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A Hard or a Soft Border? An Update on the "Two Irelands" After Brexit

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Abstract

Relying on the speeches and remarks of Theresa May, Boris Johnson and Rishi Sunak, the paper is an analysis of how these three British Prime Ministers have each dealt with the 'eternal Irish question', looking first at the relation between the Good Friday Agreement and Brexit and then at the reasons why the so-called Irish backstop was regarded as so controversial that it delayed Brexit. The corpora we have relied on are evidence of the fear that, had the backstop been triggered, it would have been impossible to remove. This was so despite the many reassurances of Theresa May, who consistently reiterated that the backstop was temporary and that it was neither a trap nor a threat, but only a last resort to deliver Brexit with a deal, to avoid "a one-way ticket with no clear destination". Leaving without a deal, instead, was not such a huge dilemma for most Leavers, who kept repeating that "no deal is better than the rotten deal we've got now".

When Boris Johnson was forced to stand down in June 2022, Rishi Sunak took to heart the Irish border issue, finally delivering the Windsor Framework in February 2023, thus bringing peace in general, but mostly peace of mind, preserving not only economics but also identity and dignity, placing the Northern Irish people on equal footing with the rest of the UK.

Keywords: Ireland, Backstop, Border, Brexit, Agreement, EU

1. Introduction

When the UK voted to leave the European Union in June 2016, Northern Ireland disagreed, voting to remain in the EU by a majority of 56% to 44%. Sinn Féin (Note 1) were opposed to Northern Ireland leaving the European Union along with the rest of the United Kingdom, and suggested a referendum on the reunification of Ireland immediately after the 2016 Brexit results were announced, a stance reiterated later as a way of resolving the border issues

created by Brexit.

Adamant that the UK is "stronger in Europe", metropolitan London also proved a fervent Remainer, with a majority of 60% to 40%, as was Scotland, with a majority of 62% to 38%. Thus, it seems that the departure of the UK from the EU was misnamed (Maccaferri, 2019). Engxit would have been more appropriate, given that it was England that voted to leave the EU, not all the United Kingdom. Brexit is equated with division, contention and discord (Charteris-Black, 2019). The outcome of the referendum shocked the world, and even though the UK had been talking about leaving the club since 1975 (Note 2), it was generally assumed that they would never make good on the chatter.

The split was tragic, and saw the country divided in opinion by age, class and geography, causing huge trouble at home and abroad. Even though the parliamentary majority won by Boris Johnson gave the impression of a countrywide consensus for the 'divorce' (Milizia and Spinzi, 2020), the Kingdom was left in pieces. It is true that Boris Johnson succeeded where Theresa May had failed, i.e., strengthening the conservatives in a national election and carrying the UK out of the EU on January 31, 2020. He delivered on his promise to "get Brexit done", but he did not manage to reach a deal. Conversely, Theresa May's government, whose main concern was to safeguard the United Kingdom's unity, had been unable to reach a withdrawal agreement acceptable to the Conservative Party as a whole. The key reason why an agreement was never reached on her watch was the thorny issue of the Irish border, often referred to as the 'Irish backstop'. Boris Johnson had downplayed the gamut of regional views across England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, thus silencing Scotland and Northern Ireland, where Remain was by far the preferred choice (Zappettini and Krzyżanowski, 2019). He wanted to leave the EU at any cost, "no ifs no buts" "come what may", "do or die", even at the cost of having a "disunited Kingdom" torn apart by divorces from Northern Ireland (uniting the island under Dublin) and Scotland. It seems that the Irish border was not a huge concern for Boris Johnson, who was willing to leave the Kingdom in pieces. Indeed, the Brexit Secretary, David Davis, did not the take the Irish issue particularly seriously, either (O'Rourke, 2019).

In this paper we rely on a spoken corpus including the speeches delivered by Theresa May (2016-2019), Boris Johnson (2019-2022), and Rishi Sunak (2022-2023). Rishi Sunak, in particular, attempting to avoid identification checks taking place at the sensitive land border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland (Note 3), worked hard on the issue. He was hoping to end years of dispute and division by beginning a new chapter in the relationship in an attempt to save the Union and the special bonds among England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

The paper is structured as follows: after this introduction, the second section provides a brief historic overview of the two countries on the one island, looking at both the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland, where there is no physical border, despite their status as separate political entities. Section 3 is an investigation of the Irish border, which the cakiest British wanted both closed but somewhat open, in an arrogant attempt of "combining the best of both worlds". Sections 4 and 5 analyze the language of the three Prime Ministers who have

been dealing with the Irish issue in relation to Brexit, looking first at the Good Friday Agreement that brought peace to the country, and then at the reasons why the 'backstop' proposed by Theresa May contributed to delaying Brexit, thus becoming the most complicated feature of Britain's negotiations with the European Union. Section 6 draws some conclusions which are, given the topicality of the issue, somewhat provisional.

2. Ireland: Two Separate Countries on the One Island

It does not fall within the scope of this paper to canvass the long and convoluted history of Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, but a brief overview of recent events is in order. After being ruled for over a century from London by the British, Ireland achieved independence from the United Kingdom in 1922. In the 1916 Easter Rising in Dublin, Irish republicans launched an armed insurrection against British rule in Ireland with the aim of establishing an independent Irish Republic. The First World War and the Easter Rising exacerbated the differences between the largely Unionist north and the Catholic south. Needless to say, while Britain was fighting World War I, the Protestant north perceived the rebellion as a profound act of betrayal against Great Britain in its time of desperate need. At that point, reconciliation between north and south had become virtually impossible, and partition transpired in the immediate aftermath of the war. Even though Britain attempted to create two separate Home Rule territories for the north and the south, Irish nationalists had already unilaterally created an independent Ireland. In December 1921, the British reconciled themselves to the nationalists' demands, thus partitioning Northern Ireland from the rest of Ireland for good. As Lynch (1970) put it:

Partition is more than just a border, more than just an artificially-made and artificially-maintained barrier, more than just an economically-disruptive division, more than just a culturally-divisive influence, more than just an historical affront.

Prior to partition, the island of Ireland was a single economic, social, cultural and historical unit; partition was regarded as the artificial division of a natural entity, with the Irish border representing a political travesty for Irish official nationalism (Hayward, 2004).

