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The European Parliament: A Critical Space for the Development of Anglo-Irish Relations on Northern Ireland

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ABSTRACT

The European Parliament (EP) serves as the legislative body where elected representatives from EU member states are organised into political groups, rather than by nationality. Initially established as a consultative assembly, the EP's influence in budgetary politics, legislation and oversight has expanded significantly since the first direct elections in 1979 and the passage of the Single European Act (SEA) in 1987. While it has often been argued that the EP's ability to influence national politics is limited, recent studies show that the active involvement of Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) in EU legislation and other EP activities can foster stronger ties between European representatives and their national parties. These representatives can leverage their involvement to demonstrate influence on supranational policy outcomes and build consensus both at the bilateral and EU levels. This article uses the developing British-Irish relationship on the Northern Ireland conflict to demonstrate this function. It focuses on the early 1980s and the Northern Ireland hunger strikes. Using a novel network approach, the article draws on a qualitative analysis of original archival sources, triangulated with semi-structured elite interviews, to demonstrate that the EP not only supported this relationship but also played a pivotal role in transforming it before the 1985 Anglo-Irish Agreement (AIA) negotiations. In light of Brexit, this analysis highlights how the departure of the UK from the EU may create a deficit in the British-Irish relationship. Furthermore, it provides a foundation for further study of the EP's dynamic role in fostering stronger relationships among EU member states.

1 | Introduction

The European Union (EU)[1] is in constant constitutional development. Part of this evolution has seen the European Parliament (EP) undergo a very significant transformation since the late 1980s. From a consultative assembly, the parliament gradually progressed towards becoming a pivotal institution in a European governmental system, trying to resemble more and more a parliamentary democracy (Lehman and Schunz 2005). Direct elections in 1979 and the Single European Act (SEA) of July 1987 were pivotal moments in the pathway towards change. Subsequent treaties extended these powers further.

Most recently, the Treaty of Lisbon granted the EP co-decision rights in areas where a veto had long been denied, such as agriculture, justice and home affairs policies.

Existing scholarship has demonstrated how the Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) have responded to this growth by increasing the powers of the EP's biggest party groups. In turn, these political groups have learnt how to deal pragmatically with the Council of the EU and the Commission (Cooper 2012; Corbett, Jacobs, and Shackleton 2011; Kelbel and Navarro 2020; Kreppel 2002; Kreppel and Gungor 2006; Neunreither 2005; Warren 2018; Whitaker 2011). Studies have

also shown that the MEPs' popularity in EP delegations, and their active involvement in the EP's activities, is directly proportional to their ability to influence the development of political agendas within national political parties (Hobolt, Spoon, and Tilley 2009; UACES and IACES 2024 webinar). This is because Member States have reasons to care about what goes on in Europe. While voters may not pay very much attention to MEPs' activities, and while the profile of the EP's transnational party groups is low in the EU electorate, evidence exists demonstrating that EU-related factors influence policy choices and the development of new political approaches at the national level (Whitaker 2011, 2). This is because there is an increasing number of policy areas in which the EU is involved, with greater potential for clashes with the thrust of policies in Member States or the emergence of restrictions on the policy options open to national governments in specific areas (Dobbs, Gravey, and Petetin 2021; Lindstrom 2010). The MEPs have, therefore, a strong interest in reflecting national parties' priorities in their activities, for example through their committees' membership. Predilecting those with greater legislative powers is a way of increasing their potential for policymaking across different levels of governance (Scully 2005; Scully and Farrell 2003).

It is interesting to notice how much of the EP's activity in which MEPs were directly involved in the period around the 1979 direct election – for example, tabling questions and motions-for-resolution, setting the agenda within parliamentary committees, and actively participating in plenary sections – focused on the Northern Ireland situation.[2] This is unsurprising, considering that the relationship between the United Kingdom (UK) and the Republic of Ireland was amongst the tensest of European diplomatic relationships at the height of the Northern Ireland conflict (1969–1998). In particular, the Northern Ireland prison protests and the hunger strikes, which led to the death of 10 Catholic/nationalist/republican[3] prisoners, dramatically impacted the search for common ground. However, while the internal (Coakley 2014; Cox, Guelke, and Stephen 2006; McLoughlin 2014; McLoughlin 2016; Ó Beacháin 2019; O'Callaghan 1993; Williamson 2017) and the external (Cochrane 2007; Guelke 2012; Kelly 2020; Mac Ginty 1997) factors contributing to the extraordinary transformation of Anglo-Irish relations on Northern Ireland have been amply documented (Coakley 2014; Cox, Guelke, and Stephen 2006; McLoughlin 2014; McLoughlin 2016; Ó Beacháin 2019; O'Callaghan 1993; Williamson 2017), much less has been said about how the European institutions encouraged the rapprochement of the two states. In this realm, the EP has been particularly neglected. Scattered studies have traced a preliminary connection between the 'Europeanisation'[4] of the Northern Ireland situation and the Northern Ireland MEPs (Lagana 2021; Lagana 2022; Lagana and McLoughlin 2023). However, systematisation of the Republic of Ireland and the UK MEPs' networking strategies, and how the interplay between their interactions subtly influenced the development of a common approach to the Northern Ireland situation, has yet to be traced.

