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Drivers of Consensus: Responses to Brexit in Germany, France, Ireland and Poland

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ABSTRACT

Brexit was potentially a highly divisive issue for the EU27 with states having different relationships with the UK. And yet in the period from the UK’s referendum in 2016 until the exit of the UK in 2020, the EU27 maintained a remarkable degree of unity. This article examines relative EU27 unity in the face of the Brexit process. The article is based on interviews and other research on four selected EU member states: Germany, France, Poland and Ireland. The article considers four different factors drawn from the theoretical literature that might account for EU27 unity and then examines how they played out in each of the four states. We then compare across the cases and conclude that they all shaped national responses to Brexit, but that how they mattered and the patterns of effects were differentiated among the cases. This points towards the importance of seeing Brexit as a multifaceted phenomenon.

The vote to leave the European Union (EU) on 23 June 2016 was the culmination of a long-term trend of the politicisation of European integration within UK politics (Usherwood 2018; Taggart 2020). As Brexit unfolded after the referendum, the process effectively engulfed UK politics and was marked by division and conflict. When the ‘Brexit shock’ (Lane 2016) reverberated across Europe many observers discussed the UK vote as a possible harbinger of similar dynamics of politicisation and contestation in other EU member states (see Oliver 2016; Rosamond 2016) and even of disintegrative tendencies in the EU (see Webber 2019; Wellings 2021). This shock was keenly felt in Germany, where Brexit was seen as a threat to European integration and thus to a central pillar of the country’s international orientation (von Weitershausen 2017). Consequently, the main priority in Germany’s response to Brexit was to secure the survival of the EU and to keep the remaining 27 member states together (Heidbreder 2017). However, this was dependent on the responses to Brexit in other EU members which
often had different interests in a new UK relationship (Oliver 2018) and divergent conceptions of how European integration should develop.

Still, what was striking about the period between the referendum decision in 2016 and the UK’s exit from the EU in January 2020 was that the EU27 maintained a highly consensual position on Brexit throughout the negotiations (Jensen and Kelstrup 2019; Laffan 2019). This unity of the EU27 is surprising for at least three reasons. First, Brexit has diverse political and economic impacts on different member states, and we would accordingly expect conflicting preferences. Second, EU institutions and member states were not exactly famed for their cohesiveness in managing the crises of the recent past (Schuette 2021, 1). Finally, it wasn’t just that the EU27 remained united on high-level objectives such as protecting the Single Market (Laffan 2019). They also held a common line on specific and relatively demanding positions, over a protracted period, including the Northern Ireland Protocol and on an a relatively ‘hard’ negotiating stance (Chopin and Lequesne 2020, 4; Walter 2021).

This puzzle motivates the objective of the paper to contribute to emerging scholarship about how we can account for EU27 unity in the Brexit process despite powerful arguments as to why we should have seen disunity. To this end, we explore the political drivers behind the responses to Brexit in a comparative analysis of four EU member states – Germany, France, Poland and Ireland.¹ The selection of country cases follows the analysis of Durrant, Stojanovic, and Lloyd (2018) which suggests that the EU27 can be divided into three groups in the Brexit context. Germany and France are selected as representative of the ‘pro-integration core’ (Durrant, Stojanovic, and Lloyd 2018, 4), motivated by preserving the unity and stability of the EU. They are also the largest and most powerful of the remaining EU member states and can thus be expected to having played a central role in shaping the EU27 response to Brexit. Ireland is chosen as part of a group of ‘traditional UK allies’ which also includes the Netherlands, Scandinavian member states, and the Baltics and who are motivated, in part, by a preference for a close economic relationship with the UK. Finally, Poland is selected as a representative of the so-called Visegrád Group (also including the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Slovakia) whose preferences are for a close relationship with the UK on trade and security, the protection of citizens’ rights in the UK, and a favourable financial settlement (Durrant, Stojanovic, and Lloyd 2018, 4). While our claim is not that our country cases are fully representative of all viewpoints on Brexit in the EU27, we still contend that our selection covers a broad range of the most influential member state positions in the Brexit process (see Kassim and Usherwood 2017).

The case studies are based on elite interviews in the four member states and on publicly available sources, such as government documents, think tank reports and media coverage. Data was gathered between March 2017
and April 2019, with five research visits during this period from a multi-member research team, as well as two supplementary interviews in 2020 and 2022, resulting in 20 elite interviews. Our interviewees were members of parliament working on European policy from different political parties, government officials as well as European policy experts in academia and at think tanks (see the online appendix for details). Interviews were semi-structured and covered the topics of leadership, strategies, and domestic political factors. We also used public statements of political actors to fill in gaps in our interviews and to broaden the political and ideological range of our sources. The timeline covers the period of the Brexit negotiations over the withdrawal agreement which started with the triggering of Article 50 in March 2017 and ends with the exit of the UK in January 2020. For each country case, we explore the role of four drivers of member state responses to Brexit that we draw from wider theories of European integration.

