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Cormac Walsh

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# Brexit Geographies: Spatial Imaginaries and Relational Territorialities on the Island of Ireland

**Cormac Walsh**

Department of Integrative Geography, Institute of Geography, University of Hamburg, Bundesstrasse 55, 20146 Hamburg, Germany

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**Abstract:** The pending exit of the United Kingdom from the European Union has far-reaching consequences for the political geography of the island of Ireland. The current territorial settlement founded on the 1998 Good Friday Agreement (GFA) was made possible by the common membership of Ireland and the UK of the European Union. The logic of the Good Friday Agreement replaced competing territorial claims with a settlement whereby the territoriality of Northern Ireland has shifted from that of a bounded container space within the UK to a relational space, dependent on North-South-and Ireland-UK relations within the broader European context. Brexit continues to represent a moment of critical transformation with as yet very uncertain outcomes. This paper explores the potential for a nuanced understanding of the ‘island of Ireland’ and Irish border region pre- and post-Brexit, as liminal ‘soft spaces’; spaces of possibility located outside the formal spheres of nation-state territoriality, but nevertheless very much located within the shadow of territory.

**Keywords:** *Brexit, spatial imaginaries, territorialities, island of Ireland, spatial planning, cross-border*

## Introduction

The pending exit of the United Kingdom from the European Union constitutes a redefinition of spatial relationships with profound implications for the political geographies of the UK and the island of Ireland. This process of redefinition is evident along multiple axes, where in many cases new tensions are emerging. These axes include the East-West relationship between Ireland and the UK, the relationship between the UK and its devolved administrations in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland and, perhaps most significantly, the North-South relationship between the two jurisdictions on the island of Ireland (Harvey, 2018; Hayward, 2018; Mair and McCabe, 2019). In this

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\* cormac.walsh@uni-hamburg.de

regard, Brexit represents a moment of critical transformation with as yet very uncertain outcomes. Indeed, Brexit constitutes a substantial threat to the tenuous and fragile territorial settlement of the 1998 Good Friday Agreement (GFA) and a serious risk to the social and economic development of the border region. The prospect of a hard border challenges the very concept of an all-island economy and cross-border functional region. The Irish border region is particularly vulnerable to impacts of Brexit, given its legacies of peripherality, underdevelopment and violent conflict in the past (De Mars *et al.*, 2018; Fenton, 2018). It is evident that the potential impacts of Brexit for border region communities cannot be measured in economic terms alone as the border itself continues to hold emotional and symbolic significance (Morrow, 2017; Hayward, 2017b). Brexit risks unravelling the progress that has been made in enabling, facilitating and improving cross-border cooperation and interaction over the twenty-year period since the Good Friday Agreement. A destabilisation of the existing political settlement and associated deterioration in economic prospects risks hard-won trust and good-will, giving way to suspicion, self-interest and distrust.

It is possible, however, that the informal networks and spaces for cooperation which have emerged over the last twenty years can continue to provide the institutional capacity to face the challenges posed by Brexit from shared, common perspectives. This paper explores the potential for a nuanced understanding of the 'island of Ireland' and Irish border region pre- and post-Brexit, as liminal 'soft spaces'; spaces of possibility located outside the formal spheres of nation-state territoriality, but nevertheless very much located within the shadow of territory. It is argued in this paper that creative solutions to the 'border question' post-Brexit will require transcending commonplace either/or notions of container-space territoriality, embracing the potential of soft, relational boundary spaces.

### ***Spatial Imaginaries, Metageographies and Shifting Territorialities***

There is clearly a strong spatial dimension to the discourse and practice of the UK exiting the European Union. The discursive narratives informing debates on the role of the UK within the EU prior to the June 2016 referendum and on the form Brexit should take in the period since the referendum reflect underlying spatial imaginaries. Spatial imaginaries have been recently defined as 'deeply held, collective understandings of socio-spatial relations that are performed by, give sense to, make possible and change collective socio-spatial practices' (Davoudi, 2018, 101). They are further understood to be produced through political struggles and to be infused by relations of power (*ibid.*). Spatial imaginaries are found at multiple scales from that of the home, to cities, regions, nation-states and supra-national bodies such as the EU (Watkins, 2015; Sykes, 2018). Healey (2004, 64) writing from a planning perspective has argued that 'spatial vocabularies' influence how political debate is framed and structured. Reflecting on processes of strategic spatial planning in Europe, she reasons that established spatial vocabularies are resistant to change as they reflect 'significant intellectual and political capital' embedded within political and market processes (*ibid.*). Other authors have