This article will delve into this lesser-known aspect of European influence on the development of institutionalised East-West cooperation on Northern Ireland from the 1980s. It will demonstrate comprehensively the role the EP institutional space played in fostering cooperation and conciliatory attitudes, and ultimately creating a functioning 'space to think' (Litter 2023) on Northern Ireland. The article will achieve its aim by empirically examining original archival sources providing first-hand insights on the MEPs' strategies at a time of intense EP scrutiny of Northern Ireland. In 1988, Guelke wrote: '… the 1981 hunger strike proved to be a watershed in European perceptions of the Northern Ireland problem, though this was not immediately apparent in the deliberations of the EP' (Guelke 1988). This statement has never been contradicted, but no studies have widened the knowledge of the period, which is what this article proposes to do. Written sources will be triangulated with the author's semi-structured interviews with EU, Irish and UK officials.

Methodologically, this article bridges the fields of History and Political Science. It employs a triangulation (Burnham et al. 2008) of archival research and oral history practices to address the gaps and limitations often inherent in archival studies. The primary archival sources analysed are held at the Historical Archives of the EP (Luxembourg). These sources include 205 documents, such as motions for resolution, EP plenary debates, parliamentary questions, and 15 reports. Additionally, full access was granted to the private archives of President Simone Veil, which are organised into three series: Public Personality, Presidency of the Parliament and Relations with the General Secretariat. The largest series pertains to sponsorships and events, media image, assistance to private individuals and the defence of human rights. Over 40 of President Veil's private documents and correspondence were examined. Further documents were collected from the UK National Archives (London) and the National Archives of Ireland (Dublin).

Archival sources were instrumental in identifying interviewees, who then participated in semi-structured interviews. The triangulation of archival material and oral history generated a specific narrative, organised chronologically, where material conditions and discourses intertwined, leading to sharp theoretical conclusions regarding EU peacebuilding. Moreover, by incorporating multiple viewpoints, the analysis provided greater accuracy and offered an original perspective on the phenomenon under study, considering various types of data in relation to the same issue.

The article first examines the EP political *milieu* and the potential of this space to foster connections and interactions between MEPs to find common ground. Interactions are investigated with the objective of grasping how policy networks of MEPs are established and facilitated in their work by the EP institutional configuration. Third, the article explores empirically how these connections were made, prompted by the Irish MEPs during the Northern Ireland hunger strikes to demonstrate how contents and policy solutions articulated within the EP forum during those years have complemented the more organic process that saw a joint approach between the UK and the Republic of Ireland in cooperating to tackle the Northern Ireland conflict.

2 | Fostering Networked Connections Among MEPs: Theoretical Insights Into the Role of the European Parliament

The EP is the world's most ambitious experiment in transnational democracy (Corbett et al. 2011, 2). In addition to its legislative, supervisory and budgetary functions, it represents the largest electorate globally (Corbett et al. 2011, 4). Over the years, its existence has sparked controversy, with some politicians in certain Member States opposing its creation and further expansion, while others have championed its growth and development (Abeles 1993; Blondel, Sinnott, and Svensson 1998; Tsebelis 1994).

The MEPs are elected from the Member States, drawn from governing and opposition parties. They represent not just capital cities, but the EU regions in their full diversity. They are organised into political groups rather than nationalities. Three main political groups were formed in 1953: the Christian Democrats, the Liberals and the Socialists (Corbett et al. 2011, 70). Nowadays, while the political groups have increased in numbers, the biggest and most historical EP political parties – the Group of the European People's Party (EPP) and the Group of the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats in the European Parliament (S&D) – have developed their internal organisation and have consolidated their position inside the assembly. The structure in which they are embedded has the ultimate objective of avoiding the dominance of national perspectives in the working of European cooperation (Heidar and Koole 2000). Moreover, this political *milieu* encourages representatives to establish transnational networked connections among colleagues from different Member States.

Scholars (Lehmbruch 1984; Van Waarden 1992; Rhodes 1997; Bevir and Richards 2009) use the term 'networks' to describe interconnected actors and organisations, such as economic associations, governments, public administration, nongovernmental organisations, civil society groups and parliamentary parties. Interconnections within a network, and between different networks, are often established through 'junction points' (Bevir and Richards 2009, 135), joint committees, or, more durably, overlapping memberships, particularly at the leadership level. A key feature of these relationships is the enduring linkage pattern that arises from the interdependence of various actors, including politicians and interest representatives (Klijn and Koppenjan 2016; Rhodes 2017). Differing needs and interests drive exchanges and transactions, and when they occur regularly, they can become institutionalised within network structures (Klijn and Koppenjan 2016; Rhodes 2017). Such structures, in turn, constrain the range of options available to actors and, over time, may even influence the structure of the participating network (Klijn and Koppenjan 2016, 140; Rhodes 2017). Consequently, the concept of a 'policy network' refers to public and private relationships established among actors within and across networks, aimed at elaborating, participating in, and implementing policies and politics.

