“Embedded or Ephemeral? Europeanization and Regionalism in Ireland”

Paper to be presented at the Workshop 3. Societal regionalism in Eastern & Western Europe, ECPR Joint Sessions, Granada, Spain, 15-19 April 2005

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Abstract

Regionalisation has been categorised as both a top-down process by which the state devolves competences and allocates resources and as a concept which encapsulates social, institutional and political reforms which lead to the recomposition of the framework of public life (Keating 1998; Rodriguez-Pose 2002). One of the catalysts driving regionalisation has been Europeanization which impacted differently in the diverse member states and has varied according to the EU’s changing economic, social and political concerns and circumstances (Olson 2002; Featherstone and Radaelli 2003). The process of Europeanization has led to adaptation, evolution and frequently, the creation of new regional structures as well as changes in administrative practices and patterns of social engagement.

Although Ireland is frequently cited as an exemplar of how effective use of structural and cohesion funding promoted regional and local development, the impact of regionalisation has been under-researched, and is often not fully understood. Having examined the concepts of Europeanization and regionalism, including suggesting a framework that utilises historical and social institutionalism, the paper examines the impact of the creation of regional structures on spatial and political relationships and realities in Ireland. It then analyses the patterns of adaptation and institutional and policy learning among the main governmental and non-governmental actors. It argues that Europeanization has not led to the socio-political embedding of regionalisation. Despite the creation of regional structures, recent government reforms have served to entrench localism rather than foster regionalisation (Rees, Quinn, Connaughton 2004). The paper concludes that while institutional structures, civic and interest group participation, and patterns of interaction (new patterns of governance) have evolved, a lack of regional identity persists and regionalisation remains weak in the Irish case.

1. Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to firstly examine what impact Europeanization has had on sub-national government and governance in Ireland, and secondly to explore the relationship between Europeanization and regionalism. Ireland is an interesting case to examine, as the state is seen as having massively benefited from EU membership, gaining access to European markets and receiving significant transfers from the structural funds. Indeed, Ireland is seen as a European success story, with many attributing its economic success during the 1990s to the benefits of EU membership, although more nuanced accounts highlight the importance of domestic policies, economic reforms and the corporatist style social partnership arrangements in underpinning that success. Ireland, therefore, is often considered to have successfully adapted to EU membership, with Europeanization having had a significant impact on all aspects of Irish life, at a societal, economic, and political level. Nevertheless, as Eurobarometer surveys suggest, Ireland amongst all European states has a strongly nationalistic tradition, with citizens continuing to have a strong identification with the state and limited commitment to regionalism.
Ireland is an intriguing case, as whilst Europeanization appears to have had a significant impact on political and economic life, including the Irish administrative system and policy implementation, it appears not to have stimulated or underpinned a mobilisation of regional interests and regional civil society, as has been the case in some other European states, such as Belgium, Germany and Spain. Regionalism has never constituted a strong force in Ireland and the idea of creating regions, other than for functional purposes, has never had widespread public appeal or even much political support (Rees and Holmes 1995). In the recent past the only outwardly visible signs of regionalism, was a strong sporting identity with the regional provinces of Munster, Connaught, Ulster, Leinster, and the small Gaeltacht (Irish speaking) areas, of which there are seven spread-across the country, although the basis of identity in these areas was language and culture rather than territory. At the time of EU membership Ireland was initially treated as ‘one region’ for the purposes of structural funding, although the requirements of EU regional policy, have led to a greater degree of ‘regionalisation’ in Ireland, leading to the creation initially of eight regional authorities (1994) and two regional assemblies (1999).

Europeanization has been an important force in Ireland, directly leading to the establishment of two levels of non-elected and largely functional regional institutions, increased regional planning and policy delivery, but it has not led to a strong societal identification with regions or much interest in moving to directly elected regional institutions. Ireland’s strongly nationalistic culture, recent history and strongly centralised political-administrative structure, as well as its geographical and population size, all mitigate against strong pressures for regionalisation. However, national level changes during the 1990s have altered the pattern of governance in Ireland, with evidence in policy areas such as the environment, health care and infrastructure, suggesting that new patterns of local and regional governance have been emerging in direct response to public policy problems. The emergence of policy networks and communities, comprising national and sub-national public, private and civic actors, seems evident in these areas of policy, but these developments raise key questions about accountability and democracy, as well as about the efficiency and effectiveness of such approaches to public policy (Adshead 2002).

The paper is organised around four principal sections. The first section considers the principal concepts of Europeanization and regionalism, reflects on the link between the two processes and considers whether these processes have led to the development of new and emerging patterns of governance in Ireland. Following from this general discussion we look at the Irish case, wherein Europeanization would appear to have had some impact on the development of new sub-national institutions and led to new patterns of governance at local and regional levels that involve public bodies, private interests, NGOs and elements of civil society. Europeanization, however, does not appear to have led to the socio-political embedding of regionalisation, rather regionalisation has occurred in a highly functional manner and largely as a means of managing regional-level EU operational programmes as part of the national development plan. Reforms of local government during the 1990s may have reinforced localism, or at least the existing territorial division of the state, rather than

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1 The designated Irish speaking areas are in counties Donegal, Mayo, Galway, Kerry, Cork, Waterford and Meath, but the boundaries of these areas are not coterminous with the county boundaries. These areas, with a population of about 90,000, elect 17 members to the Údarás na Gaeltachta, the state agency responsible for economic developments in these areas.
supporting the development of regions. In section four we examine the impact of EU membership on sub-national governance in Ireland, by considering how Ireland responded and adapted to membership and look at the degree to which there was a ‘goodness of fit’ with EU policy. It is suggested that Ireland’s pragmatic response to EU requirements for change, perhaps reflecting a particular national policy style, ensured piecemeal reform and adaptation rather than much rethinking of the territorial division of the state. The evidence suggests that weak regionalism and superficial identification with newly created regional structures, has ensured that regionalisation remained limited. Nevertheless, there have been changes, reflected in different emerging patterns of governance, that do suggest that Europeanization has had an impact on the roles played by both public, private and civic actors, the relationships between the actors and the types of approaches developed to address public policy issues.

