on the social relations and on the differential, strategic organizational effects of these on social actors in specific contexts. The SRA encourages the cross-pollination of public administration, political science, organizational science, and urban planning (Plangger 2019). It emphasizes the mutual interaction between strategy and structure in multi-level processes of EU peacebuilding policies implementation, including important variables such as territories, spaces, places, and networks (Hill and Hupe 2009).

Empirically, the article focuses on the Northern Ireland peace process, which is emblematic because Northern Ireland has been the theater of strategic attempts by the EU to connect actors and places across the ethno-national divide, across territorial borders, and across governance levels. EU peacebuilding policies have encompassed supranational, national, and subnational institutions in different ways and with different results (Teague 1996; Buchanan 2008; Hayward and Murphy 2012; McCall 2014; Lagana 2021). Moreover, policy implementation has included a role for Northern Ireland civil society organisations (CSOs) (Kilmurray 1995; Williamson et al. 2000; Cochrane and Dunn 2002; Kilmurray 2012; M. Knox and Quirk 2016; McWilliams and Kilmurray 2018; Acheson et al. 2022), whose activities have also had to survive new geopolitical shifts.

In this regard, the Brexit process has negatively impacted on public attitudes, intensified divisions, and produced political polarization (Murphy 2018a, 2019b, 19; Wager 2022). Despite Brexit, the EU has remained committed to the peace process. In particular, it has guaranteed—in line with the UK government—the survival of the EU Programme for Peace and Reconciliation in Northern Ireland.[2] The program is now in its fifth round of funding, named "PEACEPLUS" (2021–2027).[3] The PEACE package functioning has been characterized by a very active metagoverning role taken by the EU. Hence, Northern Ireland constitutes a unique setting to preliminary examination of the efficacity of EU peacebuilding and to reflect on its shortcomings, in connection with the organizational routines of policy implementation.

The article proceeds in four steps. First, it engages with the international literature on public policy and governance (Rhodes 1996; Skelcher 2000, 11; Kissler and Heidemann 2006; Kitthananan 2006; Medzini 2021) to identify the foundational elements that will be integrated through the SRA in the context of EU peacebuilding. Second, it proposes a strategic-relational framework that relates strategic action to structural opportunities and constraints impacting the ability of CSOs to take ownership of peace processes from the bottom-up. Third, it exemplifies the proposed framework within the history of the EU relationship with Northern Ireland. It examines the metagoverning role of EU policies, especially the EU PEACE programs, in the purposeful creation, territorial delineation, thematic shaping, and governance construction of "peacebuilding from below" (Lederach 1997) within Northern Ireland's contested society. Fourth, it scrutinizes the difficulties the EU has encountered in achieving its peacebuilding objectives. The concluding remarks synthesize the main approach and findings of the analysis. They demonstrate that metagovernance should receive attention in the study of EU peacebuilding, notwithstanding the fact that it must evolve as it responds to the everyday problems that people on the ground have to face.

2 | EU Peacebuilding: A Socio-Spatial Framework for Analysis

The EU aims to promote stabilization and peace in close coordination with its member states, combining conflict prevention, mediation, and peacebuilding efforts (Tocci 2021). This approach must incorporate top-down elements of conflict resolution to address structural and cultural violence, support conflict settlement and peace-making, and ensure conflict containment through peacekeeping (Hughes 2009; McCall 2013, 206; Forero and Nunez 2021). These efforts appear to have led to the restructuring and empowerment of subnational levels, fostering the emergence of new political arenas (Dias and Seixas 2020).

EU peacebuilding is conceptualized as a long-term endeavor aimed at addressing ethno-national, ideological, political, and cultural incompatibilities between conflicting parties within a cross-community context. For such efforts to be effective, top-down approaches must be integrated with bottom-up policies and initiatives. This integration helps to connect supranational and regional levels with individuals and groups "on the ground"—including community and religious organizations, grassroots movements, policymakers, and powerbrokers—in the pursuit of resolving these deep-rooted incompatibilities (Lederach 1997, 2005; Galtung and Jacobsen 2002; Schirch 2005; Philpott 2010). Consequently, EU peacebuilding strategies emerge from evolving relationships between tiers of governance and territorial organization, as well as between the public and private sectors (Bollens 2000; Bache and Flinders 2004; Brinkerhoff 2005, 2007; Stephenson 2013; O'Connor 2014; Loizides 2016).

Three main theoretical frameworks have been employed to examine these relationships, particularly to question whether states should be understood as apparatuses or as governing actors in EU peacebuilding. These frameworks are governance (Rhodes 1996; Skelcher 2000, 11; Kissler and Heidemann 2006; Kitthananan 2006; Medzini 2021), multi-level governance (MLG), and network theory (Hooghe and Marks 2002; Morçöl et al. 2022; Peters et al. 2022a, 2022b).

First, it is impossible to study organizational structures for peace and EU policy implementation without engaging with the umbrella concept of governance. In this realm, the body of literature is vast and diverse (e.g., Hollstein et al. 2018; Peters et al. 2022a, 2022b). While governance as a concept may be as old as government itself, scholarly and policy interest emerged more prominently in the corporate sector during the 1980s. At that time, growing demands were placed on large corporations to demonstrate justice and fairness in treatment, transparency in information disclosure, accountability, and compliance with regulatory standards (Khan 2011). Later, the concept has found applicability in the field of peacebuilding. Kissler and Heidemann (2006) highlight the relevance of governance as it began to be used in models designed by international organizations, commonly referred to as "good governance." Institutions such as the United Nations (UN), the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), and the EU employed the term to promote public policies guided by principles such as accountability, transparency, effective management, and the legality of the public sector. These principles are viewed as structural foundations for building peaceful societies (Roberts 2011; Nyamnjoh 2018; Beevers 2019; Vanelli and Ochoa Peralta 2022). Academic contributions have accordingly focused on the set of practices that steer societies toward collective goals, with public policy identified as a key mechanism through which this steering occurs (Peters et al. 2022a, 2022b).

Second, MLG is defined as "a system of continuous negotiation amongst nested governments at several territorial tiers in which supranational, national, regional and local governments are enmeshed in territorially overarching policy networks" (Marks 1996, 21–23). MLG has the advantage of having identified the different forms of governance that exist in Northern Ireland, and their separate and distinct character (Birrell and Gormley-Heenan 2015, 20–22). It has also been largely employed to examine the role of different actors in the development and implementation of cross-border and cross community relations, which have been integral to the EU approach to peace on the island of Ireland (Tannam 1999; Laffan and Payne 2001; Murphy 2014; Lagana 2021).

