

THE FUTURE OF WALES IN EUROPE

Rachel Minto* and Kevin Morgan†

A. INTRODUCTION

Wales' post-Brexit European strategy is currently under construction, as part of a wider international relations strategy, spearheaded by a new Minister for International Relations and the Welsh Language, Eluned Morgan.¹ In this contribution, we explore Wales' existing three-pronged approach to engagement in Europe and highlight the ways in which Wales needs to adapt and tailor its approach for a post-Brexit context. We argue that a successful post-Brexit strategy should address two key issues. Firstly, it must deliberately ensure a clear coherence between domestic and external agendas. Secondly, it must actively engage with actors beyond government, providing financial and organisational support for this engagement. Attentive consideration of these issues is imperative in the shadow of both severe capacity constraints and the reconfigured legal and political relationship between the UK, Wales and the EU post-Brexit.

B. THE INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS ACTIVITY OF SUB-STATES: WALES IN EUROPE

The European Union (EU) serves as a valuable political arena for sub-state actors, affording them possibilities of policy influence, capacity building, profile raising and partnership formation, outwith the structure of the Member State of which they are part. Whilst far from a 'Europe of the Regions', the raft of Regional offices in Brussels is one indication of the hospitality of the wider European political system to the representation of sub-state interests. The UK is no exception, with Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland holding long-established outposts in Brussels, as the physical hub or "front door" for their European activity. This international relations activity of sub-states (known as paradiplomacy)² is predominantly expressed through non-legal tools and mechanisms. Indeed, as is the dominant convention within devolved or federal state structures,³ Wales does not hold legal powers over any outward-facing policy area, including the external dimension of devolved policy areas;⁴ and so promotes its policies and priorities in Europe through less formal methods.

Whatever the nature of the UK's withdrawal from the EU, Europe will remain a crucial site for Wales, as part of its wider international activity. Wales' post-Brexit position in Europe will be determined to

* Research Fellow on Brexit and UK devolved politics, Wales Governance Centre, School of Law and Politics, Cardiff University

† Professor of Governance and Development, School of Geography and Planning, Cardiff University

a large extent by the future relationship established between the UK and the EU. Unsurprisingly, this is the case at present, with the Welsh relationship shaped by the twin phenomena of the UK's EU membership and devolution.⁵ At the time of writing, consensus around this future UK-EU relationship remains elusive; however, the Welsh Government has been consistent in advocating close European ties,⁶ including continued membership of the Customs Union, participation in the Single Market, and participation in key EU programmes, particularly Erasmus+, Creative Europe and Horizon Europe.⁷

If Brexit takes place, it will see Wales become a de facto Region of a non-EU Member State, with very restricted opportunities for access and influence in Europe. This leaves Wales particularly exposed given the weakness of the UK's intergovernmental relations structures in affording Welsh influence,⁸ which is further compounded by Wales' poor bargaining hand (particularly when compared to the other devolved nations). If Wales wants to influence forthcoming EU programmes, and gain access to European funding, partnership and investment opportunities, it will require deeper and stronger alliances within Europe.⁹

C. HOW MIGHT WALES' PROFILE CHANGE IN EUROPE POST-BREXIT?

Wales' activity in Europe revolves around three strands:¹⁰ an outpost in Brussels; participation in European networks; and bilateral partnerships. As the UK leaves the EU, Wales must refresh each strand to reflect new political and institutional frameworks, revised domestic agendas and significant capacity limitations with which Wales must contend post-Brexit.

(1) Wales' representation in Brussels

As an international office, the key functions of the Welsh Government's representation abroad are intelligence gathering, policy influence, profile raising and partnership building.¹¹ Welsh Government officials also enjoy the benefits of full accreditation as part of the UK's Permanent Representation to the EU. Notwithstanding this formal accreditation, as a Regional representation, Welsh Government officials do not have the level of privileged access and inclusion as their British counterparts. As such, Wales' international office in Brussels already has to work harder to develop and maintain relationships in Europe beyond the formal structures available to Member State actors. Brexit will only increase the significance of these relationships.

Wales' presence in Brussels has undergone something of a transformation as the devolution process has unfolded. Today, the Welsh Government is co-located with Wales Higher Education Brussels, the National Assembly for Wales and, until March 2018, the Welsh Local Government Association. Although all based in Wales House, these organisations operate as distinct entities with limited formal cooperation between them. This is in stark contrast to the original, pre-devolution model of Welsh representation in Brussels – through the Wales European Centre (WEC) – which embodied a co-operative, partnership approach to promoting Wales and Welsh interests in Europe.

