Exploring the ‘Brussels bubble’: everyday communication and trust amongst Irish, UK and Northern Irish political and diplomatic figures, post-Brexit.

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By

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Certificate of Ethical Approval

Applicant:	Jenny Ratcliffe
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This is to certify that the above named applicant has completed the Coventry University Ethical Approval process and their project has been confirmed and approved as Medium Risk

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> "For a research worker, the unforgotten moments of his life are those rare ones which come after years of plodding work, when the veil over nature's secret seems suddenly to lift & when what was dark & chaotic appears in a clear & beautiful light & pattern."
>
> (Gerty Cori, Nobel Prize winner)

During this three-year PhD journey, my desire to lift the veil on this area of study has been a real driving motivation which has sustained my enthusiasm and curiosity, but the unstinting support and guidance I received along the way made it all possible. It has been a true apprenticeship in the art and craft of academia, and I have been blessed by the generosity of many. Most especially my incredible Director of Studies, Dr Charis Rice, together with my second and third supervisors, Professors Joel Busher and Ann-Marie Nienaber. My thanks also to Professor Mike Hardy, for his sharp insight and engagement with my thesis. It has been an immense privilege to work under the ever kind and encouraging guidance of such brilliant academics in the Centre for Trust, Peace and Social Relations. They have generously provided advice, opportunities and the most wonderfully supportive and developmental environment in which to learn and grow, for which I cannot thank them enough. Although I started PhD life under the cloud of the Covid pandemic, I am grateful to have finished it in more normal times. The many belated opportunities to attend conferences in person, to meet, learn, and benefit from the support of peers and esteemed colleagues in the field have been a huge source of joy and inspiration. And of course, I owe unending gratitude to every one of the individuals who graciously granted me their time for an interview and spoke to me with such candid insightfulness. Without their contribution the light and patterns wouldn't have emerged from the darkness and chaos. Finally, a personal thanks to my wonderful husband Ian, and my children Florence and Isaac – I couldn't have done it without their patience, love and support.

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ABBREVIATIONS

CGT	Constructivist Grounded Theory
CoReper	Committee of Permanent Representatives in the European Union
CTI	Communication Theory of Identity
DUP	Democratic Unionist Party
EU	European Union
GFA	1998 Good Friday Agreement
GUE/NGL	European United Left/Nordic Green Left
MEP	Member of the European Parliament
ONIEB	Office of the Northern Ireland Executive in Brussels
RST	Relational Signalling Theory
SDLP	Social Democratic and Labour Party
TCI model	Trust, Communication and Identity model
TUV	Traditional Unionist Voice
UK	United Kingdom
UKMis	UK Mission to the EU (post-Brexit evolution of UKRep)
UKRep	UK Permanent Representation to the EU
UUP	Ulster Unionist Party
WPUK	Working Party on the UK

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ABSTRACT

Brexit was an external shock for the domestic political landscape in Northern Ireland and wider UK-Irish relations. It changed political and diplomatic relationships at all levels. Prior to Brexit, the presence of trust and communication amongst Irish, UK and Northern Irish political and diplomatic figures underpinned strong interpersonal relationships, which contributed to stronger institutional and interstate relationships. So a better understanding of the Brexit-related changes to interpersonal communication and trust will inform a better understanding of how to repair and rebuild these foundations of political and diplomatic relationships, which contribute to broader relations at the institutional and state level.

This research moves the analytical gaze away from the political home soil of Northern Ireland and explores the distinctive situational context of the 'Brussels bubble' space for the communication and trust relations in play amongst co-located UK, Irish and Northern Irish political and diplomatic actors continuing to work there, post-Brexit. Viewing communication as a vehicle for trust, this research looks at how communication has changed and impacted on trust and trust-building, and how political and diplomatic figures perceive these changes to have affected their working relationships in the Brussels bubble, as well as political and diplomatic trust relations more widely. This study finds that trust relations are not just supplementary elements of the UK-Ireland-Northern Ireland dynamic but a fundamental means of maintaining ongoing working relations at government level. The study demonstrates the significance of identity in impacting both communication and trust amongst political and diplomatic figures in Brussels. These findings have informed the development of the TCI model as a new theoretical means of understanding the interaction between these different factors of trust, communication and identity which together form the TCI acronym.

This study also puts forward the 'bubble' conception of Brussels as a distinctive space with particular qualities as an away-from-home shared site of multilateral business and interaction, enabling the normalisation and strengthening of trusting relationships across (inter)national boundaries. Such bubble spaces support a transferable culture and climate of trust, based on shared values, principles, and integrity in practice, whilst enabling the de-sensitisation and reframing of contentious issues by providing a space for reflection and detachment from the cultural norms and scrutinising political and media gaze of 'home'. These qualities of the Brussels bubble space support political and diplomatic trust and relationship building by shaping an environment in which communication and trust amongst UK, Irish and Northern Irish political and diplomatic figures can work differently.

CHAPTER 1: Introduction

1.1 Background

The pre-Brexit strong degree of consensus and trust in the British-Irish relationship was critical in managing the "instability, crisis and political conflict in Northern Ireland" (Murphy & Evershed, 2022, p147). Brexit has emphatically changed the UK's relationship not only with the European Union (EU) as a natural consequence of the departure from the EU, but also with Ireland, and with Northern Ireland as a part of the UK. Interpersonal relations between politicians, diplomats and civil servants are an essential part of the overall climate of trust between states (Sinkkonen, 2018; Wheeler, 2018). State relations are not spontaneously formed in a vacuum. They are the product of many separate incrementally built political and diplomatic relations at the interpersonal level. In developing their own relationships with each other, politicians, diplomats, and civil servants create the possibility to see others – whether they perceive of them as interlocutors, opponents, contacts or something else - as human beings and not just nominal representatives (Lane, 2019, p4; Cornut, 2017) of a political position or state interest. This then allows them to break down barriers and build trust (Wheeler, 2018, p62) in their own relationships and work. This process is replicated across a wider landscape of political and diplomatic relationships, supporting the emergence of a more positive climate for broader state relations over time. Kappmeier (2016, p134) comments that "peacemaking without at least some degree of trust is impossible", and trust has been a key part of the backbone of the good UK-Ireland relations that have supported the enduring if somewhat fragile peace in Northern Ireland in the wake of the 1998 Good Friday Agreement (GFA) (Cochrane, 2020). The commitment explicitly built into the GFA to sustain cross-community political cooperation within Northern Ireland further reinforced this by strengthening Irish-Northern Irish and UK-Irish relations (Mitchell et al., 2018, p283). Collectively these comprise the 'North-South, East-West relations' aspired to in the second and third strands of the GFA respectively (Kelly & Tannam, 2023).

The twenty-five years since the signing of the 1998 Good Friday Agreement have brought a period of relative post-conflict peace. The consociational (power-sharing) 'Executive' governance structure devised in Northern Ireland was intended to maintain representation of both unionist and nationalist communities and securing engagement across the political divide. As noted by Rice et al. (2023, p7), "broadly speaking, unionist parties wish to remain an integral part of the UK and consider themselves British, while nationalist parties tend to strive for a 'United Ireland' with no constitutional ties to the UK, considering themselves Irish". Under the consociational arrangement, a joint First and Deputy First Minister co-chair the Executive (Rice et al, 2023), with

one each drawn from the largest unionist and nationalist parties. The Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) and Sinn Féin have held these unionist and nationalist positions respectively since 2007 (Tonge & Gomez, 2015). There is then a cadre of further Ministers designated from across all eligible political parties according to the d'Hondt electoral method (Rice et al., 2023; Birrell, 2012), unless they decline to nominate a candidate for a vacancy, in which case that party can elect to take up the role of official opposition.

However, as O'Kane (2021, p177) notes, "the fact that devolved government was achieved did not mean that devolved government would be harmonious". The power-sharing model locks in mutual dependency between the largest unionist and nationalist parties. If one side withdraws their representation the Executive collapses. In consequence, relationships and political sensitivities on either side need to be continuously carefully managed to avoid relationships becoming untenable to the point of collapse. Indeed, the consociational model that the Good Friday Agreement ushered in has seen multiple periods of government suspension and political stasis, notably since 2007 between the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) and Sinn Féin as co-chairs of the Executive, as the largest unionist and nationalist parties respectively (Haughey & Loughran, 2023, p3). During the years since the Brexit referendum results in June 2016, sustained collapse of the Executive has happened twice. The first period from January 2017 to January 2020 was precipitated by Sinn Féin's withdrawal from the Executive, ostensibly in reaction to the 'Cash for Ash' renewable heating policy fiasco and their related concerns about DUP First Minister Arlene Fosters involvement and (mis)handling of the issue (Heenan & Birrell, 2022). The second currently ongoing collapse was instigated in February 2022 by the DUP's removal of their First Minister, in light of their stated concerns about the implications of the Northern Ireland Protocol and the protection of Unionist interests (Colfer & Diamond, 2023). During these periods of absence, the responsibility falls to civil servants to do what they can despite the political dormancy. This adds to an already challenging working dynamic for civil servants and political actors in the Northern Irish system (Rouse and O'Connor, 2020).

In considering Brexit as a "critical constitutional juncture", Murphy and Evershed (2022) frame the concept of critical junctures as situations that "typically emerge from crisis or an exogenous shock which alters perceptions, positions and policies of key actors and can change the path-dependent trajectory" (Murphy and Evershed, 2022, p15). This thesis picks up this concept of Brexit as critical juncture, causing an exogenous shock to political and diplomatic trust relations within the UK, Irish and Northern Irish context. The potential fallout of Brexit for Northern Ireland garnered very little attention prior to the referendum in 2016 (Dooley, 2023; Cochrane, 2020).

However, the widely reported political, diplomatic and policy challenges since have illustrated the folly of this, showing Brexit to be a critical juncture in not only the UK-Ireland relationship but also in political tensions in Northern Ireland between the unionist and nationalist perspectives, which align with the UK and Ireland respectively. As Rowan (2021, p209) puts it, "Brexit has left its imprint – its mark has disturbed relationships. Once more, politics feels broken". Although the absence of the Executive since early 2022 has created political deadlock in Northern Ireland, it has not been able to prevent broader electoral and political change. Specifically, that the May 2022 elections saw both the rise of the centrist Alliance party, and nationalist Sinn Féin becoming the largest majority for the first time in the century-long history of Northern Ireland (Kelly & Tannam, 2023, p87). This moved the DUP off the top step for the first time, adding to their sense of "destabilisation and crisis" (Kelly & Tannam, 2023, p86). Additionally, over the years since the Brexit referendum the issues of borders, division and identity have come bubbling back through cracks previously papered over during the post-conflict years. This has forced a renewed focus along binary British-Irish lines and revealed the fragility and vulnerability of the constitutional settlement and climate of relative post-conflict peace in Northern Ireland (Cochrane, 2020). It has led to increased amplification around the Irish unity debate (Laffan, 2018), and something of an existential crisis for Northern Ireland, whereby "what was firm ground before the referendum, the idea of the GFA and the devolved institutions providing the main political axis in Belfast, now looks to be much less solid. At a basic level, Brexit placed the constitutional question back on to the political agenda" (Cochrane, 2020, p52).

Within this complex wider political landscape, positive commitment to communication and building or maintaining trust between politicians, diplomats and civil servants is key in reacting to and managing these problems. Communication and trust form the building blocks of strong relationships at both the individual and institutional level (Holmes & Wheeler, 2020; Pouliot, 2015), both domestically in Northern Ireland and also at the interstate level between Ireland and the UK. These in turn are conducive to a wider endeavour around consensual working and commitment to ongoing engagement and dialogue in addressing specific policy issues as well as broader problems at the societal, diplomatic, and political level (Gray & Potter, 2020; Malis, 2021). The achievement of the 1998 Good Friday Agreement as an enabling step towards an enduring peace in Northern Ireland is a key example of this (Hayes & McAllister, 2013). It depended, in part, on strong political and diplomatic relations with political and diplomatic neighbours Ireland, in which the UK and the EU playing a role, alongside domestic working relationships within the Northern Ireland political system (Lagana, 2021a; Coakley, 2018; McQuaid, 2020). Yet little is known about how everyday relations between politicians, diplomats

and civil servants work. In addition, whilst much attention centres on devolution, partisan political divides (Dixon, 2018; Murphy & Evershed, 2020) and the domestic challenges relating to the consociational model of governance (Rice & Somerville, 2018), there is relatively little work exploring the detail around how relationships amongst politicians, diplomats and civil servants outside of Northern Ireland flow back to Northern Ireland in terms of their influence and impact.

The focus in this study on the communication and trust dynamics amongst Irish, UK and Northern Irish political and diplomatic actors in Brussels responds to this gap. It was spurred on by my own professional experience within the Brussels bubble that told me that, within this bubble environment, things perhaps worked differently than they did within home capitals. That the removal from home political ecosystems and the continual interaction and co-location within the same 'bubble' space of Brussels might feed a different type of communication and trust dynamic.

Fifty of the fifty-two interviews conducted for this study took place between September 2021-October 2022, with the final two interviews conducted in March-April 2023. As such, this research unfolded in parallel with the gradual evolution of the post-Brexit 'new normal'. In the wider context of the implementation of Brexit and the Northern Ireland Protocol, this included a particularly challenging period in UK-EU relations and UK-Irish relations, with significant tensions in respect of ongoing implementation challenges for the Northern Ireland Protocol and a high degree of political instability and churn in Westminster, as widely reported in the media. Additionally, in the Northern Irish political context, many of the interviews were conducted during a sustained period of absence of the Northern Irish Executive, with implications for the daily working practices and communication of both politicians and civil servants. This context is acknowledged here because interviewees drew directly on their daily experiences and practice before, during and after Brexit, but these were of course grounded in the changing and challenging political and diplomatic landscape at the time.

This thesis makes an important contribution in attending to these issues in respect of the changing post-Brexit communication and trust dynamics in Brussels between UK, Northern Irish and Irish political and diplomatic elites, and gives consideration to the significance that this has for the wider Northern Ireland political landscape, post-Brexit.

1.2 Aims and objectives

This qualitative study centres on a series of fifty-two elite interviews with Northern Irish, UK, and Irish politicians, diplomats and civil servants, as well as EU officials, policy experts and political commentators, with the aim of developing a better understanding of day-to-day communication and trust amongst those working on Northern Ireland issues, post-Brexit. By exploring changing communication dynamics and relationships in the Brussels bubble, this study aims to increase understanding of the changes to trust relations amongst Northern Irish, Irish and UK political and diplomatic elites, and their implications, post-Brexit. In applying the principles of constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2008), this study is founded upon inductively derived themes and findings that emerged from the interview data. The intended research focus was two-fold from the start – communication and trust. However, the additional element of identity, that emerged during the iterative interview data collection and analysis process, was also of central importance.

This research was initially underpinned by two core objectives. The first objective was to conduct and analyse qualitative semi-structured political elite interviews to better understand the link between communication and trust amongst Irish, UK and Northern Irish political and diplomatic figures. The second objective was to use the research findings about communication shifts as a lens to explore the changing trust dynamics between political and diplomatic figures, post-Brexit. In acknowledgement of the emerging role of identity linking both communication and trust in this setting and context, a final objective was added: to explore the different ways in which identity played into communication and trust in this context and setting. My methodological openness to including this third objective as an emergent priority reflects the core tenets of the constructivist grounded theory approach that underpins this study. Namely, the integral aspect of moving iteratively between data and analysis throughout the study to support an inductive and epistemologically subjective emergence of theory grounded in the data (Bryant, 2019; Charmaz, 2008; Bryant & Charmaz, 2019). Further detailed consideration of the methodological approach is provided in Chapter Three.

This study takes, as a starting point for consideration, the framing of Brussels as a "politically neutral space" in the Northern Irish context (Phinnemore et al., 2012, p569; Wright, 2018; Féron, 2014; Lagana, 2021a; Connelly, 2018). The contention is that this enabled political and diplomatic figures from Ireland, Northern Ireland and the wider UK to work together and alongside one another on a number of fronts, thereby contributing to positive relations in support of the achievement of the Good Friday Agreement (Goddard, 2012). The contemporary post-Brexit

colocation of Northern Irish, Irish and UK politicians, diplomats and civil servants in the multilateral 'Brussels bubble' context is explored in respect of the following research questions:

1. How do political and diplomatic figures perceive any changes to the communicative dynamic to have impacted on trust at a day-to-day working level?
2. What are the implications of changes in trust between these political and diplomatic figures for wider post-Brexit relations, at the interorganisational and interstate levels?
3. What are the implications for theoretical development in political and diplomatic trust?

1.3 Definition of key terms

Trust

There is no singular and definitive agreed meaning of 'trust' but there are instead "multiple constellations" (Möllering et al., 2004, p560), which as suggested by McKnight and Chervany (2001) can be fairly attributed to "both the proliferation of narrow intra-disciplinary research definitions of trust and the multiple meanings the word trust possesses in everyday use" (McKnight & Chervany, 2001, p27). Nonetheless, as Bachmann and Inkpen (2011, p283) note, "trust has become a central concept in explaining business behaviour in organizational contexts", although much of the literature disaggregates interpersonal trust from organisational and interorganisational trust (see McKnight & Chervany, 2001; Bachmann & Inkpen, 2011). The focus of this study is on interpersonal trust and communication between politicians, diplomats and civil servants across different government administrations. However, in this context there is a degree of porosity between interpersonal and interorganisational trust, because of the layered and multilevel complexity of the relationships being built or strengthened by politicians, diplomats and civil servants.

There is potential for the practice of interpersonal trust to enhance or reduce interorganisational trust, just as there is potential for the climate of interorganisational trust or distrust to impact on the interpersonal relations on the ground. This is because the trust emerging from interpersonal relations occurs within an (inter)organisational context and contributes, incrementally, to interorganisational trust relations. Conversely, interpersonal trust is also affected by interorganisational trust, in that it alters the contextual and situational level of comfort that

individuals have in trusting others in that setting (McKnight & Chervany, 2001, p37; Fulmer & Gelfand, 2012). This can create a "trickle down" (Nienaber et al., 2023, p107) effect on positive shared working environments and interpersonal trust. In addition to the porous borders between interpersonal and interorganisational trust in political and diplomatic contexts, there is an additional element of porosity associated with the interface between domestic politics and international relations in the UK-Northern Ireland-Ireland context. This owes in part to the broader structural arrangements and interfaces put in place by the 1998 Good Friday Agreement (Whitten, 2023). These positioned the UK and Ireland as co-guarantors for the implementation of the Agreement, and put an emphasis on building and maintaining both North-South and East-West relations. This had the effect of essentially tumbling elements of domestic and international relations together as objectives of the Agreement, even if these elements were separated out across different strands of the Agreement.

This overarching porosity between domestic politics and international relations in the Northern Ireland context is also made possible by the colocation and interaction of politicians, civil servants and diplomats from the UK, Northern Ireland and Ireland in the Brussels bubble space. This remains the case even following the UK's formal exit from the EU, at which point the UK and Northern Ireland no longer hold member state or EU region status respectively, and no longer have any formal role in respect of EU business. The Brussels bubble offers a distinctive place for interaction, away from home capitals. In this respect, the qualities and nature of the bubble as a multilateral, shared space is important in offering the opportunity for politicians, civil servants and diplomats to engage and work together and alongside each other in ways that would not be possible or would be less viable in alternative bilateral contexts or home capitals.

This thesis draws on evidence of communication and working practices to shine a light on the way in which interpersonal political and diplomatic trust relationships build, endure and break. I adopt Mayer et al.'s (1995) widely accepted framing of interpersonal trust as a willingness to be vulnerable and accept risk in extending trust, based on an assessment of a person's ability, benevolence and integrity. Concurrently, I acknowledge the importance of "interdependence" (Rousseau et al., 1998, p395) in trust development in the political and diplomatic context, in which "the interests of one party cannot be achieved without reliance upon another" (Rousseau et al., 1998, p395). I refer to trust, and the absence, building and breakdown of trust. This reflects the language used by interviewees, with the words 'distrust' and 'mistrust' largely conspicuous by their absence, with phrases including 'the absence of trust', 'the breakdown of trust' and 'there is no trust' regularly used by interviewees rather than the words distrust and mistrust themselves.

This study does not focus upon either the conceptual parameters of distrust and mistrust (Schoorman et al., 2007, Sitkin & Bijlsma-Frankema, 2018, p51; Lewicki et al., 1998; Bijlsma-Frankema et al., 2015; Rice et al., 2021; Jennings et al., 2021, p1177), or the academic distinction made between mistrust and distrust (McKnight & Chervany, 2001; Lewicki et al., 1998, Sitkin & Bijlsma-Frankema, 2018,) but recognises that the breakdown of trust opens a doorway to both.

Rousseau et al. (1998, p395) point to trust as "a psychological state comprising the intention to accept vulnerability based upon positive expectations of the intentions or behaviour of another". Nienaber et al. (2015, p570) point to the importance of these twin aspects of vulnerability and positive expectations, because they are processed and perceived in fundamentally different ways by the person judging trustworthiness. In effect, the element of positive expectations is tied to cognitive trust, "a rational assessment…determined by a perception of the other party's ability, benevolence and integrity" (Nienaber et al., 2015, p570; Mayer et al., 1995). By contrast, the element of vulnerability is related to affective trust, which is tied to emotions and developed predominantly through interpersonal interactions (Nienaber et al., 2015, p570; Lewis and Weigert, 1985). This is a point at which I conceive of an overlap and interaction between the interorganisational and interpersonal in this context, with the concept of "trust in trust" (Eikeland & Saevi, 2017, p614) whereby norms and conventions of practice have become safeguards over time to the initial extension of trust on an interpersonal and interorganisational basis. There is a sense of "situational normality" (Baer et al., 2018) that is an element of interorganisational trust "established through social or organisational structures" (Cheng et al., 2017, p27) but which is propagated and upheld by individuals through their interactions and interpersonal trust dynamics. It is when there are radical changes to relationships and norms at both the interpersonal and interorganisational level – such as that between the EU and the UK as a result of Brexit – that prevailing positive expectations and the ability to "trust in trust", to borrow Eikeland and Saevi's (2017, p614) phrase above, is jeopardised.

In conceptualising trust building, and by extension trust breaking, I borrow from Six (2005, p4) in emphasising the interactive nature of the process, in which two or more people learn about their respective trustworthiness and react accordingly. It is this human element of interpreting, interacting and adapting in the face of different relational and communicative contexts that drives my conceptualisation of trust in practice as socially constructed, such that "organizational phenomena like trust, emerge, change, are reduced and sometimes destroyed by us, and as they are socially constructed, we relate to the discourses that are established when interpreting the meaning and value of the different phenomena" (Eikeland & Saevi, 2017, p607-608). In this

respect Eikeland and Saevi (2017) illustrate the connection between the interpersonal and the organisational in the formation and refinement of trust in (professional) lived contexts. In this social construction of trust, the acts of building or breaking trust are not singular and static, but reciprocal and self-reinforcing (Korsgaard, 2018), dynamic (Kim et al., 2009) and variably emergent over time (Vanneste et al., 2014), working as "a process rather than an event" (Gormley-Heenan & MacGinty, 2009, p424).

Communication

Communication plays a key role in the formation and breakdown of trust (Nienaber & Schewe, 2011) and can be conceptualised and compartmentalised in many different ways, but at the core of this study is the notion that "communication between people is the 'stuff' that makes and enables trust" (Rice et al., 2021, p1156). This reflects the idea that while at its most basic level, communication can be viewed as simply "the exchange of messages" (Krone et al., 1987), communication is better understood as a complex and symbolic process of co-creation and developing shared meaning and understanding (Braithwaite et al., 2022, p4). This focus on the meaning and understanding of communication as being co-created reflects the social constructivist ontological and epistemological foundations of this study, and the constructivist grounded theory methodological approach I have applied. I outline these terms and my interpretation of them here by way of introduction, providing further elaboration in the later methodology section (Chapter Three).

Interpretation and the possibility of subjective and intersubjective understanding are central to a social constructivist stance. Constructivism is intentionally messy, in as much as it allows for complexity, multiple interpretations, and an interaction between people and the different societal contexts in which they are situated and move between (James et al., 2018, p2), which influences the way people act and live their lives. Lincoln and Guba (2013) refer to this as "sense-making, or the creation of constructions" (Lincoln & Guba, 2013, p46), emphasising that this can be an individual or collective endeavour between individuals who, for whatever reason (come to) "see the world in the same way" (Lincoln & Guba, 2013, p47). For UK, Northern Irish and Irish politicians, civil servants and diplomats, the way that they interact with each other and communicate together is a crucial component which feeds into this sense-making process. Their communication and relationship building in the Brussels bubble as a place away from home is important in allowing them new and different individual and collective sense-making

opportunities, and the chance to find common ground and some degree of shared perspectives. As Lincoln and Guba (2013, p47) put it, the possibility to begin to "see the world in the same way", in part at least.

This study intentionally avoided prescribing specific forms of communication for interviewees to address, and uses the accessible everyday term 'communication', while recognising that there are various types and sub-components of communication in practice, that have distinct meanings and are underpinned by different (strategic) motivations. For example, communication may be formal or informal, written or spoken or visual. It may also focus on engagement (relationship building and motivating action), dialogue (working through problems) or persuasion, all of which have different accompanying theoretical and normative foundations (c.f., Anderson et al., 2016; Lane, 2019; Johnston & Taylor, 2018; Somerville & Kirby, 2012; Cockcroft et al, 2014). All these aspects are relevant in the context of this study, but these granular distinctions are of interest here only in as much as they matter to, and are reflected in the discourse of, the people and relationships under study.

In the context of politics and diplomacy, the pursuit or neglect of different communicative practices respectively leads either to the articulation and development of trust or the breakdown of trust and the growth of distrust (Head, 2012, p35). Communication, and the sending of signals through this communication, allows for the conveyance and interpretation of intentions and values, enabling trustworthiness and relationship value to be decided (Raaphorst & Van de Walle, 2020, p59). Interpersonal trust has a particular complexity, derived from the fact that it "inheres in relationships instead of individuals" (Jones & Shah, 2021, p205). This intertwines the elements of trust and communication in a symbiotic relationship, which can be either mutually reinforcing or mutually destabilising.

Whilst the element of interpersonal communication is the primary lens for the exploration of trust in this study, much like the above approach to trust, it is analytically positioned within the wider context of organisational and interorganisational communication. This supports the underlying premise in this study that interpersonal communication is an integral part of the role for politicians, diplomats and civil servants, but that whilst they are engaging in interpersonal communication as a mechanism for trust building, they are also working within and representing the organisational structures and constructs of their department, their organisation and their government. The consequence of this is that interpersonal communication and trust necessarily also fits within a wider hierarchical and interactive web of team, organisational and inter-organisational communication and trust (Nienaber & Schewe, 2011; Fulmer & Gelfand, 2012).

Identity

The study of identity draws from multiple disciplinary perspectives in conceiving of identity as something personal to an individual, but also something reflecting their place in a wider context of roles, social engagement and belonging in (local, national or international) communities. The role of identities – at the individual and collective level – in trust-building is widely recognised by international relations scholars, (Forsberg, 2018, p161; van de Wetering, 2018, p75), with recognition given to the interactive connectivity between trust and identity as socially constructed concepts (Haukkala et al., 2018, p4). So this study takes a path already walked to some extent in recognising the significance of identity, alongside communication in forming and affecting trust, and also giving importance to the context in which it occurs, whether normative or newly emerging through practice. But in looking specifically at the way in which trust relationships work within the Brussels bubble context, I also take a new fork in the path, by focusing in on the way in which being in a 'bubble' away from home creates a space – literally and figuratively - in which it is possible for communication, trust and identity to play out differently.

Stryker and Burke (2000) suggest that two separate but highly connected strands of identity theory arise, with one focused on "the linkages of social structures with identities" and the other focused on "the internal process of self-verification" (Stryker & Burke, 2000, p284). In addition, identity, whilst belonging to the individual, also exists within and between people (Stryker & Burke, 2000; Jung & Hecht, 2004; Xin et al., 2016; Webster & Wong, 2008; Lenard & Miller,2018). In other words, it is (self-) constructed. As such, identity can be both subjective – "what you conceive yourself to be" – and objective – "how you might be viewed independently of how you see yourself" (Bilgrami, 2006, p5). In her work on political tribes, Chua (2018, p7) recognises the human tribal instinct, both to belong and also to exclude. This ties strongly to a sense of identity, based on not just who an individual is, but also on who they know – the literal and figurative social world around them. This creates the possibility of multiplicity and also hierarchy in how we perceive and experience our own identity. A person may feel that they wear multiple different identity 'badges' that they or others have assigned to them, and these may sit within a shifting hierarchy of importance to the individual. For example, this collection of different identities may affect the way a politician feels when enacting their different roles - representing a government, a political party, their family or themselves as an individual - and they may consciously or unconsciously move between these different identities. At this point it is helpful to return to the previously raised issue of porosity. With regard to identity, there is also an element of porosity

across the different identities that a person may carry – they do not all or always have clear lines of demarcation. All these different expressions of porosity across boundaries reflect the social constructivist tenet put across by Onuf (2012, p37) that our worlds and lives are filled with porous boundaries, and that we negotiate these by a process of constantly moving between and socially constructing our different conceptions of them.

Identity also grounds us, or as Castells (2009, p6) puts it, "identity is people's source of meaning and experience". Here, Castells makes an important distinction between identity and roles, with roles a purely function-based external marker, "defined by norms structured by the institutions and organizations of society" (Castells, 2009, p7), where identity is internalised and "constructed through a process of individuation" (Castells, 2009, p7). As a result, Castells argues that roles do not carry the same power of meaning that identities do, because roles have a lesser element of self-construction and ownership than identities (Castells, 2009, p7).

In acknowledging these distinctions, this thesis adopts the overarching view of identity as a "reflexive construct or experiential modality through which one knows oneself and claims recognition" (Leve, 2011, p513). The Communication Theory of Identity (Hecht, 1993; Jung & Hecht, 2004; Hecht & Choi, 2012; Hecht & Phillips, 2021) is discussed in further detail in Chapter Eight, and is instrumental in shaping the theoretical contribution of this thesis. It conveys the idea of the multiplicity of identity, based around four core frames of identity (personal, enacted, relational and communal) (Hecht, 1993, p79). Also fundamental to both the Communication Theory of Identity and this thesis is the premise that these multiple identity frames can interact and coexist, allowing for "layering, juxtaposition, interpenetration and dialectic tension" (Hecht, 1993, p79).

Political and diplomatic figures

This study centres on three different professional groups - politicians, diplomats and civil servants - pertaining to the three different Irish, UK and Northern Irish systems or 'home capitals', to use diplomatic terminology. Interviews were conducted with Northern Irish, UK and Irish politicians, civil servants and diplomats based in Brussels and home capitals. Additional interviews from EU officials and key political commentors and policy experts provided valuable rigour and triangulation.

The term 'civil servants' is used specifically for Northern Ireland, and 'diplomats' for the UK and Ireland, because Northern Ireland does not have its own diplomatic corps. Where either a professional group (for example 'politicians') or a system (for example "Northern Irish interviewees…" indicating both system and the multiple professional groups in that system) or both (for example "UK diplomats…") is specified in talking about a theme or point, this reflects the findings from the analysis that this was distinctive to that domain. Where statements are more generalised (for example, "interviewees commented…") this indicates that this finding was not distinctive to any one professional group or system. The collective phrase 'political and diplomatic figures' is used at times for brevity, encompassing all three of the professional groups.

Throughout the study I distinguish between UK and Northern Irish political and diplomatic figures, despite Northern Ireland being a composite part of the UK as a whole. The distinction is made to reflect the EU multilevel governance separation (Hooghe & Marks, 1996, 2001) of 'states' (the UK) and 'regions' (Northern Ireland), and the resulting implications for interaction and engagement amongst state and regional political and diplomatic figures within the Brussels bubble. It also reflects the fact that as a devolved government of the UK, Northern Ireland has its own separate footprint of civil servants within the Brussels bubble in the form of the Office for the Northern Ireland Executive in Brussels (ONIEB), which remains in place post-Brexit. Additionally, the distinction captures the fact that Northern Ireland had its own allocation of seats in the European Parliament prior to Brexit, although this ended (for both UK and Northern Irish MEPs) at the official point of exit in January 2020. Furthermore, the implementation of Brexit for Northern Ireland has required specific measures– in the form of the Northern Ireland Protocol and subsequent Windsor Framework – which have served to set it apart from the rest of the United Kingdom and underscore the contextual distinctiveness.

I conducted 'elite interviews' with fifty-two political and diplomatic figures - individuals from multiple professional groups, as described above. I use the term 'elite interviews' to indicate my process of engagement with them. Within the literature defining 'elite' in this context, the term is broadly applied in two key ways. Firstly, to "those with close proximity to power" (Lilleker, 2003, p. 207) fulfilling powerful political and executive roles or professionally prestigious roles (Slote Morris, 2009, p209; Boucher, 2017, p100). Secondly, to "functional experts who hold expertise even if they are not of high organizational stature" (Boucher, 2017, p100). In the case of political and senior diplomatic interviewees, the former definition is most appropriate. However, I also interviewed numerous policy experts and civil servants who may themselves have identified more strongly with the concept of being a functional expert than being politically powerful, and a small

minority of interviewees could be considered both 'elite' and 'expert', based on their changing career pathways. Although I acknowledge here the distinction in some of the literature between 'elite' and 'expert', this study does not disaggregate the two. This decision was made in recognition of Littig's (2009, p98) findings that "it would seem that the differences between interviews with the elite and interviews with experts lie primarily in differing social and political sciences research traditions and interests", and in response to the absence of this distinction in the way that interviewees in this study perceived and positioned themselves in their interactions with me.

Space and Place

The terms space and place are often used interchangeably in everyday usage, and this study does not routinely distinguish between the two, because interviewees did not make any distinction in their own reflections. However, the well-established differentiation in the extant literature (cf. Agnew, 2011) is acknowledged, whereby space acts as a vital segue or precursor to place-making (Akinwumi, 2005, p951), in which "place is space filled up by people, practices, objects and representations" (Gieryn, 2000, p465). In this respect there is an interpretive and experiential element to place, such that the sense of a place is dependent upon the people who construct and organise that conception (Sack, 1993, p329) and can be "flexible in the hands of different people or cultures, malleable over time, and inevitably contested" (Gieryn, 2000, p465). As such, place plays an important role as a vehicle for enabling us to frame and reframe who we are, as a reflection of our understanding of our own selves, but also of those around us, those who inhabit the spaces and places we inhabit.

This thesis gives consideration to the distinctiveness of the 'bubble' – in this case the Brussels bubble – as a place which is set apart and different from 'home' and what is normal in that context. My contention is that this state of difference imbues the place and practice of life in the bubble with a particular quality and some sense of safety arising from that, as a place where, consequently, the concept of trust behaves differently. This thesis explores the possibilities for political and diplomatic figures to go about their practice and their roles differently as a result of this distinctiveness of the political and diplomatic bubble in Brussels.

The sense of place attached to the Brussels bubble is interactive with individual and collective identity. For UK, Northern Irish and Irish politicians, civil servants and diplomats, the Brussels bubble is a place apart, a place that is different from the familiarity of home. So whilst Brussels is

a physical space, it is the sense of place that political and diplomatic figures (my interviewees amongst them) have with regard to Brussels and the Brussels bubble that is central to this thesis, because this sense of place informs the way in which they operate in the Brussels bubble. This is framed within a recognition and exploration of the idea that there are particular qualities inherent in the nature of multilateral bubbles as places – in this case, Brussels – that make them different from bilateral or home capital comparators. In particular, the way in which Brussels as a bubble offers a collective and relatively safe place for the fluid community of political, civil servant and diplomatic inhabitants in which to act and interact. A place in which to develop communications and relationships, allowing trust to be built and performed differently than it would be at home or from a distance with politicians, civil servants and diplomats in the other home capitals, and which infuses their practice whilst in the bubble, but also continues to do so after they have departed and moved on to other posts in other places.

This possibility of the 'bubble' being a space and place which offers political and diplomatic figures a degree of protection and freedom for expanding relations and developing opportunities is notably positive in contrast with the more generally negative perception of the concept of bubbles as restrictive, insular and detached from the real world (Charteris-Black, 2019, p141-142). As such, it challenges us to reconsider the benefits and opportunities of multilateral bubbles as a specific type of political and diplomatic space and place. By developing a better understanding of the interaction between trust, communication and identity in Brussels amongst UK, Irish and Northern Irish politicians, diplomats and civil servants, this thesis also offers a means to better understand the way that political and diplomatic bubbles work more generally. In looking at the changes to the communication and trust dynamic amongst Irish, Northern Irish and UK political and diplomatic figures in Brussels, post-Brexit, this thesis contributes an understanding of the importance of this colocation in the Brussels bubble going forward, and a consideration of how this impacts more generally on the stability of the political and diplomatic landscape in respect of Northern Ireland.

1.4 Structure of thesis

This introductory chapter is followed by Chapter Two which reviews the related literature. This considers Brexit in respect of communication and trust within the Brussels bubble, looks at the context of Northern Irish engagement in the EU and representation in the Brussels bubble, and refers to the wider literature in developing an understanding of the post-Brexit role for Northern

Irish political and diplomatic figures in Brussels. A focused consideration of the trust literature follows, pertaining to political and diplomatic relationships, trust at different levels, and relationship lifecycles of trust.

Chapter Three describes the methodological approach. The study draws upon in-depth qualitative elite interviews, guided by Practice Theory and a practice turn approach which emphasises everyday political and diplomatic practice at the interpersonal level as a means of understanding political and diplomatic trust and relations. The chapter also outlines the constructivist grounded theory methodological approach, and how this informed the study. This chapter introduces the overall presentational framework for the findings, outlining the focus for each of the findings chapters and their core themes.

Chapters Four, Five, and Six provide the detailed findings from the study, relating directly to the underpinning research questions one and two. These chapters start from three different conceptions of the Brussels bubble as a space. Chapter Four takes Brussels as a shared space, Brussels as a 'neutral space' is explored in Chapter Five, and Chapter Six addresses Brussels as a developmental space.

Chapter Seven offers an analytical discussion of the findings in respect of the implications for trust amongst Irish, UK and Northern Irish political and diplomatic figures in the Brussels bubble and beyond. This chapter looks at the interface of identity and trust, the specific significance of integrity-based trust, and the issue of trust reciprocity in the Brussels bubble environment. This discussion responds to the first and second underpinning research questions.

Chapter Eight introduces a new theoretical model – the TCI model - which has been developed out of the findings of this study, to express the connectivity between trust, communication and identity in this context. The TCI model provides a theoretical bridge between two existing theories - the Communication Theory of Identity (CTI) and the theory of interpersonal trust-building based on Relational Signalling Theory (RST). This chapter introduces and frames the TCI model in the context of these prior theories, and gives critical consideration to the value of the TCI model as an expression of the findings of this study, considering the limitations, implications, and possible next steps in further developing, refining and validating the TCI model. This chapter responds to the third (final) research question underpinning this study.

Chapter Nine concludes this study, providing key reflections, a consideration of the limitations of the study and findings, and suggestions as to possible contributions to knowledge made by the study. A final summary of findings and concluding thoughts are also offered.

CHAPTER 2: Review of related literature

2.1 Introduction

Although trust scholarship has grown considerably as a field, there is still veracity to Gambetta's (1988) observation that scholars have a tendency to refer to trust "in passing, to allude to it as a fundamental ingredient or lubricant, an unavoidable dimension of social interaction, only to move on to deal with less intractable matters" (Gambetta, 1988, *ix-x*). This 'stepping around' the issue of trust at individual, institutional and state level is broadly evident in the literature on (international) political relations in the complex and sensitive Northern Ireland context (White, 2017; Spencer, 2015, Owsiak, 2017; de Mars et al., 2018; Murphy, 2014). Trust between political and diplomatic figures is acknowledged and interwoven with many other factors, but rarely extracted and examined in isolation. However, there are practical benefits from interpersonal trust between political and diplomatic figures (Walker & Biedenkopf, 2020; Holmes & Yarhi-Milo, 2017; Brusenbauch Meislova, 2020), and as Bachmann (2011) argues, "a better understanding of how trust-building processes can be effectively supported is urgently needed in order to develop appropriate methods for policy makers to intervene in existing institutional arrangements, and to actively promote the development or repair of trust" (Bachmann, 2011, p204).

It is evident from the literature (White, 2017; Rowan; 2021; Cochrane, 2020) that trust has been a factor in securing and maintaining the Good Friday Agreement (GFA), and enabling Irish, UK and Northern Irish political and diplomatic figures to work together on behalf of their governments. This work has occurred on a multilateral basis, and with other key players including the supranational entity of the EU, both in and through Brussels as the site of EU business. Trust in these circumstances between politicians, diplomats and governments is not stable, but susceptible to changes in dynamics at interpersonal, interinstitutional and interstate levels (Searle et al, 2018; Lindsey, 2023; Wheeler, 2018), and the interactive and malleable nature of trust is both an opportunity and a challenge for making political and diplomatic relations work in practice. As such, many scholars in the fields of politics and diplomacy are interested in how and why trust relations change, and the implications of that change for peace, war, security and political or diplomatic relations broadly (Haukkala et al, 2018; Gambetta, 1988; Bjola, 2013; Wheeler, 2018; Gormley-Heenan & MacGinty, 2009; Van de Wetering, 2018; Walker, 2022). This relevance of trust for real-world political and diplomatic relationships and outcomes drives the motivation amongst trust scholars to better understand the elements of trust and the way that it works in practice. As Bachmann (2011, p204) observes, "If trust could not be influenced and indeed be deliberately created and shaped, trust research would largely be a waste of time".

This study focuses on the changing communication practices amongst Irish, UK and Northern Irish political and diplomatic figures in Brussels as a means to better understand the changing trust dynamics, and the wider implications of that, post-Brexit. Accordingly, this chapter provides the context for this research, drawing from the existing literature. It first positions the broader trust theoretical and contextual literature, before outlining the different key elements in the literature in respect of Northern Ireland specific political and diplomatic communication and trust relations in Brussels. Grounding this study through these two aspects of existing literature helps to guide this research and signpost to further opportunities for scholarly debate in respect of communications and trust in political and diplomatic contexts.

2.2 Political and diplomatic relations: positioning trust

Introduction

Trust research spans a vast multidisciplinary spectrum, although it has at times struggled to step out of discipline-specific silos (Arnott, 2007, p1203; Oomsels & Bouckhaert 2014, p579). Even within certain disciplines this remains problematic, as evidenced by the divide between the study of trust within diplomacy studies and the wider international relations field in which it sits (Adler-Nissen, 2015; Jönsson & Hall, 2005). Whilst there is a wealth of literature in the fields of politics and international relations on trust in respect of political elites, the main focus is heavily oriented in two key directions. The first of these is trust of political elites by their publics, the second is trust at the level of intergovernmental relations, predominantly from the perspective of foreign policy, international relations and conflict resolution. This research focuses on a third, relatively lesser studied element of what is sometimes known as 'elite-elite' interpersonal trust – the trust *between* political and diplomatic actors - and draws on that aspect of interpersonal trust in considering the implications for wider interorganisational and intergovernmental trust dynamics.

The trust literature broadly divides into two main camps around the fundamental roots of trust, and these have influenced the differing definitions of trust in the literature. The first of these is the behavioural (also classified as 'rationalist') approach to trust (Deutsch, 1958, 1960; Hardin, 2002, 2006; Kydd, 2000, 2005; Liebermann, 1964), which is considered entirely in terms of individual trust. The second is trust as a social phenomenon, which further subdivides into psychological (Mayer et al., 1995; Rousseau et al., 1998; Lewicki et al., 1998; McAllister, 1995;

Rotter, 1967) and sociological (Gambetta, 1988; Lewis & Weigert, 1985; Möllering, 2001, 2006) components, within which both institutional and individual presentations of trust are addressed. This simplistic division of the main schools of thought gives the false impression of clear delineations between each of these, but the reality of the borders between these categories is notably more ambiguous and porous at times. After more than sixty years of trust research across these different behaviouralist, psychological and sociological trust paradigms, there is still not a singular agreed definition of trust, as noted by PytlikZillig and Kimbrough (2016) and Li (2012). That said, there are broadly recognised consistencies around the centrality of 1). "positive expectations of trustworthiness" and/or 2). "the willingness to accept vulnerability" (Lewicki et al., 1998; Mayer et al., 1995; Rousseau et al., 1998).

Amongst political and international relations trust scholars, there is also a preoccupation with trust in conflict scenarios (Wheeler, 2018; Yarhi-Milo, 2014; Kydd, 2005), with considerably less consideration of peacetime and operational trust scenarios. In countering this disciplinary limitation, there is a small but growing body of literature taking a 'Practice Turn' (Bueger & Gadinger, 2018; Adler-Nissen, 2016b; Cornut, 2017; Pouliot & Cornut, 2015) approach, that looks to understand political and diplomatic relations by unpacking the everyday practices of interpersonal trust between political and diplomatic figures. This is key in understanding trust as something that can be practiced and influenced at the individual level. In particular, this growing body of work offers the potential to begin to identify common factors in forming and maintaining trust in different conflict and non-conflict scenarios, and identify potential gaps, overlaps, similarities and distinctions between these different contextualised forms of trust.

Understanding trust at the interpersonal and inter-organisational level

Amongst trust scholars there is now a common recognition of the complexity of the multilevel and multireferent nature of trust (Reynolds & Lander, 2023; Gillespie et al, 2021; Fulmer & Gelfand, 2012). In the political and diplomatic context, this means that trust can exist, interact and be influenced in different ways at individual, organisational and state levels. This aligns with Fulmer and Gelfand's (2012) contention that "trust within any one level does not occur in a vacuum and needs to be considered in the context of trust and related factors at the other levels" (Fulmer & Gelfand, 2012, p1204). However, as Fulmer and Gelfand (2012, p1170) highlight, this multidisciplinary recognition of the complexity, interactivity and differences of trust at these different levels has emerged over time, with much of the early trust scholarship focused

exclusively on trust at the individual level. It is only more recently that organisational trust scholars have begun to address this by establishing a conceptualisation of trust as a "shared construct", going beyond the individual-level conceptions of trust (Fulmer & Gelfand, 2012, p1173).

Approaching the issue of trust through the social phenomenon paradigm provides a theoretical lens for considering political and diplomatic trust relationships as existing at both an individual and an institutional level. In looking at trust within and between firms, Rousseau et al. (1998, p393) suggested that trust "may be a 'meso' concept, integrating microlevel psychological processes and group dynamics with macrolevel institutional arrangements". Fulmer and Gelfand's (2012, p1207) multilevel review of trust research also points to a need for greater understanding of "how trust at one level may be affected by or has an impact on trust or constructs at different levels". This flexibility and ability to conceive of trust as something that can and does switch and transfer between the individual and institutional level goes to the heart of a wider debate about the operationalisation of political and diplomatic decision making and communication. Wheeler (2013) argues that trust is fundamentally a function and interaction at the individual level, not the state or organisational level. However, Wheeler also makes the strong case for recognising that, in political and diplomatic contexts, individuals are not acting as individuals but as representatives: "those human agents who are central to whether diplomacy succeeds or fails at all levels speak and act in the name of collectivities called states" (Wheeler, 2013 p480).

Diplomatic relations exist between states, but as Faizullaev (2014, p276) asserts "diplomacy is not achievable without the activity of organizations and individuals". Choudhury (2008) argues that interorganisational trust is a "relational orientation", derived from interaction at both the personal and institutional level, and that the subjective evaluations of individual actors have a role in informing these interactions (Choudhury, 2008; Oomsels & Bouckhaert, 2014, p591). There is an interconnectivity and symmetry here with the more specific argument by trust scholars (Wheeler, 2013; Holmes & Wheeler, 2020; Ruzicka & Keating, 2015) that the human aspect of diplomatic relationships is integral in facilitating trust at the interorganisational and state level. As Holmes and Wheeler (2020, p137) assert, tacit knowledge of the considerable difference that "interpersonal interactions among leaders, diplomats, and policymakers can make" is not new amongst international relations and diplomacy scholars, although they acknowledge the paucity of systematic engagement with the effects of these interactions as a field of enquiry. Pulling together the different approaches to considering trust as an individually constituted or socially constructed state, Wheeler (2018) suggests that trust research in international relations and

diplomacy contexts clusters around five key premises. He summarises these as “leap in the dark”, incrementalism through “rounds of reciprocal cooperation”, shared identity building, individualist trust building based on the “dispositions and beliefs” of leaders, and finally interpersonal trust as “an emergent property of dyadic interaction between decision makers” (Wheeler, 2018, p25).

In consolidating the field on trust, one significant ongoing challenge is the different operationalisations of trust. One of the issues that trust scholars in the international relations and diplomacy arena seem to grapple with in particular is the question of whether trust can be applied and bridge between more than one level or whether it can only be owned at the individual or institutional level. There is a clear tension in the literature between those who see trust as either wholly a condition and consequence of activity at the individual or organisational level, and those who see it as the combined result of activity at both individual and collective (organisational or state) level. Rationalist and psychological proponents predominantly position trust as an interactionist concept at the interpersonal level. By contrast, proponents of the sociological model frame trust as a means to understanding trust at not just the individual level, but also at organisational or collective level. Perhaps though, this binary distinction oversimplifies the complexity of political and diplomatic contexts, where a more sensitive reading of trust as shared territory between the two might help in acknowledging the strengths and vulnerabilities bound up in the human element of building trust through interaction (Lindsey, 2023; Kegley & Raymond, 1990; Wheeler & Holmes, 2020).

Taking a sociological approach, Lewis and Weigert (2006) argue that creating a false divide between individual and institutional operationalisations of trust is counterintuitive because it is an issue that is interwoven through both. Keating (2015, p2) expands on this, arguing that the concept of trust is both a function between political and diplomatic figures, and also at the state level, positing that “states can, and should, be conceptualized as agents in the international system with the ability to either determine trustworthiness or enter into trusting relationships”. This research, concerned as it is with the trust implications of changing communication and trust dynamics amongst political and diplomatic figures in Brussels, aligns with this concept of trust as a social phenomenon and something which occurs at both interpersonal and inter-organisational levels. However, the existing literature highlights a number of key unresolved tensions in the application of this conception of trust in the context of international relations and diplomacy.

Bjola (2013) rejects the concept of trust in favour of his concept of “collective intentionality” driving the interpersonal dynamics between diplomats. Bjola (2013) reasons that collective intentionality is the concept which best captures the way that “people usually start developing

affinities towards each other by working and doing something together and then sharing the success of their collaboration" (Bjola, 2013, p14). Fundamentally challenging "the rather elusive question of trust" he argues that collective intentionality is a more tangible concept (Bjola, 2013, p14). However, a key weakness of this argument which goes unaddressed by Bjola is that collective intentionality confers a simplicity and assumed shared intention on interactions, without recognising that there may be points of commonality in diplomatic action and engagement which outwardly display common ground without necessarily being underpinned by collaborative intention. An example might be when a group of diplomats working for different EU member states, who would not normally trust one another or in any other respect be considered "like-minded countries" (Elgström, 2017), work together to get collective agreement in the wider group on policy X, because in that specific instance it suits their separate national interests to do so. Whilst Bjola's (2013) framing of trust as an elusive concept may be well placed, unlike collective intentionality, trust arguably has the conceptual flexibility to recognise the nuanced interactive and changing dynamics between individuals and organisations.

Ruzicka and Keating (2015, p14) emphasise the institutional-interpersonal dual track of trust in international relations in their recognition that "states and organisations are represented by individual human beings who trust or distrust their counterparts and interlocutors", contributing to a cogent narrative for trust in the international relations arena as a psychological phenomenon. Wheeler (2013, p484) also supports this, arguing that the development and sustenance of interpersonal trust is an integral but largely ignored part of the process of international relations and diplomacy. While his argument is well made, by focusing his own research solely within the bracket of highest-level political elites and heads of state, Wheeler misses the opportunity to delve into the international organisational trust implications of interpersonal trust dynamics amongst those in more junior roles and contributing at different levels of the diplomatic and political network.

Indeed, looking widely across the literature, it would be fair to say that the majority of the attention centres on the trust relations of political and diplomatic leaders (Wheeler, 2013, 2018, 2020; Rathbun, 2009, 2012; Hall & Yarhi-Milo, 2012; Versloot, 2022; Walker, 2022). As Keating (2015) notes, in the context of international relations trust literature "the two major ways that trust is tied to individual leaders within the literature comes from Brian Rathbun, who focusses on the psychological nature of generalized trust, and Nicholas Wheeler, who focusses on the importance of the interpersonal relationships between leaders" (Keating, 2015, p2). Keating argues that trust theories need to look at both the individual leader level and also the state level

as connected but distinct if there is to be true understanding of the trust dynamics in play, and that the validity of past work by Wheeler (2013) and Rathbun (2012) is undermined by their "conflation of the state and leadership levels" (Keating, 2015, p6). Arguably, Keating's own suggested solution in fact does not fully resolve the problem either, given that it retains the individual level of analysis at leadership level, instead of arguing for a wider consideration of political and diplomatic actors in other roles and at other levels.

Shifting focus away from the literature looking at interpersonal trust amongst (senior) politicians, the parallel track of trust research in respect of civil servant and administrative roles is naturally largely focused on domestic rather than multilateral and international contexts such as the Brussels bubble. It is also considerably less voluminous, although growing, with notable work by Oomsels (2013), Oomsels and Bouckhaert (2014), Eichbaum and Shaw (2008), Rice et al. (2023), and Gouglas (2018) as some key examples. An important point arising from this literature with potential transferability to the Brussels bubble context is in respect of the tie between communication and trust. Lewis (2014) points to the role that senior diplomats in Brussels have in creating connectivity and information flow between their home capital and the Brussels bubble. Oomsels et al. (2019) emphasise a similar connective capacity in civil servant roles. Specifically, that civil servants as "boundary spanners" (Oomsels et al., 2019, p519; Oomsels and Bouckhaert, 2014, p590) play a key role in maintaining communication and trust. The impact on trust relations is also noted, in which the "repeated, reciprocal interorganizational interactions in which specific boundary spanners repeatedly meet one another may be characterized by trust dynamics that differ from those in single, one-shot interorganizational interactions" (Oomsels et al., 2019, p519). This returns to the issue of the specific benefits of embedded, sustained communication and engagement in building relationships and trust.