2. Regions, Regionalism and Europeanization

The relationship between regionalism and Europeanization provides an interesting problematic for scholars, as it suggests a re-defining of the role of the state and raises questions about the relationships between the different levels of government and patterns of governance in many European states (see Bache and Jones 2000). The core focus of much research since the 1990s has been on examining the role of the state, with scholars often viewing it as having either been eroded (Ohmae 1995; Strange 1996) or revitalised (Milward 1992), depending on the theoretical perspective adopted. In this context, the forces of globalism (including regional integration in Europe) and regionalism are seen as key factors in explaining the changing position of the state. Globalism, however it is defined given that there are many competing definitions from a range of disciplines (e.g. Clarke 1997; Held 1998), suggests that territorial, often state boundaries, are increasingly less important in understanding how human activity is organised and how we study political behaviour (Armstrong 1998). Equally, regionalism is seen as a potent force, both in Europe, as well as in other parts of the world, in understanding how the role of the state has been changing.

Regions and Regionalism

The term “region” is a very elastic and all-embracing concept, and one that is used by a range of disciplines and scholars in different ways. In the present analysis it is used to refer to a sub-national level of government, although even such an approach is not without its problems given the mosaic of regions that exist in many European states. Keating notes that at a minimal level region may be seen as intermediate between the state and the locality, or “more positively” according to geographic criteria (1998: 9). He goes on to suggest, “We can most usefully conceptualise regions as spaces, but extending the notion of space beyond the territorial to include functional space; political space; and social space. A region is constituted from a territory, whose significance is given by its functional and political context.” (1998: 79). In this setting a region may be characterised by regional government and / or a set of administrative institutions, as well as developing as an actor in its own right.

Loughlin (1998) suggest that we can identify four types of regions, although the exact terms may differ: historical, cultural, and ethnic regions; economic regions, administrative regions and political regions. The categories are not exclusive, and
where they coincide, it is more than likely that a region can be said to be a significant actor in the political system. In many cases they may not coincide and may conflict. Using these definitions, it is perhaps best to treat regions as social constructs within territorial boundaries. As Keating argues: “The territorial element in the definition of regions, if not its precise delineation, is fundamental; the social, economic and political content of regionalism varies according to the outcomes of political processes. It is a contested concept, both in its spatial limits and its social content, since these condition the distribution of power, the weight of social interests and the allocation of resources” (1998: 13).

The focus on regionalism during the 1990s ignored or downplayed many of the developments and changes already underway in the state systems of Western Europe in the postwar period. Regionalism, then, is by no means a new phenomenon, and regionalism as a political movement existed at the end of the nineteenth century. The range of political systems that have emerged from the postwar period differed from those built around unitary versus federal principles, with some paying attention to regionalism, others decentralizing elements of authority, and still others remaining centralised unitary systems. In many of these instances, the very essence of the welfare state was strongly associated with the growth and development of political and economic systems that largely depended on centralized political authority as the means to ensure the delivery of programs for economic welfare and political justice. However, the demise of the welfare state model, the changing nature of the state and its role in the domestic economic systems of many European states provided an opportunity and an impetus for the regionalists seeking to promote the development of regional government and economic growth. Regionalists in Belgium and Spain won major concessions from national governments that emphasized federalism and autonomy respectively (Keating 1993).

The degree to which regionalism has been supported by European integration, and specifically the policies of the European Commission, has also been the subject of research (e.g. Marks 1993, 1996; Hooghe 1996; Keating and Loughlin1997; Jeffery 1997). Many studies highlight the importance of regional funding as a pre-requisite for regional mobilisation, although the degree to which such mobilisation occurs is related to the type of political system, with federal systems being more likely to have experienced such developments, whereas this has been less the case in countries such as Greece, Portugal and Ireland. Equally illustrative is the degree to which such regions have mobilised themselves for action in Brussels, with studies again highlighting federal regions as most likely to be represented in Brussels, and to develop pro-active European strategies (Hooghe 1995). Most recently, there have been an increasing number of studies focused on examining the effect of EU support on regional policy and government in the new EU member states (Grabbe 2003; Paraskevopoulos and Leonardi 2004). Many of these studies highlight both the importance of EU funding, especially in the pre-accession period, but also note the difficulties in adapting to European policies, drawing down the funds, and the problems of developing sufficient administrative and institutional capacity, both at the national and sub-national level.

**Europeanization**

In seeking to understand how the existing Irish political and administrative system
coped with the pressures of Europeanization, and how it responded to the pressures to adapt existing institutional structures and national policy to comply with new European requirements, we draw on historical and social institutionalist approaches in order to understand what has been happening in the Irish case. In examining the impact of Europeanization on national governance structures and policy processes it is assumed that this varies according to the national context and indeed the policy sphere (see Cowles et. al. 2001; Knill and Lenschow 2001; Borzel, 2002). We are, therefore, interested in understanding whether Europeanization has led to new ways of thinking about the institutional apparatus of government and the organisation of governance in Ireland (see Rees, Quinn and Connaughton 2004). Our focus is predominantly on the effect of Europeanization on sub-national government in Ireland, although clearly understanding how Ireland manages its relationship with Europe and the national level organisation is important (see Laffan and Tannam 1998; Laffan and O’Mahony 2003).