In governance research, policy networks are described as functional responses to organisational fragmentation following general processes of globalisation, specialisation, decentralisation and individualisation (Klijn and Koppenjan 2016; Rhodes 2017). Networks allow more or less large numbers of individuals, or groups, to overcome problems of mobilisation and communication (Shyrokykh and Rimkutė 2019). Their structure may come about as the outcome of planning, or it can develop as the result of the accumulation of pairwise connections between individuals (Leuprecht, Aulthouse, and Walther 2016). In the latter case, the room for manoeuvring of the network is constrained by common purpose, and it is a good indication of 'what works' (Interview with Matt Carthy 2017). If the network does not contain the required actors, or if those actors cannot communicate as required, it will be unsustainable (Leuprecht, Aulthouse, and Walther 2016, 378). However, if the right degree of interdependence among the actors develops, these will be more prone to engage in sustained cooperation, which in turn will improve the network's resilience (Tortola and Couperus 2022).

In the EP framework, interdependence has been defined as the inability of single actors to achieve goals on their own (Lagana 2021, 51). The EU, by embedding the MEPs into a neutral arena in which to recognise dependencies and in which to deconstruct or reconstruct them, manages interdependencies in a way that enhances the problem-solving capacity of single actors (Kickert, Klijn, and Koppenjan 1997). However, it is important to specify that the EP does not foster processes of network formation per se, but instead it provides actors with the ideal environment in which networked connections become a mediated response to interdependency (Torfing and Sørensen 2011).

An example might prove useful. Within the EP, Irish and British representatives were at the same level. Despite their conflicting political views on many aspects of public life, including the situation in Northern Ireland, when organised in political groups rather than national delegations, they became actors with common goals. The environment enabled them to recognise their interdependencies. Subsequently, network arrangements were made based on organisational complementarity, with key actors at key moments playing a leading role in driving the activities. Over time, the newly connected actors started to work strategically to adapt nationally the policy solutions suggested and/or designed at the supranational level. These had to be made acceptable by all people and political parties involved. The interplay of these interactions across levels is in no way able alone to produce significant national policy change. However, if they constitute a factor among many pushing in the same direction, these should also be accounted for among the various subtle contributions.

At the core of the MEPs' activities is their capacity to influence the flow of information, lobby interested parties and contribute to the eventual contents of the policy outcomes (reports, plenary debates…). The process becomes easier if MEPs are supported in their endeavours by colleagues across the whole EP, and not just their political group. Therefore, committees' membership is also essential to the establishment of broad networked connections (Interview with Richard Corbett 2023) as committees tend to develop a corporate identity and to attract members with a particular sympathy for the sector concerned. This explains why Irish MEPs have always shown a strong preference for certain committees. The Agricultural Committee

has always been one of the main choices of Irish representatives because the agricultural sector has always been very high on the list of Ireland's strategic priorities, North and South. Irish farmers have always relied, to a great extent. On EU subsidies and have historically constituted an important part of the Irish electorate. Consequently, by defending the interests of agriculture within the EP, Irish MEPs also achieved better results in their national elections (Laffan 2023).

There are several ways to influence a committee's activity. Once the decision to draw up a report or opinion is taken, the members nominate a rapporteur. Rapporteurs rely on secretariat officials to provide independent policy information (Corbett et al. 2011, 56; Whitaker 2011, 60–63). However, officials might lack detailed knowledge (Whitaker 2011, 96). For example, the causes of the Northern Ireland conflict were only superficially known in the early 1980s (Interview with Drik Toornstra 2021). Emblematic is the EP plenary section taking place in 1981 (while the hunger strikes were underway) in which MEPs from the Socialist Group officially asked 'our Irish colleagues'[5] to enlighten the EP as to the origins of the Northern Ireland situation.[6] The information that Irish and Northern Irish MEPs could provide in that instance was almost certainly influenced by their individual backgrounds. This is not to claim that secretariat officials play a biased role in the European legislative process or in updating rapporteurs on specific issues. They correctly serve as the source of independent policy expertise. Nonetheless, deep-rooted interests (Whitaker 2011, 51) indirectly act in lobbying the rapporteurs and EU policymakers. This affects, at the same time, the content of official texts and the knowledge that the MEPs receive.

This brief analysis of processes of network formations, and of possible ways in which to steer and lobby information mechanisms within EP committees, is a useful basis to proceed to the investigation of how, during the early 1980s, intense EP activity produced endogenous as well as exogenous change related to Northern Ireland and Anglo-Irish relations. Once established, a policy network of Irish MEPs raising attention to the region's issues, especially within the Socialist Party Group, contributed to bring the topic onto the EP agenda. Issues could be subsequently debated within the political groups, the committees and in plenary. The MEPs could vote on the proposed legislation and the proposed amendments, thus bringing Northern Ireland effectively under the European spotlight. This international dimension, in turn, subtly influenced the course of national politics on the conflict as the same actors interacted also at the national level, thus nudging national agendas.