Whilst it is clear from the above examples that trust research in an international relations and diplomacy context has some challenges ahead in developing a more comprehensive and representative base of analysis at the individual level, the recognition of the role of individuals as representatives both in and of their organisational setting is nevertheless encouraging. In building on these early foundations, international relations and diplomacy trust scholars could potentially take something from the approach of their colleagues in business and management disciplines, who are further advanced in their consideration of how trust is developed and sustained not just at the most senior level, but throughout and between all levels in organisational and interorganisational trust dynamics (Arnott, 2007; Bachmann & Inkpen, 2011; Fulmer 2018; Möllering et al., 2021). Bachman's (2011) work is a particularly relevant case in point, given his

assertion of the "intrinsic link between the level of interaction and the level of institutional arrangements, as well as the interplay between the two levels" as being vital to "understanding the essence of institutional-based trust" (Bachmann, 2011, p208).

In applying these findings from the trust literature to the Northern Ireland context, political and diplomatic actors representing the UK and Northern Ireland arguably find themselves in a new position relative to their former counterparts in EU member states, including Ireland. With direct access to many formal EU arenas contingent on EU membership, much of the focus for the UK and Northern Ireland by necessity now shifts to the alternatives: indirect access via 'friends' and allies, and use of informal opportunities for enhancing reputation and influence.

Relationship lifecycles and the evolution of trust.

Within the trust literature in the international relations and diplomacy field there is growing recognition and consideration of evolution of trust over time, both at the individual and organisational or state levels. There are arguably inadequacies in this body of literature in respect of the at times siloed application of this analysis, although as Fulmer and Gelfand (2012, p1206) suggest, this can bring potential opportunities for "testing principles" and establishing "a valuable and parsimonious understanding about trust" between individuals and organisations. There is a growing line of argument in the broader literature that trust is not a static state of being or engagement (Reynolds & Lander, 2023; Gillespie et al, 2021; Versloot, 2022), and that trust relationships change and adapt to circumstances over time, at both the individual (Wheeler, 2013) and organisational level (Jones & George, 1998). Rousseau et al. (1998, p395) are emphatic that "trust changes over time—developing, building, declining, and even resurfacing in long-standing relationships", and that as such trust relations can be built, stabilised and dissolved. Versloot (2022) also identifies a framework of variable core factors which affect the "vitality of trusting relations, trust climates and the decision-making process" amongst political and diplomatic figures. These findings from the literature reflect the complexity of interpersonal trust, before even bringing into consideration the additional country-specific factors, such as those in the context of Northern Ireland and EU supranational and member state politics and diplomacy, before and after Brexit (White, 2017; Tannam, 2018; Hayward & Murphy, 2018; Murphy, 2014; de Mars et al., 2018).

The significance of time is arguably particularly pertinent in the context of trust in international relations and diplomacy. It is something that has been given growing prominence in more recent

trust literature, with recognition of the "limited insights into the growth and decline of trust over time" offered by "static, 'snapshot' studies that measure trust at a single point in time and test its relationship with hypothesized variables of interest" (Lewicki et al., 2006, p992). As Rathbun (2011) asserts, "generalised trust" between individuals "begins a reciprocity circle of trust, cooperation and enhanced trust. And it helps sustain cooperation when the exchange of benefits is not consistent or frequent over time" (Rathbun, 2011, p3). Taking a more cautious view, Wheeler (2018, p2) asserts that this is not an inviolable state of being and is not "guaranteed into perpetuity; rather, it will continue as long as the bonding process and identity transformation that made it possible exists". Keohane (1986) also explores this dynamic, through his distinction between 'specific' reciprocity of trust in short term contexts where simultaneous exchange of trust may be necessary to prove trustworthiness, and 'diffuse' reciprocity in longer term situations, where trust is repaid not as a like for like exchange, but as part of a more holistic fabric of trust exchange and renewal. Looking to the evolutionary link between communication and trust, Fulmer and Gelfand (2012, p1185) point to research at both the individual and organisation level which supports the role of communication in evolving relationships and trust building, although they recognise that the specific dynamics and mechanisms are different at each of these levels. The relative paucity of trust research that looks at individual and organisational trust in conjunction means that, in turn, the potential evolution, interconnectivity and overlap between these different sets of communicative dynamics is little addressed to date.

The context of trust between political and diplomatic figures and the organisations they represent lends itself favourably to a conception of trust which, at its core, recognises trust as adaptive and fluid in responding to changing contexts and drivers over time. Looking at how trust evolves and shifts, Rousseau et al. (1998) and Lewicki et al. (1998) both proposed the notion of trust having a "bandwidth", although with notably different conceptualisations of the term. In Rousseau et al.'s (1998) case, their adoption of the bandwidth concept was an attempt to find a way to simultaneously accommodate all three elements of calculative, relational, and institutional aspects of trust within the same framework, based on their assertion that "trust takes different forms in different relationships—from a calculated weighting of gains and losses to an emotional response based on interpersonal attachment and identification" (Rousseau et al., 1998, p398). For Lewicki et al. (1998) it was a means of firstly, incorporating the elements of trust and also distrust within the same conceptual framework and secondly, suggesting that the concept of an interactive bandwidth could be helpful in understanding trust relationships not just as something that represent a singular moment in time, but as entities which mature and change over time (Lewicki et al., 1998, p443). Whilst these two interpretations of the "bandwidth" concept of trust

are divergent in their application, both share the common recognition that trust is not a static, pre-formed entity and there is arguably some mileage in trying to find ways to further integrate both interpretations.

Versloot's (2022) work on the vitality of trusting relations in multilateral relations within the EU through the work of the Council of the European Union is a strong new addition to the consideration of the evolution of interpersonal trust in everyday multilateral diplomacy and the different factors that positively or negatively affect the vitality of trust in this context. Equally, Walker's (2022) work on the factors affecting the trust in the person in the role of Chair in multilateral negotiations is another key contribution in demonstrating interpersonal trust evolution in everyday multilateral settings. However, although looking at distinctly different angles of multilateral diplomacy and engagement, for both these studies the focus of multilateral and interpersonal trust building relates to trust built in the context of formal business, amongst players who - at the personal and organisational level - are 'at the table' together. This is notably different from the post-Brexit context of this study, in which the UK has actively chosen not to be at the formal EU table at the state level, and Northern Ireland cannot 'play the game' at that level even if it wanted to, because of its subregion status. This positions trust relations between the political and diplomatic figures representing Ireland, Northern Ireland and the UK in the Brussels bubble, post-Brexit, in new territory. Shared interests and opportunities for trust-building and maintenance have changed. These will now likely be driven by informal rather than formal engagement, frontloading much of the trust-building work on to personal and informal rather than formal and systemic opportunities for communication, influence and engagement. Being able to build and maintain trust in everyday practice will be a key tool for those in Brussels, going forward.

2.3 The Brussels Bubble, Northern Ireland and the Brexit factor

Introduction

Over the years, Brussels has assumed the mantel of being the primary seat of EU business and the beating heart of the EU. Accordingly, the EU Quarter in Brussels has developed a collective presence and personality of its own. Kortelainen and Koeppen (2018, p41) describe this "imaginary political island" as being "typically related to a bubble metaphor (Brussels bubble or the EU Bubble)" populated by a wide variety of EU officials alongside political and diplomatic figures from both member states and other non-member representations. Given the continual

rotation of posts, the immediately post-Brexit cohort of UK and Northern Irish political and diplomatic figures in Brussels have the unique and time-limited experience of having an established understanding of what it means to operate on the inside of the EU business track, and a new and evolving understanding of what it means to have to do so from outside those same corridors of power.

The community of political and diplomatic actors within the Brussels bubble splits into two broad camps: those working at the state/national level, and those working at the subnational or regional level. Prior to Brexit, when the UK was one of twenty-eight member states of the EU, representation at the national level was through the UK Permanent Representation to the EU (UKRep). The devolved governments for Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales operated at the regional level in the EU structures, with Northern Ireland represented by the ONIEB (Office of the Northern Ireland Executive in Brussels). Routine business for national representations of member states is predominantly linked in with formal negotiation and policy setting functions in relation to the EU Council, the Parliament, the Commission (Pouliot, 2011; Kortelainen & Koeppen, 2018; Kuus, 2015). Subnational and regional actors do not have this same access. Instead, as outlined by Murphy (2011), Huysseune and Jans (2008) and Marks et al. (2002), the work of subnational and regional actors centres upon four primary functions: "information gathering; networking; liaising between the region and the EU; and influencing policy" (Murphy, 2011, p559). Huysseune and Jans (2008, p5) go on to add that this activity is driven by underlying motivations around securing funding and playing a political role at the EU level, in addition to "raising the region's profile and connecting with networks and a supranational community in the proximity of the EU institutions" (Huysseune & Jans, 2008, p1).

There is a small body of work looking more generally at the "peculiarities" of the intense intimacy (Busby, 2013, p204) and socialisation practices in the Brussels bubble space, and the interactive impact that has on political and diplomatic practice and relationship building (Busby, 2013; Kuus, 2014; Kuus, 2015; Kortelainen & Koeppen, 2018; Juncos & Pomorska, 2006; Lewis, 2005; Suvarierol, 2009). However, there is little extant literature directly concerned with the detail and distinctiveness of Irish-UK-Northern Irish political and diplomatic relations at the practice level within the Brussels bubble space specifically. A notable exception is Kelly's (2023, p1) work on "Sinn Féin's strategic 'venue shopping' approach in the European Parliament", although this examination is at the political party rather than government level.

Taking aside the distinct remits and power hierarchy in the UK-devolved country dynamics (Murphy, 2011), prior to Brexit, Northern Ireland and the other UK devolved authorities were able

to act in Brussels at the level of regional engagement. Under the EU's regional governance structures, Lagana (2021b) argues that they were able to utilise "a whole toolbox of relationships, resources and ideas to overcome UK centralism" (Lagana, 2021b, p36). Post-Brexit, the UK and its devolved nations have entered entirely new territory, as the first member state to ever leave the EU. As Shackleton (2016, p817) observes, whilst the provisions made by Article 50 of the Treaty on European Union provide a legal basis for handling the transition, no such mechanism exists for managing this step-change from Brussels insider to outsider, and the implications that this has at an everyday practice level. There is no longer a place for UK and Northern Irish MEPs in the European Parliament, and the UK Representation (UKRep) and the Northern Ireland Executive in Brussels (ONIEB), as national and regional representations respectively, occupy different places in respect of representation and interaction within the EU bubble.

These changes will invariably affect the way in which each engages with Ireland and other EU member states, with the EU institutions, and with each other. Although growing, the literature in this area is still in its relative infancy and the post-Brexit 'new normal' for future relationships is still being worked through. This is not least because the issue of the implementation of the Northern Ireland Protocol remains unresolved at the political level, despite continuing efforts and the introduction of the Windsor Framework as an intended means of improving the situation (Hayward & Komarova, 2022; Murray & Robb, 2023; Melo Araujo, 2023; Usherwood, 2023). The focus on the practice and implications of Brexit for political stability in Northern Ireland, and political and diplomatic relations for Northern Ireland, the UK and Ireland will remain an important research priority going forward, adding to what extant literature there is to date (Colfer & Diamond, 2023; de Mars et al, 2018; Laffan, 2018; Martill & Staiger, 2019; Murphy, 2018; Murphy, 2019; Murphy, 2021; Farrand & Farrand-Carrapico, 2021; Hayward & Komarova, 2022; Menon & Wager, 2020; Hayward & Murphy, 2018; Whitman, 2019; McEwen et al., 2020).

Communication in the Brussels bubble

In the context of politics and international relations, communication is a key medium through which "trust is articulated and developed", such that trust and communication are interdependent and "intimately entwined" (Head, 2012, p35). However, in a media-dominated political communications landscape (Soukup, 2014; Davis, 2003), political and diplomatic figures increasingly look for ways to develop relationships and work on key issues beyond the media's gaze (Owsiak, 2017; Davis, 2003; Canel & Sanders, 2012). Efforts around 'off-camera'

interpersonal relationship building and communication is vital – perhaps increasingly so – in modern politics and diplomacy as a means of building trust and rapport (Wheeler, 2018; Holmes & Wheeler, 2020; Jönsson & Hall, 2005).

Within communication literature, there is a broad split between two approaches. The transmission, encoding and decoding of messages (the Process School) on the one hand, and the production and exchange of meaning via interpretation of signals (the Semiotic School) on the other (Fiske, 2010; Wright, 2008). There is also a tendency within the literature for disciplinary isolationism, with communication scholars focusing more upon the semiotics of communicative texts, whilst communicative behaviour has tended to be the preserve of social science and psychology scholars. In practice, this conceptual separation of communicative act and communicative text is problematic in the study of political and diplomatic relationships and contexts, given that political and diplomatic signalling can arguably be both an embodied communicative act and a text (Jönsson & Hall, 2005; Cohen, 1987), as seen during the Brexit negotiations period (Dooley, 2023; Farrand & Farrand-Carrapico, 2021; Schnapper, 2021; Martill, 2022; Atkins & Gaffney, 2020). As Cioffi-Revilla (1979) demonstrates through a three-level analysis of international or diplomatic communication, this is also a multi-level concept, occurring in the form of channels (through dyads), signals-messages (through international events-intents), and networks (through international systems) (Cioffi-Revilla, 1979, p209). This links with Wheeler's (2013, p480) positioning of political and diplomatic elites acting as more than merely individuals, but as representatives of an organisation and a state, thereby indicating that perhaps even these three distinct levels laid out by Cioffi-Revilla (1979) are arguably too simplistic at times.

It is also necessary to acknowledge the variable definitions and complex interplay within the literature on communication, dialogue and engagement as related but separate aspects of communicative relationships (Lane & Kent, 2018). In particular, the distinction between dialogue as "a particular form of repeated, responsive, two-way communication", as compared to engagement as a more holistic "state of being fully immersed and involved in something" (2018, p69), or as Doerfel (2018, p234) puts it, engagement as "an ongoing, communicative orientation". Although not written from a communications perspective, in achieving these distinct elements of communicative dialogue and engagement in practice, there is an extensive body of research looking at the European regions, regional representation and paradiplomacy in the EU context (Hunt & Minto, 2017; Lagana, 2021b; Minto et al, 2023; Tatham 2008, 2013; Tatham & Thau, 2014). Much of this frames the role of these regional actors through the interactive, vertical

relationship with the central state to which they 'belong'. By contrast, as noted by Beyers and Donas (2014, p548), there is notably less literature considering the horizontal interactions amongst EU regions, although contemporary scholars such as Lagana (2021b) and Tatham (2008, 2013) are making inroads in this respect. The literature suggests that, in EU contexts, networking and communication create power and influence (Elgström, 2017, Lewis, 2014; Bomberg & Peterson, 1998; Suvarierol, 2009; Hooghe & Marks, 1996, Tatham, 2008). As such, as Beyers and Donas (2014, p548) note, enhancing the understanding of how regions form networks and exchange information in Brussels is vital in forming a wider understanding of how trust relationships work within the Brussels bubble.

Looking specifically at the Brussels context, Kuus (2014) also underlines the entanglement and interdependencies of communication and trust in political and diplomatic relationships. Kuus points to the importance of communication through informal networks as well as formal mechanisms, and the ability to build trust through interaction long before the formal requirement for trust, via "chats at receptions, in the everyday life in the European Quarter" (Kuus, 2014, p141). This slow, low risk, and routinised building of trust that Kuus refers to supports Adler-Nissen's (2015, p286) assertion that "most diplomats know, in an embodied but often unarticulated sense, that world politics is deeply relational", making the Brussels bubble an important site for building trusting relationships. Gartzke and Weisiger (2013, p25) also emphasise the relational and contextual nature of friendship as a key ingredient in international political alliances. It is arguably at this point in political and diplomatic contexts that the realms of trust and friendship (Bjola, 2013; Hoef & Oelsner, 2018) begin to overlap, with trust and friendship both recognised as having the capacity to act as a "catalyst for change in international politics by transforming the nature of interstate relations" (Koschut & Oelsner, 2014, p. 201).

Devolved representation in the Brussels bubble

Devolution following the 1998 Good Friday Agreement brought considerable change to Northern Ireland's governance arrangements, including fundamentally altering the presence, operating model and representative activity in Brussels (Moore, 2007; Murphy, 2011). The Office for the Northern Ireland Executive in Brussels (ONIEB) is the physical manifestation in Brussels of those new formalised governance and accountability relations (Phinnemore et al, 2012, p565), which formed between the UK Permanent Representation to the EU (UKRep) and the ONIEB as the Brussels-based representation for the devolved government of Northern Ireland (alongside its

Welsh and Scottish equivalents). Moore (2007, p275) summarises these changes to the configuration as being designed to "maintain the primacy of the UK negotiating stance" providing "a framework of incentives [which] links the new executive bodies to the UK's Permanent Representation, UKRep, in an effort to prevent the mediation of multiple policy positions" (Moore, 2007, p275). There was an emphasis upon collaboration, communication, and the prevention of ONIEB being in a position to "circumvent the central UK line and forge explicit strategic alignments with other member states and regions" (Moore, 2007, p280), which Murphy (2011) echoes in her analysis of the relationship.

This 'control and cooperation' reading of the situation is continued by Minto et al. (2023) in respect of the corresponding situation for Welsh and Scottish representation and paradiplomacy efforts within Brussels. Although there are differences in the Northern Irish, Welsh and Scottish situations, Minto et al. (2023) demonstrate that in the Brussels-based Welsh and Scottish relationships with UK counterparts the emphasis is on largely cooperative relationships, "punctuated with periods of tension and conflict" caused by domestic politics and intergovernmental relations (Minto et al., 2023, p15). These changing cooperation and trust dynamics in the intergovernmental relations over time (McEwen et al., 2020) were seen to have tangible implications for on-the-ground relations in Brussels, with a fractious lack of trust at the higher political level reflecting in challenging interpersonal relationships. Although Northern Ireland is not considered within the study by Minto et al. (2023), the general tenor of the pre-Brexit UK-Northern Ireland relationship captured by Murphy (2011) indicates a similar interdependency between the tone of 'big politics' and the positivity of everyday relationships in Brussels.

Where the literature evidences a difference is in the respective devolved governments approaches to engaging in Brussels. Whilst Scottish endeavours in Brussels have tipped towards concerted "low level protodiplomacy" (Minto et al. 2023, p16), typically characterised by "efforts to promote claims of political independence or autonomy" at the subregional level (McHugh, 2015, p244), the slim extant literature addressing the Northern Ireland presence in Brussels indicates a less strategically coordinated and proactive approach, reflecting the prevailing instability and divisions within the Northern Irish system. In Hayward and Murphy's (2018) assessment of the failings and challenges faced by the devolved Northern Ireland government in engaging with EU membership and Brexit, the inability to secure internal agreement and a clear position on key EU and Brexit issues (Hayward & Murphy, 2018, p282) is highlighted. Even before Brexit, Murphy (2014, p105) indicates a recognition in Brussels that engagement from Belfast-

based politicians was minimal, inconsistent, and prone to lapses given changing political persuasions of senior political figures. This made access and influence in Brussels harder, exacerbated by structural limitations on engagement imposed by the EU's multi-level governance system and the understanding that the ONIEB's engagement would remain respectful of the "overall UK government responsibility for EU relations". More generally, Northern Ireland's particularly "introverted form of politics" (Murphy, 2018) has been recognised as a disabling feature, and Hayward and Murphy (2018) give a damning assessment of Northern Ireland's long-running insularity and lack of engagement with broader EU-UK debates both before and during the Brexit period. They point to Northern Ireland's ineffectiveness to act in any consistent or meaningful capacity as an EU player because of their limited and predominantly inward looking "utilitarian motivations to avail of EU funding" and the perennial diversion of attention to "home-grown political disputes and disagreements" (Hayward & Murphy, 2018, p281). Lagana (2021b, p38) offers a more positive assessment of Northern Ireland's pre-Brexit ability, as a devolved representation in Brussels, to use the experience and agency of Northern Irish political and diplomatic figures in Brussels to "bypass the centrality of the UK government" in "mobilising the EU opportunity structure" to access programmes and funding (Lagana, 2021b, p36). This builds on previous work by Murphy (2019) and Mitchell et al. (2018), pointing to the benefits of establishing strategic partnerships and cross-border cooperation with Ireland.

Brexit has changed the nature of Northern Ireland's interface with EU business and shifted the relationship drivers and asymmetries with UK and Irish colleagues within the Brussels bubble. As part of this, Murphy (2018, p108) notes the North-South Ministerial Council's (NSMC) support for intensifying the already close working relationship between the Irish Permanent Representation and the ONIEB. In later work looking at Brexit and the complicating conception of 'sovereignty' in the Northern Irish context, Murphy (2021) is aligned with Lagana (2021b) in recognising that Brexit challenges Northern Ireland's political stability and "constitutional moorings" (Murphy, 2021, p416), although the exact post-Brexit consequences and what this means for Northern Ireland's engagement in Brussels are still unfolding. The future shape and form of Irish-UK-Northern Irish relations will play a role in exacerbating or managing these challenges, as well as enabling Northern Irish political and diplomatic figures to support regional interests and "shape and influence new opportunities structure coming from within the Union – if there are any" (Lagana, 2021b, p38). Exactly what this will now look like and mean in terms of day-to-day practice and relations within the Brussels bubble remains unaddressed in the literature to date.

The UK-Ireland dynamic and the big picture on Northern Ireland in the Brussels bubble: pre-Brexit to post-Brexit

In considering the post-Brexit Northern Irish trust and communications implications arising from shifting relations amongst political and diplomatic elites in Brussels, it is necessary to take into account the wider, enduring factors which have shaped these relationships over time. One of these is the emergence from thirty years of conflict, under the terms of the 1998 Good Friday Agreement (GFA), and the knotty challenges of maintaining political stability and progress through a consociational model of governance (Dixon, 2023; Cochrane et al., 2018; McGarry & O'Leary, 2006a, 2006b; Hayes & McAllister, 2013; Hayward & Murphy, 2018) that is increasingly coming under scrutiny with regard to whether it remains fit for purpose at this point in Northern Ireland's sociopolitical evolution (Dixon, 2023; Cochrane et al., 2018; Rice & Somerville, 2018). Another is the almost fifty-year history of the UK as an EU member state, alongside neighbouring Ireland (O'Brennan, 2019). In relation to this comembership it is also necessary to consider the framing of Brussels as a "politically neutral space" (Phinnemore et al., 2012, p569; Wright, 2018; Féron, 2014; Lagana, 2021a; Connelly, 2018) in the Northern Ireland context. In this respect there is significance to the colocation of political and diplomatic figures for Ireland, Northern Ireland and the UK, including the implications of both formal and informal interactions and the parallel engagement by the UK, Ireland and Northern Ireland with the EU's bureaucratic and policy machinery.

As O'Brennan (2019, p161) highlights, the extent of the significance of EU membership in impacting trilateral relations between the UK, Ireland and Northern Ireland, and their subsequent ability to sustain the GFA, is contested within the literature. O'Brennan argues that it positively altered the structural relationship between them, and played a 'critical role' in developing consensus building and maintaining dialogue even during periods of intense difficulty (O'Brennan, 2019, p162). By contrast, Hayward and Murphy (2018) and Tannam (2018) lean more towards an indirect and dispersed correlation between EU membership, sustained commitment to the GFA and trilateral cooperation, with the assertion that this indirect shaping of "the structures, context and language of conflict resolution among regional level actors" was the EU's "most crucial influence" (Hayward & Murphy, 2018, p279). Birrell and Gray (2017) balance both these perspectives in their consideration of the social, political and policy implications of EU membership and subsequent Brexit for Northern Ireland and the other devolved UK nations. Within this they point to the significance of the physical presence of the Office of the Northern

Ireland Executive Brussels (ONIEB) and the chance this afforded for developing beneficial contacts with member states and EU officials (Birrell & Gray, 2017, p767).

Cooper and Cornut (2019) make the case that scholars need to move away from what they consider to be the flawed thinking that 'frontline' diplomats are disconnected "from the spheres of power, having only a marginal role in decision-making processes" (Cooper & Cornut, 2019, p301). Instead, they point to the "ostensibly mundane phenomena" of everyday actions and interactions of diplomats as a vital engine that should be recognised as driving bigger political and international relations agendas (Cooper & Cornut, 2019, p301). Although sometimes only in passing, this importance of political and diplomatic relations is supported in some of the literature on Northern Ireland (Hayward & Murphy, 2018; Féron, 2014; Cochrane, 2020). Hayward and Murphy (2018) point to the positive effect on state-level relations, explaining the UK and Ireland's coexistence as EU member states as creating an element of uncontentious commonality on EU membership, vision, objectives, and policy action (Hayward & Murphy, 2018, p277). They argue that this then generated valuable common ground and trust, enabling both sides to work with Northern Ireland in maintaining sufficient political will and cooperation to sustain the GFA (Hayward & Murphy, 2018, p277).

Such reshaping of relationships is evident in the deepening evolution of the bilateral relation between the UK and Ireland over the years since they simultaneously joined the EU in 1973, and gradually established themselves in the EU (and the Brussels bubble specifically) over a sustained period. There is a tendency in the wider literature to focus on bilateral diplomatic activity in national capitals, rather than at the dispersed embassies, permanent representations and consulates embodying the "frontline" of diplomacy (Cooper and Cornut, 2019, p300), or within multinational hubs - 'bubbles' - such as Brussels or New York. However, the distinctive complexity of these multilateral bubbles (Kuus, 2014; Versloot, 2022) as operating spaces arguably supports a shift in focus. In the Northern Ireland context this is reinforced by O'Brennan's framing of Brussels as a literal as well as figurative 'neutral space' which enabled political elites from all sides to build relationships, establish mutual exchange and patterns of trust (O'Brennan, 2019, p160) over time.

In examining the ways in which trust is created and sustained over time, scholars such as Hoffman (2002), Das and Teng (1998) and Dowell et al. (2014) repeatedly point to the significance of this type of long-term structural embedding and establishment of cooperative relations. Social Exchange Theory (Cook et al., 2013; Ritzer & Smart, 2001; Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005) has been developed and refined by scholars across a plethora of disciplines since the 1960's into a highly influential means of understanding interactions and behaviours. In particular, Social Exchange

Theory points to the importance of reciprocity (Molm, 2010) and interaction as a means of supporting relationships to "evolve over time into trusting, loyal, and mutual commitments" (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). This is evidenced by the way in which Northern Irish political elites have used the shared, neutral political space in Brussels to position themselves in trusted, cooperative formal and informal alliances (O'Brennan, 2019; Hayward & Murphy, 2018). However, such relationships depend on give and take (Shackleton, 2016; Molm, 2007) and an awareness of where these relationships fit in a bigger picture. O'Brennan (2019, p158) picks this up in his consideration of the relational asymmetries in the UK-Irish relations, asserting that the "remarkable reverse asymmetry" after the Brexit referendum is notable.

In politics and diplomacy, the issues of trust and power are distinct but with areas of interface, and the aspect of relationship asymmetry plays into both (Ran & Qi, 2019; Kroeger, 2012; ÖUberg & Svensson, 2010; Bachmann, 2003). This issue of asymmetry is important, not just in respect of the trilateral UK-Irish-Northern Irish dimension, but also in wider framing of Brexit as it specifically pertains to the UK-devolved government relations (Birrell & Gray, 2017; McEwen, 2020). Whilst the power dynamic is not in itself the focus here, the UK's departure from the EU tilted the balance in respect of the relative influence the UK and Ireland had with the EU and other member states. There is also an important symbiotic link with the Irish government's loss of trust in the UK government, in response to increasingly hostile rhetoric and actions widely seen as demonstrating considerable bad faith on the part of the UK government (Dooley, 2023; Martill, 2022; Farrand & Farrand-Carrapico, 2021). This showed itself through the move towards "megaphone diplomacy" and "brinkmanship" (Tannam, 2018, p256) on both sides, in an increasingly fractious communications strategy. Scholars (White, 2017; O'Brennan, 2019; Hayward and Murphy, 2018; Tannam, 2018) all emphasise the importance of ongoing positive British-Irish relations in the successful delivery of the 1998 Good Friday Agreement and maintaining peace across the island of Ireland.

There are significant political and diplomatic ramifications underpinning Tannam's assertion that the shift towards a more combative Irish approach during the early post-(Brexit) referendum years was a conscious step away from British-Irish intergovernmental cooperation, calculated to be necessary to maintain wider trust relations with the EU at the possible risk of British-Irish ones (Tannam, 2018, p2014). This sits alongside the considered choice on the part of the UK government to work to a performative sovereigntist narrative that consistently underplayed the value of the UK-EU and UK-Ireland political and diplomatic relationships that it had steadily built over the previous four decades, as an intended display of its own power and independence

(Menon & Wager, 2020; Martill, 2022; Farrand & Farrand-Carrapico, 2021). Collectively these different provocative communicative acts on the part of the UK and Irish governments fed a highly confrontational and unconstructive negotiations environment (Dooley, 2023; Schnapper, 2021; Farrand & Farrand-Carrapico, 2021). They also contributed to setting off a sequence of landmark events and political fires at the domestic level in Northern Ireland, including the historic May 2022 election results for Sinn Féin and the considerable growth of the middle ground under Alliance, as well as the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) moving to collapse the Executive in February 2022. This was ostensibly over concerns about the viability of implementing the Northern Ireland Protocol. However, there are suspicions in many quarters that the generalised and growing "ontological insecurity" (Murphy & Evershed, 2019, p456) within the DUP political party and the wider unionist community, caused by the shockwaves of electoral and socio political change in response to the ascendancy of Sinn Féin and Alliance, have also played a significant contributory role. These shifting asymmetries and soured UK-Irish intergovernmental trust relations may not directly involve Northern Irish political and diplomatic figures. However, there are undoubtedly adverse consequences for Northern Ireland in light of the political and diplomatic fallout, which frame the context of Northern Ireland's engagement in Brussels and need further consideration.

The everyday angle on Northern Ireland in the Brussels bubble: pre-Brexit to post-Brexit

Whether representing member states or non-member states, at the state or regional level, political and diplomatic actors in Brussels do not operate in a vacuum (Chelotti, 2013; Adler-Nissen, 2015). There is a line of connection and communication with their home government, although the tangibility of this connection is variable across different countries and organisations (Tatham, 2013; Kuus, 2015). However, despite some notable examples such as Hayward & Murphy (2018), the body of literature offering detailed exploration of the causes and consequences of the intermittent engagement from Northern Ireland's political and diplomatic figures (at government rather than party level) with either EU business or the issues of Brexit remains sparse. This makes it hard to develop a comprehensive picture of the practical consequences and challenges for Northern Irish political and diplomatic figures in Brussels, looking to engage in relationship-building, informal diplomacy and communication, particularly in the current absence of an effective and functioning Executive. In her examination of the intersection of British and Irish intergovernmental cooperation, Tannam (2018) makes a strong argument for the connection between John Hume's "Three Strands Approach" to conflict

resolution (Tannam, 2018, p243) and how this relates to the formal and informal structural forms that the EU provided for cooperative relationship building and engagement between Northern Ireland, the UK and Ireland, focusing on the Brussels-centric opportunities for such activity. In this she emphasises the distinct role that membership of the European Parliament, formal UK and Irish committee membership (such as CoReper I and II) and additional informal and substate opportunities for engagement (such as via the Committee of the Regions and influence through the UK/Irish Permanent Representations) had in creating and embedding trusting relationships. However, having set out the importance of these three Brussels-centric domains of Northern Ireland's pre-Brexit political relationship building, and hinted at altered diplomatic relationships post-Brexit, Tannam does not elucidate further. In addition, her methodological focus upon qualitative data from sources drawn solely from home-based administrations, without any engagement of representatives from any of the UK, Irish or Northern Irish governmental presences in Brussels (Tannam, 2018, p244) hinders Tannam's consideration of the implications of the evolving bilateral intergovernmental relations within Brussels as a result of Brexit.

In thinking about the shifting dynamics between Irish, Northern Irish and UK political and diplomatic actors over the course of the Brexit journey since the June 2016 Brexit Referendum results, it is helpful to look to the literature on trust in political and diplomatic relations. Bjola's (2013) conception of diplomacy is helpful in framing the everyday interactions as "a method of building and managing relations of enmity and friendship in world politics" (Bjola, 2013, p8). He suggests that "by doing things together over years and sharing the fruits of collaboration, they have learned that there is something more at stake in acting together than in acting separately" (Bjola, 2013, p15). As Pouliot (2011, p550) puts it, multilateral diplomats have a stake in "making things work out". Pouliot suggests that this is an underlying accord in such relationships - "unspoken and generally unquestioned" (Pouliot, 2011, p550) - that coming up with a jointly acceptable position is the only admissible option. Although Bjola (2013) argues that it is not trust but "collective intentionality" that drives this relationship building, nonetheless, this focus on relationship building brings the concept of trust back into the frame, and makes Bjola's arguments particularly pertinent in the context of Northern Ireland's political and diplomatic relations.

Returning to the trust-power nexus, Bjola asserts that "diplomats do not exercise power directly over one another, but rather through relations of enmity or friendship. Forging joint commitments and fostering authority-sharing are the key tools of relationship-building" (Bjola, 2013, p18). This is especially relevant in considering how Brexit has impacted on the way that

political and diplomatic actors in Brussels communicate and engage at the interpersonal level, and the implications this has for wider trust dynamics at the interorganisational and interstate levels. Amongst political and diplomatic actors and organisations it would be reductive to equate friendship with alliances, but there is weight to Gartzke and Weisiger's (2013, p32) suggestion that the avoidance of enmity may enable trust and relationship building with "relatively friendly" partners. Indeed, Murphy (2011) draws attention to the different relations in Brussels, pre-Brexit, between the ONIEB and respectively, the Irish and UK Permanent Representations. Noting the "sometimes strained relations between the ONIEB and UKRep", Murphy (2011, p562) contrasts this with the proactive and deliberate engagement in a "functional and friendly" good working relationship with the Irish Permanent Representation. The intent to build trusting relations here is explicit, based on a pragmatic recognition of reciprocal benefit.

Chelotti (2013, p1069) proposes that Brussels-based diplomats could perhaps be considered as "change agents" at "the crossroads of domestic and European settings", arguing that there is an often overlooked but influential two-way flow of information and influence between Brussels and national capitals in decision making processes. By contrast, there is a more cautionary tone to Faizullaev's (2014, p294) assertion that whilst strength at any of the individual, institutional or state level will confer strength upon the others, equally failure or weakness at any of these points will also be communicable. In avoiding this, Faizullaev suggests that strength at the organisational level is "derived to some extent from the state's resources, structure, decision-making mechanisms, communication capacities, and legal foundation; and the individual agent's strengths are powered by his or her knowledge, skills, status/rank, personal relations, and political backing" (Faizullaev, 2014, p294).

Recognising the opportunities and challenges that Chelotti (2013) and Faizullaev (2014) outline here, there are particular complicating factors for Northern Irish representation in Brussels. Specifically, that the Northern Ireland-UK dynamic in the Brussels bubble reflects the broader relatively normalised pre-Brexit relational asymmetry between the Northern Irish devolved regional government and the UK government. Related to this, in the post-Brexit context, there is growing interest amongst scholars over the shifting nature and expression of unionism by the UK government and the implications that this has for intergovernmental dynamics (Murphy & Evershed,2022; Sandford, 2023; Kenny & Sheldon, 2021). However, alongside this is also the "significant 'reverse asymmetry of power' [that] emerged from the United Kingdom's relative isolation in the Brexit negotiations and Ireland's privileged position as an European Union insider" (O'Brennan, 2019, p157), which continues now that the UK has formally exited the EU. Taking

these two different (UK-Northern Ireland and UK-Ireland) relationship asymmetries into account, there are possible consequences arising from the relationship dynamics across these three groups of players. This is a particular consideration given the potential post-Brexit shared interests and incentives for cooperation between Ireland and Northern Ireland in light of Northern Ireland's unique position as a part of the UK with a distinctive post-Brexit relationship to the EU (Murphy, 2018). Post-Brexit, the way that these relationships at the political level will translate down into practice is still evolving. But the varied literature indicating the importance of networks and relationships for influence in the EU and Brussels bubble context (Huhe et al., 2018; Versloot; 2022; Perarnaud, 2022; Lewis, 2003; Huysseune & Jans, 2008) suggests that the ability for Northern Irish political and diplomatic figures to amplify regional interests within the Brussels bubble will be affected in part by their ability to handle and balance these relationships with Irish and UK counterparts in Brussels and beyond.

Political and diplomatic figures "traditionally represent, negotiate, and communicate at the frontlines of the sovereign polities in whose name they act" (Cooper & Cornut, 2019, p318). As such, for member states and non-member states alike, informal relationship building and transnational networking is a feature of the Brussels political and diplomatic landscape at both national and subnational level (Müller, 2015; Huysseune & Jans, 2008). In this context, the concept of information as currency in the EU is something that Coen and Vannoni return to repeatedly (2016, p811; 2020, p635). Tatham (2008, p511) argues that the "assumption that central governments are the sole players involved in negotiations at both the national and international tables" is outmoded. Huggins (2018) notes that, with respect to subnational actors "voluntary horizontal links" unite "subnational actors across national borders" through informal information sharing and networking on the one hand, and more formalised engagement through partnerships and associations on the other (Huggins, 2018, p1263). These wider points from the literature on political and diplomatic relations support the feasibility of Northern Ireland political and diplomatic figures being able to play an active role in keeping communication channels open. Indeed, prior to Brexit, Murphy (2011) noted that "with a current high degree of goodwill towards Northern Ireland, the ONIEB enjoys comparatively good access to key EU officials, including European Commissioners", with a two-way flow between Brussels and Northern Ireland facilitated by the ONIEB (Murphy, 2011, p560). Arguably, the challenge for the ONIEB is if and how they can continue to replicate these successes, post-Brexit.

There is not yet an answer to the question of how this relationship balance and communication flow will change, post-Brexit, and what the respective sides will experience as gains and losses

from this new dynamic. What is evident is that communication and trust in Northern Irish relationships within the Brussels political and diplomatic sphere to date are complex and dependent on the wider political environment.

2.4 Conclusion

There is a burgeoning body of literature giving consideration to Brexit and the operationalisation of the Northern Ireland Protocol (Diamond et al., 2018; Martill & Staiger, 2018; Murray & Robb, 2023; Murphy, 2021; Whitten, 2022; Colfer & Diamond, 2023; Evershed & Murphy, 2022; Cochrane, 2020; Birrell & Gray, 2017; Hayward & Komarova, 2022). Hayward & Murphy (2018) succinctly express Northern Ireland's dilemma given that "the impact of Brexit is such that two states will now diverge, leaving Northern Ireland in the awkward place between" (p285), in a new political landscape where "the EU will no longer provide a context for dialogue, cooperation, and support" (p288). What has been lost is the ability to gather in the margins and under the radar in the EU's formal spaces and structural mechanisms "to make incremental and painstaking progress" on issues of joint concern (O'Brennan, 2019, p162). Further literature emphasises the changing relations since the June 2016 Brexit referendum results, not only between the UK and the EU, but also in the Ireland-UK-Northern Ireland dynamic and internally within Northern Ireland (Laffan, 2018; Tannam, 2018; Murphy, 2019; Hayward & Murphy, 2018; O'Brennan, 2019; McQuaid, 2020; Hayward, 2021). In addition, literature looking to wider political and diplomatic trust issues such as the tensions in respect of reciprocity on Covid-19 vaccine availability (Jennings et al, 2021) and the UK's security and defence strategy (Whitman, 2020) have pointed to the risks and benefits attached to trust building/maintenance and relationship management, post-Brexit.

Within the disparate strands of scholarly activity looking at different dimensions of Brexit, identity, communication and trust are recurring touchpoints which signpost to a complicating obstacle in the already complicated Brexit conundrum: that implementation of policy and governmental decisions cannot be disentangled from the human element. The tone and direction of the Brexit negotiations and everything that followed was set at the (inter)governmental level (Dooley, 2023). However, political and diplomatic figures – people, not 'governments' at a more abstract or institutional level - are responsible for making policy work in practice. They have agency, to a greater or lesser extent (Cornut, 2018; Sztompka, 2015; Lindsey, 2023). They may work within institutions that are metaphorically framed as 'machines', but at the everyday practice level, human factors and interfaces of identity, communication and trust really matter

(Adler-Nissen et al, 2017; Atkins & Gaffney, 2020; Farrand & Farrand-Carrapico, 2020). The idea of trust, as something that can and should be better understood as a means of driving political and diplomatic relations and practice, is important. This is particularly the case in the deeply polarised Northern Ireland context, where wider trust and the line between sociopolitical stability and instability is stretched very thin at times, and where the memory of the years of violent conflict is still never far below the surface, despite twenty-five years of fragile peace under the GFA (Hayes & McAllister, 2013; Cochrane, 2020; O'Neill, 2018; Gormley-Heenan & Aughey, 2017). In these circumstances there is a clear rationale for better understanding how, in the context of Northern Ireland, political and diplomatic trust relations work.

The literature indicates a role for the Brussels bubble as a place, and for Brussels-based political and diplomatic figures, in not just reflecting, but actively communicating and creating political will and trust, by combining national interests with "cooperative Brussels diplomacy" (Svendsen & Adler-Nissen, 2019, p1422). There is, as yet, little in the literature regarding the lived realities of the Irish-UK-Northern Irish political and diplomatic dynamic in this context. Arguably, the challenge lies in the ability of UK and Northern Irish political and diplomatic figures to successfully refine their approaches to working and building relationships from outside of the formal EU spaces and networks in Brussels, after nearly half a century of having the advantage of being on the inside.

This chapter has provided a detailed overview of existing research and debates in the fields of elite-elite political and diplomatic communication and trust, and considered this alongside the literature on pre-Brexit EU membership, Brexit and Northern Ireland to give consideration to the specific Irish-UK-Northern Irish dynamics in the Brussels bubble. However, there is arguably the need for further trust research in respect of the Irish-UK-Northern Irish context, and more broadly in respect of the role that interpersonal trust plays in feeding into wider inter-organisational and interstate trust, to arrive at a greater understanding of the communication and trust dynamics involved in reframing these political and diplomatic relationships, post-Brexit.

CHAPTER 3: Methodology

3.1 Introduction

This chapter provides the outline of the research methods deployed in this study, and frames these in terms of the broader methodological, ontological and epistemological considerations relevant to social constructivism and constructivist grounded theory (CGT). This chapter provides a broad introduction to my understanding and application of social constructivist and CGT approaches, before outlining the 'practice turn' approach adopted (Bueger & Gadinger, 2018; Adler-Nissen, 2016b; Cornut, 2017; Pouliot & Cornut, 2015), and detailing the specific data collection and analysis aspects of the constructivist grounded theory research methods applied.

Quality research: putting the 'quality' in 'qualitative'

Qualitative research is a "discipline of discovery" (Flick et al., 2004, p25) and in breaking from the quantitative focus on proof or disproof, it brings with it a nuanced and complex consideration of "judging quality" (Tracy, 2010; Staller, 2021). In departing from the methodological strictures of positivist research conventions and the "quantitative criteria of objectivity, reliability, validity" above all else (Steinke, 2004, p257), the challenge for qualitative research is in remaining credible, impactful and "at once theoretically grounded and methodologically rigorous (even if its rigor takes different forms from that which is to be found in positivist research)" (Prasad, 2017, p4). Grounded theorists have argued that it is unhelpful to 'measure' qualitative research against the same markers, and that qualitative research must be evaluated on its own canons, not on those imposed by the dominant quantitative tradition (Charmaz & Thornberg, 2021, p310). There are a number of recognised quality markers for qualitative research (Tracy, 2010), which I have embedded throughout my approach to data collection and analysis.

Rigour is one such key quality marker (Collins & Stockton, 2018). Although I would agree with Tracy (2010) that attaching numbers to qualitative research - how much data, how much analysis and so on – is not a foolproof measure of quality, I also recognise that it can support rigour which in turn can "increase the odds for high quality" (Tracy, 2010, p 841) research. Retaining a focus on quality in collecting and analysing data, this study has focused on securing a "rich complexity of abundance" (Tracy, 2010, p841), using CGT methods to allow themes and theories to emerge from the data. Alongside rigour, Charmaz (2006, 2014) also argues that "credibility, originality, resonance, and usefulness" are key quality markers for grounded theory studies (Charmaz &

Thornberg, 2021, p315) and these were points of critical reflection which I returned to throughout. In achieving credibility, Charmaz and Thornberg (2021, p315) emphasise the importance of being able to "persuade sceptical audiences", suggesting that more data and "more incisive questions" about that data make it more likely (Charmaz & Thornberg, 2021, p315). But it goes wider than that, and as Saldana et al. (2011, p135) observe, "research is an act of persuasion" such that whilst qualitative research may not aim to prove or disprove, it does need to reassure the reader that the questions asked were important and meaningful, and the processes adopted in answering those questions were informed and credible (Saldana et al., 2011, p136). CGT-driven research emphasises the role that individuals play in the (social) construction of knowledge and meaning through their ability to both "perpetuate and alter their worlds" (Klotz et al., 2006, p355). As such, my consideration of the credibility of this study extended not just to the processes used and the data gathered, but also to my own involvement as researcher, as well as the suitability and relevance of each interviewee. In elite interviewing, this element of interviewee credibility comes from firstly securing the 'right' interviewees and secondly ensuring that the interviews get beyond the outer façade to the real substance of the issue. This can be particularly challenging when interviewees potentially bring their own agenda (Slote Morris, 2009, p211) and skills in diplomacy and evasiveness to the process. I also recognised that my interpretation and interaction with the data could affect the overall credibility of the findings. Particularly given the CGT tenet that data alone reveals nothing, and imbuing data with meaning is dependent on the researcher bringing their own experiences, knowledge and interaction with the social world to construct this meaning (Leavy, 2014, p85).

Identity, positionality and why it matters

Whilst the idea that "ontological assumptions lead to epistemological assumptions" (Coşkun, 2020, p2) is generally logical, they are not necessarily unequivocally evident in the way we practice or communicate our research. Indeed, there is scholarly contestation around the role that theoretical perspectives and epistemology play in shaping our approach to research. The argument that these aspects are essential in enabling us to effectively select and apply research methods (Daba-Buzoianu & Bîră, 2017, p9) sits in opposition to the view that there are times when "epistemological indifference" or even outright avoidance are understandable if "hazardous" (Bryant, 2019, p60). My own view is that our theoretical, ontological and epistemological standpoints drive method, even if unconsciously at times. Even - as Graue and Karabon (2012, p16) note - that "epistemology is such an all-encompassing element that it

remains tacit rather than explicit", with indicative "markers of epistemology" commonly evident in place of specific reference to epistemological viewpoints or adherence. One such notable marker of my own social constructivist epistemological stance is my recognition of the relevance of my own positionality as a researcher, and the positionality of my interviewees. This acknowledgement of the significance of positionality is reflected in the underlying research focus on better understanding the perceptions and lived experience of political and diplomatic figures.

Positionality can be described as "an individual's world view and the position they adopt about a research task and its social and political context" (Holmes, 2020, p1). I recognise this as something which has shaped my own understanding and perception of the research context that I am studying, the way in which I engage with it, and the way in which my participants engage with me. In recognising this interactivity, I am not looking to uncover a singular truth, and I appreciate the potential for multiple different truths, dependent on the viewpoints and contexts that I engage and uncover. As Saldana et al. (2011, p22-23) write, my aim is to "come to insight and understanding about social life, not necessarily to predict and control it", and I accepted and expected this insight and understanding to shift throughout my research process, based on the research participants involved and interviews undertaken.

In constructivist grounded theory research, researcher positionality is acknowledged and welcomed as part of the process of constructing an understanding of the knowledge derived from the findings. This "dynamic interaction" and "mutual influence on one another" (Leavy, 2014, p83) between researcher and participant is considered to be central to actively constructing understanding. The argument is that aiming to remove bias through researcher neutrality and objectivity is less important than seeking to "enhance the trustworthiness of the findings by including and documenting multiple perspectives on the focus of the inquiry" (Leavy, 2014, p83). I see this as an important reframing rather than reduction of the notion of academic rigour, to more fully reflect the ontological and epistemological drivers of subjective and constructivist research, which I would suggest is perhaps methodologically more transparent and beneficial than effectively ignoring the impossibility of forcing an epistemological square peg into a round hole.

'Objectivity' and 'neutrality' are key watchwords in the positivist empirical research lexicon, but in adopting the more interpretivist and subjective CGT approach I have followed the well-known maxim that we should strive to "bring an open mind, not an empty head" (Giles et al., 2013) to research. The axiological idea that "no research endeavour is value-free in that researchers brings their values to what is researched" (Yilmaz, 2013, p316) and the idea that positionality is

understandably influential over objectivity (Holmes, 2020, p5) resonated for me, in respect of application in the political and diplomatic spheres as well, and my own professional and personal background played a part in this. After a decade of far-flung expatriate working, in 2018 we moved to Belgium. The reality of living in Europe whilst the Brexit withdrawal negotiations were ongoing made the issues of identity and the broader political and social discourses they sat within very tangible. At this time I was also working in Brussels at what was then known as the UK Permanent Representation to the EU (UKRep). This allowed me to gain some understanding and experience of the 'Brussels bubble'. I came to appreciate some of the nuances of how business passes through the EU institutional structures of Commission, Parliament and Council. I became familiar with esoteric aspects of EU Committee structures and roles like the Antici, Mertens and Nicolaidis groups[1], which are hugely important to keeping the wheels of EU negotiation in motion, and yet barely known or commented on by anyone beyond the Brussels bubble. I witnessed dynamics and alliances at play between individuals and institutions representing different member states in policy work and negotiations. I experienced how formal 'lines to take' and positions from London came into the office and were handled in the Brussels context. My time in post opened my eyes to some of the day-to-day relationships and realities of working in the EU quarter. It was enough to mean that I came to this PhD with a pre-existing understanding of Brussels and an awareness of some of the particularities of political and diplomatic relationship building. It also supplied me with a feeling that there might be something distinctive about the way that communication and trust work within the Brussels bubble, as a result of the presence of the EU institutional superstructures of Commission, Council and Parliament, and the collective presence and ways of working of representations for all the EU member and non-member states and institutions.

In thinking about the impact of positionality on the research process and the rigour, credibility and overall quality of outputs, I found the concepts of researcher/interviewee conscious and unconscious baggage (Scheurich, 1997, p74) and identity (McEvoy, 2006, p185; Bourke, 2014) useful. Related to this, I am also cognisant of the 'insider-outsider' aspect of positionality (Holmes, 2020, p6) and the extent to which this brings conscious and unconscious baggage, both positive and negative in impact. As Holmes (2020, p6) notes, there can be a tendency in research to claim an either/or insider or outsider, subjective or objective perspective, although there is a

[1] Each EU member state has Antici, Mertens and Nicolaidis - senior diplomats (attachés*)* who meet 2-3 times every week, before their Ambassador/ Permanent Representative attends every Coreper II, Coreper I and Political & Security Committee (PSC) respectively. The attachés work collectively to iron out issues and positions and choreograph speaking points, so there are no unexpected surprises and items progress appropriately at formal committee level.

growing argument that this two-track distinction risks projecting an overly simplistic binary choice (Bourke, 2014), which has led some scholars to challenge this reductionist and "simplistic subjectivity-objectivity dichotomy" (Aiello & Nero, 2019, p252; Labaree, 2002, p101). An alternative perspective put forward is one of positionality as an interactive and mobile repositioning of constructed roles and selves between researcher and subjects (Davies & Harré, 1990, p. 49; Harré & van Langenhove, 1991; Savvides et al., 2014), which has the potential to change both within a single interaction, and over a longer period. This casting of insider-outsider "not as roles but as ephemeral positions" (Aiello & Nero, 2019, p252) which are "complex, multi-layered, and context-dependent" (Aiello & Nero, 2019, p261) is a welcome, nuanced portrayal which fits with my own feelings and sense of my evolving insider-outsider status with interviewees. In conducting this study I have felt myself both an insider and outsider at different points (Mullings, 1999). The boundaries of this divide have been fluid and influenced by my own projection of, and others' perceptions of, a number of variables including my nationality, social demographics and professional standing. Whether this insider-outsider ambiguity is helpful is questionable, but it does support the logic of giving genuine consideration to my positionality. It challenges me to recognise my positionality, my insider-outsider status, but to wear it lightly and embrace the fluidity and change in positionality (Greene, 2014, p2; Chaves-Reyes, 2008). It also allows me to recognise it as an indication of working effectively within a positionality continuum, rather than perceiving it as a failure to hold my ground and remain static within a dichotomised conception of positionality (Greene, 2014, p2).

Whilst researcher positionality is often discussed in terms of cultural or ethnic identity, in this study insider-outsider status in respect of professional identity also played a contributory role, particularly in establishing credibility when trying to secure interviews, as well as in developing rapport with interviewees before and during interviews. Although not only framed in terms of researcher insider-outsider status, this aspect of relationship building is addressed in work looking at the challenges of reputation and rapport building in elite interviewing (Aberbach & Rockman, 2002; Liu, 2018; Peabody et al., 1990). I also recognised that elite interviewing carries particular issues around "positionality and power negotiations" (Bakkalbasioglu, 2020, p 691), with the very real potential for an adverse perception by interviewees of my own positionality to impact upon "the quality of the interviews and information collected during the research" (Bakkalbasioglu, 2020, p 691; Boucher, 2017). This was one of the driving factors in my considered approach and additional time committed to building credibility and rapport with each interviewee.

By definition, positionality is a personal and highly reflexive thing. Acknowledging the significance of researcher and interviewee positionality rather than "trying to eliminate their effect" as a source of bias (Holmes, 2020, p3) is, in itself, a tacit challenge to the dominant positivist assumptions around researcher objectivity and neutrality. In adopting CGT assumptions, I have considered positionality as a contributory factor in this research. However, I also recognise that reflexivity alone does not automatically guarantee transparency or quality, such that consideration of positionality is just one strand contributing to a larger set of considerations and practices underpinning quality research.

3.2 Research approach and design

Constructivist Grounded Theory and taking a Practice Turn approach

Grounded theory is "a qualitative research methodology that incorporates guidelines for simultaneous data collection and analysis to develop theories about social processes that are grounded in real-life experiences" (Rieger, 2019, p1). However, there are numerous different conceptions of grounded theory, with different ontological and epistemological roots, which "move up against and flow into one another" (Denzin, 2019, p450) and which feed different approaches to theory formation (Apramian et al., 2017). As Mills (2014) acknowledges, disentangling the philosophical and theoretical underpinnings to methodology can be tricky. There are many circumstances where there is not one singular, constant and unswerving line of connectivity between a given methodology and its ontological and epistemological footprint. This is evident in the journey Ralph, Birks and Chapman (2015) chart from the positivist leanings of 'classic' grounded theory as conceived by Glaser and Strauss (1967 / 2010), to the postpositivist approach of Strauss and Corbin (1990 / 1998), through to the constructivist approach led by Charmaz (2006; 2008). This supports Prasad's (2017, p5) point that the term 'research paradigm' can often lend a deceptive veneer of ontological and epistemological cohesion and practice specificity that doesn't always relate to "the messy reality of contested ideas, multiple ongoing influences, and constant experimentation" (Prasad, 2017, p6). Nonetheless, there are common "family resemblances" (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007, p11) in grounded theory method, particularly in respect of the inductive approach to simultaneous collection and analysis of data, with a view to deriving theory that is grounded in the data (Rieger, 2019, p2).