**Drivers of Member State Responses to Brexit**

The relative unity of the EU27 in their approach to the Brexit negotiations has struck observers as puzzling (Jensen and Kelstrup 2019). What explains this unexpected unity? Existing literature argues that it is a combined product of three main factors. First, it is true that Brexit imposes differential costs on member states (Laffan 2019; Chopin and Lequesne 2020, 4). However, protecting the integrity of the Single Market and ensuring that the UK was not perceived as getting favourable treatment was considered of greater importance than domestic interests (Jensen and Kelstrup 2019, 33; Durrant, Stojanovic, and Lloyd 2018). Existing accounts argue that this same calculation led to a post-referendum boost in public support for the EU (Walter 2021) and a muting of hard Euroscepticism among key parties (Costello 2020).

Second, EU institutions mattered (see Schuette 2021; Laffan 2019, 15; Jensen and Kelstrup 2019). Although the Commission’s Article 50 Taskforce (TF50) led negotiations, it did so in ways that were highly consultative, transparent, and nurtured trust (Laffan 2019, 18). Member states set the agenda, had to approve any ultimate agreement, and decided whether sufficient progress had been made (Laffan 2019). Existing literature also highlights how delegating negotiating authority to the TF50 allowed the EU27 to negotiate with a single voice (Schuette 2021), limiting the possibility of bilateral negotiations with the UK.

Third, literature focusing on framing and identity observes a dual process wherein Brexit deepens in-group identities among the EU27, and where the UK increasingly comes to be discriminated against as a member of an out-group (Jensen and Kelstrup 2019, 30; Laffan 2019). Simply put, if the UK was the EU’s ‘awkward partner’, Brexit negotiations positioned it as an
awkward non-partner. At the same time, EU institutions and member states consolidated a sense of being an in-group with a strong joint purpose, ‘if not a common identity’ (Jensen and Kelstrup 2019, 34). Framing is an important part of this perspective. EU institutional and member state actors were quick to strategically frame themselves to the public as united in the aftermath of Brexit (Šimunjak and Calandro 2020) a rhetorical device, according to Laffan, that soon morphed into a reality (2019). Other important frames were ‘Brexit as an existential threat’ and the commitment of remaining member states to fundamental EU principles and values (Laffan 2019; Jensen and Kelstrup 2019, 35).

Building on this existing literature, this article makes three key contributions. First, the literature reviewed here tends to concur that EU27 unity is a combined product of preferences to protect the single market, institutional factors, identity and framing. However, it has not yet taken up the task of unpacking how the different factors combined to enable EU27 unity. Through a comparative analysis of Germany, France, Poland, and Ireland, this article can show which factors were more or less important and how they worked together in driving consensus. Second, while the literature on German hegemony and leadership in the EU is substantial (see especially Bulmer and Paterson 2013), surprisingly little has been written about it in the context of Brexit (see Bulmer 2018; Krotz and Schramm 2021 for notable exceptions). This article addresses this gap by analysing the potential importance of German leadership in the production of EU27 unity. Third, existing literature tends to move very quickly from the acknowledgement that member states have heterogenous preferences on Brexit, to the claim that these preferences are irrelevant in the face of preferences to protect the Single Market. Our analysis provides space to reconsider the importance of national preferences, other than those related to the Single Market, in the consensus-building process.

Along these lines, the article explores the role of four factors that may have contributed to the ability of the EU27 to maintain unity in the Brexit process. These factors come from different theoretical perspectives on European integration – liberalism, realism, institutionalism, and constructivism – and represent both top-down and bottom-up drivers of EU consensus. Specifically, the theories foreground the possible impact of domestic politics, German leadership, principal-agent relations and norms and identity on member state responses to Brexit.

The focus on domestic politics as a driver of European integration was developed by Bulmer (1983) and made up an important component of Moravcsik’s (1998) liberal intergovernmentalist (LI) approach that focuses on the preferences of powerful societal, but mainly economic, actors in structuring member state interests on the EU level. The increasing politicisation of the EU after the demise of the permissive consensus combined with the growth
of Eurosceptic forces across member states has seen a resurgence of interest in domestic politics through postfunctionalist approaches (Hooghe and Marks 2009). Such approaches take the role of domestic politics more seriously than LI (Jensen and Snaith 2016, 1308), focusing on public opinion, party competition, and identity. They recognise that economic groups are not always the tightest constraint on state action (Forster 1998, 353). From a domestic politics perspective, therefore, member state responses to Brexit will be driven by the mobilisation of domestic demands and concerns (Moravcsik 2018). If such demands and concerns are strongly politicised and point in different directions across the EU27, this perspective would expect EU disunity. In contrast, if domestic actors support a common EU line or are weakly mobilised and leave governments large discretion in responding to Brexit, domestic politics can contribute to explaining EU unity.

Realist explanations of European integration, in turn, would stress the importance of hegemonic leadership. While such leadership has often been seen to be provided by the Franco-German tandem (Krotz and Schild 2013), Germany has moved centre stage of EU expectations of leadership due to its enhanced economic and political power position since the end of the Cold War (Paterson 2011; Webber 2019), and especially following the Eurozone crisis, during which the Franco-German engine stalled (see Schoeller 2017). Although Germany has often been reluctant to fulfil such expectations, it has shown sometimes controversial leadership in recent crises, including the Eurozone and migration crisis (Schoeller 2017), contingent on domestic politics (Bulmer and Paterson 2019). Similarly, in the case of Brexit, other EU member states as well as the UK, expected Germany to set the tone of the EU27 response (Oppermann 2019). A realist focus on German leadership can contribute to explaining EU unity to the extent that Germany was willing to provide such leadership in building EU consensus and if Germany’s position was significant in shaping how other member state governments formulated their responses to Brexit.

