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Structuring Women's Interest Representation in Europe: Between Europeanisation, De-Europeanisation and Regionalisation in the UK

Paul Copeland, Queen Mary University of London – ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9767-8210>

*Rachel Minto, Cardiff University – ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0040-3198>

*Corresponding author

Abstract:

This article brings a multi-level perspective to women's interest representation in Europe through exploring how processes of Europeanisation, de-Europeanisation and regionalisation interact to shape multi-level structures in civil society. Taking the case of the UK's membership of the European Women's Lobby and adopting a longitudinal perspective (1989-2022), the article analyses new empirical data from interviews, a witness seminar and archival texts. It reveals how processes of Europeanisation secured the establishment of a de-centralised model of women's interest representation, supporting the differentiated Europeanisation of feminist organisations across sub-state territories. The EU's structuring role was subsequently displaced by domestic regionalisation processes which consolidated this regionalised model. More recent de-Europeanisation agendas pursued by the UK Government (including but not limited to Brexit) have left the regionalised model of women's interest organisations intact. However, they have constrained the realisation of sub-state regions' divergent Europeanisation preferences and flattened potential differentiated de-Europeanisation.

Key words:

Feminist Civil Society; Europeanisation; De-Europeanisation; Regionalisation; United Kingdom; Brexit

Word count: 9,095

1) Introduction

This article brings a multi-level governance perspective to women's interest representation in Europe, through exploring how processes of Europeanisation, de-Europeanisation and regionalisation interact to shape multi-level structures in civil society. The past forty years have witnessed the diffusion of state power both upwards (through membership of the European Union [EU]) and downwards (in function of domestic processes of regionalisation) (Tatham, Hooghe and Marks 2021), with civil society organisations developing or pivoting in function of these emergent tiers of governance through processes of Europeanisation and regionalisation. More recently, this largely settled status quo of multi-level governance has been upset by the 'rolling back' of European influence within states, otherwise known as de-Europeanisation (e.g. Copeland 2016). As this 'reverse gear' (Burns et al 2019) of Europeanisation becomes more prevalent across Europe, important questions are raised about its impact on women's interest representation and, in turn, on gender equality governance. Crucially, the territorial nature of these questions must be foregrounded, as processes of de-Europeanisation play out at the state *and* sub-state levels (see e.g. Minto, Rowe and Royles 2025), just as processes of Europeanisation have done and continue to do. The dearth in understanding of the – potentially differentiated – processes and impacts of de-Europeanisation *within* states, at *multiple* levels of governance, is a glaring lacuna in the feminist scholarship which this article seeks to address.

To explore the interaction of these three processes – Europeanisation, de-Europeanisation and regionalisation – this article takes the UK's representation to the European Women's Lobby (EWL) as a case study. The EWL was established in 1990 as part of the European Commission's strategy to mobilise, resource, and engage with a broad range of civil society actors across the then European Economic Community (EEC). The Commission sought a single, more professional body to act as a key interlocutor on women's interests (Hoskyns 1991, Helfferich and Kolb 2001; Strid 2009: 138-9) and the EWL has continued in this role over its 35-year existence, working between its feminist membership and the EU's institutions to promote women's rights and gender equality. The EWL brings together civil society organisations from the EU Member States, the European Economic Area (EEA), accession countries and, now, a former Member State, and European associations. It works across a range of policy areas (including women's economic independence, women's representation and violence against women) and, beyond the EWL's

advocacy role, it provides knowledge of the EU's policy agenda, access to policy expertise and participation in a values-based community of solidarity (Minto 2020). Alliance building and influencing through EWL membership has had Europeanising effects within Member States (see e.g. Karlberg and Jacobsson 2015 for Sweden and Lafon 2018 for Belgium). Concurrently, distinctive processes of regionalisation within states have created new centres of political influence at the sub-state level. In turn, feminist civil society has been influenced by the *interactive* effects of Europeanisation and regionalisation, providing additional opportunities (and constraints) for activists to advance their domestic gender equality agendas. The UK Joint Committee on Women (UKJCW) exemplifies this interaction, created as it was for the UK's representation to the EWL whilst reflecting regional differentiation within the state.

The UKJCW has been a member of the EWL from the outset. It is comprised of four women's civil society organisations from the four territories of the UK (see UKJCW 2013): currently, Engender from Scotland, the National Alliance of Women's Organisations (NAWO) from England, the Women's Platform from Northern Ireland and the Women's Equality Network Wales (WEN Wales). As per the requirements of EWL membership, each organisation is a coordinating body for various gender equality groups, organisations and networks from across their respective territories. Whilst there has been some change in the UKJCW's constituent organisations over time, that it operates as a four-nation partnership of equals has been common throughout its lifetime. The structuring of interest representation in this way is remarkable, not least because its establishment preceded the process of regionalisation (known as devolution in a UK context) that de-centralised law-making in some policy areas away from London to Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales.

We adopt a longitudinal perspective with our period of analysis running from 1989 (when the EWL was being established) to 2022. This period of analysis encompasses the UK's EU membership, increased regionalisation/devolution (from the late 1990s), rising Euroscepticism (particularly marked from 2010), the UK's 2016 EU Referendum and, ultimately, the UK's withdrawal from the EU in 2020. We seek to draw out the intertwined relationships between Europeanisation, de-Europeanisation and regionalisation, and the role of actors in supporting these processes. Rather than focusing on the overall impact of Europe as an endpoint (i.e. the mechanisms of Europeanisation and their outcomes), we adopt a more dynamic approach which draws attention to the opportunities provided by the EU and the constraints under which

feminist actors operate. Such enablers and constraints interact with – and shape the impact of – women’s political agency. Attention to the context within which political agency is exercised allows for fuller accounts of the three processes under study. The UK serves as an ideal case given its shifting relationship with the EU and the significant processes of regionalisation developed from the late-1990s. More specifically, the case study enables us to further analyse the consequences and challenges of Euroscepticism for progressive politics.