Kathy Charmaz created the CGT approach, sometimes referred to in the grounded theory literature as 'Charmazian grounded theory' (Apramian et al., 2017). As one branch of the

grounded theory family tree, there are four core relativist ontological and subjectivist epistemological assumptions at the heart of the CGT approach. Charmaz outlined these as: "(1) reality is multiple, processual, and constructed—but constructed under particular conditions; (2) the research process emerges from interaction; (3) it takes into account the researcher's positionality, as well as that of the research participants; (4) the researcher and researched co-construct the data—data are a product of the research process, not simply observed objects of it. Researchers are part of the research situation, and their positions, privileges, perspectives, and interactions affect it" (Charmaz, 2008, p402).

CGT is distinctive from its precursors (Glaser & Strauss, 1967 / 2010; Strauss & Corbin, 1990 / 1998) in recognising the counterintuitive positivist and postpositivist influences over prior grounded theory approaches. In addition, in the earliest versions of grounded theory, researchers were encouraged to avoid the extant literature prior to data collection and analysis, as a means of mitigating the concern that this would influence theory formation, rather than allowing more organic theory emergence through the data. Whilst I recognise the intentions behind this early stance in the grounded theory approach, I would argue that this risks throwing the baby out with the bathwater, and the more pragmatic approach adopted by Charmaz (2006; 2014) to reviewing the literature in a timely manner was a key reason that I was drawn to the CGT approach. For established academics with extensive experience and publication history behind them, the idea that they could come to a new project in their field with an entirely blank mind is implausible; for new and early-career academics who attempt to be true to these methodological specificities there is well-expressed concern in the extant literature about the risk to research quality and researcher reputation (McCallin, 2003; McGhee et al., 2007). This was something I was keen to avoid. In addition, I welcomed the reflexivity of the CGT approach, which very consciously drives a form of grounded theory which recognises the importance and influence of the individual – both the participant(s) and the researcher – in shaping the research process and outcomes. The emphasis on positionality and co-construction made this method particularly attractive over other branches of grounded theory, given the synergy that this offers with the recognition in this study that international relations and high politics are impacted upon by individuals and their interactions. Traditional Grounded Theory approaches also take a more formulaic and regimented approach to data analysis, with such specificity around the coding, memoing and analysis processes that I agree with Melia's (1996; 2010) assessment that it risks "the technical tail beginning to wag the theoretical dog" (Melia, 1996, p376). Again, the Constructivist Grounded Theory approach offered a more adaptive and responsive approach to data analysis, which

seemed to me to offer more scope to enable theory to emerge from the data and was therefore more in keeping with the espoused purpose of the Grounded Theory method.

As a methodological approach, CGT "acknowledges individual agency in making meaning" (Groen et al., 2017, p3), as distinct from a social constructivist outlook which "views individuals as products of society" (Groen et al., 2017, p3), in which "our social context informs identity and action, or who we are and what we do" (Srivastava, 2020, p325). Together, the two mark an important turn towards subjectivism and acknowledging that politicians, diplomats, civil servants and other elite actors have their own agency and are more than automaton-like representatives of the institution or state they represent. Taking these constructivist ontological and epistemological foundations, this study applies a so called "practice turn" approach (Bueger & Gadinger, 2018; Adler-Nissen, 2016b; Cornut, 2017), in which everyday practices are the "main units of analysis" (Pouliot & Cornut, 2015, p300), with a theoretically-focused purposefulness, common to the practice turn approach, in applying this mundane practice lens "to resolve the tension between structure and agency in the moment of practice" (Adler-Nissen, 2016b, p88).

Constructivism is an approach to research which is used within a broad spectrum of disciplines, but irrespective of broader disciplinary distinctions and challenges, it is wholly committed to the ontological and epistemological value of subjectivity and interpretation. It supports the notion of multiple possible realities, and the possibility of subjective and intersubjective understanding. There is an associated profound shift away from the objective neutrality of positivist research to a recognition of the role of researcher subjectivity and positionality in constructing knowledge and understanding of what is being seen and understood from the research. There is a consistently important interactive role for the researcher in engaging with and interpreting the literature and collecting and interpreting the data. Bearing these methodological groundworks in mind, my own approach to the literature review, data collection and data analysis aspects of this study is outlined below.

Engaging with the literature

The constructivist approach to grounded theory emphasises that theories and data evolve as the product of interpretative co-construction and "the interplay between the researcher, the environment, the participants and the literature" (Thornberg & Dunne, 2019, p218). As such, I align with other constructivist grounded theorists in making the conscious choice to engage with the literature, even at the earliest stages of the research (Charmaz, 2006; Charmaz, 2008). In

doing so I explicitly reject the methodological stance advocated in the earliest conceptions of grounded theory (Glauser and Strauss, 1967/2010, p37) that engagement should be avoided in the early stages of the research, so as to prevent the research or researcher being 'tainted' by existing literature or theory.

I conducted a preliminary review of the literature, ascertaining an overview of current scholarship on trust and communication, particularly in respect of political and diplomatic relationships and the post-Brexit Northern Ireland and Brussels political and diplomatic contexts. Establishing this broad, early understanding of the existing literature enabled me to refine my understanding of the gaps in the field and hone my research questions. This preliminary review was supported by a return to the literature later in the research process and again during my data analysis phase. This iterative approach is typical of the CGT approach as a whole, as evident in the back-and-forth coding and theme development stages (Charmaz, 2006, 2008). By conducting the literature review iteratively, it allows for a different focus at each stage – firstly general familiarisation, then enhancing contextual understanding of findings emerging from the data, and finally positioning "the constructed grounded theory in relation to established theoretical ideas ... [to] identify theoretical reference points against which to compare and contrast the data" (Thornburg & Dunne, 2019, p211). As such it allowed me to progressively sharpen my analysis through more insightful and focused reading of the literature, and as Charmaz (2006, p166) notes, it is an approach that brings the added benefit that it "strengthens your argument – and your credibility" (Charmaz, 2006, p166).

3.3 Data collection

Introduction

This qualitative study draws on fifty-two semi-structured, in-depth elite interviews with civil servants, diplomats and politicians, policy experts and political commentators, looking at day-to-day working relationships between Irish, UK and Northern Irish politicians, diplomats and civil servants working in the Brussels bubble, post-Brexit. On the political side, I spoke with current and former MEPs. With regards to civil servants and diplomats, I selected interviewees with relevant roles and experience, working in the EU institutions, the Irish Permanent Representation, UK Mission (known as the UK Permanent Representation before Brexit), and the Office for the Northern Ireland Executive in Brussels (ONIEB). Rigour was also added by interviewing further politicians, civil servants and diplomats from all three home capitals, and also a small number of

well-placed policy experts and political commentators. Every interviewee was specifically identified as having a particularly relevant and important insight to add, in better understanding and contextualising the Brussels bubble communication and trust dynamic. I use the term 'elite interviews' to reflect the fact that interviewees were purposively sampled (Campbell et al., 2020) for their particularly pertinent experience, expertise and knowledge, having been individually identified as having a contribution to make to the research.

The interviews were focused upon understanding everyday practice experiences and perceptions, to explore how trust-building, relationship-building and communication happen between individuals, and use this to develop a better understanding of how this feeds into the wider post-Brexit political landscape that supports the maintenance of the Good Friday Agreement. Questions focused on how relationships between politicians, diplomats and officials work on an everyday level - the way communication is used in different contexts, how relationships are formed and strengthened, how trust is built. The intention behind this is to explore what is significant or distinctive about the Brussels bubble dynamic for trust and trust building, and where this piece of the puzzle fits in relation to politics conducted on home ground in Northern Ireland. In turn, this enables broader consideration of how and why continued presence and engagement in the Brussels bubble matters for the future Northern Ireland-Ireland-UK relationship and the enduring commitment to maintaining North-South and East-West relations (Kelly & Tannam, 2023) which support peace in Northern Ireland.

Throughout this thesis, interviewees are identified only by number. I chose not to add further detailed definition, given that many of the individuals I spoke with could potentially be personally identified by their colleagues, counterparts or interested others if too many such 'cookie crumbs' were scattered. This was a conscious decision on my part, reflecting the ongoing sensitivity of the political and diplomatic context around the subject studied, my respect for the anonymity of the interviewees I spoke with, and my gratitude for their candour about the issues discussed.

This next section of the chapter outlines the approach I took to identifying and selecting interviewees, the aspects of my pre-engagement with interviewees, and the elements of conducting and writing up the interviews.

Who to interview?

Two core sets of interviews formed the basis of this study:

- Individuals in a range of roles from different institutions in the Brussels bubble, as the primary context.
- Individuals in political, civil servant or diplomatic roles in the home capitals of Belfast, Dublin and London.

Across these groups, twenty-six civil servants and diplomats were interviewed, together with a further seventeen politicians. In addition, a further nine interviews were also completed with highly engaged policy experts and political commentators with expertise in relevant aligned areas.

Selection of interviewees started on the basis of purposive sampling initially, with identification based on a combination of key factors: the individuals' employing organisation, the relevance of their role/remit, their career history and experience in respect of engaging with Northern Irish issues, Brexit related concerns in respect of Northern Ireland, and the Brussels bubble context. Prior knowledge of some of the key organisations and individuals in Brussels provided a starting point, combined with extensive desk research which produced an initial long list of around sixty people to contact, although I anticipated that not all of these would commit to an interview and that this would be only an initial starting point. This process for identifying interviewees was then supplemented by a targeted snowballing approach. This was achieved by asking all interviewees either during their interview or as part of follow up communication afterwards if they had any recommended further contacts for me to consider. Where the snowball recommendations were particularly helpful was in identifying individuals – particularly civil servants – who might normally be out of the public domain. The snowball approach worked well, although as a novice academic I felt somewhat ungainly at times in walking the tightrope in these conversations between prioritising ethical commitments and protecting the confidentiality of previous interviewees, whilst acknowledging a more general sense of ethical awkwardness around transparency and politeness to my current interviewees who were offering me names and asking if I'd spoken to them already. Although I have since uncovered accounts of similar uncomfortable moments for other academics (Farquharson, 2005; Duke, 2002) there appears to be no real solution to the problem beyond giving vague, polite answers and learning to accept the awkwardness. Although my assurances of confidentiality for interviewees meant that I was unable to mention names of secured or completed interviews as leverage when contacting those recommended new potential

interviewees, nonetheless this snowballing approach proved to be a very rewarding strategy which yielded some extremely relevant contacts, a number of whom accepted interviews.

Taking Guetterman's (2015) position that our remit as qualitative researchers is to "explain, describe, and interpret", (p3) the intent behind purposive sampling was not only about securing "representative opinions, but a matter of information richness" (Guetterman, 2015, p3). That said, a degree of pragmatism was needed in the face of rejected invitations to interview, given that in purposively-sampled elite interviewing every person approached has been selected with some degree of intent. In the end a total of fifty-two interviews were conducted. In keeping with grounded theory practice (Thomson, 2011; Corbin & Strauss, 1990/1998; Glaser & Strauss, 1967/2010), my decision to stop interviewing at this point was based on achievement of "theoretical saturation" (Glaser & Strauss, 1967/2010; Strauss & Corbin, 1990/1998; Charmaz & Thornburg, 2021, p309) and "thematic saturation" (Staller, 2021, p902), whereby interviews were no longer providing novel information and codes during the iterative production of analytical memos and initial coding work.

The majority of interviews lasted around an hour, and every interview was conducted remotely, via Zoom videoconferencing. This reflected the ongoing Covid-19 restrictions in place at the time that interviews were first being conducted, and I maintained the Zoom format throughout for consistency, and in keeping with the specificities of the interview processes that I had outlined in seeking ethical approval for the study. It also enabled greater flexibility on my part to respond to the availability of interviewees in the different geographical locations of Brussels, Belfast, London and Dublin.

Pre-interview: getting to Yes!

I contacted every potential interviewee by email, starting with a general introduction and invitation to interview, and following up with more specific details when invitations were accepted. For non-replies I allowed myself up to two polite follow up emails, to maximise the potential for uptake. In ideal circumstances I would have also used policy events and similar opportunities as networking opportunities and offered introductory face to face pre-meetings for interviewees or their "gatekeepers" (Harvey, 2010, p10) as a means of establishing rapport and credibility in advance of the interview. However, even after Covid-19 restrictions had lifted, the enduring preference for some aspect of remote working, a very slow return of 'in-person' policy and networking events in Brussels, and a general wariness about non-essential in-person

meetings preventing this from being a viable option. Acknowledging this challenge, I used my email exchanges with interviewees and their gatekeepers to establish rapport and give a positive impression, by ensuring that all my communications were consistently polite, well written and transparent. I also have a Twitter presence and LinkedIn profile which I anticipated might be used by some as a form of verification before agreeing to an interview, and I know from some conversation points made by interviewees that this was the case.

Bakkalbasioglu (2020) points to the issue that "in challenging research environments, you will probably encounter more difficulty in accessing the elites in your purposive sample" (Bakkalbasioglu, 2020, p692). My approach to sharing information with interviewees about the study in respect of the aims and objectives, my process, and their involvement was transparent and meticulous, and every one of those actually interviewed provided their unwavering informed consent. However, many more were contacted than agreed to be involved, and even amongst those who did consent to interview, a number of them mentioned during the conversation that this was a very politically sensitive area and that I should prepare myself for a struggle in finding people willing to accept interviews. Some interviewees responded to my request immediately and without hesitation, but amongst others there was a very real wariness in responding to and accepting my invitation to interview, reflecting a general political wariness. Some even went as far as voicing a degree of caution about the honourability of outsiders such as academics and journalists, which are risks in securing elite interviews that are reflected in the literature (Greenstein & Mosely, 2020). Whilst the causes of this wariness were largely beyond my control, I mitigated them to the extent I could through my own professionalism and ethical practice. But as noted by Bakkalbasioglu (2020), for purposively-sampled elite interviewing "non-response has a very high cost" (Bakkalbasioglu, 2020, p692) because each interviewee brings something unique that cannot simply be replaced by interviewing someone else. Despite my communicating the apolitical focus of my study and my interest in the experiences and reflections that each person contacted would bring in respect of the communicative and trust functions of relationships as opposed to the political context they functioned within, access remained a real challenge. This was exacerbated by the fact that in some cases I found it difficult or even impossible to get multiple interviews within the same organisation. I suspect there were multiple factors at play. In at least one case I got the impression that it was a considered effort at funnelling and containing the contact through a single "spokesperson" (Lancaster, 2017, p96) given the perceived sensitivity of the topic, in other cases it possibly simply reflected a sense on their part that granting me one interview was enough, given the seniority of many of the people I contacted, and their busy schedules and limited availability.

In conversation: the interviews.

> "Techniques of interviewing political elites can be taught and disseminated; the art of interviewing respondents and informants can best be learned from experience."
>
> Peabody et al., 1990, p451

There is, without doubt, an art as well as a science to the interviewing process, and there are a distinct set of challenges that come with elite interviews (Abbott, 2015), particularly in respect of power and positionality (Aiello & Nero, 2019, p253), establishing rapport, controlling the direction of the conversation, and getting beyond the official position.

Where the constructivist grounded methodology offers particular value for this research, and what made it methodologically attractive to me, is its emphasis on the emergence of theory through the collaborative input to the research process from both the researcher and the participants. This approach to the relationship between researcher and research participant is something I consider to be important, particularly in conducting elite interviews, where interviewees are potentially figures in the public eye, in which context the researcher may unavoidably bring some knowledge of the organisation, the context and also the interviewee. This prior knowledge in the researcher cannot be undone. Whilst an objectivist research narrative – including the earliest forms of grounded theory given their objectivist leanings - would view this as bringing the potential for unacceptable researcher bias, CGT embraces it as a methodological strength, arguing against researchers attempting to "erase their preconceptions or pretend that their privileges and preconceptions do not influence the research process" (Thornberg & Dunne, 2019, p210). Charmaz (2014, p239) is emphatic that theory construction "depends on the researcher's view; it does not and cannot stand outside of it". This person-centred focus provides a degree of transparency around the role of the researcher, their interactions with the participants, and their respective positionalities that I find refreshing and helpful in researching in a political and diplomatic context in which there is a complex tangle of human, individual relationships contributing to the shaping of institutional and global politics.

Constructivism surrenders neither the role of individual agency nor social structure (Adler, 1997, p326) in the construction of reality, emphasising the role of human action and interaction in

subjectively and intersubjectively shaping the institutions and material world around us (Adler, 1997, p322). It allows for the acknowledgement that "people have the potential to destabilize even deeply institutionalized meanings", which is in stark contrast to mainstream international relations assumptions that states - "as the primary actor in world politics" - have an unwavering constancy born of collective identity (Klotz & Lynch, 2007, p66-67). Set against this backdrop, I was clear with each interviewee that I was not looking for a 'corporate position' from them, and that I was interested in their own personal experiences, perceptions and observations. This relates to constructivism's fundamental ontological assumption that we are all influenced by the world in which we live, leading to the question "how does this shaping happen and with what results?" (Finnemore & Sikkink, 2001, p394). In this context, individual identities, perspectives and the experiences of both interviewee and interviewer play a part in constructing an understanding of the world around us. This focus on the significance of the individual ties directly with the focus of this research study on exploring day-to-day trust dynamics at the individual level. Whilst so much of the trust literature looks at trust at the organisational level, the questions posed by this research provide room for acknowledging the relevance of the variability of the individual's experience, identities and relationships in affecting the way that they frame their world and interact with others. It is this potential for the contextually-informed coexistence and blending of individual, organisational and state-level perspectives that makes the combination of practice turn approach and social constructivist outlook one which offers scope for effectively exploring the research questions at the heart of this study.

Despite being framed within a wider political context which interviewees often freely chose to draw from in giving their answers, my questions with elite interviewees did not focus on politics as such, or specific policy portfolios but were focused on the building blocks of the relationships behind the politics. In this respect it was a methodologically and ethically straightforward study, which I was granted approval to conduct on those terms. Whilst the interview phase can be considered a success and generated huge amounts of rich data to use as a basis for strong analysis and theory generation, it took considerably longer to complete the interview phase than initially anticipated, despite conservative margins being built in to accommodate practical issues around accessibility and availability of interviewees. Changes to working practices in response to the Covid-19 pandemic and the impact that this had on interviewee availability was a major contributory factor, although I am aware that, as a 'Covid years' PhD study, this experience is by no means unique. I am also mindful of Lancaster's (2017, p101) point that for researcher's working in 'highly politicised' fields – such as Brexit and post-conflict Northern Ireland – there perhaps should sometimes be a more reflexive, nuanced consideration of what it means to be a

'vulnerable' participant and a 'sensitive' research subject, and that this can have real impact on access. Specifically, that 'elite' interviewees can sometimes be vulnerable given the "professional and political issues in play" but that "such vulnerabilities could easily be overlooked…as they are masked by the apparent 'elite' power of the roles occupied by these individuals" (Lancaster, 2017, p101) and the authority that they are accustomed to bringing to their working lives, including in interview scenarios (Conti & O'Neil, 2007, p71). This is borne out by my own experiences with this study, and I would say that Boucher's (2017) assertion that the researcher-interviewee relationship is "inevitably asymmetrical regardless of the research strategies deployed" (Boucher, 2017, p100) is an oversimplification in this context. Even though I gave assurance of anonymity in writing and verbally before each interview, a number of interviewees sought additional reassurance during the interview, and this caution is reflected elsewhere in the literature on elite interviewing (Lilleker, 2003, p213). This contrasts with the more traditional depiction of elite interviewing that characterises the elite interviewee as holding the balance of power (Slote Morris, 2009, p209; Conti & O'Neil, 2007). This hesitancy amongst my interviewees was compounded by some known broader pre-existing challenges in securing interviews with civil servants and representatives of political parties in post-conflict Northern Ireland (McEvoy, 2006; Reed, 2012).

The first few interviews were conducted using an indicative interview schedule, which gave core questions to cover and additional possible follow up questions. These early interviews confirmed that the questions I was asking were pitched in the right way and at the right level, and answers given were thoughtful and detailed. It was always my intention to tailor interview questions to the interviewee. In elite interviewing this reactivity is not only acceptable but appropriate given that these interviewees are likely to bring a particular and distinctive set of experiences, which the interviewee should be trying to acknowledge and respond to as a means of gathering genuinely rich data, rather than trying to neutralise this variance through consistent adherence to identical and generic questions. However, having created an interview question protocol as a 'helpful guide' it quickly became apparent that it was creating rather than solving problems, by inhibiting the flow and reactivity of the interviews because of my efforts, in the moment, to stick too tightly to the planned questions. Recognising the need for greater adaptability, I switched to an approach based on asking broad, open-ended questions addressing five key discussion themes – trust, relationships, communication, the Brussels bubble as a conduit, and the concept of politically neutral space. Taking a conversational approach and posing broad, open-ended questions in elite interviews is not without risk. Critics would argue that it "can yield poor information and funnel an inquiry away from the primary research focus to a respondent's

stream-of-consciousness thoughts and biased perceptions" (Beamer, 2002, p86). By contrast, constructivist grounded theorists would argue that enabling and exploring some of these "tangents" (Boucher, 2017, p102) can provide surprising and valuable "insights into the issues under consideration" (Boucher, 2017, p102). Despite acknowledging the risks, I found that this approach maintained sufficient structure to allow me to address key issues but provided greater flexibility to adapt my questions to the interviewee and follow leads from their answers before going back to the research themes for the next question.

I never felt that my interviewees lacked confidence in giving their own opinions or experiences – as elite interviewees they were all highly articulate, well informed, and used to giving their opinion in a professional context (Lancaster, 2017). However, I was aware that the extent to which they would willingly, freely speak to me and go beyond official 'lines to take' would depend in part on their perceptions of how credible my research purpose and my own status as a researcher was. I started every interview with a straightforward introductory scene-setting question to settle interviewees into the flow of the interview, before moving on to a mix of general and more specific open-ended questions. In establishing my own credibility as an interviewer and to give them confidence around my level of understanding, where appropriate I also phrased some of my clarifications and questions in such a way as to demonstrate that I brought appropriate prior "knowledge of and insight into the issues or personalities under discussion" (Peabody et al., 1990, p452). I also assiduously avoided asking for any information which I could have found through general reading or internet research (Beamer, 2003, p92), so as to avoid wasting precious time in the interview, as well as avoiding giving the interviewee any impression that I had not made every effort to prepare.

Charmaz and Thornberg (2021) highlight the centrality of the "emergent interaction" of the interview process, emphasising that the approach to "asking questions, listening and following up" are "crucial in the co-construction and quality of data" (Charmaz & Thornberg, 2021, p318). The element of conversational and interpretative interaction is something I grew in confidence with over time, and this was a key part of my approach, aligning with the CGT principles of interview co-construction principles (Charmaz, 2006, p10; Kelle, 2019, p80; Birks & Mills, 2011). Reflecting this constructivist approach and Talmy's (2010) argument that interviews are "not merely tools through which interviewers extract facts from participants but are socially-situated speech events in which meaning is (co)constructed" my aim was for a conversational style, where questions were reactive to comments made by the interviewee. In the majority of interviews this approach worked very well and created a good rapport with the interviewee, which in turn

generated often very frank, and fulsome, rich answers to questions. That said, as Berry (2002) observes, in elite interviewing particularly, this kind of reactive and co-constructed approach can be challenging when it comes to knowing "when to probe and how to formulate follow-up questions on the fly. It's a high-wire act" (Berry, 2002, p681). Adding an extra layer of difficulty to this already challenging task, I was ever mindful of the particular challenges of elite interviewing in relation to Northern Ireland, given the specific sensitivities around trust, perception and bias related to the fraught and deeply divided Northern Ireland political context (McEvoy, 2006).

Despite recognising the potential for interviewees to be more guarded in what they might say (Peabody et al., 1990, p454), I chose to record the interviews, as the most accurate way of capturing the exact wording of the exchange. Starting this study during the Covid-19 pandemic has meant that professionals in those groups I was interviewing are now widely accustomed to meetings via videoconferencing in lieu of in-person meetings. As such, conducting and recording the interview in this manner was not noticeably inhibiting, and brought considerable benefits to the overall tone and flow of the interview by enabling me to "maintain eye contact and a feeling of informal conversation" throughout (Peabody et al., 1990, p454).

Transcriptions

Interviews were transcribed using the zoom videoconferencing auto-transcription function, which I then cross-referenced and amended for errors against the zoom audio recording to produce a verbatim transcript. I completed all the transcriptions myself. This gave me an important early close reading of each one, which was helpful for the data analysis process. It was also an ethically-led decision, as I quickly realised that outsourcing the transcription element might compromise confidentiality for some interviewees – particularly those in the public eye and widely reported in the media - given the contextually revealing details around roles and workplaces that some mentioned in their interviews. This risk is particularly pertinent for elite interviewees in the public eye, where such references can leave a trail of breadcrumbs that might enable identification.

Every interviewee was told in advance that they would be provided with a copy of their completed transcript. Adopting a tried and tested method (Abbott, 2015; Lancaster, 2017) I advised interviewees that I would welcome their comments with regard to "verifying accuracy, correcting errors or inaccuracies, and providing clarifications" (Lancaster, 2017, p100). This evidenced the transparency and professionalism of my approach and helped to provide reassurance in managing any concerns or sensitivities they might have about how their interview

would be captured. Ultimately, only two interviewees requested (minor, non-substantive) amendments to the transcript of their interview. One interviewee (Interviewee 12) declined permission for the interview to be audio recorded, and in that case a full written record was made immediately after the conversation, covering the key points covered and any direct quotes that were captured with pen and paper during the interview. As with the transcribed interviews the interviewee was given the opportunity to comment on the record, but no amendments were offered.

3.4 Data Analysis

Introduction

As Peabody et al. (1990, p454) observe, "the best of quotations are no substitute for thinking and formulating themes". These lengthy in-depth elite interviews generated a huge amount of rich material for analysis, but I needed to find a way of allowing their meaning to emerge, by recognising patterns and order amongst them (Saldana et al., 2011, p26). Although the data collection component of this study was the part that I agonised over to ensure that I was getting the interviews I needed, the analysis component was critical to making those interviews count towards something. Despite some significant ontological and epistemological differences between the different forms of grounded theory, they all espouse a broadly similar approach when it comes to the approach to the generation of theory through the data, and the use of the constituent elements of "coding, constant comparison, memo writing, and theoretical sampling and theoretical saturation" (Priya, 2019, p402). The iterative nature of the grounded theory data analysis process was essential in allowing patterns to be identified and "constructed by reorganising and grouping data into comparable categories and/or themes" (Saldana et al., 2011, p26). The data collection and data analysis phases in grounded theory studies are not sequential but intertwined (Charmaz, 2006; Charmaz, 2020, p167). As such, I based my decision about when to stop interviewing on my understanding of the data obtained and the theoretical saturation point achieved, rather than on a pre-determined and somewhat arbitrary number. This next section outlines the approach I took to the different elements of data analysis undertaken.

Memos, coding, and constant comparison

> "Grounded theory coding generates the bones of your analysis. Theoretical integration will assemble these bones into a working skeleton. Thus, coding is more than a beginning; it shapes an analytic frame from which you build the analysis."
>
> (Charmaz, 2006, p45)

The process of writing memos is about creating "records of thoughts, feeling, insights and ideas" (Birks & Mills, 2011: 40) that relate to the interview material. It is a means to start identifying patterns and begin analytically engaging with the information coming out of the interview. In CGT there are a number of aspects that can be included in memos, but there is not a specific recipe for what constitutes a good memo (Charmaz, 2006, p82). My memoing process focused on highlighting any strongly evident emergent codes or themes; recording any notable comparisons between data, codes or themes emerging within or between interviews; identifying any gaps in the analysis to explore further in later interviews. It was a crucial means of allowing me to pause and think about the data I already had, as well as enabling me to "spark ideas" (Charmaz, 2006, 85) for picking up on in subsequent analysis and interviews. I wrote at least one memo for every interview, and often two or three, if there was a particular aspect that I wanted to return to and explore in further detail. I approached the memo-writing process as a relaxed, speedy drafting process, rather than a formal and official record. This allowed it to become a stimulating means of maintaining analytical momentum (Birks et al., 2008, p71) and a process which allowed the ideas and thoughts to flow, without being stifled by focus on perfect presentation and wording.

Coding and identifying themes was a many-layered and cumulative process. I listened through each interview shortly after completing it and produced my first memo. Next, the transcription process would build on this broader thinking about codes (Ryan & Bernard, 2003, p88). Once a transcript was completed, I would then read it through twice in full, memoing again on any key aspects that jumped out from the reading. At this point I would start the process of line-by-line coding, highlighting and annotating the transcript in Nvivo. Opting to code line-by-line enabled me to "remain open to the data and to see nuances in it" (Charmaz, 2006, p50) that I might have otherwise missed, whereas I felt that a word-by-word coding approach would have been too granular for the focus of this study, and I was concerned that going straight to an initial thematic coding would have been too broad and may have risked missing unexpected discoveries. One of the key benefits I found in undertaking this "tacking back and forth between data and analysis" (Charmaz & Thornberg, 2021, p307) was that it helped to "check the pertinence of...nascent

ideas, raise the analytic level of those that hold up, and support them more fully". The reflexive style afforded by this "methodological self-consciousness" (Charmaz, 2017, p34) and the constant comparison of codes and themes created by moving repeatedly between memoing, coding, and interviewing also stopped me from imposing my "preconceived ideas on the data" (Rieger, 2019, p8) which added methodological rigour.

The memoing approach and iterative data collection and analysis approach inherent in the constructivist grounded theory method gave me considerable familiarity with the interview data and an appreciation of issues that were particularly distinctive and/or kept occurring across multiple interviews. Consequently, when I first came to set up my Nvivo codes, I already had a number of areas in mind to use as an initial set of codes. This aligns with the approach set out by Ryan and Bernard (2003) of initially identifying topics for further analysis by recognising things that arise repeatedly and/or are recognised as significant by interviewees (Ryan & Bernard, 2003, p89). Working through each interview transcript in turn, I enhanced this initial set of codes, developing an inductive hierarchical coding framework within Nvivo. The number of descriptive codes grew as I conducted the coding process, and as new codes and subcodes emerged I would go back to previously analysed transcripts to re-code for those newer additions, to ensure comprehensive coverage.

I ultimately used eighteen top level "descriptive codes" as a starting point from which I developed the final "conceptual codes" (Holton, 2007), looking at a full range of aspects arising from the interview data: Brussels as conduit; forms of communication; communicative intent; Covid-19 impact; identity; perception of Brussels space; performativity; post-Brexit EU mechanisms for maintaining contact; relationship (a)symmetry; relationship building; relationship formality – individuals; relationship formality – institutions; relationship reciprocity; scale of institutional presence; strategic priorities; trust breaking; trust building; trust vitality. Each of these was then analysed in further detail through multiple subcodes, with a focus on exploring the full range of similarities, differences and relationships evident in the interview data relating to a given code (Ryan & Bernard, 2003, p91). For example, the 'trust-breaking' code included subcodes: actions; attitudes; commitment; consistency; reliability; time, and each of those also had further subdivisions. To give another example, the subcodes under the 'performativity' code were split by intended audience: domestic political sphere; perceived opposition; others in Brussels; intergovernmental; (domestic) public. The 'forms of communication' code included the following subcodes: backchannels; for information gathering; for information giving; formal versus

informal; holistic – multichannel; incremental; information as currency; public; task oriented; transactive; collaborative.

Where relevant and appropriate across the coding framework, further sub-subcodes were developed, to allow for detailed disaggregation of issues emerging from the interview data. For example, within the 'formal versus informal' subcode of the communication code were further sub-subcodes: formal – institutional agreements/understandings; formal – legally binding; formal – at official meetings/events; informal – unofficial meetings; informal – social/networking/events; informal – opportunities in margins of other (formal) business. These examples of the detailed coding framework used in the Nvivo qualitative data analysis software programme illustrate the wide-ranging, comprehensive and rigorous nature of the coding and data analysis approach applied.

In taking the step from descriptive to conceptual coding, I followed the understanding in grounded theory that "coding is a process of taking apart the story, so that one can rearrange it, can see categories and their properties" (Belgrave & Seide, 2019, p.171). So whilst undertaking the Nvivo analysis I also repeatedly stood back to spend time thinking about the overarching themes that were emerging from the hierarchical analytical coding framework I had developed in Nvivo. As the coding process evolved, this enabled me to develop the emerging themes and conceptual codes. Through the iterative analysis process these codes were refined, conflated or abandoned, leading to six final key themes emerging from the data, with a number of sub-themes each:

- The magic of the mundane: routine, informal and low-risk relationship building
- Co-located multilateral and multilevel relationships away from home
- Perceptions and pragmatics about the value and need for 'neutral space'
- The switch from cooperative to oppositional dynamics and the impact on normative relationships
- Performativity as a communicative mask or magnifier of trust
- The role of time away: immersion, reflection and identity

As with the process of thematic refinement, during the data analysis and development of the coding framework, I refined codes and subcodes where it became evident through the growing picture emerging from the interview data that they needed to be combined with others, recategorized higher or lower in the hierarchical framework, moved to sit under other codes,

discarded or redefined in their focus. As Tarozzi (2019) acknowledges, in constructivist grounded theory, there is a crucial subjective interpretation role for the researcher because the analytical codes are "not there, enclosed in the data, but it is up to the researcher of the task to co-construct them…to bring out as much meaning as possible incorporated in a particularly rich and evocative [text]" (Tarozzi, 2019, p14).

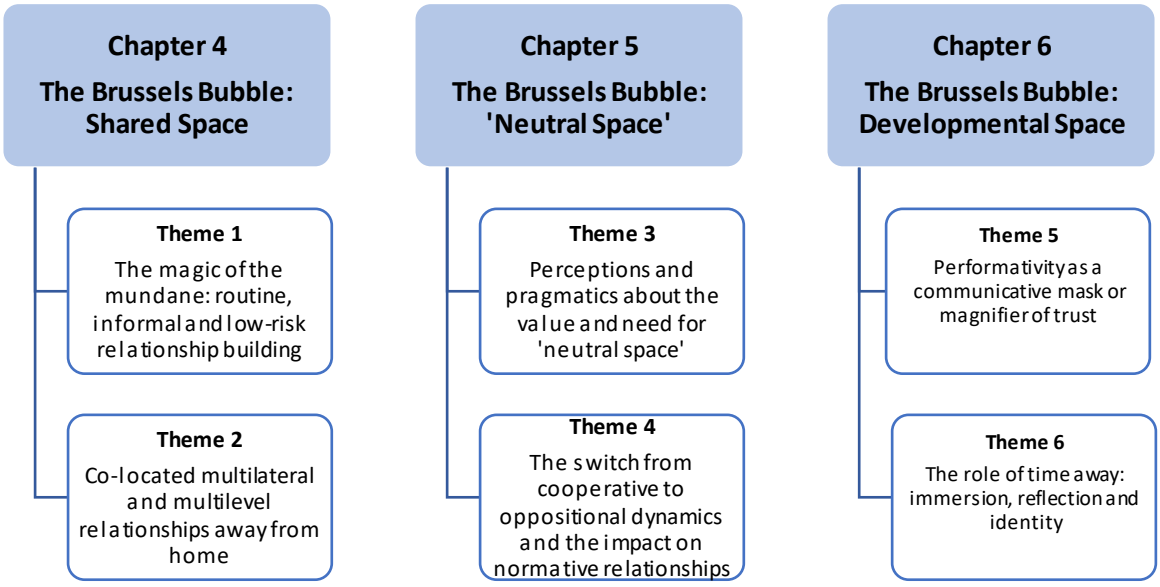
In this respect, the overt emphasis in CGT is that researcher agency in interpreting the data and constructing the codes is paramount: "we define what we see as significant in the data and describe what we think is happening [and] interpret participants' tacit meanings" (Charmaz 2014, pp. 114– 116). Yet implicitly, there is also a significant focus on process and procedure, particularly when it comes to the analytical process around memoing and coding. Although I adopted the methods wholeheartedly and found them to be productive, I am mindful of this somewhat contradictory tension in the grounded theory method. Even in CGT there is a rather formulaic and prescriptive approach to memoing and coding, and I can empathise with critics of the approach who argue that this makes them extremely "time-consuming and convoluted, involving a multitude of rules that come across as challenging and even obtuse" (Timonen et al., 2018, p1). Charmaz's (2008, p398) rather defensive counter-argument is that the "guidelines" of grounded theory "promise flexibility and encourage innovation" inferring that it is essentially user error on the part of the researcher, that has led to misguided use of the method "as a recipe for stamping out qualitative studies" (Charmaz, 2008, p398). Staller (2012) argues that the approach to thematic analysis, coding, and constant comparative methods reflects a lingering "epistemological unconsciousness" (Steinmetz, 2005; Staller, 2012) of embedded positivist assumptions, despite Charmaz taking a conscious step away from earlier iterations of grounded theory focused on "an objective external reality, a passive, neutral observer or a detached, narrow empiricism" (Charmaz, 2006, p13) in her efforts to use constructivism to ground theory in the data. On balance, I would suggest that there has been little meaningful effort to date by constructivist grounded theorists in reconciling this tension between the practical focus on prescriptive application of the coding and memoing process on the one hand, and the aspiration on the other hand that, at its core, CGT is entirely contingent not on the specificities of the coding process, but on the researcher's ability to interpret and interact with the data to the extent that theoretical discovery and emergence (Tarozzi in Bryant and Charmaz, 2019, p195) is possible.

word count (excluding front matter and end references): 89,594.

3.5 The presentational framework for the three findings chapters

In looking at the way in which communication and trust are perceived by interviewees to have changed amongst Irish, UK and Northern Irish political and diplomatic actors in the Brussels bubble following Brexit there were a number of core themes, as outlined below in Figure 1, that emerged when analysing the interview data.

Figure 1: the core themes as the framework for the findings and analysis chapters



Whilst undertaking the early stages of Nvivo analysis and consideration of themes, I initially considered splitting the thematic presentation of the findings and discussion along four domains:

1 Place: communication, relationship building and trust dynamics away from home.
2 People: individual and institutional trust dynamics.
3 Practice: politics, performativity and principles.
4 Peace: What does this mean for Brussels, Belfast and the Good Friday Agreement?

However, as I got further into the analysis I came to recognise that it was impossible to pull some of these elements apart and trying to do so would give a false sense of almost clinical separation and simplicity to something that is both fluid and inherently complex. I also came to recognise that the space and place of the Brussels Bubble was integral to the entirety of the thematic picture emerging from the interview data. With this in mind, three different conceptions of the

Brussels bubble as a space became the organisational framework for the findings and discussion - Brussels as a Shared Space; Brussels as a 'Neutral Space'; Brussels as a Developmental Space. Each of these aligned with two of the six core themes which emerged from the data analysis, and the three findings chapters address each of these in turn. This structure allows for recognition of Brussels as a 'bubble' - a particular place and space for the expression and emergence of elements of trust, communication and identity amongst UK, Irish and Northern Irish politicians, civil servants and diplomats. In looking at the elements of communication, trust and identity that unfurl from my data, the thematic divisions and distinctions have been pulled apart and presented separately for discursive and analytical clarity in providing the overall picture. However, in reality there was no such stark separation between the different thematic areas and there were times at which different elements ran into or over each other.

3.6 Conclusion

> "interpretive analysis provides means to address puzzles of contemporary politics that positivist tools cannot unpack."
>
> Kurowska & Bliesemann de Guevara (2020, p1211)

This chapter has given a detailed overview of my methodological thinking, choices and processes in applying a CGT approach. I have outlined the steps I took in seeking and conducting elite interviews, and collecting and analysing data arising from those interviews. The framework for the presentation of the findings has also been introduced. Next follows the three findings chapters that present the themes and findings emerging from the qualitative data derived from my 52 in-depth elite interviews. These are followed by a discussion chapter drawing on the totality of the findings to explore and explain the importance of the findings within the context of the study and as it relates to the literature.

CHAPTER 4: Findings - Brussels as a Shared Space.

4.1 Introduction

The Brussels bubble has been a shared space for Irish and UK politicians, civil servants and diplomats since both countries acceded to the EU in 1973, with Northern Irish politicians represented since 1979 and the Northern Irish civil service represented since devolution in 1999 (Moore, 2007). As such the colocation of Irish, UK, and Northern Irish political and diplomatic actors in the Brussels bubble has been a constant thread of interaction and engagement throughout that time. It has endured through years of conflict during the Troubles, the formulation and implementation of the GFA, Northern Ireland's devolution, and more than two decades since, right up to the UK's exit from the EU in January 2020, and even beyond, albeit in a different capacity now the UK and Northern Ireland are no longer within the EU.

In the remainder of this chapter, I present the findings and analysis in respect of themes one and two of the six core themes that emerged from the interview data. The first theme looks at the Brussels bubble as shared space for mundane, routine, low stakes communication and relationship building, and the role that informal communication and information circulation plays. The second theme looks at the Brussels bubble as a shared space in which multilevel and multilateral ways of working are the norm, and in which different professional relationships evolve out of and support the regularised intensity of everyday life in the Brussels bubble.

4.2 Theme 1 – The magic of the mundane: routine, informal and low-risk relationship building

Continual low-stakes communication and relationship building in a place oriented towards collaboration

Within the formal fabric of EU business life there are hundreds of committees and meetings taking place every single day amongst political and diplomatic figures in Brussels. Interviewees repeatedly raised the importance of the constant cycle of mundane committee-related work and the routinised nature of the pre-Brexit relationships in Brussels for enabling communication and building relationships. This aligns with the practice turn approach in international relations broadly (Adler-Nissen, 2016b; Cornut, 2017), which emphasises the significance of these seemingly mundane everyday interactions (Jones & Clark, 2015) for understanding the bigger picture of politics and diplomacy. Interviewees spoke about the sometimes idiosyncratic ways of

working for interactions within Brussels between UK, Northern Irish and Irish politicians, civil servants and diplomats:

> It's not all constitutional issues. That is the success of the EU - it's so boring…it sucks all the mind-numbing stuff out of ordinary people's lives and which, for example, UK citizens are now having to deal with again, like the stupid customs forms. That's boring stuff, but that's the raison d'être of the EU alongside peace. But for the ordinary politicians, like, you may find that all of a sudden actually you're aligned with your nationalist or unionist colleague, much more so than you are with your Romanian colleague, and that helps. (Interviewee 21)

The pre-Brexit focus on recognising common ground and making continuous collective efforts to overcome challenges and find solutions is something that plays out repeatedly in the way that interviewees talked about engaging with others and building trusting relationships within the Brussels bubble. Interviewees convey the sense that, even with the complex diversity of specific member interests, there is also a recognition amongst those in the Brussels bubble of the motivational benefits of cooperation and being on the same 'EU team':

> I think a final element that is very important to trust, of course, is an idea of community or commonality of the broader aim of what one is doing. That is important. Being part of a common project. Giving it time and building personal relations. (Interviewee 08)

Although contemporary multilateralism is not without its challenges, as noted by Versloot (2022), there is also a recognition of the sense of collective endeavour that comes from individuals and states working together in a multilateral environment (Keohane, 1990). The quote above picks up on literature in the field which emphasises this "quiet unity" (Kyriazi et al., 2023) in everyday practice amongst EU member state political and diplomatic actors, where consensus-building, cooperation and trust provide the vital framework for the ability to work together as a multilateral collective.

Aligned to this, Irish, UK and Northern Irish interviewees often mentioned that – amongst political and diplomatic figures from member states and their subregions – this created a receptive wider engagement atmosphere in Brussels. They suggested that the constant routinised interaction and collective focus meant there was an open door, right from the start, for communication and trust-building amongst individuals representing member states at state and regional level. Interviewees spoke about there being an initial baseline of trust which was granted at both the institutional and individual level. So UK and Northern Irish interviewees who had arrived in the Brussels

bubble prior to the Brexit referendum spoke about being able to rely on a degree of inherited trust in establishing themselves upon arrival within the Brussels bubble. For politicians this meant being brought into networks by already established colleagues from their own political party from back home, as well as being welcomed and introduced to others by their new political group colleagues under the EU parliamentary political structures. For civil servants and diplomats it meant receiving the benefits of slotting into what several of them referred to as 'grandfathered' inherited contacts networks and trusted relations, which were extended over time and passed down by each successive post-holder to their replacement.

This was seen as generating an almost self-perpetuating pool of trust amongst member state political and diplomatic figures, which was continuously extended and reinforced by the regularity and intensity of the interactions within the Brussels bubble:

> Multilateral posts you arrive, and the next day you're sitting around a table with people. You spend three days a week around the table with those people, and you spend the other two days preparing to sit around the table. Hammering out your position, forming alliances, following up, reporting on the meeting. You're in a collective dynamic from the moment you arrive. You slot into your predecessor's role, and into a system that is already rich in trust, then you have to add to that by making your personal contribution. Getting to know your colleagues, showing that you're serious and constructive and pushing your own point of view, trying to find solutions. (Interviewee 30)

Interviewees suggested that – amongst member states - this trust didn't have to be immediately 'earned' initially by each new individual. Rather, it was extended on the basis of professional and institutional reputational norms that those in the Brussels bubble representing member states could be trusted as part of a collective insiders 'EU member state team', in effect. Interviewees spoke about it then being the responsibility of the individual to personally develop that baseline trust extended to them. But they emphasised that this was perfectly possible to do, almost as a welcome by-product of routine formal and informal communications and everyday, low-stakes interactions within the continual cycle of EU business - committee work, policy development, supplemented with more informal additional aspects of the role such as networking at official functions. In this respect, prior to Brexit, building trust was intentional but not particularly contrived, in that it was relatively easy to do this between Irish, UK and Northern Irish political and diplomatic figures within the framework of the job you'd been sent there to do.

This passing on of trusting relations is addressed in Versloot's (2022) work on trust vitality amongst EU diplomats. Versloot (2022) emphasises that trusting relations are reliant upon continuous "revitalisation" efforts, but that member state new arrivals have the considerable benefit of having ready-made trusting relations "handed over" by their predecessors, adding that: "new colleagues are not only filled in about files under discussion, but are also informed about relevant like-minded colleagues" (Versloot, 2022, p524). Interviewees commented that the results of the Brexit referendum in June 2016 did not create a direct, sudden break in formal opportunities for building trust through shared business, cooperative working, and incremental relationship development, but that their experience was that from that point until the UK's formal exit in January 2020 it was a period of "trying to hold something together, which was essentially rapidly disintegrating" (Interviewee 28). Part of this was the gradual closing of doors for new arrivals to many of these old, established trusting relationships that had previously been handed down time and again.

Since the Brexit referendum results in the summer of 2016, UK and Northern Irish civil servants in the Brussels bubble have had to work harder to maintain their relationships and networks. With each other, with officials within the EU institutions and with former counterparts in the EU27, in the absence of the opportunities and regularised intensity and structure previously offered by working together on the formal business of the EU. Having made the decision to depart the EU, a number of interviewees spoke about the UK and Northern Ireland being 'outside the room'. They were no longer in the club and a number of interviewees emphasised that, as a consequence, trust now had to be earned. It drove a concerted effort on the part of UK and Northern Irish political and diplomatic figures to keep existing relations warm, and UK and Northern Irish interviewees spoke about this as requiring them to focus their efforts through the main channel still available to them – informal work and networking.

In the course of the interviews something that came across consistently was that trust within the Brussels bubble is built incrementally, from layer upon layer of positive communication and a series of ongoing interactions in various different formal and informal settings and scenarios. This was often linked to the need for sufficient time to really strengthen relationships and develop those layers of trust. Interviewees talked about trust being dependent upon relationships and understanding formed from repeated interaction and not just sporadic or one-off interactions:

> Time is the first element, but you have to build up a relationship with someone, to have something other than a meeting. To have where you can ring someone up and ask them

> something very frank, where they will tell you something, it takes a while to build that up (Interviewee 01).

In the UK-Irish-Northern Irish political and diplomatic context, the element of constant interaction over time is important, but so too is the distinctive nature and purpose of this interaction in the Brussels bubble context. Over the years there have been many coordinated talks and initiatives elsewhere, such as those in South Africa in 1997 (Guelke, 2000), which interviewees spoke about as having been planned and implemented with the express focused intention to encourage and facilitate dialogue and foster better relations within Northern Ireland and in the Anglo-Irish relations context. Bilateral diplomatic postings in Dublin and London have also been consciously focused on that element of relationship building and management. By contrast, the footprint of political and diplomatic figures in the Brussels bubble were never posted to Brussels with the express purpose of working on the Anglo-Irish relations or what is often referred to in the literature as the 'Northern Irish problem'. Instead, their focus of work in Brussels related to EU business, and in order to be more effective in their daily role and delivering for their own country's best interests, there was a need to work well with others 'round the table':

> It's a very different operating environment in Brussels. If we're not talking about Brussels and their role with the Protocol, if we're talking about generally how work is done in Brussels, my experience is that collectively, with the odd exception, the Member States are grappling with a common challenge. So there isn't this hostility. There isn't a 'them and us', there isn't an enemy mindset. It was kind of an operational policy space, and it was 'jaw jaw, better than war war'. (Interviewee 37)

When speaking about Northern Irish politicians and Members of European Parliament (MEPs), interviewees repeatedly pointed to the importance of that colocation in Brussels, frequently citing the well-known MEP trio – John Hume (SDLP), Ian Paisley (Senior) (DUP) and Jim Nicholson (UUP). Whilst far from unique to this research, even the recognition of these three politicians as a collective 'on the same team', with "a strong *esprit de corps*, positively advanced by the neutral environment of the network" (Lagana, 2021a) in the EU context is significant given the deeply divided Northern Ireland sociopolitical landscape. Interviewees spoke about the trio building sufficient trust and understanding between them to bridge their domestic political differences whilst in Brussels, to the benefit of Northern Ireland as a whole, with their collective endeavours in securing the EU PEACE funds programmes given a number of times as the most directly tangible expression of this move towards a more collaborative approach. In talking about how this was possible, given their very different political positions and the deep-rooted conflict in the

Northern Ireland context at the time, interviewees suggested that their colocation and routinised engagement on low-stakes EU business had helped develop an enhanced understanding of each other on a personal level, and a recognition of areas of shared interests and common ground.

The positive effect of colocation and continual low-stakes engagement was also commented upon in respect of UK, Northern Irish and Irish officials collectively. However, interviewees remarked on this as having been less outwardly noticed at the time. The cordial and cooperative relations had grown gradually and quietly into a taken for granted norm within the Brussels bubble, and the extent of the benefit of this was only fully realized with hindsight, once it was compromised by Brexit:

> I mean I think there had been no meeting between an Irish Taoiseach and a British Prime Minister before both countries were in the European Union or the EEC [European Economic Community] as it was. So it's taken as a kind of a truism now that the corridors of Brussels have provided a really useful platform for informal and formal contacts between British and Irish officials. It's funny like, I suppose that that whole idea was kind of presented in retrospect. You know, it was only once Brexit happened that people were going 'yeah but, of course, for all those years…', you know, whereas before Brexit happened, you may not necessarily have been conscious that British and Irish officials were talking in the corridor about stuff that was relating to Northern Ireland. (Interviewee 14)

This acknowledges one of the key features mentioned by interviewees of working in the Brussels bubble, which is that UK, Irish and Northern Irish civil servants and diplomats are usually not subject to the media gaze in the same way that politicians are. Additionally, Brussels was far enough away from the political gaze of their respective home capitals to routinely just get on and build the relationships needed to get the everyday job done, without any significant issues around optics. This is an important distinctive quality of the 'bubble' space, with associated positive implications for practice and relationships. Kyriazi et al. (2023) pick up on this quality of the Brussels bubble as offering political and diplomatic actors shelter "from the glare and heat of a domestically salient, politicised issue [where] the lack of elite-level conflict itself continues to keep press salience at a low level (since, to a large extent, conflict is what the media are in the business of reporting)" (Kyriazi et al., 2023, p7).

In particular, Northern Irish politicians and civil servants interviewees talked about being able to operate in a different way in Brussels than when at home. Interviewees felt that this was partly

because of the different working culture in the Brussels bubble and partly because being away from home enabled them to work more freely, without the usual suspicion and constraints that they spoke of as being an integral part of working within the Northern Ireland consociational system:

> [in Northern Ireland] You go into any engagement, certainly with the media - nothing is ever off the record. Like, you're very guarded these days. You know, any meeting we go into we're always very, very guarded. (Interviewee 47)

In talking with civil servants and diplomats about their everyday work, a number of interviewees spoke about their experiences of their continual, low-stakes communications efforts and interpersonal relationship building being useful in unlocking potentially beneficial further opportunities at a higher level, or in enabling opportunities on behalf of those from national administrations who may not be personally linked into the Brussels bubble themselves:

> It is about going in and being able to have discrete conversations to pave the way to maybe 'well our senior official will meet your senior official or our Minister will meet a Commissioner or an MEP' … it's laying the foundation for those conversations, finding out what are the red lines of the conversation, how will they steer it that makes them more likely to be receptive to a proposal, [making sure I am not] going to say something that's going to totally alienate them. (Interviewee 01)

For civil servants and diplomats, the move from home capitals or bilateral postings to the Brussels bubble requires an intensification of effort in forming dense networks of trusted contacts with whom to share and leverage information. The multilateral nature of the bubble space of Brussels intensifies the focus on continual relationship building because "consensus-building, networking, and peer pressure are the driving forces of policy-making, [and] both states' and individuals' ability to advance their interests depends in part on their intangible resources of networks, connections, and reputation" (Kuus, 2014, p133). This reflects the fact that in Brussels there is a more complex, dispersed network of power and influence than is evident in domestic systems. The latter have more hierarchical structures with more distinctive circles of trust and power (Gouglas, 2018) making it easier for political and diplomatic actors to pinpoint key contacts to maximise influence and success, thereby reducing their reliance on wide and strong networks. As one interviewee put it:

> There's a lot more actors in Brussels, with a lot more independent viewpoints. London is quite a unitary system of government…There are just fewer actors who've got kind of

> independent movement, you know. So in some ways you almost need trust less in London, because you just know where the centre of power is, and that's kind of the key factor (Interviewee 10).