According to Featherstone, ‘Europeanization’ can be understood as (a) a historical process, (b) a matter of cultural diffusion, (c) a process of institutional adaptation, and (d) the adaptation of policy and policy processes (2003: 5). This categorisation captures both the opening up of traditional state structures to the supranational level and the adaptation of internal processes and systemic features to the exigencies of EU membership. Other theorists such as Ladrech (1994) and Borzel, (2002) assert that the impact of Europeanization has both economic and socio-political consequences – the former evident in the provision of increased resources through redistribution, the latter evident in the shaping of intra-regional interactions and the improvement of local institutional capacity through the creation of intra, inter and transregional networks that support development initiatives. In this paper, Europeanization is used to describe ‘a process in which domestic policy arenas become increasingly subject to European policy-making’ (Borzel 2002).

Europeanization may be considered to promote learning and adaptation among actors and institutions. Institutional learning has been conceptualised from both sociological and rational choice viewpoints. Proponents of the rational choice perspective such as Garrett and Tsebelis (1996) and Pollack (1996) tend to minimise the role of institutions and focus on the role and motivation of individual actors, depicting institutions merely as intervening variables between actor preferences and policy outcomes. By contrast, sociological institutionalists afford an important role to institutions and assert that institutional factors determine the interests and identities of policy actors (see, Risse et al 2001; Borzel 2001; Paraskevopoulos 2001; Checkel 2001a & b). Credence is also given by sociological institutionalists to the way in which actors are socialised into the norms and rules of the internationalised arena in which they operate.

The learning, which results from Europeanization, reflects the complexity of the processes in which domestic preference formation occurs. It is hypothesised that the ‘goodness of fit’ between national policies and EU policies results in little adaptational pressure whereas a misfit between the EU approach and national structures and policies leads to the need for adaptation and learning. In exemplifying the notion of ‘goodness of fit’ as a crucial intervening variable between Europeanization and domestic policy/institutional change the new institutionalist literature has identified two broadly different mediating mechanisms/logics of domestic institutional and policy change in response to Europeanization. The ‘logic of
consequentialism’, espoused by the rational choice school, points to the role of redistribution of resources and the differential empowerment of actors at the domestic level and highlights the importance of multiple veto points and existing formal institutions as crucial mediating factors that affect domestic actors’ capacity for action, thereby leading to policy learning and institutional change. Sociological institutionalists identify a ‘logic of appropriateness’, which champions the process of social learning as a fundamental mechanism of domestic change. They identify networks (either epistemic communities, or advocacy and/or issue-specific) and informal institutions (namely political and organisational cultures and social norms) as mediating mechanisms that affect actor preferences leading to the re-conceptualisation of their interests and identities and thus facilitating the learning and socialisation processes.

The social learning process resulting from adaptation is a dynamic process and incorporates elements of both the rational choice and sociological institutionalist perspectives by focusing on strategic interaction between actors, institutions, structures and social norms. Such learning can be depicted by the emergence of new forms of governance such as epistemic/advocacy/issue networks (Rhodes 1997; Adshead 2002) and the identification of social capital with the resultant features of social organisation such as trust, norms and connectedness (Putnam 2000).

In using the above definition of Europeanization, it is argued that Ireland’s existing institutional structures of government have been relatively resilient to change, and that adaptation and change of existing policy procedures and processes, where they have been required by European policy, have been pragmatic and piecemeal, reflecting a strong nationalistic political culture, historical patterns of institutional development and societal forces (Rees, Quinn, Connaughton 2004). Ireland has responded, usually in positive ways to European pressures to adapt, learning how to do things differently, and benefiting from European policies, especially from the structural funds. However, it has done so in a way that reflects its own distinctive political traditions and understanding of how such policy should be translated into policy and action. Moreover, unlike in some other European states, there has not been a distinct regionalist movement in Ireland, with most political pressures being highly localised reflecting the clientilist nature of the Irish political system (Keating 1999). In the Irish case, institutional change has been limited, but there is some evidence (including evidence of vertical and horizontal networks) to suggest changing patterns of governance do exist, although in limited form (Adshead and Quinn 2000; Adshead 2002).

The Irish case may, however, be similar to the experience of some other European states. Notably, Bache and Jones in their study of the impact of EU regional policy on Spain and the United Kingdom argue that much still depends on the central government’s willingness to acquiesce (2000; 16). They also note that a supportive structure depends as much on the capacity of regional actors to seize such opportunities, as on the nature of the Commission’s regional policy. Harvie, commenting on developments in the 1980s, suggested, “Common to all the new regions is the fact of political presence. They are not claimants for provincial self-government; they exercise it, or appear to exercise it, despite widely different resources.” (1994: 4). More recently national studies, such as Gualini’s examination of Italy (2004), suggest that Europeanization has had a positive impact on Italian
regional policy, with the adoption of new programming approach for the 2000-2005 period, although the evidence also suggests the difficulties of adopting a multi-level governance approach (including subsidiarity and new partnerships). In Ireland there is limited evidence of such development occurring at the regional level, although developments at the county level, place a much greater emphasis on sub-national actors as the agents of local economic development. The next section considers the distinctive features of the national political context, including the size and demography of the state; the nature of Irish political culture, nationalism and identity; the political and administrative system, and role of civil society in Ireland.

3. Ireland’s social and political context – conducive or inimical to regionalism?

The impact of Europeanization is mediated by the socio-political structures and domestic context of the member-states. Therefore, prior to assessing the impact of Europeanization on Ireland it is pertinent to review the country’s demography and political and administrative structures as well as the distinctive political and social culture and patterns of development.

3.1 Size and population patterns
In understanding the limited degree of regionalisation in Ireland, it is important to recognise that the physical size and population of the country are significantly less than those of many regions within most other EU member states. The island of Ireland has an area of 84,431 sq. km. and in 2004 the Republic’s population exceeded four million for the first time since the Great Famine of the 1840s. Ireland’s overall density of population, at 56.9 per sq. km. (2002 census), is low by international standards. The population is unevenly distributed, with a noticeable east-west cleavage. Figure 1 shows the population distribution in the four provinces between 1946-2002 and illustrates the disproportionate growth in Leinster (the province in which Dublin is situated).