Following this introduction, the second section outlines our conceptual approach to analysis (specifically the interaction between Europeanisation, de-Europeanisation and regionalisation) with particular reference to our state case study. The third section sets out our methodological approach, data collection methods and research design. The fourth section is the empirical heart of the paper. Here we organise our findings into three time periods which emerged during analysis. In each, we show how the processes of Europeanisation, de-Europeanisation and regionalisation have served differently to shape the structures of women’s interest representation across the UK, influenced by the political agency of key feminist actors operating to maximise opportunities despite constraints. The final section draws on these findings to advance two related arguments. Firstly, we argue that whilst Europeanisation provided feminist actors at the regional level with opportunities to advance their domestic agendas, feminist agency was inhibited in the context of *de*-Europeanisation. Secondly, and more broadly, we argue that when de-Europeanisation is pursued by the state’s central government, the Europeanisation agendas held at the regional level are devalued and their realisation constrained. In the context of rising nationalism and Euroscepticism across Europe, and persistent challenges to some established norms of gender equality, our research exposes the vulnerability of more progressive gender equality agendas held at the sub-state level.

2) Europeanisation, Regionalisation and De-Europeanisation as interacting phenomena

The extent and conditions under which the process of European Integration impacts the policies, politics and polities of its Member States is a cornerstone line of enquiry within EU studies and has been the subject of extensive theoretical and empirical interrogation. Within the Europeanisation literature, the impact of Europe is seen as a circular process in which domestic actors first ‘upload’ their preferences to the European level and thereby construct EU policy, and then, ‘download’ Europe’s policies, institutions, rules, beliefs and values to the Member State

and sub-national level (Börzel and Risse 2003). Europeanisation can best be understood by Radaelli's (2004, P. 3) definition as being : "a process involving a) construction, b) diffusion and c) institutionalisation of formal and informal rules, procedures, policy paradigms, styles, 'ways of doing things' and shared beliefs and norms which are first defined and consolidated in the EU policy process and then incorporated in the logic of domestic (national and subnational) discourse, political structures and public choices. The extent to which the EU generates domestic change depends on the 'goodness of fit' between the EU and domestic policy (Börzel and Risse 2003; Radaelli 2000).

More recently, research has focussed on processes of De-Europeanization, as the integration project has become more contested and experienced political backlashes (e.g. Copeland 2016; Gravey 2016; Burns et al 2019; Wolff and Picquet 2022). Whilst receiving considerable attention in the context of the UK's departure from the EU (e.g. Burns et al 2019; Gravey and Jordan 2023), as a process it predates the UK's recent difficulties with European integration (see e.g. Copeland 2016) and can be found across a broad range of policy areas (including in non-Member States, such as Turkey e.g. Aydın-Düzgit and Kaliber, 2016). De-Europeanisation can be broadly defined as the 'reverse gear' (Burns et al 2019) of Europeanisation. For Daehnhardt (2011) de-Europeanisation is: 'a practice through which a Member State [or actors] acts intentionally so as to prevent uploading or downloading effects from occurring in the national and European dimensions.' A result is the de-construction of previous advancements made through Europeanisation.

Related and intertwined with processes of Europeanisation and de-Europeanisation is that of regionalisation, which gained momentum across Europe from the 1970s onwards and has affected most of the EU Member States (e.g. Hooghe et al 2010). Notably, processes of regionalisation have been uneven across – and within – states, ranging from the federalisation of Belgium, asymmetrical regionalisation processes in Spain, Italy and the UK, and decentralisation reforms in France (Keating and Loughlin 1997; Swenden 2006). Today, the EU is best understood as a complex system of multi-level governance in which decision-making and implementation authority is shared across multiple tiers of governance, including subnational, national, transnational, and supranational. In turn, the conventional EU nation-state has experienced both a dilution of sovereignty by collective decision-making and the delegation to supranational institutions, whilst subnational (local and regional) authorities have become more assertive vis-

à-vis national governments thus eroding executive control in many policy areas (Hooghe and Marks 2001; Tatham, Hooghe and Marks 2021). The interaction between regionalisation and Europeanisation has been the focus of much research which explores how European integration affects Europe's regions in terms of adaptation to the EU and the mobilisation of domestic actors (e.g. López and Tatham 2018; Keating 2021 and 2022; Jeffrey 1997; Tatham 2015, 2018; Schakel 2020; Hooghe and Marks 2023). The drivers behind different outcomes include national characteristics such as the type of interest intermediation culture (e.g., from more statist to corporatist or pluralist systems) and how central government views its relationship to other public and non-public authorities, including regional governments and interest groups (Schmitter and Streeck 1999; Vannoni 2015). Additional factors may be significant, such as identity or civic traditions (Keating and Loughlin 1997), and group characteristics, such as individual entrepreneurship, transnational socialization, human and financial resources (Jeffery 1997; Klüver 2010) or the level of embeddedness of the group in its immediate environment (Beyers and Kerremans 2007, 2012). Furthermore, EU-level characteristics such as the degree of the group's regulatory and financial exposure to EU activities also act as a pre-condition to its Europeanisation (Callanan and Tatham 2013: 191–193; Dür and Mateo 2014; Chaney 2007). Finally, as demonstrated by López and Tatham (2018: 768), actors become increasingly Europeanised as their region's public authorities become more powerful.