From the new institutionalist perspective of the principal-agent approach, moreover, EU governance can be analysed in terms of the delegation of responsibilities from one or more principals to different agents (Pollack 1997; Kassim and Menon 2003). The approach explores the discretion of agents as well as the ability of principals to monitor and control their agents. In European integration theory, this links in with neofunctionalist approaches that emphasise the agency of supranational actors in driving European integration forward (Haas 1958). In the Brexit case, the principal-agent perspective emphasises the fact that member states delegated the authority to negotiate a withdrawal agreement with the UK on behalf of the EU to the European Commission. While the Commission worked closely together with the Council, and while the European Parliament and Court of Justice also had important roles to play (see Schuette 2021, 1143–
1145), we decided to focus on the European Commission because its responsibility to lead the EU negotiations is most directly relevant to our research interest, which is to explore possible drivers of member state unity rather than give a full account of EU politics in the Brexit process. Along these lines, the principal-agent perspective can contribute to explaining EU unity if member states accepted and supported the role of the Commission in encouraging a common EU line.

Constructivist approaches to European integration, finally, stress collective ideational factors, foregrounding the role of norms and identity (Christiansen, Jørgensen, and Wiener 2001). In this view, convergent norms and discourses across Europe facilitate institution-building at the EU level. Moreover, national actors become socialised in a set of EU norms that support the process of European integration (Checkel 2005). In other words, constructivism highlights the Europeanisation (see Featherstone and Radaelli 2003) of norms and identities. At the same time, Brexit, has the potential to weaken EU norms and identity and to disrupt the ongoing socialisation dynamics that support the wider integration process. The constructivist perspective can thus contribute to explaining EU unity in the Brexit process to the extent that national actors critique Brexit as a threat to EU norms and identity and frame their responses to Brexit in terms of countering this threat (see Laffan 2019). In the following section we present, in turn, the results of the four case studies.

**Responses to Brexit: Germany, France, Ireland, Poland**

**Germany**

In view of its role in recent EU crisis management, Germany’s response to Brexit should be a critical influence on the approach of the EU27. Given Germany’s economic interests, some UK negotiators, in both the May and Johnson governments, expected that ‘divide and rule’ negotiation tactics can be successful (Durrant, Stojanovic, and Lloyd 2018; Martill and Staiger 2021) and that Germany would be open to special bilateral arrangements with the UK (Galpin 2016). This was also seen as a threat to EU27 unity in the EU (Barigazzi and Cooper 2018) and among EU member states (Guardian 2017). In the event, however, Brexit galvanised Germany’s ‘European vocation’ (Paterson 2010) and rallied the country around the European integration project. Consequently, Germany became one of the architects of unity and consensus among the EU27 in the Brexit process.

**Domestic Politics**

In the domestic arena, Brexit has halted and partly reversed recent trends towards a ‘constraining dissensus’ in German politics which was most
visible during the Eurozone and refugee crises (Oppermann 2019). Specifically, the Brexit process became a focal point that mitigated domestic contestation around European integration in three closely related ways. First, it reinvigorated the traditional pro-EU consensus at the centre of German party politics and provided it with a new rationale. Indeed, interviewees in the German Bundestag attested to a broad consensus among the centre-right and centre-left that Germany’s priority in the Brexit negotiations must be to preserve the unity and stability of the EU27. In almost identical terms, the Christian Democrats, Social Democrats and Greens supported a ‘hard line’ with the UK to prevent a further disintegration of the EU, even if that involved short-term economic costs for Germany. Moreover, what helped sustain this consensus was the close involvement of the Bundestag in shaping Germany’s position (Interviews #1, #4) as well as broad consultations with powerful interests in society (Interview #3). Second, Brexit muted the Eurosceptic voices at the left and right extremes of the German party system. For the Left party, Brexit presented a strategic dilemma because it brought out tensions between the party’s soft Eurosceptic and internationalist agendas. As a result, the party remained ambivalent about the issue (Interview #5). The right-wing populist Alternative for Germany (AfD) was divided between pragmatists who deplored the exit of a Eurosceptic member state and more ideological voices who celebrated Brexit as an example for Germany to follow (Spiegel online 2016). Ultimately, how Brexit unfolded made the party leadership tone down the party’s support in its 2019 European Parliament election manifesto for a German exit from the EU (‘Dexit’) if its reform proposals were obstructed (FAZ 2019; Telegraph 2019). Third, as the Brexit process unfolded, there was a marked uptick in public support for the EU. According to Eurobarometer data, the shares of Germans who hold a positive image of the EU and who tend to trust the EU have both increased by about 20 percentage points between May 2016 and June 2019 (European Commission 2016, 2019).