The Anglo-Irish Treaty radically redrew the map of the United Kingdom, and for the first time an international border was drawn between Northern Ireland and the south. The shape of the border is highly unusual. The calculation as to where the Northern Irish border was drawn was a crude and simple means of trying to keep as many Protestants as possible in the north and as few Protestants as possible in the south. Needless to say, partition satisfied neither Protestants nor Catholics. Catholics in the north were put in an especially difficult position, feeling trapped in a state they did not want. More than 400,000 Catholics were 'trapped' on the wrong side of the border. In the north, anti-Catholic discrimination became rife, and the plight of the Catholics triggered decades of bloodshed, giving rise to a 'tit-for-tat' campaign of violence. Over the thirty years of 'The Troubles', more than 3,700 people were killed and many more were injured, most of them civilians. During The Troubles, a new lexicon of horror was generated: collusion, internment, kneecappings, hunger strikes, Bloody Sunday, the Disappeared.

In 1972, British soldiers opened fire on Catholic protesters, killing 14 and injuring at least 15. This event radicalized angry Catholics and became known as Bloody Sunday (Note 4). In 1998, there was a breakthrough and, in an attempt to promote peace, global leaders decided "to take a collective breath and begin to blow away the cobwebs of the past". The British and the Irish governments signed a landmark deal, the Good Friday Agreement, removing the hard border between the two countries, stating that if majorities in both north and south wanted to reunite Ireland, they could. If a reunification were to happen, the achievement of unity by peaceful means had to include the consent of Northern Ireland because, as Irish Taoiseach Albert Reynolds rationalized, "we have no interest in creating by force a united but unstable Ireland…. Unless and until we can persuade a majority of the people of Northern Ireland to join with us, there will not be a united Ireland" (Hayward, 2004).

Today, there are 32 counties in the island of Ireland; six of them are Northern Ireland counties (Note 5), and 26 are in the Republic of Ireland (Note 6) (see Figure 1).

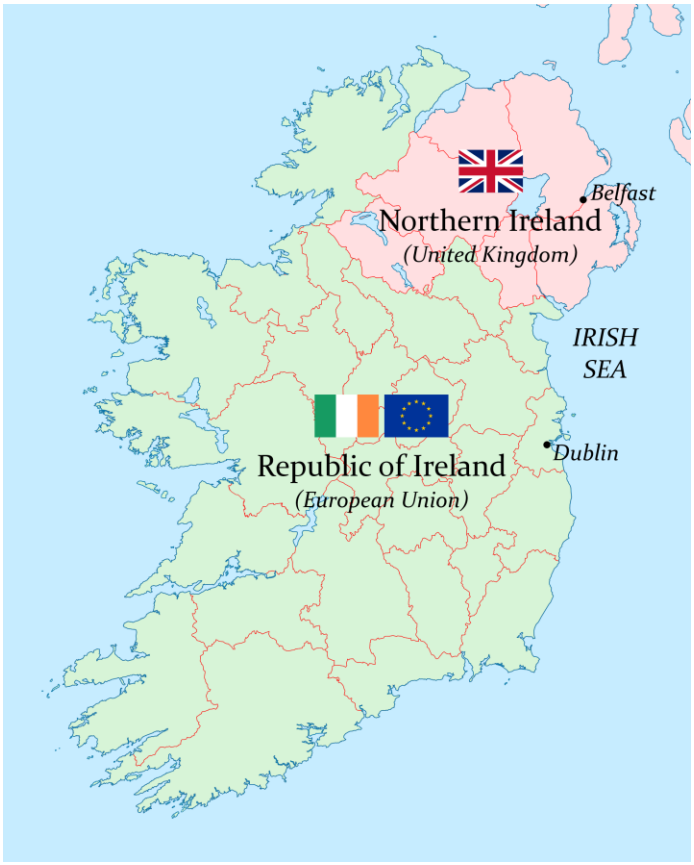

Figure 1. Ireland and Northern Ireland

At the time of writing, the island of Ireland has a population of approximately 7 million people, with 1,903,100 in Northern Ireland, and 5,123,536 in the Republic of Ireland. Their capital cities, Belfast and Dublin, are, unsurprisingly, the most highly populated areas, with 643,000 inhabitants and 1.5 million inhabitants, respectively. In 1973 the Republic of Ireland, or Eire, together with the UK and Denmark, joined what was then called the European

Economic Community (EEC) and is still part of the EU today. Northern Ireland is, of course, no longer in the EU, as we shall explore in this study. As mentioned above, there is no physical border between the north and the south, despite their status as separate entities, and we can safely say that this is one of the world's most curious border situations. It is a matter of great political and diplomatic sensitivity, with the 310-mile frontier representing the only land border between the UK and the EU. The 500 km-long Irish border is famously irrational, which makes sense since it was never designed to be an international frontier in the first place. Rather than following a major river, the border runs through Carlingford Lock on the east coast to Lough Foyle in the west, crossing fields and farmlands, rivers and mountains, forests, lakes, towns and villages. As it meanders across the Irish countryside, it divides communities that naturally belong together, on occasion bisecting individual farms or even buildings. There are more border crossings between Northern Ireland and Ireland than there are between the European Union and all the countries to its east (O'Rourke, 2019).

As to the monetary unit, obviously enough, Ireland uses the European single currency, i.e., the euro (EUR), adopted on January 1, 1999 (Note 7), and Northern Ireland, just like the rest of the UK, uses the pound sterling (GBP), as British leaders have always argued that "we will never join the euro and give up the pound", because it is not in their national interest (Milizia, 2014). Furthermore, the 26 counties of the Republic of Ireland are a parliamentary constitutional republic, the current President being Michael D. Higgins, whereas Northern Ireland has had a devolved government within the United Kingdom since 1998, led by the Northern Ireland Assembly. The Republic of Ireland has two official languages, Irish and English (Note 8). In Northern Ireland, English was the only official language until June 2022, when the *Identity and Language Bill* was passed, giving the Irish language official status in Northern Ireland so that Irish can now be used in courts.