Case Study: The UK's four-nation representation to the EWL

It is here that we situate our research, as we seek to better understand the interplay between processes of Europeanisation, de-Europeanisation and regionalisation in structuring women's interest representation. The UK provides a unique case study, both in terms of processes of Europeanisation and de-Europeanisation, but also processes of regionalisation or, specifically, devolution. Our case study is the four-nation UKJCW (from 1989 to 2022), which forms part of the EWL. Asymmetrical processes of were launched across the UK in the late 1990s, with some law-making power de-centralised to Belfast, Cardiff and Edinburgh. The intervening years have seen the (further) development of political institutions, civil society organisations, think tanks and media across Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales. As the UK's Westminster model was reconfigured within the EU's system of multi-level governance, power and authority in selected policy areas moved both upwards to the EU level and downwards to the sub-state ("devolved") level. It is significant that this regionalisation unfolded against the backdrop of the UK's

membership of – and then departure from – the EU (see e.g. Minto et al 2025). Nevertheless, the UK's 2016 referendum on EU membership returned a vote to 'Leave', with a majority in favour of continued membership in Scotland and Northern Ireland, and majorities for withdrawal in England and Wales. Upon withdrawal, the system of multi-level governance in the UK shifted, with contracted European opportunity structures for UK-based actors and new questions about the future of devolution (Morgan and Wyn Jones 2023).

3) Methodology

Our empirical data was drawn from three sources. The first source was 11 in-depth, semi-structured interviews conducted between 2019 and 2022 with key individuals involved with the UKJCW from its inception (in 1989/1990) to 2022. We continued an informal dialogue with several interviewees as the project evolved. The identification of interviewees followed the positional method (Hoffman-Lange 2007) i.e., individuals in leadership positions who had direct involvement in the UKJCW and encapsulated a 'relevant range' in terms of experiences and interactions (Mason 2018: 58). Given the extended period of analysis, the tracing of interviewees relied on 'snowballing' and participants' personal contacts. During the semi-structured interviews, participants were asked to reflect on their experiences of the UKJCW and the EWL, the opportunities, challenges and obstacles experienced in their advocacy work, and their achievements. The second source of data was archival, from the four regional organisations and (limited) texts from the UKJCW. Data included documents provided by interviewees, the majority of which are not in the public domain. The third source was a day-long witness seminar held in June 2022, with 13 participants (all of whom had played a key role in the UKJCW and covering the whole period under study) invited to collectively reflect on the establishment and evolution of the UKJCW and the EWL. These participants included (but were not limited to) individuals who had been interviewed in the first phase of data collection. The one-day witness seminar allowed us to cross-check consistencies and inconsistencies within the narratives emerging from the two other data sources, to gain further clarification on events, and to establish a shared sense of the significance and importance of various aspects of the evolution of the UKJCW. Interviews and the witness seminar were transcribed for text-based analysis.

From these three sources, we gained a unique and rich data set to analyse the interplay between Europeanisation, de-Europeanisation and regionalisation over a 30-year period. Our approach

was deductive. We explored the data for evidence of Europeanisation, de-Europeanisation and regionalisation, with reference to the agency of key individuals. We used the software NVivo to code our data against these three phenomena and through analysis the varying relationships between them emerged. Beyond the value of the data set in advancing our theoretical understanding, it also captures a history that, given the informal and fluid nature of these organisations and the paucity of formal records, risks being lost over time (see Copeland and Minto 2024 for the project report).

4) Three phases of Europeanisation, de-Europeanisation and regionalisation in structuring interest representation

During analysis, three distinct time periods emerged in which Europeanisation, de-Europeanisation and regionalisation interacted in different ways to structure women's interest representation. These three periods were: 1989 to 1997 (a period that was pre-political devolution and during which the UKJCW was established in the context of the EWL); 1997 to 2010 (a period which began with the launch of devolution across the UK under a Labour Government in Westminster); and finally 2010 to 2022 (marked by the installation of a Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition Government, the roll-out of the government's austerity agenda, increasing Euroscepticism and Brexit). Figure 1 provides an overview of the dynamics of Europeanisation, de-Europeanisation and regionalisation and the significance of feminist agency during each time period .

[FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE]

Phase 1 (1989-1997): Regionalisation through Europeanisation to establish the UKJCW

The inaugural meeting of the EWL was held in September 1990, following a colloquium held in London in 1987. Organised by a key figure within the European Commission's Women's Information Service, Fausta Deshormes, and the Fawcett Society, it brought together 85 civil society organisations from across the Member States, and 17 European women's organisations (Strid 2009; Hoskyns 1991). Activity to establish the EWL dovetailed with that to establish the UK's representation to it, all against the backdrop of growing support for a more regionalised UK to be realised through processes of devolution. The latter ultimately culminated in successful

referendums in Scotland and Wales in 1997; whilst in Northern Ireland, the 1998 referendum on the Good Friday/Belfast Agreement founded the Assembly that same year. Preceding these milestones, however, distinct civil society actors and organisations had already emerged in these four regions of the UK, representing a range of specific interests and with their own regional associations (Wincott, Chaney, Sophocleous 2023). Many of these regional organisations also campaigned – ultimately successfully – for devolution and were also involved in supporting the development of a unique quasi-federal approach to the formation of the UK’s representation to the nascent EWL.

Crucially, the establishment of a partnership of equals structure for women’s interest representation was a hard-won achievement and such an outcome was far from inevitable. Indeed, it was only through successful lobbying both within the UK and then at the European level that what was an innovative structure of women’s representation was secured.

Indeed, the initial assumption amongst women’s civil society actors located in Westminster was that they would hold the responsibility to represent the UK in its entirety. At the time, representation around a centralised UK-wide polity was a dominant model of interest representation. Meanwhile, although the EC/EU was developing an infrastructure for the representation of regional interests, the nation states (as the Member States) were the ultimate centres of power within EU decision-making.

Reflecting the dominant London-centric sentiment at the time, one interviewee remarked:

“Europe isn’t interested in whether you’re from Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland. They are interested if you’re from England because Westminster is the main Government”.