German Leadership
The domestic consensus on Germany’s priorities enabled the German government to take the lead in securing a common EU line in the Brexit negotiations. Indeed, Berlin became a diplomatic hub where the positions of member states were coordinated and where the Commission’s negotiating strategy was discussed (Interview #3). The Merkel government engaged in multiple diplomatic activities to consult with other EU27 governments and made a point of touring the European capitals to foster ‘understanding and learning from each other’ (Bundeskanzleramt 2016). German leadership was instrumental in shaping the basic parameters of the EU approach to Brexit, including the timetable and sequencing of the negotiations (Interview #3). The Merkel government placed particular emphasis on maintaining a
close dialogue with its French counterpart and was credited with defusing possible Franco-German conflicts (Interview #4), for example regarding the Brexit timetable or how much of a priority avoiding a disorderly Brexit should be (Bourgeot 2019). Within days of the Brexit referendum, Merkel invited French President François Hollande and Italian Prime Minister Matteo Renzi to a ‘mini summit’ in Berlin in order to ‘set a signal that we stand together’ (Zeit online 2016). German leadership thus was a central ingredient to the unity the EU27 were able to demonstrate in the Brexit process.

**Principal-Agent Relations**
The German approach to Brexit was premised on the view that the European Commission must play an essential role in delivering a united EU position vis-à-vis the UK. To that purpose, the German government was a staunch supporter of delegating responsibility for the Brexit negotiations to the Commission, which it saw as the best safeguard against UK attempts to divide the EU27, and argued against a greater role of the European Council (Interview #3). Germany consistently rebuffed UK advances to enter into direct bilateral negotiations, reminding the UK government that ‘the Commission is leading those negotiations’ (Merkel, cited in: Reuters 2018). At the same time, Berlin insisted on close Commission oversight to ensure that the negotiations did not depart from German priorities. Specifically, the German government and parliament took steps to keep up with Commission thinking throughout the Brexit process. For example, this involved Michel Barnier reporting back to the Bundestag committee on EU affairs as well as informal lines of communication between Bundestag members and Sabine Weyand, the Commission’s German deputy chief negotiator for the Brexit process (Interview #2).

**Norms and Identity**
In Germany’s response to Brexit, ideational factors often take centre stage. German actors see Brexit first and foremost as a threat to European unity, and their approach to Brexit is driven more than anything by a normative commitment to defend that unity. Thus, for foreign minister Heiko Maas, the only positive that came out of the Brexit process was the ‘unity and consensus between the 27 member states of the European Union’ which he described as critical for a ‘strong and sovereign Europe’ (Maas 2019a, 8599). The key role of ideational factors was perhaps most evident in Germany’s support for Ireland on the Irish border. While some in the German debate anticipated that including the issue in the first stage of negotiations risked obstructing the talks, such concerns were easily outweighed by a normative commitment to the European project (Interview #1). Germany would not, in the words of a Bundestag member, ‘sacrifice our friendship to
Ireland’ (Leikert 2019, 8601). For Germany, siding with Ireland was a matter of identity, unity and solidarity:

We are strong when we stand together. During the Brexit negotiations, all 27 Member States agreed on a common position – and stood by it. This unity includes full solidarity with Ireland. […] It is a matter of principle, a question of identity for the European Union. (Maas 2019b)

France

In the post-Maastricht era France’s ‘permissive consensus’ on European integration has given way to increasing domestic politicisation of the EU issue (Hutter and Kerscher 2014). This has involved two highly contested EU referendums, on the Maastricht treaty and the Constitutional treaty, the outcome of the latter having derailed a major integration project. France also has a significant Eurosceptic party, the right-wing populist Front National (since 2018: Rassemblement National), which mobilises identity-based opposition against European integration. Against this backdrop, Brexit could have been expected to reinforce the existing ‘constraining dissensus’ about Europe in France, including demands to follow the UK example, which should have made it more difficult to agree to a common EU response to Brexit. Still, France has, by and large, remained committed to EU27 unity in the Brexit process.

Domestic Politics

The impact of domestic politics on the French response to Brexit divides between the Hollande and Macron presidencies. Hollande’s presidency was in its dog days in the immediate aftermath of the UK’s referendum and Brexit was an issue that played into the hands of Marine Le Pen. After the presidential election in April/May 2017, and particularly the debate between Le Pen and Macron after the first round, her position on withdrawal from the Euro appeared fundamentally flawed and untenable. The party has not since 2017 used the EU issue strategically (Chopin and Lequesne 2020). Indeed, the chief architect of the policy of withdrawal from the Euro, Florian Philippot, left the party and formed his own party, Les Patriotes. The 2017 election can be seen as an event which muted Euroscepticism. Macron’s election gave him the domestic capacity to pursue his EU agenda whereas Hollande had been stymied by his own party with a group of Socialist Party deputies voting against their own government. Macron’s presidency, while it has faced difficulties, has therefore been characterised by a largely pro-EU agenda given his own position and presidential mandate. (Hard) Euroscepticism has been largely neutralised through Le Pen’s failures. This tendency has been reinforced by the collapse of Mélenchon’s standing along with that of his party La France Insoumise and his brand of left soft
Euroscepticism, since the election. French public opinion has seen a rise in support for EU membership after Brexit, with support reaching a 26 year high in 2017 (Euractiv 2017b) which may have been crucial in neutralising this issue. Domestic politics have therefore not significantly constrained the French response to Brexit, enabling the government to maintain a relatively consistent position that emphasises EU interests and the need to resolve Brexit as soon as possible, whilst also pushing for certain domestic concerns to be taken into account. Notably, this includes the issue of fishing rights and quotas (Interview #6) and concessions for the Calais area (including opportunities for return to duty free shopping) as the main point of access at the new border with a non-EU country, seen by local Deputy Pierre-Henri Dumont as the key to a successful Brexit (Interview #7). There was also evidence of attempts to divert some of the financial activity from the City of London to Paris (Interviews #8 and #9). The general sense that although France didn’t want the UK to leave, it wanted to make some gains out of it was confirmed by the newly elected Deputy for the overseas constituency that includes the UK (Interview #10).