3. An Irish Border That Is Both Closed But Somehow Open?

Leavers, also referred to as Brexiteers, often have been accused of wanting "to have their cake and eat it too" (Milizia, 2023), meaning that, in voting to leave the EU, they wanted to get the best of both worlds: departure from the EU but continued membership in programmes like Galileo and Erasmus, access to the single market without its most important conditions, abidance by three of the four freedoms, and an Irish border that is closed but somehow open. In other words, Leavers wanted to choose only pleasurable actions while avoiding the painful ones (Charteris-Black, 2019). It cannot be denied that Leavers were not realistic about the Irish border. They underestimated the possibility that Brexit could have reintroduced conflict around what had become an invisible and mostly insignificant border, thus reversing the hard-fought peace reached in this turbulent region (O'Neill, 2018). This is why Brexit has been defined by many as a rejection of the Good Friday Agreement (Milizia, 2023). The accord was signed in 1998 and managed to end The Troubles, the thirty-year period of sectarian violence that tormented the region. If the Agreement did not solve the geopolitical dispute at the heart of the conflict in Northern Ireland – i.e., whether Northern Ireland be part of the UK or the Republic of Ireland – it did allow people in Northern Ireland to identify themselves and be accepted as Irish, British, or both, and to hold a passport from either or both countries. In a statement that would have been regarded as fairly controversial prior to

the Agreement, Brian Cowen, the Minister for Foreign Affairs, acknowledged equal weight of the Britishness and Irishness of Northern Ireland (Hayward, 2004):

It is that fact of deep and enduring difference which makes Northern Ireland unique. It is neither wholly British in identity, nor wholly Irish, but both British and Irish. To seek to eliminate all traces of Britishness would be as absurd as to seek to eliminate all traces of Irishness.

Under the Good Friday Agreement, people and goods could cross the border without stopping (Milizia, 2020). However, with Brexit, i.e., a hard north-south customs control, the core elements of the Agreement have been challenged. The peace process was able to abolish all visible signs of the border, but with Northern Ireland leaving the EU along with Britain, the fear arose that violence – and the border – could return. The lack of any workable solution to this conundrum led to the insertion of the so-called 'backstop' into the 2020 Withdrawal Agreement. Among the many metaphors used in Brexit parlance to simplify complex political concepts, 'backstop' was not an easy one to understand and, while intelligible to politicians, it was not so for the general public. A 'backstop' is a thing that is placed at the rear of something else to form a barrier behind it. It served as a crucial concept in the debates between the UK and the EU governments because both sides wanted to avoid imposing an actual border between Northern Ireland and Ireland, i.e., customs posts with systematic checking of vehicles and people crossing between the north and south of the island. The metaphor of the 'backstop', as well as the metaphors of the 'cliff edge' (Note 9), the 'red lines' (Note 10) and the 'emergency brake' (Note 11), among many others, became shorthand terms for complex political positions. The term 'backstop' became shorthand for the requirement that the UK remain within a Customs Union until a solution was found to the Irish border question (Charteris-Black, 2019). What politicians meant when they spoke of a 'backstop' was "a position of last resort", designed to ensure that there would be no hard border between the UK and Ireland, thus no check along the Irish border as set out in the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement. Opposition to the backstop was a key factor leading to the resignation of Prime Minister Theresa May.

4. Brexit and the Good Friday Agreement

The Good Friday Agreement was signed in Belfast in April 1998. As shown in Figure 2, British Prime Ministers refer to it by both names: the name of the day on which it was signed, i.e., Good Friday, or often the name of the city where it was signed, Belfast. Let us now see how the three Prime Ministers object of our study have been talking about this peace agreement over the last eight years.

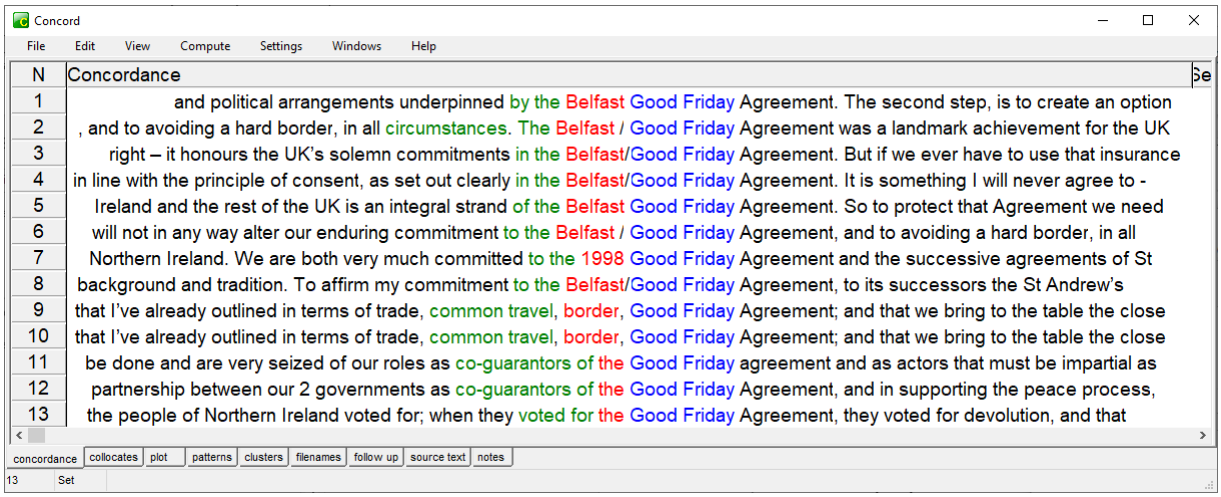

Figure 2a. Belfast/Good Friday Agreement in Theresa May's corpus

As we can see in Theresa May's corpus (Figure 2a), the Good Friday Agreement was a landmark achievement for the UK government, the Irish government, and the political parties in Northern Ireland, bringing peace to the country after many years of tragedy, adamant that the security and well-being of the people of Northern Ireland is also the security and well-being of the UK. Theresa May refers to the backstop as an insurance policy to guarantee that there will never be a hard border in Northern Ireland, thus honoring the UK's solemn commitments in the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement. Creating any form of customs border between Northern Ireland and the rest of the UK would not respect Northern Ireland's status as an integral part of the United Kingdom, in line with the principle of consent, as set out clearly in the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement. Hence, to protect the Agreement, preserving the totality of relationships it sets forth is a requirement. Nothing agreed to with the EU under Article 50 should risk a return to a hard border or threaten the delicate constitutional and political arrangements specified by the Belfast Good Friday Agreement.