Finally, networks too have been an increasingly popular concept employed to examine peacebuilding and EU politics and policies. Most often, scholars differentiate between policy networks and governance networks (Börzel 1998; Blanco et al. 2011; Lagana 2025). However, the two intermesh in peacebuilding. Scholars turn to networks to examine the structure of cross-community contacts at the grassroot level, and their influence on policymaking (Blatter 2003; Perkmann 2007; Bsisu and Murdie 2021). Networks are not necessarily neutral and empowering structures, but they differentially affect the ability of individuals to pursue their interests. The linkages of networks provide a central position and influence for some, while they disadvantage others (Metzger and Schmitt 2012; Durand and Nelles 2014; Sohn and Giffinger 2015).

These three theoretical approaches fail to comprehensively explain socio-spatial structuring principles (Jessop 2016a, 20) following the implementation of EU peacebuilding policies within contested settings. Moreover, they disregard that grassroot actors can challenge the EU opportunity–structure, shaping it to better represent interests, thus ignoring tangled scalar state and network hierarchies (Piattoni 2009). Hence, overall, the contrasting logics of territorialization consequent to EU policy implementation, when specifically aimed at overcoming socio-spatial divisions in contested spaces such as Northern Ireland, remains deeply problematic for government and governance and its analysis. Scholars (Tannam 1999; Laffan and Payne 2001) have related the issue to complex interdependence to justify the need for greater MLG, but this justification underplays the complexities of governing the Northern Ireland geographical space, as well as the challenges posed by the influence of specific spatial dynamics and private networks (Jessop 2016a, 21).

These limitations indicate the need to shift the attention from agency to the opportunity-structure[4] that follows the implementation of EU peacebuilding policies to investigate their impacts. At the same time, it calls for a consideration of the contested space in which policies have to be implemented, which are objects of strategies that create and shape them, but also means that serve actors' certain purposes (Jessop 2016a). From this perspective, the implementation of EU peacebuilding in contested societies is a process that empowers certain actors while disadvantaging others within a set of well-defined structural conditions (Torfing et al. 2019). These dynamics effectively relocate state power, necessitating a degree of reformulation in the role and function of the state. Historically, states have been the central actors in the formulation and delivery of public policies and services, including those related to peacebuilding. However, in response to increasingly globalized and constantly shifting contexts, states are now compelled to develop strategies that involve a broader range of actors in the public policy cycle. In this evolving landscape, new modes of governance often operate either within or outside the so-called "shadow of

hierarchy“ (Börzel and Risse 2010). At the European level, growing evidence points to self-regulatory mechanisms functioning under the influence of regional hierarchies, where policymakers adopt alternative strategies to address these complexities indirectly (Medzini 2021).

This transformation does not signify the erosion of state centrality. On the contrary, it reflects a shift toward a softer, and at times more effective, mode of control: one that relies less on coercion and authoritarianism, and more on subtle forms of influence. In response to these developments, the concept of *multi-spatial metagovernance* has emerged to capture this evolving reality (Sørensen 2006, 102; Jessop 2016a; Torfing et al. 2019, 23; Sørensen and Torfing 2020; Dias et al. 2022). Metagovernance emphasizes attempts to influence the processes and outcomes of governance without reverting to hierarchical forms of command and control (Jessop 2001; Sørensen and Torfing 2009; Torfing et al. 2019). While in the past, metagovernance tended to be defined exclusively in managerial terms, new research has recognized that it also involves political decisions that only elected politicians have sufficient democratic legitimacy to make. Thus, a conceptual distinction has been made between “political metagovernance” and “administrative metagovernance” (Sørensen and Torfing 2019, 1447). “Political metagovernance” involves political efforts to frame and direct grassroots’ activities by endorsing their policy recommendations. When properly exercised, it enables public and private actors to learn about policy problems, seek inspiration for developing new solutions, and generate support for their implementation (Sørensen and Torfing 2019, 1447). “Administrative metagovernance” frames all those indirect techniques and “tools” that public governors can use to target the environment of a policy process. These include financial, legal, and discursive framing; goals and frameworks steering; and, more broadly, all creative ways of managing processes aimed at fostering interdependencies and incentivising actors with opposing interests to mobilize and commit to peacebuilding (Sørensen and Torfing 2009).

Metagovernance appears to be an especially interesting lens to examine the EU peacebuilding approach in Northern Ireland, where policies have had to be imaginative, tackle divisions, be legitimated by the two national governments involved, and implemented to create spaces for cross-community, and cross-border cooperation (Lederach 1997; Lagana 2021). To use the concept of metagovernance in conjunction with the SRA (Jessop 1990, 2008) allows us to take a further step into the study of the impact of EU policies on Northern Ireland society. The SRA acknowledges that the EU provides opportunities and constraints (Bourne 2003; Fleurke and Willemse 2006) and it emphasizes that these are not uniform, but relate to the realization of specific interests. Opportunities support the realization of actors’ interests, while constraints hinder these. Structures are “strategically selective” (Hay et al. 2014). They privilege some interests, resources, and strategies, while they disadvantage others (Jessop 1990, 10). Opportunities and constraints also differ over time and space (Jessop 1999, 124). While this focus on structures provides a common point with network and governance approaches (Rhodes 1996; Kohler-Koch and Eising 1999), metagovernance within the SRA shifts the attention to the interaction between governance structures, the activity of public governors, and societal strategies in creating the environment for peace.

3 | A Strategic-Relational Heuristic to EU Peacebuilding

Interests, strategies, contextual elements, and the impact of strategic efforts are the dimensions to take into account when developing a strategic-relational heuristic to EU peacebuilding. They all have a distinct spatial dimension and encompass all governance levels. Processes of strategic transformation combine the four spatial aspects of territory, place, scale, and networks (Jones and MacLeod 2004; MacLeod 1999; MacLeod and Goodwin 1999; Brenner 2003; Jessop et al. 2008) and provide a comprehensive basis for the analysis of EU metagovernance and its multiple spatial facets in peacebuilding. Metagovernance is not limited to the delimitation of a territorial area as a political sphere, or the reordering of scales. Rather, it forms and connects territories, places, scales, and networks as part of the functional dynamic of EU integration (McCall 2014). The concrete configuration and weight of these different dimensions change constantly. They influence what actors perceive and pursue, and privilege or disadvantage certain actors, interests, and strategies.