**German Leadership**

Germany’s approach and priorities have been an important factor in shaping France’s response to Brexit, in particular since Macron was elected President in May 2017, but largely as a component of an emphasis on Franco-German leadership. A key foreign policy objective of the Macron Presidency was to reinvigorate the Franco-German tandem (Macron 2017) after the slump in the relationship under his predecessor François Hollande (Drake 2018; Pertusot 2018) and there were, in the early stages, questions about Germany’s ability to lead effectively (Interview #11). While this did not make France uncritically follow Germany’s lead on Brexit, it shaped the French approach in two ways. First, Macron wanted to avoid Brexit driving a wedge between Germany and France and was keen to use Brexit to overcome divisions between the two countries which had opened up during the Eurocrisis regarding the management of the Euro. France therefore placed a high priority on coordinating its position with Germany and was willing to support Germany’s diplomatic efforts at engaging in broad consultations with the other EU member states over Brexit. Second, Macron saw Brexit as an opportunity to restore Franco-German leadership in the EU, rather than German leadership per se, in order to shape the post-Brexit trajectory of European integration (see Reuters 2017). To that purpose, France under Macron actively worked towards a strong Franco-German tandem in the Brexit process and tried to enlist German support for a range of EU initiatives, including, for example, on European defence and a Eurozone budget (Euractiv 2017a; Financial Times 2018). Overall, the French response to Brexit was informed by a strong desire to maintain a common front with
Germany, which was part and parcel of Macron’s broader strategic agenda for a powerful Franco-German alliance in the post-Brexit environment, binding the other 26 EU member states in (Interview #8).

**Principal-Agent Relations**
Given its intergovernmentalist leanings, France could have been expected to oppose delegating leadership of the Brexit negotiations to the European Commission. Indeed, it initially argued for a stronger role of the European Council in this process (Hollande 2016a). However, France’s reluctance to accept Commission leadership was defused by the decision of Commission President Jean Claude Juncker to appoint Michel Barnier as the EU’s chief negotiator on Brexit already in July 2016; as Deputy Pierre-Henri Dumont commented: ‘it was no accident he was chosen because he was French’ (Interview #7). As a former French foreign minister and European Commissioner for the internal market and services with a formidable reputation as the ‘bête noir de la City’, Barnier enjoyed a high standing among pro-EU French political elites in Paris who will have seen him as well-qualified for the role (Quatremer 2016), despite belonging to a different political camp to that of the President. His appointment reassured the French government that the Commission could be trusted with leading the negotiations under the guidance of the Council. Much like Sabine Weyand, the deputy chief negotiator, in Germany, Barnier could be seen in France as the guarantor that French positions would be heard during the Brexit negotiations.

**Norms and Identity**
Hollande’s initial reaction to Brexit was framed in terms of seeing it as a challenge to EU unity and stressing the importance of the UK paying a price for Brexit to prevent other exits: the fear of ‘contagion’ to other countries was described by Hubert Vedrine as an ‘obsession’ (Interview #9). Hollande (2016b) argued early in the process that France would defend its conception of Europe and its values, epitomised by what Vedrine called the ‘European religion’ of the Ministry of Finance, ‘la pensée Bercy’ (Interview #9). In early July 2016, the SGAE (General Secretariat for European Affairs), an inter-ministerial body run from the PM’s office, set up a task force to work on the French response to Brexit which identified Brexit as an opportunity to relaunch the European project (Léglise-Costa 2016; Vinocur and de la Baume 2017). Macron continued a hard line towards Brexit and was instrumental in shaping the responses to requests for extension when the UK government was unable to get the Withdrawal Agreement through Parliament. Macron’s pressure that resulted in the shortening of the extension of the timing of Brexit in October 2019 was very much in terms of his concerns that Brexit should not get in the way of relaunching the EU project.
**Ireland**

As the state with most to lose from Brexit, it would not be unreasonable to expect that Irish actors may have supported a softer negotiating stance with the UK. In the immediate aftermath of the 2016 Brexit referendum, Ireland’s unique position vis-à-vis Brexit led to concerns that the country might ‘peel off’ from the EU27 in the UK’s favour (Connelly 2017). Instead, Brexit created pressures for strengthened Irish unity with the EU27 and helped generate domestic party and public consensus on European integration (Dooley 2022).