3 | The 1980 Northern Ireland Republican Hunger Strike Discussed in Brussels

The Northern Ireland prison protests, and the 1980 and 1981 hunger strikes, offered a powerful window of opportunity to push the then European Community (EC) to take a more active stance on the conflict. The year 1976 saw the removal of 'Special Category Status'. Those sentenced for offences, who had previously been regarded as political prisoners, were now to be treated as common criminals and forced to wear prison uniforms and do prison work. The republican inmates refused to go

along with the policy and, as a consequence, they were locked in their cells 24 h a day with no access to books, magazines, TV, radio, or exercise (Hennessey 2014). After 4 years of protesting against the new regime, and refusing to go along with it, seven prisoners began a hunger strike on 27 October 1980 and information spread across Europe. The hunger strike was called off 53 days later when news circulated among the prisoners that an agreement with the British government had been reached (Ó Dochartaigh 2021). Only several days later it became evident that the government had no intentions of making any concessions relating to the prisoners' five demands (Ó Dochartaigh 2021).

A second and more organised wave of hunger strikes was then called, which began with Bobby Sands on 1 March 1981 (Hennessey 2014, 85). Sands' plight received enormous international publicity, especially after he was elected to the UK Parliament in a by-election in the Fermanagh-South Tyrone constituency (Ó Dochartaigh 2021, 178). Eventually, the 1981 hunger strike claimed the lives of ten prisoners in the spring and summer of 1981. The strike was called off in October of the same year and, politically, it resulted in a showdown between Margaret Thatcher, the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland's politicians. Echoes of these events extended to the European institutions where the protests generated much interest.

Between October 1980 and May 1981, MEPs belonging to different political groups tabled several motions for resolutions on the situation in Northern Ireland. These were translated into all EU languages and were distributed to everyone within the EP. They were, therefore, useful to raise awareness about the conflict, even when no follow-up took place. The motions were also an excellent means for individual MEPs to demonstrate their activities on behalf of their constituencies, to place a viewpoint on record, to draw attention to a particular problem, or to contribute to discussions in other very specific frameworks.

The Irish MEPs were often involved in tabling the motions. Patrick Lalor (*Fianna Fáil* – Group of European Progressive Democrats), Síle De Valera (*Fianna Fáil* – Group of European Progressive Democrats) and Neil Blaney (Independent *Fianna Fáil* – Group of Independents) all contributed to the debates. They were all involved in the Committee on Regional Policy and the Political Affairs Committee.[7] While regional policy was known for targeting EU regions and cities and boosting economic growth, it was also focused on support for less-developed regions. These goals, jointly with the core of the Political Affairs Committee, focused on finding ways to foster political dialogue, peacebuilding and conflict prevention, and had a great potential to positively impact politics on the island of Ireland and conflict resolution in Northern Ireland.

The motions endorsed Irish nationalists' aspirations to various degrees and were regarded suspiciously by Unionists and British MEPs. However, they were generally supported by the vast majority of the EP. The texts condemned the British government for violating human rights in Northern Ireland 'in a cruel and merciless fashion'[8] and further criticisms were levelled at the UK for the inhuman conditions in which 'political prisoners' were 'being detained'.[9] These were opportunities for the Irish representatives to challenge British narratives on the

conflict, with MEPs from other Member States willing to hear.[10] The then EP president, Simone Veil, considered the topic admissible for consideration in plenary and Northern Ireland was subsequently added to the agenda. The parliament accepted the importance of the motions and allowed the matter to be further investigated and subsequently discussed.

The parliamentary session in which Northern Ireland figured as a matter of urgent discussion for the first time was held on 18 December 1980 (the day the 1980 hunger strike was called off). To start, Patrick Lalor was called to make the opening state-ment. After an assertion about the health of the seven prisoners, Lalor highlighted the humanitarian aspects of the situation, leaving aside the most political features. The reactions to his statement can be summarised in the declaration made by the Socialist Group's spokesperson, Ernest Glinne, a Belgian socialist, who declared:

> The parliament would, in my view, be demonstrating a lack of sympathy if it failed to adopt urgency on this matter. However, in this particular case, we do have strong reser-vations on the question whether it is opportune to have in this Assembly at this moment a full-scale debate. We feel that such a discussion, instead of helping [...] might increase the danger that lives will be lost. We need the benefit of the knowledge and insight of our Irish members from North and South before we can make a judgement. The Socialist Group is satisfied that our colleague John Hume [...] is doing his utmost to resolve this tragic situation.[11]

This quotation shows how, although significance was ac-corded to the matter, there was a certain degree of reticence to engage in a full-scale debate. Three reasons exist to justify this weariness. First, Dirk Toornstra (at the time Secretary General of the EP socialists), explains that Member States with their own ethno-national divisions – most notably Bel-gium and Spain – were reticent of any move that might set a precedent for unwelcome interferences in domestic affairs: 'It was easier to get involved with a problem in Africa or Asia ... than to focus on something which was happening within [the EC].'[12]

Second, the lack of knowledge of Northern Ireland's internal political dynamics, which 'our Irish members from North and South'[13] should elucidate, made MEPs wary of engaging fur-ther. A call for clarification on the conflict's causes was accordingly launched within the parliamentary group which had one of its members, John Hume, directly involved in the negotiations aimed at ending the strike. Hume was the pas-sionately pro-European deputy and later leader of the Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP) (Lagana and McLoughlin 2023, 4). He was an MP, but he was also taking part in the hunger strike talks as an MEP, thus raising his status with the UK government and giving a European dimension to those efforts. In turn, this could raise the profile of the EP internationally and legitimate Northern Ireland as a matter of concern for Europe, since one of its representatives was directly involved in processes of mediation to resolve the crisis (Ó Dochartaigh 2021, 176).