focussed more specifically on the interrelationships between multiple spatial imaginaries in a region-building context. Harrison (2013, 55), in particular, has called for attention to the processes through which particular socio-spatial relations and associated imaginaries become 'dominant, emergent or residual' in a given context. Within political geography, the related concept of metageographies has been employed to highlight the fallacies of state-centric thinking and methodological nationalism in mainstream accounts of international and supra-national relations (e.g., Taylor, 2000; Murphy, 2008). The term metageography originated within the field of area studies and Lewis and Wigen's (1997) critique of the taken-for-granted division of the world into continents. In this context, metageographies are defined as 'the set of spatial structures through which people order their knowledge of the world' (Lewis and Wigen, 1997, ix). The term metageographies implies critical reflection on particular sets of territorial boundaries and bounded spaces and their influence on how actors understand their world in spatial terms (Walsh, 2018, 178). The concepts of metageographies and spatial imaginaries taken together enable a nuanced, analytical understanding of territoriality, relevant to our discussion of Brexit and its implications for cross-border cooperation on the island of Ireland.

Territory is commonly understood to refer to politically bounded space, or in other words, areas of land or sea under the jurisdiction of a particular ruler or state. Territoriality, however, is an act of social construction. Borders and the means of control of geographical space are asserted through communicative practices and narrative claims as much as through border posts and the threat of force (Sack, 1986). Territoriality shapes our perceptions of the world – 'we act within territorial frames' (Faludi, 2018, 33). Following Stuart Elden, territoriality may be understood as a situated discursive and material practice of boundary-making and control with substantial variation across space and time (Elden, 2013). Thus, territoriality is mutable. Its situated socially constructed meanings can change over time. Placing the current dominance of nation-state territoriality in Europe within its historical context, Murphy (2008) emphasises its contingency and the need for the analysis of the rationalities underlying and implications of this particular form of socio-spatial organisation. Critical perspectives within regional studies concerned with the spatiality of regions have focussed on the degree to which regions may be considered as relational or territorial spaces and, more specifically, on how elements of relationality and territoriality intersect in the socio-political construction of individual regional spaces (e.g., Hudson, 2007; Morgan, 2007; Harrison, 2013). Political space is understood to be both 'bounded *and* porous' (Morgan, 2007, 33). This literature has been instrumental in moving beyond studies of formal regional structures to consideration of the ways in which informal and often ephemeral regional spaces are mobilised within particular policy contexts (e.g., Allmendinger and Haughton, 2009, Allmendinger *et al.*, 2015). Territoriality is increasingly understood in contingent, processual terms, defined, for example, by Paasi as a 'political, spatially selective strategy that can be exercised or not' (Paasi, 2009, 124). From this perspective, the mobilisation of specific discursive imaginings and the spatial frames (*spatial imaginaries*) are constitutive to the institutionalisation of geographical spaces as territory within specific socio-spatial contexts (cf. MacLeod and Jones, 2007).

The process of the UK leaving the EU is evidently underpinned by contested spatial imaginaries concerning the relationship between the UK and Europe (Sykes, 2018). The apparent desire of Brexit proponents to reclaim territorial sovereignty and control over the UK's borders, contrasts sharply with the contemporary reality of a British economy and society situated within a relational space of flows and interdependent connectivities. Within this context, the very concept of European space is at stake as the meanings attached to state and inter-state territoriality are struggled over and contested. This paper focuses specifically on the implications of underlying spatial imaginaries and metageographies for cross-border cooperation, territoriality and identity on the island of Ireland. It is argued that a nuanced understanding of territoriality, as outlined above, can aid understanding of the positioning of Northern Ireland and the 'island of Ireland' within the context of contemporary politically charged debates on Brexit.