At a meeting held in July 2016 with Irish Taoiseach Enda Kenny, Theresa May, arguing that in recent years the relationship between the two countries had gone from strength to strength, underlines her personal commitment to nurturing this deep and important relationship, trying to make a success of Brexit and taking the relationship forwards, not backwards. As "co-guarantors" of the Good Friday Agreement, the British and the Irish Prime Ministers agreed that they wanted to maintain the closest possible economic relationship in the future, as we see in the words of Enda Kenny:

And we did repeat and reiterate the importance of the partnership between our 2 governments as co-guarantors of the Good Friday Agreement, and in supporting the peace process, and in contributing to stability and continued progress in Northern Ireland. We are both very much committed to the 1998 Good Friday Agreement and the successive agreements of St Andrews and Fresh Start, and we will continue to work for a prosperous and peaceful Northern Ireland in the time ahead. [...] It's not an outcome that we wanted in Ireland, but we respect the decision of the UK electorate, and we now must work out the consequences of that. So, we

intend to work with the Prime Minister, and all our partners in the EU and in the Northern Ireland Executive, to make sure that we can achieve the best outcome in the forthcoming negotiations.

The following year, the words of the (then) new Irish Taoiseach, Leo Varadkar, in his first visit "overseas" – i.e., the UK – did not differ much from those of his predecessor, especially when he speaks of Ireland and the UK as "co-guarantors" of the Good Friday Agreement. Reiterating the fact that Ireland was saddened that the United Kingdom had decided to leave the European Union, Leo Varadkar argues that one of the most important points to focus on during the negotiations is to preserve the Common Travel Area, securing the British and Irish people's freedom to travel, live, work, study, reside, access healthcare, pensions and housing in each other's countries "as though we were citizens of both". In attempting to minimize disruptions to trade between the two countries (Note 12), he says that both countries want to ensure that while there may be a political border, there should not be an economic border, and that any border that does exist should be invisible. Reminding and echoing the words of Winston Churchill, who said that the two countries should walk together in mutual comprehension and forgiveness, Varadkar adds that they should go one step further by walking together in mutual comprehension and understanding, united in their shared ambition to find the best possible solutions to all of the many changes.

Theresa May, for her part, in attempting to prove that Britain would retain many of the benefits that it had enjoyed as an EU member, consistently reiterated (almost like a nervous tic) that "we are leaving the European Union but we're not leaving Europe" (Milizia, 2020). She insisted that the UK would remain a committed partner and ally of Ireland and of European friends across the continent, a statement that, unsurprisingly, would be reiterated also by her successor.

Let us now look at how Boris Johnson and his party deal with the Peace Agreement (Figure 2b).

Figure 2b. Belfast/Good Friday Agreement in Boris Johnson's corpus

The Belfast/Good Friday Agreement, despite being an agreement that dates back to 1998, is frequently mentioned by the Prime Ministers in this study, being strictly connected with the backstop proposed by Theresa May. In Boris Johnson's corpus, the Good Friday Agreement is always mentioned to indicate that "the backstop has to go", suggesting that it is inconsistent with the agreement it claims to protect.

In the attempt to find a "landing zone" in a creative and flexible way, Lord Trimble, one of the architects of peace in Northern Ireland who won the 1998 Nobel Peace Prize for the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement, said that "the backstop is not in keeping with the spirit and the letter of the Belfast Agreement", and "it is riding roughshod over our agreement".

One of Boris Johnson's early moves when he took over for Theresa May was to remove the backstop provision, which proved to be the most contentious part of the Brexit deal May negotiated with the EU. Johnson was adamant that the UK did not want to jeopardize the achievements of the Northern Irish peace process, making sure that "there is free movement north-south and free movement east-west". The manifesto on which his government was elected promised business in Northern Ireland, "unfettered access to the rest of the UK", maintaining and strengthening the integrity and smooth operation of the internal market, and preserving an open border with Ireland with the express and paramount aim of protecting the Belfast Good Friday agreement and the peace process.

Interestingly, in terms of frequency, Rishi Sunak, who was sworn in in October 2022, when the UK had already left the EU, spoke about the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement as often as his two predecessors, as we can see in Figure 2c.

Figure 2c. Belfast/Good Friday Agreement in Rishi Sunak's corpus

In announcing the Windsor Framework, signed in February 2023 to replace the Northern Ireland Protocol, Rishi Sunak said that the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement had endured because at its heart is respect for the aspirations and identities of all communities. The new framework, he said, is about preserving the delicate balance inherent in the Belfast

Agreement, charting a new way forward for the people of Northern Ireland, avoiding a hard border with Ireland and indeed any sense of a border in the Irish Sea. The NI Protocol had undermined that balance, causing the institutions of that agreement to collapse, mainly because it treated goods moving from Great Britain to Northern Ireland as if they were crossing an international customs border. This would have disrupted family life and, consequently, the family of nations. Instead, the Windsor Framework is a permanent solution that brings peace in general, but mostly peace of mind, preserving not only economics but also identity and dignity. Challenging the conventional narrative that dignity is not an important or pervasive feature of the law of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, and that dignity is related to the idea of the equal worth of each human being who is due respect as an integrated, multidimensional whole (Bedford, 2019), the Windsor Framework places Northern Irish people on equal footing with the rest of the UK with respect to tax, trade, and the availability of goods and medicines, thus restoring dignity in NI (Note 13), as Rishi Sunak highlights:

Imagine someone suffering with cancer in Belfast, seeing potentially lifechanging new drug available everywhere else in the UK but unable to access it at home. [...] Now, the same packs, with the same labels, will be available in every pharmacy and hospital in the United Kingdom. [...] dual regulation means that Northern Ireland can still trade with both the UK and EU markets.

It can safely be said that the Windsor Framework marks a turning point for the people of Northern Ireland who were given, with the Good Friday Agreement, the possibility to choose whether they wanted to identify as Irish, British, or both, and to hold a passport from either or both countries. The Windsor Framework preserves all this, going even further: scrapping 1700 pages of EU law – i.e., the amount of EU law that applies in NI is less than 3%. The Stormont Brake (line 10, Figure 2c) gives the institutions of the Good Friday Agreement a powerful new safeguard: not only does it give the people of Northern Ireland a say over new EU laws, but they can also block them, just like the ‘petition of concern’ mechanism in the Good Friday Agreement.