It was with this assumption in mind that the London-based National Alliance of Women’s Organisations (NAWO), formed in 1989, prepared to become the UK’s representation to the EWL. At the time, NAWO was relatively well-funded, with approximately 10 members of staff. However, feminists based in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland were adamant that a UK-wide, London-centric model was unfit for purpose. Feminist actors calling for a four-nations representation drew on the evolving devolution movements in Scotland and Wales, and the unique political situation in Northern Ireland. Resistance was channelled in part via the Women’s

Committee of the National Council for Voluntary Organisations (NCVO), which was responding to the European Commission's request for UK representation within the soon-to-formed EWL. In Scotland, in the context of the Scottish Constitutional Convention and the Scottish Convention of Women, women from the church, business, trade unions and members of political parties pushed for distinct representation from Scotland. Meanwhile, there was insistence from Belfast that Northern Ireland also required its own representation in the EWL, as women in Northern Ireland could not be represented from London. Along with feminists in Wales, they finally secured the wider acceptance of this four-nation model as the most appropriate structure for the UK's EWL representation. A participant from Northern Ireland articulated the shared view that,

"... it had to be negotiated and that was sometimes very difficult. People were coming at us with quite different perspectives. I know that our sisters in England, some of them found it really... they could not quite understand what we were driving at. They could not see there was an issue [with a London-based, UK-wide representation], so I give credit to them when people began to understand why we were pushing so hard for this and we came to an agreement."

Once this agreement had been reached, the four regional organisations (NAWO in England, the Northern Ireland Women's European Platform, Wales Women's European Network and Women's Forum Scotland) worked together to secure four-nations working in practice, an outcome that was dependent upon decisions taken within the nascent EWL. The original plan within the EWL was that each Member State would have one representative on the EWL Board (originally known as the Bureau), with a three-seat delegation to the EWL (specifically to the Annual General Assembly). It was left to each national coordination to decide how to organise their delegation, with the three seats held by either the same or different organisations. However, the lobbying and persuasion of UK and Republic of Ireland-based actors resulted in the 'uploading' of a four-seat model to the European level, to accommodate the proposed four-nations model. This was a significant achievement.

To secure this four-seat model, UK-based feminists from each of the four regions insisted that distinct regional representation was essential for a representative presence, so a three-seat delegation would not suffice. This approach was also supported by the Irish delegation which argued that women in Northern Ireland required representation from Northern Ireland rather

than London or Dublin. Indeed, key to the argument advanced at the European level was the 'special case' of Northern Ireland in the context of the sectarian unrest and the importance of EC/Brussels as a neutral meeting arena. As recalled by a participant from Ireland,

"... I do remember one of the funny things was a lot of the Europeans, other Europeans were really astonished that we [the Irish] were supporting, we were part of the demand that the UK delegation had to be four-way. Their sense of what was going on in Ireland was we were all killing each other, and so the idea that the southerners would support anything that the UK delegation wanted seemed to be a bit... they were a bit nervous of that."

"It was absolutely central that Northern Irish women didn't feel that they couldn't be represented or wouldn't be represented by an English, London-based organisation, and equally the other half of the women in Northern Ireland would feel that maybe in some way we [the Irish delegation] were trying to represent them. It just had to be the way we insisted it had to be. We were very happy to support everybody to get that."

It was through this successful lobbying that the EWL's initial structure afforded each delegation four seats. As such, each of the constituent members of the UKJCW enjoyed their own, distinct relationship with the EWL (as a delegate to the EWL), with the UKJCW itself operating as a mechanism to select the UK's one EWL Board member and to provide a structure to support that single voice on the EWL Board. The European interest representation structure therefore legitimised and buttressed the UKJCW as an innovative, four-nation model, institutionalising a partnership of equals approach in an era prior to regionalisation (through devolution). In this regard, the governance framework within feminist civil society was ahead of constitutional developments in the UK and the ECC/EU was the opportunity structure within which this was achieved. This all unfolded within a British political context in which the Conservative Government under Margaret Thatcher was becoming increasingly Eurosceptic and resisting attempts for deeper integration, including political integration.

Following the establishment of the UKJCW and the EWL, the early years of their existence were spent institutionalising patterns of working between the four nations within the UKJCW, and developing the governance structures of the EWL. This all required tremendous and continuous investment of time and effort, largely from volunteers. Not only was this uncharted territory for

almost all involved but, given the period of time, communication was limited to letters, telephone conversations, faxes, and in-person meetings.

The UKJCW had no resources of its own, with volunteers operating within one of the most under-resourced parts of an under-resourced sector. Financially, as a coordinating body of interest representation across the four nations, the UKJCW did not receive any funding, and the financial situation of the UKJCW's constituent organisations waxed and waned, with EWL rules preventing them from raising funds by charging membership fees. A consequence of such squeezed resource was that, whilst constituent organisations were given a direct link to the EU policy-making process, there were challenges both to maximising this function and also to communicating important Europe-related information beyond their immediate circle of volunteers.

As outlined above, our analysis has highlighted the crucial significance of Europeanisation processes to supporting the regionalisation of women's interest representation in the UK. It was through both UK-based advocacy of gender equality actors and then processes of 'uploading' and 'downloading' that the UK's partnership of equals model was formally established. Without the EWL's policy of a four-seat delegation, it is difficult to see how the four-nations model in the UK could have been sustained and, indeed, it is possible that without it there would have been pressure to revert to a London-centric model of representation. At the very least, the three-seat model initially proposed would not have so easily accommodated the UK. Following the formal downloading of the four-seat model, a key preoccupation during this time-period was the maintenance of the UKJCW, as feminist actors learned and normalised four-nations working. During this time, the protection provided by the EWL's four-seat delegation was crucial for securing this regionalised, four-nation model in the UK as it allowed for a period of learning and institutionalisation. Such institutionalisation was to become essential for the future of four nations working given later changes to the governance of the EWL. Despite this notable success, the limited funding landscape of the UKJCW and its four sister organisations was a significant constraint, limiting substantive policy activity and associated Europeanisation through such activity.