Despite decades of European integration, nation-states have continued to represent the 'most important internal spaces' of the EU (Murphy, 2008, 9). He suggests that this persistent state-centric metageographical understanding of European space constrains the scope for multi-level and transboundary governance. Yet, at a fundamental level, the idea of Europe is predicated on the idea of a European space (Hayward, 2006). The recent history of European integration may in many respects be read in terms of a series of concerted, if partial and incomplete, efforts to frame European space in non-state-centric terms, to replace the map of a Europe of nation-states with that of Europe as a coherent, functional space where political borders are of secondary importance. The concept of a 'Europe of the regions' featured prominently in debates on European integration in the 1990s, signifying a shift towards sub-national regions as the core units of economic development and socio-economic governance in Europe. At a higher spatial scale, the Europe 2000+ report of the European Commission explicitly adopted functional rather than administrative regions as the focus for analysis. The rationale for this was articulated in terms of an explicit desire to reframe European space in functional, non-territorial terms: to 'encourage new ways of thinking about spatial prospects which is not limited by national boundaries' (Commission of the European Communities, 1994, 169). The report stressed that the particular functional regions identified were only one possible division of the European territory and were not intended to provide a basis for future policy action. The intention was not to create new territorial spaces or 'European super regions' but to identify functional linkages across territorial boundaries (Walsh, 2014). Subsequent European spatial planning policy initiatives have maintained this explicit focus on functional spaces.

The European Spatial Development Perspective (ESDP) (CEC, 1999) made strong reference to the concepts of urban-rural relations and polycentric urban regions, both of which emphasise functional relationships across space rather than territorial divisions. The Territorial Agenda of the European Union (TAEU) which superseded the ESDP has further emphasised the importance of 'connectivity' and urban-rural partnerships in overcoming the challenges associated with the concentration of economic development in the larger urban centres (TAEU 2020, 2011, Walsh 2012). The concept of territorial

cohesion has been employed to emphasise the coherence of the European territory and, furthermore, implies an implicit commitment to inter-regional solidarity across the EU. The emergence of macro-regional strategies for the Baltic Sea and Danube represent the latest iteration in this series of efforts to project European space beyond the borders of nation-states and, in both of these cases, beyond the boundaries of the EU to include regions of neighbouring non-EU states within these supranational functional spaces. Significantly, formal governance arrangements or competences are not envisaged for these macro-regional spaces. Rather they are expected to take the form of 'soft spaces' for cooperation, with at times, blurred or fuzzy boundaries (e.g., Allmendinger *et al.*, 2014; Sielker, 2016). Indeed, it has been argued that the future of European spatial planning and territorial cohesion policy will be in terms of soft processes and soft spaces at a variety of scales rather than formal instruments operating within formal jurisdictional boundaries (Faludi, 2018). For Faludi, the spatial imaginary or metageography underlying the ESDP and TAEU processes are, nevertheless state-centric terms: the EU as a 'club of self-contained nation-states' (Faludi, 2009, 35). Presently, the UK is seeking to leave this 'club' and is discovering to its cost that the interdependencies between Member States and across European space run deeper than perhaps was fully realised or acknowledged. A critical example of this is the European Union providing the implicit, taken-for-granted, yet essential context to the GFA as discussed below.

At a lower spatial scale, territorial cooperation initiatives such as INTERREG have given rise to a plethora of cross-border cooperation arrangements with varying degrees of institutionalisation (e.g. Fricke, 2015, O' Keeffe & Creamer, *this issue*). Cross-border regions have been referred to as 'micro-laboratories for European integration', indicating their assumed role in fostering inter-cultural understanding at the local and regional scales (Garcia-Álvarez and Trillo-Santamaría, 2013, 2). It is in border regions where the limits to bounded territoriality often become materially visible as the spaces of everyday life crisscross state borders and border-crossing moves from the realm of the extraordinary to that of the ordinary and mundane. Through cross-border governance arrangements, local and regional governance actors seek to work around the constraints of the formal bounded space geographies of nation-states. Through such processes and routinised practices, cross-border regions emerge as spaces of social, economic and cultural exchange, where actors seek to develop and foster functional relations across formal political boundaries. Recent contributions to the literature on cross-border regions in Europe have focussed more specifically on how regional identity is constructed and performed in cross-border spaces regional spaces (e.g., Prokkola *et al.*, 2015; Zimmerbauer, 2016).