5. Brexit and the Backstop

It is worth recalling that the Brexit referendum originated in the (unsuccessful) attempt by David Cameron to heal the deep divisions within the Conservative Party regarding EU membership (Marra and Villafranca, 2019). When, in the Bloomberg speech (Wodak, 2016) of January 23, 2013, he promised the British people an in/out referendum, Nick Clegg, then Deputy Prime Minister, warned David Cameron that he was playing with fire, and “if we go down this track, it is Britain that will get burned” (Milizia and Spinzi, 2020).

Theresa May was serving as Home Secretary under David Cameron’s government and, like the Prime Minister, she was pro-Europe, willing to fight “with all her heart and soul” to stay in the Union. Yet, when David Cameron announced in his June 24 resignation speech after the referendum outcome that he could no longer “steady the ship over the coming weeks and months” (Spinzi and Manca, 2017), Theresa May took over for him, despite being part of the Remain camp in the run-up to the referendum. It can safely be said that she did not “win the

hearts and minds of voters", as it were, and saw more resignations of key ministers than Tony Blair and Margaret Thatcher had in ten years (Milizia, 2023). Driven onto the ropes by her own party and facing a risk that the agreement would be rejected, she opted to postpone the vote in the House of Commons until mid-January 2019, but had to undergo the humiliation of a vote of no confidence by Conservatives MPs (Marra and Villafranca, 2019). This resulted in a historic loss – 432 against versus 2020 for – followed by two further lost votes in March of the same year (Meyenburg, 2022). Her deep desire was to avoid a hard Brexit, i.e., leaving the single market and the custom union, which would cause chaos at ports, airports, and other border crossings, in that "all previous arrangements would become null and void" (Milizia, 2020). Theresa May's biggest worry was that exiting from the EU without an agreement, and therefore with no transition period, would be like falling off a "cliff edge" into the unknown. This is the reason why she thought the backstop would be the best solution to avoid a hard border, creating instead a soft border that would preserve the free flow of goods and people. This is exactly the reason why she put forward three withdrawal agreements, all of which were rejected by the House of Commons. The existence of the backstop was the core reason why Parliament refused to accept her agreements, arguing that the UK was being locked into a customs arrangement in which they would have no voice, thus remaining in a position of 'vassalage', in permanent customs and regulatory alignment with the EU and with no certainty that the conditions for lifting the backstop might ever be met (Milanese, 2019). The backstop would have required keeping Northern Ireland in some aspects of the single market until an alternative arrangement could be reached between the EU and the UK. The proposal also provided for the UK as a whole to have a common customs territory with the EU until a solution could be reached to avoid the need for customs controls within the UK., i.e., between Northern Ireland and Great Britain. The Irish government and Northern Irish nationalists (favouring a united Ireland) supported the Protocol, whereas Unionists (favouring the existing United Kingdom) opposed it. In June 2019, Theresa May conceded that "it is now clear to me that it is in the best interests of the country for a new prime minister to lead that effort".

Let us now look at her corpus (Figure 3) and see why she describes the backstop as a necessary guarantee for the people of Northern Ireland, as she firmly believed that could be the best way to provide a temporary arrangement ensuring there would be no return to a hard border between Northern Ireland and Ireland (line 88).

Interestingly, but not surprisingly, the word 'backstop' appears frequently in Theresa May's corpus, occurring on 141 occasions, as we can see in Figure 3, occurring instead only on 20 occasions in Boris Johnson's data, and never in Rishi Sunak's.