The WEC first opened its doors in 1992. Its activity supported and was supported by a number of sponsoring organisations, including the Welsh Development Agency and Welsh Local Government as leading sponsors and, beyond this, Training and Enterprise Councils, Welsh Universities and the Wales Council for Voluntary Action, to name but a few. This networked approach fostered a 'Team Wales' attitude and supported a variety of actors in their engagement with Europe. However, with the establishment of the Welsh Assembly Government, this model was displaced.

Notwithstanding its existing channels of access and influence that are independent from the UK's EU membership, post-Brexit, Wales will have to work harder to capitalise on the partnership and funding opportunities provided by Europe on the one hand and, on the other, to influence projects, programmes and policies which continue to take effect in Wales. This will necessitate the forging and maintenance of stronger formal and informal alliances, guided by clear objectives, and the role of Wales' office in Brussels will be key in this alliance-building process.

In the shadow of post-Brexit capacity constraints, Wales' representation in Brussels ought to fully engage with actors beyond government so as to represent, support and be supported by a broad base of Welsh organisations. This broader-based partnership model is not to detract from the key role for Government, but instead goes hand in hand with it.

(2) European networks

Networks – both formal and informal – are an integral part of the European political landscape. They serve as structures for information exchange, policy development, advocacy activity and collaborative working;¹² and, unsurprisingly, participation in European networks is an important pillar of Wales' European activity. Post-Brexit, the significance of these networks as "gateways to Europe" will increase.

As it stands, the Welsh Government participates in a range of pan-European networks. Some are extensive in reach and focus, such as the Conference of Peripheral and Maritime Regions (CPMR), which even embraces North Africa and works across a range of policy areas. Others, are smaller and more focused, such as the Vanguard Initiative for innovation and smart specialisation in industry, which Wales has recently joined; and the Four Motors for Europe, which aims to promote the knowledge economy at the regional level, in which Wales is an Associate Member.

Once again, this dimension of European activity is not reserved for the Government. Instead, organisations across the piece use European networks to support their domestic activity. For example, the National Assembly for Wales participates in the Conference of European Regional Legislative Assemblies (CALRE), the WLGA is a member of the Council of European Municipalities and Regions (CEMR) and Cardiff is a member of EUROCITIES. Then there are numerous Welsh civil society organisations (such as Women's Equality Network Wales through the European Women's Lobby) and trade unions (such as the National Farmers' Union Cymru through COPA-COGECA, the Committee of Professional Agricultural Organisations - General Committee for Agricultural Cooperation in the European Union), all of which are networked into Europe.¹³

Participation in European networks generates multiple dividends, enabling Welsh players from across the board to access and exchange information, to seek policy influence, to build and maintain strategic partnerships and to secure investment. Although Brexit may see the UK and Wales lose their privileged status as full members of some of these networks, there have been some clear indications that European Regions and organisations would like to maintain their relationship with their UK-based counterparts.¹⁴ But given the financial commitment required, participation must necessarily be selective, with decisions to invest (and perhaps disinvest) in these European networks carefully aligned with domestic priorities which may themselves shift with Brexit.

(3) Bilateral relationships

The Welsh Government cultivates formal and informal relationships with Regions across Europe; with this activity being an important part of the work undertaken from the Brussels Office. The longest standing of these more formal relationships is with Brittany, through a Memorandum of Understanding signed in 2004 and then refreshed in 2018. As Brexit restricts Wales' access and influence in Europe, these bilateral relationships will become ever more important, furnishing Wales with concrete opportunities for collaboration and exchange. Indeed, since the EU Referendum, Wales has placed more emphasis upon these relationships, as a complement to its networking

activity. It is forging a series of bilateral alliances with regions with which it feels a sense of strong common identity and mutual interest. Beyond Brittany, these bilateral alliances include the Basque Country, Galicia, Nord Holland and Flanders among others.

Notwithstanding the symbolic value of these relationships (which has some significance in and of itself), any strategic alliance must align with domestic priorities and, in turn, involve Welsh actors beyond Government. Looking at the Memorandum of Understanding signed with Brittany on 11 January 2018, it committed the two parties to cooperate in the following ways:¹⁵ to strengthen economic cooperation, including identifying opportunities for business-to-business exchanges; to develop cooperation in the field of education and training (within the bounds of competence), including youth exchanges; to create relationships for exchange between cultural networks; to share and promote best practice regarding language planning; and to develop exchanges of experiences and information in all fields of mutual interest, including cybersecurity, sustainable development, renewable energy, tourism (particularly water sports and sailing activities), and the development of trade in the agrifood area.