Figure 1. Provincial population shares, 1946-2002

![Provincial population shares, 1946-2002](image)

Source: CSO, 2004
Ireland’s small size and demographics have frequently been cited as reasons for opposing any move to create regional structures, with officials sometimes suggesting that such structures would be wasteful and are not economically justified.

3.2 Political culture
Ireland’s political culture is unique, reflecting its inheritance of agrarianism, colonialism and religiosity as well as its pattern of development (Farrell, 1971; Garvin, 2004). Political culture reflects and affects the institutions, processes and social context in which it prevails and in Ireland’s case, moderates the impact of Europeanization. Ireland, until recently, was a relatively homogenous society with few social cleavages and strongly conservative political values. For Coakley, ‘nationalism, implies at a minimum, a sense of loyalty to one’s nation - a type of community with which one primarily identifies’ (2005: 51). Such nationalism has led to political and patriotic support of the state; oscillating degrees of irredentism with regard to Northern Ireland; a tendency towards isolationism in foreign policy (the attachment to military neutrality is evident in debates on CSFP, for example) and an ethnocentrism which stemmed from the monoculturalism which prevailed. However, recent Eurobarometer data suggests that not only are Irish citizens more attached to their own country than many other Europeans, but that they also strongly identify with Europe.²

Localism and clientilism are also significant features of Irish political culture. The parliamentary system selected in the 1920s, with its strong role for the executive, reduced the policy role of deputies. The voting system adopted, namely, PR-STV gave marginal voters significant power and fostered what Garvin has rather harshly described as a ‘a sometimes pathological personalism and particularism and a disregard of the public interest’ (2004: 23). This encouraged a strong localism whereby T.Ds frequently engage in personal interaction with their constituents. The strong sense of community which has always been evident in Ireland and the high levels of voluntary activism have also served to reinforce the personalist approach by placing the politician in the role of local promoter. Both politicians and electorate have been socialised into norms of patronage and brokerage and local and national politics continue to be interwoven. Initially, the public assumed that the similar norms might apply to Europe – an assumption which led the academic Brigid Laffan, to entitle a 1989 article ‘While you’re over there in Brussels, Get us a Grant’. Although the brokerage approach does not apply to European practices, the easy relationship between Irish politicians, administrators and the public prevails and in the early nineties it was true to say that ‘at a micro level, all kinds of interest organisations seek to influence the Irish response to EC law and Commission proposals’ (Laffan 1996: 309).

The visibility of the state’s institutions, the dirigiste approach to policy processes and the strong belief in democratic institutions result in the state playing a significant part in the lives of Irish people. Another powerful social force has been the Catholic church. Until the 1990s the church exerted a strong influence on the constitution, the type of laws enacted and the type of social and educational policy which emerged as well as on personal values and practices. The fact that the church was organised on a parish basis reinforced the localness of interaction. Ardagh blames the church’s ‘moral monopoly’ for the fact that ‘Ireland has never really developed the alternative found in other countries of a liberal, humanist or socialist ethic of civic-cum-personal

²See the survey results of Eurobarometer No. 62 (Autumn 2004
The Catholic church also inculcated a deference to authority, a deference which affected political culture. The deferential authoritarian values were accompanied by a strong belief in democracy (reflected, for example, in continuing high electoral turn-out), but a democracy which was practiced only at local and national levels. A Eurobarometer survey in 2003 found that 96% of Irish people declared themselves proud to be Irish, a much higher percentage than the EU average. However, the attachment is to the national entity rather than to the regional or local levels.

Ireland’s political culture and its adaptation to Europeanization have also been tempered by the degree of social and economic change. Social mores have transformed from a conservative outlook at the time of accession to the liberal, cosmopolitan attitude that now prevails and has been fuelled by wider educational opportunities, improved communication, internationalisation and increased affluence. Attitudes towards, religion, family, sexuality and morality have undergone profound change, a change which led to the questioning of traditional political culture and the secretive, personalist approach which had been the norm. The emergence of the Celtic Tiger has led to unequalled prosperity and accelerated modernisation with increased workforce participation, rising consumption patterns but an unequal distribution of wealth. The new affluence and materialism has altered patterns of social and political interaction and highlighted regional disparities.

3.3 Political structures and institutional development

Factors that have limited the possible development of regions are the strong tradition of local government and the fervent attachment to place. Since Celtic times effective models of co-ordination and participatory democracy have been created in Ireland. The ‘tuath’, the Celtic unit of identity constituted “the central nexus, both ritual and political in Irish society” (MacCana 1981: 206). During the Middle Ages and the Tudor era strong local structures also existed, based on the county as an administrative unit. However, the formalisation of such structures occurred mainly during the last two hundred years. In the 19th century regional and local structures were created which were similar to those in place in Britain. The basic politico-administrative system in Ireland has changed little from the configuration adopted during the 1920s (following the attainment of independence from Britain) a configuration not conducive to region building.

Ireland’s public administration comprises a strong central administration, weak local authorities and significant state sponsored bodies (see Figure 2). The institutions put in place in Ireland after independence reflected a desire for central control (Lee 1989; Garvin 1996; Coakley 2005). This institutional configuration of sectorally-focused state departments and functionally and financially restricted units of local government still predominates. Systemic modernisation has taken place over the past twenty years with the introduction of the Public Services Management Act (1997), the Strategic Management Initiative, which impacted on national and local levels and comprehensive reform of local government structures and practices since the mid-1990s. However, the system is still categorised as highly centralised, focused on Dublin, with regional representation of government departments (John 2001).