**Domestic Politics**

Interviewees all acknowledged that protecting the Good Friday Agreement and Ireland’s place in the Single Market (which is crucial to its economic growth model) were the main goals driving Ireland’s Brexit position. Brexit has transformed what could have easily been a volatile three years of domestic Irish parliamentary politics into ‘the glue that has kept the government together’ (Interview #12). This was most clearly apparent in December 2017 when a political scandal risked a snap general election at a crucial point in the Brexit negotiations. Fianna Fáil leader Micheál Martin explicitly referenced the uncertainty surrounding Brexit as the reason for extending his party’s confidence and supply agreement with government party Fine Gael until 2020 (Fitzgerald 2018). As one Irish TD (Irish MP) put it, ‘if the sky fell in tonight [Fianna Fáil] couldn’t vote against the government because of Brexit’ (Interview #13). Interviews with TDs from a range of parties show that there is no party-political disagreement on Brexit, ‘there isn’t a TD in there [the Dáil (Irish Parliament)] that doesn’t support what Ireland is doing’ (Interview #12). One TD described the unifying effect of Brexit as creating a de-facto national unity government (Interview #13), while others emphasised how unthinkable it would be to politicise Brexit in the Dáil (Interview #14). While hard Euroscepticism is virtually absent in Irish politics, respondents from Government parties noted that TDs who could be described as Eurosceptic, especially on the left, have tended to keep these views quiet in the context of Brexit: ‘they’re not taking that out for a spin every day’ (Interview #15).

**German Leadership**

Many TDs interviewed emphasised the success Ireland has had in ‘[maximising its] strength through cooperation with … European colleagues’ (Interview #15). Since 2016, there were persistent diplomatic efforts by Irish political actors to convince German counterparts that Irish concerns deserve special attention in Brexit negotiations (Newstalk 2016). There were numerous trips to Germany by senior Irish political figures and
diplomats as well as delegations of German politicians visiting Ireland during this period. Most notably, a panel of 15 people from both sides of the border, and from protestant and catholic communities met with Angela Merkel and Leo Varadkar (Belfast Telegraph 2019) in April 2019. By the time the UK activated Article 50, Germany had offered concrete assurances that it would help Ireland protect its interests in Brexit negotiations (Duffy 2017). Germany has also featured as a key reference point. Most prominently, Ireland’s securing of the ‘United Ireland’ provision in advance of the first European Council Brexit summit in April 2017, was nick-named the ‘GDR clause’ in reference to the precedent of German reunification (Kenny 2017; Rankin 2017).

**Principal-Agent Relations**

Irish actors courted the European Commission to secure support for Irish concerns in negotiations with the UK. Issues surrounding the Irish border were one of three priorities enshrined in the Commission’s negotiating mandate. ‘Ireland is front and centre in thinking and framing of EU position on Brexit and we have to give the government some credit for that’ (Interview #16). Tony Connelly’s (2017) account of the Irish response highlights the concerted diplomatic efforts of the Irish to target the Commission and, in particular, Michel Barnier’s task force after the beginning of October 2016. Ireland secured privileged access and used its influence to appraise Commission officials of the complexities of the Northern Irish peace process, and the impact on Irish trade. Connelly quotes an Irish diplomat close to the negotiations, ‘the aim is that the EU position and Ireland’s position are one and the same on as many areas as possible, so that the idea of an Irish position disappears’ (Connelly 2017, 182). This is reflected in our interviews:

> ... as the Commission led, they led on behalf of our viewpoint. That’s been a huge success for Ireland. (Interview #15)

**Norms and Identity**

Interviews did not show the driving influence of collective ideational factors. However, actors did frequently use language of shared EU norms and values: ‘Europe is our destiny and has been since … we joined’ (Interview #12). The idea of the EU as Ireland’s destiny was also mentioned in a speech delivered in Germany by Leo Varadkar (Varadkar 2019). Brexit was criticised by Irish TDs as compromising European unity, Britain cannot be offered a ‘have your cake and eat it deal, because the threat of contagion is too real’ (Interview #17). In addition, most TDs spoke in terms of their European partners, colleagues, and ‘team Europe’ when discussing Brexit negotiations. Interactions with European counterparts were referenced by many, and Fine Gael TDs
are known to stress the importance of their party’s membership in the EPP in giving an ‘incredible interlock to the Irish position in terms of the European position’ (Interview #15). Some offered stronger sentiments than others: ‘… if tomorrow morning the problem is a Finnish problem or a Romanian problem we’d all be the same, we’re all family’ (Interview #12).

**Poland**

Poland had a strong economic interest in using its leverage to encourage the EU to adopt a flexible and accommodating approach with the UK in the Brexit negotiations. The Polish government’s top priority, however, was to protect the status and rights of the one-million strong Polish community in the UK. This concern left the Polish government with little room for manoeuvre to position itself as the main spokesman for an amicable negotiated ‘soft’ Brexit settlement. In the event, with one or two small exceptions, Poland never broke ranks from the EU negotiating consensus.

**Domestic Politics**

Domestic politics, and particularly inter-party domestic political competition, did not drive the Polish response to Brexit, in the sense that the government’s approach was not really politicised and contested between the administration and its opponents. The right-wing Law and Justice (PiS) party, Poland’s ruling party after Autumn 2015, was a Soft Eurosceptic grouping but regretted the UK’s 2016 Brexit vote, as it saw Britain in general, and the UK Conservative party in particular, as key strategic allies within the Union (Stankiewicz 2016). On the other hand, Poland’s main opposition grouping, the liberal-centrist Civic Platform (PO), cited Brexit as an example of how a country’s ruling elite could almost sleepwalk into leaving the EU the more that they moved away from the so-called European ‘mainstream’ (Bielecki 2019). However, this warning did not amount to criticism of Law and Justice’s approach to the EU’s Brexit negotiating strategy. For all the main parties, the key policy driver of their approach to the Brexit process was the rights and status of the Polish community in the UK. The political significance of this community was huge as virtually every family in Poland had friends or relatives that were living and working in the UK and could, therefore, have been potentially negatively affected by Britain leaving the Union (Bankier.pl 2018). According to the Polish Ambassador to the UK during the Brexit negotiations, ‘our main priority in (the) Brexit negotiations … was fully securing the rights of Poles in the UK. Indeed, we adopted a common European approach in the negotiations’. He also said that, ‘it was (also) important for us that, after Brexit, co-operation with the UK was as close as possible both from the Polish and EU perspectives’ (Interview #19).
German Leadership