Interests serve as a starting point to engage in strategic action towards specific objectives. In contested societies, actors represent interests in a way which is never completely reducible to subjective identities. Interests also relate to the contexts in which actors are embedded (Jessop 2016b, 93–94) and the challenges they face. Actors can also adapt their interests on the basis of an observation of the material context, but they are not able to observe every detail of the situation. Rather, they can be persuaded to take a particular direction based on systems of values, which serve the need to select among the many possible observations (Jessop 1990, 300; Jessop 2008, 235). Interests can also emerge following processes of social learning and persuasion occurring by mutual interactions between different levels of governance (Diez 2013). In such instances, these serve to incentivise actors to cooperate and to strike a balance within a certain territorial or functional constituency (Jessop 2016a, 207). The interests raised often mix personal and professional concerns of public governors and politicians on the one hand, and pressures exercised by grassroots communities on the other. The weight of these influences varies and depends on personalities, issues, and political constellations.

Bringing a conflict onto the EU agenda with the objective of prompting its involvement in activities connected to peacebuilding can be a contested process in which governmental and nongovernmental actors with different interests and perceptions of a problem participate (Jessop 2003). Objectives are set through processes of problematization. Specific issues can be defined as problematic for a particular community, group, or the whole of the society. They have to be subsequently located within a policy area, or a policy priority, in which they can be resolved (Debarbieux 2009). Their realization depends on the strategies and strategic responses of the EU (Hay 2006, 210–211). This is because, as we will analyze later in the article, the EU does not serve as a simple strategic instrument. It will,

once involved, offer opportunities and constraints that are not the same for all. Jessop has accordingly introduced the notion of "strategic selectivity" to grasp this nuance. The term implies that a certain structure will give different opportunities to actors who want to access it (Jessop 2001, 9). Structures "privilege some strategies over others, privilege the access of some forces over others, some interests over others, sometime horizons over others, some coalition possibilities over others" (Jessop 1990, 10).

When public governors and representatives reach alignment, they are ready to start engaging in strategic action at the supranational level. Strategies can involve several EU institutions at the same time. Ways in which interests will be represented, and issues problematize, will vary across the different forums available (e.g., the EU Council, the Commission, or the European Parliament). The most suitable space within which to make a statement or support a specific argument will be chosen on the basis of a subjective and filtered analysis of the material context. Not the context itself, but the actors' understanding of the context forms the basis for the strategic action (Hay 2006, 211–213).

The response of the EU will be the result of its interaction with various other structural patterns providing opportunities and constraints (Durand 2015). National, regional, local, and global elements will be all taken into account in setting-up the EU peacebuilding toolbox (Richmond and Mitchell 2011; Kapogianni 2021). However, member-states (in cases of conflicts internal to the EU such as Northern Ireland), or member-states and the national governments involved (in instances of foreign policy) need to recognize the EU as a legitimate peacebuilding actor (Gualini 2005; Jessop 2004). This is because the EU cannot directly command and control. It can only design creative ways in which to steer common goals so that opposing actors can grasp the opportunity to form networks, and to take an active part into the peace process. This usually occurs under the incentive of financial support.

Goals can be steered in different ways: by the EU itself, which might lead to a narrow conception of effectiveness, or by actors at other levels, which can provide a much more comprehensive assessment of effectiveness, although there will be challenges when it comes to determine "whose" effectiveness is under analysis. It is interesting to notice that since the establishment of the CSDP in 1999, the EU has been increasingly interested in setting-up peacebuilding objectives by engaging with bottom-up and local dynamics (Ejdus and Juncos 2018; García Álvarez and Trillo-Santamaría 2013, 11). This "local turn" in EU peacebuilding has provided CSOs with instruments to contribute toward establishing policy priorities or applying for financial support for locally shaped activities (Kilmurray 2012; M. Knox and Quirk 2016; McWilliams and Kilmurray 2018). Hence, a bottom-up approach to peacebuilding has provided new opportunities and instruments to societal actors, albeit within the framing and steering of the EU. Opposing groups of grassroot actors may still try to influence the process in a desired direction. However, they will not be able to revert to traditional governmental means, like hierarchical commands, to impose order upon a framework that consists of institutions beyond their territorial and legal control. As Jessop points-out, governance "removes issues from the formal purview of a territorial state...and moves them into an ill-defined political sphere where diverse interests may contest how to define and govern them" (2016, 14).

Goals and framework steering, process management through cooperating with governments and governmental actors, and bottom-up empowerment are metagovernance activities that shape not the process as such, but the environment of the process (Peters 2010; Sørensen and Torfing 2009). However, administrative and political metagovernance seem to intermesh in peacebuilding within contested societies, where interests are diametrally opposed and policies are rarely stripped of political meanings. This affects the goal attainment by privileging some actors over others. Grassroot groups and CSOs can strive to influence both the political and administrative contextual elements of EU peacebuilding to optimize the realization of their strategies. In parallel, the EU mixes, orders, and alters different modes of governance, different spatial dimensions, and different material and discursive forms. Thereby, metagovernors respond to complexity and failure (Jessop 2010) and hierarchies may not vanish altogether.

The notion of the "shadow of hierarchy" developed by Scharpf (1994) is widespread in this regard to describe the relationship between hierarchy and governance arrangements (Jessop 2010; Peters 2010; Sørensen and Torfing 2009; Van Bortel and Mullins 2009). The EU may determine priorities, objectives, and rules, but it needs to lock governments in the process, thus limiting the autonomy and flexibility of networked connections (Davies 2002; Van Bortel and Mullins 2009; Whitehead 2003). Arrangements may rely on "the underlying threat of government interventions" (Van Bortel and Mullins 2009, 208) or even on hierarchy and coercion as an omnipresent practice (Davies and Spicer 2015). This makes the EU peacebuilding structure just another arena in a polyarchic European political system that interweaves different hierarchically organized levels (Maurer 2002; Pfetsch 1998).

The following section provides an outline of the application of the proposed framework. The empirical analysis of Northern Ireland draws on a comprehensive qualitative documentary analysis. Documents were made available by archival institutions in Ireland and in the United Kingdom, where possible. Further sources were identified during an extensive desk-based search of the newly created online database the PEACE Programmes Learning Platform.[5] Additionally, semistructured qualitative interviews with representatives of the grassroots, national (Ireland, the United Kingdom), devolved, and European levels of governance provide complementary information. This has been triangulated with archival and policy sources.

4 | Metagoverning Peacebuilding in Northern Ireland

The first dimension of the SRA we present here emphasizes that an examination of the structural impact of EU peacebuilding policies requires knowledge of the interests that encountered opportunities and constraints. Research on the relationship of Northern Ireland with the EU (Kennedy 2000; Harris 2001; Cox et al. 2006; McCall 2014; Murphy 2014; Lagana 2021) has shown

that Northern Ireland political actors have been motivated to seek influence through the EU opportunity structure to defend civil rights and competences, protect distinct identities, and to mobilize resources. Therefore, the genesis of the EU peacebuilding strategy for Northern Ireland must be seen against the backdrop of the conflict.