Although this appears a sound framework for cooperation – speaking as it does to some of Wales’ economic, social and cultural priorities – it is only meaningful insofar as tangible benefits are derived from it. This will necessitate the design and implementation of various programmes of work, implicating a wide pool of diverse actors. If this is a template for the other bilateral alliances, it raises the question as to whether the Welsh Government has the institutional capacity (specifically, the officer expertise and financial resources) to deliver across a range of bilateral alliances. This throws the prioritisation of bilateral relationships into sharp focus.

D. THE WAY AHEAD

The re-imagination of Wales’ future in Europe – as a Region of a non-EU Member State – must be carefully aligned with the three strands of existing activity: Wales’ representation in Brussels; membership of European networks; and bilateral relationships. In the context of severe capacity constraints, it is imperative that the Welsh Government remains acutely attentive to the coherence between its internal and external agendas, and embraces a stronger co-production ethos to work more closely with its partners in business, universities, civil society organizations and beyond. This collaborative, network-based approach will deliver a double dividend: it will help Wales to draw on all its national resources and it will send a compelling signal that international engagement is a matter for the whole nation and not just its government.

Notes

¹ E Royles “Charting a course for Welsh international relations” (2019) Click on Wales, Institute of Welsh Affairs (30 April 2019), available at: <https://www.iwa.wales/click/2019/04/charting-a-course-for-welsh-international-relations/>

² See e.g. F Aldecoa and M Keating (eds) *Paradiplomacy in Action: The Foreign Relations of Subnational Governments* (1999) London: Frank Cass; A Lecours “Paradiplomacy: Reflections on the foreign policy and international relations of regions” (2002) *International Negotiation* vol 7(1) 91–114.

³ Belgium is a notable exception.

⁴ E Royles “Sub-state diplomacy: Understanding the international opportunity structures” (2017) *Regional and Federal Studies* vol 27(4) 393–416.

⁵ R Minto, J Hunt, M Keating and L McGowan “A changing UK in a changing Europe: The UK state between the European Union and Devolution” (2016) *Political Quarterly* vol 87(2) 174-178; J Hunt, R Minto and J Woolford “Winners and Losers: The EU Referendum Vote and its Consequences for Wales” (2016) *Journal of Contemporary European Research* vol 12(4) 824-34.

⁶ J Hunt and R Minto “Between intergovernmental relations and paradiplomacy: Wales and the Brexit of the regions” (2017) *British Journal of Politics and International Relations* vol 19(4) 647-666.

⁷ Welsh Government and Plaid Cymru “Securing Wales’ Future: Transition from the European Union to a new relationship with Europe”, (2017) White Paper (24 January 2017).

⁸ e.g. J Hunt and R Minto “Between intergovernmental relations and paradiplomacy” (2017).

⁹ K Morgan “Wales in a Post-Brexit World” (2018), Click on Wales, Institute of Welsh Affairs (4 September 2018), available at: <https://www.iwa.wales/click/2018/09/wales-in-a-post-brexit-world/>

¹⁰ R Minto “Meanwhile in Brussels...” (2018) chapter in *Brexit, Devolution and Wales Report for UK in a Changing Europe Initiative* (Autumn 2018) 14-17, available at: https://www.cardiff.ac.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0004/1449040/English_Brexit.pdf

¹¹ J Hunt and R Minto “Between intergovernmental relations and paradiplomacy” (2017).

¹² P Copeland and R Minto “Accessing European opportunity structures in the shadow of Brexit” (2019) Paper presented at Jean Monnet Centre Seminar, University of Manchester, November 2018.

¹³ R Minto “Re-wiring European networks? Continuity and change for feminist civil society post-Brexit” (2019), Paper presented at the European Conference on Politics and Gender, Amsterdam, July 2019.

¹⁴ CPMR, “Cardiff Declaration”, (2017) Political Statement, Approved by the CPMR General Assembly, 19-20 October 2017, Helsinki (Finland), available here: <https://cpmr.org/wpdm-package/cardiff-declaration-on-brexit/?wpdmdl=14547&ind=1508745275771> and R Minto “Re-wiring European networks?” (2019).

¹⁵ Welsh Government “FM Visit To Brittany 10-12 January 2018” (2018) written statement (18 January 2018), available at: <https://gov.wales/written-statement-fm-visit-brittany-10-12-january-2018>