### ***The Territorial Imagination of Brexit and the European Project***

Much of the rhetoric of Brexit has centred on the powerful imagery of 'taking back control' of the UK as a sovereign state and, in particular, of the movements of people, goods and services across the borders of the state territory. It is argued by Brexit supporters that the UK has progressively lost territorial sovereignty as a consequence of EU membership (see Sykes, 2018, 151). This Brexit metageography relies on a particular interpretation

of state territory as internally cohesive, bounded, container spaces where the relevant economic, societal and political boundaries coincide at the borders of the (nation-) state (see also Auer, 2017). As a consequence, the professed need to maintain the territorial and constitutional integrity of the UK has featured strongly in the opposition of the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) and the Conservative Party leadership to proposals requiring a differentiated treatment of Northern Ireland to safeguard the GFA and ensure the continuance of a soft border (see Hayward, 2018). The proposal to create a customs boundary 'in the Irish Sea', should alternative arrangements not be found, was interpreted as the imposition of a territorial border within the jurisdiction of a sovereign nation-state.

Speaking in Belfast in July 2018, Prime Minister Theresa May outlined her government's reasons for rejecting this proposal as follows: '...as a United Kingdom Government we could never accept that the way to prevent a hard border with Ireland is to create a new border within the United Kingdom... I do not think any member state would be willing to accept that, in order to leave the EU, a nation must accept such a threat to its constitutional integrity. We made the choice to join as nation states. We must be free as nation states to make the choice to leave' (Theresa May, Belfast, 20 July 2018). In February 2019, in a second Belfast speech, she restated her commitment 'to protect Northern Ireland's integral place in the UK' (Theresa May, Belfast, 5 February 2019). Her assertion of the UK's right to be 'free' to make the choice to leave as a nation-state and rhetorical framing of the UK as a 'nation' represents an appeal to Wilsonian ideals of the national self-determination. The rhetoric employed here, undoubtedly strongly influenced by the minority government's reliance on the DUP for support in the House of Commons, deliberately ignores the complexity and nuances of territorial politics and identity in Northern Ireland and the contemporary realities of the UK as a pluri-national union (Keating, 2018). The notion of the UK as a unitary state implicit in the political and ideological framing of Brexit is evidently outdated. Rising national sentiments and regional identities in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland since the 1960s and the lack of a common 'constitutional narrative' for the UK have contributed to increased and unresolved tensions between the devolved administrations and the Westminster government (e.g., Anderson, 1989; Mullen, 2019).

In practice, the process of devolution initiated in the 1990s together with the governance institutions introduced by the GFA in Northern Ireland have served to strengthen the degree of internal spatial differentiation within the UK. Furthermore, the sectarian polarisation and intransigence of Northern Irish politics has ensured a growing misalignment with the rest of the UK (and Ireland) on many issues of social policy (Fenton, 2018). The invisibility of and lack of consideration of Northern Ireland in the debates leading to the Brexit referendum in June 2016 only reinforced existing perceptions of Northern Ireland as a 'place apart' (De Mars *et al.*, 2018). It has been argued elsewhere that Brexit constitutes a particular form of English nationalism, albeit infused with a territorial imaginary centred on a revived British empire (O'Toole, 2018). In this context, the emotional and symbolic power of territory is mobilised as the embodiment of state and nation, eliding internal and external contradictions.

### ***The GFA and Emerging Spaces for Cross-Border Cooperation***

The 1998 Good Friday Agreement (GFA) introduced a new territorial settlement on the island of Ireland. Competing territorial claims were replaced through an agreement that the constitutional future of Northern Ireland could only be decided through a referendum of the citizens of both jurisdictions, North and South of the border. Through this process, the 'island of Ireland' emerged as a common, shared space, implicitly accommodating both Nationalist and Unionist identities. Irish Nationalists, North and South were required to accept the discrepancy between the actual boundaries of the Irish state and the idealistic notion of Ireland as an 'island nation' (Hayward, 2006). Significantly, the notion of a 'common space' owed much to the concept of 'European space'. Both terms rely on an alternate, perhaps aspirational, conceptualisation of territory as an 'area for common interests and cooperation... not delimited by state borders' (ibid., Bialasiewicz *et al.*, 2005; Faludi, 2018). Membership of the European Union provided the necessary context required for a reinterpretation of socio-political and territorial relations on the island of Ireland, as subsequently articulated through the Good Friday Agreement (GFA). This process has made it possible for fluid identities to emerge and to be acknowledged by governance authorities North and South. A key achievement of the peace process and GFA was the decoupling of national identity from claims to territorial sovereignty. In particular, opening up Irish citizenship rights to residents of Northern Ireland, represented a formal recognition of dual nationalities within Northern Ireland. The consociational power-sharing governance structures introduced through the GFA have, on the other hand, served to entrench polarised political identities as parties representing both nationalist and unionist communities are required to share power.