For Poland, it was not so much a case of feeling pressure to give way to Germany that was one of the reasons why its approach to the Brexit negotiations was not more assertive. Rather, it was the fact that, on this particular issue, Warsaw trusted Berlin to make sure that its interests were represented in this process (Interview #18). This was interesting because, when it was elected, Law and Justice had criticised its Civic Platform-led predecessor’s EU strategy of presenting the country as a ‘model’ European state and prioritising close relations with the main EU powers, especially Germany. Law and Justice, on the other hand, argued that Poland needed to be more robust and assertive in advancing its national interests and develop its ‘own stream’ within the EU by, for example, building alliances to counter-balance the influence of the dominant Franco-German tandem (Bielecki 2015). After the UK vote to leave the EU scuppered this attempt to develop an alternative strategic foreign policy vector, some commentators noted a subsequent pivot by Law and Justice in Poland’s international relations back towards closer co-operation with Germany as a key EU ally (Bielecki 2017). In the light of this, strong reliance upon, and trust in, Germany by Law and Justice as a representative of Poland’s interests in the Brexit negotiations was not so surprising.

Principal-Agent Relations

Although it made occasional, very minor criticisms of the Commission’s negotiating stance calling for some greater flexibility (Bielecki 2019), Warsaw broadly trusted Brussels to represent its interests in the Brexit negotiations. Again, this was in spite of the fact that Law and Justice had been in conflict with the Commission since it was elected at the end of 2015 which might have led one to expect that Poland would have been less trusting of Brussels. However, this was not the case and there were a number of possible explanations for this. It may have been that Warsaw was looking to avoid more disagreements and opening further fronts when it came to confrontation with the Commission. Indeed, Law and Justice increasingly developed a twin-track approach to the EU institutions where it tried to present Poland as a constructive EU member state and de-couple the ‘rule of law’ dispute from its ability to develop a pragmatic working relationship with the Commission and major European powers on day-to-day business, including the Brexit negotiations.

Norms and Identity

The Polish response to Brexit was not driven by a desire to ‘swallow its pride’ for the sake of the European project. For sure, Poland did not want to be seen to be ‘rocking the boat’, but this was not motivated by Europhilia rooted in norms and identity. Rather, Warsaw fell into line with the EU consensus
because it felt that the main Polish interest in the Brexit negotiations, securing the position of the Polish community in the UK, was best served in this way. For sure, when Poland joined the EU one of the drivers of public (and, to some extent, elite) support was the notion of ‘returning to Europe’ (Szczerbiak 2004). However, this romantic idea of EU membership came under strain subsequently due to an increasing sense of cultural distinctiveness that many Poles felt towards Western Europe. Polish attitudes towards EU membership thereby became driven increasingly by the tangible material benefits that the Union was felt to deliver, exemplified by the Law and Justice government’s more instrumental and transactional approach towards the EU (Balcer et al. 2017).

**Conclusions**

Brexit represents a major rupture in European integration. It raises questions about the resilience of the integration project, challenging EU27 unity and affecting all remaining member states differently. Still, member state responses to Brexit have by and large succeeded in maintaining a common EU27 line. Our case studies on Germany, France, Ireland and Poland show that the paths to member state unity have been diverse and that the four drivers of consensus combined in different ways in the four countries (see Table 1).

In responding to Brexit, the **German** government under Merkel was relatively free from domestic constraints in its approach to Brexit and was influential in upholding unity and consensus between the EU27. This can best be accounted for by the interplay between **domestic politics, norms and identity** and **German leadership**. Specifically, Brexit largely suspended domestic contestation and politicisation of European integration and reinvigorated Germany’s normative attachment to the EU project, both of which enabled and motivated the German government to show leadership in cultivating a unified EU response to Brexit. The **principal-agent** perspective complements this account in that Germany was happy to delegate responsibility for the Brexit negotiations to the European Commission as a means to lock in its priorities and to insure against UK efforts at dividing the EU27.