Political violence initially drew the then European Community's (EC) attention to the political as well as to the contested nature of the Irish border (Patterson 2013, 495). However, it was a small group of national representatives belonging to the Catholic/Republican/Nationalist community in Northern Ireland who first saw in the EU a peacebuilding model. Led by John Hume, a passionately pro-European politician and later Leader of the Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP), this group of nationalists had the goal of resolving the conflict by exclusively peaceful means. The chosen arena within which to "Europeanize" the situation was the European Parliament (EP). Organized in political groups instead of nationalities, the EP served to purposefully foster networked connections with powerful European political figures, who could be sympathetic to the Irish cause (Lagana and McLoughlin 2023).

The 1981 Northern Ireland hunger strike, a watershed moment in Europe's perceptions of the Northern Ireland problem (Guelke 1988, 158), provided Hume with a window of opportunity to bring Northern Ireland under the EU spotlight. In the EP, Hume became the spokesperson of a distinct nationalist cultural and political community and economic interests. In particular, by using the neutral terrain of economic regeneration, Hume was able to find common ground with Protestant/unionist/loyalist representatives in the EP, thus starting a joint strategic action unthinkable at the national level (Lagana 2021, 63–65; Lagana and McLoughlin 2023).

While for nationalists the EU arena represented a means to jump scales and to raise issues and challenges, political claims, and financial demands in a neutral framework, unionists feared that in this context their main interest (maintaining the union with the United Kingdom) would fall behind, and wanted to build a counterweight. The chance to exploit financial or political opportunities to create new functional, cross-border spaces did not constitute an advantage for them. However, their collaborative participation in experiences and debates within the EP is evidence of their strategic engagement, and of a change in attitudes occurring in parallel with changes within the two national governments of Ireland and the United Kingdom. David Trimble's[6] former Private Secretary, David Crabbe, explained that unionists were excluded from the 1985 Anglo-Irish Agreement's (AIA) negotiations, which recognized the Republic of Ireland's role in Northern Ireland's affairs. This demonstrated that Unionism could not depend anymore on the UK government to look after their own interests. They would have to positively engage in the administration of Northern Ireland and this also meant engaging with the EU (Lagana 2021, 93). This change in unionists' attitude shows the potential of political metagovernance in leading nationalists and unionists to adapt their interests on the basis of an observation of the material context, even if they perceived this context through very different lenses.[7]

The second dimension of a strategic relational heuristic to EU peacebuilding, as we described it, is concerned with the mutual grasping and shaping of opportunities and constraints at different governance levels. Prompting the involvement of the EU pushed bureaucrats and officials at the supranational level to reflect on the design of the structure and the strategies for peace in Northern Ireland. Criteria were set, which were dictated by the very nature of the EU. They represented a mixture of political, personal, and professional preferences held in the Commission, representatives in the EP and the European Council, and linkages to nongovernmental organizations. The EU, as an agent of peace, could not move too quickly beyond the most immediate concern of national, regional, or community actors. This would have meant violating the principle of subsidiarity and undermining selective scalar hierarchies. It was therefore decided to frame the Northern Ireland situation in a way that reflected the normative and functional dynamics of European integration: EU peacebuilding had to encompass the need to maintain positive relationships with the two nation states involved. Furthermore, it had to overcome certain functional issues related to the Irish border (e.g., its militarization), which prevented it from positively responding to the policy's objective of transforming borders from barriers into bridges (Laffan 2005, 173). Finally, it had to address the lack of attention paid by national governments to the detrimental effects of violence on the Irish cross-border region (Tannam 1999; Laffan and Payne 2001). A form of administrative metagovernance, aimed at indirectly targeting the environment of the peace process, was therefore chosen as the best tool.

In turn, to mobilize the opportunities of this EU peacebuilding framework, the island of Ireland had to adapt to these requirements and anchor its own priorities within it. This was challenging. A cross-border dimension got institutionalized only in 1985 on the island, with the signing of the AIA. Although it was fiercely resisted by unionists, thereafter the agenda for negotiation on the future of Northern Ireland always included the Republic of Ireland. This was aided by interpersonal relations between British and Irish premiers, and élite civil servants at key stages (Tannam 1999; McCall 2014, 43; Litter 2023). Nationalists' interests prevailed over those of unionists. Furthermore, the AIA created the International Fund for Ireland (IFI) (Buchanan 2017, 183). IFI activities constituted the first attempt to develop an integrated vertical and horizontal capacity for peacebuilding in the region. The USA, the EU, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand all contributed to it (Buchanan 2017, 184), with the EU being the second largest contributor.

The IFI's main priority was the economic development of disadvantaged areas. However, it also began to focus on building community capacity to include an overall program on CSOs' initiatives. As it was created with almost no formal social or political consultation, it had no real social infrastructure, which impacted on its ability to build strong linkages with a broad range of CSOs, and to shape a positive environment within which to foster cross-community relations (interview with Carlo Trojan, EU Commission's observer on the IFI Board from 1986 to 1997 and later Secretary General of the EU Commission, 6/03/2019). Establishing cross-border and cross-community networks, relationships with national governments, and

international linkages (Royles 2016) was not part of a systematic approach to peace in the IFI framework. This affected the interplay of strategies, opportunities, and constraints.

A new and better window to mobilize the EU opportunity structure presented itself in 1994, with the paramilitary ceasefires.[8] A new call was therefore made to the EU Commission by the three Northern Ireland MEPs, who highlighted a new set of priorities (Lagana 2021, 137).[9] Socially, unemployment in Northern Ireland had touched almost 15% of the working population and was predicted to increase.[10] The need for jobs had more serious political undertones: it was understood as the source of paramilitary recruitment, particularly among young people.[11] By steering and fostering the creation of jobs, combined with the permanent cessation of violence, it was hoped that one of Northern Ireland's major structural weaknesses would be tackled[12]: educational underachievement and skill levels among the unemployed population.[13] Both governments agreed with the three MEPs that "the EU has a vital role to play in this process."[14]

In response, the then EU Commission President Jacques Delors made proposals for the so-called Delors II package, subsequently tasking a special Taskforce with extensive consultations on the ground. The Northern Ireland Taskforce officials took meetings with a variety of groupings across Northern Ireland and the border regions.[15] They consulted a wide range of public and private actors at the four different locations they visited (Belfast, Armagh, Ballymena, and Derry/Londonderry). Local groups and CSOs prepared thoroughly before meeting the Taskforce. Some of the submissions related to distinct ideologically motivated projects (Jones and MacLeod 2004). Everyone wanted to include their own community, but nationalists were more motivated than unionists in participating. First, they had less political sensitivity towards working with the EU (Coakley and O'Dowd 2005; Lagana 2017, 295; Coakley 2017). Second, they hoped to increase their functional leverage on the peace process, particularly in the economic sphere (Coakley 2017, 384). Third, they hoped to achieve more weight for the Republic of Ireland in the peacebuilding strategy to their benefit (Tannam 1999, 123). The presence of unionist representatives in the Taskforce served to mitigate a possible dominance of nationalists' views.