More substantially, common membership of the EU has ensured regulatory alignment between Ireland North and South, making possible the current permeability and (almost) invisibility of the Irish border and facilitating the emergence of a flourishing cross-border economy. The current territorial settlement, founded on the 1998 GFA, was made possible by the common membership of Ireland and the UK of the European Union. Until 1998, the spatial imaginary of the 'island of Ireland' was strongly associated with Irish official nationalism and, in particular, the nationalist territorial claim to an 'island nation' encompassing the whole territory of the island (Hayward, 2006). Indeed, prior to 1998, the constitution of the Republic of Ireland included reference to the 'national territory' as including the whole island of Ireland. This claim was neither acted upon nor accepted internationally but nevertheless, reflected the ambiguous and uneasy relationship between the two jurisdictions. It was removed as one element of the GFA (see O'Dowd and McCall, 2008; Cauvet, 2011). In its place, it was agreed that a politically united Ireland could only be achieved on the basis of majority support in both jurisdictions. In the early 1970s, as the accession of Ireland and the UK to the then European Economic Community was debated, Fianna Fail politician and future Taoiseach, Charles Haughey, stressed that, were the UK to join the EEC and Ireland to stay outside, then the Irish border would become 'permanently entrenched' as an 'international frontier not just between Ireland and the UK but also between Ireland and the EEC (Haughey, 7 May 1972, in Hayward,



2006). The accession of Ireland to the EEC was associated with the possible future reunification of the island. Through the peace process and GFA, the language of Irish nationalist discourse shifted from that of an exclusive, territorial claim to the concept of a 'common space' which could be shared by all people on the island (Hayward, 2006). The spatial imaginary of a common space opens up the possibility of approaching the territory of the island of Ireland in non-political terms, recognising aspects of a common cultural heritage and the potential benefits of a shared economic space. Paradoxically, it remains, however, a strongly political argument and one that is dependent on the assent of the Unionist community in Northern Ireland to some degree of North-South cooperation. The notion of common space also implicitly reflects that of 'European space' in the sense of a space for cooperation and mutual interests, irrespective of territorial borders. In line with expectations that the integration of Ireland with the European market through the EEC would lead to economic benefits, there was an assumption of a strong economic rationale for the development of an all-island economy (*ibid.*) Indeed, the approach to conflict resolution in Northern Ireland followed by the European Commission rested on an assumption that increased economic prosperity and interaction across the border would lead to a recognition of common interests and provide a means to overcoming the divisions of the past (Diez and Hayward, 2008).

The GFA itself is composed of three interrelated and interdependent strands, reflecting three distinct geographies at different scales. Strand I provides for devolved governance in Northern Ireland; Strand II concerns North-South relations and cross-border cooperation; and Strand III, British-Irish relations. In addition to the Northern Ireland Executive and Assembly (devolved government and parliament in Stormont), the GFA introduced a North-South Ministerial Council and a responsibility for fostering policy coordination and high-level civil service cooperation between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland and a British-Irish Council designed to provide a forum for cooperation between the UK and Irish governments in matters concerning Northern Ireland. The mutual interdependence of the three strands implies that should the functioning of any of them be undermined, it would have implications for the GFA as a whole. The EU, the UK and the Republic of Ireland recognised their obligations to safeguard the GFA at an early stage in the Brexit negotiations. A Briefing Paper published by the Centre for Cross Border Studies (CCBS) in June 2017, highlighted the implications of a potential risk to any one component of the Agreement: 'To reach a negotiating outcome that undermines any one of the strands of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement and the geographical spaces they represent would be to undermine the entire Agreement given that they are all interdependent' (CCBS, 2017, 5). In this context, the Irish and British governments have pivotal roles as co-guarantors of the GFA. The interdependence of the three strands goes to the heart of the construction of territoriality in and of Northern Ireland. The territorial settlement introduced by the GFA represents a deliberate departure away from a metageography of bounded container spaces towards a more complex relational understanding of territoriality in Northern Ireland. The GFA rests on a recognition that single-state solutions are inadequate, a fundamental principle underlying European

integration and the emergence of 'European space' (Hayward, 2017a). In this respect, the role of the EU as a facilitator of flexible, innovative forms of transboundary territoriality and shared sovereignty provided the essential context for the GFA.