Phase 2 (1997-2010): Devolution and the consolidation of the UKJCW

1997 ushered in a different political climate within the UK as the 18 years of increasingly Eurosceptic Governments of the Conservative Party were replaced by New Labour under Prime Ministers Tony Blair (1997-2007) and Gordon Brown (2007-2010). New Labour had promised a more proactive approach to EU engagement and integration than its predecessor. With other like-minded Member States within the European Council, it was also a supporter of the shift within EU governance towards a more coordinative and cooperative form of governance encapsulated by the European Employment Strategy (1997) and the Lisbon Agenda (2000). The latter two strategies contained provisions to enhance the status of women (including a specific target on female employment and an expansion of childcare provision) and the 1997 Treaty of Amsterdam committed to gender mainstreaming in the EU, across policy areas and throughout the policy process (Rees 1998). Within the UK, regionalisation through processes of devolution was moving ahead. The Scottish Parliament was established in 1999, the Welsh Assembly in 1999 and, following the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement, the Northern Ireland Assembly in 1998.

This activity at both the UK and EU levels provided a backdrop for the consolidation of the UKJCW as a four-nation structure, at times a difficult process. While UK Governments under New Labour were more cooperative with European Integration than their predecessors, the political landscape remained challenging for civil society organisations. The UKJCW sister organisations in Scotland and Wales not only struggled financially but were preoccupied for some time with establishing the polities of devolution. In a recollection shared with participants from these emerging polities, one participant from Scotland noted,

“... we were obsessed with devolution in the first few years. We had a new civil service. We had a new government and new parliament. We had a whole new set of relationships and we had no capacity to accept volunteers at that point. We just were focused on Scotland. Then once the government and the parliament started to bed in ... we finally began to pick our heads up and look outside of Scotland again. The UK Joint Committee was a great opportunity for us to then have a mechanism for doing that.”

Furthermore, due to issues of bandwidth, at times these organisations also struggled to get the importance of Europe heard, with a participant from Wales remarking, “I don't think anybody

was interested in Europe, strangely enough, at the time because I think it was hard enough for people getting adjusted to the Assembly.”

On top of this, the maintenance of four nations working required continual investment, which often eclipsed substantive policy work. This was a recurring theme and one widely shared by participants, with one exclaiming, “We would spend more time on who was going to represent us sometimes!”

Nevertheless, important achievements were secured over time. For example, in Wales the Wales Women’s European Network (WWEN) successfully lobbied the Advisory Board of the new Assembly for Wales (now the Welsh Parliament/Senedd Cymru) to set up a cross-departmental Equal Opportunities Committee to monitor women’s rights, the pay gap, and violence against women. These thematic issues were those which the EWL had prioritised and which WWEN had therefore used to guide their annual conferences. This evidences how constituent organisations of the UKJCW were indeed able, on certain occasions, to influence political agendas in these early days.

As devolution deepened regionalisation across the UK, the UKJCW’s constituent organisations also became information networks through which regional political actors (at the sub-state level) could learn from their knowledge and expertise about how policy was made in Brussels and where influence could be maximised. In turn, through the direct engagement of these regional organisations with the EWL (including through the Annual General Assembly), they were able to build capacity at a regional level (see also Minto 2020). This capacity-building complemented the evolving processes of devolution, with the de-centralisation of policy competence from London to Belfast, Cardiff and Edinburgh, and the establishment of new political institutions.

Despite financial challenges, throughout this period, NAWO remained the most well-resourced of the four sister organisations. In 2002, for example, NAWO received funding from the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust which covered staff costs over four years (NAWO 2009). Additional funds were also secured from the EU, which in 2005 provided funding for a series of workshops to be held across the UK’s four nations. The workshops coincided with the UK’s Presidency of the Council and the EWL’s General Assembly held in London in October 2005 (NAWO 2006).

Workshops were designed to bring together EU officials, Members of the European Parliament

(MEPs), Members of Parliament in the UK, local counsellors, and civil society actors to exchange knowledge and information. As with the other three sister organisations, NAWO regularly disseminated information regarding developments in EU policy-making to its members, as well as hosting events to strengthen the EU-related capacity of its members further. At the time, its proximity to Westminster enabled it to leverage financial resources, including donations from its members.

There were also other positive achievements of the UKJCW. Knowledge of the European policy-making process (particularly new policies that were being proposed by the Commission) enabled various feminist organisations to participate in the EWL's collective lobbying at the European level. In turn, the UKJCW's constituent organisations could participate in and benefit from a transnational solidarity and 'sisterhood'. They also used such knowledge to lobby their MEPs, particularly when proposals were being negotiated in the European Parliament and there was a perceived need to improve provisions for women.

Notably, through the EWL, the UKJCW fed into the consultations regarding the EU's proposed Constitutional Treaty (2004) and advocated for the proposal to better incorporate a feminist perspective. This opportunity gave feminist civil society actors in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales their own, distinct access to a valuable 'third level' of exposure and campaigning beyond their regional governments and the central government at Westminster.

The importance of this third level of interest representation must be understood within a context of a Westminster system that was relatively closed to civil society organisations, notwithstanding the opportunities provided through the Women's National Commission (an umbrella body of UK-based women's organisations established in 1969 to advise UK Governments). As articulated by one interviewee, 'It's a long-standing... mechanism for us to stay connected with places of power in Europe that were often very difficult if we went through London'.