Interestingly, independent foundations took a preliminary cross-community approach. For example, the Community Foundation for Northern Ireland[16] undertook a survey among 400 community-based groups as to what their priorities were in light of the ceasefires (interview with Dr Avila Kilmurray, former director of the Community Foundation for Northern Ireland and, today, international activist and peacebuilder, 21/01/2021). The majority of the results focused on the need to tackle unemployment as a way of solving the issues of poverty and social exclusion, particularly among political ex-prisoners. Reports were written based on the survey results, and provided to the EU officials, who included copies of the consultations in the Taskforce report.[17] A full account was presented to the EU leaders' meeting at the summit in Essen in December 1994.[18] There, the member-states approved the €240 million for Northern Ireland destined to form what became the PEACE I program.[19] The Republic of Ireland and the UK governments agreed on contributing matching funding[20] and to be part of the mechanisms, thus introducing a strong "shadow of hierarchy."

The three Northern Ireland MEPs—two unionists and one nationalist—used existing EU procedures and ideas to gather national and European institutions within a common peacebuilding structure, to exceed the territorial and thematic boundaries of Northern Ireland, to gain resources, and to anchor a role for Northern Ireland representatives in decision-making. With regard to the involvement of national and EU institutions, the MEPs convinced their national governments and the EU Commission to support their aspirations. The first national government that supported the project was the Republic of Ireland.[21] The then UK Prime Minister John Major followed suit, having already showcased its commitment to the peace process in signing the 1994 Downing Street Declaration (DSD).

The territorial scope of the EU strategy, which included the whole island of Ireland, provided a geographical reference aligned to EU cohesion policy, addressed especially to peripheral regions. However, the Taskforce officials mixed the spatial and structural dimensions of territory, scale, place, and networks, and political and administrative metagovernance. The geographical and community dimensions of the consultations delimitated the scope of the initiatives and served the wish to include certain political actors and interests, and to exclude others. The creation of the EU structure for bottom-up peacebuilding originated in the wish to enforce certain interests at a new scale, but also to increase the grassroots level's weight in the existing scalar hierarchy. The thematic dimension built discursively on the concerns felt by individual communities within specific places. Thereby, CSOs leaders used places and partnerships to legitimate certain issues in contrast to others.

The final step of the SRA we emphasize focuses on the analysis of how actors attempt to challenge the peacebuilding structures, mixing and shaping different modes of interactions and spatial dimensions. The final governance structure of the PEACE programmes attempted to create a loose, fluid political and administrative network among existing places and levels, where CSOs could build interconnections and gain power through metagovernance. The new structure represented not one, but all four spatial elements in varying degrees. It had a spatially selective impact on specific scales, territories, places, and networks. Moreover, the PEACE package was shaped as a form of bottom-up peacebuilding initiative aimed at steering common goals as a compromise between the different interests of the two communities. The role of the governmental representatives in selecting and monitoring the projects ensured that these corresponded to the desired outputs.

The EU Commission provided a further entrance gate for grassroot influence. By promoting the principle of implementation through partnership, it sought to moderate the conflictual territorialism of Northern Ireland politics (McCall and O'Dowd 2008, 34; McCall 2013, 2014; Lagana 2017). Cross-community and cross-border partnerships were introduced to challenge spatial divisions and provided a new and effective approach to transnational, EU-wide, socioeconomic problems. Partnership was interpreted as an administrative metagovernance means of implementing

peacebuilding policies initiating reconciliation between conflicting ethno-national communities, in addition to be more broadly an arrangement for the delivery of a flexible form of governance.

A practical example may prove useful. Let us take PEACE I. The program was made-up of the priorities highlighted, eight sub-programmes, and thirty-five measures, involving 64 Implementing Bodies across two jurisdictions. The reason why PEACE had such a wide-ranging number of organizations responsible for implementation was that "the implementation and delivery mechanisms should facilitate genuine bottom-up involvement by empowering local agencies and groups to participate in the direction and control of spending."[22] This translated into the creation of Intermediary Funding Bodies (IFBs) independent from the state and invited to take on the role of delivering certain priorities and/or sub-measures, depending on their area of expertise. The IFBs also had the freedom to outsource further aspects of projects to participant's groups, once the money was received. Avila Kilmurray explains:

> *What we decided to do was to have a series of meetings with political ex-prisoners' groups. Rather than us going and designing something, we asked them a) what should be funded, and b) how we should manage the money. And it came back very clearly that they said "[...] we want to be part of this process not just as recipients but [...] as decision-makers." The Community Foundation then set-up, inside it's structures, an Advisory Committee for political ex-prisoners [...] that continued to meet [...] until 2002. [...] They considered the applications that came in from the various organizations supporting ex-prisoners and undertook work within that framework, with an emphasis on a number of things, including employability.*
>
> (Interview with Avila Kilmurray, 21/01/2021)

This statement illuminates the willingness of individual community groups to take an active part in the peace process, albeit these worked on a single community basis. Grassroot leaders recognized a series of issues affecting both communities. They identified the interlocutors and perceived the EU peacebuilding space as an opportunity structure to tackle challenges. While efforts complied with the general rules set at higher levels, the strategies employed by community groups targeted four distinct features of the structure: the thematic priority, the communal delimitation, and the governance and the implementation mechanisms. They problematised issues as peacebuilding priorities and argued for cross-community relations and reconciliation as by-products of policy implementation. Hence, while the structures empowered them to take an active part to the peace process, the mechanisms set-up at the EU level, filtered through the high politics of the states, did not take into account existing political interests. The main objectives of the PEACE package—improved cross-community and cross-border relations—became not the target of the initiatives, but an indirect result of economic and social regeneration. While initiatives brought a new level of cross-community dialog, improved infrastructures and services, and started the long and tortuous process of dealing with the legacy of the conflict, a preponderance of political metagovernance hindered the ability of the initiatives to fully achieve their aims.

5 | Investigating the Shortcomings of Policy Implementation Through the SRA

To this day, over 22,500 individual projects have been funded under subsequent interactions of the EU PEACE program (EU 2022). These are named in chronological order: PEACE II (2000-2006), PEACE III (2007–2013), and so on. However, questions still exist around the real impact of these initiatives (Hayward 2006, 276; Racioppi and O'Sullivan 2007, 384; Byrne et al. 2009, 360; Skarlato et al. 2016, 176–177). A recent study of C. Knox et al. (2023, 306) in this regard concludes by stating that: "aspects of the implementation of the EU PEACE program remains ineffective despite conducive circumstances, leading to an implementation deficit." We therefore have to question what the organizational framework of analysis we have proposed tells us about this deficit.