In practice, however, the governance institutions introduced by the GFA have been suspended on multiple occasions and in many respects, the Northern Ireland conflict has been managed and 'contained' rather than resolved. Morrow (2017) argues that while the GFA was accommodating and flexible in its design, it did not require the opposing political leaders in Northern Ireland to change their long-term objectives, '... the signatories – especially those in Northern Ireland – could sign it while remaining single-mindedly committed to diametrically opposed views of both past and future'. In this context, reconciliation must be viewed as a 'compromise tactic' rather than an end in itself (ibid.). During a prolonged period of suspension of devolved governance arrangements between 2002 and 2007, the Ulster Unionist Party grew suspicious of continuing North-South cooperation activity, in their view in contravention of the GFA, 'Not only are the organisations formalised under the Belfast Agreement operating beyond a care and maintenance basis, but a substantial sub-strata of "North-Southerly" has evolved which is entirely independent and unreflective of the wishes of the people of Northern Ireland' (Jim Wilson MLA, in Slugger O' Toole September 2006). The UUP compiled a list of what it considered to be 'subversive activities' undertaken by cross-border bodies and policy actors. The above quote serves to illustrate the tentative and politically sensitive status of cross-border cooperation during this period. Recent media reports suggest that the DUP's rejection of the Withdrawal Agreement between the UK Government and the EU and the backstop proposals for Northern Ireland similarly reflect a fundamental opposition to any prospect of closer ties between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland (e.g., Beesley, 25 March 2019). At the same time, it is evident that the current reality of the border region is of an interconnected landscape where, for the most part, the state border is largely invisible (Carr, 2017). Furthermore, the economic life of the border region is dependent on an open border for its supply chains, workforce and logistics (Connelly, 2017).

### ***Spatial Strategies on the island of Ireland***

The GFA made specific reference to the formulation of a spatial strategy for Northern Ireland, which was subsequently prepared and published as the Regional Development Strategy (RDS) in 2001. The following year a National Spatial Strategy (NSS) for the Republic of Ireland was published and adopted as government policy (Department of the Environment and Local Government, 2002). Both strategies were influenced by developments in spatial policy at the European level and represent early examples of a new generation of post-ESDP national or regional level spatial planning frameworks (see Murray, 2004; Blair *et al.*, 2007; Walsh, 2009). As such, these strategies are characterised by a high level of policy ambition, relating not only to concerns traditionally ascribed to the formal planning system but also seeking to steer the spatial impacts and direction of government policy more generally. As such they are situated within the wider

context of 'making European space' through the preparation of future-oriented spatial visions with aspirational, strategic ambition. Murray (2004) has highlighted the role of the Northern Ireland Regional Development Strategy as part of a larger process of reconfiguring policy discourses and reference frameworks in Northern Ireland, following the peace process and the GFA. He suggests that the ESDP provided an imperative to rethink spatial imaginaries: 'to imagine possibilities which transcend the border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland' (ibid., 227). The RDS provided an opportunity to tentatively consider the spatial positioning of Northern Ireland within the context of the island of Ireland in a way that was not possible before. The preparation of the RDS and NSS in parallel provided an element of 'political cover' for officials from the Department of Regional Development in Northern Ireland to work with their counterparts in the Department of Environment and Local Government in a way that otherwise would not have been possible (Peel and Lloyd, 2015; Walsh, 2015).