In the case of **France**, **domestic politics** did not constrain the French response, and this enabled Macron to prioritise the broader agenda of both revitalising the EU project and doing so through the mechanism of **Franco-German leadership**. Shared **norms and values** predisposed Macron’s personal overall position, as demonstrated in his overtly pro-EU rhetoric, the product of his education and training as an ‘Enarque’ and his experience as Minister of Finance under Hollande. Moreover, the choice of Barnier as the chief negotiator facilitated France’s support of the Commission’s role in terms of the **principal-agent** perspective on Brexit.
Table 1. Summary of comparative findings.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Germany</th>
<th>France</th>
<th>Ireland</th>
<th>Poland</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Domestic Politics</td>
<td>Pro-EU consensus of mainstream parties; muted Euroscepticism at party system peripheries; increased public support for EU ++</td>
<td>Muted Euroscepticism after 2017 election; increased public support for the EU +</td>
<td>Lack of party political contestation of EU issue; soft Euroscepticism muted ++</td>
<td>No contestation between government and opposition; consensus strengthened by importance of rights and status of Polish community in the UK ++</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>German Leadership</td>
<td>Display of diplomatic leadership at the heart of the negotiations ++</td>
<td>Focus on reinvigorating Franco-German leadership +</td>
<td>Active diplomatic courting of Germany by Irish political elites ++</td>
<td>Trust in German leadership to secure Polish interests; pivot of government towards Germany +</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Principal-agent</td>
<td>Strong support for delegating negotiations to Commission; rejection of UK bilateralism +</td>
<td>Support for delegating negotiations to Commission, but contingent on Barnier role +</td>
<td>Extensive government targeting of Commission; privileged access to Commission ++</td>
<td>Support for delegating negotiations to Commission despite conflicts in other areas +</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Norms and Identity</td>
<td>Strong normative commitment to EU unity ++</td>
<td>Normative commitment to EU project +</td>
<td>Little emphasis on EU norms and values −</td>
<td>Interest-based and instrumental approach −</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

+++ very important; + somewhat important; — largely irrelevant.
Despite the increasing politicisation of the EU issue over the past decade in Ireland, in responding to Brexit, Irish political elites cultivated EU unity on the Irish position, and by ensuring domestic political consensus at home. Such unity and consensus can be accounted for, first and foremost, in terms of principal-agent relations, German leadership, and domestic politics. Brexit created pressures for Irish political elites to ‘use’ European integration to enhance their voice in Brexit negotiations. In doing so, Irish actors translated what could easily have been the drowned-out voice of a small member-state into the collective interests of the EU. In the domestic arena, Irish actors interviewed emphasised the importance of holding the Dáil together and presenting a united front. While many of those interviewed referenced language of shared EU norms and identity, there was little sense that collective ideational factors were driving things.

Despite having a lot to lose from Brexit, the Polish government supported the Commission’s approach towards the Brexit negotiations and stayed within the consensus. The most important driver of the Warsaw approach was the need to secure the status of the Polish community in the UK. The Polish government appeared to largely trust the EU, in the form of the European Commission and the main EU powers (especially Germany), to represent the country’s interests in its main priority areas effectively during these negotiations and subordinated its stance to this. However, this was in spite of, rather than because of, misgivings about German leadership and the role of the Commission in driving these negotiations. Although norms and European identity were to be found in the government’s rhetoric, these factors did not play a major role in driving the Polish government’s stance. It was domestic politics – but in the sense of a need to defend a politically important UK-based diaspora rather than inter-party competition – driven by an instrumental cost-benefit calculation of the best way to advance Polish national interests, that was, above all, the key factor driving the Polish response to Brexit.

It thus was the confluence of these four drivers across cases that enabled consensus between a diverse set of member states in the Brexit process. Germany was willing and able, for domestic political and normative reasons, to play a leading role in fostering EU consensus while France, Ireland and Poland had different reasons to accept and utilise this leadership. Similarly, the four countries accepted a leadership role of the Commission because they saw their interests represented by the Commission. At the same time, governments in the countries under study benefited from permissive domestic political contexts that did little to constrain their ability to support a common EU27 line. While norms of EU unity only played a powerful role in Germany, the lack of domestic political contestation around Brexit in all four countries enabled governments to maintain a European consensus that they believed was in their interests.
It remains to be seen if the conflation of the four factors in driving EU27 unity in the Brexit case is unique and if Brexit is indeed an exceptional and singular phenomenon (Laffan 2019). In any case, the findings suggest that EU27 unity in member state responses to future crises of European integration that threaten EU consensus can be facilitated by the interplay between top-down and bottom-up processes. From the top down, EU27 unity benefits from leadership that encourages member state consensus. While realists would look to powerful member states, in particular Germany, for intergovernmental leadership, institutionalists would emphasise supranational agency, above all from the Commission. From the bottom up, EU unity depends on permissive member state contexts that enable governments to pursue a common EU approach. While liberals would point to domestic politics as the main constraint on the willingness and ability of governments to maintain EU consensus, constructivists would foreground the normative commitment of governments to EU unity. Whereas the sources of leadership – intergovernmental or supranational – and the reasons for permissive member state contexts – domestic politics or norms – may to some extent be substituted for each other, the combination of leadership on the European level and permissive conditions on the member state level seems critical for the ability of EU member states to maintain unity in the face of crisis.

Notes

1. For the same selection of country cases, see the UK in a Changing Europe’s (2022) report on the State of the European Union six years after the Brexit referendum.

2. This is not to deny a longer history of UK isolation from the EU27. However, there is a qualitative difference between differentiated integration and differentiated disintegration (see Schimmelfennig 2018). For instance, in the period running up to the 2015–2016 EU-UK ‘renegotiations’, member state views on the UK’s reform demands ranged from hostility to sympathy as member states attempted to negotiate an EU28 settlement (see Möller and Oliver 2014, 106–109; Meislová 2019, 1265–1267).

3. The focus of this article is on the drivers of EU27 unity. As such, it does not make any direct claims about the EU or UK’s broader negotiating successes or failures in Brexit talks. See Dooley (2022, 3–7) for an overview of the literature on the Brexit negotiations.

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