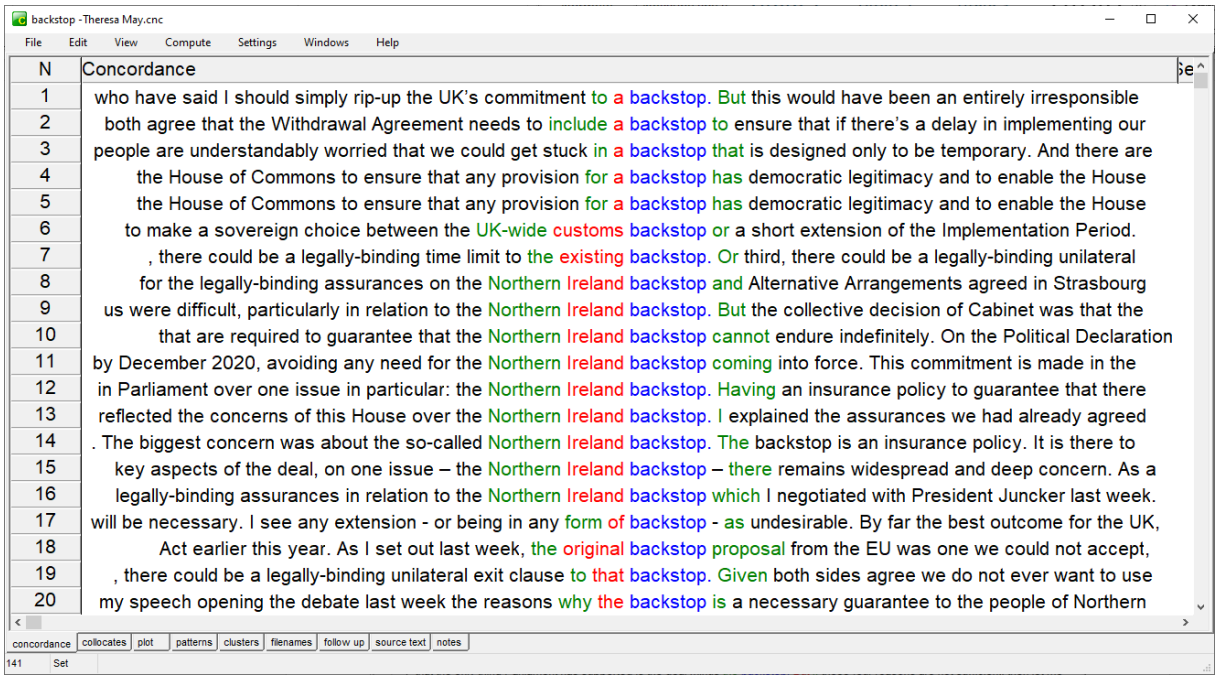

Figure 3. Backstop in Theresa May's corpus

The Irish backstop has often been referred to as "one real sticking point", yet was a considerable matter that needed to be addressed, as the commitment to avoiding a hard border was one that the House of Commons had emphatically endorsed and enshrined in law in the Withdrawal Act. As we can read in line 3, Theresa May is trying to reassure British MPs that she would never risk a return to a hard border or threaten the delicate constitutional and political arrangements created by the Belfast Good Friday Agreement. Notably, she insists that people should not worry that they could get stuck in a backstop that is designed only to be temporary and, even more, that Northern Ireland could be cut off from accessing its most important market, i.e., Great Britain. The UK chose to leave the EU, and now they must honour their duty and finish the job, as they have a responsibility to find a solution and break the impasse, protecting relations between north and south but also east and west. Knowing that the House of Commons was deeply uncomfortable with the backstop she was proposing, as we can see in Figure 3, Theresa May goes further in her reassurances. She tries to guarantee that the backstop would never risk being permanent, that there is a termination clause, and that there is no plot whatsoever on the EU's part to keep the UK in the backstop. As French President Emmanuel Macron said at the time, the EU would use its best endeavours to negotiate and conclude expeditiously an agreement that would replace the backstop, and "this bears repeating: the backstop will not need to be triggered". Yet, if triggered, "we can clarify and reassure, the backstop is not our objective, it is not in the EU's interests either, it is not a durable solution, and nobody is trying to lock the UK into the backstop". In line 111, Theresa May makes clear that they would have the backstop only as a last resort, and that the 27 EU countries had made it absolutely clear that the backstop was neither a threat nor a trap, yet "if we let the perfect be the enemy of the good, then we risk

leaving the EU with no deal". As it is obvious, May was fighting hard to see this version of Brexit through, to finalize the future relationship with the European Union, honoring the referendum and attempting to provide for a smooth and orderly exit, or 'a velvet divorce', as it has sometimes been called (Milizia, 2023). The agreement she was putting forward was, borrowing European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker's words, "the best deal possible and the only deal possible". Theresa May worked hard to negotiate a Brexit that would have permitted the UK to take back control of their money, borders and laws, while protecting the integrity of the UK as well as the historic progress that had made in Northern Ireland. Despite her best efforts and intentions to deliver her interpretation of the Brexit the British people had voted for, May decided, with deep regret, to draw her turbulent three-year premiership to a close, and stepped down in June 2019.

Let us now look at how Boris Johnson describes the Irish backstop:

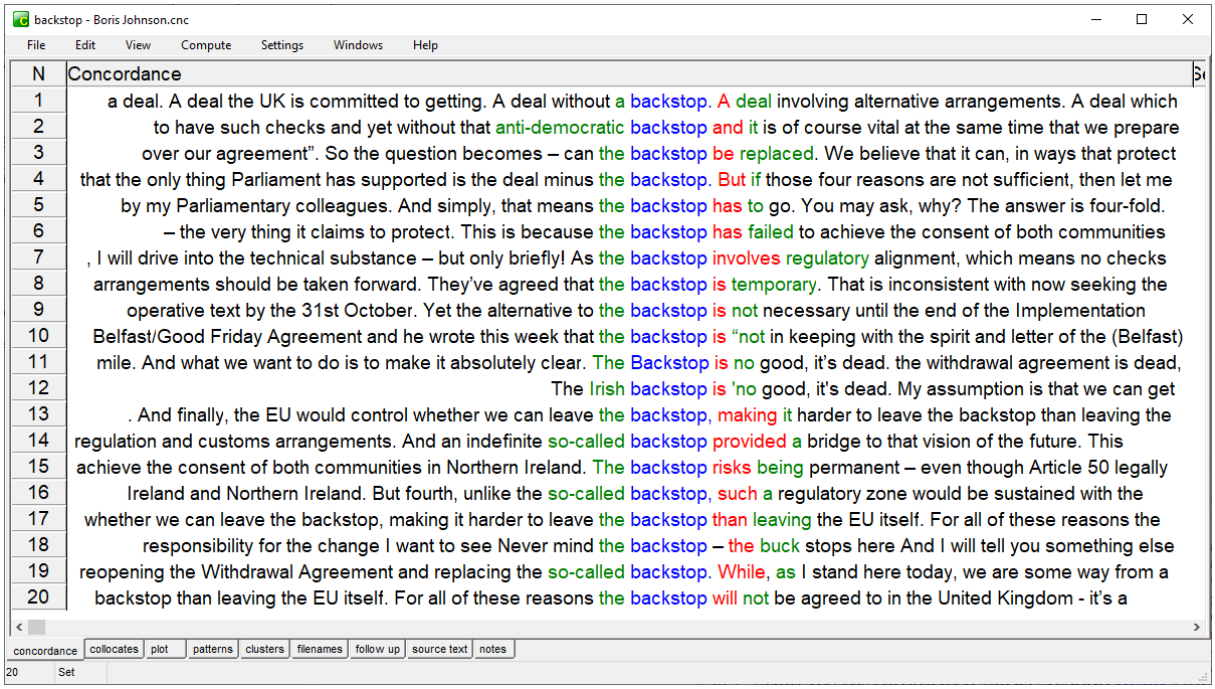

Figure 4. Backstop in Boris Johnson's corpus

As Figure 4 clearly illustrates, the UK under Johnson's leadership was committed to getting a deal before exiting, but it had to be a deal without a backstop (line 1). The backstop had proven politically untenable, as Parliament had rejected it three times. Indeed, Parliament had supported the deal proposed by Theresa May, minus the backstop (line 4), which is regarded here as 'anti-democratic' (line 2). In justifying the reasons why British MPs would ever have agreed to the backstop, Johnson, despite the many reassurances May had provided, keeps saying that it risked being permanent, even though Article 50 legally required it to be temporary. Finally, "the EU would control whether we can leave the backstop, making it harder to leave the backstop than leaving the EU itself". As we can read in lines 11-12, the backstop is 'no good, it's dead', and 'the withdrawal agreement is dead, it's gotta go':

The Irish backstop is no good, it's dead. My assumption is that we can get a new deal, we're aiming for a new deal, but of course my colleagues absolutely write that it is responsible for any government to prepare for no-deal if we absolutely have to. [...] I don't want the UK to be aloof or hanging back, I want us to engage, to hold out the hand, to go the extra mile, the extra thousand mile. And what we want to do is to make it absolutely clear. The Backstop is no good, it's dead. The withdrawal agreement is dead, it's gotta go. But there is scope to do a new deal. We will, I've made it very clear to our friends, we're talking to the Irish today, what the limits are, what we want to do and we're very confident there will be good will on both sides. The UK and the EU can get this thing done.