In the previous section, we have examined the compositional elements of the EU peacebuilding strategy for Northern Ireland (interests, resources, hierarchical structures, policies, rules and processes) and the functional elements making-up its structure (planning, managing, grassroot consultations, decision-making, and implementation). While we have observed a wide variation of compositional elements across time and space, it became clear that the EU had conducted a core set of administrative metagovernance functions, aimed at targeting the environment of the peace process from the bottom-up, in a way that was highly influenced by a political form of metagovernance. The aim of applying universal values to two very different ethno-national cultures in Northern Ireland—and on the island of Ireland as a whole—has not reaffirmed and legitimized existing social and cultural identities. Such key-tension is evident in the implementation of the PEACE program, which has been unable to balance forward-looking aspects of political and economic power with backward-looking issues of reparation for injustice and reaffirmation of historical and cultural identities. One of the factors having caused this tension is the uneven mobilization and grasping of the EU opportunity structure within civil society.

Research finds that the success of peacebuilding in contested societies depends on the involvement of a wide range of actors and their equal mobilization across the divide (Richmond et al. 2011; Pogodda et al. 2014; Mac Ginty 2018; Juncos 2018; Deiana et al. 2019; Bouris and Papadimitriou 2019). In Northern Ireland this has remained a challenge. For example, the midterm evaluation of PEACE II found that the catholic share of approved funding accounted for an estimated 51.4% of the total, compared to a protestant share of 48.6% (where Catholics made up 45.2% of the population of Northern Ireland, and Protestants 54.8%).[23]

The reason for this unbalanced engagement has been explained through a number of factors including higher levels of deprivation in Catholic areas; a greater tendency by those living in those areas to apply; and higher levels of community-based activity in the Catholic community (Interview with Dr. Laurence McKeown, project manager and development worker in Northern Ireland since PEACE I, 27/01/2021; interview with

Anonymous 1, former project manager at the Ex-Prisoners Interpretative Centre EPIC, 19/04/2021). On the other hand, it is also true that republicans have been more organized, more strategic thoughout the developing peace process, while loyalists are internally divided, often competing against each other to the detriment of that community (interview with Brian Rowan, a former BBC journalist covering the Northern Ireland conflict and peace process, 24/01/2025). These divisions have hindered their ability to act strategically to, first, overcome their distrust in the initiatives, and then engaging strategically.

These overall circumstances have increased the perception in parts of Protestant areas that they were not receiving a "fair share" of PEACE funding (interview with Tommy Andrews, former Ulster Defence Association member, now employed as youth worker, 15/03/2021). Hence, from PEACE III onwards, a commitment was made that the program would particularly welcome applications from groups who had not previously applied, especially those who were underrepresented. These were usually applications from Protestant working-class areas, isolated rural communities, and ethnic minority groups (interview with Patrick Colgan, former Chief Executive of the Special EU Programmes Body (SEUPB) responsible for the implementation of EU programmes in Northern Ireland, 16/09/2021).

Years later, as the target was still not reached, the EU instead of developing a structural response to the issue based on an in-depth knowledge of the environment introduced a technocratic measure. The infamous "50–40–10" ratio[24] came into force with the advent of the PEACE IV programme (2014–2020). This was (and still is) a metrics-based accountability norm, as a result of which the EU believed that equal participation would automatically improve, and the project's goals would be more easily met. All participating CSOs had to meet the following representation's targets when designing and implementing subprojects: 40% Catholic, Nationalist, Republican (CNR); 50% Protestant, Unionist, Loyalist (PUL); and 10% Black and Minority Ethnic (BME).

This criteria have been introduced without previously securing the compliance of CSOs. It disregarded that the underrepresentation of one community over the other was caused by the strategic selectivity of the peacebuilding structure, which privileged some actors over others. In addition, it was dictated by the funding-led nature of the PEACE programmes and emphasized by the belief that cross-community relations are "necessarily positive" (C. Knox et al. 2023, 293). Failing of addressing the core of the issue, and only approaching it superficially via a technocratic measure, left important details unclear. For example, who has had to define those who should be labeled as a "Minority Ethnic group"? In Northern Ireland, this is not as intuitive as in other places. Should the "Other"[25] go into the category, even if a person or group resents the term?

In sum, under representation and the way the issue has been dealt by the EU, showcases how administrative metagovernance in contested societies should not be reduced to a engineering-style of orchestration, but it should take the form of an adaptive approach constantly evolving as the society in question develops. Empowerment can be steered vertically and horizontally across the dividing lines, targeting more narrow issues, and proceeding gradually over time to broader problems, such as reconciliation and cross-community dialog. As pointed-out by McCall and O'Dowd (2008, 32): "building peace and reconciliation is a long-term process rather than a tangible and clearly defined product."

In connection to this citation, it is important to notice that while EU peacebuilding is supposed to be "a long-term vision" (Tocci 2021), the PEACE programmes have been structured as funding-led, and not project-led. The start/stop nature of the programs therefore has impacted negatively on the continuity of the grassroots work undertaken within both communities. The worst of this could be seen within the period between the end of PEACE I and the effective commencement of PEACE II in the year 2000 (McCall and O'Dowd 2008, 33; Buchanan 2017, 193; Lagana 2021, 147–149). Some organizations received "gap funding," but this was not a smooth process, especially because the gains made in the previous round were lost and many groups were threatened with closure (interview with Dr. Avila Kilmurray, 21/01/2021). The consequences of this time gap included loss of expertise, experience and knowledge, especially when staff had to be made redundant. In addition, the transition between different rounds of the programs was characterized by discontinuity, with changes being made among many of the personnel on both the European and the governmental side (Racioppi and O'Sullivan 2007).

This lack of continuity in the operationalization and implementation of the PEACE package—although majors gaps have not occurred post 2000—highlights a problematic and excessively bureacratized lack of strategic planning by the EU in peacebuilding in Northern Ireland. If it is true that rationalized bureaucratic systems are forced, by their very nature, to create categories, norms, and cycles serving the purpose of transferring finances across governance levels in a way that it is efficient, this does not automatically translate into making the processes of implementation and evaluation from the bottom-up function in a way that is modeled to the supranational policy cycle. As suggested by C. Knox et al. (2023) peacebuilding policy implementation requires a degree of ambiguity, increased administrative capacity, and a form of metagovernance framed through multiple lenses where institutional learning across levels is a fundamental step in the structure. Moreover, planning for building the sustainability of bottom-up peacebuilding should occur in tandem with governments. Failing to do so creates dependence from external intervention and impacts on continuity, especially if geopolitical circumstances change.