Other benefits of EWL – and EU – membership were access to comparative data and policy learning. One participant encapsulated the general consensus in stating,

“I think the link to European comparative information and that expertise has been particularly useful, both as a lobbying tool, to be able to know what other countries are doing ... We’ve been able to provide that representation in regard to, “This is what’s coming from the EU as a policy ...” or being able to say, “This is coming in other countries as an example,” rather than using just a UK example, it’s been a very useful tool for lobbying and discussions with the [regional] Government.”

Along with their European counterparts, UK-based actors were central to the formation of such comparative data, with agreement on definitions and its formation often resulting from long, and sometimes difficult, political negotiations (Copeland and Minto 2023). This comparative data was considered both reliable and objective, giving additional credibility to the lobbying activities of the UKJCW. In addition, members of the UKJCW also benefited from transnational policy learning through participating in EWL meetings and working groups. As summed up by one participant,

“...we got quite a lot of the same thing back, I think. Which was learning about other approaches and priorities, how other women and structures built trust, how important mutual respect was”.

Despite the opportunities provided by EWL membership and regionalisation (through devolution), important challenges remained for all of those involved in the UKJCW. One particular difficulty was resource, with a notable constraint imposed by the EWL’s stipulations around funding for civil society organisations, specifically that they could not charge members a fee. The struggle for sufficient funding has persisted, with the reliance upon voluntary contributions being, to varying degrees, a hallmark of the successful functioning of the UKJCW. While in England NAWO was relatively well-resourced during the early years of the UKJCW, the three other sister organisations had scant (if any) funding. The EWL would pay travel expenses to its official events (such as conferences or the General Assembly); however, beyond that, UK-based organisations have struggled to survive financially and would often pay their own expenses. This focus on survival has consumed considerable amounts of time and energy, and relied on the resilience and dedication of committed individuals, particular in the early days. In turn, this lack of resource limited the potential of these networks to maximise the use of the available opportunity structures. It was only following the establishment of the regional governments in Scotland and Wales that the Scottish and Welsh sister organisations were able to

secure more funding. Relatedly, the need to formulate and follow processes and procedures also consumed a significant amount of time and resources, particularly given that the sister organisations of the UKJCW - except for NAWO - did not have their own staff. One interviewee articulated this dimension of the UKJCW's story as follows,

"So, my observation is that on the journey, it was a very developmental process for the four. That you went from perhaps not having an awful lot of interaction to suddenly having lots and lots of interaction to the point where you were able to come to an agreement as to how you were going to proceed, so that was really important."

A significant change to the governance structures of the EWL came during this time period, when the EWL reduced the size of national delegations from four seats to three seats (therefore reducing the number of votes from four to three per delegation). This change preceded the EU 'big bang' enlargement in 2004, when the EWL would have to accommodate ten more national delegations.

Despite the centrality of the EWL's four-seat model to establishing the UKJCW as a partnership of equals (as explored above), the UKJCW's partnership of equals structure withstood this change in EWL rules. By this time, the process of regionalisation through devolution was becoming further entrenched across the UK, with strengthening relationships between the three sister organisations in Belfast, Cardiff, and Edinburgh and their regional governments/administrations. Alongside Europeanisation, the institutionalisation of regionalisation further consolidated the structure of the UKJCW, and there was never a question of moving away from a quasi-federal model of representation.

Instead, post-2004, given that there was no longer one vote per organisation, the UKJCW took on an enhanced role as it was required to coordinate the UK's position on policy matters, specifically for the Annual General Assembly. It was decided that voting intentions for the General Assembly were to be agreed in advance and in the rare event that a consensus could not be reached, delegates from the UK would abstain from voting. The UKJCW also committed to finding the funding to ensure all four representatives could attend the General Assembly (although only three were formal delegates). The ability of the UKJCW to evolve (rather than fracture and disintegrate) illustrated that the form and spirit of the four nations working

together had been institutionalised amongst the sister organisations of the UKJCW. Also, additional legitimacy afforded to the organisations in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales through political devolution served to reinforce the quasi-federal status quo. As such, whilst initially regionalisation of women's interest representation was supported by Europeanisation, it was later supported through the UK's own processes of political de-centralisation.

This time period is characterised by a shift in underpinning of the UK's four-nations structure of interest representation. As opposed to the fundamental role of the EU and processes of Europeanisation, what was crucial during this time was the process of regionalisation (through devolution), in supporting and legitimising the four nations approach to interest representation, entrenching this model further. Indeed, the UKJCW as a four-nations structure withstood the EWL's switch to a three-seat delegation. The effort to institutionalise this pattern of working and the launch of political devolution (a process of regionalisation which led to some increase in funding in Scotland and Wales) ensured against any drift from this model. Whilst the potential was limited (partly determined by the structural constraints imposed from Brussels and London), direct access to the EWL supported a level of capacity building at the regional level which, in turn, reinforced the UKJCW as a four-nations structure.

Phase 3 (2010-2022): De-Europeanisation and the uncertain future of the UKJCW

The change of UK Government in 2010 signalled a shift within politics at Westminster which was to have important consequences for the UKJCW. The Eurosceptic Conservative Party under Prime Minister David Cameron had failed to win an outright majority at the General Election and entered a Coalition Government with the pro-EU Liberal Democrats. The 2007/2008 financial crisis (which resulted in the bailout of several UK financial institutions) increased national debt, and was perceived to be putting pressure on national finances. Along with other European countries, the Coalition Government implemented austerity, which saw drastic cuts to public spending to bring national borrowing under control.

One consequence of austerity was the so-called 'bonfire of the quangos' or quasi-autonomous non-governmental organisations, which included the Women's National Commission. For the UKJCW, the demise of the Women's National Commission was considered a blow for the

advancement of women's rights and gender equality in the UK. A further dimension to the changing domestic fortunes for the UKJCW was the ushering in of a normatively Eurosceptic UK Government, despite it being a coalition government with the pro-EU Liberal Democrats. The 2010 Conservative Party Manifesto emphatically called for 'less Europe', particularly in the context of those policy areas which were deemed to move beyond the long-held Conservative Party belief of the purpose of European integration to serve as a free trade area rather than a *sui generis* political and economic union (Copeland 2016). Both of these aspects provided a more difficult political context for the UKJCW.