UK and Northern Irish politicians also spoke about their pre-Brexit experiences of the Brussels bubble as requiring a step change from their home capital mindset and what they called the more combative approach in domestic politics, compared to the more consensus-driven EU approach, which created a different environment and impetus for relationship and trust building. These interviewees spoke of the need to shift their own approach on arrival in Brussels, to reflect and adapt to the Brussels bubble norm, because trust and cooperation rather than distrust and competition was the enabling step for getting what you wanted, either politically or diplomatically. This involved an attitude change and a willingness on their part to accommodate a different set of role expectations in order to be able to operate effectively within the Brussels bubble. It also reflected the wider culture of collective trust that more naturally supported them in taking a "leap of faith" (Möllering, 2006) or what Wheeler terms "trust as suspension" (2018, p293) in trusting those around them initially. Interviewees spoke about there being a much stronger emphasis on the importance of trust between individuals as an essential component of getting things done and reinforcing the fabric of trust within the different political and diplomatic networks and the Brussels bubble more broadly, as opposed to distrust between parties as the prevailing norm which then shaped practice and relationships at the individual level. Northern Irish political interviewees in particular commented that the contrast was marked, and impacted directly on the way in which they communicated and built relationships in the Brussels bubble. In emphasizing this difference, one interviewee pointed to the Northern Irish consociational approach as notionally facilitating powersharing, but in practice, disincentivizing politicians from working in a way which facilitated trust building and cooperation, and instead encouraging 'power-splitting' as a particular interpretation in practice of the 'power-sharing' model:

> [in Brussels] To get anything passed, you can't do it on your own basically. Whereas basically [in Northern Ireland] the DUP and Sinn Féin, again this comes back to the problem with the model that we have at Stormont. It doesn't incentivise cooperation and compromise because of the mandatory coalition. If you get your vote out, you get your bits of government, and government doesn't happen without you. You have absolutely no need to make your agenda palatable to any other party. (Interviewee 11)

There are many arguments both for and against the success and continuation of consociationalism in Northern Ireland, which are addressed elsewhere in the literature (Dixon,

2023; Cochrane et al., 2018; McGarry & O'Leary, 2006a, 2006b; Hayes & McAllister, 2013). With regard to power-splitting, whilst the intention might be to enable two highly opposed sides to work together, critics of the consociational approach argue that, in reality, it disincentivises cooperation and builds division into the formal governance arrangements. As such, the two parties leading the Executive effectively work separately and "split power along ethno-political lines" (Rouse & O'Connor, 2020, p4). By contrast, power and decision-making in the Brussels bubble is more dispersed and consensual. In this context, building trusting relationships and alliances that genuinely secure support and facilitate cooperation is integral to the way in which the Brussels bubble operates (Heisenberg, 2005; Kuus, 2014; Kortelainen & Koeppen, 2018) as a shared space of everyday practice.

Keeping lines open: information circulation and the importance of informal communication

The ability to earn and keep trust by gathering, using and sharing information with integrity is central to the way in which business gets done in the Brussels bubble. Interviewees talked about their awareness that being able to develop trusting relationships, and being seen as trustworthy yourself, was vital:

> When you're meeting with a contact it's trusting that that person will treat that information [you give them] in a way that is not going to make your life difficult. That's a big part of working in Brussels. That is how people share information. These informal back channels are part of how the machinery works, so you can't not have them, but if somebody tells me something and I go and say 'well this person told me this' and it gets back that they've told me something they shouldn't have, they're not ever going to tell me anything again, they're not going to trust me. (Interviewee 01)

Although overall opportunities are much reduced, there remain some targeted points for focusing communication and engagement efforts from the UK perspective in respect of formal business relating to Northern Ireland issues. One particular example mentioned by interviewees was the Working Party on the UK (WPUK) which is the 'future relationship' focused successor, following on from the negotiations-focused EU's Task Force 50, and was established to "assist Coreper and the Council in the course of the negotiations on the future relationship and on matters related to the implementation of the Withdrawal Agreement" (Consilium, 2020). UK interviewees noted the

unusual format for this Committee compared to conventional EU approaches to 'third country'[2] relationships, in that it acted as a funnel for "all matters relating to the Withdrawal Agreement, the Northern Ireland Protocol, the Trade and Cooperation Agreement, fisheries…everything really. So that's kind of an interesting quirk but obviously that provides a bit of a kind of locus for us as well" (Interviewee 10). The point made by the UK interviewee was that having that singular point of focus on 'UK issues' made it easier to identify the players involved from the EU side, making it easier to strategically focus engagement efforts. However, in this scenario the UK is firmly on the outside looking in. The WPUK is obviously not a continuation of former 'EU business' but a distinctive new strand of EU formal business that is about EU business issues pertaining to the UK and Northern Ireland in respect of the post-Brexit EU-UK future relationship. This is different from pre-Brexit work in which all these players were on the same side of the table. So there remain some formal aspects of work in the Brussels bubble pertaining to the UK and Northern Ireland. However, interviewees were clear that as a 'third country' the UK was now usually not on the inside leading that work, but on the outside, trying to find ways to engage with those people who did have a seat at the table, as a means of staying informed and influential where possible.

In this respect, informal communication and information exchange was seen as a vital tool for Irish, UK and Northern Irish political and diplomatic figures in the Brussels bubble, allowing them to build trust with contacts and thereby giving them "a network to pull on when we need answers to something, or we need to set up a meeting with someone" (Interviewee 48). In conversation with Brussels-based interviewees it became clear that, in the period since the Brexit referendum, UK and Northern Ireland political and diplomatic figures have faced significant barriers in trying to maintain their day-to-day personal status as a 'trusted trader' within the Brussels bubble information 'currency' circulation market. This partly related to what was broadly recognised by my interviewees as a tougher wider operating environment since 2016 because of an increased hostility and volatility in the UK-Ireland political relationship that hadn't been there prior to Brexit. In this context, Irish, UK and Northern Irish civil servants and diplomats talked about the role they played in gathering information and building strong and trusting interpersonal connections that would help in smoothing out some of the bumps both within the Brussels bubble at the political level, and also between home capitals:

> We act under the political, and our job is to tease out the art of the possible with the other side, right? And that takes - particularly with something as politically sensitive as

[2] A third country is any country which is not an EU member state.

> what we're dealing with at the moment - that takes a degree of trust in someone. That what they're telling you is accurate, and that what you're telling them will be used correctly. We prepare the ground for meetings between our political leaders. So if I want to be in a position to provide a brief on the meeting he's about to have, I need to be able to say, you know, this is what we've heard, and this is what we believe the red lines are, and so on and so forth. So that's very important. It's very, very important. And at the end of the day, if someone likes you, if you get along with somebody, all of that is much easier. (Interviewee 48)

What UK and Northern Irish civil servants and diplomats were very clear on was that, whilst their networks may have shrunk, in part because the formal points of engagement had reduced after Brexit, the contacts that they continued to hold were very important because they held the keys to information and information exchange. They also heavily emphasised that actually being in the Brussels bubble and knowing the contacts there could enable them to bring extra benefits. The main reason that they pointed to for this was their being able to engage differently – more flexibly and informally – than their colleagues in London and Belfast could:

> We can engage with them in a different way here. You can go for coffee with someone, you can explore positions in a slightly different way to someone back home who's spoken to a Minister yesterday, and really has no flexibility in terms of the messaging, they are the holder of the position. Whereas sometimes you know, we obviously represent the government position, but sometimes you can have a slightly more thoughtful approach, I suppose…it also just means you can engage informally with someone, in a way that you wouldn't do if you were back home. Or it's certainly much harder to do. (Interviewee 10)

In outlining what 'informal' communication and relationship building looked like, post-Brexit, interviewees spoke about "just, you know, going out and having meetings with officials, I mean, you may not have an agenda, or a kind of a roadmap for a meeting. It might just be a touching base…just kind of keeping the channels open for dialogues when you need them" (Interviewee 48). There was also a real emphasis on the formats and arenas in which this informal communication and trust building takes place in Brussels. As one interviewee commented, "Brussels of course isn't a dinner parties and cocktails sort of place. It's a working place. So it's coffees, and maybe a beer quickly after work." (Interviewee 04). This emphasis on the importance of those relaxed, low-stakes settings and engagements was notable as being integral to the Brussels way of working and building trusting relationships through constant information circulation and communication:

> A lot gets discussed over coffee or lunch or a drink after work. Brussels operates a lot like that. An awful lot of stuff gets discussed informally. And things people might not necessarily ask in a meeting in front of everybody else, they'll come to you over coffee and ask. An awful lot can get discussed informally and socially in Brussels - that's how it operates. (Interviewee 25)

Civil servants and diplomats discussed how much easier and more normalised this kind of interaction was in Brussels as compared to Belfast, Dublin or London, and it was seen as a particularly important tool for building strength into interpersonal relationships by enabling people to get to know each other, beyond the formal representations that they made in official business meetings and settings.

Northern Irish interviewees, in particular, talked about how different this was from their previous professional experience, and the contextual reasons for this:

> [Back home] I had a lot of policy contacts, and I met with them regularly, but I had a meeting with them, and it might have only had a small agenda but I wouldn't have rung someone and said 'do you fancy a coffee?'. Mostly, because there was a lot of being very careful about how you dealt with them; relationships were formal even when they were informal. I certainly would have always been extremely careful about what I said to people. Not that I'm not now, but in a different way. Anything I ever said was the view of the department, whereas here… you can be a bit more flexible in giving people background information. It's a big part of how to do the job here. The point of having an office in Brussels is to be able to go and build those informal relationships with people. (Interviewee 01)

This element of informal communication and relationship building through coffee meetings, beers and organised social events to support and facilitate the formal work in the bubble is woven into the fabric of Brussels life. This distinctiveness in comparison to ways of working 'back home' or in bilateral rather than multilateral settings was recognised by interviewees and is reflected in the wider literature looking at ways of working in the Brussels bubble (Kuus, 2014; Busby 2013). It is used continually as a means of doing preparatory or follow on work in relation to the formal business of the Brussels bubble, to ensure that there are no unanticipated 'nasty surprises' and to come to an agreed solution for any problems that do arise in formal business, so that momentum isn't lost. It is also used as a vital means of conveying intentions, gathering and passing on information, and more generally getting to know contacts on an approachable personal level,

because the more people in your network and the stronger your relationships with them, the more chance a political and diplomatic actor has of leveraging that, as needed. For UK and Northern Ireland political and diplomatic figures in Brussels it has become especially important since Brexit. Communication and relationship building opportunities in the course of formal business have been lost after Brexit, as have the reasons to meet informally directly in respect of aspects of formal EU business.

Despite the recognition of the importance of this informal communication work for the UK and Northern Irish cohorts in maintaining a flow of useful information and securing their connections – with Irish political and diplomatic figures in particular – interviewees commented that it was hard to keep people interested and willing to accept invitations. One reason given was the new asymmetry and imbalance of the UK-Ireland relationship since the UK became a 'third country' in the Brussels context. The resulting lack of direct access means that UK political and diplomatic actors now need more information from Irish counterparts than they can give. This has caused an asymmetry in many UK-Irish interpersonal relationships and interactions in the Brussels bubble, making them more 'transactive', in the words of interviewees, than reciprocal. This is problematic because reciprocity is key for building and maintaining trust in interpersonal and interstate exchanges in politics and international relations (Keohane, 1986; Molm, 2010; Vanneste, 2016). Both UK and Northern Irish political and diplomatic interviewees spoke about this, but the challenge for Northern Irish civil servants in maintaining this element of reciprocity was particularly acute, given that they were operating without a functional Executive during the protracted 2017-2020 collapse of Stormont:

> It's very much about give and take. You can't constantly meet someone, ask them to tell you things and then not have anything to tell them back. That's sometimes difficult, particularly when we didn't have ministers, because the position on the withdrawal agreement in Northern Ireland didn't evolve. So when you were meeting people, it was still 'well, you know our position remains as it was in July 2016'. (Interviewee 01)

Although the loss of formal opportunities for engagement affected both UK and Northern Irish political and diplomatic figures in Brussels, interviewees I spoke with recognised that there was a clear distinction in the way that the wider political and diplomatic community in Brussels interacted with Northern Irish representatives, as compared to their UK counterparts. This was particularly in terms of a willingness to keep informal communication lines open with them, which Northern Irish civil servants recognised as an opportunity that they needed to capitalize on in securing their position going forward:

> There's an element of the goodwill nature of others to share some of that information, although I do think there is a certain sympathetic view, possibly, for Northern Ireland [because] we've been thrust into the spotlight in Brussels – rightly or wrongly. We got a lot of airtime – it's about building on that and actually saying right okay, we've got this attention, come speak to us. (Interviewee 17)

A number of interviewees linked this more favourable willingness to engage with Northern Irish than UK civil servants and diplomats to the different formal levels of engagement that the UK and Northern Irish elements had in the Brexit negotiations. Interviewees also commented that this was aided by the fact that Northern Ireland was one of the parts of the UK that had voted 'Remain' in the 2016 Brexit referendum. In this sense, they garnered a degree of sympathy and benevolence from those within the Brussels bubble who perceived them as being collectively pulled down a path not of their choosing. Brexit negotiations were led from London by the UK government, with input where appropriate from the Brussels-based personnel at the UK Permanent Representation (known since Brexit as the UK Mission or UKMis). This formal role played by the UK government (including those that were Brussels-based) in the Brexit negotiations was not matched on the Northern Irish side, or indeed by any of the other devolved governments. Interviewees observed that this created an opportunity for the Northern Ireland team to play on this element of separation from the official negotiation work, and cultivate warmer informal links with both Irish MEPs and the Irish Representation in Brussels, as well as with contacts representing the other EU member states and EU institutions:

> If you look at the overall negotiations, it was the UK Government leading on it, so if they reneged on any of it, it was like the UK position, so we were almost detached from any of that. So that helped us retain that element of trust, because we weren't engaged directly. It was almost the UK Government did this, or said that, or didn't do that, or said they were going to do X, Y and Z but maybe didn't. It maybe helped our hand that we weren't at that table, because then we did get detached from it. You know, 'Northern Ireland, they're their own separate entity, they've got their own devolved policy areas'. There was never any need not to trust us, I suppose. So that trust has always been there, and we haven't given them a reason for us to lose that. (Interviewee 17)

This detachment from the official UK negotiations work enabled the Northern Irish civil servants to benefit from both benevolence-based trust and integrity-based trust (Svare et al., 2020) from contacts in the Brussels bubble. Interviewees spoke about this trust allowing them to maintain much more active, open channels of communication, with those more open, warmer relations

continuing after the UK's official January 2020 exit from the EU. Although interviewees I spoke with felt this receptiveness to the Northern Irish civil servants to be generally the case amongst other political and diplomatic figures in the Brussels bubble, it was seen as particularly pertinent in the Irish-Northern Irish relationships. Irish political and diplomatic figures agreed with this view, pointing to shared interests as a key reason for this receptiveness:

> With the Northern Ireland Executive Office - much better relationship, much closer relationship with them [than with UKMis], just because of the nature of the islands, and it is relevant to us. And I suppose we are more inclined because we want the Northern Ireland Executive Office's voice heard. It's very important for us that people understand the nationalist perspective, the unionist perspective in the rest of Brussels, so we would have a much closer relationship with them (Interviewee 21)

Developing stronger relations and a basis for trust relies on communication, but UK and Northern Irish interviewees highlighted that in the Brexit and post-Brexit years, communication needed to become more strategic because opportunities arose less organically. Just opening up more avenues and hoping, or piling on more and more attempts at communication with a particular contact or organisation did not necessarily yield better results in managing relationships. One of the real complexities in managing relationships that UK and Northern Irish interviewees spoke about was the need to be able to recognise when to be judicious and show restraint with how much informal communication and activity to try to build in, to avoid overplaying an issue or a particular relationship. Within the Brexit negotiations context, interviewees spoke about the nuanced way in which informal relationship building opportunities could be used to support the formal 'in the room' points of engagement:

> I would have been very careful about engaging. It depends on how much 'in the room' activity there is, as to how much you can do outside the room. If 'in the room' - whether it be virtually or in person - is basically every day or four days a week, there isn't an awful lot of space for you to then work with outside of that. Whereas, if you've got a Committee meeting every three months there's an awful lot of activity you can do in between in a sort of informal way. (Interviewee 10)

Interviewees talked about this patience in waiting for the right moment and the right approach for sharing or asking for information as both a skill and a risk, and timeliness of communication and engagement required a sensitive balancing act. If you waited too long, you might miss your moment, if you were too impatient and went too hard, you could push contacts into feeling less

comfortable and less trusting, making them more likely to withhold and making the exchange ultimately less fruitful.

Despite the previously mentioned challenges of operating in the absence of government oversight and direction from Stormont throughout the 2017-2020 period, a number of interviewees remarked on the effectiveness of the Office of the Northern Ireland Executive in Brussels (ONIEB) team in gaining access to information, in developing relationships, and taking and capitalizing on opportunities for informal engagement. The counterpoint to this was a level of concern about the lack of engagement from the Northern Irish political side. There was not a singular cause put forward for this by interviewees, but a complex combination of three primary issues. Firstly, the travel and workplace restrictions arising during the Covid-19 pandemic, which meant there was a sustained period of little to no movement between Belfast and Brussels. Secondly, the collapse and absence of the Northern Ireland Executive and Assembly from January 2017 to January 2020 and then the subsequent collapse of the Executive again from February 2022. Finally, the reticence on the part of certain Northern Ireland (Unionist) political parties to overtly engage with the EU. Despite this combination of factors, there was an evident desire on the part of political and diplomatic figures in the Brussels bubble to engage with Northern Irish politicians on an informal basis, to keep information flowing:

> So for the last two years, nobody from Belfast has set foot in Brussels. And if they are in the single market for goods that's not healthy – it's completely wrong in fact. Because eventually they'll have to vote on renewing Article 5-10 of the protocol in 2024 in the Assembly. And I don't want the argument to be made, 'well, we don't know anything, we never hear anything'. So we're trying to anticipate and make sure people know what is actually coming, how it might affect them, give them an opportunity to give their view. (Interviewee 18)

Interviewees emphasised that, in the Northern Ireland context, these kinds of opportunities to engage informally in Brussels provided a valuable opportunity to begin to establish relationships and develop interpersonal understanding and trust. This interaction – particularly in informal situations like dinners or drinks events - was a critical step in forming a stable base for some of the trickier conversations needed on issues of contention around the Northern Ireland Protocol or other problematic issues:

> When you sit down and have dinner with people [in Brussels], and you're not under the glare and it is informal. Those are really good for icebreakers, and then you find out about

> each other's family, you have discussions which are not about the Protocol or anything else, but maybe learning about what's going on in somebody else's country, the politics of their country. That helps, I think, normalise the harder conversations. (Interviewee 38)

Some interviewees spoke about the way that the UK's tactics and political narrative during the negotiation and transition periods had shocked people in Brussels. There was a sense that the UK had repeatedly and knowingly acted without integrity and, consequently, had badly compromised trust. In response to this, interviewees often talked about a post-Brexit shift within the Brussels bubble in their sense of professional obligation to keep informal channels open with UK contacts and aligned to that, a less automatic extension of trust. Whereas previously their sense of professional obligation was to keep channels open as part of the normative practice of information sharing amongst member states, they now felt more professionally obligated to withhold information if it was not intended for sharing beyond member states. In addition, the perception of 'bad faith' on the part of the UK at both institutional and interpersonal level made interviewees feel less personally inclined to go out of their way to maintain links or help out UK contacts who might previously have been in their 'circle of trust':

> There is still a relationship, but it's not very good, there's not much trust. But I think also it's transactional like there's very little UKMis can provide to the Reps, but there's a huge amount the Reps can provide to UKMis, but they probably don't want to provide it, because again, they are a third country. So you know, I have gotten texts from UK colleagues saying 'Oh, how did such and such a meeting go? I can't tell them, you know. I can't tell them what happened in the meeting. But you know, they ask it all the same. (Interviewee 21)

A number of interviewees spoke about the importance of repairing the political environment, and that improving the fabric of both the UK-EU and the UK-Ireland relationship was a key part of this. This was seen as something that had to come from a cumulative layering of understanding and relationships, which – with far less formal opportunities for engagement post-Brexit – were heavily reliant on informal communication and working. However, interviewees spoke about the challenges in making this work, because the very fact of Brexit reduced opportunities and created a divisive gap to overcome in terms of outlook, shared interests and understanding. Amongst member states and sub-regions, a key feature of the Brussels bubble as a shared space is the ability for communications and trust to be passed on and built upon in a perpetually self-reinforcing and self-sustaining closed loop. This was easier for the UK when it was a member state because, as the literature on professional socialisation in the Brussels bubble indicates (Juncos &

Pomorska, 2006; Tuinier et al., 2023), shared interests drive extensive opportunities for cooperation, interaction and the development of a "we-feeling" in relation to role-identity amongst political and diplomatic actors in the bubble (Juncos & Pomorska, 2006, p3). By contrast, as an EU 'third country' the dynamic has now changed and UK political and diplomatic actors are now outside of that collective loop and can no longer trade on shared interests and common identity in the same way:

> I mean, of course there will be a relationship, there has to be a relationship. But the less layers of that informal, behind the scenes working, the less there is understanding of how the system works, the less effective it's going to be for the UK. It will also have an impact in areas where there is a need to cooperate. (Interviewee 31)

Interviewees expressed concern that this gap would only widen with time, as UK political and diplomatic figures became less and less practiced and grounded in the Brussels bubble culture and ways of working.

4.3 Theme 2 - Co-located multilateral and multilevel relationships away from home

Multilateral and multilevel as standard in the Brussels bubble.

As a post-Brexit union of twenty-seven member states the EU is, by definition, a multilateral entity, and a key physical expression of this is the colocation in the Brussels bubble of political and diplomatic representatives from every EU member state. Within this diverse Brussels bubble community there are political and diplomatic figures as well as officials working for the EU institutions directly, and collectively these span the different 'levels' of EU business – subregion, state, EU institutions. The concept of multilevel governance in the EU context was developed by Liesbet Hooghe and Gary Marks (cf Hooghe & Marks, 1996; Hooghe & Marks, 2001; Schakel, 2020) and applied in respect of Northern Ireland and the EU by Murphy (2011, 2017) and Moore (2007) as a means of more fully accounting for the role that subregions played in the governance and policy work of the EU. The multilevel governance approach identifies three distinct levels – subregion, state, EU institutional level – with the subregional track focused on three key elements: "regional representation in the CoR [Committee of the Regions], regional access to the Council of Ministers, and regional lobby offices" (Schakel, 2020, p768). This recognises the distinction between the different focus for committees, work, and engagement for diplomats and civil servants at state level (for member states such as Ireland, and the UK before Brexit) as

compared to the subregional level (such as the UK's devolved Northern Irish, Welsh and Scottish governments, pre-Brexit). There was considerable evidence throughout the series of interviews of the change and variance in the previously extensive communication and trust work that contributed to relationship building across multilateral and multilevel lines in the Irish-UK-Northern Irish co-located community in the Brussels bubble.

Before Brexit, as subregional actors, Northern Ireland political and diplomatic figures had their own direct responsibilities at the subregional level, through the Office for the Northern Ireland Executive in Brussel (ONIEB). Interviewees also spoke about their pre-Brexit use of the formal and informal communication channels available to them through their UK and Irish political and diplomatic contacts to try to gain support on policy issues of concern, or influence the position on any given issue being progressed at the member state level. For Irish, UK and Northern Irish civil servants, diplomats and politicians alike, their day-to-day work and presence in the Brussels bubble provided extensive and continual opportunities for engagement and interaction with one another, across the member state-subregion lines.

Many interviewees referenced the pre-Brexit normalized, low-stakes everyday communication and interaction in the Brussels bubble between the three different communities of UK, Irish and Northern Irish political and diplomatic actors. This was in-keeping with the subregion-state dynamic in the Brussels bubble and not distinctive to Northern Ireland. However, in the Northern Irish context there was a need to keep close ties on both sides because of the distinctive Northern Irish geopolitical context. Having what was framed by interviewees as the 'official' open door through the UK Representation and MEPs and also a secondary 'friendly ear' through the Irish Representation and MEPs was seen as very important, although after Brexit the official route through the UK became inevitably less helpful because they were no longer 'in the room'. However, a number of interviewees spoke about the strength and warmth of the Irish-Northern Irish relationship as compared to the UK-Northern Irish relationship, which interviewees spoke of largely positively, but framed as being more 'functional' and born of the formal governance link between the two organisations:

> There was a lot more connection and connectivity and rapport between the Northern Ireland bureau and the Irish Perm Rep than with UKRep. I think, at times, UKRep probably had much more on its mind - like financial services in London - than it did with Northern Ireland, and was content to leave that to the bureau. Whereas the Irish Rep …Sometimes I'd go to receptions in the Northern Ireland office and there would be more officials there from the Irish Perm Rep than there would be from the UK Perm Rep. (Interviewee 19)

None of the UK, Irish or Northern Irish teams in Brussels were responsible for leading the Brexit negotiations or setting the tone for the post-Brexit relationship, but political and diplomatic interviewees recognised that they provided a vital sounding board and an important message relaying function back to home capitals, both during and after Brexit. Irish interviewees spoke about capitalising on this awareness, using Brussels-based UK contacts to relay messages to seniors and those actively leading negotiations from London:

> The UK mission, you know, we got off a call with them and someone said 'God, you were very harsh with them', and I said 'well, I wasn't being harsh on him, he just has to write a memo now'. So, that's really…it's about sending signals, that kind of thing you know, but they know the game. (Interviewee 18)

This sense of 'playing the game' was talked about as a core part of the multilevel, multilateral normality of working in the Brussels bubble, although prior to Brexit there was more parity between UK and Irish 'players' in controlling the communications. For the UK political and diplomatic actors in Brussels, not only were they no longer on an equal footing with Irish counterparts, they were also disempowered by the fact that the whole Brexit process was being primarily driven from London. For the UK team, the fact that London 'held the reigns' hampered their ability to engage in Brussels as much as they might have liked, whilst it was recognised that the Northern Irish team had to navigate cautiously in the absence of the Executive:

> UKMis or UKRep wasn't as involved as they should have been. It was simply not very many people were involved as much as maybe they could have been in that Withdrawal Agreement negotiations process. Often - I'm sure - for very good reasons, because of the level of political sensitivity etc. I think sometimes the NI Exec Office here felt that they'd been cut out because they were the NI Exec Office, whereas actually most Whitehall departments had been cut out, and to some extent UKRep as well at different times. But I think the NI Exec Office also were in a very challenging position, representing the devolved government that didn't have political leadership during that period. (Interviewee 10)

As the quote above indicates, there was also a tension at times in the day-to-day interpersonal relationships between members of the Brussels-based UK and Northern Irish teams, with sensitivities that sometimes arose around how the Brexit negotiations handling process unfolded. This was acknowledged by UK and Northern Irish players in Brussels, who talked about having worked on strengthening ties between them, as a means of maintaining relationships and also

managing and improving communication flows both between themselves and with home capitals. Interviewees spoke from both the UK and Northern Irish perspective about the increased effort on the part of the UK Representation in the wake of the Brexit referendum to improve and regularise the connections and flow of information with Northern Irish colleagues in Brussels, as a means of building trust and stability in the relationship:

> UKMis have made a lot of effort over the past couple of years to bring us in a little bit more. I think a lot of the contact has been more regularised…[Previously] sometimes it was very hard to find the person who you needed to get information from. When you did, they treated you … it felt as if you were an external person asking them. ... I think it's more the way things have been regularised so that it isn't that we're asking for these meetings, but that they're automatically and systematically set up. (Interviewee 01)

However, there was also a recognition that relationships were not always smooth, which interviewees talked about in relation to Brussels-based actors on both the UK and Northern Irish sides not leading the Brexit process, and therefore being limited as to what they could share, both with each other and with others within the Brussels bubble.

Northern Irish interviewees recognised that both before and after Brexit a key part of their role and purpose in Brussels was in developing relationships, gathering and giving information, and maximizing opportunities, both with the Irish Permanent Representation and also more widely with the EU institutions and member states. One technique they spoke of was springboarding off opportunities via their UK counterparts, who held a much wider circle of contacts, both because they were a much bigger team and also because of the previously greater range of formal business and committee work at the member state level, meaning that the UK team naturally held many more points of engagement. This ability to access and leverage wider contact networks was one of the real benefits that Northern Irish interviewees perceived from falling under the UK Mission's wider institutional umbrella:

> UKRep/UKMis would have a wider range of contacts than us, so we could tap into their contacts as well. And they would be very good at doing sort of more soft engagement events and things, using their residence. So we'd go along to those, and meet up with their contacts and their contacts became our contacts. It's all about who you know in Brussels – who you know, who you can link up with and get that information. (Interviewee 17)

This importance of leveraging networks goes to the heart of the Brussels bubble way of working (Bicchi, 2014; Kuus, 2014). Alongside this, they also had pre-existing strong ties with the Irish Representation. Interviewees spoke about their reliance in the pre-Brexit years on their connections and interpersonal relations with colleagues on the UK and Irish sides, as a route into both influencing and keeping informed on business of relevance at the member state level. It was mentioned as a primary reason, pre-Brexit, for the efforts expended on communication and relationship building with Irish and UK political and diplomatic players in the Brussels bubble. However, interviewees emphasised that keeping these links became much more of a priority after the Brexit referendum, and was welcomed on all sides:

> We were in quite a good position because we had links with the UK Mission or Rep, and the Irish Perm Rep and for me, that was always a positive, because we had such willingness from all sides to engage with us, and we were willing to engage with them, and there was always great efforts made on both sides, I thought, to keep those connections going. And that certainly came from the top - our senior management were very keen for that. So that was a stabiliser in everything, all the chaos, but that was maintained for us. (Interviewee 17)

The receptiveness to Irish and EU engagement, and the ability of the Northern Irish team to tap directly into the Irish Permanent Representation and the EU via Irish MEPs was also noted as having given them a beneficial and distinctive identity of their own, away from that of the UK team at UKMis:

> I think it's fair to say they were better engaged actually by the Irish and the EU for a while, and I think they were quite effective in presenting - from their perspective - a kind of factual analysis of the issues and the risks. The upside of that is I think they're seen as a reasonably credible, distinct voice in Brussels, and I think that has been helpful when they have since been part of the UK delegation to the Joint Committee and the Ireland-Northern Ireland Specialized Committee, and throughout the last year kind of said how important it was to have flexibility and things like that. Although obviously in the Joint Committee, you often have the First Minister and Deputy First Minister who present quite different perspectives. But there is still some commonality around the need for flexibility and things like that, and I think that voice has been useful. But also at the kind of official level, I don't think they've been seen as being unthinking apologists for the UK position, far from it. So they've, I think, had the credibility to say, actually, this is a

> massive problem with medicines or this is a massive problem for supermarkets etc. (Interviewee 10)

The open engagement between the Irish Representation and the Office for the Northern Executive in Brussels (ONIEB) was not something new that started in the years following the Brexit referendum, but had evolved over a long history. A number of interviewees felt that the shared space of the Brussels bubble as a whole played a part in this, but emphasised that the particular geographical closeness and colocation in respect of the Irish and Northern Irish offices in Brussels was even more acute and instrumental:

> I mean for years before they moved into their current premises, the Northern Ireland office actually shared a building and was on the ground floor, with the Irish Perm Rep occupying the top three or four floors. You would have thought it was all one thing, which didn't quite appeal to some unionist politicians - might have given the wrong impression, if you know what I mean. Even now you can literally walk between them. The Irish Perm Rep is a completely separate entity it's a Member State in its own right, but they all worked extremely well together. (Interviewee 19)

Friends, colleagues, acquaintances and the regularised intensity of interactions in the Brussels bubble

The professional life cycles of politicians and MEPs in Brussels are distinctly different from those of civil servants and diplomats. For politicians the role is nomadic by nature because they have their home constituency, and they are also regularly in both Brussels and Strasbourg as the two sites of the European Parliament. MEPs are appointed on a five-year term, but can be reelected for multiple terms, so for example Jim Nicholson (UUP) was a serving Northern Irish MEP for 30 years, whilst his colleagues Ian Paisley (DUP) and John Hume (SDLP) both retained their seats for 25 years. For diplomats and civil servants, postings to Brussels are usually fixed term rotational posts, lasting somewhere around three to four years normally. These positions are fixed in Brussels, meaning that for these diplomats and civil servants the relatively small space of the Brussels bubble becomes their permanent base in that time – their home, their workplace, and their social environment.

Although the life cycles of the roles are different, they have two key things in common. Firstly, a reliance on building strong and trusting relationships and alliances with colleagues to progress

their own particular interests and objectives. Secondly, a constant intense cycle of formal and informal interactions during their time in Brussels, which is tied to the cyclical rhythms of formal EU business. The collective efficiency of the Brussels bubble 'machine' is essential in supporting the continual delivery of this business. This 'machine' is formed from the dense network of political and diplomatic figures within the Brussels bubble, and is affected by the ability of these players to build cooperative interpersonal and interorganisational alliances and sub-communities by developing strong and trusting relations through formal and informal connections and activities. Given that the individual political and diplomatic actors are constantly changing on a rotational basis, my interviewees spoke about the Brussels bubble 'welcoming new arrivals' culture amongst member states, developed over time, based on a collective acknowledgement and acceptance of the need for a supportive process of handing on connections and contacts to successors (in the case of civil servants and diplomats) and new members of the political party (in the case of MEPs), to enable them to quickly get to grips with the role.

Interviewees spoke about the respective political and diplomatic communities collectively buying in to this 'induction' phase for new arrivals through both formal work streams and informal engagements, welcoming them into the community and giving opportunities for them to demonstrate that they are willing to 'play the game' of engaging in the multilateral Brussels community. Interviewees spoke about this socialisation process as being not just a social nicety but a recognised essential component of cooperative multilateral politics and diplomacy, working both in the interests of the EU collectively and also the individual member states. All the member states are invested in it, because it is a mutually beneficial process, with a constant reciprocal give and take from all sides. Interviewees also recognised it as being a key part of maintaining an effective working level of connectivity between politicians, civil servants and diplomats from all the EU member states, in supporting the collective efficiency of the Brussels bubble machine. UK, Irish and Northern Irish interviewees spoke of developing these connections into very supportive and close interpersonal relationships which even turned into friendships in some cases. Looking to the literature suggests that this is distinctive to member state and subregional political and diplomatic actors, rather than applying more generally to officials working within the EU institutions (Commission, Council, Parliament). For them, there is a more competitive "sink or swim" culture (Kuus, 2014, 81). This can also be seen in the different framing of the concepts of networks and contacts as compared to friendship, as typified by this response from an EU interviewee:

> I wouldn't use the word friends, to be honest. Contacts yes, but friends is something different… If I'm going to an event for anything and I interact with people, this is not friendship, this is a part of diplomacy… But this is also linked to the discussion about trust. Who are you? Where are you from? What type of organisation do you work for? What kind of interests? What are your main issues? Which angle? (Interviewee 05)

In recognizing the constant "revolving door" (Coen & Vannoni, 2016) nature of the Brussels bubble for political and diplomatic figures, a number of interviewees commented on these built-in processes amongst member states for establishing yourself and others following you in post. Interviewees made the point that - prior to Brexit - it was almost easier to integrate in Brussels than in home capitals, because establishing connections is such an important, widely accepted and normalised part of the Brussels dynamic:

> People understand that you come and go. You're always meeting replacements or they're meeting your contacts or meeting you as a replacement, and there's always a handover element…'these are the people you should go and meet first, and these are the people I found helpful'. (Interviewee 01)

Although it took three and a half years from referendum to actual exit, the outcome of the Brexit referendum fundamentally changed the normative behaviours and relationship 'lifecycles' of UK and Northern Irish political and diplomatic roles in the Brussels bubble right from the start, becoming more pronounced with time. UK and Northern Irish interviewees said that once the UK was no longer a member state the reciprocity of this previously normal and routine socialisation and engagement for newcomers was lost. New arrivals in particular found it much harder to build contacts and informal connections. In conversation with UK and Northern Irish interviewees there was clear recognition that having now left the EU, they could no longer rely on the relatively easy and self-sustaining loop of normalised EU member state introduction and socialisation to keep connected with the member states and institutions. It was noted by interviewees on the UK and Northern Irish side that this was becoming harder over time, with a greater need to show an element of 'added value' in order to keep existing relations and establish new ones:

> There's continuous turnover in Brussels but cultivating personal relationships does matter. We have some very, very strong contacts. The best you can hope is that people you've got to know well leave a strong message to the people succeeding them to say this is interesting. And we have to have something positive to offer as well. Not just be asking for favours...keep a line open, keep a message going, add some value by explaining things

> to them that they couldn't get otherwise and weren't getting from other sources. (Interviewee 20)

Although opinions differed about the appropriateness of the use of more familiar terms like 'friends' rather than 'colleagues' or 'contacts', it was clear from talking with interviewees that the intensity and closeness of the bonds formed in some of the political and diplomatic roles affords a particular increased level of trust at an interpersonal level. But underlying this there was an awareness that "you do always have to remember that even though you're great friends with these people and you get on well, you will leave this role eventually, but you won't leave your own system" (Interviewee 21), so managing relationships and allegiances accordingly was important.

It was widely recognised that good relationships were an important part of getting the work done, that you needed to have a relationship sufficiently developed that you are more than "just an email that they get from time to time" (Interviewee 50), and that this was integral to being able to work together and resolve issues:

> It's this familiarity thing again. You get to understand people, you get to understand the person you're talking to, you get to fix some small problems together and therefore you know that you can fix problems together and therefore you're more confident that you can fix the next problem together. I think that's really important. You know, we're social animals – relationships matter. But you do have to create these opportunities for the trust to be built through experience. There has to be a human element. (Interviewee 51)

The Brussels bubble is a tightly networked social ecosystem, and something that both political and diplomatic interviewees highlighted was the importance of behaving and communicating in ways which facilitated the enactment of integrity and reliability, which was considered to be an essential component of trust building and reputation management in the Brussels bubble. Interviewees emphasised that in situations where an individual acted or communicated in ways which demonstrably lacked integrity and/or insight, their reputation as a trusted interlocutor could quickly tarnish. There was a ripple effect from such acts of self-inflicted reputational damage, because talk travels fast in the tightly woven communicative channels of the Brussels bubble:

> You do get some people who think they can play fast and loose and get away with it. And you probably will get away with it that one time, but Brussels is a gossip centre, so if you break your word it spreads pretty quickly. And also, sometimes people might say 'oh are

> you going to support us on this? Because Y country's going to support us on this', and you're like 'oh okay, well if Y country is…' and then when you go talk to Y country they're like 'no, we never said we were going to support that'. And that's a good example of where you go 'oh, okay this guy either is A). a liar or B). doesn't know what's going on' and neither is great...So I think it's two things - it's your actual integrity as an individual and also whether you know what's going on within your own system. (Interviewee 21)

It was very apparent that whilst the formal aspects of business in the Brussels bubble provided an important dense framework of opportunities to build relationships and consolidate trust, very often the informal elements of engagement were where the relationships really formed. The importance placed on taking these opportunities, and the recognition of the difference it made to trust in the relationship was seen as being distinctive when compared to the perspectives and approaches back in home capitals. Numerous interviewees pointed to the contrast with ways of working back home and gave examples of where these informal relationship building activities were actively incorporated into the Brussels way of working, to support effective working in formal business contexts:

> So, there are trips...There's some work stuff, but there's a lot of fun in it, and they're the real moments. When you've spent a day with [an] Ambassador in a theme park it's very hard to start lying to them or bullshitting them or doing things in bad faith. And that's a key thing. So the capitals don't know them or they may know them, but they don't know them well as interlocutors, but the people in Brussels, they socialize together, they know each other, and they hang out together at times. That really kind of helps to gel the process. To ensure things work, things get through. (Interviewee 21)

It was acknowledged that the regularised interaction and intensive relationship building work in Brussels allowed political and diplomatic actors to develop an understanding of each other and develop a degree of trust that might not sit comfortably with those back in home capitals. This reflects an understanding in the literature on diplomatic trust that somewhat paradoxically, a successful diplomat must be an honest and credible communicator in their national interest, but in order to achieve this they must be given some discretion to be able to develop understanding and sympathy for the other position, and balance their sympathies to both their home country and their host country (Lindsey, 2023, p10). Interviewees also spoke about this as being understood to be part of the purpose and benefit of having civil servants and diplomats 'on the ground' in Brussels:

> Trust is vitally important. No diplomatic relationship runs at all, still less runs smoothly, if one side sees the other has misled it, especially if it's something important. That spoils things forever. And you might need to continue to deal with each other, but things will never be the same. So trust, reliability, truth-telling to each other is vital. But then this can become a problem with your head office. If things are going well, then there's a certain symmetry that the two people in the negotiating room are in some way trusting each other, or taking each other more into their confidence, more than each with their head office. In order to keep things moving, and for each side to understand the other, in the negotiating room they will probably say things that they know their head office wouldn't want them to say [and] the head office is kind of aware of that. But if you're not able to be open with the person you're negotiating with, when things get really difficult, you won't break through because each side won't think they know all there is to know or all they need to know about the others position. So that very open, rather vulnerable relationship in the negotiating room is key to ultimate success, and the head office taking a different view is part of that phenomenon. (Interviewee 35)

This illustrates the way that political and diplomatic actors in the Brussels bubble effectively act as trust intermediaries, using the discretion they have to take more risks in managing multiple loyalties and fluid identities as they build trust and relationships over time. This quote also shows the recognised importance amongst interviewees of demonstrating vulnerability in 'going beyond their line' as a means of building trust. However, interviewees also acknowledged that this required caution and skill, because failing to deliver adversely impacts perceptions of integrity and/or competence, causing trust to decrease rather than increase.

In the context of the UK-Northern Ireland-Ireland political and diplomatic dynamic, the element of developing constructive, trusting interpersonal relationships which are open to finding common ground and working cooperatively is a key tool in the Brussels bubble, and something that politicians and diplomats I spoke with actively strive for. A number of interviewees recognised that, prior to Brexit, this fed into future ways of working and an ongoing openness to keeping those relationships active. However, UK interviewees in particular emphasised that the scope for discretion in communicative practice and relationship building has declined in the Brexit era, with more centralised control and oversight from London. Despite reduced opportunities post-Brexit, the communication, engagement and trust building work done in Brussels was still recognised by interviewees as important in building relationships which could be sufficiently

'load-bearing' to maintain channels of communication, even long after individuals moved on from Brussels:

> The trust you build now will stand you in good stead in ten years time – on a completely different topic, when your officials have all rotated, and they're all in different jobs and the planets just happen to align in a different context. (Interviewee 51)

Interviewees felt that the distinctive complexity of the Brussels bubble trust-building environment and the capacity that this generated for trust-building within the Brussels bubble as a multilateral arena had the potential to be more powerful than equivalent trust-building efforts made bilaterally:

> There can be trust between two individual countries like Ireland and Canada or Ireland and Japan, and they behave correctly towards each other. But there's a deeper trust that builds up when your ministers and your officials are meeting literally every single day. I mean literally every meeting room in Brussels is occupied every day by representatives of the 27 Member States and the Commission. Negotiating openly on the legislation, on the policies that they're going to share together. And that builds up a sort of human trust that doesn't apply between two countries where their officials are not meeting so consistently. We get to understand each other, we get to know people individually as persons, rather than just as representatives of something. So that's also a dimension of the European Union that's a little bit different. On the one hand, the complexity and the other hand, the simple fact that we're sitting around the tables together, and know each other personally, and find that we have so much in common. (Interviewee 30)

Diplomatic interviewees very often merged the elements of interpersonal and interstate trust when talking about the ways in which relationship building contributed to trust more broadly. This demonstrates the porosity of the interface between the different levels of trust, and reflects the sense amongst certain scholars of international relations and trust (cf Wheeler, 2018; Lindsey, 2023) that state level trust is, in part, the product of the fabric of many, many contributory relationships between diplomats and politicians, not simply those between heads of state. In this respect, a number of interviewees commented on the particular value of trust building in the Brussels bubble as a multilateral and multilevel shared space.

CHAPTER 5: Findings – Brussels as a 'Neutral Space'

5.1 Introduction

In looking at the years of joint EU membership of the UK and Ireland, the Brussels bubble has often been framed by political commentators and scholars as a politically neutral space in the Northern Ireland context (Phinnemore et al., 2012, p569; Wright, 2018; Féron, 2014; Lagana, 2021a; Connelly, 2018), in which it was possible for UK, Irish, and Northern Irish politicians, civil servants and diplomats to work alongside and with each other. The contention is that this enabled them to strengthen understanding and working relationships with each other, in a way which made it possible to build towards a sufficiently trusting and cooperative relationship across individuals and institutions representing the UK, Irish and Northern Irish governments and political players to achieve the formulation and implementation of the GFA. In the interviews political and diplomatic figures reacted to this framing of the Brussels bubble as a neutral space in the Northern Ireland context, and attention was given to whether interviewees' perceptions had evolved over time, particularly since Brexit.

Themes three and four of the six core themes that emerged from the interview data are presented in the remainder of this chapter. Theme three looks at the perceptions and pragmatics amongst political and diplomatic figures - both in the Brussels bubble and in home capitals – about the value and need for 'neutral space' in the Northern Ireland context. Theme four looks at the impact on normative trust relationships and ways of working as a result of the post-Brexit switch from cooperative to oppositional dynamics.

5.2 Theme 3: Perceptions and pragmatics about the value and need for 'neutral space'

In considering the issue of the Brussels bubble as a politically neutral space in the Northern Ireland context, a number of interviewees strongly reiterated the point made in my participant interview briefing information which distinguished between the EU and the Brussels bubble. Related to this, numerous interviewees vigorously rebutted the possibility of the EU itself being politically neutral because whilst it is a rule-bound supranational organisation, it is also in itself a political community:

> There's aspects of neutrality and also politics in Brussels. There are aspects of neutrality that are very strong in terms of how one seeks to follow rules, for instance. I don't think

> there are that many jurisdictions around the world that are as rigorous about rules and procedures, following what has been agreed, being so treaty bound, following up on legislation. At the same time, the determining and the writing of those rules is very much part of politics. One cannot say that the Council is not doing politics, that the European Parliament is not a parliament of politics. (Interviewee 08)

However, interviewees were generally more comfortable with the idea of Brussels as the site of EU business having offered a space, pre-Brexit, that was politically neutral in the Northern Irish context. The first part of this was attributed to the colocation and shared EU business focus of political and diplomatic actors for Ireland and the UK within the Brussels bubble over many years:

> If you look at the history of Britain and Ireland it started working really well when we both joined the European Union together. I mean would the peace process have worked if we hadn't both been in the European Union, that's an interesting question, I think. Certainly institutionally, the fact that we were governed by a lot of the same laws and processes, and we were part of the same diplomatic block, I think was an important contributor. And certainly, the fact that we're now at odds on a lot of that stuff is itself undermining of the peace process. (Interviewee 03)

The second key element that most interviewees considered to be very important was the fact that the Brussels bubble had offered a space for formal and informal engagement and relationship building amongst Northern Irish MEPs, away from the highly sensitive and polarised political home ground of Northern Ireland. In the Brussels bubble it was the expected norm that they find a way to cooperate and work together, rather than work in opposition:

> Sometimes putting people out of Northern Ireland in groups….you get them to have a little breather, maybe get to dialogue and talk to each other, in a safe space or in a neutral location…I never got the sense that Europe did that to a targeted degree, but because we had representation in Europe with our MEPs and party leaders, all in Europe at the same time, they had that space to talk about things….away from Northern Ireland, you're then forced to be together and forced to have those conversations which, if you're at home, you always have something else pressing on you. (Interviewee 42)

Being thrown together in the Brussels bubble gave Northern Irish MEPs the reason and means for building a different kind of relationship together. In illustrating their point, numerous interviewees pointed to the evidence of the positive and collaborative relationships built by John

Hume (SDLP), Jim Nicholson (UUP) and Ian Paisley (DUP) over many years as MEPs for their respective constituencies:

> It's not just about Brussels. It's about any space that is outside of this contested little piece of green land [but] Brussels, I think, is the big version of that, and the historical version of that. Where the precedent, I think, was set. Take these people away, let them go out for dinner together, despite their complete opposite politics. Of course, Ian Paisley and John Hume became good friends because of their time as MEPs. Not because of anything that was happening on this island. They gained a much better understanding of each other's position. And they may have stood in front of a camera and lambasted each other, but in reality, they would have gone for dinner, and chatted and tried to figure things out, and it was always in Brussels. (Interviewee 33)

In the Northern Ireland context, prior to Brexit and the ongoing issues with the implementation of the Northern Ireland Protocol, the Brussels bubble was broadly felt to have been a politically neutral space and site of interaction in which UK, Northern Irish and Irish political and diplomatic actors coexisted and worked cooperatively for the most part. Their working relationships were forged through a sense of commonality and shared interests as part of the EU collective of member states and regions. Interviewees I spoke with indicated that cohesion in these day-to-day working relationships steadily enhanced over the years under the twin umbrellas of shared interests and collaborative working on EU business, alongside broader principles of North-South and East-West relationship building commitments under the GFA.

A common thread that ran through the series of interviews was the complexity of the overall picture of the different relationships and inter-relationships in the Brussels bubble, and the ways in which the rollout of Brexit impacted on this. Whilst the Brexit referendum created an explicit need to renegotiate the UK-EU relationship in triggering the UK's exit from the EU, interviewees emphasised that the outworkings of the Brexit negotiation and implementation process also had very significant consequences for the UK-Ireland relationship in the Brussels bubble and also between London and Dublin. In particular interviewees spoke about the impact from some of the longer-term, far-reaching consequences of the headline-grabbing relationship management decisions taken during the negotiations and implementation phases. Interviewees spoke about the way that Brexit had short-circuited a wider political and diplomatic dynamic in respect of the enduring stability and viability of the 1998 Good Friday Agreement. Their comments reflected both the challenges to, and complexities of, the consociational settlement in Northern Ireland, as well as some of the concerns in the literature about the vulnerability and viability of

consociational settlements as long-term peace agreement arrangements (Dixon, 2023; Cochrane et al., 2018; Hayes & McAllister, 2013; McGarry & O'Leary, 2006a, 2006b):

> It has compounded an already unresolved set of issues. Good Friday didn't resolve all of the issues. It simply gave us the space and the opportunity to look at the situation. It just gave everyone the space to look afresh…but it has been, and represents, a point on the road and a journey. The hope was at the time, that it wouldn't be necessarily the destination. It was the first couple of steps, we'd started the journey. And we'd deepened the trust, strengthened the relationships - we'd let the destination take care of itself in the future. What Brexit has done is brought that right up in front of us, because it has brought back the issue of borders and identity, who you are, and so on. (Interviewee 45)

Regardless of their views on the prior political neutrality or otherwise of the Brussels bubble, interviewees universally agreed that it could no longer be considered in that light since the 2016 Brexit Referendum results. Interviewees felt that this was intrinsically bound up with the fact that of the two guarantors of the GFA, Ireland was remaining as an EU member state whilst the UK was exiting the EU, thereby creating a new dynamic between them within the Brussels bubble:

> We have this political dynamic of 'UK versus EU'. So whereas, previously, shared membership of the EU was something that, obviously UK and Ireland had in common, and was directly applicable to Northern Ireland, given the importance of freedom of movement – free movement of persons, free movement of goods. And of course, the PEACE funding that came from Brussels as well. I don't think that's the case anymore. I think that… well, the EU is a club of members, and it looks after the interests of its members. Ireland is a member. UK is not. (Interviewee 50)

Interviewees spoke about the outworkings of the Brexit negotiations and ongoing issues around the Northern Ireland Protocol as having left the UK and Ireland on opposite sides of the table. This was magnified within Northern Ireland along Unionist and Nationalist lines, with a sense conveyed by some interviewees that the UK and Irish governments had each chosen a side, as well as being amplified from the two opposing political positions – the UK government position by the Unionist side, the Irish government position by the Nationalist side by default because they were wholly against the UK government position. The GFA worked on the premise that the UK and Irish governments would a). continue their joint membership of the EU, and b). would act as "co-guarantors and joint custodians" (Cochrane, 2020, p58) of the Agreement. Many in Northern Ireland were dubious about their ability to act in this capacity, seeing them as more likely to

contribute to problems than ameliorate them. The practical, sociopolitical and legal complexities (Murray & Robb, 2023; Whitten, 2022; Hayward & Komarova, 2022) for Northern Ireland of the UK's exit from the EU, combined with the political fallout for Northern Ireland of the divergence and plummeting trust in UK-Irish relations since the Brexit referendum arguably justifies these concerns. Interviewees felt that, in consequence, the framework for Brussels to be a 'politically neutral' space in the Northern Ireland has been fundamentally altered.

This loss of status as a 'politically neutral space' in the Northern Irish context is a negative outcome of the soured UK-Ireland and UK-EU relations, exacerbated by the complications arising from the ongoing political roadblocks in Northern Irish domestic politics. However, taking a more positive view, some Irish and Northern Irish interviewees also spoke about new pragmatic incentives for Irish and Northern Irish political and diplomatic actors in the Brussels bubble to work together. This could also be perceived as tipping the balance of neutrality in the Brussels space, albeit in a more constructive and intentional way:

> The Executive Office has an office in Brussels, and we've always had good staff there, but we always relied very heavily on working closely with UKRep, who, of course don't have the same presence they had. And they don't have the same access that they had. And indeed they don't have the same interests that they once had. So Northern Ireland is in a particular difficulty there…It's going to be quite a challenge to have the sort of influence that is necessary, just given the sheer volume of new regulations that come through Europe. And without us having the access that we would have had through UKRep before, that is a major concern, there's no doubt about it. With Great Britain no longer being in the single market, they don't have the same concern about new regulations or amended regulations that are being developed in Europe, because they don't apply in Great Britain. But obviously, with Northern Ireland through the Protocol effectively still being in the single market, that is an issue for us… As time goes by there's greater divergence between the regulatory regime that is in Great Britain, compared with the regulatory regime that is in the single market, which is then going to be a huge problem for Northern Ireland. And we will not have the same access to the same levers we would have had before, when the whole of the UK was in the single market. (Interviewee 29)

The interviewee made this point as a means of demonstrating the pragmatic need to not just sit quietly as a devolved unit under the encompassing umbrella of the UK Representation's communication and engagement work. Instead, they recognised that they had to very actively and proactively build and maintain trust with others member states, but particularly with the Irish

Representation, given the good existing relations built over many years, and the multiple points of shared interest. Northern Irish civil servants in Brussels had to look objectively at the declining power and influence of the UK Representation in Brussels as compared to the enduring stability of the Irish Representation and take a measured decision in investing in relationship building with the latter. It was not an 'either/or' choice, but a recognition that civil servants on the Northern Irish side needed to become more proactive in understanding and reacting to EU-related issues in Northern Ireland's best interests, rather than relying on the UK position.