This idea of multi-level institutional learning leads us to our final point. The absence of mutual sharing and institutional learning at the EU level, represented, for example, by the fact that the case of Northern Ireland is rarely mentioned in the literature on EU peacebuilding and in EU policy documents produced in this realm, has impacted negatively on the EU's ability to establish a contextual structure for peacebuilding able to overcome divisions. The PEACE package was created in 1994 as a special program, not part of mainstream Structural Funds (interview with Patrick Colgan, 16/09/2021).[26] It was intended to be a community initiative fully supported by all the member-states of the EU, and a demonstration of solidarity to the people

of Northern Ireland.[27] This meant that the initiative focused on civil society and had the main objective of developing the so-called "peace dividends": the advantages of peace and the gains of addressing the legacy of the conflict.[28] However, in 1999, the PEACE package ceased to be a "Special EU programme" and became mainstreamed as a Structural Funds program. This led to the setting-up of a Northern Ireland Community Support Framework (CSF),[29] which brought an additional layer of rules and regulations. This was in sharp contrast with the demands of CSOs continuously asking to simplifying the PEACE programmes' bureaucratic machinery.

Hence, from 1999 onwards, tthe PEACE package had to conform to the rules applying to mainstreamed Structural Funds. Its intrinsic aim became the generation of policy networks fostering cooperation across borders, and within and between the two Northern Ireland communities to make policy happen (Hughes and Ketola 2021). Unfortunately, this model did not take into account that the peace process was (and still is) situated within a highly contested political environment. Most local politicians and voluntary groups serve their own community (C. Knox et al. 2023; interview with Stephen Barr, Director of Services at Start360NI, 02/03/2021; Joe McComb, Executive Officer of Include Youth, 12/04/2021; Lauri McKusker, Executive Director of the Fermanagh Trust, 12/02/2021). The increased emphasis on joint management and joint delivery of the initiatives on a cross-community basis, combined with the stress on regulatory compliance and oversight through the IFBs, proved to be complex and burdensome. Furthermore, since 1999, projects tended to be larger, increasing the bureaucracy further. This has had an impact on the delivery of the initiatives, particularly at the early stages when the new management mechanisms were being adopted. Several consultations highlighted the need to help CSOs to increase their administrative capacity,[30] but these calls were only superficially addressed.

This lack of knowledge sharing across governance levels and the absence of mechanisms in place for the EU to integrate the feedback of participants evidences how the EU has been more inclined to generate increased bureaucratization mechanisms than to shape peacebuilding from below (Williams and Mengistu 2015). Without adaptability, metagovernance has treated local knowledge, often coming from policy evaluation reports, as a resource rather than a process inherently part of the overall structure. The need to rationalize the implementation of programs across the entire EU territory has widened instead of tightening the implementation gap. Moreover, the strategy failed to reflect that, in a contested society, policy coherence can only be better achieved if the main objective of metagovernance is to improve coordination among opposing actors (Torfing et al. 2019). This means allowing for more flexibility in steering outputs and goals, and appropriate authority and knowledge across spaces and places to make decisions and building relationships in tandem with civil society (Chisholm 1992).

Currently, changes in the configuration of strategy and structures at the national and supranational levels have serious, negative effects on EU sponsored peacebuilding in Northern Ireland. The strong dependence on CSOs' active role and participation in PEACEPLUS, and the need to foster cross-community representation in the appraisal of the funding, has been even more problematic. This partly explains why Brexit has been detrimental for bottom-up peacebuilding, notwithstanding the fact that the PEACE package has survived the crisis. Changes in the relationship with the EU have caused a serious decline in mobilization, a change in interests, new territorial fragmentation, and political polarization between the two communities (Murphy 2018; Murphy and Evershed 2022). This new set of circumstances sits uneasy in the EU peacebuilding structure. Some believe that those at the grassroots level who have voted in favor of Brexit felt the need to turn their back on the activities sponsored by PEACEPLUS (interview with Gerald Solinas, Project Manager at Farset Youth & Community Development, 9/03/2021; interview with Dr. Avila Kilmurray, 21/01/2021). While no evidence demonstrating that PEACEPLUS has seen a decline in participation has been produced yet, it is true that the program's bureaucratic machinery has been amplified as activities now encompass peacebuilding and the style of cross-border cooperation previously covered by the INTERREG program, which has formally ended.

The new never-before-seen status of Northern Ireland at the edges of the EU has raised discrepancies in the interests not only of the two communities but also within the Irish and the UK government. Governments do not take part in the program as equals as before, the Republic of Ireland being the only member-state of the community and thus the only one fully aligned with EU policies and priorities across spaces and levels. The strategic selectivity of the structure has been amplified by Brexit, which has also entailed significant processes of exclusion, inclusion, subordinating, and disconnecting. The imbalance between political and administrative metagovernance has been also amplified. Technocratic responses are hardly suitable in this context.

On the other hand, while imperfect, the EU PEACE package remains a powerful instrument and the only one currently available to civil society to tackle divisions and shape the environment of a new post-Brexit peace process from the bottom-up. The governments' focus has been on resources and personnel, therefore favouring macro-level institutional reform and democratization processes. At the same time—although to a lesser extent, at least in terms of resources—the EU still has its metagovernance toolbox, and the commitment to tackle the negative societal effects of Brexit. Efforts should be made to improve PEACEPLUS especially by developing processes of institutional learning to allow policy implementation to leverage the social capital of cooperation, trust, and support that exists with the mid-range and their grassroots constituents.

6 | Conclusion

The article started by examining the limitations of existing theoretical accounts on EU peacebuilding. It assessed how the field would benefit from more theoretically guided organizational research on the socio-spatial dimensions of territory, place, scale and networks, and their interactions. This approach demonstrates how bridging governance, MLG, and network theories with the concept of multi-spatial metagovernance—embedded within a strategic-relational heuristic—shifts the

focus toward the EU's opportunity structure as shaped through policy implementation. It enables scholars and practitioners to move beyond traditional conceptual and practical understandings of peacebuilding, offering insights into how, in a transformed context, the state acts as a filter for EU policies implemented across various territorial tiers, within the "shadow of hierarchy." Within this framework, multi-spatial metagovernance incorporates dimensions of place and territory, scale, and network, moving beyond a narrow emphasis on maintaining state hierarchy. As such, it offers a theoretical lens that highlights the interplay between strategic efforts, tangible outcomes, and the evolving spatial configurations of peacebuilding in contested societies.