Notably, the changing fortunes of the UK's political context were unevenly distributed across the UKJCW's four sister organisations. This becomes clear when tracking the financing and activity of each over this final period of analysis. Although it never received funding from Westminster, the London-based NAWO (which at the beginning of the UKJCW was the most well-resourced of the four organisations) lost funding in the context of pervasive public and third sector austerity and, subsequently, had to rely on volunteers to continue its work. As was often the case with the UKJCW, the determination and voluntarism of those involved enabled NAWO to continue its work, focused at the international, European and UK-levels. The significance of voluntarism has characterised the work of what became the Women's Platform in Northern Ireland (previously NIWEP), as a consistently relatively poorly resourced organisation. Like NAWO, NIWEP has never received government funding, although in recent years it has secured limited funding to cover communications and membership work under the leadership of a director. In addition to its EU-focused activity, it works at the international level and within the UK, although the multiple suspensions of Northern Ireland's regional political institutions (including in the context of Brexit) have impacted this work.

Despite capacity pressures, Engender in Scotland and WEN Wales have emerged as the most well-financed of the sister organisations and are widely recognised in their domestic political settings as key civil society representatives for women. Following the pulling of Welsh Government funding and subsequent battles to secure a representative organisation for women in Wales, WEN Wales was established in 2010. It receives some financial support from the Welsh Government and has staff covering a variety of different roles and functions. Meanwhile, Engender in Scotland is the most well-funded of the four organisations, including from the Scottish Government, with multiple staff covering policy, development and communication

functions under the leadership of the Executive Director. Notwithstanding this variation, all organisations work under significant resource constraints which force difficult decisions about where to invest their limited capacity.

The 2016 referendum on the UK's membership of the EU ushered in further uncertainty for the UKJCW. The *raison d'être* of the UKJCW can be found in the European project and the UK's prospective (and eventual) departure called into question the extent to which it should continue. However, given the value of EWL membership to the sister organisations, the UKJCW requested and secured its continuation (Minto 2020). This continued membership was realised through an amendment to the EWL's internal rules, such that a national coordination can maintain full membership even if the state they represent changes its formal relationship with the EU (Article 2, European Women's Lobby, 2019). This amendment was supported by the EWL Board in February 2019 and later approved unanimously by the June 2019 General Assembly, long before an agreement on the UK's departure from the EU was agreed. On this point, participants agreed with the following statement,

"... we need to collectively think, what are our priorities, what's our approach, all the rest of it. But surely we're not going to renounce an opportunity to keep that slight foothold in there [in Europe], and with all the benefits that we know we get from being in the Lobby, and with all the things that we know we can contribute collectively to the Lobby; for goodness sake, why would we not take that as an opportunity? "

Despite the UKJCW's continued EWL membership post-Brexit, the UK's departure from the EU has impacted profoundly on access to and participation within networks and other spaces for feminist actors (Copeland and Minto 2023). The loss of UK relevance and influence at the EU level is regarded as significant, not least because of the difficulties civil society organisations have accessing Westminster. The removal of the UK from the EU's legal framework means that UKJCW/EWL lobbying activities were set to have minimal – if any – impact on policy in the UK, thus calling into question the capacity of stretched civil society organisations for such activities. Resource challenges have been compounded through the loss of access to EU-funding, including that channelled through the EWL specifically for Member State actors. Post-Brexit, the constituent organisations of the EWL have been left with a less favourable opportunity structure for advancing their equality agendas and reduced access to resource (including funding,

advocacy tools including comparative data and relevant policy expertise as the UK potentially drifts from the EU-level equality discussions).

Nevertheless, the UKJCW's four sister organisations remain as transmission belts for knowledge exchange across the UK's four nations in the context of developments in EU policy and the Member States. This appears to have more significance for Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales than it does for England, given the political requirement (Northern Ireland) and will (Scotland and Wales) to keep pace with EU developments. Indeed, the consolidation of the UKJCW's four-nations model continued throughout this time as each organisation was firmly embedded within – and legitimised by – their regional political context. Strikingly, following the EU Referendum, there were clear differences in the extent to which these political contexts were pro-European. Only the UK Government pursued a withdrawal agenda, with the Scottish and Welsh Governments committing to inter alia continued alignment with EU rules in certain areas (Minto, Rowe and Royles 2025) and Northern Ireland required to take on much Single Market legislation.

The distinctive status of Northern Ireland was captured in this quote from a participant,

“... I think one of the interesting things is that actually, [the UKJCW is] not now four equal nations, because Northern Ireland has more [space] in terms of the EU. Partly because of the [Northern Ireland] Protocol, being that the [Northern Ireland] Protocol is nothing to do with the European Women's Lobby, but also because there is a recognition that the Northern Ireland situation is unique. And in that sense, the Northern Ireland organisation has access to the Irish Government and has always been able to have a voice there as well.”

During this period, in a context of increasing Euroscepticism in the UK and evidence of the UK Government pursuing a de-Europeanisation agenda (e.g. Copeland 2016), actors involved in the UKJCW used their agency to engage actively with the EWL to draw down resource to advance their own (now more mature) domestic equality agendas. The same actors pushed for the UKJCW's continued membership of the EWL post-Brexit, which they secured. These efforts from the UKJCW to continue within the EWL were not attached to questions about the structure of interest representation in the UK, as this had been settled. That feminist actors pursued – and secured – the UKJCW's continued membership of the EWL post-Brexit is evidence of the perceived value of the European level to advancing the regional equality agendas of the UKJCW's

constituent organisations. Crucially, this value is contingent upon the (Europeanised) regional structure for interest representation. The securing of continued EWL membership was a partial response to broader processes of de-Europeanisation across the UK, not least a concern about the future of equality policy in the UK post-Brexit and the different Europeanisation preferences of the four governments/administrations across the UK.