Interviewees spoke about the status change that Brexit triggered for the UK, almost by default, from trusted insider to outsider needing to earn trust. Several interviewees pointed to the UK's communicative acts in response to this status change as actively reducing trust further:

> Putting itself on a pathway to leaving the EU, the dynamic changed instantly. You're no longer in the family, you're outside the family. So you have to earn trust at that point. And then it was quite clear that the UK was lobbying different capitals to try and peel them off against Ireland, or against Barnier. That was very transparent and everybody picked up on that very quickly. It went down very badly. Then, after the joint report was agreed in 2017 then British officials would come out, like David Davis saying 'this is not legally binding, we can change this later'. That damages trust. (Interviewee 14)

Interviewees spoke about the need for a working relationship in getting through the Brexit negotiations, implementation period, and beyond. However, they spoke of significant challenges in doing so, which were magnified by the UK governments choices in managing the Brexit process including what was perceived by many as a very hostile and public communication strategy, which actively contributed to turning the Brussels bubble space from a 'politically neutral space' in the Northern Ireland context to a space of opposition and dissent. As one interviewee put it: "Of course it was important to build a relationship with the UK, because it was important to be able to get a deal, but it was complicated by the UK political context, which made it harder to build relationships with politicians and civil servants involved" (Interviewee 12). This made it challenging to build trust: "at the human level you could build a degree of trust, but this wasn't possible institutionally because it was as if for the UK trust no longer mattered" (interviewee 12). Numerous interviewees talked about the way that this was exacerbated by the changing political leadership and personnel involved in the negotiations from the UK side, which made it very hard to build up relationships and trust at the human level.

Given these circumstances at the higher political level, interviewees spoke about the day-to-day post-Brexit UK-Irish-Northern Irish dynamic in the Brussels bubble being highly sensitive, in which interpersonal relationships were handled with care to minimize accidental damage from the tangle of domestic politics and tense international relations that sparked off each other at different points since the Brexit referendum. Interviewees spoke about this as being an issue that continues to create a challenging environment for political and diplomatic relations in the Brussels bubble. Without divulging identifying details, some interviewees pointed to the fact that a small number of relations between Irish and UK political and diplomatic figures in the Brussels bubble had endured, on the basis of sufficiently strong pre-existing interpersonal trust and good relations. But more generally, interviewees highlighted the adverse impact on interpersonal relations, pointing to the compromises and complications for communication and trust-building at both interpersonal and interinstitutional level.

In talking about the reasons why the Brussels bubble is no longer 'neutral space', interviewees highlighted the damaged EU-UK relationship and the considerable gap between the EU and UK positions on the issue of the negotiation, implementation and resolution of Brexit related issues. Many interviewees felt that the ongoing challenges around the Northern Ireland Protocol lay at the heart of the issue: "the relationship in general - and I suppose trust is a hugely important part of any relationship - but the relationship cannot repair itself until the Northern Ireland Protocol issue is settled" (Interviewee 14). However, looking across interviews, this tie between practical resolution and political and diplomatic relationship building created a kind of 'waiting game' suspension effect on a number of fronts simultaneously, which put trust and relationship building efforts on pause:

> The lack of serious engagement in the UK on the Protocol issue is very disappointing. They have made their own bed, and now they actually refuse to lie in it. And the result is that there is no pressure from anywhere within the EU for re-engagement with the UK on the terms that the British say that they want. Partly because the British are seen as unreliable and deceptive. But also, people can read the newspapers. How much longer is Boris Johnson going to be there? How much longer is Liz Truss going to be there? What is the point in negotiating with people who may lose their own jobs. So, in general the toxic relationship between the EU and the UK has been very bad in reducing the space for political agreement in Northern Ireland. Which is always difficult to find anyway. (Interviewee 26)

Whilst many of the issues raised around the changing conception of Brussels' neutrality were issues around trust and communication at the highest political level, interviewees were consistently clear that these issues did directly impact onto trust, trust-building capacity and communications at the interpersonal level within the Brussels bubble, because the entire operating environment became one of suspicious caution and uncertainty.

In reflecting on the handling of the Northern Ireland Protocol issues and the Brexit process as a whole, interviewees emphasised that – as a consequence - Brussels could not currently be considered as a useful politically neutral space for advancing Northern Ireland political stability. However, many interviewees felt that what pre-Brexit Brussels had demonstrated over many years was that there was real value in identifying and utilising neutral space in the Northern Ireland context. Despite this recognition, interviewees felt that identifying a specific place that might be a 'neutral space' in post-Brexit times was particularly challenging:

> I don't believe there's ever an absolute neutral space. But there can be more neutral spaces, and I think places away from Northern Ireland could be the key. Brussels in light of Brexit and all the narratives that have been spun can probably no longer be that space…I don't think America is either. But it's just so strange that politics is all about relationship building, really, and yet there's no space to do that. (Interviewee 34)

Thinking more laterally about 'neutral spaces' as organically evolving, safe bubbles for repeated interaction and incremental trust and relationship building, a number of interviewees suggested that it might be necessary to think beyond purely geographical neutral spaces. The work of the British-Irish Association (BIA) was referred to repeatedly as providing a much-needed neutral space for post-Brexit dialogue and relationship-building between UK, Northern Irish and Irish politicians, diplomats and other relevant parties:

> The British-Irish Association meeting every year…is a space for dialogue and discussion, and that, I think, is an important thing to always have for Northern Ireland. Whether it's in Northern Ireland, outside of Northern Ireland, that kind of space where people come together and can be in a safe place to maybe talk about difficult issues is important. And not an easy thing to create. But the BIA have done it quite successfully, I think. (Interviewee 48)

This was felt to offer a distinctive and more neutral type of space that more conventional forms of dialogue and formal talks processes, where regularised and intentional governmental focus is put into task-oriented engagement with a specific goal or purpose in mind. By contrast,

interviewees suggested that key points contributing to the success of the BIA approach were that it is "a neutral space which is on nobody's patch, and is not issue driven. And nobody is forcing anybody to be there, but it's a recognised place that you can go and have constructive conversations" (Interviewee 51). These key features of success for the BIA could, pre-Brexit, also have been said to apply in the Brussels bubble context. As such, this perhaps helps to verify why the Brussels bubble was conceived of as a neutral political space in the Northern Ireland context during so many years of EU membership, and also indicates why, post-Brexit, it no longer is.

5.3 Theme 4: The switch from cooperative to oppositional dynamics and the impact on normative relationships

Oppositional narratives and politicisation of roles in Brussels

There are two levels of politicisation that emerged in the context of this research. The first is the politicisation of the issue and the way that this impacted upon Irish-UK-Northern Irish relations and day-to-day practice within the Brussels bubble. Schmidt (2019) talks of politicisation "emerging" amongst political and diplomatic actors in the EU context "in the increasingly politically charged dynamics of interaction within and among EU actors… politicization involves struggles for power and influence that are ideational as much as institutional and coercive" (Schmidt, 2019, p1). Wolff and Ladi (2020) borrow this conceptualisation and counter it with the simultaneous evidence in the EU context of "depoliticisation" which they define as "a process that removes the political character of an issue from decision-making" (Wolff & Ladi, 2020, p1027). Scholars suggest that, in the EU context, both politicisation and depoliticisation are responsive to "functional and political pressures travelling up from the member states" (Bressanelli et al., 2020, p329) but are strategically managed by political and diplomatic actors in the Brussels bubble to maintain their "room to manoeuvre" (Schimmelfennig, 2020, p343).

The second level of politicisation that was evident during interviews was in respect of the roles of Irish, UK and Northern Irish diplomats and civil servants working in the Brussels bubble. Politicisation of these roles is understood in three distinct senses. The first two of these are "formal politicization, defined as political influence on the (de)selection and promotion of bureaucrats… [and] functional politicization, understood as (senior) bureaucrats' consideration of the political realities in fulfilling their jobs" (Bach et al., 2020, p6). The third - administrative politicisation - is understood as actions in practice which contravene "the principles and conventions associated with a professional and impartial civil service" (Eichbaum & Shaw, 2008,

p343). In the context of this research all three different conceptions of role politicisation came up in discussion with interviewees.

For the first time since the UK's accession to the EU in 1973, Brexit brought a sustained and intentional change to the entire focus and purpose of the relationship between the UK and the EU, and by association, the member states of the EU, including Ireland. In negotiating the departure from the EU, the UK was in direct opposition against the EU and its member states during the Brexit negotiation phase. A number of interviewees perceived the UK government's amplification of the oppositional narratives as an intentional communicative device for politicising the Brexit narrative. It created an 'us and them' dynamic that pervaded the political level and also impacted upon the working level in the Brussels bubble:

> There's a sense of hostility towards the EU that's really astounding. It is politically expedient and advantageous to cast the EU in the role of the bogey man, where everything the EU does is designed to punish Britain for voting to leave. That narrative is informing everything they say, and those narrators are very powerful within the ruling party's leadership. (Interviewee 37)

Interviewees felt that there was a much more politically-charged impetus behind relationships than had previously been the norm for Brussels-based civil servants and diplomats. Interviewees talked about this as changing the tone of the relationships in Brussels and also keeping Brussels-based civil servants and diplomats at arms-length at times:

> The role of chief negotiator became much more political, much more centred on whoever the minister in charge at the time was. Which I think continues the theme you notice with a lot of ministers now, they don't trust the civil servants. They ultimately don't believe that the civil servants will negotiate in their interests, because they see the civil servant as…well, in the European context, as far too pro-European. But more generally, that they don't share the same ideology of deregulation, of not actually having a large state. (Interviewee 31)

Many interviewees discussed the political fallout of the fractious negotiations and 'divorce' period. Interviewees felt it made the operating environment in the Brussels bubble more politicised than usual and resulted in previously open contacts becoming more cautious in their interactions. Diplomats are conventionally recognised as being more politically-sensitised than civil servants, but in-keeping with the literature (Hartley & Manzie, 2020; Rhodes, 2016) civil servants are also recognised as needing "political antennae" (Interviewee 20) to enable them to

"navigate the different interpretations of 'political' (both informal politics within and between people and organizations and formal institutional and constitutional politics)" (Hartley & Manzie, 2020, p570). Even so, some Irish and Northern Irish interviewees felt that since the Brexit referendum UK civil servants and diplomats delivered a far more politicised performance of their role than had previously been the norm in Brussels, with a sense that this was a direct reaction to political and ideological undercurrents from London during the Brexit period. Certain interviewees went further, in commenting that the line taken by UK civil servants and diplomats in Brussels demonstrated an internalisation and adoption of the UK government's political narrative, without balanced due regard for the Northern Ireland history and political context:

> We had a number of meetings with UK [Brussels-based] officials who, I must say, I was a wee bit surprised at the extent to which they had internalized the kind of Frost narrative and the UK Government position. ...It was at the height of the 'we're going to trigger it' drumbeat around Article 16... I did find the political positioning and honestly the lock, stock and barrel absorption of the political positioning and even the UK Ambassador really a little bit disturbing actually…That visit made quite clear to me, the interests of the UK in Brussels are not the same as the interests of the people that I represent. (Interviewee 11)

A number of interviewees spoke about the increasing polarisation of Northern Irish political positions since the Brexit referendum, as a direct consequence of the line set down in the oppositional narrative from the UK government. Interviewees suggested that the hard line taken by unionist politicians in respect of the Northern Ireland Protocol and their resistance to engagement with political and diplomatic actors in Brussels was a direct response to this, as a demonstration of their unwavering commitment to the principles of unionism above all else:

> [They] take their lead from London - and Unionists are never likely to take a more moderate or more conciliatory line than the UK Government is on Britishness. So, for that reason, it is a less neutral space because of decisions taken by the UK government to not be in the EU. (Interviewee 27)

Brussels-based civil servants and diplomats from all sides spoke about the sudden politicisation of their roles and how hard this transition from cooperation to a more antagonistic oppositional dynamic felt at the time. One interviewee spoke at length about this change in the political environment and how it impacted upon the interpersonal dynamics in Brussels:

> You are trying to protect and promote your national interest, and the relationship with your opposite number is a means to bring that about. Now most of the time the stakes are not especially high, it's sort of an insurance policy, and so it's relatively less stressful. But occasionally, things change and change quite quickly, and you need to work those relationships to achieve a national objective. And that is what happened in the Brexit negotiation. Relationships which were cordial and professional but fairly low stress level suddenly were ramped up to the most important thing that the government was doing in quite an antagonistic atmosphere. So I think there was a personal toll in Brussels - on all sides in Brussels. Because the EU and the other Member States weren't used to this relationship with the United Kingdom, as we weren't used to it with them. So I think it was difficult on all sides. (Interviewee 35)

Although interviewees talked about the heightened politicisation of roles in Brussels, UK diplomats and civil servants also said that their jobs were made slightly easier by a distinction that they felt was often made in Brussels between the operational element that they provided there, as compared to the political environment and tone being set from London. Talking with Irish and EU interviewees confirmed this to be the case, and it afforded Brussels-based UK civil servants and diplomats some latitude in maintaining their working relationships. However, they were mindful that their ability to develop these in any significant way was impacted because the element of trust at the political level and the norms of cooperative reciprocity between member states had been lost once the UK exited the EU:

> So trust means that we will stick to what we say we will do, and that we will act in good faith. On the working level, that is generally fine. People accept that, as a representative of the UK you have a large machinery at your disposal, and you generally have a habit of acting honestly, and all the rest of it. That you genuinely care about the issues that you're putting forward. Obviously on the political level, I mean, that suffered hugely because of what has always been characterised as Boris Johnson repudiating his own deal, rightly or wrongly….negotiating the details of treaties between two states is something that happens all the time, to reflect lived realities, to reflect changing circumstances. That happens a lot. Renegotiating the deal that you just signed is something else. So trust did suffer. Trust on a working level, again, we still have a good reputation, but it's hard to actually test that since we're not in the position of doing things for people anymore. I would have a better answer for you if I had a list of demands from other people that I was trying to deliver at the moment. But it's all one way these days isn't it. (Interviewee 50)

UK and Northern Irish interviewees spoke about the challenges in navigating their role in a sensitive political environment, and the particular impact that this wider political environment had on their day-to-day work environment and their ability to maintain and build professional relationships. They spoke about the complexity of balancing political astuteness and civil service neutrality, and the challenges that this created for trust in their relationships on the political side:

> We always tried to make sure that we were not making any judgment as to the merits of Brexit. The referendum on the one hand, the Withdrawal Agreement…we had no agency over those. But we had a responsibility to deal with the consequences. I think probably we were perceived as anti-Brexit, even though all we were doing was saying, you know 'this has happened, here are the consequences…There were times when they would almost have perceived the premise of our advice as indicative of a prejudice against Brexit. That made life very, very difficult. (Interviewee 20)

It was also suggested by some interviewees that the possibility of being seen to be overly 'friendly' or sympathetic to the EU approach was something that UK diplomats had to be consciously wary of in protecting their own position. This presented itself in day-to-day working practice:

> I get the feeling that the civil servants are being instructed from the top, not to say or do certain things. Not to give information, not to progress some of the work, just be in a holding pattern. They're not actively engaging in contacting me or others. Because really they don't have that much to say. And they know if they don't have that much to say, or are not allowed to say very much, then obviously we're not going to say very much. (Interviewee 25)

Interviewees talked about a noticeable evolution in the engagement of UK civil servants and diplomats in Brussels over time. They attributed this to the changing nature of relationships in Brussels, the change of personnel in Brussels and also a wider change in UK political culture. One interviewee spoke about the way that this directly affected the nature of discussions in Brussels, post-Brexit:

> At the beginning, it seemed much more like a normal Brussels discussion. That you have people who work with each other all the time, who are very familiar with how it works, who are not, for lack of a better word, suspicious. Because yes, you know that others are representing certain interests, but it's part of the normal exchange you have in Brussels. What you had at the beginning of this process were essentially much more European

> British civil servants. So the kind of people who knew the system, who in many cases had been part of the Commission at some point in time or had been very much involved. Whereas over the period, it has become much more of a third country feel. So you have people who are much more foreign policy oriented. But I think it's also much more about a change in political culture in the UK. This is now about ministers controlling the civil service much more. The civil service is no longer empowered to do these kinds of negotiations, to find solutions. Rather it takes its cues directly from ministers. (Interviewee 31)

Interviewees commented that, in addressing the challenges and implications of Brexit, the UK government and ministers in London didn't trust the EU, but also didn't necessarily want or trust the advice of their own people in Brussels who were "telling the truth, but nobody liked hearing the truth" (Interviewee 35). This point about distrust and disfunction within executive relations between ministers and civil servants is important and relates to a wider context of changing functionality and accountability of the civil service (Byrkjeflot & Engelstad, 2018; Peters, 2020), as well as a change in the trust environment within the post-Brexit UK political system, in which there was an increased emphasis on alignment with the governmental agenda. This study focuses on one dimension of the Brexit related implications in political and diplomatic relations and practice, but it fits within a bigger Brexit picture in respect of devolution, policy and legal changes, and UK governmental and intergovernmental relations. However, the indication from this study of changing trust dynamics within government reflects Peters' (2020) work that suggests that in the changing political climate, politicians and diplomats are increasingly "on different teams with different goals" (Peters, 2020, p214), changing the balance of their relationship. In the face of generally increasing "policy alienation" (Tummers, 2011) amongst civil servants, Peters argues that politicians have reacted by increasingly seeking out "political loyalty" in the form of categorical "support [for] the policy ideas of the incumbent government", thereby politicising the civil service as a function further (Peters, 2020, p15).

The role as intermediaries between Brussels and London also brought problems for Brussels-based UK interviewees working in this more politicised working environment. They spoke of the challenges in developing relationships in Brussels in such circumstances, not least because of the complexities of definitively keeping London on-side in the face of significant churn in Westminster and Whitehall. Interviewees explained that the flux meant that Brussels-based UK political and diplomatic actors had to not only work carefully to maintain their networks in the Brussels bubble in a way that wouldn't cause undue sensitivities back in London, but they also had to constantly

build new relationships with newcomers into Whitehall and Westminster roles. Operating in these circumstances, interviewees commented that, before they could even get to 'the day job' in the Brussels bubble, it was necessary to factor in considerable time and effort in managing the internal UK government relationships, to secure what effectively amounted to their endorsement of a particular approach or relationship-building focus on the ground in Brussels:

> There are a couple of problems simultaneously in London. I mean, one of them is obviously the lack of knowledge, and one of them is the political churn. And I think very specifically, I don't think I'm speaking out of class if I say that the political character of this government - of the successive iterations of the current government that we've had in the last three years - have not been minded to build a deep and sustaining relationship with the EU. So you have two things which kind of reinforce each other. You have a lack of knowledge among the colleagues who give the advice, and you have the steer from the political element that advice is not always welcome, or advice which points towards greater engagement with the EU is not always welcome. So what we find is that, yes, we spend a lot of time managing the London relationship. (Interviewee 50)

The impression given from the UK interviewees in Brussels was one of doing the best they could within the operational constraints, under a sharper political gaze from London. This emphatic need to manage the sensitivities and mistrust within the UK system itself was something that UK interviewees spoke about as being a new or at least significantly increased feature of their relationship with London, that came in after the Brexit referendum.

Even the role conception of civil servants became politicised during Brexit on the UK and Northern Irish side, with regular accusations from political quarters that civil servants could not be trusted to deliver Brexit because of a prevailing 'Remainer culture' (Dudley & Gamble, 2023, p2579). Interviewees spoke of evident antagonism between these two professional sides, with UK and Northern Irish civil servants and diplomats roundly rejecting the politicised framing of civil servants as being untrustworthy in delivering Brexit, and arguing that this was an act of scapegoating and political deflection on the part of politicians:

> The idea of the civil service as a block to Brexit is just a complete nonsense. It's people who are scared that their project is foundering, thrashing around, trying to find reasons why it's not doing what they said and thought it would do. The ideological rift was not in the civil service, it was between ministers. So in some departments ministers were instructing their civil servants to go slow. (Interviewee 28)

This indication of the particular complexities of the trust dynamics between diplomats and civil servants on the one hand, and politicians on the other, provides an insight into some of the systemic instabilities and insecurities within both Belfast and London during the Brexit years, and how this impacted on the ability of civil servants and diplomats in the Brussels bubble to operate with efficiency and effectiveness at this time. This issue around the trust dynamics between these two realms of government and the way that civil service professional identity comes into this adds another layer to the issues around the change to normative relations during the Brexit period, in respect of the switch from cooperative to oppositional dynamics. Whilst they weren't necessarily always oppositional, the evidence from my interviews suggests that they weren't always harmonious either.

UK and Northern Irish civil servants and diplomats in the Brussels bubble also acknowledged the challenging trust environment and their difficulties in managing relationships with others in Brussels, not on the basis of their own actions, but in the broader politically fraught context in which they were operating:

> It [trust] does matter. It's going to be difficult for us, no doubt about it. I think our discussions over the operation of the Protocol would be quite different if it were assumed that we were coming from a point of good faith. It is fair to say it is not. Some of the most political flash points that have occurred in our relationship with the EU were the Internal Market Bill, and then the Protocol Bill - those are seen as untrustworthy. Partly because of repudiating the deal, and partly because it's seen that the stated purpose is not the actual intent. So the stated purpose of managing the concerns in order to bring the DUP back into Stormont are not seen as either being the true intent or actually the effective intent. The true intent, by which I mean there is a school of thought that is interpreting our actions in that space as being to undo the TCA. And the effective intent that it won't really bring the DUP back into Stormont anyway, because their primary concern is not the Protocol, but playing second fiddle to Sinn Féin. So that is an example of where we've kind of blown up any trust that we've had. I think the discussions would be seen as much more, if you like, technical modifications, if they didn't have this background of the Protocol Bill, threats to use Article 16, et cetera. (Interviewee 50)

This quote is significant in highlighting both the lack of trust and the extent of the disconnect between the UK's politicisation strategy for Brexit and the consensus-driven normative tendency within the Brussels bubble towards the "technicalization of politics… in which policy issues are gradually drained of political connotation and framed in technical terms" (Kuus, 2014, p77) as a

means of making progress. Interviewees felt that the inability to resolve Brexit at an operational, technical level thereby also prevented a move to refocus efforts on repairing and strengthening the political and diplomatic relations. Interviewees talked about the way that this impacted upon their ability to keep channels open and build trusting and collaborative relationships at both working level in Brussels and at the higher political level:

> The UK needs to comply with what it signed up to; without that there is no way forward. At the human level there might be some trust with some people, but nobody knows at the institutional level whether the UK can be trusted, and that is not a basis for building a trusting relationship going forward. Anecdotally, it is also problematic that there is a sense in Brussels that at present it is politically not clear what the landing zone is for this [UK] government. Adding this to the current threats and rhetoric around the Northern Ireland Protocol make for a strange political cocktail for establishing a relationship. (Interviewee 12)

Inside and outside the room: adjusting to a new playbook between Ireland and the UK

In implementing a semi-structured interview approach, I found that interviewees often brought in wider Brexit-specific contextual information and political considerations in thinking about the new Ireland-UK relationship. Interviewees very rarely touched on specific wider policy or political issues beyond the substance of Brexit itself, or the outworkings of Brexit in respect of the negotiations, implementation, the Northern Ireland Protocol or the Windsor Framework. However, numerous interviewees recognised that tensions between the Irish and UK governments had grown since the 2016 Brexit referendum, creating a generally harder, more suspicious and less amicable operating environment, both for those operating in Brussels, and between London and Dublin. The Brexit period was recognised as a significant catalyst in creating a wider environment of broken trust between the two governments. At the governmental level, Irish interviewees spoke of Brexit-related behaviour on the part of the UK government as being seen as a strong indicator of their wider (un)trustworthiness and (un)reliability:

> politically, the challenge is exacerbated by the actions of the British government [in respect of the Northern Ireland Protocol]. The idea that they have no interest really in meaningful dialogue, whether it's on the legacy issues to do with Northern Ireland, or the Protocol. They are interested, and look to how their actions play, with the Conservative party base, first and foremost. And rarely if at all, do they ever consider the implications

> and ramifications for Dublin. So that makes the high-level diplomatic relationship extremely fraught, and makes it very challenging to see how that can be improved in the coming period. (Interviewee 37)

Despite this awareness of the wider political context at the governmental level, those working in Brussels mostly (although not entirely exclusively) kept their reflections specific to issues around Brexit and the Brussels bubble space and dynamic, rather than looking more widely to non-Brexit Northern Ireland specific issues of interest to both UK and Irish governments (such as the Irish Language Act 2022 or the Northern Ireland Troubles Legacy and Reconciliation Act 2023). Accordingly, external factors that came up were more often wider non-Brexit factors that were not specific to UK-Irish-Northern Irish relations but were relevant to broader EU/Brussels bubble priorities and how Ireland and the UK played their different parts in these issues.

This largely bubble-centric focus emphasises the distinctive way that these different communities of political and diplomatic actors come together within the Brussels bubble, with 'home capital priorities' now sitting alongside Brussels perspectives and priorities rather than being the sole focus. Two examples that came up with UK and Irish interviewees a number of times were the handling of the Covid-19 pandemic and the response to the Russia-Ukraine war. In respect of these issues, interviewees spoke about the variable approaches of different home capitals, and the distinctive EU/Brussels approach. One interviewee gave a particularly detailed consideration of why the changed post-Brexit role for the UK was significant for day-to-day work within the Brussels bubble:

> The Brits not being in the European Union for Covid and now the war in Ukraine probably has meant that things have happened that would not have happened with the UK in the system. Like, they just didn't want any further integration, didn't want any more powers in the centre, they just were a break on everything. You see it with the Covid bonds, with the vaccine procurement. Maybe with defence it would have been different, sending weapons to Ukraine…I think they probably would have been on board with that. But, generally, since January 2020 to now, I mean it's barely two years and huge amounts of things have happened that would have been previously unimaginable. (Interviewee 21)

Despite the changed and challenging relationships, numerous interviewees pointed to the importance of getting the UK-EU and UK-Ireland relations back on track, in the context of shared problems and wider global political and diplomatic challenges:

> Russia's invasion of Ukraine has brought home for a lot of people that whilst we might have differences with the United Kingdom, they are a guaranteed stable democracy, so we'd better get on with them and work closely with them, because there are bigger enemies out there. (Interviewee 23)

Interviews with UK, Northern Irish and Irish interviewees highlighted a sense that the UK approach at the political level had been to prioritise the delivery of the task – Brexit – over and above the wider relationship with the EU and its member states, including Ireland. This prioritisation of task over relationship was felt to have been driven by political necessity in delivering Brexit. However, many of my interviewees talked about the cost to the political and diplomatic trust environment, particularly in respect of the UK's reputation and the foundations of trust in the UK-EU and UK-Ireland relationships. Interviewees spoke of the importance of a post-Brexit UK-EU relationship, however, the continuing challenges around the implementation of the Northern Ireland Protocol were seen as the primary barrier to the effective completion of Brexit as a process. The concerns about the ability to trust in the integrity of the UK government broadly, and political and diplomatic actors specifically, was integral to this.

As a result of the UK's decision to exit the EU, Dublin was faced with a choice to make and interviewees spoke about what they perceived as the perhaps inevitable realignment of interests and allegiances at the political level. Against the backdrop of the oppositional UK-EU Brexit negotiations narrative, Ireland essentially had to pick a side. Speaking with interviewees, there was a clear feeling that the EU side recognised very early on that they needed to keep a strong communications loop with their points of contact on the Irish side, as a means of effectively and categorically representing and protecting Ireland's interests. Interviewees spoke about this having been a strategic decision, designed to maintain a cohesive EU negotiation approach and avoid the temptation for Ireland to try to work certain things out bilaterally with the UK, which some interviewees pointed to as having been a plausible concern. The success of the EU's approach in this respect was considerable, and resulted in a clear reframing of the UK-Ireland relationship in the Brussels bubble and more widely, as discussed by interviewees and evidenced through the literature (Dooley, 2023; Connelly, 2018; Kyriazi, 2023). Connelly (2018) notes that this "shift in the chemistry, or the geometry" of the relationship meant that "Ireland would no longer be stuck between London and Brussels trying to look to both for answers" (Connelly, 2018, p181). It undoubtedly fueled a distancing in the UK-Irish relationships at both institutional and interpersonal levels in the Brussels bubble (and home capitals). Further concerns on the Irish side stemmed from a sense that neither before or after the Brexit referendum, had there been any

real consideration shown by the UK government of the implications of a possible UK exit for Ireland or of the potential impact on the UK-Ireland relationship. Combined with the general tenor of the UK-EU negotiations period, there was a significant adverse effect on the UK-Ireland relationship at both the political and working level in Brussels:

> Over the last five years, especially since Brexit, those relationships with British government officials have deteriorated quite substantially. Relations are just non-existent to be quite frank, and they do tend to be quite tetchy. So that's unfortunately, the kind of arena we're in at the minute. We need to reset. At the very least we need to be able to talk to each other constructively about how we deal with stuff. (Interviewee 47)

My interviewees indicated that the consequence of all this was that, for UK and Irish political and diplomatic actors, the Brussels bubble has certainly not been seen as a politically neutral shared space since the Brexit referendum, either by those in Brussels or by those looking on from Dublin, London or Belfast.

Interviewees also acknowledged that actions jeopardising trust were not entirely one-sided. Both UK and Irish interviewees spoke about the outrage and trust issues that followed the (admittedly swiftly recalled) threat on the part of the EU to trigger Article 16 in relation to the handling of Covid-19 vaccine supplies in January 2021. There was a recognition in the Brussels bubble that, despite not actually following through with the initial threat, the unfortunate handling of an already sensitive issue and the way that this was picked up in the press "had a deep and lasting impact on people's trust in Northern Ireland" (Interviewee 43). Although they recognised the distinctive communications strategy from Task Force 50 and the EU institutions themselves during the Brexit negotiations period, interviewees spoke about the fact that the more typically inflammatory, oppositional communications pieces were more often generated by political and diplomatic actors in London, Dublin and Belfast than Brussels. Interviewees spoke about the proactive successes of Irish civil servants and diplomats in "getting their analysis front and centre" (Interviewee 14) very early on and then capitalising on and retaining that level of influence and engagement on the EU side to ensure that "the Irish analysis of the risks of Brexit and the threat to the peace process kind of got embedded in the DNA of the EU's response with the negotiating guidelines" (Interviewee 14). Interviewees spoke about this in contrast to Brussels-based UK and Northern Irish counterparts whose roles were more reactive. They also had to defer to the tone set by their home capital, whilst working within the acceptable margins of that as best they could, to keep engagement and communication channels open within Brussels. For Northern

Irish civil servants in Brussels there was the particular challenge of operating in the absence of a functioning Executive back in Belfast.

Focusing on the UK-Irish relationship specifically, rather than that with other member states, my interviews broadly reflected the febrile nature of the relationship as reported in the media over the eighteen-month period in which I was conducting my interviews. Indeed, more than one interviewee suggested that the UK-Irish relationship at that time felt like it was on more of a 'war-footing', indicating the perceived extent of the damage to the relationship at both the operational and political level. This was a stark contrast from the years prior to Brexit, when political and diplomatic interviewees both in Brussels and in home capitals acknowledged that there was a more cooperative and constructive environment in the Irish-UK-Northern Irish relations, in which "there was a coming together of North and South…there was certainly a blurring of the lines" (Interviewee 49). Interviewees comments that Brexit was bringing "all those hard lines back again" (Interviewee 49). One interviewee spoke pragmatically about the importance of working to mend the damaged political and diplomatic relations amongst Irish, UK and Northern Irish political and diplomatic figures, but also recognised the challenges and limitations of even the strongest relations in being realistically able to deliver a 'solution':

> The lesson of the whole Good Friday Process is that what happens in Northern Ireland is shaped by its external relations. And Northern Ireland is fundamentally about contested allegiance or contested nationality. So by definition relationships are how you solve it, or at least how you manage it. And it might well be that the Northern Ireland situation is a situation which has to be managed rather than solved. (Interviewee 27)

Interviewees voiced concerns about the UK government's (over)exposure to DUP perspectives, at the cost of political balance and engagement with other political perspectives from Northern Ireland. Related to that, some noted that "in Dublin there is disbelief at some of the stuff said by British politicians, the Prime Minister. Disbelief at the perceived lack of understanding, the naivety about how Northern Ireland functions. The more right-wing the Tory government becomes, the more it seems to think that Northern Ireland is still in 1995, that it's staunchly British" (Interviewee 33). One interviewee also explicitly emphasised that the complexities around Brexit in respect of Northern Ireland have to be understood alongside the shifting political ideologies and priorities of the parties in government in the UK since the 1990s, shaping their approach to Brexit and also the post-Brexit tenor of relations with the Irish government and the Northern Irish Executive:

> the Tory party are obviously - it's in their name - a strong Unionist party. But what that amounts to is a kind of very strong sense of a specific type of Unionism. That is less, four nations bound together through consent and more sort of a British flag-waving style of unionism, and very antagonistic, actually. And the Devolution settlements do not belong to this government. The Good Friday Agreement does not belong to this government. Neither of those are their creatures…. The danger is that for the Conservatives, devolution has been an abject failure. Because devolution did not stem the tide of nationalist feeling and support. So if devolution is an abject failure, to what extent do they care that the Executive is not there? They don't. Not really. (Interviewee 39)

Although the Brussels bubble offered a space away from the full spectrum and intensity of home politics, where it was relatively less politically heated and relatively easier to find ways of working together and developing interpersonal interactions, interviewees spoke about the loss of trust at the governmental level compounding the post-Brexit loss of many of the more organic opportunities in Brussels for UK and Northern Ireland players to smooth over some of the bumps in the wider UK-Ireland relationship.

Despite the challenges, interviewees recognised that informal opportunities for engagement amongst political actors from the UK and Irish governments in relation to Brexit were helpful in breaking down barriers and humanising the relationship sufficiently to enable them to engage at a personal level at least – to talk and relate to each other. And on a practical level, such opportunities meant that "then they have each other's telephone numbers, they pick up phones, they stop talking at a distance. They stop doing it all through their officials and they start to speak to each other as individuals. That's got to produce some level of trust" (Interviewee 52). However, attached to this there was a degree of scepticism about whether that interpersonal trust could make sufficient difference to improve the situation at the institutional level, in respect of Brexit or more generally across other elements of policy or practice:

> when you have to put that trust in the framework say of for example anger in Dublin about legacy handling in London, whether you can say that anything would produce trust at a kind of existential level, I don't know….I think that all we can really hope for is a level of honest exchange and if that builds trust then that's good. (Interviewee 52)

In this respect, interviewees acknowledged that careful handling of this adjustment to a new Brexit era political and diplomatic 'playbook' between Ireland and the UK is important, despite the recognised challenges. Since the earliest days of the GFA and even before, political and

diplomatic actors or scholars have made arguments both for and against this premise of the importance of external relations for resolving the 'Northern Ireland problem' (White, 2017; Clancy, 2010; Cochrane, 2020; Arthur, 1985). A number of interviewees were mindful that the post-Brexit tumultuous UK-Ireland relations are problematic in this respect, acknowledging that positive, constructive UK-Ireland relations can only be a good thing in creating a conducive climate for ongoing efforts.

Looking at the factors feeding into interpersonal communications and trust, interviewees spoke of a lack of trust in "the clarity or the sincerity of intent in the communication" (Interviewee 08) coming from the UK government regarding the Northern Ireland Protocol. Amongst the three distinct groupings of Irish, Northern Irish and UK political and diplomatic actors in Brussels there was also a shift in the extent and pattern of communication and engagement. Although contact between the Northern Irish and Irish teams continued, the extent of the contact between the UK and Irish cohorts in the Brussels bubble was commented on by both sides as having reduced since the Brexit referendum. This reflected the broader challenging trust environment and a reticence that each side perceived on the part of the other to engage too warmly, for fear of the optics. The Irish perception of UK reticence related to a sense of hesitation on the part of UK civil servants and diplomats to appear overly aligned to the EU position or the 'Remainer' pre-Brexit position. As one interviewee put it, "Lord Frost talked openly about a clear out of Remainer mindsets in the FCDO [Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office – UK government department]. And I would say they feel they have to play it very carefully, in terms of outreach and discussion, contact work" (Interviewee 37). On the other hand, within Brussels the UK perception of Irish reticence to engage related to a sense that the Irish needed to very clearly show to their EU27 counterparts and EU officials that they were fully aligned with the EU position:

> They [at the Irish Permanent Representation] are extremely disciplined, and very conscious of their position within the Council. They are very careful to represent the Council position and not to suggest that there is a Council position and an Irish position… to preserve their being part of EU unity and solidarity. Having successfully leveraged that to date, they are not keen to be in a position where it feels like they have become the UK's advocate. (Interviewee 10)

This perception was accurate, and there was a real awareness amongst Irish political and diplomatic actors of their need to safeguard their relationship with EU member state counterparts, and their related caution about the optics of their relationship with the UK government:

> We obviously have to think about the relationship with other Member States in terms of what they can bear in terms of flexibility to the United Kingdom, their patience on the discussions, their concerns ...making sure that we don't mis-step – we don't go in too hard, or too weak, and that we also raise flags. But it's gauging the temperature. (Interviewee 21)

This heightened politicisation in the Brexit-era, with UK players always looking over their shoulder to London and Irish players always looking for wary eyes in Brussels caused real hesitancy over day-to-day engagement, eclipsing the previous ease of interaction between the UK and Irish sides in Brussels. Interviewees spoke to me about the way that this hesitancy showed itself in the interactions at an interpersonal level within the Brussels bubble, because of the concerns amongst Irish political and diplomatic actors in Brussels that they would be perceived as a self-serving "trojan horse for UK interests" (Interviewee 14):

> There's always a wee bit of suspicion amongst other Member States that Ireland might get a bit too close to the UK. Not just for historical reasons, but also to preserve the huge trading links and you know, obviously the lighter the Protocol, the better it is for the Irish economy in the south as well. (Interviewee 14)

In talking about how to overcome this period of tension in the new UK-Irish dynamic in Brussels and more widely, interviewees spoke repeatedly about the importance of using opportunities to build understanding and 'confidence' between two players representing different sides, in developing a relationship strong enough to work through problems effectively together. They spoke of trust as being central to this, built on three main components: respect, predictability, and reliability, with all three elements needed and developed over time until the relationship becomes sufficiently trusting that, from an institutional perspective, people and time "can be redirected away from maintaining or monitoring a difficult relationship if it becomes less difficult, and put into something else instead" (Interviewee 26). In this respect, the change to the formal dynamic of the Irish-UK relationship in Brussels was compounded by a perception on the part of the Irish interviewees I spoke with that there had been a sizable politically-driven reduction in the ability for UK civil servants and diplomats to engage fully and transparently, which changed the whole tone of the relationship at the interpersonal level:

> One of the great things about dealing with British diplomats - for an Irish diplomat - was that we could be very open and frank with each other. So of course we disagreed - our governments disagreed - on many things, of course we did. All sorts of European issues

> like agriculture, or the very nature of the European Union, or things like that. But we could be very, very relaxed in explaining and exchanging views and say you know, 'this is our line on this, I'm not sure it's the right line, but you know that's what's being done for the moment'. And the British likewise would say, 'well, our official line is this, but I think we'll have to compromise on that'. It's sort of the fluidity of the way that international negotiations work. [Because of the current centralised, controlling] approach in Downing Street, I think it's more difficult for British diplomats to use that oil in the machine for not dismissing or rejecting or disrespecting the government's position, but for creating a space for trust. (Interviewee 30)

Acting with integrity and working in good faith were elements of trust building that were consistently emphasised as being particularly important between Brussels-based UK, Northern Irish and Irish political and diplomatic actors:

> What makes you trust people at a human level, on an institutional level, on an intergovernmental level? Well, certain characteristics make you trust them – honesty, integrity, concept of solidarity and truthfulness, consistency of behaviour. And those things are all absent right now - one might argue - in the UK's position. (Interviewee 06)

Amongst Irish interviewees talking about the changed UK-Ireland dynamic in Brussels, the practice of acting in bad faith or failing to honour an agreement or commitment was seen as a major barrier to trust. Interviewees spoke about issues at the working level in Brussels where actions on the part of individuals had lost them their reputation of trust. But the majority of interviewees felt that the biggest barrier to trust was the ripple-effect from bad faith being demonstrated at the political level, which interviewees spoke about as then having direct consequences for trust at both the political and working level:

> That is the fundamental problem at the heart of it, because if you don't trust the other side to honour an agreement that they have signed, how can you trust them? You are standing on ground that is perpetually moving and uncertain. You can't. And there is very, very little trust in the British Government, frankly. And it's like a really acrimonious divorce, and then there's counter-accusation and complaint. And those are all signs of a breakdown in the relationship. (Interviewee 41)

Interviewees spoke about the reaction to this being a shift to a much more superficial level of engagement in the new UK-Ireland dynamic in Brussels. This is significant because one key way of building trust through communication that UK, Irish and Northern Irish interviewees repeatedly

mentioned was gaining trust by holding confidences. This was really significant amongst Brussels-based interviewees, and they highlighted the value placed on 'information as currency' within Brussels. Interviewees spoke of the constant exchange of information, both informally and formally, as a means of establishing trust and confidence in the other. In situations where trust was broken through the betrayal of confidences, both political and diplomatic interviewees talked about the way that interactions reverted back to a much more formal exchange, simply duplicating the official top-level 'lines to take':

> If you come to an arrangement under Chatham House rules and then you go out and find it has leaked, and sometimes leaked incorrectly, then obviously you're going to be very slow to further engage or give your real opinion in future. You'll just stick to the formal approach, which wouldn't lead to effective solutions down the road. (Interviewee 23)

Consequently, the move to superficial, information-light interactions demonstrates not just the loss of trust but also the removal of opportunities for rebuilding trust between political and diplomatic players from both sides. Interviewees emphasised that engagement in these circumstances was a fairly pointless exercise that notionally 'ticked the box' for engagement, but didn't actually enable political and diplomatic actors to really get in under the issues. Irish and UK interviewees spoke about their own personal experiences of the increased number of occasions since the 2016 Brexit referendum results in which the paucity of trust prevented the formation of anything beyond the most courteous but superficial professional relationship. This reduced the opportunities for finding consensus and problem solving, because the value of that relationship and depth of understanding on each side lessened significantly:

> At a personal level, when I'm interacting with individual politicians, very rarely would it become a fractious, difficult, or challenging conversation. But for all that, when I feel that my interlocutor really hasn't agency, and is simply trotting out the party line, literally the party line and you feel that you're just being read a set of speaking points, it's meaningless, and it feels fruitless to pursue. (Interviewee 37)

A number of interviewees also spoke about not only the changed relationship dynamic between the UK and Ireland in light of the UK's exit from the EU, but also the significance for relationships in the Brussels bubble as a result of the changed status of Northern Ireland. Although it remains a part of the UK under a devolved government, interviewees spoke about the distinctive position of Northern Ireland in respect of the EU under post-Brexit arrangements. As such, a number of interviewees pointed to the likelihood that already warm interpersonal connections and

professional networks would continue to strengthen between Irish and Northern Irish political and diplomatic figures in the Brussels bubble, as a result of necessity and continued interaction on issues of shared importance. This was specifically highlighted by interviewees as being in contrast to the UK-Ireland relationship on the ground in Brussels, which interviewees pointed to as already waning due to the broader lack of trust at the political level and the realities of no longer having formal shared EU business interests:

> There's an informal angle, but actually, without having too much schadenfreude, the Brits are just going around asking people for meetings the whole time. People don't really care or want to meet them, because there's no benefit to us, or very little benefit to us, you know. On Brexit we would meet more informally, we were more inclined to meet, just to keep those informal lines open. But outside of Brexit, there's consistent things where UKMis tries to mirror [events relating to EU formal business] and everyone's like 'I'm not going to that'. (Interviewee 21)

Interviewees spoke about the challenges they saw at both the political and working level of moving the UK-Ireland relationship back on to a more positive and trusting footing. A number of interviewees reflected on how difficult this would be, precisely because the relationship playbook had changed and there was no longer shared EU membership driving opportunities for positive interactions and relationship building:

> EU membership allowed the UK and Ireland to build relationships 'in the margins' at the political and the official level, which helped enormously in terms of the Anglo-Irish relationship. It was absolutely essential for mutual understanding, and to be able to kind of build trust as well between the two sides. Absolutely. Absolutely essential. Now…well, it's one of the big drawbacks of Brexit, right? That UK officials are no longer around the table. Because it's the informal engagement in the margins of meetings where you really build those relationships. And it is, it's a huge drawback. (Interviewee 48)

Post-Brexit, interactions between Irish and UK political or diplomatic players needed to be engineered outside of the natural opportunities afforded by being together naturally during the course of routine EU business. Interviewees acknowledged that the ease and certainty of knowing that there would be a continuous succession of readily available opportunities for engagement in the margins of official EU business was gone. Interviewees emphasised that UK political and diplomatic actors in Brussels are now reliant on the willingness of Irish counterparts to engage with them, which for the reasons outlined above, is not always a given.

CHAPTER 6: Findings and analysis - Brussels as a Developmental Space.

6.1 Introduction

Throughout the four decades of shared EU membership, thousands of UK, Irish and Northern Irish political and diplomatic figures have rotated in and out of Brussels. Their time in Brussels is time limited – in the case of MEPs by electoral cycles, and in the case of diplomats and civil servants by pre-agreed fixed term postings. However, through the process of interviewing it became clear that time spent in the Brussels bubble can be considered developmental for many of these political and diplomatic figures, on a number of grounds. Working in the Brussels bubble provides exposure to cooperative multilateral working cultures and norms which can be a very different experience to working within home administrations and political systems. Immersion into these new working environments and ways of working over time can profoundly affect the way in which political and diplomatic figures experience, engage with and react to their own and others sense of identity. This in turn has consequences for communication and trust dynamics amongst political and diplomatic figures and communities, both within the Brussels bubble and beyond.

This chapter presents the findings and analysis in respect of themes five and six of the six core themes that emerged from the interview data. Theme five looks at performativity as a communicative mask or magnifier of trust in relationships within the Brussels bubble, considering the distinctiveness of the Brussels bubble ethos and character and the way that performativity plays into agenda setting and relationship building. Theme six looks at the role of time away from home capitals in the Brussels bubble and how this frames and feeds into changing and framing perspectives. Theme six also looks at the ways in which political and diplomatic figures experience and react to their sense of identity whilst in the Brussels bubble, and the impact this has on communication and trust dynamics.

6.2 Theme 5: Performativity as a communicative mask or magnifier of trust

The realms of politics and diplomacy are often considered by scholars to be established arenas of performativity at interpersonal, interorganisational and interstate levels (Glass & Rose-Redwood, 2014; McConnell, 2018; Dixon, 2018; Cohen, 1987). In this context, political and diplomatic actors communicate - either with each other or publicly – with the intention of controlling the tone and direction of the conversation or the framing of an issue. They do so through signaling (Wheeler, 2018) and the "rhetorical construction and performance of a persona" (Atkins & Gaffney, 2020,

p293), narrative (Cobb, 2013) or collective national or sociopolitical identity (Adler-Nissen et al., 2017). This aligns with Goffman's (1959) influential work which contends that all interaction is performative to an extent and impacted by not only the intended 'audience' but also the context and purpose of the interaction.

A number of interviewees made the point that even by usual political and diplomatic standards, the UK approach to Brexit was highly performative from the start. Interviewees recognised that that performativity in line with national interests is part of the fabric of multilateral politics and diplomacy and an expected part of communication and interaction within the Brussels bubble. However, they also spoke about the importance of getting the balance right between public domestic performativity and private multilateral pragmatism in negotiations, in order to maintain trust between the different players. A number of interviewees indicated that, prior to Brexit, the UK had been reasonably adept at balancing these contrasting elements, but that during the Brexit era the space of separation between these two elements has reduced. Interviewees gave examples of where private pragmatism was diminished if not eclipsed altogether by the more publicly orientated performative and ideologically driven Brexit narrative. In this respect, interviewees talked about the UK's approach to Brexit as not only being about leaving the EU, but also fundamentally stopping playing by the established 'rules' of the multilateral political and diplomatic game in Brussels:

> There's always the domestic dimension. So what we have is signaling. Where a decision is taken at the European level, with the support of all the Member States, but then there are some other signals which are given back home. Generally, that is accepted, as long as it doesn't go too far. But that's part of the trust as well. That you can actually sit down with people, behind closed doors, and talk about what are the necessities, what are the interests, how can they be brought together. But in the end the ideological rhetoric which was done in public was also reflected in the negotiations. Yes, in public, it was always clear that the UK would reject whatever the Member States would insist. But there could have been a way of finding language which worked for both sides, which in essence would tick all the boxes. It's the constructive fudge of which a lot of European policy is made. (Interviewee 31)

Interviewees commented that the UK's apparent focus on scoring performative points and trying to frame every aspect as political, as compared to the EU focus on matters of a more technical nature had made it consistently challenging for the two sides to meet on the same page. This was remarked on by UK, Irish and also EU institution interviewees:

> So you make your choice, fair enough. This is the sovereignty of the UK. But now we are going to see how you can leave the EU in an adequate and proper manner, but from a technical side. From the UK, it was always a political issue both for internal reasons and for external reasons, and I would dare say that it is still the case. But it is not the case here. Here it's a technical issue, which means that these working groups dealing with the follow up of UK relationships are looking at technical matters. (Interviewee 05)

As one interviewee put it, this fundamental difference of approach and understanding meant that the two sides were effectively isolated 'bubbles' talking past each other, with "this big bubble in London speaking between itself, and a big bubble in Brussels speaking between itself, and very little overlap between the two, meaning that you quite often had two different takes on what was happening" (Interviewee 43). This contributed to the deeply oppositional divide that formed between the UK and the EU, for which a number of interviewees used the metaphor of a bitterly hostile divorce. In this context, Ireland was called upon by both sides to 'be on their side'. One interviewee spoke about the temptation, early in the Brexit journey, for some on the Irish side to focus on the utility of a bilateral approach between Ireland and the UK, particularly given that "the two countries have been very close bi-laterally through the Northern Ireland peace process and through the Good Friday Agreement structures" (Interviewee 14). However, the EU recognised very early on that this could pose a risk to the integrity of the EU's negotiating position and moved swiftly to ensure that Ireland felt represented by the EU's negotiating team. In this situation, performativity of alignment was used to secure and strengthen trust between Ireland, the other EU member states and their collective negotiating team. There was an overt demonstration of commitment and trust from the EU in safeguarding Ireland's position, which Ireland reciprocated by showing itself to be undoubtedly 'in the EU camp'.

Despite this evidence of performativity as a tool for demonstrating both alignment and non-alignment within the Brussels bubble, interviewees felt that the distinctiveness of the Brussels space meant that performativity worked differently than in home capitals. Notably, that Brussels provided a different kind of space for engagement than London and Belfast because of the relatively reduced media gaze on specific national elements in Brussels, making political and diplomatic players there feel less inclined or compelled to reflect or react to the sometimes dramatic highs and lows of domestic politics. There was the sense that this less politically dramatic, less performative environment provided a (relatively) calmer space for more measured communication and consensus building, which made it a more conducive space for supporting trust and relationship building.

Brussels-based interviewees recognised that, on the UK side, Brexit negotiations were a London-led process with Brussels-based actors working more in a supporting capacity, particularly in respect of providing expert advice and analysis to London, and maintaining open channels within the Brussels network. A number of interviewees commented that the performative and antagonistic communications and actions coming out of London were seemingly indifferent to the potential Brexit-related damage to the UK-EU and UK-Ireland relationships and the potential Brexit-related risks to post-conflict Northern Ireland's political and social stability:

> This government seems pretty cavalier about Northern Ireland. It's not the people on the ground, it's not deep experts that are running this. It is people who deal with Northern Ireland from time to time. And I think that there's danger to the overall UK interest in that approach. (Interviewee 35)

Interviewees spoke about the politically sensitive and highly suspicious operational link in to London, putting UK civil servants and diplomats in a sustained tricky position of "managing both their advice and their ministers at the same time" (Interviewee 39), with a palpable disconnect between the UK governments stance and the advice coming from their 'experts on the ground', both in Brussels and Belfast. For Brussels-based UK civil servants and diplomats this meant needing to maintain and gain trust with London colleagues by unequivocally 'performing' their commitment to the UK government's position. However, this performativity which was needed to appease London had the opposite effect in Brussels, thereby simultaneously making it more challenging for Brussels-based UK political and diplomatic actors to maintain relationships and keep channels open with Irish and other EU contacts.

Interviewees talked about the trust and rapport needed between political and diplomatic actors to be able to step off the formal negotiating terms and top lines in unravelling problems. For UK actors operating in Brussels during the Brexit era, interviewees spoke about the implicit challenge in trying to build trust and find space for solutions in these circumstances, in an environment in which international diplomacy was being turned on its head and driven by domestic politics in both Northern Ireland and the UK as a whole in respect of Brexit. Alongside this, a number of Irish interviewees expressed a sense of frustration at the inability to be able to find common ground between the two 'sides' during Brexit because of the prevailing performativity in practice:

> There are multiple tensions. More than anything else there's like an ideological sort of system. There's entrenched views, you know, - 'Brexit is the answer to everything' versus

> 'Europe is good, Europe is brilliant, so everything the EU says must be correct'. And you're just going 'no, none of this is….'. Where is the political process of compromise, dialogue, and understanding? It's not there. And I think what we're seeing is clashes of identity and ideology, rather than sort of political pragmatism. (Interviewee 46)

It is hard to overstate just how much importance is placed in the Brussels bubble on developing trust and positive interactions at the interpersonal level, and this showed through in points made about the trust and distrust between political leaders, as well as trust and distrust amongst political and diplomatic figures at the working level in the Brussels bubble and in home capitals. There was significant emphasis on the difference that trusting personal relations can make in advancing or holding back problem solving and resolution of issues at working level amongst political and diplomatic actors in Brussels, and also at the broader political level. Openness and pragmatism over performativity are essential pre-requisites - in private if not publicly - in building day-to-day trust with interlocutors within the Brussels bubble: "at the very least, that they are transparent and open. It [trust] means a certain level of honesty. Not necessarily in public, but certainly in private" (Interviewee 31). However, if this was the aspiration, Irish interviewees spoke about the particular real-world challenges of working with UK counterparts in the Brexit period.