Third, as evidenced by Glinne's statement, the MEPs still placed trust in the ongoing negotiations, ignoring that Thatcher had made clear in news bulletins that nothing would be done by the British government to negotiate an end to the protest (Hennessey 2014, 84).

The debate proceeded with Ian Paisley's statement. Paisley, MEP, was the leader of the Northern Ireland Democratic Unionist Party (DUP), who had won the majority of unionist votes during the European elections in 1979, at 29.8%.[14] He declared:

> I am one of the few [...] who has been in the prison. I have sat in the cell with these republican protesters, who smashed their furniture, who have urinated on the floor and have sought in every way possible to make impris-onment impossible.[15]

To which the Irish Neil Blaney immediately retorted:

> The hunger strike is not being undertaken by people sentenced under due process of law. Eighty per cent of the inmates of Long Kesh today are there by virtue of forced confessions [...] to criminalise those prisoners who were, in fact, given special status from 1969 to 1976. [...] The truth is that they are in a hell-hole in Long Kesh, being treated like animals and dying for their determination not to stand for that sort of treatment.

In these quotations, the arguments on both sides, which were usually advanced nationally and within the media, are stated in front of a European audience. Blaney and Paisley's assessments were maybe expected in their contents, but their objective dif-fered. Gaining the attention of fellow MEPs meant for Blaney to bring an added dimension to the conflict, which could have in time put pressure on the UK government. Blaney also expressed a viewpoint that was close to the Republican Movement, but that enjoyed widespread support South of the Irish border: he referenced the illegitimacy of many British government proce-dures in force, imploring Europe to focus instead on 'saving human lives, to save misery, and to save a useless escalation of violence.'[16] On the other hand, Paisley wanted to avoid an involvement of the EC in the Northern Ireland conflict. Hence, he aligned himself with the same political line of the British administration.

The EP rejected the request for urgent action on the 1980 hunger strike, but the motion was referred to the Political Affairs Committee. The decision not to follow up could be based on the trust placed in the ongoing negotiations between the prisoners and the UK government. Indeed, the 1980 hunger strike had just been called to an end (Ó Dochartaigh 2021, 176). Secondly, it might have had its roots in what was recognised by the Socialist Party Group's statement: the EP's deficit of knowledge of the origins of the Northern Ireland conflict. However, the importance of this debate is in the role it played in raising awareness about the conflict. Networked connections between the Irish MEPs, within the Political Affairs Committee, and between different political groups supporting the idea that the EC had a role to play in resolving the situation were created,

and such interactions found fertile territory in the new transnational forum that the EP had become.

4 | The EP and the Plenary Debate Held After the Death of Bobby Sands

A significant number of letters were sent to the EP President, Simone Veil, from the day Bobby Sands started his fast onwards.[17] These letters came overwhelmingly from leftist political parties within Member States, and sometimes from individual politicians nonelected to the EP. Countries included Italy, Belgium and France. The messages had several common features. First, they offered a generic summary of Sands' motives and medical conditions. Second, consternation was expressed almost unanimously towards Thatcher's government's refusal to negotiate. Finally, all letters appealed to the EP to take a stronger and firmer position against the UK government's behaviour. Veil was also explicitly asked to bring the topic to the following EP sitting and she was questioned about the possibility of calling for an inquiry to inspect human rights adherence in Northern Ireland, and all over the UK.[18]

This mobilisation on behalf of the republican prisoners was an early sign that the EP had achieved a new international status. It was seen as potentially able to mediate between two Member States. It was also considered as having the potential to influence the course of British politics on Northern Ireland. However, the fact that national parties within Member States felt the need to directly address President Veil without solely relying on their MEPs could be evidence of either a possible distrust in the efficacy of their representatives in exercising influence on the matter, or of the need to provide them with greater national support. Eventually, in May 1981, the EP and the Political Affairs Committee were instructed to add the matter of the hunger strike to the agenda. The sitting took place on the 7 May, 2 days after Bobby Sands' death.

The plenary session started with the Irish MEPs called to make their statements. These were made 'on behalf of all the Irish political parties in the Republic represented in this House and in the Irish Parliament back home,'[19] and described the death of Sands as 'regrettably, the supreme sacrifice of an Irishman in an effort to achieve simple humanitarian prison conditions being denied in the UK.'[20] The MEPs De Valera, O'Connell (Labour Party Ireland – Socialist Group), and Blaney had all been involved in the effort to end the strike. They had visited Sands in prison – he had requested a meeting with representatives of the Republic of Ireland (Beresford 1997) – specifying that they were doing so as MEPs and not as TDs (Hennessey 2014, 182). The British government had granted permission despite Unionists' objections. In the aftermath of the meeting, the three MEPs had requested a consultation with Thatcher, which was refused (Hennessey 2014, 181) on the following basis:

> It is not my habit or custom to meet MPs of a foreign country about a citizen of the UK resident in the UK. If they wish to make representations and if they wish to do so with speed, they should go through their own government in the customary way.[21]

As this quotation shows, Margaret Thatcher referred to the Irish MEPs as 'MPs of a foreign country,' disregarding the European status of the three representatives. While they had explicitly attempted to 'Europeanise' the Northern Ireland hunger strike, Thatcher's response displays her refusal to accept any possible involvement of the EC in the situation, considering it a 'foreign' interest even if the UK was a member of the Community.