Subsequently, the article turned to the case of the Northern Ireland peace process. The historical analysis of the EU involvement in peacebuilding in Northern Ireland, exemplified through the history of the PEACE program, showed that a small group of nationalist representatives in the EP were able to initiate and shape an EU opportunity structure that served their distinct interests. The fact that they were able to engage in strategic actions within the EU institutions jointly with their unionist counterparts—who did not want to be left behind—meant that none of them could enforce their vision unconditionally. The EU as a metagovernor influenced the outcome. However, elements of the peacebuilding architecture, political discourses, and interpretations also constrained, shaped and informed metagoverning efforts. Administrative and political metagovernance intermeshed as actors at different levels and within different arenas, with diametrically opposing interests, interacted mobilized by EU. They found ways to participate to the peace process through processes of problematization, by exploiting the strategic selectivity of the territory to their own advantage, and by anchoring their strategic priorities to the supranational policy agenda.

The last section investigated how interests, opportunities, and constraints interplayed in the implementation of the EU PEACE programs. The shortcomings of the initiatives, and the technocratic solution adopted by the EU to address them, showcased how failing to achieve a balance between political and administrative metagovernance in a contested society produces outcomes and opportunities that are not the same for all. A classical engineering approach to steer the management of peacebuilding from below to foster equal mobilization across the divide needs rethinking. Building peace is not made of a linear stream of events, in which plans are formed, then approved, and then executed. To be more effective, administrative metagovernance needs to simultaneously accommodate for goal planning, activity planning, implementation, and institutional learning, assuming that it has to remain provisional and highly context-related. Flexibility could serve the EU, but particularly local peacebuilding networks, which through a higher degree of ambiguity in implementing policies could really help peace survive the challenges of the time. Second, political metagovernance should serve to foster a higher degree of coordination across governance levels. Such coordination should be embedded in all the phases of the policy process and it should serve to develop a degree of policy coherence and adaptability. Lastly, the sharing of knowledge across governance levels should be embedded within the metagovernance approach, where the supranational level should also account for the different interests represented by grassroot groups, public governors, and political representatives engaging with the EU opportunity structure to shape it. In turn, this should also help to achieve more balance between administrative and political metagovernance, underpinning all these steps.

Overall, the article demonstrates that metagoverning EU peacebuilding is a highly complex task. The moving of issues in the supranational framework exposes the governance process to various influences from different territorial levels. Different actors manage governance arrangements not in a coherent manner, but in multiple ways. The EU can pursue contradictory political goals, and prompt struggles when complex interactions prevent actors from enhancing all their initial interests in the administrative framework of peacebuilding. This dynamic, ever-changing, context of complexity means that metagovernance strategies might not produce desired outcomes, but fail. Therefore, peacebuilding strategies may neither just serve as strategic instruments, nor solely as opportunity structures, but combine both in different ways.

The case of Northern Ireland is only one among many where EU activities in metagoverning peacebuilding have taken place between both, structure and strategy, opportunity and purpose. The complex relationship between interest-induced strategies and strategy-induced contextual factors means that any examination of EU peacebuilding in contested societies cannot claim a theoretically grounded analysis without considering both sides of the coin. Further research is needed on metagovernance within other contested societies that have experienced a level of EU involvement (e.g., Cyprus, Kosovo, and Colombia). Future studies could address the diverse interests and strategies the EU and different subnational groups and leaders have employed to influence peacebuilding, or the impacts of these strategic efforts, and the contextual opportunities and constraints faced in diametrically opposite contexts. In any case, the future of peacebuilding could profit greatly from organizational analysis on the interplay of administrative and political metagovernance, and the role of CSOs in between strategy and structures.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Endnotes

[1] The terms EU, will be used consistently across the article. Only in specific instances the names EEC and EC will be used to indicate, respectively, the "European Economic Community" and the "European Community." The European Economic Community was created by the Treaty of Rome in 1957 and was a regional organization aimed to bring about economic integration between its

member states. Upon the formation of the European Union (EU) in 1993, the EEC was incorporated and renamed as the European Community. Today, the name EC is commonly used to indicate the community as it existed before the 1993 Maastricht Treaty.

[2]The program is commonly referred to as "the PEACE programme," "the PEACE package," or "EU PEACE." These names will be used as synonyms across the article.

[3]For more information, please visit https://www.seupb.eu/peaceplus.

[4]This article uses the notion of "opportunity structure" to refer to the structural landscape of opportunities and constraints influencing the formation of policy networks, the strategies employed by actors to foster networked connections, and the realization of interests positively influenced by the EU framework.

[5]Available at https://www.seupb.eu/past-programmes/peace-platform.

[6]David Trimble was a Northern Irish politician who was the inaugural First Minister of Northern Ireland from 1998 to 2002, and leader of the Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) from 1995 to 2005.

[7]See https://dcubrexitinstitute.eu/2020/11/historicising-the-role-of-the-european-union-eu-in-the-northern-ireland-peace-process/.

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[17]A copy of the original report, which includes sample of the consultations (among which the report of the Community Foundation for Northern Ireland), is available at the University of Galway archives, donated by one of the officials. University of Galway Library Archives, Galway, NI 08 96, European Commission office in Northern Ireland weekly press review, December 11, 1994.

[18]For more information, please visit https://peaceplatform.seupb.eu/en/ (last accessed on May 8, 2024).

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[25]In Northern Ireland, the "Other" are those who do not identify as neither nationalist nor unionist.

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Interviews

Andrews, T., former Ulster Defence Association (UDA) member, now employed as youth worker, 15/03/2021.

Anonymous 1, former project manager at the Ex-Prisoners Interpretative Centre EPIC, 19/04/2021.

Barr, S., Director of Services at Start360NI, 02/03/2021.

Colgan, P., former Chief Executive of the Special EU Programmes Body (SEUPB) responsible for the implementation of EU programmes in Northern Ireland, 16/09/2021.

Kilmurray, A., former director of the Community Foundation for Northern Ireland and, today, international activist, scholar, and peacebuilder, 21/01/2021.

McComb, J., Executive Officer of Include Youth, 12/04/2021.

McDonald, J., a Northern Irish loyalist active in South Belfast, 24/01/2025.

McKeown, L., project manager and development worker in Northern Ireland since PEACE I, former Irish Republican Army (IRA) volunteer, 27/01/2021.

McKusker, L., Executive Director of the Fermanagh Trust, 12/02/2021.

Rowan, B., former BBC journalist covering the Northern Ireland conflict and peace process, 24/01/2025.

Solinas, G., Project Manager at Farset Youth & Community Development, 9/03/2021.

Trojan, C., EU Commission's observer on the International Fund For Ireland (IFI) Board from 1986 to 1997, and later Secretary General of the EU Commission, 6/03/2019.