There was recognition from interviewees on all sides that the UK's political approach in recent times had been heavily influenced by domestic politics, at the expense of developing relationships in Brussels. This was felt to have significantly impacted on personal trust with UK political and diplomatic actors, at leader level but also at the working level within the Brussels bubble. Interviewees spoke of a marked shift towards a new kind of engagement, which Irish interviewees felt rarely deviated from the performative UK public narrative, thereby reducing the space for meaningful engagement on problematic issues and requiring a greater level of interpretation and guess work:

> It's about that seeking to understand, that's going to inform how I do my job, I suppose, as best I can. What's driving this [UK] government's posture? And what part of all of this noise and spin, and in some cases outright lies, and avoidance of the facts on the ground in Northern Ireland, what part of that actually may have a germ of truth and a germ of legitimacy in it, that we have to separate out from the noisy, politically motivated propaganda? (Interviewee 37)

On the Northern Irish side, the portrayed 'golden era' of Northern Irish MEP cooperation and collaboration that Ian Paisley (senior), John Hume and Jim Nicholson performed so effectively to

maximise EU-derived benefits for Northern Ireland and Northern Irish citizens was not replicated amongst subsequent cohorts of MEPs. Interviewees recognised that this was partly due to personality, partly due to constitutional changes following devolution. As one interviewee put it:

> There was a sea change from when Paisley and Hume, and John Taylor and later Jim Nicholson were sort of tribunes of the people, going to get money out of the EU. [After devolution] they lose that role, really, because there's an Executive whose job it is to make those calls. And of course they play the same sort of facilitating role that any member of the European Parliament does with their home region – or at least any good one – but it's not the same. (Interviewee 26).

Paisley and Hume both retired their European Parliament seats at the 2004 elections, but Jim Nicholson held his MEP seat for an unusually long total tenure of 30 years, remaining in position as a widely-respected and active MEP within Brussels circles until the 2019 elections. Nicholson's Northern Irish MEP counterparts that followed Hume and Paisley in Brussels were Jim Allister (TUV, MEP: 2004-2009), Diane Dodds (DUP, MEP: 2009-2020), Bairbre de Brún (Sinn Féin, MEP: 2004-2012), Martina Anderson (Sinn Féin, MEP: 2012-2020) and Naomi Long (Alliance, MEP: 2019-2020). These later Northern Irish MEPs continued to benefit from the professional space and ways of working available to them in Brussels. Interviewees spoke about some of those MEPs being able to bring that broader experience back to Northern Irish politics, including by providing a "feel for what other countries and other people think about things and react to things" (Interviewee 34). However, interviewees suggested that the performance of cooperative unity and the sense of holistic, collective Northern Irish MEP endeavour that had been evident in the Hume-Paisley-Nicholson trio had gone, and been replaced with more of a constituency focus in the main. There was a new set of professional priorities, distinctive circumstances and political styles amongst the more recent Northern Irish MEPs, bringing fresh challenges:

> Diane Dodds, Bairbre de Brún, Martina Anderson – not really cut from the same mould [as Ian Paisley and John Hume]. …. [When devolution resulted in] a Northern Ireland Executive whose job it was to talk to Brussels, and get stuff out of Brussels….at that time the MEP's significance really reduces, except in so far as they're able to play the game within the bigger political groups. Diane Dodds just wasn't interested in playing that game at all, and Bairbre de Brún and Martina Anderson were on the saner wing of one of the crazier groups in the Parliament. Which left Jim [Nicholson] rather bizarrely playing the role of bridgeman – he was the only person that both wings of the Conservative party in

> the European Parliament would talk to, so he quite often found himself playing an internal peace brokering role' (Interviewee 26).

The degree of Northern Irish euroscepticism in the pre-Brexit years was also noted as a contributory factor, such that "until Brexit was conceived as an idea not just the two unionist parties but also Sinn Féin were all Eurosceptics, so it wasn't embraced in the mainstream, despite the benefits to Northern Ireland" (Interviewee 11). Sinn Féin's stance has changed considerably since the early 2000's, but in particular, as Kelly (2021) notes, "the prospect of Brexit prompted a significant shift in the tone of Sinn Féin's public position on the EU" (Kelly, 2021, p2). In contrast to the evolution of Sinn Féin's approach and the perception that they increasingly operate comfortably and effectively within the Brussels bubble, a number of interviewees pointed to the overarching significance of the DUP's enduring euroscepticism and the way that shaped their desire to fully engage in the Brussels bubble:

> the DUP were actually pretty effective in Brussels over the years, going back to the time when Ian Paisley was MEP. He was the arch Euro-sceptic, but nonetheless he could work Brussels with the best of them. And Diane Dodds, in fairness, was pretty good as well. She worked very well with other MEPs, the Irish MEPs, but others as well. And again, had very good access in the Commission and used her own personal connections very effectively. But, nonetheless, she was always euro-sceptic and even though she was able to achieve quite a bit of success there, she was always quite negative about the institutions. And just the DUP generally, I never saw them feeling comfortable in Brussels. You just got the sense…Like, for example, I would have been in Brussels on a few occasions with Arlene Foster - she was just never as comfortable there as she would have been, for example, in the United States. (Interviewee 29).

In considering the performative nature of engagement and non-engagement from Northern Irish and UK politicians in the Brussels bubble, there was a recognition from some interviewees that during the Brexit era certain politicians have had to work cautiously and creatively within their mandate, with respect to both their voter base and their political party's ideological doctrine. In this respect, a number of interviewees spoke about the DUP having "got themselves on a hook they can't get off" (Interviewee 49) because of a combination of factors. Interviewees spoke about a sense of DUP vulnerability caused by internal power dynamics and a fundamental lack of longterm strategy, being driven instead by "knee jerk reactions to the extreme voices" inside and outside the party (Interviewee 33). In this context, interviewees also spoke about the day to day working difficulties for politicians in the face of an intractable voter base:

> It's not just their own perceptions of things, it's not personal - they are representing people that mandate them there. I would even go as far as to say that a lot of the challenges that we are experiencing in getting the executive up and running is because the DUP - who ultimately hold the ball in their court at the minute - are very much representing concerns on the ground. Now, whether those concerns are valid or not, they exist, and those people do believe them. So I suppose they're trying to balance that with the people that they need to work with. (Interviewee 32)

Compounding the DUP's general pre-Brexit detachment and the political challenges at home in Northern Ireland, interviewees noted that the tenor of the engagement in the Brussels bubble worsened markedly in the Brexit years:

> you have a totally broken relationship between the DUP and the Commission. I was at one quite incredible meeting where Arlene Foster was really, frankly, very rude to Maroš Šefčovič. He hadn't had a nuanced brief as to how to say stuff, so it was all stuff that she could pick up as anti-unionist but it wasn't intended to be. There still is amazing goodwill towards Northern Ireland in Brussels but the DUP haven't done themselves any favours. (Interviewee 20)

Interviewees spoke about the DUP's disinclination to capitalise on what was "virtually an open door policy [in Brussels] for Northern parties to engage with them, to listen" (Interviewee 47), with a number of interviewees suggesting that this "miscalculation" (Interviewee 49) on the DUP's part was beginning to be recognised by some in the party, privately if not publicly. But interviewees observed that it was hard for the DUP to change their course or attitude towards engaging in the Brussels bubble, because of their instinctive alignment with the tone and direction set by the UK government.

By contrast, their Sinn Féin counterparts have been much more willing and proactive in engaging with Brussels-based contacts within the Irish government and the EU institutions, through opportunities via the Executive's office in Brussels (ONIEB), the GUE/NGL European political block with which Sinn Féin are aligned, and Sinn Féin's own very proactive European Team in Brussels. This was partly in support of Sinn Féin's own particular constitutional interests around Irish reunification and unity, but also contributed to a more strategic collective effort on the part of Irish and nationalist politics. This performance of cohesion came through in conversation with interviewees, reflecting prior work by Murphy and Evershed (2022) and Kelly (2021) in this respect:

> As much as we may have been fighting like cats and dogs domestically, whenever it came to Brussels and Brexit there was nearly uniformity across the Irish political system, and then the likes of ourselves and the SDLP in the North as well. There was nearly just one broad team when it came to it, so we worked quite well together on that front. (Interviewee 47)

6.3 Theme 6: The role of time away: immersion, reflection and identity

Finding different perspectives: the effects of change and immersion experiences

In the years before Brexit, the opportunity to work together in the Brussels bubble context provided multiple opportunities to increase understanding and establish areas of common ground, and this was reflected in interviews with Brussels-based civil servants and diplomats. Interviewees emphasised that this also very much applied in the political cohort, between Northern Irish politicians elected to MEP positions, and also between politicians collectively representing UK, Northern Irish and Irish politicians. A number of interviewees commented that this provided helpful stability to the relationships, which political and diplomatic figures drew upon when faced with challenging situations and areas of disagreement. One interviewee described it as the ability to see things in more than one dimension:

> If you interact in only one dimension, you probably focus on the difference. Northern Ireland would have been a bit like this. You never met the other, so therefore you didn't know what to believe. And if you only interact on one thing, we have something in common, but we could still be very different, people can still exploit the difference. But if you interact on ten things, nine of which are common then the difference is only one dimension of your interaction, therefore it's harder to exploit. So the more engaged communities of decision makers are, and the more they have in common, then the easier it is to build trust. Because then you can say 'well on these dimensions I understand what I'm seeing, and then on this dimension, well they're clearly not completely mad because I understand what I'm seeing on the other ones'. (Interviewee 51)

As part of the context around the way that immersion and colocation in the Brussels bubble facilitated this kind of strengthening of interpersonal relationships and positive interactions, a

number of interviewees spoke about the importance of shared business. In particular, the way that - in the pre-Brexit years - shared attendance at routine EU business at member state level (such as the European Parliament) or regional level (such as the Committee of the Regions) enabled "people to hear other stories and have commonalities. And then you get to know people and you find out all that we don't know - the details of other people, other countries problems. And then you identify quite a few similarities" (Interviewee 15). Interviewees spoke about the way that this could, over time, contribute to an evident blurring of some of the harder lines people might have arrived with, in terms of the way that they talked about issues or expressed their own perspective within the wider political context. As one interviewee said of many Irish and Northern Irish counterparts he had worked with over a number of years in the Brussels bubble, "views tend to change, the longer people are outside of their habitats" (Interviewee 15).

So the fact of being away is important, but the nature of Brussels itself – as a bubble space with its own ways of working and outlook – plays a part too. Alongside current Irish and former UK and Northern Irish MEPs, I also spoke with other politicians from Northern Ireland whose experience of Brussels was less regularised over a sustained period but who may have had specific or strong points of contact there in relation to Brexit and the Northern Ireland Protocol, including multiple short visits for specific meetings and engagements. Many talked about the way that their time in the Brussels bubble gave them the opportunity to think about things slightly differently, and a number of interviewees spoke about it helping to broaden their understanding and perspective over time, in a way that they felt they couldn't have back home. In particular, former UK and Northern Irish MEPs routinely framed their discussion not just in terms of their sense of their own political affinity and nationhood, but also their changing sense of their Europeanness and their affinity to the EU and the Brussels bubble. The ability to take opportunities for dialogue and strengthen relationships was talked about often as a key benefit of being in the Brussel bubble. As one interviewee put it, "there were people there that would not sit in the same room as each other here, but they were able to do it over there" (Interview 09). For many interviewees, the immersion in the Brussels bubble – even if only on a temporary basis – was key. They spoke about the dislocation from the normal relationships and environments at home as being important in supporting their reflection and enabling them to be more open to understanding.

In reflecting on the four decades of shared EU membership, Irish and Northern Irish interviewees who had worked in the Brussels bubble spoke about the particular challenges that many of them had experienced in moving towards a more cooperative style, given the prevailing strong political divides that they were accustomed to working with in their domestic political life. But they also

spoke about the way that, with time, the normative EU requirement for cooperation and consensus building effectively propelled them towards a growing recognition of their similarities and shared objectives, and an appreciation of the political benefits of focusing on the common ground in the first instance, rather than the differences:

> That was the first time I was dealing with people who lived across the border from me and I had never had any physical contact with before. But once you got to speak to them and listen to what they had to say, you suddenly discovered that maybe their view of what they needed for their people was not that far removed from what you are trying to do yourself. You learn that by cooperating with them, you could actually achieve more for the people that you represented if that makes sense. (Interviewee 13)

MEPs and former MEPs also emphasised the fact that the role itself required a mindset shift – which wasn't always easy - from the more typically confrontational style of domestic politics to the more cooperative, consensus-driven approach in Brussels.

After the UK officially exited the EU in January 2020 there was no longer a role for MEPs in representing either the UK or Northern Ireland. As a result, the lines of engagement between Northern Irish politicians and those in the Brussels bubble became less formalised, less routinised, and more issue-specific. Interviewees commented that – to date, since Brexit – engagement has largely been related to particularly problematic aspects of the implementation of the Northern Ireland Protocol. Under these circumstances, opportunities for building trust and relationships off the back of recognised shared interests and common ground have been minimal.

For Northern Irish politicians the loss of the formalised and routinised points for engagement in the Brussels bubble with each other alongside UK and Irish MEPs has been compounded by the two sustained periods of absence of Stormont since 2017, and the related loss of the formalised and routinised points for engagement through that system. A number of interviewees spoke about the significant challenge that this creates for building and maintaining cooperative relationships and trust:

> Our politicians aren't actually meeting normally in Stormont. They're not doing what they used to do. They were there three days, three and a half days a week, they ate together in the canteen, they debated together, they sat in committees. None of that has been happening...And those conversations just eased, I think, the whole political narrative. That has just stopped. So that interaction between politicians just doesn't exist anymore.

> I mean, how could that not have an impact on how the body politic functions? (Interviewee 49)

So during the Brexit era there has been a narrowing of routes and opportunities for Northern Irish politicians to engage – with each other, with Irish counterparts and UK counterparts. At the point of writing, the political machinery of Northern Ireland is still limping along in the absence of a functioning Executive, and the extended period of political limbo from this means that Northern Irish politicians are still working through the practical implications of the change to their linkages with Brussels. However, the sense given by a number of interviewees was that – despite willingness on the part of the EU and member states including Ireland to engage - it is now much harder for Northern Irish politicians to create the opportunities to work with and in Brussels. They have substantially lost the kind of incremental and consistent communication and engagement opportunities required to make meaningful, deep and long-lasting trusting connections in Brussels. This is partly due, as interviewees recognised, to the fact that whilst Northern Irish political figures and parties can and do make representations in Brussels, since Brexit "there is a constraint on to what extent the Commission can have a direct role in speaking to people in Northern Ireland, because that's very much a UK competence" (Interviewee 19) because of the formalities around levels of engagement with the devolved governments.

In addition to the changed face of engagement with the Brussels bubble and the extended periods of institutional absence of Stormont, interviewees spoke about the compounding effect of deliberate politically or ideologically motivated lack of engagement by certain Northern Irish political parties with those in the Brussels bubble. In particular, the Democratic Unionist Party's (DUP) political self-isolation and non-engagement not just with the EU but more generally in Brussels as a space was routinely referred to by interviewees as being a long-term problem, but something that had become particularly striking during the Brexit years:

> [The DUP] didn't engage overly well in Europe. I think that's something they've realised they've been poor at over recent years. That they've nearly allowed Irish Nationalism that space to go out and lobby, and do whatever they want to do. (Interviewee 47)

Interviewees pointed out that this contrasts with the more proactive approach taken by other Northern Irish political parties, particularly Sinn Féin, and this distinctive approach is also reflected in the literature (Kelly, 2023; Evershed & Murphy, 2022; Murphy, 2018). In exploring the drivers behind this variance in engagement, a number of interviewees spoke about the growing

post-Brexit polarization of politics in Northern Ireland, and the challenges this raised for politicians and political parties in trying to overcome issues and move things forward:

> Politics here is becoming more polarized, but it's also something which shows how limited the room for manoeuvre on both sides is. And how easy it is for one of these groups of people to be outflanked if they, you know, strike something. And so that makes it really hard for Jeffrey Donaldson. His people just don't want it [implementation of the Northern Ireland Protocol]. So how do you persuade them, when it's something that they haven't even thought about? (Interviewee 40)

Recognising that UK and Northern Irish politicians no longer have the opportunity for trust and relationship building through immersion in Brussels, interviewees pointed to the importance of enabling wide-ranging long term and sustained interaction across the political spectrum in Northern Ireland over isolated, issue-focused 'quick fixes' as the basis for problem solving. The pre-Brexit requirement to work together in the Brussels bubble was repeatedly highlighted in interviews as a key past route for exactly this type of engagement, and the loss of that space for Northern Irish politicians was seen by interviewees as a thorny problem in the post-Brexit context.

Post-Brexit, a footprint of UK and Northern Irish civil servants and diplomats remain in Brussels, and given the absence of MEPs they now find themselves in the new position of being the primary point of contact in the Brussels bubble on a day-to-day basis. Consequently, the UK and Northern Irish civil servants and diplomats that I interviewed emphasised that, despite now being out of the formal loop of EU business, they now needed to become better at picking up information, communicating their position on key issues, and influencing – both with EU officials and Irish (and other member state) political and diplomatic contacts.

Interviewees talked about their sense that spending time immersed in the Brussels bubble made civil servants and diplomats in tune with, not only the 'political temperature' of their own domestic political scene, but also that of Brussels. They suggested that this gave them a greater appreciation of how to manoeuvre through sensitive issues in their national interest, and a better ability to recognise the areas to cede or stand firm on. Anecdotes from UK, Irish and Northern Irish civil servants and diplomats indicated that the continuous colocation and immersion of people in those roles in the Brussels bubble allowed for a gradual incremental strengthening of interpersonal relationships. Interviewees spoke about the way that this greater personal understanding could contribute to diffusing tensions at a higher level because the stronger

relationships built in Brussels supported a more accurate ability to predict, interpret and respond appropriately to actions on the part of their counterparts and contacts. The benefit was in being able to say, with a relative degree of confidence, "well, you know, I happen to know these people – they won't be doing this, they'll be doing that; their motivation won't be this, it will be that" (Interviewee 51), which could help to isolate and resolve issues before they became a problem at a higher level. A number of interviewees commented that replicating this outside of Brussels was much harder and required more of a contrived effort between geographically dispersed counterparts in home capitals, where there was not the same level of personal rapport and understanding built from continual interaction and engagement.

Interviewees also spoke about the significance of these relationships built in Brussels, not only whilst immersed together in the Brussels bubble, but also afterwards in maintaining points of connection between individuals. This ability to draw on past contacts from their time in the Brussels bubble was recognised for its potential benefits. However, interviewees also emphasised that it needed to be mutually desired and done well, otherwise there was a risk of appearing either manipulative or desperate to benefit from these past warm relations built in Brussels. This point was demonstrated in conversations with both Irish and UK interviewees who spoke about the way in which, following Brexit, the UK Mission were known to strategically engineer the return of certain individuals formerly posted to Brussels, in the hopes of encouraging engagement from the Irish side:

> They definitely still try and use the people they had pre-Brexit as a hook because you know them. And they do still bring them out from London, but then it's such an obvious 'here's the person you used to work with, you can't ignore them!'. (Interviewee 21)

More generally, a number of interviewees from UK, Northern Irish and Irish perspectives spoke about the positive benefits of sending civil servants and diplomats out on postings to Brussels, not just for their work whilst they were there, but also from the benefits they brought back in terms of their understanding of the business of the EU and the Brussels ways of working. Northern Irish interviewees in particular also emphasised that experience of working in Brussels made Northern Irish civil servants more politically adept, which was helpful in navigating the political in Northern Ireland:

> One particular Permanent Secretary that I worked with had worked in Brussels for a long time and there was just a complete difference in how they worked with a multi-party executive... because they were used to brokerage because brokerage happens in

> Brussels, and it's no big deal. Whereas I think the Northern Ireland civil service world was very tentative because they were very allied to a Whitehall notion of impartiality, and very worried about sort of moving away from that. But people who had worked in Europe or had worked in that system were much more pragmatic and much more amenable to - I wouldn't say political decisions, but - understanding the broader political environment in which they were situated. They were much more alive to that. (Interviewee 22).

Through their immersion in the Brussels bubble, civil servants learnt an appreciation and skills base for a different way of working. Although a footprint of Northern Irish and UK civil servants remain in Brussels, their exposure to these different ways of working is of course now significantly reduced by no longer being 'in the room' of EU business.

Seeing identity through a different lens in the Brussels bubble

Whilst interviewing, the issue of identity and recognition of the particular role of political identity in the history and politics of Northern Ireland came up repeatedly. The link between identity and the history of Northern Ireland's period of violent conflict was something that Irish and Northern Irish interviewees referred to as an intrinsic part of the everyday fabric of social and political life in relation to Northern Ireland. It was also something that was acknowledged by some of the interviewees as having contributed to the EU's position on Northern Ireland during the Troubles, which coincided with the early years of EU membership for Ireland and the UK:

> The EU has always taken a very neutral approach to Northern Ireland. It is not interested in the internal identity issues and the ongoing question of Unionist versus Nationalist identities. It was simply that – Barroso put it this way - in a European Union that was founded on the very principles of peace and democracy, it was an anomaly that in one corner of the European Union, this violence was going on about questions of identity. (Interviewee 19)

A number of interviewees also spoke at length about the way that working in the Brussels bubble allowed Irish and Northern Irish political and diplomatic actors to acknowledge the issue of identity, whilst beginning to reframe or even set it aside:

> I think it gives Northern politicians the freedom to get a little bit away from their base, or the extreme ends their base. I think more important than that, they hear what other Europeans think. You know, it's harder to be a nutcase when you're not surrounded by people who don't understand the context in history, and I mean that from all sides. Like, we all know about the Battle of the Boyne, 1690, 1968, Bloody Sunday…you know? We know all this context, so actually when we're talking to each other, Nationalists-Unionists, North-South, all this is there, so you don't even need to explain the context before you get angry or launch into it or pander to your base or whatever. But when you come out here and start talking to some Finnish guy or some Estonian guy, they're like 'What are you talking about here? What's going on here?' you know? So I think that's very helpful. (Interviewee 21)

The importance of having this literal and metaphorical space within the Brussels bubble to pause and see it through the eyes of someone else who has no understanding or emotive connection to the issues was referred to a number of times. Interviewees were not suggesting a naivety on the part of Brussels-based political and diplomatic actors, but rather that they also had their own, different experiences of conflict and identity. Numerous interviewees suggested that in this respect, Brussels has provided a space in which to reflect, and also in which to reconsider issues with a different sense of proportionality and perspective:

> You're with a group and you realise that trotting out your exact thing, you're losing them and you sort of say, well okay…'I'm a proud Ulster man' or whatever - it has a different meaning when you're in a different environment…And other people are looking at you and saying 'do you realise how many times we've been walked over in Western Europe and had war walking through our place. So it changes the views of people. That they're not alone in having had conflict and ethnic strife. And that a lot of people are just trying to get over these things and put them behind them. (Interviewee 15)

In this respect, interviewees spoke about the Brussels bubble as providing a space in which it is professionally appropriate to be politely curious about the sociopolitical context and history of your European colleagues and neighbours. Sharing and learning about different localised experiences of conflict was normalised in Brussels and enabled reflection, and the ability to conceive of conflict more broadly as something that has the potential to unify as well as divide. Specifically, that it is something that is collectively experienced and felt by people, regardless of where they are from or what their views are. A number of interviewees reflected on the way that the multilateral environment in the Brussels bubble was ultimately underpinned by a drive to

understand the other and find common ground, from which to build from as the basis for further trust and cooperation. In this context, Northern Irish interviewees made a clear distinction between Brussels and Belfast in terms of the way that identity came into their everyday professional interactions. As one interviewee put it:

> [In Brussels] Everyone's like 'okay, the game here is that we get to know each other'. It's very mutually beneficial. In Belfast I find it's much more closed off, because there's so much history in Belfast, that it's really about who are you, where are you from, where's your family from. I find Brussels much more welcoming in that regard. (Interviewee 24)

This unprompted reflection on the role and expression of identity and how this differed in the Brussels bubble as opposed to at home was distinctive to the Northern Ireland interviewees. In this respect, many of the Northern Irish interviewees I spoke with found relationship building in the Brussels bubble relatively less complex than when at home because they didn't have to so extensively factor in the framing of their own social and political identity. Some Northern Irish interviewees also spoke about the way that being within the Brussels bubble allowed them to 'legitimately' interact with Irish and British counterparts without scrutiny, whilst operating within a space in which it was possible to present themselves in a less identity-centric way than was possible back in Northern Ireland:

> In Belfast, there's always a kind of… I mean it's instinctive, but when you're with the more Irish person, you figure it out, you present yourself in a more Irish way. And when you're with a more British person you kind of present yourself in a more British way. And you always have to be very careful with what you say. Can I say I'm Northern Irish? Do I say Northern Ireland? Do I say the North of Ireland? Because it does have an effect on how people react to you. And here in Brussels, so many people have dual identity, you know, dual nationality. So, when I just say 'oh I'm a dual national' or you know 'I'm Northern Irish', no one cares you know. Unless they're Irish or British, in which case they might have a reaction, but it's much more muted than in Belfast. (Interviewee 24)

Interviewees spoke about the way that, over time, this had the capacity to gradually shift or soften the ways in which Northern Irish political and diplomatic actors in Brussels communicated, delineated or evolved their own sense of identity:

> I remember one person who was from a unionist background and an employee of a European institution. Over a number of years - I knew him for about 10 years - he'd changed his view. He had been an Ulster man - British, an Ulster man. At one stage I met

> him again and he said he was Irish, but he came from Northern Ireland. Now that took a long move for him to get there. I talked to him about this and he said 'yeah, I'm okay with that'. And I think he was probably frustrated with trying to explain the parochial level of differentiation that happens when you're back home in a place that everyone knows this. Whereas if you're living your life with a bunch of other people, and they're going like 'yeah, I'm Italian and well, we have these places as well, so just get on with it'. I think it was just, having been away, he could sort of say I'm an Irish man, understanding that if he said 'I came from Northern Ireland' it was fine. (Interviewee 15)

By contrast, amongst the Irish interviewees I spoke with, there was no unprompted reflection on this comparative home versus Brussels framing of identity. Rather, a number of interviewees instinctively spoke about feeling an additional sense of European identity alongside their Irish identity, and the comfortable interconnectivity between these for them, in part because of the way these related to another layer of their identity – their professional identity:

> I don't think my sense of identity has particularly changed. Because I suppose, as a diplomat, I'm just used to carrying my identity with me wherever I go. Part of your role is representing your country, so you still feel very connected to it. I do feel my European sense of identity more strongly. I've always felt very European, but I think it's inevitable when you are sitting in an EU seat and taking a European perspective on things, that that bit of yourself becomes more reinforced. But I've always been a very committed European, so it really didn't take much to be honest. I see Irish identity and European identity being very complementary, so one doesn't really take from the other. (Interviewee 48)

This is logical amongst a group of professionals who have chosen the career they have, and broadly reflected the Irish government's commitment to their place within the EU. This showed in contrast to the Brussels-based UK political and diplomatic interviewees I spoke to, who did not directly raise the subject of identity at all. Some spoke either directly or tangentially about their alignment with the ideological principles of Brexit, but they did not translate that into a wider consideration of their own sense of social or political identity, or how that shaped the way they worked and interacted within the Brussels bubble. However, those who had previously worked in the Brussels bubble spoke about the challenges for UK politicians and diplomats in adapting since the Brexit referendum, and what that meant for them professionally:

> The UKRep team itself was not in a great place, and they'd had a very tough time inevitably because the whole of their purpose had been turned on its head. There were a lot of people in UKRep who were there because they wanted to work in the EU, and now their job was to facilitate the process of taking the UK out of the EU. So it was, as well as the work being difficult, it was emotionally a tough time for the folk in UKRep. They were living this day in day out. They were in Brussels, they were confronting the concern, disappointment, anger, sorrow from all the other member states on a daily basis, and this was very difficult for them. (Interviewee 28)

This comment and others like it did not bring in the word 'identity'. However, they fed into a more general picture of the lived experience and cognitive friction experienced by many of the UK politicians and diplomats in Brussels at the time. Whilst not explicitly framed as an identity issue by the interviewees, the focus on the connection between the professional and emotional challenges bound up in the fundamental change of balancing all of this against their professional purpose and duties, has clear ties into a sense of professional identity for UK civil servants and diplomats.

In looking at the respective collective political and diplomatic sense of identity for the UK and Irish contingents in Brussels, many of the interviewees spoke about the significance of Ireland and the UK joining the EU at the same time, and the way that this had shaped both their relationship and the value accorded to EU membership. Several interviewees used the framing of 'big brother and little brother' when speaking about this relationship. They spoke about the changes whilst the parallel EU memberships progressed, particularly Irelands' notable growth - politically, diplomatically and economically - after its accession. Extending the metaphor, interviewees conveyed the notion that over time the bond between the 'brothers' grew stronger, and that as Ireland grew, so the height gap reduced, making them look and feel more similarly matched by the time that Brexit came along. In particular interviewees spoke about the closeness of the relationship between UK and Irish politicians, civil servants and diplomats in the Brussels bubble, not only in terms of the formal ties between the institutions, but also the formal and informal elements of the interpersonal working relationships:

> Things were very, very cordial between us... In general I would struggle to think of issues where we were not aligned with the Irish. And of course that plays through into your working and personal relationships as well. Conversations just become easier in many ways. (Interviewee 50)

Although interviewees spoke of a small number of interpersonal connections that had endured between the Irish and UK sides, interviewees were emphatic that Brexit had ended their ability to capitalise on their shared sense of EU identity and had caused a strongly felt breakdown in the closeness of many of these interpersonal and inter-institutional relationships. Alongside this loss of shared EU member state identity, UK political and diplomatic actors in Brussels are now having to acclimatise to their new identity as an EU third country, and what that means for their relationships with Irish and Northern Irish contacts within the Brussels bubble.

The Brexit referendum and subsequent steps triggered a disengagement by and with UK political and diplomatic colleagues at all levels within the Brussels bubble. Some changes – such as withdrawal from certain committees took place rapidly, others – such as the final stepping down of Northern Irish and British MEPs - more slowly. Interviewees on the UK side acknowledged that, whilst they would continue to need to be informed of and try to influence EU matters that impact on the UK, the choice to leave the EU meant that there was increasingly and explicitly less shared European identity and common ground for day-to-day informal interactions and relationship building. This was felt to have had a snowball effect on compromising favourable conditions for trust and undermining trust across the UK and Irish political and diplomatic communities in the Brussels bubble and more widely. Interviewees also acknowledged that it prevented Brussels' ability to maintain a supportive developmental space for Irish-UK-Northern Irish communication and trust-building in the same relatively easy way it had prior to Brexit.

CHAPTER 7: Discussion – Trust amongst Irish, UK and Northern Irish political and diplomatic actors in the Brussels bubble and beyond

7.1 Introduction

This study examined the interpersonal communications dynamic amongst Irish, UK and Northern Irish political and diplomatic figures in the Brussels bubble during and after Brexit to address the following research questions:

1. How do political and diplomatic figures perceive any changes to the communicative dynamic to have impacted on trust at a day-to-day working level?

2. What are the implications of changes in trust between these political and diplomatic figures for wider post-Brexit relations, at the interorganisational and interstate levels?

3. What are the implications for theoretical development in political and diplomatic trust?

The findings highlighted that Irish, UK and Northern Irish political and diplomatic figures in the Brussels bubble perceived a number of changes in respect of communication, which they felt impacted upon trust. These communicative changes and the subsequent impact on trust had consequences for trust not only at the interpersonal level, but also at the interorganisational and interstate levels. The discussion of these impacts is broken into three sections. The first of these looks at the issue of identity in the Brussels bubble and the role that this has played in respect of both communication and trust. The second section considers the particular importance of integrity-based trust in the Brussels bubble and the implications that this has for trust building and trust maintenance efforts, post-Brexit. The third section looks at the factor of trust reciprocity and the impact that (the expression of) the shift in shared values between the UK, Northern Ireland and Ireland has had on trust relations. The conclusion summarises the key points of the discussion. Chapter Eight then follows, presenting a new theoretical model - the TCI model - as a means of further understanding the trust, communication and identity findings of this study in terms of the theoretical application.

7.2 It's how you wear it: identity 'badges' and trust in the Brussels bubble.

> "As an Irish diplomat, the key interlocutor for those UK civil servants is the EU, not me. I'm seeking to influence, persuade, gather information, but I do not have agency to negotiate directly with the British on anything to do with Brexit or the Protocol. Which is sometimes maybe a little bit misunderstood [by the UK side]. Irish diplomats and politicians have no agency, we stand firmly united with the EU position, and that will always be so." (Interviewee 37)

In the wider context of Northern Ireland history and politics, recognising the deep-rooted significance of political identity is part of understanding the history of violent conflict and appreciating the scale of the political and diplomatic efforts. Firstly, in achieving the 1998 Good Friday Agreement, and secondly, in delivering the long period of relative political stability and peace that followed it. Identity has emerged during this study as a key issue for consideration in the practice of communication and trust amongst Irish, UK and Northern Irish political and diplomatic figures within the Brussels bubble, both before and after Brexit. In taking a practice theory approach which departs from state-centred theoretical approaches to international relations, this thesis recognises the centrality of work at the practice level in shaping political and diplomatic relations through their communicative practices and trust-building work. That not just political leaders, but those many, many political and diplomatic figures operating beneath them collectively keep the wheels of politics and diplomacy in motion through their communication and trust-building practice. Furthermore, that in doing so each one of them brings their own sense of contextually formed identity to their work, whether consciously or unconsciously, which plays a contributory part in the political and diplomatic operating environment created by the collective practices of those individual political and diplomatic figures.

The findings of this study demonstrate that for political and diplomatic figures operating in the Brussels bubble, this sense of identity at the individual and interpersonal level is highly relevant and the product of a complex combination of different elements of personal and role-based experiences, influenced by context. This is reflected in work by Kasten (2018, p103) who emphasises the relational nature of trust, for which there are causal and constitutive links between trustful behaviour and intersubjective contextual factors between individuals: "first, trustful behaviour (re-)produces shared social identity; second, trustful behaviour satisfies the socio-emotional needs of the trusted actor; and third, trustful behaviour complies with a social

norm and obligation to trust" (Kasten, 2018, p103). Furthermore, Kasten finds that when identity plays a role in the formation of trust it is important that resulting trust and trustful behaviour is recognised and celebrated, to support the "(re-)production of the socio-emotional foundation of an identification-based trusting relationship" (Kasten, 2018, p103). Although there are elements of distinction across the different Irish, UK and Northern Irish cohorts in the Brussels bubble in the extent of the impact, the findings of this present study show that this socio-emotional foundation is invariably harder to achieve now, in the absence of the 'shared bond' of EU member status, and the loss of many of the pre-Brexit formal and informal shared business and engagement efforts between Irish, UK and Northern Irish political and diplomatic actors in the Brussels bubble.

This study found that the sense of identity that each political and diplomatic figure carries with them in the Brussels bubble is not static and fixed, but susceptible to change in response to experiences whilst in the role and within the Brussels bubble context. It was apparent that political and diplomatic actors do not radically or suddenly fundamentally change their identity – who and what they are – simply by being in Brussels. However, it was clear that, prior to Brexit, their expression of and perspective on their identity did sometimes change over time whilst in the Brussels bubble, in a way that was both a cause and effect of opening and maintaining lines of communication and building trust, working with and alongside Irish, UK and Northern Irish political and diplomatic counterparts within an operating environment that was more normatively geared to support and facilitate it.

This process of identity reframing and reflexivity was most often expressed as being as a result of continuous, repeated, predominantly low-stakes routinised engagement with two distinct groups. Firstly, others who were not from Ireland, the UK and Northern Ireland and had less knowledge of, or investment in, the particular history and sociopolitical context. Secondly, others from Ireland, the UK and Northern Ireland in the shared context of EU membership in which, over time within the Brussels bubble, the collective 'ingroup' identity of being EU members gave cohesion and commonality that outweighed their separate points of difference at the political or national level. Whilst nationality and national interest was a starting point from which efforts around communication and trust building developed, at the day-to-day interpersonal working level there was a policy/committee-focused, role-based, practice emphasis rather than a repeated heavy emphasis on clearly performing national or political identity. This created space at the interpersonal engagement level for a shift towards performing a more collective and cooperative identity, within pairs or small groups of political and diplomatic figures and even at the

interorganisational level on certain policies and issues across the Irish, UK and Northern Irish presence in the Brussels bubble. This allowed for more constructive reciprocal communication and engagement, which established a baseline of trust which was strengthened over time between individuals. For example, Irish and UK diplomats in supporting roles to the main weekly Coreper I and Coreper II meetings, who might be working together in the same room two or three days a week, every week for the entirety of their posting to the Brussels bubble. These individuals had to work together round the table, and find constructive ways to resolve issues on areas of difference, whilst maintaining a positive working relationship to enable them to do it all again the following week. It required diplomats to get to know and trust one another to the point where they could be confident that frankness would be reciprocated, so that together they could get underneath the 'official position' and come to a compromise that worked for both sides. Formal business was complemented with informal relationship work and trust-building. For example, preparatory meetings followed by the whole group going for weekly beers, or UK and Irish diplomats meeting for a coffee in one of the many Brussels cafes to figure out together how to package and present an item at the formal meeting in order to get the necessary buy-in from others in the room without too many concessions. The intensity of this way of working forged a new layer of role-related identity that was shared and focused on what was common rather than what was different between them, and this supported greater trust between these diplomats.

The interpersonal relations were sometimes even expressed as being more than just strong professional working relationships, and more akin to friendship. Interviewees recognised that these relationships were contextually specific to the Brussels bubble and had to be balanced against a recognition that "you will leave this role eventually, but you won't leave your own system" (Interviewee 21). However, the findings of this study suggest that these trusting relationships forged in the Brussels bubble imprinted a change on the way that diplomats across the different systems interacted, even after they had left the Brussels bubble. This was both in terms of maintaining and drawing on those trusting relationships and also in terms of their wider outlook once back in their domestic system. For Northern Irish civil servants the fact of operating in a space which was culturally oriented towards collaboration and less intensely partisan and politically-charged was significant. They retained their role-based identity and focus on civil service impartiality and neutrality, but once away from home they found that they could 'let down their guard' a little in terms of the feasibility and optics attached to communicating with Northern Irish political figures and UK and Irish political and diplomatic figures. This enabled them to work more freely and constructively across divides, with a focus on communicating and building trust with whichever people were appropriate to help achieve policy objectives and

priority outcomes, rather than having to be constantly cautious in bending everything around wider political optics.

The combination of continuous formal and informal interaction for all these roles and situations is important in this context, and was expressed by both political and diplomatic figures across the board. For example, prior to Brexit Northern Irish and Irish MEPs worked within a wider community of MEPs across 28 European states. In this context, they found themselves working for their own national interest alongside others doing the same for their national interest, with Northern Irish and Irish MEPs often finding that they were in fact looking for very similar things, despite having different political perspectives. For politicians the expectation is that identity is a badge that they wear openly, that shows their affiliation to a party or a cause and points to their positionality in respect of their role, the community they serve, the principles that they uphold in that role and for the political party that they are a part of. But taking on an MEP role meant affiliating with a different political grouping in the European political group model, rather than simply continuing to wear the same political party identity badge from back home. Additionally, in working on policy files and different committees, MEPs came to recognise that whilst the differences that their political identities had highlighted back home might still be there, in the EU context there were also points of commonality in terms of some of their policy priorities, things they believed in, or championed in their role. Politicians also spent much time together in committees and foras of formal business of the European Parliament. But there was also a lot of other time spent together, informally, at dinners or events in Brussels or on trips organized by MEPs as "study missions" (Interviewee 02) in relation to particular issues or policy files being considered. This put politicians in the situation of having to socialize with each other – be in the same room together, make small talk, get to know each other. Although the findings of this study do not suggest that this diluted the political identity of MEPs per se, they did indicate that time in Brussels in this role supported a greater focus on looking for consensus and common ground, and an openness to engaging with the political 'other' to try to resolve issues and get the best outcome for their own political group and constituency. This more open engagement within the Brussels bubble carried over benefits at home too, particularly amongst Northern Irish politicians. Although they emphasised that the public tone of the relationship may still have to be performative, to fit with the public political climate and party politics, the colocation and interaction in Brussels built understanding (and in some cases trust) amongst politicians who had worked in Brussels together that injected some much-needed oil into the political machine, behind the scenes.

The idea of developing a framework of 'friendship' to overcome tensions and flashpoints is something that both political and diplomatic figures conveyed as an integral way of working in Brussels in particular, that looked beyond conventional dividing lines and allowed for more positive and constructive engagement. Social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1985) emphasises the importance that people place on group membership as a key part of overall identity and sense of belonging, such that "we are motivated to belong to positively-valued groups and to see our ingroups in a positive light" (Vermue et al., 2019, p1004). Being in the Brussels bubble effectively offered a new layer of "positively valued groups" (Vermue et al., 2019) and a different dimension from which to build an angle of social identity that went beyond what they could have done in home capitals.

Given this dense tapestry of positive interpersonal relations, it is little wonder that prior to Brexit the Brussels bubble is recognised as being a space in which, collectively, Irish, UK and Northern Irish relations were nurtured and strengthened in the years of shared EU membership (Connelly, 2018). This study shows that the benefit to UK-Irish relations and Northern Irish domestic politics was not simply structural cohesion and shared EU business interests but, at the practice level, a wide network of open and communicative political and diplomatic interpersonal trust relations built in the Brussels bubble. Many of these were built initially out of calculated practical necessity first and foremost, in finding ways to deliver on their national or political objective. But many of them were also further strengthened or even formed outside of a particular objective-driven need, by simply being together so much and coming to understand and appreciate each other at a personal level. This shows a certain symmetry with the years of work put into improving intergroup relations and healing deeply divided communities in post-conflict Northern (Reimer et al., 2022; Hewstone & Hughes, 2015; Dixon et al., 2020; Dovidio et al., 2011) through supporting increased contact and interaction. Much of this work on improving community cohesion and relations has drawn on contact theory and the fundamentals of "equal status contact, cooperative interaction, common goals, and the support of relevant authorities" (Dovidio et al., 2011, p148).

This study found that colocation and immersion in the Brussels bubble supported a degree of identity reflexivity and adaptability in practice for Irish-UK-Northern Irish political and diplomatic actors. There was also a sense of shared role-based identity which contributed to feeding communication which then fed trust, which in turned affirmed the sense of shared-role based identity and the cycle went round again. This indication of the important role of identity in

feeding into practices of communication and trust echoes some of the international relations literature which looks at the nature of relations between groups. Building from Tajfel and Turner's (1985) early work on social identity theory, scholars point to the multiplicity of identity and the way that "people understand situations in terms of identity categories, and their thoughts, feelings and actions are determined by whatever identities are 'salient' in that situation" (McKeown et al., 2016, p168). Extending this logic, McKeown et al., (2016) suggest that this variable influence of identity salience explains how it is that people can act rationally even in changing and unexpected situations (McKeown et al., 2016, p168). However, even acknowledging the possibility and benefit of identity salience, this study has found that the existential shock to the Irish-UK-Northern Irish political and diplomatic operating environment in the Brussels bubble caused by the outworkings of Brexit has severely challenged the day-to-day communications and relationship-building work amongst Irish, UK and Northern Irish political and diplomatic figures. This study strikingly points to how different communication and trust dynamics have been at the practice level since the Brexit referendum. Everyday communication in the day-to-day work of Irish, UK and Northern Irish political and diplomatic figures changed on a number of fronts relating to three overarching factors. Firstly, the loss of opportunities for engagement in light of structural changes resulting from the UK's exit from the EU and all the lost formal business aspects and points of engagement that entailed. Secondly, operating environment changes in relation to specific actions at the practice level on the part of individual political and diplomatic figures in the Brussels bubble. Finally, political and strategic environment changes in relation to narratives and signals emanating from the respective governments in home capitals.

An important aspect of identity reflexivity that happened over the years of EU membership and applied to interviewees from all the different nations and role groups was the way in which working together with colleagues from other administrations contributed to changing conceptions. The ability for Irish and UK politicians and diplomats to work together on common EU business drove the realisation that there were many shared interests in respect of policy issues or funding priorities or whatever it might be, that supported a sense of alliance. It also allowed a reframing of how politicians and diplomats working within the Brussels bubble saw the other, at the interpersonal and governmental level, because being in a working space together enabled them to see beneath the public narrative and build a stronger understanding of the other. In particular, colocation and working together in the Brussels bubble fostered the idea that they had a shared problem that both sides wanted to resolve, and the other areas of EU shared business and cooperation afforded them the mutual understanding to "reframe what they heard publicly from the other" (Interviewee 40) and go beyond the oppositional, securitised more public

framing. This created capacity in the relationship and a tone to the relationship that was more conducive to trust, going beyond political rhetoric and "simply seeing it in security terms around 'why are you not doing more to extradite IRA men?' " (Interviewee 40).

For political figures the same was also true and Brussels offered both a space that fostered a climate of trust and the opportunity for Irish and UK politicians to work together. For Northern Irish politicians working in Brussels, either as MEPs or in visiting for specific business this was a really heavily emphasised important benefit of working in the Brussels bubble. UK and Northern Irish politicians reflected that the consensus and cooperation approach to political dialogue and decision making in the Brussels bubble was a significant departure from their own domestic experiences which took some getting used to. It required a new attention to building constructive rather than purely combative relationships with political opponents. It also exposed politicians to the idea that, in the multilateral environment of the Brussels bubble, politically-driven identity amplification isn't always needed or helpful in achieving political objectives. For Northern Irish politicians working with each other or with UK and Irish colleagues this was a very different dynamic than they were accustomed to in domestic politics. In respect of both the political and diplomatic interpersonal communications and trust building work in the Brussels bubble, reflecting on these lost pre-Brexit practices is important in recognising the post-Brexit implications for trust and communication which are derived from the loss of this type of exposure and opportunity in the Brussels bubble.

The issue of identity as a key relational component of trust was woven through the fabric of all the interviews, although the conscious recognition of the impact of identity was variable, both in relation to the different professional groups and also the split across Irish, UK and Northern Irish interviewees. For UK and Northern Irish politicians, in addition to their own sense of political identity and party allegiance, there was a wider consideration in working within the parameters set by their political party, and the extent to which voter identity played into that (Evershed & Murphy, 2022; Tonge & Evans, 2018; Tonge, 2020; Wincott, 2018; McLoughlin, 2009). For diplomats and civil servants, personal sense of identity was consciously put to one side, reflecting the fact that for each of these role groups the expected focus is on doing their role well by working in the national interest under the government of the day, regardless of their own personal (political) views or feelings on policy positions. For civil servants the traditional focus on political neutrality remained evident in this study, but working in the diplomatic Brussels bubble environment facilitated a more nuanced approach to balancing the line between political astuteness and neutrality in their communications and interactions than would normally be the

case back in home capitals. For Northern Irish civil servants, being in Brussels continued to offer something of an escape from Belfast's normalized partisan political operating environment. However, there was a recognition that the Brussels bubble had become and been perceived as a much less politically neutral operating space since the Brexit referendum, impacting on both the range and quality of opportunities for engagement with UK and Irish political and diplomatic figures. The loss of the continual, low-risk, routinised interactions, and the lost common ground offered by shared interests and alliance building on EU business matters has removed a large sliced of the shared professional identity that was previously a part of Irish, UK and Northern Irish political and diplomatic figures all interacting and operating in the Brussels bubble. This strand of shared identity that connected Irish, UK and Northern Irish political and diplomatic figures within the Brussels bubble was very evident and their shared experience and understanding of the 'Brussels ways of working' was also something they had in common, that collectively set them apart from their colleagues back in home capitals. In effect, Irish, UK and Northern Irish political and diplomatic figures prior to Brexit collectively came together in different combinations and formal and informal working contexts, but all under the shared umbrella of being on the 'inside' as EU member state players. As Vermue et al. (2019, p1003) identify, this shared 'insider' status has significant impact on group identity and trust dynamics. In particular, that being on the inside of a group creates a greater tendency to favour those other ingroup members, as compared to a tendency to distrust and discriminate against those that are not a part of that ingroup (Vermue et al., 2019, p1003).

Post-Brexit, all previous 'normal business' EU points of formal engagement at the working level in Brussels were lost to UK and Northern Irish political and diplomatic figures. Although a small and focused number of formal new arrangements have been put in place to deal with core elements of the future EU-UK relationship, the realm of interactions between Irish-UK-Northern Irish political and diplomatic figures is now largely through informal communication and engagement rather than formal committee work. In the new post-Brexit dynamic, political and diplomatic figures representing Ireland – as a continuing member of the EU – remain in the 'ingroup', whilst those representing the UK and Northern Ireland now belong to the 'out-group'. The findings of this study support this ingroup/outgroup group identity and trust framing, with the UK's transition to EU 'third country' status shifting them to the 'outgroup' identity, accompanied by a change in the overall relationship to a less trusting and welcoming dynamic with those, including Ireland, still within the 'ingroup' as EU members.

Diplomats are conventionally seen as belonging in between the highly partisan realm of politics and the politically neutral realm of civil service, and this was absolutely the case in this study. However, the wider political environment since the Brexit referendum results has been challenging, and this study found that as a consequence, Irish and UK diplomatic roles and communication work in the Brussels bubble has gone through multiple periods of being politicised in ways that they had not experienced prior to the Brexit referendum, with consequences afterwards for their ability to 'slot back into' more conventional diplomatic relationships and tracks of communication and engagement work with each other. Even fully utilizing their highly sensitive "political antennae", as a number of interviewees put it, UK diplomats continue to find the post-Brexit Brussels bubble a relatively unreceptive environment for communications and engagement with Irish contacts, despite previously warm relations between the two organisations and the network of trusted connections at the interpersonal level underpinning them.

One significant contributory factor which was nothing more than a very unlucky quirk of fate was that the official UK exit was followed immediately by the global Covid-19 pandemic. The intention was to refocus efforts on informal engagements as a means of gradually easing into a new relationship on the ground in Brussels, relying on the same people with already warm connections and bonds of interpersonal trust to figure out how communication and engagement work now needed to happen under a new operating model of 'Irish inside, UK outside' the EU. Instead, much of the Brussel bubble's formal business (which the UK was no longer part of) – like the rest of the world – went online, and the informal work just stopped or was hugely scaled back, in line with Covid restrictions in Belgium. This forced a sharp severing of connections, and by the time people began to return to the Brussels bubble and working life was more or less normal again, many of the interpersonal connections had gone cold. People who had been around on both sides prior to the UK's official exit had rotated out, and been replaced with new people who had no past shared bond, trust or shared sense of identity in relation to committee work or policy files or any other aspect of formal or informal life in the Brussels bubble from which to build forward from. This study found that this exacerbated the new ingroup/outgroup dynamic, which was explicitly communicated on the Irish side by overt emphasis of the Irish commitment to the EU and the EU's position vis-à-vis Brexit, a decreased willingness to disclose information to UK contacts, and a reduced willingness to commit to communication and relationship building efforts over and above the bare minimum professionally required during the formal aspects of Brexit negotiation and implementation work.

There was a tangible shift away from a normative interpersonal relational commitment to engage and build trusting relations between UK and Irish diplomats. As was mentioned a number of times during the course of interviews, diplomats work under the political, and the relationship at the political level had soured significantly and impacted upon the framework of interpersonal relationships at the practice level in the Brussels bubble. This study found that Irish diplomats were extremely cautious about engaging with UK contacts, and were guarded when they did. This was partly connected to the certainty of the need to continue to demonstrate their pro-EU identity and trustworthiness to the EU and other member states, contrasted against their absence of certainty of what the soured political environment means for future UK-Ireland relations. It was compounded by the additional temporally-led factor that for many Irish diplomats now in Brussels there is no longer any element of personal trust or feelings of friendship in relation to a cohort of UK diplomats that they had personally worked with and built up trust in, because the doors of Brussels keep rotating and there are now very many Irish and UK diplomats in the Brussels bubble who have no personal connections to build on from.

For UK and Northern Irish politicians, the Brussels bubble has become a less routinised space of interaction with Irish politicians (and diplomats) because the official UK exit was also the official end of UK and Northern Irish MEP positions. This study evidences the resulting loss of both formal and informal communication and engagement routes now available between Irish, UK and Northern Irish politicians, and Irish and UK politicians in particular were concerned about how this new gap between them could be bridged going forward. New initiatives such as informal engagement events and more formal arrangements such as the UK-EU Parliamentary Partnership Assembly have been established, acting in part as a vehicle for engagement between Irish, UK and Northern Irish politicians, although the delegations on each side are relatively limited in number and not of the scale and consistency of previous interaction possible through MEP roles. Politicians on all sides emphasised that this loss was problematic for enabling communication and understanding and building trust amongst Irish, UK and Northern Irish political figures, and gave extensive examples from pre-Brexit times of how Irish, UK and Northern Irish politicians working together and alongside each other in the Brussels bubble had built vital trust and understanding that had fed into broader political momentum and good relations. The fact of politicians from different political positions having a role in the Brussels bubble did not necessarily equate to them developing a shared perspective or a shared sense of identity. Indeed, this quote from one interviewee points to the early consequences, from a time significantly before the Brexit era, for

the way that different political players in Northern Ireland engaged with the EU in terms of identity, and how this both reflected and fed into a wider sense of political identity in Northern Ireland:

> [John Hume] was a massive fan of Europe. He used the European Union as a model for Northern Ireland. And therefore I think nationalists would always have identified quite happily with Europe, because in the south, by becoming European, Ireland was able to come out from under the shadow of its big brother – the UK – and be seen as an equal. And that belonging to a wider grouping of Europe gave nationalists a sense of identity, whereas unionists did not want the UK to join the EU, because that diluted the Britishness. (Interviewee 19)

However, deep-rooted identity differences aside, Bjola and Kornprobst (2013) recognise the importance of communication in building understanding, even if it falls short of reaching a point of commonality and identity convergence, arguing that:

> Dialogue sometimes leads to a better understanding of the other side and sometimes even to a convergence of views. Both are seen as contributing to improving relations. They may not necessarily reach shared identifications. Yet relations are already expected to improve if the parties no longer see each other as aliens but come to understand each other. (Bjola & Kornprobst, 2013, p125).

Lincoln and Guba (2013) also bring in the consideration of place, pointing to the influence on personal and cultural identity formation of different interaction opportunities generated by physically relocating people and taking them away from what is familiar. They argue that over extended timeframes this can exert a "counter-cultural reprogramming" effect, which ultimately makes those individuals "more mature, more tolerant, more deeply empathic than they were prior to the experience….[developing] broader capacities for understanding, and consequently, identities which are able to consider and reflect upon constructions not previously entertained" (Lincoln & Guba, 2013, p49). Although the exemplar that Lincoln and Guba (2013) give is not from the political and diplomatic realm, there is parity with the findings from this study about the pre-Brexit evolution of interaction amongst Irish, UK and Northern Irish political and diplomatic figures in the Brussels bubble. Given the positive impact identified in respect of communications, identity reflexivity and the effect that this had on trust relations holistically within the Brussels bubble, this study raises concern as to what is lost by Northern Irish politicians no longer routinely sharing the Brussels bubble space with each other and with Irish and UK politicians.