However, in the course of the debate, it became obvious that the three Irish MEPs had coordinated their stances and that they had also secured a certain degree of support from two of the most influential political groups: the Socialist Group and the Group of European Progressive Democrats. A clear indication of the networked connections that had formed across the Parliament in support of Northern Ireland's cause. A statement made by the Socialist Group later in the debate is interesting:

> I am quite convinced that it is up to both London and Dublin to find a solution to this problem [...] It is not just a question of defending the rights of the majority in Northern Ireland but also of finding a solution to problems of an economic and social nature [...]. A solution to these problems needs to be found which will meet with the agreement of the minority in Northern Ireland [...]. Given the circumstances, I feel I can only repeat [...] you must get around the table and carry on negotiating until the problems have been solved.[22]

This quotation elaborates for the first time within the EP the idea of a joint Anglo-Irish approach to tackling the conflict. A particular emphasis is also placed on the power that dialogue involving all parties could have to reach a peaceful settlement. These principles would later characterise the pathway towards the signing of the 1998 Belfast/Good Friday Agreement (B/GFA) and were always at the core of John Hume's activity as a peacemaker nationally and internationally.

At the time of the 1981 hunger strike, Hume had chosen to avoid any overt political agenda and was involved in the working of the 1981 Martin Report.[23] He had tabled a motion calling on the EP to conduct an enquiry on the impact of EC membership on Northern Ireland[24], which had been symbolically signed by an Irish, a Northern Irish and a British MEP, thus building on the EP provision for transnational networking (Lagana 2021). The commonalities between the above statement and the work that Hume was undertaking behind the scenes is evidence of how the wheels were by then in motion to find ways to help solve Northern Ireland's issues. This was also a consequence of the interplay between frontstage debating, political groups networked connections – the European socialists, which were then the largest group within the EP, were backing Irish nationalists' stances – committees' activities, and public debates.

The 1981 parliamentary sitting ended with the EP adopting the motions for resolution tabled on the 1981 Northern Ireland hunger strike. Most importantly, it ended with a new awareness of the deep divisions and violence affecting Northern Ireland

and a willingness to understand more in-depth the root causes of the Northern Ireland conflict:

> The European Community was created to erase old sectarian and nationalist antagonisms. That Community cannot be indifferent to the sufferings of the people of Northern Ireland [...] where the worst aspects of our common heritage appear to exclude all too often forgiveness, tolerance and cooperation. We, in this House, should seek different ways to render some form of assistance which could relieve the tensions in Northern Ireland.[25]

5 | Follow-Ups From Debating the Northern Ireland Hunger Strikes in the EP

Two elements surfacing during the investigated plenary sessions subsequently set the direction of multi-level policymaking on Northern Ireland. First, at the European supranational level, the answer to the Socialist Group's request to deepen the knowledge of the EP on the conflict materialised in the form of the 1984 'Report drawn up on behalf of the Political Affairs Committee on the situation in Northern Ireland.'[26] This report is more commonly known as the Haagerup Report, from the name of its rapporteur Niels Haagerup (Hayward 2006). This inquiry, reflecting the conclusions of the May 1981 debate, had to see if and how the EC could be of additional assistance to the people of Northern Ireland, beyond the support already rendered within the framework of regional policy and the Social Fund. The investigation was supported by three of the EP's largest blocs: the Socialists, the EPP and the Liberals.[27] The report is also the result of a particular form of lobbying and networking across the EP and the Political Affairs Committee, within which the Irish MEPs were a driving force.

The document constitutes a historical investigation of Northern Ireland's constitutional setting and includes a territorial dimension, an active and supporting role for civil society, and respect for the autonomous role of the two national governments involved.[28] The conclusion emphasises the belief that any reforms and advances in the overall political situation of Northern Ireland should be planned and executed by responsible UK authorities, with the consent of the people in Northern Ireland and with the fullest possible cooperation from the Republic.[29] This delineates a strategy that goes beyond conflict management, reduction of violence and agreement on political issues, as it addresses at the same time social justice, ending violence and building healthy cooperative cross-community relationships on the island (Lagana 2021, 90–92). This position seems to develop what was first articulated by the European socialists in the 1981 EP plenary session on the hunger strike.

While initially met with fierce resistance by the British government, who instructed everyone in Northern Ireland not to cooperate, Haagerup's conclusions were welcomed also in the UK. As explained by a NIO senior civil servant:

> Baroness Diana Louise Elles [a UK Conservative MEP] told me that Haagerup was a sensible guy and that I should help him. I briefed the then Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, Jim Prior... and I sent papers to Haagerup via our Embassy in Copenhagen. The outcome was indeed a helpful report.[30]

This quotation shows how dissenting voices existed within the Conservative Party regarding engaging with the EC, which eventually led to cooperation and to welcoming the broad idea of involving the Republic of Ireland in efforts to resolve the conflict.