As anticipated earlier, in his first speech as PM delivered on July 24, 2019, Boris Johnson promised that, against all the doubters, doomsters and gloomsters that had held the country back over the last three years, he would get Brexit done on October 31 at any cost, no ifs, no buts. He went as far as saying that he would rather be dead in a ditch than agree to a further Brexit extension (Charteris-Black, 2019; Milizia, 2023). In the same speech he said, "Never mind the backstop – the buck stops here", meaning "the buck stops with me". Ultimately, he would not pass the buck, as it were, to anybody else and would deliver Brexit, with or without a withdrawal agreement, but certainly with no backstop.

6. Conclusions

A great deal has been written about borders in Europe and the United States, but little scholarship focuses on the border between Northern Ireland and Ireland. While allowing free movement within its borders, the European Union has strict borders with non-EU countries. The border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland is the most contentious and disputed in the world, exacerbating the social, religious and economic divisions that have caused years of violence on the island. The irregular shape of the Irish border looks odd but, as explained above, had its own curious logic for dividing the island in two, mainly to keep as many Protestants as possible in the north and as few as possible in the south. Obviously enough, nobody was satisfied with the partition, in particular the Catholics in the north who lost the most, as they were trapped on the wrong side of the border.

After The Troubles, the Good Friday Agreement finally ended Europe's longest conflict, but it has been argued that, since the GFA, Northern Ireland has had an absence of violence rather than real peace, with no proper process of reconciliation or accountability. Northern Ireland remains a deeply divided place where they still call a union between a Protestant and a Catholic a "mixed marriage". Brexit has proved disastrous for the Unionists on several counts, as it unsettled a position that was more stable than it had been since 1921. Brexit is ultimately an expression of populism, which argues that politics should be an expression of *volonté général* (Kaltwasser and Mudde, 2012), as the notion that 'the will of the people' must be adhered to is constantly repeated in the politicians object of our study. Yet, Brexit has accelerated a campaign for reunification that was moribund. Today it is said that a united Ireland is now inevitable. The 2021 Northern Ireland Census showed that, for the first time, Catholics outnumber Protestants in Northern Ireland, even though not all Catholics favour reunification. However, nobody in Northern Ireland would want a repeat of the Brexit ballot,

where the electorate was asked to fall off a "cliff edge" into the unknown (cf. Semino, 2008), i.e., to vote on whether they wanted to Remain or Leave the EU without any idea of what that would mean in practice.

This paper has looked at the chaos and turmoil caused for Ireland by Brexit, which saw the UK, i.e., Great Britain and Northern Ireland, leave the European Union, despite the fact that both Northern Ireland and Scotland had voted to Remain. We have looked at Theresa May's attempts to leave the EU with a deal, and at her desire to exit while making sure that the hard border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland that had been eliminated with the Good Friday Agreement would not return. The backstop she proposed was a key reason why an agreement was never reached on her watch. Boris Johnson, who took over the responsibility to deliver Brexit at any cost, with or without an agreement, seemingly did not worry about Northern Ireland or their preference to remain in the EU. He showed a startling indifference to, and a shameful ignorance of, Northern Ireland, comparing the Irish border, "that 100-year scar on the island of Ireland", to "crossing the Congestion Charge boundary in London". He repeatedly lied about NI, promising Unionists a bridge and then a tunnel, but giving them instead "a lousy border in the Irish Sea", ultimately betraying the province to secure the withdrawal deal. Boris Johnson had in fact promised the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) that he would never permit a border in the Irish Sea, yet he agreed to precisely that to get Brexit done. Thus, also in the Irish Sea red tape, Boris Johnson has proved his cakeist attitude (cf. O'Rourke, 2019), i.e., preferring to have his cake and eat it too (Milizia, 2023; Musolff, 2019). Relying on the speeches and remarks of the last three UK Prime Ministers, the paper has been an analysis of how Theresa May, Boris Johnson and Rishi Sunak have each dealt with the 'eternal Irish question', looking first at the relation between the Good Friday Agreement and Brexit and then at the reasons why the so-called Irish backstop was regarded as so controversial that it delayed Brexit. The corpora we have relied on are evidence of the fear that, had the backstop been triggered, it would have been impossible to remove. This was so despite the many reassurances of Theresa May, who consistently reiterated that the backstop was temporary and that it was neither a trap nor a threat, but only a last resort to deliver Brexit with a deal, to avoid "a one-way ticket with no clear destination". Leaving without a deal was not such a huge dilemma for most Leavers, who kept repeating that "no deal is better than the rotten deal we've got now" (Note 14).

When Boris Johnson was forced to stand down in June 2022, Rishi Sunak took to heart the Irish border issue, finally delivering the Windsor Framework in February 2023. With its green lanes and red lanes, the Windsor Framework is to be regarded as an acceptable compromise (cf Wodak, 2021), as a due act towards the British people and as an act of loyalty towards the people of Northern Ireland, who need and deserve their power-sharing government to be up and running again (Milizia, 2023). It was an attempt to protect the Union and the "one nation" government, highlighting "the special bond" between England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

At the time of writing, current British Prime Minister Keir Starmer and current Irish Taoiseach Micheál Martin have pledged a new era in Anglo-Irish relations after years of toxicity caused by Brexit, thus turning a page on the turbulent years. Yet, it cannot be denied

that, since the Brexit referendum, a shift in political mood has been building. Sinn Féin President Mary Lou McDonald has claimed that a referendum will be held by 2030 and that a 32-county democratic socialist republic is written into the Sinn Féin Constitution. Leo Varadkar, a conservative politician by nature, has also argued that Ireland is on the path to reunification.