*autonomous public authorities endowed with duties and powers by statute or ministerial order*
Although the county initially emerged as an instrument of colonisation, it became the unit with which people identified politically and through which political campaigns and later, electoral activity have been organised. The county serves both as the unit of local administration and as the focus of personal and sporting identity and loyalty (Gillimor 2003: Daly 1999). The counties vary hugely, in size and population. County Leitrim has a population of 25,815 while South Dublin County Council has a population of 239,887. The area of County Cork is 749,995 hectares while County Louth has an area of 82,613 hectares (CSO, 2002). These differences reflect diverse demographic and geographic endowments and varying organisational factors yet, all Irish local authorities operate within the same centralised framework. Recent reform of local government structures was designed so as to integrate local government and local development. Each local authority established (between two and five) Strategic Policy Committees (SPCs), mirroring the authority’s major functions. Not less than one third of SPC members are drawn from bodies relevant to the committee’s work, thus ensuring the involvement of wider society in policy design, while ensuring a majority for elected members. The creation of County Development Boards in 2000 was a further instrument for the broadening of Irish local government. The CDBs bring together representatives from the four key sectors, namely, local government, local development, the social partners and state agencies. The boards were charged with preparing an agreed vision and a 12 year social, economic and cultural strategy for their county/city. The resulting strategies, published by 2002 are key instruments in the move towards improved co-ordination at local level. These reforms underscore the importance of the county/city as the unit of local governance. While there is *ad hoc* collaboration between county authorities for specific issues, it has only been in response to statutory obligation that counties grouped themselves in regions for purposes such as waste management. For the public, the county is the unit of recognition and reference and identification with the county has never been replaced by a regional identification. As Clinch, Convery and Walsh (2002) assert ‘no one wears a jersey for the Midlands region’.

**Figure 2: Ireland’s Political Structures**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PRESIDENT</th>
<th>OIREACHTAS</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dáil/Parliament</td>
<td>166 T.D.'s (41 constituencies)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seandáil/Senate</td>
<td>60 Senators</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>34 County/City Councils</td>
<td>Membership range 15-52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>80 Town Councils</td>
<td>Membership range 9-12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 REGIONAL AUTHORITIES (established 1994)</td>
<td>Membership range 21-37 (appointed by local authorities)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 REGIONAL ASSEMBLIES (established 1999)</td>
<td>Membership range BMW 29; S&amp;E 41</td>
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Structures and institutions at national and local levels have evolved and strengthened over time but this has not been the case at regional level. Many proposals for some type of regional structures had been made, particularly during the 1960s and 1970s in documents such as the Buchanan Report (1968) and the government statements on regional policy issued in 1965, 1969 and 1972 but the political will to create governing regions has never been evident. In Ireland regions have, however, been delineated for many purposes – Regional Development Organisations were established in 1968/69 but were abolished for financial reasons in 1987. Fisheries Boards and Tourist Boards operate in specified regions and regional health boards were in operation until January 2005. Regions have also been designated by state agencies such as FÁS (the national training authority) or state-sponsored bodies such as the ESB (Electricity Supply Board). Planning regions, Gaeltacht (Irish language) regions and industrial development regions have all been designated at different times. McCafferty refers to the ‘on-again off-again, opportunistic and ad hoc nature of official engagement with regions in the past’ (2003: 89). There has never been a co-ordinated approach to regional designation with the result that the regions for various administrative purposes have not coincided and there has been a consequent diversity of demarcations which still exists. O’Leary refers to a 2001 finding that there were up to thirty public sector strategies in existence using different regional boundaries (2003:27). The shifting regional boundaries have led to administrative awkwardness, bureaucratic lourdeur and have hindered statistical comparison.

However, involvement in the EU, particularly its regional and cohesion policy processes, has served as a catalyst for the establishment of regional structures in Ireland. Ireland was initially treated as one region within the EU, thus reinforcing centralisation. Later, seven consultative regions were designated for preparation of the CSF/NDP 1989-1993. However, these were regarded as ‘cosmetic’ (Laffan 1999). In 1994, following further prompting from Brussels, eight Regional Authorities were established with a mandate to promote the co-ordination of public services at regional level and to monitor and advise on the implementation of EU funding in the regions. Regional Authority members are appointed by the constituent local authorities which also fund them. In 1999 a further layer was added with the creation of two new regions at NUTS II level – the BMW (Border, Midlands and West) region and the Southern and Eastern region (which stretches from Dublin to Kerry). These regions were created as a result of the Irish government’s decision to apply to the European Commission for continuing Objective One status for the Border, Midlands and West region. Controversy emerged as the Irish government initially sought to revise the 1994 regional boundaries for reasons of political expediency but Brussels insisted on continuing the existing designation. Consequently, for the 2000-2006 round of Structural Funding Ireland includes both an Objective One region and an Objective One in Transition region. Membership of the Regional Assemblies is broadly similar to that of the existing Regional Authorities.

Membership comprises elected representatives from the constituent NUTS III regional authorities, nominated by county and city councils within the NUTS II area. The Assemblies play a significant role in the planning and monitoring of programmes funded by the EU. In carrying out their functions the Regional Assemblies must have regard to the general physical, economic, social, demographic, infrastructural and environmental situation of the region. This represents a broader brief than that given to the Regional Authorities at the time of their establishment in 1994. It is particularly
noteworthy that the Regional Assemblies have been given responsibility for managing special Operational Programmes in their regions within the National Development Plan. This regional management of such programmes represents a new departure in Irish administration although the extent of the regional Operational Programmes is quite limited and their implementation is spread over the four national programmes so the de facto management role of the assemblies is restricted (O’Leary, 2003). Nevertheless, the process of Europeanization has fostered the nascent regionalisation, which has been supported in recent government pronouncements. Although there is little public affinity with regions in Ireland, key government documents in recent years have articulated the need for balanced regional development. One of the four objectives of the National Development Plan/CSF 2000-2006 is ‘fostering balanced regional development’ while the National Spatial Strategy published in 2002 aims to achieve ‘a better balance of social, economic, physical development and population growth between regions’ (DoELG 2002:10). Despite the rhetoric, adequate resources have not been designated in order to achieve these aspirations.