A joint Anglo-Irish approach to politics in Northern Ireland stands at the foundations of the 1985 Anglo-Irish Agreement (AIA) and the consequent institutionalisation of cross-border cooperation. The AIA was ratified only 1 year after the publication of the Haagerup report, and it has been described as arguably the most far-reaching political development since the creation of Northern Ireland in 1920 (McCall 1999), and before the 1998 B/GFA. The agreement made provisions for the Irish government to gain the right to put forward views and proposals on the internal affairs of Northern Ireland (Coakley 2004), although it stated explicitly that this was not a derogation of sovereignty. The latter unmistakably reflects what was suggested by the Haagerup Report and, previously, by MEPs in the EP.

There is no direct link between Haagerup and the AIA, and the credit for the latter is primarily attributable to the Republic of Ireland's persuasive efforts conducted over many years to convince Thatcher to sign such an accord. The Taoiseach was supported by John Hume and by the Fianna Fáil MEPs in this endeavour, thus showcasing the degree of multi-level interactions occurring in pushing for the same solution. If other outside actors deserve credit, Washington would come ahead of Brussels, as the Reagan administration used its influence to encourage compromise (FitzGerald 1991). Nonetheless, scholars who have examined both USA and EU influence on Northern Ireland argue that Haagerup similarly helped nudge Thatcher towards a deal with Dublin (Guelke 1998). This argument, this article demonstrates, can, in some sense, be traced back to the time when the hunger strikes were debated in the EP.

6 | Conclusion

This article investigated the response of the EC to the Northern Ireland hunger strikes of 1980 and 1981. It examined how, through the instruments provided by the EP to raise awareness among its Members and within the other European institutions – including the motions for resolution and the plenary discussions – the Irish MEPs were able to secure a place for the Northern Ireland conflict in the EC agenda. Even in instances where there was no follow-up, such as after the parliamentary debate following the 1980 hunger strike, these efforts heightened the European interest in Northern Ireland, giving nationalists an opportunity to challenge British narratives on the conflict and with MEPs from other regions willing to hear their voices. Moreover, never-before-seen documentary evidence reveals how the hunger strikes triggered the EP's necessity to increase its

knowledge of the root causes of the conflict. This originated the subsequent 1984 Haagerup report, whose conclusions are strikingly similar to the provisions made by the 1985 AIA, and subsequent advancements in Anglo-Irish relations.

The article focussed on the EP as a functional space which fostered cooperation and conciliatory attitudes. It demonstrated how political change within this particular European institution, which led the parliament to gain a more prominent role in legislative processes, has tightened the links between the MEPs and national parties. Those who are better able to distinguish themselves for their activities in the EU are also better placed to influence the course of policymaking nationally. The EP space can therefore be associated with processes of network formation and engagement based on identification, shared common goals, transnationalism and interdependency. The article also emphasised how the EP's formal committee rules created the conditions enabling Irish MEPs to initiate strategies of lobbying to produce follow-ups from plenary sessions.

The empirical analysis of how the Northern Ireland hunger strikes raised awareness of the Northern Ireland situation within the EC has implications both for reforms and theoretical understanding in the area of networks' responses to EU institutional polities, policies and politics, and changes within it. The mechanisms presented do not call into question the existing knowledge of the EP. However, by providing another example of how MEPs' multi-level interactions can lead them to also better connect to their national parties, this article's findings call for a broadening of existing perspectives on the EP's ability to subtly influence bilateral or multilateral dynamics across multi-level policymaking.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Endnotes

[1] The terms EU, EEC and EC will be consistently used in this article to indicate, respectively, the 'European Union', 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 organisation 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 the European Community. Today, the name EC is commonly used to indicate the community as it existed before the 1993 Maastricht Treaty.

[2] Archival evidence in support of this statement will be cited all through the article. Existing studies nonetheless exist. See for example (Coakley 2014; Cox, Guelke, and Stephen 2006; Gillespie 2006; Harris 2001; Kennedy 2000; Laffan 2005; Lagana and McLoughlin 2023; Meehan 2006)

[3] The article will subsequently refer to those taking part in the prison protests and the hunger strikes only with the adjective 'republican'.

[4] By the term 'Europeanisation', this article does not refer to Europeanisation theory in its strictest sense, but to the process of bringing a specific political and policy issue to the EU agenda.

[5] Historical Archives EP, PE 1-755/80. *Debates of the European Parliament: Hunger Strikes of Prisoners in the Long Kesh and Armagh Prisons.* December 18, 1980, 23.

[6] Historical Archives EP. *Hunger Strikes of Prisoners in the Long Kesh and Armagh Prisons*, 24.

[7] Please visit: Accessed February 7, 2025. https://www.europarl.europa.eu/meps/en/1435/%28PADDY%29+PATRICK+JOSEPH_LALOR/history/1#detailedcardmep; https://www.europarl.europa.eu/meps/en/1019/NEIL_BLANEY/history/1#detailedcardmep.

[8] The National Archives: Public Record Office (TNA: PRO), Kew, Foreign Affairs Office, FCO30/5259. *Motion for a Resolution Tabled by Mr Kappos Pursuant to Rule 47 of the Rules of Procedure on the Violation of Human Rights in Northern Ireland.* May 22, 1980.