We conclude by arguing that, even though the Protestant tradition and the sense of Britishness of the Unionists were finally given consideration on a par with the Irishness of people with Gaelic roots, and the "two Irelands" had reached a pacific order on both sides of the border before Brexit disrupted such equilibrium, identities and aspirations are enduring but not immutable. As Minister for Foreign Affairs Brian Cowen put it, long before Brexit was even envisaged (Hayward, 2004), unionism and nationalism need to continue to redefine themselves to meet the real needs and hopes of the people of the Emerald Isle.

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Notes

Note 1. "Sinn Féin" is Irish for "Ourselves" or "We Ourselves", even though it is frequently mistranslated as "Ourselves Alone". The name is an assertion of Irish national sovereignty and self-determination, i.e., the Irish people governing themselves rather than being part of a political union with Great Britain under the Westminster Parliament. The Sinn Féin movement has a policy of not swearing allegiance to the Queen or King.

Sinn Féin is a "republican" party in the specifically Irish sense, as it aspires to unite the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland into a single state, by violent means if necessary. Sinn Féin's entire political project has been described as unashamedly populist, engaging in the "us versus them" rhetoric. Even though the party has been historically considered to be Eurosceptic, and they campaigned for a "No" vote in the Irish referendum on joining the European Economic Community in 1972, Sinn Féin supported continued UK membership in the European Union in the 2016 referendum, and, in April 2022, they said "We strongly support the Ukrainian people's stated desire to join the European Union".

Note 2. After only two years of "marriage" (Milizia and Spinzi 2020), Labour Prime Minister Harold Wilson tried to renegotiate the original deal, thus holding the first referendum ever in the United Kingdom. The British people were asked whether the UK should remain or leave the Community: voters approved continued EC/EEC membership by 67% to 33%, on a national turnout of 64%.

Note 3. A year after the referendum, in 2017, Rita Duffy created *Soften the Border*, a project that saw the installation of hand-knitted votive dolls on the Northern Irish-Irish border, to urge decision makers to make the border as soft as possible. Women turned old clothes into stuffed shapes, knitting and crocheting dolls. Their hard work festooned the bridge that denotes the border between counties Fermanagh and Cavan (Coomasaru, 2021).

Note 4. The tragic incident in Derry is famously reported in the lyrics of the most overtly political songs by the Irish rock band U2, where an observer describes the horror felt in the Troubles, even though the band said that the lyrics refer to the events of both Bloody Sunday in 1972 and Bloody Sunday in 1920.

The same event inspired also John Lennon and Yoko Ono who wrote *Sunday Bloody Sunday* in the same year. John Lennon had sympathies for the Roman Catholic Irish minority in Northern Ireland and had joined a protest in London in August 1971 that attempted to

pressure the British government into removing its troops from Northern Ireland, shortly before Lennon moved to New York. After the tragic killing in Derry in January 1972, he quickly dubbed the incident "Bloody Sunday". The song is an angry response to the massacre.

Note 5. Antrim, Armagh, Tyrone, Fermanagh, Down and Derry/Londonderry.

Note 6. Donegal, Galway, Kerry, Cork, Clare, Wicklow, Mayo, Sligo, Waterford, Dublin, Meath, Louth, Wexford, Limerick, Kilkenny, Westmeath, Leitrim, Cavan, Tipperary, Kildare, Longford, Laois, Monaghan, Offaly, Roscommon and Carlow.

Note 7. Ireland was one of the first countries to adopt the euro. The Irish pound was replaced by the euro on 1 January 1999. Yet, euro currency did not begin circulation until the beginning of 2002.

Note 8. In the 2022 Irish census, 39.8% of the population claimed to be able to speak some Irish, which was an increase of 6% compared to the 2016 census.

Note 9. The cliff-edge metaphor was widely used during the transition period in reference to all the risks the UK would face in the event of a no-deal Brexit. The edge of a cliff, in fact, is a high area of rock with a very steep side, often on a coast, where the ground falls very steeply down (Cambridge Dictionary 2020). The metaphor is often accompanied by images and political cartoons depicting Theresa May about to fall off the edge of a cliff into the unknown.

Note 10. During the negotiations, both the EU and the UK set some constraints (the 'red lines') with important implications for the possible solution to the Irish border issue. When Theresa May insisted on her 'red lines' she was using a familiar idiom to mean "I am not prepared to negotiate on these issues."

Note 11. In trying to renegotiate the conditions surrounding one of the so-called 'four freedoms' of EU membership, David Cameron was offered what was known as an 'emergency brake' to limit access to in-work benefits for new EU immigrants for up to seven years. The official name of the arrangement was the 'alert and safeguard' mechanism, which became known in the media as an 'emergency brake' that could be used for stopping in the event of failure of the main brakes. The metaphor acknowledged that immigration to the EU had reached a crisis point, and there was some sort of emergency. This implied a moral duty to undertake action (see Charteris-Black, 2019, for further detail).

Note 12. It is worth highlighting that Ireland has been badly damaged by the Brexit referendum outcome, being squeezed between two behemoths, the UK and the EU. The Irish were initially reassured by British promises that there would be no return to the borders of the past, but even if the borders of the future were not the same as the borders of the past, they would be borders nonetheless (O'Rourke, 2019).

Note 13. The idea of an 'inferior Irishman' dates back in history, and has been widely documented and made infamous, as in Thomas Nast's 1876 political cartoon depicting the Irish on a level scale with an African American in the antebellum south. As early as the

mid-1300, the Irish were known as "the Irish inhabiting the wild countryside", often translated as 'wild Irish', with the connotation 'not yet subdued into submission with the law', thus reinforcing early accusations of savagery, barbarism, and cultural inferiority (Clery-Lemon, 2019).

Note 14. Nigel Farage, the then leader of UKIP (United Kingdom Independence Party), was one of the most prominent advocates of a no-deal Brexit, and one of the most frequent users of the phrase "no deal is better than the rotten deal we've got now". In this respect, most Leavers thought that, even though leaving with no deal was a huge risk, great political leaders have always respected the need to take risk. Referring to General Charles De Gaulle, who once said "A true statesman is one who is willing to take risks", their mantra had become that leadership requires more than remaining within a safety net.

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