The study also found that another current and future concern is the impact that the loss of MEP roles will have specifically for the tone and practice of Northern Irish politics. Many of the politicians interviewed felt that the colocation of Northern Irish MEPs in Brussels had been important during the conflict years, reflecting that "we weren't going to solve Northern Ireland just by focusing on the narrow ground of Northern Ireland, but by being open to other ideas, and indeed other political language" (Interviewee 36). In this respect, this study found that time spent in the MEP role in Brussels was felt to offer valuable space and opportunity for immersion in a less confrontational, more consensus-driven style of politics. Further to this, some interviewees reflected that the post-Brexit loss of opportunity for current and future generations of Northern Irish politicians to become MEPs was lamentable. In particular it was felt that it removed their opportunity for engaging constructively with both UK and Irish politicians, and experiencing a different way of doing politics and building relationships with their Northern Irish political counterparts, beyond the constraints of the consociational political system at home.

This study also found a concern about the loss of something akin to generational institutional knowledge, as a combined outcome of the near simultaneous end of the MEP route for Northern Irish politicians and the sustained collapse of Stormont in 2017-2020, followed by the further ongoing collapse of the Northern Ireland Executive in 2022. Interviewees spoke about the way that, in combination, this had reduced the channels and spaces that this offered for Northern Irish politicians to interact, communicate and build resilient relationships. The collective absence of these different factors may well be to the disadvantage of enduring political stability of post-conflict Northern Ireland, particularly given the continuing domestic political instability and periods of protracted absence of Northern Ireland's own political institutions, which further exacerbates rather than ameliorates political polarization in Northern Ireland. In this respect the loss of the MEP role and Brussels bubble space, alongside the continuing instability and absence of Stormont as a space of political engagement carries the risk that contemporary and especially newer and younger politicians will come to lack the personal and professional exposure and the political opportunities to frame their own politics in a less insular way. As one interviewee put it, that doesn't help the wider political environment and conversation:

> You build trust by face-to-face meetings and getting to know people. If you don't meet people, how can you learn to trust them? You can't. The people who were around in that transitional period of pre-1998, and then post 1998 –they passed a lot of that stuff on to a new generation. We're now in danger of losing that collective wisdom and experience. A lot of the people who are coming through don't really have any memory of what it was

> like during the Troubles. Don't know how high the stakes are. Didn't learn from Seamus Mallon, Mark Durkan, didn't learn from Hume, Adams, McGuinness and Paisley - all of those people who had to walk the hard road. I worry that people might forget how difficult it was, and not slip back to out and out violence again, but just slip back to a different way of doing things that's much sharper, much more shrill. (Interviewee 49)

Set against a wider context of less amicable UK-Irish political and diplomatic relations, and increasing polarisation of the political divide in Northern Ireland in the wake of Brexit, the possibility of a move to an even more fractious and insular Northern Irish political scene does nothing to support Northern Irish politicians to continue to try to find ways to work together in upholding the commitments of the GFA. The findings of this study highlight that political and diplomatic figures in the Brussels bubble are conscious of having a multiplicity of layers of identity, or what has been referred to as "social identity complexity" (Xin et al., 2016, p428; Brewer & Pierce, 2005). A sense of Northern Irishness and/or British and/or Irishness, Europeanness, alongside the distinct sense of professional identity relating to their being a part of the Brussels bubble community, and also identity associated with the professional role that they fulfilled. Within the multilateral space of the Brussels bubble, interviewees wore their multiple different layers of identity, recognising that there were areas of overlap between some of these, and that this multiplicity of identity felt normal within the Brussels bubble multilateral environment. Xin et al. (2016) suggest that the ability to wear a multiplicity of identities can positively impact on trust between individuals because it "can reduce the importance of any one social identity for satisfying an individual's need for belonging and self-definition and the magnitude of ingroup–outgroup distinctions, which may reduce the likelihood of intergroup bias and influence positively intergroup perceptions and attitudes" (Xin et al., 2016, p428).

The idea of being able to wear more than one identity 'badge' is a particularly salient one in this study, reflecting in part the broader principle, hardwired into the GFA that people in Northern Ireland have the right to identify as British, Irish or both. This fed into a particular consciousness on the part of Northern Irish political and diplomatic figures in reflecting upon the importance and expression of identity both in respect of their own practice but also in relation to the broader socio-political Northern Irish context. There is growing literature that points to the issue of sovereignty as a source of post-Brexit divergence and a reflection of change in the state identities of Ireland, UK and Northern Ireland (Murphy, 2021; Menon & Wager, 2020; Gibbins, 2022), particularly in respect of the GFA and Northern Ireland's devolution creating a "post-sovereign political settlement" (Murphy, 2021). In the post-Brexit context of this study, this study found

that there is a recognition that aside from the relevance of identity at the interpersonal level between political and diplomatic figures, and the differing perspectives on sovereignty at the political level, there are pragmatic drivers for political and diplomatic engagement and dialogue. In particular, the fact that the Northern Ireland Protocol keeps Northern Ireland linked to the EU in a way that no longer applies for other parts of the UK. Furthermore, as noted by some interviewees, the EU is mindful that despite being part of a country that is now outside of the EU, the entire population of Northern Ireland has a right to EU citizenship via their right - enshrined in the Good Friday Agreement - to Irish passports. Brexit has muddied the water for the population of Northern Ireland for whom, under current arrangements, the possibility of dual nationality and identity creates an enduring line of connection to the EU, irrespective of the Brexit-related positive or negative relations amongst Irish, UK and Northern Irish political and diplomatic figures in the Brussels bubble, or the broader trust relations at the political level.

7.3 Demonstrating integrity-based trust: why does it matter so much in the Brussels bubble?

> "Trust is at an all-time low with the Brits. I know for a fact across Missions people have met with the Brits, only for the Brits to go back to the Commission and say 'Oh, we met with X country and they said Y' which they didn't say. And I think when people get burned like that they just go 'I'm not meeting these people again because there's no benefit to me here'. So yeah I would say the relationship is generally poor." (Interviewee 21)

Looking to the literature on trust (Mayer et al., 1995; Gillespie et al., 2021; Searle et al.; 2018), there are three core ways in which trust is commonly categorised: competence-based trust (sometimes referred to as ability-based trust), integrity based-trust, and benevolence-based trust, which serve different functions in interpersonal and interorganisational relations (Xu et al., 2016; Svare et al., 2020; Baer & Colquitt, 2018). Tomlinson and Langlinais (2021) simplify these respectively as referring to "situation-specific or task-based competence", "the consistency of the trustee's actions and the match of these actions with the trustor's values", and "caring and good intentions" (Tomlinson & Langlinais, 2021, p67). However, Janowicz-Panjaitan and Krishnan (2009, p252) point to evidence across the body of trust-related empirical studies that have shown that, within professional relationships and interorganisational contexts, competence-based and integrity-based trust are more salient, with benevolence being less of a consideration. This

emphasis on competence and integrity over benevolence was reflected in the findings of this study. Benevolence-based trust was also evident at times, particularly in examples of benevolent communication and interaction on the part of EU and Irish political and diplomatic actors with Northern Irish contacts in the Brussels bubble. However, the examples given of benevolent trust were always contingent upon prior evidence of integrity on the part of the recipient(s) of that benevolence-based trust, thereby demonstrating the primacy of integrity-based trust in this context as a feature of interpersonal trust relations in the Brussels bubble. There was a significant focus on the impact that approaches to communication and engagement at the operational and political levels had played in impacting on the integrity-related trust relationships at the interpersonal level. Although elements of competence-based trust such as technical skills, experience and reliability (Connelly et al., 2018, p919) were also mentioned by a number of interviewees, the elements of trust which were mentioned regularly and emphasised as being particularly important in the building and maintenance of trusting interpersonal relations within the Brussels bubble were the communication of aspects of integrity-based trust, concerning "motives, honesty and character" (Connelly et al., 2018, p919).

This focus on integrity-based trust amongst member state and regional political and diplomatic actors contributed to making the Brussels bubble a distinctive space in which a sense of interpersonal trust vulnerability was reduced. This came directly from the sense of being on the same big 'EU team', which built trust in as a normative expectation, taking out some of the vulnerability and risk in making a trusting "leap of faith" (Möllering, 2006). Of course, this dynamic changed for UK and Northern Irish political and diplomatic actors, post-Brexit, because they were no longer on the EU team. So vulnerability in extending and earning trust became a bigger risk, and demonstrating integrity became even more important in gaining and maintaining trust.

Many interviewees in this study spoke about trust as being built up incrementally, through layer upon layer of separate acts of trust-supporting communication and engagement work over a long period of time prior to Brexit. By contrast they emphasised that the process of trust being lost or destroyed in UK-Irish interpersonal relationships in the Brussels bubble happened much more quickly following the Brexit referendum. One interviewee (Interviewee 42) likened this to popping a balloon, as compared to the process of building trust which was more like the slowly forming layers of a growing onion. This is consistent with trust literature (Korsgaard, 2018, p20) that points to this slowly built, quickly broken understanding of trust. Additionally, interviewees emphasised that in situations where a contact did or said something particularly egregious, trust

broke entirely rather than gradually disintegrating. In exploring this further it was evident that people's experience was that once the trust within those relationships was compromised they were very hard to rebuild to being anything more that perfunctory professional cooperation. This is consistent with trust literature which points to the particular fragility of integrity-based trust in response to even a single or slight wrong (Connelly et al., 2018, p927) and highlights the deep and long-lasting implications of failure or scrutiny of integrity-based trust within an interpersonal or interorganisational relationship, as compared to competence-based trust:

> People are likely to consider a single integrity failure to be an indicator of a dishonest partner, but they do not consider a single competence failure to be an indicator of incompetence (Kim, Ferrin, Cooper, & Dirks, 2004). Moreover, people tend to generalize information about integrity across domains of a relationship, but information about a partner's competence is more likely to be domain specific (Connelly, Miller, & Devers, 2012). Whereas trust based on integrity implies a reduced threat of opportunism, competence-based trust does not. (Connelly et al., 2018, p921)

As such a loss of integrity-based trust impacts across the totality of the interpersonal relationship and raises a concern about potential opportunism. In the domain of international relations and politics so much rests on trusting that the other will not act opportunistically (Wheeler, 2018; Ruzicka & Keating, 2015). In the wider context and history of Northern Irish politics and the UK-Irish relationship, there are clear points in time when this evidently has and has not been the case, with direct consequences for UK-Irish relations and political stability on the ground in Northern Ireland. Indeed, the ability for the different sides to take a 'leap of faith' on the road to the GFA is well understood to have been underpinned by strong interpersonal relationships amongst leaders, who, at a personal level, trusted the integrity of the others round the table with them even if their perspectives and political interests were not (wholly) aligned (White, 2017; O'Kane, 2021; Spencer, 2015).

This study found that, for Irish and UK political and diplomatic figures in the Brussels bubble, their ability and willingness to maintain open communications and positive trusting relations was severely compromised during the period since the Brexit referendum, in the face of perceived lack of integrity at two distinct levels. At the interstate political level each side perceived that the other's government had acted in bad faith and demonstrated a lack of integrity at different points in the Brexit journey since the results of the Brexit referendum and pointed to specific examples of how this had impacted on the general operating environment in which interpersonal relations functioned at the practice level in the Brussels bubble. At the day-to-day working level, Irish

interviewees also pointed to instances of particular engagement or communication choices on the part of UK diplomats which they felt had lacked integrity, and that this had compromised their ability to trust them on a personal level. In combination, the effect of these two different levels of integrity-related trust violations was that the post-Brexit communications and engagement between UK and Irish diplomats in the Brussels bubble became much more cautious and reserved, and trust was adversely affected, particularly on the Irish side.

Connelly et al. (2018) conducted a meta-analysis of 150 empirical articles that collectively covered trust in 37,366 interinstitutional relationships in commercial business contexts, applying an analytic structural equation model to test the impact of different aspects of trust on interorganisational relationships in the commercial business context. Although the professional field under study is different to this one, Connelly et al. (2018) find that demonstrating integrity-based aspects of trust matters more for trust between organisations than developing competence-based trust, despite the broadly recognised importance of competence-based trust in impression management and trust-building within organisations (Connelly et al, 2018; Svare et al. 2020; Nienaber et al., 2018). Reimann et al. (2022, p1) also argue against the assumption that "competence breeds trust", in circumstances where communicative style and content decreases trust on grounds of integrity and benevolence. This is significant in the context of this study, supporting the importance of integrity-based trust in creating interpersonal trust between individuals in forming threads of interorganisational trust. By extension, given the multilevel nature of trust (Lumineau & Schilke, 2018; Gillespie et al., 2021), and the ability for the effects of trust to travel across these levels, or "trickle up and down" in the language used by trust scholars (Fulmer & Gelfand, 2012; Nienaber et al., 2023), it highlights the potential for damage to interorganisational trust when these interpersonal relationships are damaged by integrity-based trust violations. Given the indication of the significance of integrity-based trust in interpersonal and interorganisational level relationships and the wide-ranging repercussion of handling it badly, these findings suggest that for Irish, UK and Northern Irish political and diplomatic figures in the Brussels bubble, finding ways to demonstrate their integrity at the interpersonal level are now even more important. This is particularly important given that there are no longer the same routinised and constant EU-business requirements to work together anymore, so there are less opportunities for attempting to rebuild trust once it has been compromised.

A key vehicle for demonstrating integrity-based trust within the Brussels bubble is via the exchange of information. Information is considered to be the 'currency' that is passed between the different players in the system, and it is in this currency circulation and exchange process that

trust is extended and proven at the interpersonal level. Small insights or pieces of information of a useful, confidential or sensitive nature are shared, on the understanding that the receiver will act with integrity in that anything shared will be appropriately and sensitively handled, and that the source will not have their reputation damaged by being revealed as the source, nor will they be compromised by having that information used directly against them personally or against their organisation. It is a key means of reciprocating trust, although there are different tiers of 'acceptable' sharing, for example, amongst member states or between member states and third countries, with different purposes for sharing information to inform or influence the receiver. As one interviewee put it: "it's about being willing to share as much as you get back. I think the other element of that is, people will trust you with information, if you trust them with it. If you're always asking them to tell you confidential things, but they have nothing back, there's no basis for them to trust you." – (Interviewee 01).

This study found that Irish diplomats had lost faith in the integrity of the approach taken by both the UK government as a whole and by individual Brussels-based UK diplomats in securing and using information, and that this had caused a reduced willingness to engage on their part. Janowicz-Panjaitan and Krishnan point to evidence at both interpersonal and interorganisational levels that "when integrity-related trust is violated, even once or at low severity, the trustor is likely to assume that the violation is representative of the trustee's general character…[causing] an irreversible damage to trust" (Janowicz-Panjaitan & Krishnan, 2009, p259), with consequences for this willingness to further trust them. In looking to the literature on integrity-based interpersonal trust violations (Parent, 2023; Lewicki & Bunker 1996), "trust is more likely to be disrupted if the behaviour is perceived as personally determined instead of being situational in nature" (Parent, 2023, p95).

This study found that those in the Brussels bubble tend to feel that being further from the gaze and centre of power in home capitals means that they have more latitude in the way that they approach tasks and relationships, so there is more personal agency possible. Whilst this enables a more personal level of identification between individuals within the Brussels bubble, which equips political and diplomatic figures with individually tailored "knowledge about how to maintain each other's trust" (Parent, 2023, p95), it also carries the risk that interpersonal trust relations have the potential to fall further if the other party believes that a trust betrayal has been motivated at the individual level rather than at the organisational level. For UK diplomats a guarded hesitancy on the part of Irish contacts to engage because they've lost faith in the integrity of the individual diplomats they are dealing with on a personal level is relatively new to

them, given that pre-Brexit relations were largely constructive and open. It also causes operational difficulties at the practice level as they lose a vital link into the formal business of the EU and the ability to both access and feed in information in support of UK interests or concerns. A move to reduced-engagement or non-engagement impacts a key component of diplomacy, which is about keeping dialogue channels open, identifying where there is room for compromise and consensus building on problem areas, finding space for solutions and overcome issues, in a country's national interest. As one interviewee put it: "the absence of dialogue is the complete absence of understanding. Even if it doesn't solve the problem at the touchpoint of the relationship, at least it's better than no dialogue at all. Simply statements of position or command papers" (Interviewee 52). So the effect of this non-engagement or reduced engagement across multiple interorganisational interpersonal relationships is noteworthy. But more than that, it potentially translates into a weakened UK-Irish interorganisational relations structure as a whole within the Brussels bubble, with more systemic implications for the ability to move the relationship forward to a more trusting and stable footing.

These details of the problematic engagement picture within the Brussels bubble are, in part, the expression of the wider problems at the political level. At the top level, the challenges in respect of implementing the Northern Ireland Protocol remains a complex unresolved problem and a source of friction in the UK-EU political and diplomatic relationship to this day, which is evident in the fractious communications and interactions within the Brussels bubble even long after the UK's exit from the EU. In particular, this study found strong disbelief on the Irish and EU side at what many interviewees framed as a total lack of integrity and an extremely cavalier attitude on the part of the UK government in disrespecting agreed international treaties and the rule of law. On the other hand, UK interviewees felt that the EU had demonstrated a lack of integrity in prioritising Irish analysis of the impacts of Brexit and 'choosing their side', thereby disregarding the political complexity of the Northern Ireland situation. This study found that this ongoing tension and lack of resolution at the UK-EU level carried down the chain to both the UK-Ireland and domestic Northern Ireland levels in terms of the way that political and diplomatic actors in the Brussels bubble interact.

In the course of this study, many interviewees equated the relationship issues around the implementation of the Northern Ireland Protocol to a particularly messy and hostile divorce, in which each side calls upon their friends to show their allegiance and stand with them. In this process, Ireland was pulled over to the EU's side, setting up a narrative frame of Ireland versus the UK. This then got translated down to Nationalist vs Unionist at both community and political

level in Northern Ireland, with each side resenting and blaming the other for stepping away from the commitments to Ireland-UK neutrality as co-guarantors of the 1998 Good Friday Agreement. For the wider Northern Irish political landscape, the impact of the UK and Ireland now being explicitly in opposing camps meant that the principle of being able to be 'British or Irish or both' was being undermined at the political level, raising the political temperature and exacerbating the political polarisation on the ground in Northern Ireland.

The consequence of all of this for the day-to-day aspects of post-Brexit communication and trust within the Brussels bubble are two-fold. This study has found that political engagement from Belfast with the Brussels bubble as a whole has been piecemeal, patchy and lacking in coherence. This reflects the extensive periods of political disturbance and absence of the Northern Ireland Executive since 2017 when Stormont first collapsed in the wake of the cash for ash (McBride, 2019; Rice et al., 2023) scandal. This has left much of the engagement over the years since the Brexit referendum result at the party rather than Executive level, which has been very different across the parties. The DUP have focused their efforts on communication and engagement efforts on Westminster and have been unwilling to engage to any notable extent on almost any level in Brussels, as a demonstration of their total rejection of the Northern Ireland Protocol (Murphy & Evershed, 2020; Hayward, 2022). By contrast, this study found that Sinn Féin, along with a number of other political parties in Northern Ireland have been much more active in engaging with political and diplomatic actors on both the UK and Irish side, as a means of shoring up their points of engagement in the absence of Northern Irish MEPs and using the opportunity to drive home 'the other side of the picture' from the one which they felt was being represented loudly by the UK government on the behalf of the DUP. These findings are in line with prior literature (Evershed & Murphy, 2022; Kelly, 2023; Barnier, 2021) which has identified this split approach amongst Northern Irish political parties to communication and relationship building within the Brussels bubble.

Alongside the fragmented Northern Irish political approach, interviewees emphasised that, as with their colleagues back home, the Northern Irish civil servant cohort in Brussels have been left effectively navigating without a map or compass for long stretches of time, given the lack of political leadership and mandate in place during the lengthy periods of collapse and absence of the Northern Ireland Executive since 2017. To this end, Northern Irish civil servants have continued to communicate widely and effectively at the interpersonal level within the Brussels bubble, and pointed specifically to their recognition of the critical need to prove their trustworthiness and demonstrate integrity in their own practice, as a means of maintaining strong

professional ties now that they were outside of the official loop of EU business and networks. This study has found that the perception from Irish, UK and Northern Irish perspectives is that Northern Irish civil servants have successfully applied this integrity-driven approach in maintaining warm and constructive interpersonal trust relations with Irish political and diplomatic figures in the Brussels bubble. However, there was a sense that the domestic political context meant that much of this was working in a holding pattern, rather than being able to strategically drive things forward. Nonetheless the value of this focus on maintaining trusting relations reflects literature on the relationship between trust and integrity, which emphasises trust as a reciprocal process where perception on the part of the trustor (Mayer et al., 1995; Eberl et al. 2015) is as important as demonstration on the part of the trustee. In other words, this maintenance focus has supported an important basis of trust between Irish and Northern Irish cohorts in the Brussels bubble, and so was not a wasted effort on the part of the Northern Irish civil servants, even if they couldn't immediately maximise a more strategic advantage from it.

The importance of the success or failure of interpersonal trust building and maintenance efforts amongst UK, Irish and Northern Irish political and diplomatic figures in the Brussels bubble cannot be under-estimated in making efforts to repair relations at the interorganisational level. As Janowicz-Panjaitan and Krishnan (2009) observe, "one can speak of organizations trusting each other only because they are made up of, and managed by, individuals…it is not the organization itself, but rather the individuals who constitute it, that trust" (Janowicz-Panjaitan & Krishnan 2009, p247).

7.4 The post-Brexit challenges of maintaining trust reciprocity in the Brussels bubble

> "Both sides need to work to build up trust, and they have no alternative but to try to do that. But the world has changed very significantly, because the UK is no longer sharing the same objectives, respecting the same institutions, sitting around the same tables. I keep saying sitting around the tables but that's what it is, because you know you get to know everybody so well." (Interviewee 30)

This study acknowledges the wider body of work (Versloot, 2022; Linn, 2017) that raises the concern about the challenges to multilateralism in respect of rising global political, social and economic threats driving the politicisation and contestation within multilateral environments and

causing a vulnerability and weakening of trust within contemporary multilateralism and within the EU specifically. However, in contrast to this more generalised argued threat to, and decline of, multilateral trust within the literature, this study finds a more favourable scenario. In the case of the Ireland-UK-Northern Ireland political and diplomatic relationship, their pre-Brexit collective presence and efforts towards multilateral working within the Brussels bubble actually contributed to a deepening strength in communication and trust at the interpersonal and interorganisational level within Brussels. Before Brexit, Brussels was an intentional shared site of interaction on EU business, and although it wasn't contrived as an opportunity for interaction on the 'Northern Ireland problem', colocation of Irish, UK and Northern Irish political and diplomatic actors in the Brussels bubble also supported a secondary incidental contribution to broader North-South, East-West interaction and relationship building. Specifically, working in Brussels didn't compel people into working on UK-Ireland bilateral issues or domestic Northern Irish partisan political differences as a means of fixing problems. Instead, it provided a completely different shared business platform which supported relationship building in the round. This in turn made it easier to tackle problems, knowing the relationships already had the resilience to bounce back in recovering after any hard conversations. This greater trust between those political and diplomatic figures within the Brussels bubble was one strand of cooperation and relationship building that fed back into the national administrations alongside others, contributing to a trust dynamic at the interinstitutional and interstate levels that had steadily progressed over the years of joint EU membership.

The entire balance and tone of the relationship between Irish, UK and Northern Irish political and diplomatic figures in the Brussels bubble has changed with the post-Brexit move to non-member 'third country' status and all that entails for changed working relationships and lost shared formal business opportunities, compounded by ongoing challenges at the political level. However, this study found that the trust extended by Irish political and diplomatic figures to Northern Irish and UK political and diplomatic actors differed, with Irish interviewees generally pointing to more positive relations with Northern Irish contacts and expressing a greater natural inclination to engage and trust Northern Irish contacts than those on the UK side. Looking to relational signalling theory this can partly be attributed to communicative choices by those in the Brussels bubble, which impacted on the perception of them at an interpersonal level and affected the stability of the normative frame of that relationship. Both Northern Irish and UK political and diplomatic figures in Brussels were operating against a backdrop of political churn and instability in their respective systems in London and Belfast. However, on the Northern Irish side, political and diplomatic figures very consciously set out to preserve the relationship with Irish

counterparts. They were mindful of not overstepping the line in trying to access information, as well as being careful to maintain confidences in terms of sources and information accessed. This built their trusted status at the interpersonal level and meant people in those roles could continue to work effectively, even though at the governmental level the stability and trust was less secure, because of ongoing problems in respect of the Northern Ireland Protocol and the prolonged absence of the Northern Ireland Executive (2017-2020 and again 2022-ongoing).

Despite interpersonal efforts at relationship building and maintenance, there is considerable evidence within this study that Brexit – not just from the moment of exit in January 2020, but right from the decision of the June 2016 referendum – caused a profound change to, and significant adverse impact on, the opportunities available for Irish, UK and Northern Irish political and diplomatic figures in the Brussels bubble to interact and communicate with one another, with direct and indirect consequences for trust at the interpersonal level that then also fed into the broader trust environment at the interinstitutional and interstate level. There were a combination of structural and person-centred operational factors alongside broader political and ideological factors that played a part in this. There was also interplay between these different factors. For example, for UK diplomats and civil servants working in the Brussels bubble, this study demonstrates that the day-to-day reality during the EU-UK negotiations period was undoubtedly affected by political and ideological narratives and signalling being driven from the top in London, which permeated the operating environment in the Brussels bubble to the extent that the climate for trust was affected, making interpersonal communication work and trust-building efforts significantly more challenging.

At the political level, facilitating Brexit required the UK and EU to negotiate the settlement of the UK's exit from the EU, disentangling every aspect of UK legal, social and economic life that had become entwined with EU procedures, regulations and legislation over forty years of membership and agreeing the course of the future UK-EU relationship. This quickly went beyond the scope of technical discussions and became a highly politicised and publicised battle between the two sides, on a number of fronts. Scholars (Farrand & Farrand-Carrapico, 2021; Martill, 2022; Frennhoff Larsen & Khorana, 2020) have emphasised the significance of the opposing approaches and communicative style of the technocratic EU versus the UK's more populist Brexit approach, arguing that the difference in their underlying drivers and means of expression motivated actors on each side to "construct their identity in a way that seeks to legitimise its own political action, while in turn delegitimising that of its opponents" (Farrand & Farrand-Carrapico, 2021, p148). This delegitimization and divergence in values was expressed through contrasting communicative

styles and constructed identities which created an oppositional framing (Farrand & Farrand-Carrapico, 2021, p150) that made the ground for compromise and reconciliation very narrow. The findings from this present study show that this impacted not only upon trust within the UK-EU relationship, but also upon the operating environment and working relationships amongst Irish, UK, and Northern Irish political and diplomatic figures within the Brussels bubble.

This study indicates that - in respect of the pre-Brexit day-to-day interpersonal communication and relationship building actions amongst political and diplomatic figures in the Brussels bubble - the sense and enactment of shared values was pervasive. As such the UK's decision at the political level to step away from the project of European integration – and the sense of solidarity connected to that – fed into a reaction, which is evident in the changes to the communicative dynamic at both the political and operational levels. During the negotiations period in particular, the issue of the communicative intent on the UK government's part in respect of their (lack of) concern for prioritising the political and diplomatic relations had a direct impact in restricting the way in which UK political and diplomatic figures were able to interact in the Brussels bubble, in recognition of the fact that, as one interviewee noted, "we act under the political" (Interviewee 48). At the structural level, the UK's decision to exit the EU meant the extrication of UK and Northern Irish politicians, diplomats and civil servants from the formal business of the EU and the official fora in the Brussels bubble for this business. For UK civil servants and diplomats this happened incrementally up to the point of departure, with a withdrawal even prior to official exit from certain committees, with some of that withdrawal intended to send a deliberate political message to show that "we were being serious about our intention to walk away from the deal, should it not go to our satisfaction" (Interviewee 50). Interviewees recognised that this reduced their ability to maintain links with other member states' political and diplomatic figures within the Brussels bubble including Ireland. This has become more of an issue as time has passed because the pre-Brexit contacts with whom strong links had been forged had since moved on, as have many of the UK's own civil servants and diplomats.

This study found that the consequence of this disengagement is that UK civil servants and diplomats, especially new arrivals, are now having to work more creatively to get in the door, before they can even start to build relationships – something that one diplomat likened to 'cold calling', reflecting another diplomat's comments that future UK diplomats arriving in Brussels will increasingly lack the warm networks of contacts inherited from predecessors, and will not develop the experience and deep knowledge that comes with direct exposure to the inside of the system, so instead will have to come prepared with a different set of communication and

influencing skills, more akin to lobbying than diplomacy. Aligned to the structural changes following the UK's formal exit from the EU, interpersonal interactions with UK civil servants and diplomats are now also seen firmly through the asymmetric lens of transactive member-to-third country dynamics, rather than the more cooperative trust symmetry of member-to-member dynamics experienced pre-Brexit.

The concept of reciprocal trust is not "a distinct type of trust, but rather it is a dynamic process through which trust grows or diminishes" (Serva et al., 2005, p627) through "repeated cycles of trust and cooperative exchanges wherein trust emerges and builds from the balanced, voluntary exchange of resources" (Korsgaard, 2018, p15). It demonstrates "an active process of exchange of trust between parties" (Serva et al., 2005, p627) over time, that is not dependent on equivalence. The importance of the iterative emergence of reciprocity over time is particularly pertinent in the context of this study, and points to the pre-Brexit Brussels bubble space as offering Irish, UK and Northern Irish political and diplomatic figures a space in which to facilitate this reciprocal trust-building. Post-Brexit, this study found that whilst cooperation continues as needed on a transactive basis, reciprocity of trust has been compromised between UK and Irish political and diplomatic figures. This reflects the observation by trust scholars that "although trust can frequently lead to cooperative behaviour, trust is not a necessary condition for cooperation to occur, because cooperation does not necessarily put a party at risk. An employee could cooperate with and, indeed, even appear to act like he or she trusts another employee who he or she does not trust" (Mayer et al., 1995, p712).

There are two forms of trust reciprocity – direct and indirect. Whilst direct reciprocity is the positive or negative return of an act between two individuals (a pair or 'dyad'), indirect reciprocity is a chain reaction in which a positive or negative act performed by one person in a pair will trigger a corresponding positive or negative response act which is reciprocated back from a further person or even many people outside of that original pair, if the communicative conditions are conducive for spreading the message about that original trust act (Vanneste, 2016). Vanneste (2016) suggests that "because indirect reciprocity goes beyond a dyad, it can yield insight into the link between interpersonal and interorganisational trust", arguing that "indirect reciprocity helps transform interpersonal trust into interorganisational trust" (Vanneste, 2016, p8). As such Vanneste argues that interorganisational trust builds from indirect reciprocity between the actions, reactions and dispositions of individuals. This is a more person-oriented, action-driven and considered enabler of interinstitutional trust than the more general trust-institutionalising process. The latter effectively dislocates the interpersonal from the interorganisational, by taking

the trust commitments between individuals and turning them into a more abstract expression of trust which can then be "codified and over time become established and taken for granted organisational structures and routines" (Vanneste, 2016, p9).

In the post-Brexit Brussels bubble context of trust relations between Irish, UK and Northern Irish political and diplomatic figures, institutionalised trust offers little to no formal route by which UK and Northern Irish political and diplomatic figures can currently build trust forward from with Irish political and diplomatic actors. By contrast, indirect reciprocity feeds interinstitutional trust but is controlled by the actions of individuals. It can support the development of interorganisational trust "when individuals interact under conditions common to an interorganisational relationship but not necessarily conducive to trust building" (Vanneste, 2016, p29). As such, indirect reciprocity is a mechanism which arguably provides a potential open door for trust building efforts on the part of UK and Northern Irish political and diplomatic figures in the Brussels bubble, because of the distinctive conditions for continued informal communication and relationship building within the wider Brussels bubble. Vanneste points to the observed human trait that we are more inclined to "give more to others who themselves have given more to others" (Vanneste, 2016, p10), which he positions as being the essence of indirect reciprocity. The findings of this study point to the Northern Irish element of the Ireland-UK-Northern Ireland triangle being caught in the middle. This study identified both challenges and opportunities from this. Being surrounded by the guarded and fractious interpersonal relationships between the Irish and UK elements in the Brussels bubble required Northern Irish civil servants to sensitively navigate between the two, keeping warm relations and open channels of communication on both sides. But there are signs in these findings to indicate a positive willingness on both the Irish and UK sides to keep these links with the Northern Irish cohort in the Brussels bubble warm and open lines of communication with Northern Irish contacts.

Adler-Nissen (2016a) emphasises the centrality of communication in the work of diplomacy and underlines the importance of the reciprocity of both trust and communication and the need for diplomats to be able to transmit and also receive information in their role, such that "the job as a communicator is not just about reporting home or gathering intelligence, but also delivering the message and being aware of national interests and influencing foreign governments and publics through meetings, workshops, interviews to the local media, dinners, receptions, cultural events and parties" (Adler-Nissen, 2016a, p97). This quote also reflects the findings from this present study that the 'informal' work is a very significant part of the role. The informal work is an important avenue for another key aspect of interpersonal trust in international relations and

politics which is demonstrating trustworthiness by making and keeping promises. As Heimann and Kampf (2022) note, these promises "are often made privately and discreetly; thus, keeping them makes credibility first and foremost an interpersonal practice" (Heimann & Kampf, 2022, p8). In this study, political and diplomatic figures reflected on the Brussels bubble as having a 'mood' of its own, which they responded to as an influence upon the parameters and tone of their own engagement. Brussels-based interviewees spoke about a key part of their role being conveying the Brussels 'mood' back to home capitals, and then finding a way to balance that against domestic interests:

> There's an absolute political temperature in Brussels. There is an element in Brussels – particularly when shit hits the fan – of saying 'okay, we need to get this done!' and a national administration may come back with 'we don't like this small thing', and it's like 'no, now is not the time. You are going to burn so many bridges here'. You've got to weigh it up. If it's a huge national issue for you, well then regardless of the mood you stand your ground... Again, it's that physical shared space thing. There's a mood in the room, there's a mood in the city. (Interviewee 21).

This quote makes the point really clearly that amongst member states, there is a distinctive Brussels-based sense of a collective pulling together against adversity, where the benefits from the pursuit of specific national interests have to be carefully weighed against the potential damage from jeopardising your position as a trusted part of the broader multilateral 'team'. This echoes Lindsey's (2023) recognition of the paradox for diplomacy in that to work most effectively in the national interest requires diplomats to keep some degree of distance from their home capital. In particular, Lindsay suggests that "the diplomat who maintains a lockstep attachment to home will not enjoy the same trust and credibility or have the same ability to advance mutual interests" (Lindsey, 2023, p267). Additionally, whether consciously or not, the fact of being in the Brussels bubble and away from home politics does begin to influence and change the way that civil servants and diplomats frame their thinking and communicate on certain issues, in building trust within Brussels. It also highlights a finding that emerged from the study that, when away from home within the Brussels bubble space, there is some room for individual political and diplomatic figures to shape their own practice, in terms of their interactions and communicative approach.

Practices, as defined by Adler and Pouliot (2011) are "socially meaningful patterns of action, which, in being performed more or less competently, simultaneously embody, act out, and

possibly reify background knowledge and discourse in and on the material world" (Adler & Pouliot, 2011, p4).

The repetition and familiarity of often repeated practices offers reassurance through recognisability and predictability. This performativity of politics and diplomacy routinely uses communication as an intended means of sparking an interpretation and reaction from other politicians and diplomats in the first instance, and then beyond them, by the states and publics that they represent. Prior to Brexit, Irish, UK and Northern Irish political and diplomatic figures working in the Brussels bubble as the primary site of the EU were operating within a normative environment that prioritised collective endeavour and in which the everyday practice between them had come to be a highly ritualised embodied presentation of the values of cooperation, cohesion and consensus-building, all of which go to the heart of the EU's founding tenets. Davies (2022) suggests that performances of trust are designed to "reflect apparent shared values, the set of standards and beliefs that define group membership and give meaning to being an *insider"* (Davies, 2022, p11) and points to rituals – "repetitious, choreographed, and embodied process of performance, and the invocation of symbols to express these group meanings" (Davies, 2022, p11) – as the means by which these shared values and trust are made tangible and communicated. This is exemplified by the comment made by one interviewee about the importance of performativity of shared values and cooperation within the Brussels bubble within member state political and diplomatic circles:

> if you didn't believe in the project – the peace project, the diplomatic project – the really inspiring, completely novel attempt to practically work – day by day, through these meetings, these cups of coffee, these performative string quartets – if you didn't understand and value that, you wouldn't belong there. So you put in a huge amount of effort to make that work and you're all sort of aware that you're doing the business, but you're also doing this other really important task alongside. (Interviewee 03)

Jones and George (1998) state that these shared values "result in strong desires to cooperate, even at personal expense, which overcomes problems of shirking and free riding" (Jones & George, 1998, p539). But the nuanced relationship between performativity and actual absorption of shared values is prominent in the context of communication and trust building amongst Irish, UK and Northern Irish political and diplomatic figures in the Brussels bubble. The findings of this study do not support uniformity of shared values and priorities amongst Irish, UK and Northern Irish political and diplomatic figures – far from it. As one interviewee said in speaking about the former Northern Irish DUP MEP Ian Paisley, "Paisley loathed the EU. He was deeply Eurosceptic.

But he also had a willingness to use it for what he could get out of it" (Interviewee 40). Within this context, Paisley is just one example of the way in which political and diplomatic figures bring their political pragmatism and performativity to bear, in shaping their communications and interactions whilst within the Brussels bubble. Davies argues that in ritual-heavy political and diplomatic spaces, the intensity of the performance of this ritualised trust can "obscure but do not overturn evidence of distrust" (Davies, 2022, p11) in the wider interpersonal and interstate relationship beyond the immediate moment of performance. In the current post-Brexit context, this focus on performing shared values and cooperation has been lost. Brexit-related political narratives and performativity at the state level have frequently been used not to perform alignment and cooperation but to perform misalignment and disagreement. This study found that Irish, UK and Northern Irish political and diplomatic figures in the Brussels bubble are still in a period of adapting to this new performative landscape which accentuates rather than obscures distrust and, by necessity, frames their own practice and role expectations, as set by their home capitals.

There is also an important recognition by some scholars (Gambetta, 1988; Faizullaev, 2006; Bjola, 2013; Bjola & Kornprobst, 2013) of the role of 'friendship' in diplomacy, and this study found that amongst the Irish, UK and Northern Irish political and diplomatic cohort in the Brussels bubble, this played into interpersonal practice and trust. A number of interviewees made the distinction between their understanding of 'friends' over, for example, 'counterparts', 'contacts', or 'interlocutors', and emphasised that friendships across the Irish, UK and Northern Irish communities in the Brussels bubble were very much a part of the fabric of working practice pre-Brexit, but had been made more difficult since Brexit. In Wendt's (1999) work on the critical role of identity in international relations at the state level, he outlines three primary types of relationship in international relations: enmity, rivalry and friendship, which are differentiated by the way that the 'self' of one state identifies with the 'other' of the state that they are interacting with. Bjola and Kornprobst (2013) continue this relational conceptualization, by which "enmity is constituted by a sharp demarcation of Self versus Other. Friendship is about a strong positive identification of Self with Other. Rivalry is located in between" (Bjola & Kornprobst, 2014, p123). Within mainstream international relations scholarship, this framing of friendship is usually in recognition of a friendship at interstate level and between leaders (Wheeler, 2018), without simultaneously recognising that this is often underpinned by a network of myriad interpersonal relationships and friendships amongst political and diplomatic figures beneath them. However, this study has shown that there is an active concept of friendship at the interpersonal level amongst political and diplomatic figures below leader level. What is more, this study has found

that these friendships can be directly impacted by a weakening or loss of trust and friendship at the interstate level, but also that friendships at the interstate level can be cultivated from interpersonal friendships, when the political and diplomatic environment is conducive to such friendships.

The findings from this study demonstrate that, in the Ireland, UK, Northern Ireland relationship context, the colocation and common purpose of derived from EU membership within the Brussels bubble space allowed interpersonal trust and friendship to flourish. By contrast, the post-Brexit Brussels bubble no longer offers that same potential because the element of shared purpose has been removed from the equation and the potential for political and diplomatic figures in the Brussels bubble to build interpersonal relations is clouded by the weakened friendship and lack of trust at the interstate level. In this context it is much harder to build positive interpersonal working relations and friendships, and so the lack of trust and friendships at the interpersonal and interstate levels become interactive and mutually reinforcing. This is a hard cycle to break. It also shows trust to be an interactive process in which both sides play a part in changing and shaping trust, with an additional important impact from the context in which attempts at trust building and maintenance are made. This reflects work by Grimpe (2019) which argues that "patterns of contextualisation" are integral to the "creation and maintenance of a trustful relationship" in everyday interpersonal trust relations (Grimpe, 2019, p88). This contextualization is, according to Grimpe (2019), an essential means of "creating order and sense in an otherwise overwhelmingly complex and changeable reality" (Grimpe, 2019, p90). What she identifies is the role of "discursive, narrative sense-making" (Grimpe, 2019, p93), where the act of communication and engagement creates trust in situations where two players understand each other because of shared context which is constituted of language, signals and communicative acts which both sides understand through familiarity. The findings in this study support this understanding of shared context generating common communicative ground which in turn supports trust building, as evidenced in the consideration of pre-Brexit communications and trust. By extension it also backs up the concerns expressed by political and diplomatic figures about the post-Brexit ability to continue to build or rebuild trust amongst Irish, UK and Northern Irish political and diplomatic figures both in Brussels and in home capitals, given the increased divergence between the UK and Ireland on the grounds of sovereignty, regulatory alignment, multilateralism and the cooperative principles of the EU (Hayward, 2021; Cochrane, 2020; Martill and Staiger, 2018).

The collectivist EU approach to collaboration and cooperation was acknowledged by a number of interviewees in this study. It was also spoken about as having been a well-known source of

inspiration to Northern Irish politician John Hume – SDLP politician, Member of the European Parliament (MEP), and one of the key architects of the 1998 Good Friday Agreement. Hume was recognised by interviewees as having used the cooperative EU approach as a model for a way of working that generated "a dividend of trust [from which to] change the nature of political argument" (Interviewee 36). This is echoed in the literature, with McLoughlin (2009) pointing to John Hume as having "inculcated a strongly pro-European outlook within the party [SDLP]" and driven "the Europeanization of the Northern Ireland problem" (McLoughlin, 2009, p603). Related to this, a number of interviewees talked about the difficulties that Irish political and diplomatic actors in Brussels had in comprehending the appeal of walking away from the EU. One key aspect identified by interviewees as being at the heart of this was the fundamentally different ideological stances of the UK and Irish governments in respect of sovereignty and financial dependency. One interviewee used a comparative example of Belgium adopting the euro. The interviewee referred to [Belgian politician and first President of the European Council] Herman Van Rompuy's statement that prior to that Belgium was "sovereign – great – but we had no sovereignty", whereas after joining the euro they "had a seat at the table", were less vulnerable to rate changes by Germany's Bundesbank, and had an active vote and a voice in shaping the decisions (Interviewee 15). This divergence in the UK government's conception of (monetary) sovereignty compared to that by Ireland and the EU is significant for "post-sovereign" Northern Ireland, caught between the two, as reflected by Wright (2018) and Murphy's (2021) acknowledgement of the considerable relational, practical, and constitutional challenges for the implementation of Brexit.

This also links in to the UK-Ireland 'big brother, little brother' idea that came through in the findings of this study, with a number of interviewees speaking about the way that joining the EU and the adoption of the euro created more parity in the relationship by freeing Ireland from a vulnerability in being tied to sterling and the UK's financial markets, whilst also giving them a seat at one of the biggest tables in the world. They emphasised that this was crucial to Ireland's growth during their membership, but that it was also important in enabling the UK-Ireland relationship to become stronger, reframed on a more respectful equal footing. Interviewees spoke about the way that, over time a strong bond of trust developed through continuous demonstration and incremental gains in every day working relationships in Brussels that – within the context of EU business, within the Brussels bubble – Ireland and the UK were 'on the same side'. When the Brexit referendum result set the course for the UK's departure from the EU, interviewees in the Brussels bubble spoke of their reaction as having been broadly one of shock and sadness. Irish interviewees also spoke of the astonishment at the seeming lack of

consideration given to the importance of the UK-Ireland political and diplomatic relationship, and the consequences that Brexit brought with it.

In contrast to the everyday working relationship challenges between the UK and Irish political and diplomatic figures in the Brussels bubble, stemming from divergence at the political level in values and shared interests, this study found that Northern Irish interviewees had managed to retain relatively open channels of access and positive relationships with Irish contacts. Although restricted by their devolved status and the limitations that placed on their ability to act independently, and challenged by prolonged periods of working in the absence of a political mandate from Stormont during periods of collapse of the Northern Ireland Executive, this study found that Northern Irish political and diplomatic figures found the Brussels bubble to be a broadly receptive space for their engagement efforts. Political stasis on the domestic front left them relatively disempowered and with little fresh insight or informational 'currency' to feed into their relationships on a continuing basis, as a means of enacting trust and maintaining reciprocity. However, Northern Irish interviewees observed this as having prompted a sympathetically receptive human reaction at the interpersonal level on the part of Irish, EU and other member state and subregion contacts who felt that Northern Irish colleagues had been "thrust into the spotlight" (Interviewee 17) somewhat. So informal receptiveness to communication and relationship work was still there, despite this study also finding that in general, the formal points of contact and channels for political and diplomatic engagement have significantly decreased, as have informal opportunities for relationship building.

Much of this directly stems from the UK and Northern Ireland no longer being part of the normal working routines and structures associated with delivering the formal business of the EU at member state and subregion level. This has reduced the opportunities for Northern Irish and UK political and diplomatic figures to exchange information, influence and build trusting relationships. On the Northern Irish side, this in part reflects the absence and instability of a domestic political landscape over the past years. Notably, in parallel with the years since the Brexit referendum, the system in Northern Ireland has gone through three years of collapsed government, a government dealing with the crisis that was the covid pandemic, the socio-politically momentous May 2022 Assembly elections, and another protracted period of political limbo in the absence of the Executive since February 2022. As such, attention has been largely focused inward, and in the absence of a consensus centrally on how to build forward, those Northern Irish operators in the Brussels bubble were left with limited direction and political mandate. Although actors on the ground in Brussels did the best that they could on a day-to-day

basis, they recognised that a degree of political stasis has hampered the formulation and implementation of a strategic long-term plan for communication and engagement for them to work to. Lack of consensus is nothing new in the Northern Irish consociational system, in which the DUP and Sinn Féin have long been pitted against each other in diametric opposition. This "lack of corporacy" (Interviewee 06), was recognised as a challenge for Northern Irish political and diplomatic figures trying to communicate strategically, build trusting relations and maximise effectiveness in Brussels. It was directly attributed by interviewees to the long-term effects of the outworkings of the deeply polarised political system, which prevented a sense of common conceptualisation and purposefulness as a region, making it harder to build strategic external relations. This also ties in with the literature that indicates a disparity between the years of considerable inward investment in peacebuilding in Northern Ireland and the piecemeal, sometimes underwhelming progress with post-conflict social and economic regeneration, reconciliation and cohesion, as facilitators or markers of successfully embedded peace, in the light of often short-termist, disjointed and haphazard political engagement with the issues (Khan & Byrne, 2016; Buchanan, 2014; Buchanan, 2017) in Northern Ireland.

In addition, in the post-Brexit world, this study found that the adverse effects of this lack of consensus and direction coming from Belfast has been exacerbated by decreased UK influence and points of engagement in the Brussels bubble. In combination with the overall increased regulatory divergence between the UK and Northern Ireland as a result of the Northern Ireland Protocol, this study found that – despite the lack of consensus and strategic direction from Belfast – Northern Irish political and diplomatic figures are now recognising and responding to the need to proactively and effectively communicate, influence and engage with Irish and other contacts in the Brussels bubble, to an extent that was neither vitally essential or possible previously under the strictures of the EU and UK approaches to multilevel governance arrangements whilst they were part of the EU. However, the absence of a collective pulling together and problem-solving mentality at the governmental level in Northern Ireland will remain a significant and ongoing challenge for Northern Irish political and diplomatic figures engaging with UK and Irish contacts. The loss of the formal arenas and opportunities within the Brussels bubble space for constant, low-stakes, reciprocal communication and trust building further confounds the issue.

This study shows clearly that the oppositional and combative tone of the negotiations-era political narrative driven from London has left a deep and lasting legacy on the interpersonal operating environment within the Brussels bubble, where there is a sense that the UK has forsaken the relationship in deliberately prioritising delivery of the task in hand (Brexit). In this

respect the damaged trust environment in the Brussels bubble can be understood by looking to Six et al.'s (2010) application of relational signalling theory to suggest that:

> If individuals want to improve the level of trust in their work relations…[they] need to move from a predominant task-orientation to relationships, to an orientation that also focuses on the relationship…For trust building to be successful, attention to showing your own solidarity frame to others is as important as stimulating the solidarity frame in other individuals (Six et al., 2010, p307).

Whilst this may be true, the findings that emerged from the analysis of interviews conducted for this study indicate that in this context, the ability for political and diplomatic figures in the Brussels bubble to prioritise the relationship (over the task), emphasise their solidarity frame and stimulate the solidarity of others they are working with have all be undermined or even prevented entirely at points by broader political drivers or diplomatic red lines and the loss of formal business opportunities in the Brussels bubble.

Despite these challenges and the reduced formal avenues for communication and engagement post-Brexit, for the Northern Irish civil servant footprint in the Brussels bubble, this study points to possible opportunity in the face of challenges. Northern Irish civil servants remained connected into the subregional structures and committees right up to exit, recognising that every effort to build and strengthen relationships with counterparts within the Brussels bubble would help, post-exit, in keeping channels open for the accessing of information and influencing of friends and allies within the Brussels bubble in respect of policy and legislation that may be of relevance to Northern Ireland going forward. Whilst now outside of the formal business loop within the Brussels bubble, Northern Irish civil servants maintain a strong focus on informal engagement and relationship work, and have found that this has been broadly welcomed within the Brussels bubble. In particular, this study found that the communication channels and trust relations with Irish MEPs and diplomats were strong, and that there was a sense that there were enduring shared interests and issues of concern in respect of the implementation of the Northern Ireland Protocol which made continued engagement beneficial on both sides. Prior to Brexit, Northern Irish civil servants in the Brussels bubble had relatively less access and influence than their UK counterparts because they could only formally operate at the lesser 'EU region' level, and were only able to act within a limited capacity under the official umbrella structure of the UK Representation over the devolved regional representations in Brussels. However Northern Ireland is placed in a distinct position compared to the rest of the UK because of the implications for trade of the Northern Ireland Protocol and Windsor Framework, making it connected to elements

of formal business in this respect in ways that the rest of the UK is not. This 'special status' means that there are continuing areas of shared interest between the EU, Ireland and Northern Ireland. Although there is no formal mechanism for engagement within EU core business post-exit, these circumstances have made political and diplomatic figures representing Ireland and the EU institutions more positively receptive on a continuing basis to informal efforts at communication and engagement from the Northern Irish cohort in Brussels than those from their counterparts representing the UK government.

In this respect, it may be that over time Northern Irish civil servants in the Brussels bubble find themselves in a 'boundary spanner' role. Boundary spanners are "individuals able to reach across organizational borders to build relationships and interconnections to help better manage complex problems" (Burbach et al., 2023, p79). Despite the reduced opportunities for formal engagement, given the special status that Northern Ireland holds amongst the constituent parts of the UK, post-Brexit, and the enduring aspect of shared interests with Irish political and diplomatic figures in respect of the Northern Ireland Protocol, Northern Irish civil servants in the Brussels bubble are potentially well placed to contribute a tangible improvement to trust dynamics at the interpersonal and interorganisational level in the Brussels bubble, via a boundary spanning role which could facilitate positive effects of trust reciprocity. As discussed earlier in this chapter, the distinctiveness of the Brussels bubble as being a site of constant immersion and interaction away from the political and media gaze of home, and its nature as a space normatively inclined towards multilateral cooperation and consensus building may also support this. In particular, the colocation of Irish, UK and Northern Irish political and diplomatic figures in the Brussels bubbles has the potential to reduce the weight of conflicting pressures on those in boundary spanner roles (Perrone et al., 2003), which would allow political and diplomatic figures in Brussels more latitude to begin to rebuild trust than might be viable for their counterparts in home capitals who do not have the same naturally occurring opportunities for low-pressure relationship building and demonstrations of trust reciprocity across the divides. However, this study found that there is a widespread recognition that "you can't push communication ahead of the politics" (Interviewee 43), and there is still a lot of work that needs to be done at that level before Irish, UK and Northern Irish political and diplomatic figures on the ground in Brussels can really begin the hard work of trying to rebuild the almost taken-for-granted collective trust that was there pre-Brexit.

7.5 Conclusion

This chapter has presented a considered discussion of the core findings of this study, positioning them in respect of related studies in the field, and highlighting the greater understanding these findings support in respect of the first two research questions underpinning this study:

1. How do political and diplomatic figures perceive any changes to the communicative dynamic to have impacted on trust at a day-to-day working level?

2. What are the implications of changes in trust between these political and diplomatic figures for wider post-Brexit relations, at the interorganisational and interstate levels?

This study has identified a number of ways in which post-Brexit changes to the communicative dynamic between Irish, UK and Northern Irish political and diplomatic figures in the Brussels bubble have impacted upon trust, both in terms of the practice level and more broadly at the interorganisational and interstate level.

The findings also validate the focus given in this study to everyday political and diplomatic practice in the Brussels bubble as a means of better understanding the post-Brexit Irish-UK-Northern Irish communication and trust dynamic. This study provides a case-specific example of the way in which the everyday mundane communicative and interpersonal relationship building practices of political and diplomatic figures fit within a wider context, and build and shape trust relations which have the potential to impact at not only at the interpersonal level, but also at interorganisational and interstate level.

In addition to the two research questions mentioned above, there is a further final research question underpinning this study which has not been attended to within this chapter:

3. What are the implications of the findings of this study for theoretical development in political and diplomatic trust.