[9] Historical Archives of the European Parliament (HAEP), Cardoc-Luxembourg, PE 1-17/80. *European Parliament Motion for a Resolution Tabled by Blaney, Castellina and Coppieters Pursuant to Rule 25 of the Rules of Procedure on the Violation of Human Rights in the Community.* Document 1-17/80, March 14, 1980.

[10] For example: HAEP, Luxembourg, PE 1-756/80. *Motion for a Resolution Tabled by Mr Hume, Mr Kavanagh, Mr Desmond, Mr O'Leary, Mr O'Connel, Mr Blaney and Mr Balfe pursuant to Rule 25 of the Rules of Procedure on the Situation in Northern Ireland.* December 18, 1980; HAEP, Luxembourg, PE 1-532/81. *Motion for a Resolution Tabled by Mr Vandemeulebroucke and Mr Blaney Pursuant to Rule 47 of the Rules of Procedure on Abolition of the "Diplock" Courts in Northern Ireland.* September 24, 1980.

[11] HAEP, Luxembourg, PE 1-755/80. *Debates of the European Parliament: Hunger Strikes of Prisoners in the Long Kesh and Armagh Prisons.* December 18, 1980.

[12] Interview with Drik Toornstra 2021.

[13] Historical Archives EP. *Hunger Strikes of Prisoners in the Long Kesh and Armagh Prisons.* 23.

[14] Accessed September 6, 2022. www.cain.ulster.ac.uk/issues/politics/election/re1979.htm.

[15] HAEP, Luxembourg, Ian Paisley addressing the EP. *Debates of the European Parliament: Hunger Strikes of Prisoners in the Long Kesh and Armagh prisons*, 196.

[16] HAEP, Luxembourg, Neil Blaney addressing the EP. *Debates of the European Parliament: Hunger Strikes of Prisoners in the Long Kesh and Armagh Prisons*, 197.

[17] For example HAEP, Luxembourg, PE1 P1 264/DHOM (Fonds des présidents: documents confidentiels). *Affaire des grévistes de la faim des prisons de Long Kesh (Maze) et d'Armagh, Irlande du Nord: telegram sent by the Parliament of Wallon to Simone Veil.* April 22, 1981; HAEP, Luxembourg, PE1 P1 264/DHOM (Fonds des présidents: documents confidentiels). *Affaire des grévistes de la faim des prisons de Long Kesh (Maze) et d'Armagh, Irlande du Nord: private letter from Gustave Ansart sent on behalf of the European Communist and Allies group to Simone Veil.* April 29, 1981; HAEP, Luxembourg, PE1 P1 264/DHOM (Fonds des présidents: documents confidentiels). *Affaire des grévistes de la faim des prisons de Long Kesh (Maze) et d'Armagh, Irlande du Nord: Private letter from Gustave Ansart sent to*

Simone Veil on Raymond Mc Creesh, Patsy O'Hara et Joe Mc Donnel, Irlande du Nord. May 4, 1981.

[18] HAEP, Luxembourg, PE1 P1 264/DHOM (Fonds des présidents: documents confidentiels). *Affaire des grévistes de la faim des prisons de Long Kesh (Maze) et d'Armagh, Irlande du Nord: telegram sent by the Parliament of Wallon to Simone Veil.* April 22, 1981.

[19] HAEP, Luxembourg, PE 1-165/81. *Debates of the European Parliament: Hunger Strikes at Long Kesh.* May 7, 1981.

[20] Ibid.

[21] TNA: PRO, Kew, Cabinet Office, CJ4/3627. *Northern Ireland: Reply to the Three TDs.* April 22, 1981.

[22] HAEP, Luxembourg, PE 1-165/81. *Debates of the European Parliament: Hunger Strikes at Long Kesh.* May 7, 1981.

[23] HAEP, Luxembourg, PE 81.265m. *Report Drawn up by Simone Martin on Behalf of the Committee on Regional Policy and Regional Planning on Community Regional policy and Northern Ireland.* May 4, 1981.

[24] TNA: PRO, Kew, Cabinet Office, CJ4/4294. *European Parliament: Resolutions on Northern Ireland.* November 15, 1979.

[25] HAEP, Luxembourg, PE 1-165/81. *Debates of the European Parliament: Hunger Strikes at Long Kesh* May 7, 1981.

[26] Historical Archives EP, PE 1-88.265. *Report Drawn up on Behalf of the Political Affairs Committee on the Situation in Northern Ireland.* March 19, 1984, 13.

[27] Historical Archives EP, PE 1-630/82. *Motion for a Resolution Tabled by McCartin, O'Donnell, Rayan, Clinton, Penders, Van Aersen, Herman, Estgen, Bersani, Protopapadakis on Behalf of the Group of the European People's Party (CD Group) Pursuant to Rule 47 of the Rule of Procedure on Northern Ireland.* May 16, 1983.

[28] Historical Archives EP, PE 1-88.265. Report Drawn up on Behalf of the Political Affairs Committee on the situation in Northern Ireland. March 19, 1984, 71.

[29] Ibid., 83.

[30] Author's Interview with Anonymous 1. *Northern Ireland Office (NIO) Senior Civil Servant.* April 14, 2022.

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