Both strategies make explicit reference to opportunities for cross-border cooperation, particularly at the sub-regional level. This is particularly evident in the case of the designation of urban centres as 'Gateways' in both strategies. Two linked Gateways have emerged through this process: Londonderry/Letterkenny in the Northwest and Newry/Dundalk in the East. The explicit identification of cross-border linkages at the time of the preparation of the NSS was, however, viewed to be politically sensitive and a cautious approach was adopted which was subsequently built on over time. Although the need for an 'island of Ireland' dimension was officially recognised and included within the terms of reference for the preparation of the RDS, the idea of 'spatial planning for the island of Ireland' was considered a 'highly political argument' (research interview cited in Walsh, 2015). The International Centre for Local and Regional Development (ICLRD) established as an applied research partnership with partners in RoI, NI and the US has played an instrumental role in setting out the strategic potential of the NSS and RDS to provide a framework for cross-border cooperation in spatial planning and regional development (see also Walsh and Kitchin, 2012). A former director of ICLRd understood the gap the organisation sought to fill in the following terms: 'There is less understanding on what happens after the... (GFA)... how local regional development, spatial planning, cooperation among local authorities or cooperation among central government authorities can begin to embed the peace process' (cited in Walsh, 2015). Spatial planning and regional development were viewed as a means to foster cooperation among governance actors at local and regional/national scales of government and of realising the benefits of the peace process. As an independent academic partnership, ICLRd was in a position to initiate and facilitate processes which would not have been possible within the formal avenues of North-South cooperation. This role has been described in terms of 'nudging people towards an understanding why it makes sense for them to work together' (interview cited in Walsh, 2015). One of the earliest outputs of this work was the preparation of a scoping study, setting out the basis for a framework for inter-jurisdictional cooperation in spatial planning, building on the NSS and RDS (ICLRd, 2006). The subsequent publication of the 'Framework for Co-operation' by the respective

government departments was, however, delayed due to political sensitivities and did not appear until 2013 (Department of Regional Development (Northern Ireland) and Department of Environment, Community and Local Government (Republic of Ireland), 2013). The Framework for Co-operation provides an explicit endorsement of, and sets out the rationale for, inter-jurisdictional and cross-border approaches to spatial planning at all scales from the island of Ireland to local area planning. In many respects, it places cooperation that was taking place already on a more formal footing, making it less reliant on personal contacts and ad hoc communication among a small group of senior officials in both departments.

The work of ICLRD and the All-Island Research Observatory (AIRO) at Maynooth University have facilitated an explicit focus on the spaces of cross-border cooperation, moving beyond relatively abstract notions of North-South, and an 'all-island economy' to a consideration of the functional geographies of socio-spatial relations on the ground (see also Gleeson *et al.*, 2008; Walsh and Kitchin, 2012; Rafferty and Blair, this issue). A former member of the ICLRD described this process as follows: 'You began to talk about the geography of the space of the island rather than necessarily the political nature of cooperation. That was very important. When you start to say the island of Ireland... you are talking about functional territories' (Interview D1 cited in Walsh, 2015). At the local scale, ICLRD has been instrumental in the development of strategic cooperation initiatives between the border towns of Newry and Dundalk (ICLRD, 2010), in the Northwest focussed on the city of Derry/Londonderry, neighbouring Letterkenny and their cross-border regional hinterland, and in the central border region (e.g., Irish Central Border Area Network, 2013). However, each of these initiatives have been tentative, reliant on short-term, project-based funding, often derived from EU INTERREG funding programmes and dependent on an alignment of local and regional interests within a broader political and institutional context, supportive of cross-border cooperation. A cross-border, spatial perspective on the border region has also served to highlight the peripherality of this region within the island of Ireland context. The central border region, in particular, is characterised by a poorly developed settlement structure and substantial infrastructural deficits in terms of transportation, communication and education infrastructures (ICBAN, 2013; Hayward, 2017b). Indeed, a recent study has indicated that cooperation between Newry and Dundalk, initiated in 2011, had lost momentum within a six-year period (Christinck, 2017). Perhaps more significantly, it is evident that the Memorandum of Understanding between the local authorities has had limited impact beyond the work of the local authorities themselves and has not filtered down to the level of community-based cooperation projects (*ibid*). Significantly the National Planning Framework for the Republic of Ireland, adopted by the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government (DHPLG) in May 2018 to replace the National Spatial Strategy makes substantial reference to the island of Ireland and cross-border context. The strategic document reaffirms a commitment to an island of Ireland perspective and a shared approach to meeting common challenges: 'By 2040, the island we share will be home to around 8 million people. Notwithstanding the context of Brexit, planning for