One indication of the current status of regions within the Irish political landscape is the thrust of the National Spatial Strategy (NSS). The NSS is predicated on an urban hierarchy (of hubs, gateways and other towns and villages) rather than a regional focus. However, the hubs and gateways are meant to be ‘strategic centres with the potential to be drivers of development at national level and within their own regions’ (DoELG 2002: 38) and one chapter in the Strategy focuses on how ‘the process of balanced regional development will unfold in each region within the national structure set out in the strategy’ (ibid.74). The Planning and Development Act (2000) specified that regional authorities should prepare regional planning guidelines, which were published during 2004. The guidelines provide a long-term strategic planning framework for the NUTS III regions and are aligned with the NSS. These moves have put in place a co-ordinated framework for development. However, implementation will be the litmus test and already some local authorities have sought to deviate from the regional planning guidelines.

In the absence of a comprehensive regional policy and structures, development in Ireland has been unbalanced. The 2002 census showed that 25.6% of Ireland’s population live in the Dublin region but it is not only the population distribution that has been unbalanced. GVA, job creation, infrastructural investment and educational participation levels are all unequally distributed, yet no government has put significant structures in place to counter the inter-regional imbalances (see Table 1).

Table 1: Regional Indicators

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Indicator</th>
<th>State</th>
<th>Southern &amp; Eastern Region</th>
<th>Border, Midlands &amp; Western Region</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Population 2002</td>
<td>3,917,336</td>
<td>2,879,325</td>
<td>1,038,011</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Density (persons/sq. km.)</td>
<td>56.9</td>
<td>79.1</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employment by sector</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agriculture</td>
<td>6.9%</td>
<td>5.5%</td>
<td>11.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Industry</td>
<td>27.8%</td>
<td>26.6%</td>
<td>31.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Services</td>
<td>65.3%</td>
<td>67.9%</td>
<td>57.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indices of GVA per person</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>111.1</td>
<td>69.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disposable Income per capita (2002)</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>103.0</td>
<td>91.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Compiled from CSO 2004, CSO 2005 and CEC 2004
3.4 Domestic patterns of policy-making

In Ireland, decision-making processes are predicated on a national rather than a regional or local approach. The Constitution specifies a clear division between the roles of the legislature, the judiciary and the executive which operate on a national basis. The doctrine of cabinet collegiality also pertains, ensuring that all cabinet decisions receive full government support. Government departments have been designated along sectoral lines and until recent years, there was little evidence of collaboration. While sections of certain government departments (e.g., Agriculture, Education and Science and Defence) have been decentralised to provincial locations, power has not been deconcentrated. Ambitious plans for decentralisation were launched in 2003 by the government but their implementation has been impeded by political and administrative reluctance. Since the 1980s wage policies and the broad parameters of social and economic policies have been determined through a process of social partnership, which operates on a national level. A consensual approach to policy-making has thus emerged, however, this is directed by the centre and consultation of organisations and individuals is managed by the centre. Partnership has also become the trend at local level, with many forms evident, particularly in the sphere of local development. The varied facets of the processual and structural arrangements involved in policy and decision-making have reinforced the dominance of the centre and have not served to inculcate a regional approach.

The rapid rate of economic progress in Ireland since the emergence of the Celtic Tiger and the accelerated social change which preceded and accompanied it has affected the range and type of policies put in place and the manner in which such policies are designed and delivered. However, the policy processes are again predicated on the local and central levels. As noted above at the local level new structures have been put in place in order to bring together a wide range of policy actors and improve co-ordination and effectiveness (Callanan and Keogan 2003). At national level the social partners (employers, trade unions and representatives of the community and voluntary sector) are part of the policy-making process and their input has influenced policy design, content and implementation. However, having examined the role and influence of interest groups in the policy process, Murphy asserts that ‘it is thus likely that the Oireachtas (legislature) and its members will remain the central focus of attention for those who want to influence public policy’ (2005: 380). Such interest groups tend, themselves, to be organised on a local or national basis with little evidence of a regional approach. Thus, the policy process is structured in a manner which mitigates against regionalisation.

3.5 Civic Culture

Despite profound social change, a positive civic culture still obtains. Traditionally, Irish society has been characterised by a spirit of co-operation and self-help fostered historically by community agricultural practices and, since the 19th century, the establishment of philanthropic societies and voluntary organisations including the cooperative movement. Although the Irish political system is characterised as a clientilistic/personalist system it is also underpinned by a strong sense of civil society, a civil society that has emerged as both a partnership with government and a substitute for perceived failures of government. In 2000 the government published a White Paper Supporting Voluntary Action which sought to develop ‘…and make more explicit the participation of the Community and Voluntary sector in partnership and
consultation mechanisms, within the overall constitutional and legal framework that
governs public administration (Government of Ireland 2000: 57). This sought to
provide an enabling framework. At national level, the social partners, including the
community and voluntary sectors have long been involved in policy making. Recent
reforms of local government have integrated local government and local development
and facilitated the establishment of community fora to feed into the work of County
Development Boards, thereby institutionalising the contribution of the voluntary and
Community sector at local authority level.

In addition to the formalised involvement of civil society in policy-making and
implementation there is a huge voluntary involvement in sporting, social and
charitable organisations in Ireland. In 1998 it was estimated that one third of all Irish
adults were involved in some form of voluntary community activity (Ruddle and
Mulvihill 1999). The existence of a strong civic culture, an active civil society and
the highly developed patterns of voluntarism and civic engagement implies significant
social capital endowment. An issues paper developed by NESF overviews levels,
trends and international comparisons of key elements of social capital. With regard to
inter-personal trust, levels in Ireland are average to above average – 36% compared
with 30% in Great Britain and 55% in most Scandinavian countries (NESF, 2002: 16).
The same document cites the European Values Survey finding with regard to trust in
specific institutions and Ireland’s level of trust in various types of institution was the
highest of any country in 1999.