However, despite the UKJCW's continued membership of the EWL and the constituent organisations' preference for a close relationship with the EU, the European activity of the UKJCW risks stalling. At the end of data collection in 2022, it was too early to speak about a de-Europeanisation of the UKJCW's activity per se; however, de-Europeanisation processes launched by Brexit had quickly reduced incentives to engage across the breadth of EWL work and left fewer funding opportunities for UK-based organisations. Already, much civil society work had pivoted from Brussels to Westminster given the increased significance of this political centre. At the close of analysis, the largest risk for the UKJCW seemed to be growing irrelevance as its constituent organisations made pragmatic decisions about the use of scarce resource. Whilst there was increased differentiation in governmental attitudes towards the EU across the UK, this was all set within a broader context of UK Parliamentary Sovereignty that undermined the potential for the realisation of such divergent de-Europeanisation preferences. The UKJCW therefore currently operates under processes of Europeanisation, regionalisation and de-Europeanisation. The UK's relationship with the EU remains in flux and so too does the purpose and function of the UKJCW in post-Brexit Britain.

5) Conclusion

This research highlights how processes of Europeanisation, regionalisation and de-Europeanisation have shaped women's interest representation in the UK. These phenomena have interacted differently over the three identified time periods, with actors from the sub-state level working strategically between multiple levels of governance to advance their regional equality agendas. The period from 1989 to 1997 was characterised by regionalisation through Europeanisation as key feminist actors in the UK used access to the European level to advance a regional agenda, ultimately securing a quasi-federal, four-nations approach to women's interest representation at a time predating regionalisation through devolution across the UK. During this

time, processes of Europeanisation were interacting with regionalisation such that they were not only complementing each other (in developing a regionalised structure for interest representation) but potentially amplifying their effects. Then from 1997 to 2010, processes of regionalisation within the UK (specifically devolution) reinforced and developed the four-nations structure, ultimately displacing the role played by Europeanisation.

From 2010 to 2022, all three processes have been evident. Increasing Euroscepticism and preferences for de-Europeanisation at the state level contrasted with the Europeanisation preferences of the UKJCW's constituent organisations, civil society more broadly and the regional governments in Scotland and Wales (see e.g. Minto, Rowe and Royles 2025). Much of the future depends not just on how Governments across the UK align (or not) themselves to the EU, but how feminist actors respond too. However, despite the success of feminist actors in securing the UKJCW's continued membership of the EWL despite Brexit, constraints on agency are compounded in a context where the UK is no longer a Member State. These constraints in turn squeeze the scope for regional actors to use the quasi-federal structure of interest representation as they had done previously.

Based on our findings, we argue that the agency of regional actors is particularly constrained in the context of de-Europeanisation given the power held by the central government. This contrasts with the opportunities presented in processes of Europeanisation, when regional actors could pursue their domestic agendas with more success. A central theme running throughout the case study is the importance, and fragility, of feminist agency to capitalise on opportunities to advance (regionalised) equality agendas. Those opportunities were provided by the EU and successive UK Governments, but as the case study demonstrates, they are also contingent on them. Feminist agency is therefore both enabled by political opportunity, but simultaneously constrained by existing structures and political arrangements. Such constraints can come from both the EU and the UK. For example, in the context of limited funding, the EU's requirement that the four sister organisations could not charge a membership fee placed further constraints on the ability of the organisations to function effectively. Post-Brexit, the loss of the EU's legal framework, EU funding and comparative data sets, and a potential drift from European policy discussions, risk either pushing the UKJCW into irrelevance or into a new functional role which does not hold the EU at its core.

Following from this, we argue that opportunities for differentiated Europeanisation are therefore not mirrored in processes of de-Europeanisation. Instead, the de-Europeanisation preferences of the central government both devalue regional Europeanisation agendas and constrain their realisation. Whilst feminist actors work to maintain European ties, there is a question about whether regional equality actors can successfully “resist” de-Europeanisation – or are ultimately “forced” to de-Europeanise (Minto, Rowe and Royles 2025). This loss of agency may also be experienced by regional actors in other states. Indeed, whilst the UK has launched an extreme variant of de-Europeanisation through Brexit, it is not alone in its de-Europeanisation preferences. Rising nationalism and Euroscepticism across Europe – coupled with a conservatism that challenges some basic tenets of gender equality – has manifested in an explicit rejection of European norms, legislation and policy, particularly in the area of equality. Our research suggests that, in the face of de-Europeanisation, it is harder to maintain “islands” of progressive equality policy at a regional level than it was to develop them in the first place, which gives further concern as to the potential consequences of the continued rise of radical-right and far-right parties across Europe.

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Key messages

- Europeanisation, de-Europeanisation and regionalisation interact to structure civil society.
- Europeanisation secured de-centralised interest representation; regionalisation consolidated this model.
- De-Europeanisation processes constrain the agency of regional actors, minimising differentiation.
- Euroscepticism leaves progressive sub-state equality agendas vulnerable, despite regional preferences.

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This project has received ethical approval from the Cardiff School of Law and Politics Research Ethics Committee (SREC) on 20th December 2019 (Internal Reference: SREC/201219/03).

Biographical statement – Prof. Paul Copeland:

Prof. Paul Copeland is professor in Public Policy at Queen Mary University of London.

Biographical statement – Dr Rachel Minto:

Dr Rachel Minto is a Senior Lecturer in Politics at the School of Law and Politics at Cardiff University where she is also Deputy Director of the Wales Governance Centre.