nearly 1.4 million extra people, their homes and places of work and the infrastructure required to support this growth, while at the same time ensuring good outcomes in terms of physical and community development and environmental quality, poses shared challenges...’ (DHPLG, 2018, 108). Specific reference is also made to the Dublin-Belfast Economic Corridor, Northwest Strategic Growth Partnership and cross-border local initiatives as areas of practical cooperation requiring a joint and collaborative approach to spatial planning and regional development (ibid, 108-110). Significantly, one of a series of regional public consultation events took place in Derry/Londonderry in March 2017, facilitated by ICLRD and the University of Ulster (ICLRD.org, 2017). This event focussed specifically on the cross-border and island of Ireland dimension of the NPF and reflected a strong commitment to continued cooperation in the spatial policy field, building on the Framework for Cooperation published in 2013.

### ***Discussion and Conclusions***

In the period since the signing of the GFA, a multitude of cross-border initiatives have developed within the public, private and community sectors on the island of Ireland (InterTrade Ireland, 2018, Centre for Cross Border Studies, 2019). This paper has focussed on one particular aspect— cooperation among central government departments and local authorities within the field of spatial planning and regional development. These initiatives show that it has been possible to begin to shift the policy vocabulary towards a consideration of cross-border geographies and functional spaces. It is evidently a gradual and tentative process, taking place in a sense, below the radar in a highly politically sensitive context. The ‘island of Ireland’ has emerged as an alternative spatial imaginary, an informal, soft space for cooperation, operating in the shadow of territory. In practice, multiple soft spaces with overlapping and, at times, blurred or fuzzy boundaries have emerged within the cross-border region with distinct institutional dynamics evident in the Northwest, central border region and eastern border region contexts (Walsh, 2015). Moving beyond the fixed, rigid boundaries and formal procedures of territorial relations to work with soft, functional spaces has served to widen the perspectives and broaden the geographical horizons of local authorities, North and South. In this sense, the cross-border region may both be viewed as a liminal boundary or in-between space, emergent of informal practices of cooperation and daily patterns of activity within a shared space. The legacy of violent conflict nevertheless ensures that the territorial border continues to cast a long shadow. As a relatively sparsely populated peripheral space, the border region is vulnerable to external political developments and in particular those which call into question cross-border relations at local, regional or national scales. Due to the legacy of the past, this vulnerability is not simply economic. It runs deeper at an emotional and psychological level (Hayward, 2017b). The emergence of a new spatial vocabulary makes it possible for local and regional governance actors to recalibrate investment priorities and development objectives within a broader cross-border context. However, the experiences of the last twenty years have served to highlight the real need for substantial central

government investment in the border region, as a necessary step to realising the potential benefits of an island of Ireland economy.

It is within this context that the pending exit of the UK from the EU constitutes a fundamental risk to cross-border cooperation on the island of Ireland. Whereas the Northern Irish backstop proposals if implemented would go some way towards mitigating the economic impacts specific to cross-border trade, the impacts of Brexit for the island of Ireland and in particular, the border region, must be seen from a broader perspective. The Brexit narrative of 'taking back control' within territorial borders runs counter to the spatial imaginary of the GFA that has enabled the emergence of nuanced both/and rather than either/or approaches to the Northern Irish question. From this perspective, Brexit risks a return to zero-sum territorialism, whereby the North-South dimension of cooperation once again becomes a highly politicised argument within diametrically opposed narratives of future relations in Northern Ireland. The destabilisation of the GFA territorial settlement risks a return to back-to-back thinking within the border region, particularly where the 'border in the minds' becomes hardened and mutual trust is replaced by uncertainty, distrust and reluctance to commit in the absence of a conducive, facilitatory framework at central government levels (Hayward, 2017b).

Regardless of the outcome of the Brexit negotiations, it is imperative that policy-makers, practitioners and stakeholders in spatial planning and regional development continue to work from an 'island of Ireland' perspective to ensure the endurance of the soft spaces of cooperation tentatively established in the post-1998 period, the potential of which have to date not been fully realised. Although Brexit can be read as a retreat to container-space territorial thinking at a political level within both Westminster and Northern Ireland, the informal spaces and relational geographies of cross-border cooperation can continue to foster alternative, inclusive and collaborative spatial imaginaries. However, this will require commitment of resources in terms of capital infrastructure, local authority staffing and expertise as well as proactive efforts to ensure the future sustainability of established practices of cross-border cooperation.

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