Ireland’s political and administrative structures have evolved to reflect the changing
internal and external discourses and demands. The degree of social cohesion, the
singular socio-political culture, the path-dependent trajectories of social and economic
development, the distinctive spatial and demographic conditions and the
administrative and political norms all serve to filter and simultaneously facilitate a
unique process of Europeanization which will be explored in the following section.

4. The impact of Europeanization on sub-national government in Ireland

In examining the impact of Europeanization on Ireland, we contend that institutions
and structures have adjusted incrementally and pragmatically to European policy
requirements, although we suggest that it is important to be aware of the degree to
which culture and context shape the response. Irish policies and mechanisms reflect
the dominant discourse in Brussels and the required modifications have been
implanted in Ireland’s political and administrative processes, albeit in a piecemeal
manner. In terms of the ‘goodness of fit’ between European policy requirements and
Irish institutional structures, we would assess Ireland as a case in which adaptation
pressures can be classified as medium. Much of the adaptation, as and when it has
occurred, has been in response to demands made by Brussels, or in response to fears
that EU funding might be jeopardised, rather than a genuine desire to embed strong
regional institutions. This leads to questions as to whether the changes were more
symbolic than real, aimed at pleasing Brussels, but avoiding domestic controversy.

During the 1970s and early 1980s Ireland made only a limited and half-hearted
commitment to regional policy and local development, reflecting the realities of Irish
economic development. There was also a prevailing view that since Ireland was a
small state, regionalised structures were not necessary. It was also believed that local
government was not particularly strong or capable of acting on behalf of local communities. The general lack of functional integration, the problem of territorial inconsistency and the absence of coordination among regional structures meant that the Irish government was not prepared for the implications of the changes in European regional development policy initiated by the 1988 reform of the structural funds (Laffan 1999). The adaptational pressure generated a positive response and since the late 1980s successive Irish governments worked with the EU in developing the National Development Plans/Community Support Frameworks and a number of operational programmes. This process has contributed to stimulating a change in the basis on which intergovernmental relations operate in Ireland as well as changes in the processes and mechanisms for regional policy – thus, a particularly Irish logic of consequentialism can be detected. (Rees, Quinn, Connaughton 2004).

EU membership and in particular adaptation to EU regional policies has had the most profound impact on Irish regions. An upsurge in interest in regional problems has been ostensibly driven by the NDP, the Structural Fund reforms and a change in focus for EU anti-poverty policies for collaboration (Pownall 1997: 181). The changed emphases within the EU since the late 1980s have combined with changed attitudes and circumstances in Ireland in order to create a climate conducive to a more regionalised focus in Irish policies and provision. In conforming to EC regional policy reforms the Irish government has been obliged to give greater voice to regional policy interests (Adshead 2002). Institution building has been manifested in the form of the new regional structures. This effort to address the institutional vacuum at regional level is the cumulative outcome of the continuous championing of devolved administration by Brussels. Whatever decentralisation had taken place previously was most evident at the planning and implementation stages of the EU regional policy process. Adaptation is also evident in the way in which membership of the various Operational Programme Monitoring Committees has gradually expanded to include regional actors as well as in the ever-increasing role of sub-national actors in the implementation of Structural Fund interventions.

4.1 Institutional and Policy Adaptation: New Patterns of Governance

EU interventions, especially the Structural and Cohesion Funds, have facilitated and on occasion forced institutional and policy change. Decentralisation of power and resources in Ireland, however, has been limited. Initially, the EU approach to Ireland (with the whole country regarded as one region) reinforced the state’s centralised approach to economic and social development. In the first two National Development Plans (1989-1993, 1994-99), central government departments and their regional bodies were principally responsible for the implementation of the operational programmes. The allocation of management responsibility for the two regional operational programmes in the NDP 2000-2006 to the two Regional Assemblies marks the first time that non-central government bodies have been given specific responsibility for such programmes. However, the power that has been given to the regional assemblies is restricted and their resource base is quite limited. Regional assemblies have responsibility for sub-programmes within their territorial areas. The implications of these changes have yet to be evaluated, but they do suggest greater involvement of some sub-regional actors and possibly more appropriate delivery of services closer to the citizen. It remains to be seen, however, whether this process results in demands for real devolved power to regions or local authorities (Fitzgerald
Questions may be raised about the viability of the regional bodies as EU funding is reduced, questions also arise regarding their positioning within governance arrangements and finally the degree to which there is any public identification with these bodies.

The Europeanization process has impacted on Ireland’s national policy making processes but it may be asked to what degree has this altered the relationships between central and sub-national levels and led to new patterns of governance? Collins and Quinlivan (2005) note that links between the local the EU level are increasing and may continue to do so in the future and such links seem to foster a more direct interface with Europe. This raises the question of links between the regions and the EU, which though tenuous, have affected intergovernmental relationships in Ireland.

Since the 1980s the local dimension grew in significance with the emergence of a cadre of non-governmental actors who facilitated the process of ‘bottom-up’ development. The inclusion of a structured local development programme in the NDP 1994-1999 was a major innovation in national planning which reflected the appreciation gained by policy makers of the potential that could be harnessed through a combination of bottom up and top down strategies. It was also an important political response to demands from local and regional interests that the spirit of partnership as envisaged in the 1988 reform of the EU structural funds was not being fully addressed in Ireland (Walsh 1996: 164). The pattern of local authority involvement and contact with Brussels officials is still very sporadic and uneven, with some local authorities far more involved in EU activities and more aware of opportunities than others. Some County/City Councils appointed individuals with specific responsibility for EU matters, but even in such cases, the persons concerned seldom work solely on EU matters. What this suggests is that the national level is not always the barrier to closer involvement in European programmes, especially as some of the specific programmes have not necessitated the involvement of national actors, but local level sometimes lacks the ability to fully engage with European programmes.