This research question is addressed separately in the following Chapter, in which a new theoretical model – the TCI model – is introduced. The TCI model has been developed out of the findings of this study, as a means of expressing the connectivity between trust, communication and identity in the context of this study. In the following chapter further consideration is given to the TCI model, and the broader implications of the findings of this study for theoretical development in political and diplomatic trust.

CHAPTER 8: A new theoretical bridge: the TCI model

8.1 Introduction

In looking at UK-Northern Ireland-Ireland political and diplomatic interpersonal relations, I was particularly interested in how these played out in Brussels, rather than Belfast, or indeed London or Dublin. An underlying driver in pursuing this focus was the recognition that the 'Brussels bubble' as a place and space (Sack, 1993; Gieryn, 2000; Akinwumi, 2005; Agnew & Duncan, 1989) provides a very different environment from home capitals in which UK, Ireland and Northern Ireland political and diplomatic figures act and interact. Busby (2013) describes the Brussels bubble as "a multinational and multilingual space, an intense environment with a distinct rhythm to life, where people come and go continuously but which feels like a small village where everyone seems to know each other and news travels fast" (Busby, 2013, p204). This is the perfect definition of the Brussels bubble, but it could equally well be applied to any other multilateral political and diplomatic bubble – for example, the United Nations headquarters in New York, or the World Health Organisation headquarters in Geneva. It was my own past professional experience of the Brussels bubble environment that made me question whether communication and trust dynamics would play out differently, as a result of the distinctiveness of operating in this space as compared to home capitals. My focus is specifically upon the Brussels bubble and my consideration of the importance of colocation within the Brussels bubble for identity, communication and trust dynamics amongst Irish, Northern Irish and UK political and diplomatic figures. However, this is situated within a broader expectation that there will be elements of generalisability and commonality in the way in which trust, communication and identity can influence, and be influenced by, the nature of multilateral political and diplomatic 'bubbles'.

In analysing the interviews, themes began to emerge and increasingly centred upon four key interlinked points of consideration. Firstly, in the context of Northern Ireland politics, identity goes to the heart of everything, whether overtly or covertly. Secondly, the colocation and interaction of UK, Irish and Northern Irish political and diplomatic figures within the Brussels bubble was distinctive. The very fact of Brussels as a place away from home capitals in which these political and diplomatic figures collectively operate and interact has significance. Thirdly, in the context of Brussels bubble day-to-day business, the components of trust and communication are fundamentally essential elements of relationship maintenance and building. And finally, the particular UK, Irish, and Northern Irish relationship dynamic as it plays out in the Brussels bubble, combined with the co-mingling of domestic and bilateral politics within a broader multilateral

political and diplomatic context also brought identity back into consideration as an important third factor alongside and feeding into communication and trust dynamics.

As previously outlined, in the iterative process of data collection and analysis I found a number of core themes related to trust, communication and identity, which all unfurled alongside a recognition of the significance of the Brussels bubble as a space:

- **Theme 1 (Brussels as shared space):** The magic of the mundane: routine, informal and low-risk relationship building
- **Theme 2 (Brussels as shared space):** Co-located multilateral and multilevel relationships away from home
- **Theme 3 (Brussels as 'neutral' space):** Perceptions and pragmatics about the value and need for 'neutral space'
- **Theme 4 (Brussels as 'neutral' space):** The switch from cooperative to oppositional dynamics and the impact on normative relationships
- **Theme 5 (Brussels as developmental space):** Performativity as a communicative mask or magnifier of trust
- **Theme 6 (Brussels as developmental space):** The role of time away: immersion, reflection and identity

In exploring these thematic elements in my own data as I moved iteratively between data collection, analysis and theoretical sensitisation, I recognised the potential to contribute to the theoretical field of trust in international politics and diplomacy by bringing together these aspects of trust, communication and identity. In looking to the work on Relational Signalling Theory (RST) by Lindenberg (2000), Six (2007) and Six et al. (2010), as well as work on the Communication Theory of Identity (CTI) (Hecht, 1993; Hecht & Phillips, 2021; Hecht & Choi, 2012), I felt that there was the potential space to develop a theoretical bridge between these two theories, which could provide a means of more fully accounting for and reflecting the findings emerging from my data.

Whilst description is a core "foundation of interpretation and theory development" (Gilgun, 2015, p743), description by itself is not enough. Staller (2015) suggests that one key technique for getting "past a simple, but premature, descriptive stopping point" (p734) in the move towards the development of theory is "capitalising on happy accidents and recognizing unexpected gifts" (p736). This is something that Staller (2015) recognises as a valuable developmental journey, albeit one that requires flexibility and adaptability on the part of the researcher. This chapter

reflects such a journey on my part, as I unpacked the nature of the communication and trust building dynamic amongst political and diplomatic figures. Even in taking a social constructivist approach, in which identity plays a recognised role in shaping the way in which we (co)construct and make sense of the world around us, my own unexpected gift from this process was the emergence of the overwhelming significance of the role of identity, whether overtly or covertly, in a lot of this. My attempts to express the importance of identity in this context, in relation to communication and trust ultimately led to the formulation of the new theoretical TCI model, introduced in this chapter as a distinctive contribution of this research to theory and knowledge in the field of trust research. I explain why I leant into the existing Communication Theory of Identity (CTI) and Relational Signalling Theory (RST) approaches, before introducing my own entirely new TCI model in development, which I created as a theoretical expression of my findings. I have developed the TCI model as a means of expressing my findings and linking these two separate elements of existing RST and CTI theory, both of which have value on their own standing and also important connectivity in the context of this research.

In this chapter I provide an outline of the key elements of the Communication Theory of Identity (CTI) and the theory of interpersonal trust-building based on Relational Signalling Theory (RST), and their pertinence to this research, but also the particular limitations and compromises inherent in the application of either one of these theoretical approaches in the context of this research. From this I build my explanation of the need for the TCI model as a more integrative and contextually driven theoretical bridge between the two. In taking a constructivist grounded theory approach, the TCI model was explicitly not developed in advance of my research with a view to testing the veracity of the model through my findings and analysis. Instead, it grew from the outcome of my findings and analysis, such that it communicates the essence of these findings. I draw on the three findings chapters and the subsequent discussion chapter to consider the proposed new TCI model as a means of further framing and understanding those findings. Finally, this chapter gives critical consideration to the value of the TCI model as an expression of the findings of this study, and considers the limitations, implications, and possible next steps in further developing, refining and validating the TCI model.

8.2 The TCI model as a new theoretical bridge

In his earliest work in beginning to consider the development of a Communication Theory of Identity (CTI), Hecht (1993) argued for a scholarly openness to layering multiple theories and

research methods, reasoning that "just because there are inconsistencies between theories…does not mean that the theories are not useful individually or cannot be combined in creative ways. Each realm is a useful but incomplete framework for understanding communication" (Hecht, 1993, p77). This was my jumping off point for beginning to rethink my own practice of constructivist grounded theory led research, and my related approach to theory development. It's in the name – grounded theory – that such an approach is intended to culminate in a theoretical output that is grounded in the data generated during the research process. But different types of grounded theory take a different perspective on what this theoretical output should look like. Drawing this out more specifically, McCall and Edwards (2021, p100) make the distinction between "Big T Theory" and "little t theory", noting that classic grounded theory lends itself more to Big T theory, in enabling the development of "generalizable theory that transcends time and context" (McCall & Edwards, 2021, p100), whilst constructivist grounded theory is better suited to little t theory generation, of a "subjective, contextualised" nature.

Constructivist grounded theory methodology emphasises an approach which produces "theory that sophisticatedly describes and provides an explanation for a process, action, or interaction situated within a particular time and context" (McCall & Edwards, 2021, p96). It is an interpretive approach to theory development which looks to understand rather than explain, with a focus on arriving at theories which "allow for indeterminacy rather than seek causality and give priority to showing patterns and connections rather than to linear reasoning" (Charmaz, 2006, p126). My own approach to theory development aligns with this conception of 'little t' subjective and contextualised theory, with a view to "not only generating theory, but also for examining and modifying existing theories" (McCall & Edwards, 2021, p100). The UK-Irish-Northern Irish political and diplomatic relations dynamic in the Brussels bubble is the exclusive analytical source underpinning my creation of the TCI model, making it context specific. However, there is possible potential for some elements of generalisability to be further drawn out in respect of the particular nature of political and diplomatic communication, interaction and trust-building behaviour in bubble contexts, not just in Brussels as a particular example of a bubble. With this in mind I created the new TCI model as a means of expressing the findings of my research, and showing the connectivity between the elements of trust, communication and identity by creating a theoretical bridge between two existing theories: Relational Signalling Theory in respect of trust (Lindenberg, 2000; Six, 2007; Six et al., 2010) and the Communication Theory of Identity (Hecht, 1993; Hecht & Phillips, 2021; Hecht & Choi, 2012). There now follows a detailed consideration of the scope, limitations and potential applications of these two particularly salient existing theories that informed my creation of the TCI model, before introducing the model itself.

Trust and Relational Signalling Theory

Signalling theory at the broader level asserts that in uncertain situations where information or communication is lacking though other routes, people look for signals – "observable, personal attributes that are believed to be linked to the sought-after unobservable characteristics" (Raaphorst & Van de Walle, 2020, p59). Signalling theory as it was originally conceived also worked on the assumption that those playing the "signalling game" do so in a calculative way, with players offering or looking for "costly signals" as verifiable signs of trustworthiness based on the view that "costly signals are observable attributes that are deemed too costly for an imposter to fake, but affordable for an honest individual" (Raaphorst & Van de Walle, 2020, p59). Driven by an interest in the workings of cooperation in contractual relationships, Lindenberg (2000) looked to relational signalling theory as a means of further exploring trust in that context. In particular, Lindenberg (2000) was concerned that theories of trust available at that point did not sufficiently address the questions of whether there could be different types of trust in that context, what might trigger them, and how they would function, as well as how they might interact with each other if more than one type of trust could be present simultaneously. This concern from Lindenberg (2000) about the oversimplistic representation of trust in practice is borne out by more recent work which explicitly illustrates the interactive, multilevel and multipurpose nature of trust (Möllering et al., 2021; Mozumder, 2018; Fulmer & Dirks, 2018). The work of Lindenberg (2000), Six (2005, 2007) and Six et al. (2010) also move forward from the original rationalist roots of signalling theory, creating a focus on relational signalling theory, which recognises the element of interaction and the role of the social and psychological drivers in relational signalling. In this respect, Six et al. (2010, p288) point to two core assumptions of relational signalling theory. The first of these is that behaviour is goal directed but susceptible to change because of competing goals and different hierarchies of priority amongst these goals. The second is that social context is a key frame, within which human behaviour is influenced, and it can change the way in which a person sees, concentrates on and commits to different priorities or objectives.

Looking at the impact of trust and mistrust on cooperation, Lindenberg (2000) emphasises the importance of behaviour in response to normative frames, in conveying "relational signals". These relational signals are a hybrid outcome, fusing relational communication which "pertains to the study of communication in relationships" with interpersonal communication, in which the focus is upon the social interaction amongst people (Horan & Bryant, 2019, p377). When working and interacting within a normative framework, considerations of appropriateness and "doing the

right thing" are central (Lindenberg, 2000; Scott, 2001; Wicks, 2001; Fulmer, 2018). But Lindenberg (2000) argues that normative frames are vulnerable in the face of competing frames, particularly the "gain frame", whereby people can be tempted to compromise normative relationships for opportunistic (individualistic or short term) gains. This is one of the reasons why trust takes time to be built (Lindenberg, 2000, p25; Wheeler, 2018, p37) but can be quickly wiped out (Currall & Epstein, 2003).

Whether the relational signals being sent are largely positive or negative impacts on whether the normative frame remains stable (and the signal-sender is trusted more) or becomes unstable (and the signal sender is trusted less). Relational signals and normative framing are intricately linked and their interaction directly feeds into the successfulness of cooperative relationship formation efforts, thereby either building or undermining cooperative relations. Lindenberg (2000, p25) asserts that this means that "when relational signals don't function properly, trust cannot develop or be maintained, no matter what the written contracts look like". This is an important perspective on trust development which raises the possibility and potential for distinction between organisational or interorganisational level parameters (at the institutional or 'contractual level') versus individual level reality (at the working relationship level). Lindenberg (2000, p29) asserts that in day-to-day relationships, "interest alignment" alone is not sufficient to build and maintain trust, but that this must be strengthened by the use of positive relational signals and "group processes (common rites and rituals and common conventions)" (Lindenberg, 2000, p29) that support the stabilisation of the normative frame and thereby create an environment conducive to trust building and maintenance. Six (2007, p 303) emphasises the importance of this normative frame as a driving force, guiding both individuals in a relationship to want to continue and grow the trust.

One key limitation of the Relational Signalling Theory approach in the context of this study relates to its conception as an interpersonal and intra-organisational theory. As such it doesn't account for the potentially greater complexities and challenges associated with creating trust between individuals from different organisations as is the case in the Brussels bubble between political and diplomatic figures from different organisations. Furthermore, because it was designed in consideration of only one organisational culture and normative frame, it also does not give consideration to interorganisational challenges in achieving frame resonance that might arise because of different organisational cultures, perspectives, priorities, and possible tensions between what individuals may want to do, versus what they are (organisationally) expected to do (Six, 2007, p304).

Work on Relational Signalling Theory to date has been developed in application within an intra-organisational context, which perhaps has less identity complexity than political and diplomatic interpersonal and interorganisational contexts. As such, there is a gap for this present research to fill in considering the interorganisational and interpersonal dimensions, and specifically the possibility that 'self' can be a composite of multiple different identity frames. For political and diplomatic figures, when they speak or act in a professional capacity, they are not just being themselves but they are an official representative, not only of their organisation but also on behalf of an entire political system or nation. It is a function of enactment, but one that becomes interwoven with the sense of self. As such, an individual in these roles may conceive of self and self-interest as being related to any one or multiple options from a long list including true (personal) self, organisational/departmental self-interest (which they represent), political party self-interest (which they may represent), government or national self-interest (which they represent). This complex layering of identity is an important underlying factor which feeds into normative frames of behaviour, communication and trust building. In acknowledging this, this present research looks to build on the existing work on Relational Signalling Theory in combination with Hecht's Communication Theory of Identity, which is discussed below, creating the opportunity for new theoretical insights in respect of trust, communication and identity in the context of political and diplomatic relations.

Communication Theory of Identity (CTI)

At the core of the Communication Theory of Identity (Hecht, 1993; Jung & Hecht, 2004; Hecht & Choi, 2012; Hecht & Phillips, 2021) is the premise that identity and communication are interwoven, such that "identity is inherently a communicative process and must be understood as a transaction in which messages are exchanged" (Hecht, 1993, p78) as a means of "identity enactment or performance" (Hecht & Phillips, 2021, p223). The Communication Theory of Identity suggests that there are four different identity frames – "personal, enacted, relational, and communal" (Hecht & Choi, 2012, p140) that can be recognised independently of each other, but which collectively link together to create the totality of a person's identity.

In the personal frame, the focus is on how an individual defines and labels themselves – friendly, career-driven, shy and so on (Hecht & Phillips, 2021, p223). The relational identity frame positions identity as counter-identity that is contextualised through knowledge of others – for example, seeing yourself as a natural leader not instinctively but as a reflection of the way that others

interact with you, ascribe that role to you and identify themselves relative to you. The Communication Theory of Identity suggests that "the personal and relational frames help us understand how we see ourselves and how others see us" (Hecht & Phillips, 2021, p224). Enacted identity comes from the ways in which we perform and express our identity to others, in conveying "who you are, or who you want someone to think you are" (Hecht & Phillips, 2021, p224). Communal identity is conceived of as a final overarching frame, which "articulates how society defines identity and identities" (Hecht & Phillips, 2021, p224) and in doing so looks beyond the individual, to look at identity as something held collectively, at the cultural and society level (Hecht & Phillips, 2021, p224). For example, the societal conception of what diplomacy is, which is staged at a societal level through convention, through media messaging, through public understanding, through educational routes and so on.

These four identity frames are "interpenetrative" (Hecht & Choi, 2012, p140), in that they are interactive, interconnected and exert influence upon each other. Furthermore, the Communication Theory of Identity presents the idea of the multiplicity of identity, in which there are "complex, fluid and multilayered" identity frames (Hecht & Phillips, 2021, p223), with different combinations of frames becoming more or less dominant and in different combinations at different times, depending on circumstances and context. The consideration of performativity of self and identity is not unique to the Communication Theory of Identity, with Mead's 1930s work on self and identity, together with Goffman's collective body of work on identity, interaction and social construction of the self, and Tajfel and Turner's work on social identity theory all acknowledged by Hecht and Choi (2012, p137) as notable examples of the literature from which the Communication Theory of Identity grew. However, the Communication Theory of Identity is distinctive in suggesting that communication is not just a product of identity but an element of identity in its own right, linked to Hecht's assertion that "not all messages are about identity, but identity is part of all messages" (Hecht, 1993, p79). Extending this argument, Hecht and Choi suggest that "communication helps build, sustain, and modify one's identity" (2012, p139). Where contradictions or tensions exist between the four different identity frames, an individual can experience an "identity gap" or an "identity conflict" (Hecht & Phillips, 2021, p225; Jung & Hecht, 2004, p267). In accordance with the interconnectivity of the elements of communication and identity as proposed in the Communication Theory of Identity, Jung and Hecht (2004, p268) suggest that "identity gaps are almost an inevitable result of communication and social relations", whilst also being simultaneously the direct cause of changes in communication, behaviour and relationships "as one attempts to resolve or minimise the gap" (Hecht & Phillips, 2021, p225).

In looking to apply a Communication Theory of Identity (CTI) approach to the specific circumstances of this research and the UK-Irish-Northern Irish political and diplomatic dynamic in the Brussels bubble, there are very evidently multiple different complex combinations running along the four lines of personal, relational, enacted and communal identity (Hecht & Choi, 2012, p140). Within these, there are significant points of challenge and tension which have been addressed in greater detail in the findings and discussion chapters. In response to these challenges and tensions, identity gaps and identity conflicts arise, creating further related challenges to interactions and communicative behaviour. My contention is that in looking at the issue of identity gaps and identity conflicts, the Communication Theory of Identity approach focuses predominantly on how these gaps and conflicts reveal themselves between the different identity layers for one individual. As such, the focus of the Communication Theory of Identity remains upon the impact that identity has upon how a person communicates, rather than going further to look at how, in communication and interaction, two or more individuals can collectively find themselves succeeding or struggling in crossing the divide between their respective combined identity frames. The Communication Theory of Identity also stops short of expanding the consideration to the adverse impact that these challenges to interactions and communicative behaviour can have on trust.

In the new TCI model which I propose below, these challenges to interactions and communication behaviour then create fracture points, whereby trust is damaged, and in a cyclical next step, further communication is damaged (either by changing the tone of the engagement and/or by reducing the volume and diversity of opportunities for it). I would suggest that there is also a counterpoint to this, whereby – broadly in the name of keeping channels open and maintaining the relationship–- individuals are intent on communicating in a way and to the extent that they can reach a point at which they find common ground in one or more of their personal, enacted, relational and communal identity layers. This is a stage at which there is a growth point, whereby drawing on identity cohesion and alignment serves to reinforce interpersonal trust and communication. This then creates its own cyclical next step whereby further communication is strengthened and extended, incrementally building trust and even more communicative engagement as a result. So the TCI model builds on from the Communication Theory of Identity, using the findings from my research to highlight the interconnectivity between not just trust and communication but also identity, and pointing to the permeable and porous nature of political and diplomatic relations in responding to these different elements. The TCI also emphasises the porous nature of Brussels as a bubble–- as a distinctive type of political and diplomatic space and place in which this relationship building occurs.

8.3 Building a bridge between trust, communication and identity: the TCI model

What has emerged from this present research is the interconnectivity between identity, trust and communication and the distinctive significance of the Brussels bubble as a place in the context of political, diplomatic and civil servant interaction in the UK-Ireland-Northern Ireland dynamic in Brussels, post-Brexit. Whilst the Relational Signalling Theory approach to trust has real strength as an interpersonal theory of trust building in organisational contexts, and emphasises the mutually reinforcing connection between "trust and action" (Six, 2007, p290) – through communication or other relational signals – it does not carry over adequately to the context of this research because it does not consider the role of identity in relational signals, nor acknowledge the challenges inherent in interorganisational interpersonal trust building in committing to and stabilising a co-constructed normative frame. The Communication Theory of Identity powerfully demonstrates the interconnectivity between communication and identity, but makes no steps towards demonstrating how these two elements can then interact with trust. In trying to bridge this gap, I have created the TCI model as a theoretical means of illuminating and underscoring the interconnectivity between trust, communication and identity in interpersonal interorganisational relationships between political and diplomatic figures, which reflects the significance of the distinctiveness of the Brussels bubble in this research context. What I am proposing is a TCI model of political and diplomatic interpersonal relationship building and maintenance, specifically pertaining to the UK-Ireland-Northern Ireland dynamic within the Brussels bubble. Although there is possible potential for further generalisability of the TCI model in respect of the nature of multilateral political and diplomatic bubbles, in expressing the outcomes of the findings and analysis from this particular study it is not intended as a grand, generalisable theory. Instead it offers a subjective, contextual (Charmaz, 2006) "little t" theoretical link (McCall & Edwards, 2021, p100) between two more overarching existing theories that, to return to Hecht's own words again, are "useful but incomplete" (Hecht, 1993, p77) in thinking about and better understanding the specific dynamic of post-Brexit UK-Irish-Northern Irish political and diplomatic trust relations in the Brussels bubble.

In the findings and discussion chapters I explore the key contextualised elements of trust, communication and identity emerging from my qualitative data. I point to the relevance of identity as a contributory factor, the interconnectivity between communication and identity, and the role of both communication and identity in developing and maintaining trust. Neither Relational Signalling Theory nor the Communication Theory of Identity fully address or express

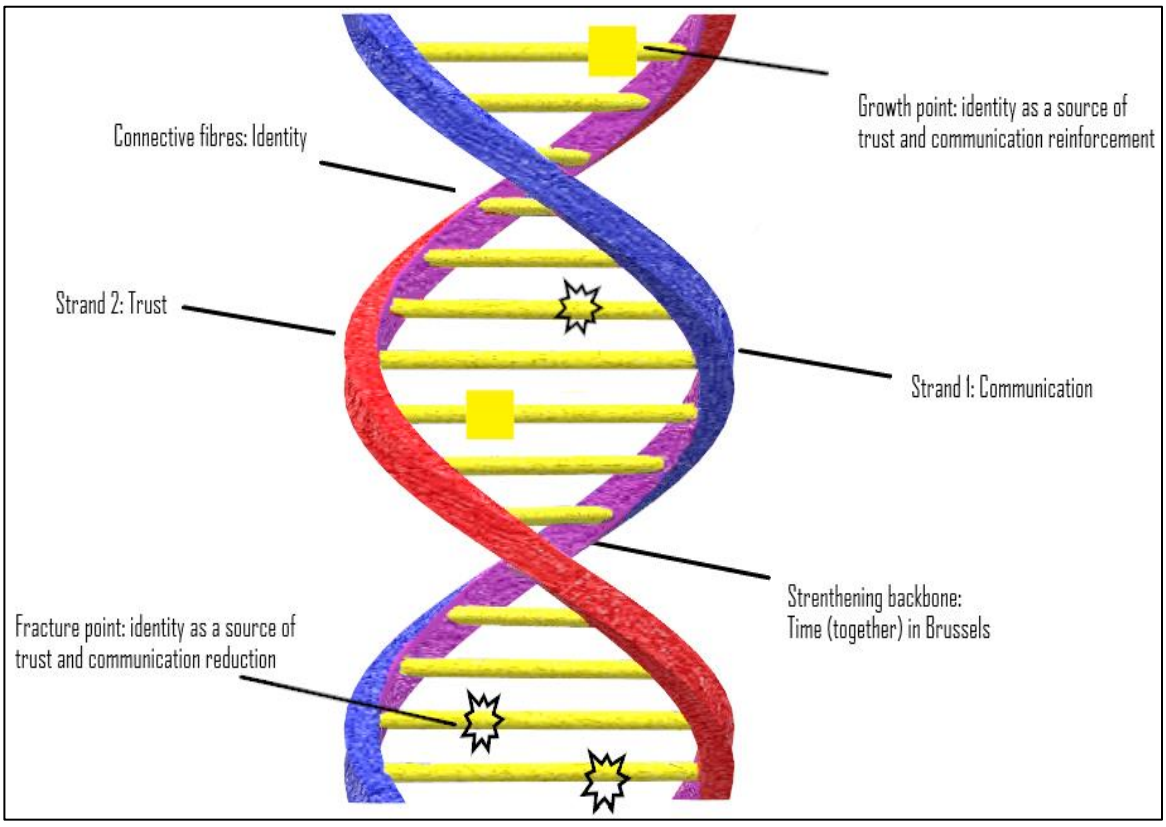
the complexity and interdependency of these three elements arising in my findings. As such, the TCI model is a means of expressing these findings, and in doing so provides a theoretical link between Relational Signalling Theory and the Communication Theory of Identity. The TCI model developed directly out of my findings and as such it provides a means of expressing and understanding my findings, rather than testing them.

The TCI model is visually presented in the form of a helix. It is intended as an illustrative heuristic of the interface found in this study between the key elements of trust, communication, and identity. It is not intended as a diagnostic tool, so it is not constrained in respect of directionality or causality of effects and relationships between the different levels. As an illustrative model it has been developed in relation to the interpersonal element of Irish-UK-Northern Irish political and diplomatic trust, communication and identity within the Brussels bubble. However, the TCI model has been designed to accommodate the degree of permeability between interpersonal, organisational and state levels of trust, communication and identity that is the lived reality of practice for political and diplomatic actors.

As visualised in Figure 2 below, trust and communication are conceptualised as two separate strands of a helix which are mutually reinforced by a strengthening backbone – time spent together in Brussels by UK, Irish and Northern Irish political and diplomatic figures. The two strands of the helix are then bound together by connective fibres. Identity is a key component of these connective fibres. Identity issues can either act as growth points which reinforce and improve the stability of the helix in the TCI model or create fracture points which undermine and break it apart. Different and multiple aspects of identity can play out at different points along the length of the TCI model, creating a complex interactive, moving web of connectivity between communication and trust amongst these politicians, civil servants and diplomats.

Consideration is given to the limitations, generalisability, and further development of the TCI model later in the chapter.

Figure 2: The TCI model



8.4 The TCI model as a means of framing and understanding the findings of this study

The findings of this study have demonstrated that none of the elements of trust, communication and identity are static – each is changeable and responsive over time to a variety of factors and contextual circumstances. In the context of work at the practice level amongst Irish, UK and Northern Irish political and diplomatic figures in the Brussels bubble they are all also relational – trust, communication and identity are not things that are formed and held in isolation by one person, but constructed and co-constructed through interaction and engagement with others, both within the Brussels bubble and beyond. The shift in the pre- to post-Brexit normative expectations and working practices for collocated Irish, UK and Northern Irish political and diplomatic figures in the Brussels bubble has impacted their working practices in respect of communication and trust building. It has required a conscious and unconscious reframing of their respective relational and enacted identities in their roles. This perhaps reflects Shannon and Kowert's (2011, p221) proposition that identities might be seen "as a special case of norms: a set of expectations or social prescriptions for how to be a certain kind of agent or how to behave as a

certain kind of agent [and that] conversely, norms (as social prescriptions) might also be seen as both constituted and regulated by identity".

In the TCI model, trust and communication are conceptualised as two separate but interactive strands of a helix which are mutually reinforced by time spent together in Brussels by UK, Irish and Northern Irish political and diplomatic figures. The two strands of the helix are bound together by connective fibres. Identity is a key component of these connective fibres. Different and multiple aspects of identity can play out at different points along the parallel strands of communication and trust in political and diplomatic interpersonal relations. These can either act as growth points which reinforce and improve the stability of the trust-communication connection within the helix in the TCI model or create fracture points which undermine and potentially break it apart. In representing this, the TCI model envisions a complex interactive, dynamic web of connectivity between identity, communication and trust amongst political and diplomatic figures in the Brussels bubble.

When interpersonal relations are strong and circumstances support interpersonal relationship building, there is the potential for communication and trust to grow and continue in parallel with each other, and positive identity related factors, identity cohesion and/or identity alignment support this. Individuals put conscious effort into communication and engagement work which supports trust-building, and having that extra trust in each other supports the willingness to create more points of connection on which to communicate, making trust and communication a self-reinforcing positive spiral. In this study this is evident in the extensive examples provided from the pre-Brexit era of time spent building trust through aspects of informal and formal communication work. For example, bilateral coffee meetings on issues of shared interest to find an agreeable approach, using the space within the margins of official EU committees and meetings to work through a particular policy problem and find an acceptable solution, spending many hours each week together on committee work during which there is a constant reciprocal communicative signalling of competence- and integrity-based trust and trustworthiness, attending policy launch events and other semi-informal networking opportunities as a means of getting to know a wide mix of people from across the EU member state and sub-region committee.

If communication and engagement work begins to take a more hostile or combative turn, it can undermine trust, particularly if there are also reduced opportunities for relationship building work. This in turn compromises the quality, flow or purpose of communication, and starts to widen the gap between the two elements of communication and trust. In this study the hostile

oppositional UK-EU negotiation narratives set the tone for a low trust environment within the Brussels bubble between UK and Irish political and diplomatic figures. This created mutual wariness and reduced the willingness to communicate and engage in both formal and informal capacities, which gave less opportunities for maintaining or building trust at the interpersonal level. Where there are aspects of identity which act to reduce trust and/or communication further, these create fracture points. These fracture points can further weaken the ties between communication and trust, or even cause communication and or trust to stop completely, thereby breaking the helix. In this study this was notable in respect of the reaction of certain Irish and Northern Irish political and diplomatic figures to the politicisation of the Brussels bubble and the apparent "lock, stock and barrel absorption of the political positioning" (Interviewee 11) by UK diplomats. This caused a reduction in both communication and trust, with a sense that there was little point trying to do any meaningful relationship building because if UK diplomats, even in private, were only able or willing to performatively deliver the official position rather than looking to work together to find space for compromise and understanding, there was little purpose or value in interpersonal communication and trust building efforts.

By contrast, where there are reinforcing identity factors, these can act as ties, holding the two elements of trust and communication together, preventing them pulling apart entirely in challenging situations, and providing the possibility of some common ground for rebuilding trust and communication from. In this study it was evident that although Northern Ireland is a part of the UK, its devolved status and distance from the handling of the Brexit negotiations meant that for Northern Irish civil servants in the Brussels bubble, their 'shared challenges' relational identification in respect of what Brexit potentially meant for a border on the island of Ireland provided a point of mutual interest which enabled them to maintain positive informal communications and trust with Irish political and diplomatic counterparts, despite the loss of formal communication channels and the fact of it being a hugely sensitive and divisive issue at the political level. Northern Irish civil servants built on this by demonstrating their integrity in handling any information or communications that did come to them via Irish political and diplomatic figures. In this way they used their communicative approach to demonstrate that "there was never any need not to trust us…we hadn't given them a reason for us to lose that" (Interviewee 01).

For political and diplomatic figures within the Brussels bubble prior to Brexit, the fact of being together in Brussels provided reinforcement of trust and communication amongst Irish, UK and Northern Irish political and diplomatic figures, as well as generating reinforcing identity factors

distinctive to their Brussels bubble experience. Prior to Brexit, the qualities of the Brussels bubble as a shared space, a 'politically neutral' space (in the Northern Irish context), and a developmental space provided insulation against the wider political context and fostered a climate conducive to communication and trust. The findings of this study emphasise the relational distinctiveness of the colocation of Irish, UK and Northern Irish political and diplomatic figures within the Brussels bubble space, and the impact that this had on the different aspects of identity, communication and trust. The colocation within the multilateral Brussels bubble operating environment supported identity reflexivity and reframing, and provided common interests in respect of the complex structure of committees and subcommittees, creating a dense fabric of activity, communication and engagement required in supporting routine EU business. This provided a constant, stable base for routine, low-stakes communication on a regular basis, and provided a continual stream of formal and informal opportunities for getting to know one another and incrementally building communication and trust through repeated reciprocal efforts to demonstrate both competence and integrity. Opportunities for building communication and trust were easy to come by, and fed positively into each other, making better relationships over all at both interpersonal and interorganisational levels.

By being together in the Brussels bubble, this study found that prior to Brexit, Irish, UK and Northern Irish political and diplomatic figures developed a sense of shared identity, on different levels. Firstly, a shared identity as being 'thrown together', away from home and together as part of the wider Brussels bubble community – distinctive and different from their separate home capital working communities and practices. Related to this it was significant that the Brussels bubble was a site of continual colocation, in which the intentional focus was upon EU business as a shared point of engagement and focus, with no intentional focus on constitutional issues, 'the Northern Ireland problem' or the UK-Irish relationship. This created an overall environment in which work broadly in relation to conflicting interests and identity differences was put to one side and instead work broadly in relation to shared interests and identity commonalities became the focus. Secondly, within their day-to-day practice, Irish, UK and Northern Irish political and diplomatic figures developed an identification with their counterparts as discrete communities in relation to their different committee or policy portfolio related responsibilities – a shared focus which gave a sense of identity as part of a collective effort on a specific common work front, often with closer subgroups and alliances within the overall group. Finally, there was an element of shared identity derived from working in member state and subregion roles in the Brussels bubble which were a direct manifestation of the common commitment from their respective national interests to the work and values of the EU, even whilst acknowledging the variable perspectives,

priorities and commitments from Irish, UK and Northern Irish governments to different aspects of the strategic and operational focus of the EU. These identity factors had reinforcing qualities, enhancing reciprocity of both trust and communication between political and diplomatic figures in the Brussels bubble, contributing to a more positive trust environment overall.

Since Brexit, this study found that despite the continuing colocation of Irish, UK and Northern Irish political and diplomatic figures in the Brussels bubble, opportunities for and receptiveness to communication and trust-building work have changed or been lost, some previously shared reinforcing identity factors have been lost, and discordant identity factors have grown. One key impact of the loss or divergence of shared identification is that for Irish, UK and Northern Irish political and diplomatic figures and their respective governments, the Brussels bubble is no longer seen as a 'politically neutral space' in the Northern Ireland context. Instead, it has become a highly politicised site of contestation as the challenges with Brexit and the implementation of the Northern Ireland Protocol have continued to feed polarised political narratives within Northern Ireland and impact on the wider UK-EU and UK-Ireland relations. The findings from this study show that there has been a severe weakening of trust in some relations, which has caused a withdrawal from communications and engagement, which in turn has reduced the opportunities for growing understanding and repairing trust, thus making trust and communication a self-destructive negative spiral.

The loss of reinforcing identity factors previously derived from shared membership and common purpose at the day-to-day practice and strategic level, combined with the emergence or growth of discordant identity factors in relation to the new member/non-member dynamic and the diverging values in respect of sovereignty that underpinned the UK's drive to exit the EU has had a destructive effect on UK-Irish communication and trust relations in particular, at the practice level. The findings from this study support Anstee's (2011) suggestion that "contestation and defection from group norms have a negative effect by distancing the actor from the social identity, both in terms of self-perception and the perception of others" (Anstee, 2011, p77) and in considering this in relation to the TCI model, it is clear that for UK and Irish political and diplomatic figures in the Brussels bubble, identity has become an aggravating factor rather than ameliorating factor.

By contrast, this study found that Northern Irish political and diplomatic figures – civil servants in particular – in the Brussels bubble have lost the formal routines for communication and trust-building work, in common with their UK counterparts, but are distinctive in that they have nevertheless managed to retain positive, open communication channels and trust relations with

both UK and Irish political and diplomatic figures. It was evident from the findings of this study that identity factors played a contributory role in this, in providing a continuing shared basis for building communication and trust on. On the UK side, the connection came via the continuing formal governance arrangements and identification of Northern Irish political and diplomatic figures as sitting under the overarching umbrella of the collective UK, as one of its constituent devolved parts. On the Irish side, the common policy, administration and implementation implications of the Northern Ireland Protocol provided an element of common purpose, and incentivised communication and trust-building, as a means of accessing information and providing analysis which supports Northern Ireland's interests and needs, within EU formal business circles, despite Northern Irish civil servants no longer having a formal place in these matters either via their own work at subregional level or via their UK counterparts at member state level. Despite operational and political challenges in relation to the continuing periods of political instability and absence at the domestic level in Northern Ireland, by recognising and capitalising on common identity factors in relation to common interests, Northern Irish civil servants have walked a careful line in making the most of their position between Ireland as member state and the UK as non-member state.

In using the TCI model to further understand the findings from this study it is evident that there is not only an interaction between interpersonal communication and trust, but that identity factors can play a role in either strengthening or weakening the points of connection between trust and communication as a connected spiral. In consequence of this impact from identity factors, it is apparent that trust and communication can either act as a self-reinforcing positive spiral, or can move into a destructive negative spiral that risks being weakened or pulled apart completely.

This applied contextualisation of the TCI model to a set of political and diplomatic relations that have undergone a considerable change in response to the UK's exit from the EU shows the importance of the complex interplay between communication, trust and identity in contributing to the shaping of these interpersonal relations and day-to-day working practices amongst UK, Irish and Northern Irish political and diplomatic figures within the Brussels bubble.

CHAPTER 9: Conclusion

9.1 Reflections, limitations, and contribution to knowledge

It is worth acknowledging that in qualitative research there is rarely if ever only one 'right' way to approach a given research question, with myriad possibilities, determined by variable possible ontological, epistemological and paradigmatic combinations, as well as a multitude of reactive or circumstance-driven decisions on research methods regarding preparation, data collection and analysis. In conducting this study, I was grateful for this methodological flexibility as I navigated through the evolving political and diplomatic tensions and implementation challenges around Brexit and the Northern Ireland Protocol, whilst also adapting to living and working during the Covid-19 pandemic, with all of the varied and unexpected challenges that created.

This study was originally conceived as an elite-interview study, supplemented with an ethnographic element. Unfortunately, even prior to submitting plans for ethical approval I had to make the tough choice to forego the ethnographic component because of the uncertainty around the viability of such an approach during pandemic conditions, given the consequences for working practices and travel restrictions. In seeking ethical approval for the study, I committed to the elite interviewing method because, whilst I recognised that the pandemic might cause some enduring challenges to access, I was struck by the pertinence of Lilleker's (2003) comment that:

> much of what occurs in politics is 'off-stage' and is either unrecorded or it is locked away under a 30 or 50-year rule and therefore inaccessible. Thus making contact with those within the political process is often the only way of uncovering details about your area of research. (Lilleker, 2003, p213)

Despite the challenges, elite interviewing remained an extremely effective means of gathering rich, insightful answers to the questions at the heart of this study. Nevertheless, gaining access to potential elite interviewees in dispersed locations whilst pandemic-imposed travel restrictions and remote working were in place went beyond the usual recognised challenges in accessing elite interviewees (Bakkalbasioglu, 2020, p688). This was exacerbated by pandemic-imposed limitations preventing informal introductory and rapport-building face-to-face pre-meetings with elites or their "gatekeepers" (Harvey, 2010). Zoom interviews had the benefit of enabling scheduling flexibility, without the logistical headaches that arise from travelling to interviews in different locations – in this case different countries. However, a number of the interviewees mentioned – in the context of their working practices – the not insignificant pandemic challenges of 'zoom fatigue' and the difficulties in establishing mutual trust and rapport through the screen. I

was very conscious that these same challenges applied to my interviews. As travel restrictions began to lift and workplace practices began to revert to pre-pandemic norms, I extended the data collection period of the study to make use of networking events and introductory meetings for securing interviews. This would undoubtedly have increased access and acceptance of interviews, if it had been possible from the start of the data collection period.

Another significant issue was the challenge of studying these elite dynamics in the context of Brexit, which remained a live issue throughout and beyond my interview period, with the diplomatic and political temperature remaining high around the implementation of the Northern Ireland Protocol and the subsequent Windsor Framework. As Lancaster (2017) acknowledges, this kind of contemporaneous qualitative analysis is affected by the amplification of sensitivities and complexities, but can bring tangible benefits in enabling narratives to emerge, particularly "when the purpose of the research is to study dynamics, contestation and multiple perspectives, rather than trying to document an 'official' account of events" (Lancaster, 2017, p94). I would agree with this assessment of the benefits of conducting elite interviews in this context, but as a new researcher with no existing contacts or reputation to lean on in establishing rapport with potential interviewees it did increase the challenges around securing trust and gaining access in this community. I ultimately secured a strong number of interviews with very well-placed interviewees, which provided considerable rich data to inform robust findings and analysis in this study. However, I also got a lot of rejections along the way, and whilst completing and analysing any more interviews may have been unfeasible within the time available for the study, it would undoubtedly have further enriched the data and the clarity of the picture that emerged from the collective body of interviews.

There are two primary contributions that this study makes in exploring the changed post-Brexit communication and trust amongst Irish, UK and Northern Irish political and diplomatic figures in the Brussels bubble. Firstly, this study offers an enhanced and nuanced understanding of the specific Brussels bubble communication and engagement context for trust building and maintenance, and the wider implications of the change as part of Northern Ireland's wider political landscape and North-South, East-West relations required in support of the commitments to the Good Friday 1998 Agreement. By taking a focus which drew directly on the views and experiences of political and diplomatic figures involved in the day-to-day work and working relations in the Brussels bubble, this study has gone beneath the media messaging and governmental narratives to understand what has changed, and the consequences of that change, looking forward.

Secondly, this study puts forward an entirely new theoretical model which has been constructed to provide a means of better understanding the link between communication, identity and trust. The TCI model was constructed in response to the data which emerged from the interviews conducted with Irish, UK and Northern Irish political and diplomatic figures in the Brussels bubble for this study. The live post-Brexit political sensitivity of the issues around the future EU-UK relationship, the Northern Ireland Protocol and Windsor Framework, combined with the domestic sensitivities around the polarised and politically volatile Northern Ireland context post-Brexit proved a potent combination in allowing issues in respect of communication, trust and identity to emerge from the data drawn from interviews. As such it is a grounded theory, which at this stage has limited application in that it is context specific, developed in direct relation to the trust dynamics between Irish, UK and Northern Irish political and diplomatic figures in the Brussels bubble. It provides an initial theoretical lens for better understanding the way in which political and diplomatic relations work in one particular 'bubble environment'.

There is more work to do in understanding whether this model has applicability only in respect of this specific combination of political and diplomatic figures specifically within the Brussels bubble as a singular 'case study', or whether the same model can be applied or refined in considering other political and diplomatic relationships and also other 'bubble environments'. If applied in considering other political and diplomatic relations in other bubble contexts and shown to hold broadly true for these other case studies, then there is potential to begin to refine and present the TCI model for more generalisable application, in supporting the formulation of some core principles to guide a more insight-driven, strategically managed top-down approach to working cultures and practice improvements in respect of trust-building and maintenance in multilateral bubble environments. In keeping with the principles of constructivist grounded theory, this study took a socially constructivist practice- and person-centred approach, which used subjective lived experience of trust and communication to build a theoretical model of trust, communication and identity. So another way to further refine and test the generalisability of the TCI model may be to consider flipping the process to a positivist analytic process, using the model to derive and test a number of hypotheses about the measurable inter-relation between trust, communication and identity in this context and more broadly.

In some ways Brexit can be framed as political history now, given that the referendum results were over seven years ago and the UK's official exit was already almost four years ago. However, for political and diplomatic figures working day-to-day in Brussels the process of adapting to the post-Brexit realities of relationship building and management remains a live and very important

one, as they learn how to adapt to and make the best of this new post-Brexit normal. It is integrally linked to their ability to work in ways which make their day-to-day job easier to do and maximise benefit in their national interest, whilst extending, rebuilding and strengthening their own network of interpersonal trust relations. There is the potential for those working in the Brussels bubble to play a part in changing the quality of the dialogue at the domestic level in Northern Ireland. Additionally, it is possible for these political and diplomatic figures in Brussels to play a role - alongside others in home capitals - in reframing and embedding a new understanding and future relationship between Ireland and the UK, with all the consequences that has for the political stability of Northern Ireland. In light of this, a limitation of this study is that there is not yet a completed picture to analyse and easily extract the answer from, because the picture is still evolving. As such some of the perspectives and findings that emerged from analysis of interviews conducted during this study may already have become dated and been surpassed by new changes, challenges and opportunities at the practice level in the Brussels bubble, and also at the higher political level. Nevertheless, the live nature of this subject creates the potential for the findings of this study to go beyond being a purely historically-framed academic contribution to knowledge, to providing a potentially useful tool for practitioners themselves. By giving them an eagle-eye perspective on the relationship challenges that they are grappling with, and by exposing some of the key different inputs and outputs of their relationship dynamics, the findings from this study have the potential to equip political and diplomatic figures in the Brussels bubble with a better understanding of the potential pitfalls they face and how to adapt to these challenges going forward.

9.2 Summary of findings and concluding thoughts

For Irish, UK and Northern Irish political and diplomatic actors working during and after Brexit, this study has reaffirmed Mitchell et al.'s (2018) wider point that "the loose cannon that is Brexit has removed some certainties in relationships and is a reminder of how fast relations can deteriorate and how fast old stereotypes can reemerge" (Mitchell et al., 2018, p307). Vanneste (2016) points to a failing of the broad body of interorganisational trust research in "treating organisations as single actors", which he suggests is a useful but inaccurate approximation given that "it is people who trust – not organisations" (Vanneste, 2016, p7). A similar point can be made about the tendency of much of mainstream international relations research to consider international relations at the state level, without consideration that these too are made up of dense networks of individuals interacting and practicing together and alongside one another. This

study highlights that during the years of EU membership, the distinctive qualities of the Brussels bubble as a space made it a taken for granted arena for building cordial and trusting relations at the interpersonal level, with a positive ripple effect at the interorganisational and interstate level. The implications of this loss at the interpersonal level are now beginning to be appreciated with the benefit of hindsight.

It is evident from the presentation and analysis of the findings of this study that whilst the challenges in the trust relationship at state level create a challenging environment for building and maintaining trust at the working level in the Brussels bubble in the context of Irish, UK and Northern Irish trust relationships, interpersonal communicative and trust-building work nevertheless plays a part in the broader trust dynamic. The ongoing politicisation of Brexit as an issue, and the politicisation of roles within Brussels have had significant consequences for UK and Northern Irish political and diplomatic figures in Brussels looking to build and maintain trust. In connection to this, Brussels cannot currently be framed as a 'politically neutral space' in the Northern Ireland context given the ongoing challenges to the political and diplomatic relationships at all levels in respect of Brexit implementation and the Northern Ireland Protocol. However, this study has found that it remains distinctive as a useful shared space and a developmental space, despite the limitations arising from the UK's official exit from the EU. Consequently, there remains an important role for individual political and diplomatic figures building communication and trust at the practice level in the Brussels bubble in moving forward, post-Brexit.

The relational nature of trust and the issue of identity reflexivity as emergent over time as a cause and consequence of communication and trust development facilitated by colocation and immersion within the Brussels bubble is a significant finding in the context of Irish, UK and Northern Irish political and diplomatic relations. Particularly so, given the salience of identity in Brexit and the Northern Ireland Protocol, and more specifically in respect of the wider Northern Irish sociopolitical context.

The study also clearly demonstrated that, in political and diplomatic relations, communication and relationship building work in informal contexts is extremely important in building and maintaining trust at the interpersonal level. In the context of the Irish-UK-Northern Irish dynamic in the Brussels bubble, this will continue to be a vital means of building and rebuilding trust, in the absence of the formal mechanisms for engagement previously available as EU members prior to Brexit. This loss of the formal route for engagement also reduces the potential for demonstrating competence-based trust on a day-to-day basis, putting the emphasis on

demonstrating integrity to build trust. This study found that the success or failure to secure integrity-based trust was a crucial factor in trust relationships in the Brussels bubble, not least because of the fragility and extreme challenge of rebuilding integrity-based trust once it is damaged. This is something that political and diplomatic figures should be ever-mindful of in their everyday practice and their efforts to rebuild trust relations in the longer term.

The distinctiveness of the Brussels bubble as a high intensity but low stakes space away from home in which Irish, UK and Northern Irish political and diplomatic figures have been able to communicate, work on relationships and build trust is a key finding from this study. A particular strength of the Brussels bubble as a space for this work, pre-Brexit, was that it was a site of continual colocation, but without a concerted focus on constitutional issues, 'the Northern Ireland problem' or the UK-Irish relationship, because the intentional focus was instead upon EU business as a shared point of engagement and focus. This is no longer the case, post-Brexit. However, this study found that the continuing colocation provides a route - reduced and more challenging, but a route nonetheless - via largely informal opportunities for using interpersonal communication and trust-building work to begin to rebuild the relationships, provided that 'political roadblocks' at the higher level can be resolved.

Finally, this study found that the unique status that Northern Irish political and diplomatic figures hold in the Brussels bubble as representing a part of the UK that has a distinctive special status and a continuing bond of shared interest and impact in light of the Northern Ireland Protocol has the potential to provide them with an opportunity to play an important trust-building role within the Brussels bubble, as a boundary spanner between the UK and Irish cohorts of political and diplomatic figures. This study found that currently, Northern Irish political and diplomatic figures are engaged in warm and trusting relationships on both the UK and Irish sides, in which each side is disposed at the interpersonal and interinstitutional level to support and engage with them. The political climate at the higher level currently acts as a considerable barrier to rebuilding trust and relations in any significant way between Irish and UK political and diplomatic figures in the Brussels bubble. However, this current mutual benevolence towards the Northern Irish cohort in the Brussels bubble does offer the tiniest possibility of indirect reciprocity of trust slowly building between them. This would depend on this three-way dynamic remaining the case going forward. Furthermore, there are – of course – no guarantees in international relations and politics, particularly on such a sensitive, challenging and protracted problem as the implementation of the Northern Ireland Protocol and the reframing of the UK-EU political and diplomatic relationship.

It is evident from the findings of this study that being an away-from-home safe 'bubble' of shared space and multilateral business endows Brussels with distinctive qualities for supporting political and diplomatic trust building, enabling:

- the normalisation of interaction and cooperation, with continual and repeated, low-stakes, informal and formal interactions
- a culture and climate that is receptive to the transferability of trust that can be passed on and inherited, based on shared values and principles, and a commitment to demonstrating integrity in practice
- the de-sensitisation and reframing of issues by giving a space which is detached from the cultural norms and scrutinising political and media gaze of 'home', thereby allowing time and space for reflection, and a greater openness to different perspectives
- the fostering of layer upon layer of trust through organic opportunities derived from the regularised intensity of EU business and day-to-day interaction
- a broader basis for trust from generalised and long-term relationship building across wide networks, rather than short-term or task specific polite professionalism with highly targeted contacts
- the formation of dense networks of strong relationships across national and international boundaries, facilitating communication, engagement and information circulation, as an integral part of role effectiveness
- the shared purposefulness and long-running 'everydayness' of interactions and routines, which imbues the Brussels space with a sense of neutrality for those working there, allowing them to work productively together and alongside each other.

When Ireland, the UK and Northern Ireland were all inside the EU, these qualities were strongly in evidence. This facilitated the development and maintenance of trust at the interpersonal level. It also fed into more positive trust relations at the organisational level within the Brussels bubble, and at the state level between Ireland, the UK and Northern Ireland as well. By contrast, since Brexit, the benefits of these key qualities of Brussels as a bubble are diminished and less easily and consistently available to the UK and Northern Ireland, although not completely absent. The end of EU membership creates certain barriers to accessing or capitalising on these qualities of Brussels as a bubble. This has been exacerbated by the politicisation of Brussels as a space and the roles within it, as well as being aggravated by the distinctive and strongly oppositional nature of the political dialogue. However, this study demonstrates that these particular qualities of the

Brussels bubble play a role in supporting the building and maintenance of political and diplomatic trust relations in the Northern Ireland context. It also points to the value of the Brussels bubble as a site for supporting UK-Irish relations and Northern Irish political stability, providing a rationale for continued efforts by political and diplomatic actors representing the UK and Northern Ireland in the Brussels bubble. Additionally, this study has uncovered these distinctive bubble qualities solely in respect of the Irish, UK and Northern Irish dynamic in the Brussels bubble. In testing and strengthening the understanding of these qualities further, future work could look to explore the generalisability and transferability of these bubble qualities to different political and relationship dynamics in the Brussels bubble, and to different multilateral, bilateral or unilateral political and diplomatic bubble contexts.

As Heimann and Kampf (2022) note, "interpersonal relations play a role in arenas of great importance for states, such as rallying international support, removing obstacles to reaching an agreement, gathering information, and diffusing interstate tension" (Heimann & Kampf, 2022, p17). The changing nature of communication and trust within the Brussels bubble remains a live and complex issue, and the findings of this study have unfolded in parallel with Irish, UK and Northern Irish political and diplomatic actors on the ground getting to grips with the everyday realities of working in Brussels, post-Brexit. Interviewees drew on their experiences before, during and after the UK's official exit from the EU to contextualise the depth and scale of the impact on communication and trust, post-Brexit and the consequences of that for Irish-UK-Northern Irish political and diplomatic relations.

It is evident that the particular nature and qualities of the Brussels bubble as a space supported extensive and effective communication and trust building prior to Brexit. It is equally apparent that those same qualities of the bubble have been considerably degraded by the act of the UK and Northern Ireland leaving the EU. Prior to Brexit, relationship building was an organic part of everyday practice in the Brussels bubble, in which communication and trust building efforts were reciprocal and intentional without being particularly contrived. Post-Brexit, the loss of shared EU membership and everything that once entailed has made communication and relationship building more orchestrated, increased the risk and vulnerability in extending trust, and reduced the opportunities and/or appetite for engagement. Added to that, the insulating and ameliorating qualities of day-to-day shared practice and coexistence within the Brussels bubble are now far more vulnerable and less effective in the face of both political uncertainty and instability at the domestic level in Northern Ireland, and enduring challenges in the UK-Irish relationship at the political level.

However, this study illustrates that the interpersonal communication work and trust relations built by individual political and diplomatic figures on the ground have the potential to be a key part of the picture for building and rebuilding communication and trust. Not only at the interpersonal level, but also in germinating seeds for communication and trust at the higher organisational and state levels. Although not without challenges, this study finds that maintaining this footprint of collocated Irish, UK and Northern Irish political and diplomatic actors and capitalising on the distinctive bubble qualities that Brussels offers may be an important means of nurturing communication and trust. This provides an opportunity for the UK and Northern Ireland to keep a foot in the door despite no longer being formally 'in the room'.

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