Initially, regional/local attempts to mobilize, faced the twin obstacles of a strong central government with consequent limited regional access to the national framework, coupled with a poorly developed regional capacity, making direct contact with Brussels difficult. Regions have since sought to become more involved with the EU policy making process through membership of the committees that assist in determining Commission proposals and increased lobbying. The Regional Authorities and Assemblies have since established the Irish Regions’ Office in Brussels in an effort to raise their profile and strengthen their links with Brussels.

The obligations imposed by the EU’s policies have also increased the resource pressures on local authorities. The capacity of these bodies to respond to such pressures needs to be considered, as there is a risk that local authorities are being asked to take on responsibilities, particularly, in the spheres of environmental and

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4 At the national level a number of new institutions and procedures have been adopted over time to cope with the EU. Various civil service and Oireachtas committees have been put in place. In 2002 both an Interdepartmental Co-ordinating Committee on EU Affairs and a permanent Oireachtas sub-committee for the scrutiny of EU legislation were established. Further institutional innovations have included the establishment of a European Structural Funds Information Unit (1996), the creation of a National Development Finance Agency (2003). A National Forum on Europe was established in the wake of the first referendum on the Nice Treaty and has enhanced understanding of EU issues as well as fostering discussion and debate.
waste management policy, for which they lack sufficient personnel and money to ensure a successful outcome.

The partnership approach stressed by EU regional policy approaches and championed by successive Irish governments has been adopted at various levels. Vertical partnerships fostered at national level have emerged, horizontal partnerships at national and sub-national levels have been put in place and ‘micro-partnerships’ at a local level have been particularly successful. Although central government still plays a dominant role in the negotiation and financial management of the funds and in the organisation of the evaluation and monitoring processes there is now a willingness to recognise, acknowledge and include the valuable contribution of non-state actors at local, regional and national levels. In some areas of activity the partnership approach was being adopted without the stimulus of the Structural Funds but the funds have added financial and authoritative impetus. Ireland’s social partnership structures and processes led to the creation of fora for consultation and dialogue. These fora play a significant role in fostering and harnessing social capital and formalising the role of civil society. Thus, a number of epistemic communities and advocacy networks have emerged and play a significant role in policy making, with their role gradually being formalised within the policy-making structures. However, these networks cannot be said to have emerged as a direct result of Europeanization but they have been influenced and often supported by the process.

Reference was made in the previous section to Ireland’s strong civic culture and Europeanization has further helped to reinforce Ireland’s this. The opportunities inherent in some EU programmes have given financial support and ensured legitimacy for local groups. The changing emphases in EU policy also supported the thrust of civic engagement in Ireland. EU anti-poverty programmes, for example, emphasised empowerment, participation and inclusion while the LEADER programme supported innovation and a territorial approach. Such themes were the mantra of Ireland’s civic community. Conversely, the positions articulated by organisations ‘chimed in with aspects of European economic policy’ (Larray 2002: 17) such as the EU employment policy articulated in the mid 1990s. Thus developments within Ireland’s civil society and the EU’s policy arena were mutually reinforcing.

4.2 Resistance to Change

Europeanization has been a positive process for Ireland but there has been resistance to various aspects of the process. Central government, while adopting an innovative approach in some spheres has shown dogged resistance to change in others. Local government has not specifically resisted change but neither have local authorities actively embraced change. The reaction among the general public has also been mixed with resistance evident on some issues. The deconcentration of power and resources continues to be a source of contention and successive Irish governments have resisted any real devolution. Initial attempts at involvement of sub-national actors in the implementation of EU regional policy were judged by Brussels to be ‘cosmetic’. Even yet, the limited functions and financing allocated to the Regional Assemblies and Authorities are indicative of central government’s continuing reluctance to devolve real power.
5. Conclusion

The Irish case highlights that the relationship between Europeanization and regionalism is far more complex than much of the existing literature on Europeanization and its impact on regions suggests. To understand the impact of Europeanization on regionalism in Ireland we have demonstrated that it is important to examine the nature of the domestic context, including size and demography, political culture, political and administrative institutions and structures, as well as civil society. In so doing we suggest that Ireland’s adaptation to Europe has been largely pragmatic and piecemeal, reflecting a willingness to change but within the limits of what is politically possible and nationally acceptable. The evidence examined, namely the development of new institutions and policy change, highlights how Ireland has responded to Europe, but also suggests that many of the changes reflect a desire to please Brussels, with limited commitment to embedding regionalism and building stronger and more democratic regional structures. However, whilst the limits of regionalism are all too apparent, change has led to the emergence of new patterns of governance, reflecting the growth of new types of partnerships, many of which involve public, private and civic actors. The emergence of such governance arrangements reflects new ways of approaching public policy problems and developing appropriate solutions.

In terms of our original theoretical framework, we draw on historical and social institutionalism to contextualise and understand the impact of Europeanization on Irish sub-national government and governance. This enables us to reflect on the context in which social learning takes place and the degree, which the pre-existing structures, institutions and practices affect, such learning. Europeanization has led to structural changes at regional level, but these changes are more a response to particular Commission concerns and requirements than any national commitment to embedding regionalism. The new structures are neither financially nor administratively anchored, nor have they been given the reinforcement of popular franchise. There is very little public interest in, commitment to or understanding of such institutional arrangements, which are largely seen as a response to the exigencies of EU policy. In the Irish case, the successful reform of local government structures and the development of new types of partnerships, have militated against the development of regionalism.

Ireland’s adaptation to Europeanization has been politically pragmatic and institutionally limited reflecting the national level factors discussed above. Within the regions there has been evidence of mobilization of actors and these actors have become increasing engaged and competent in working with Europe. However, the structures that have been put in place are fragile and not embedded at a societal level thereby limiting their potential for future development.
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Appendix 1: NUTS II and NUTS III