

**FINAL VERSION WITH ACCEPTED TRACK CHANGES**

**It's good to talk: The impact of Brexit disruption on leadership in city and regional transnational working in Europe**

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## ABSTRACT

This paper discusses responses by city and regional leaders in England working with partners elsewhere in Europe to the impact of Brexit on cross-European working and relationships. It contributes to the idea of relational leadership as a conceptual device for studying leadership in transnational working in the England–EU sub-national setting, and surfaces dilemmas faced by sub-national leaders in transnational working during significant policy turbulence. We find that while England–EU transnational working at the sub-national level is likely to survive the disruption of Brexit, a significantly changed policy environment presents new, underestimated relational challenges for city and regional leaders.

**Keywords:** Relational leadership, transnational dialogue, knowledge exchange and learning, Brexit

## INTRODUCTION

The UK's vote on 23 June 2016 to leave the EU shone a spotlight on the Daedalian nature of UK–EU leadership relations. This paper explores the lived experiences of city and regional leaders navigating the ongoing knowledge exchange and learning legacies of the Brexit 'project'.

There is considerable interest in the post-Brexit future of sub-national development across England and the EU (Bachtler, 2017; Bailey & Budd, 2017; Bell, 2017; Chen et al., 2018; North, 2017; Billing, McCann, & Ortega-Argilés, 2019; Taylor, 2019). Despite growing academic debate on the local and regional consequences in England, relatively little conceptual or empirical attention has been paid to how Brexit alters relational realities for pan-European collaborative working at the sub-national scale. Two opposing views, and intermediate positions between them, might be suggested: that Brexit will constrain, or even destroy, existing England–EU sub-national relationships; or that new post-Brexit policy mechanisms will replace the old, while existing relationships are maintained.

This paper draws on the findings of an abductive qualitative enquiry (Dubois & Gadde, 2002) into sub-national leadership experiences through the early phases of the Brexit 'project'. This posed two main questions. First, how is the Brexit 'project' impacting on leadership relations, specifically in England–EU transnational working at the sub-national level? Second, how does relational leadership (RL) theory help to illuminate the challenge(s) faced by sub-national leaders?

The evidence suggests that although encouraging non-prejudicial transnational dialogue at the sub-national level may help transcend problematic legacies, the changing supranational political and economic context presents new leadership challenges for city and regional policy makers and practitioners working on England–EU transnational cooperation. Two main findings have wider relevance for emerging city and regional (place) leadership theory and

practice. First, unanticipated shocks to supranational policy impact on sub-national leaders' ability to maintain good transnational working relationships; and second, continued open-ended and non-prejudicial dialogue and meaningful conversations between sub-national partners are an antidote to the negative legacies of such policy disruption.

The paper is organised as follows. First, the literature on RL with relevance to transnational working between EU cities and regions is reviewed. We then consider what a significant break in policy continuity such as Brexit means for England–EU transnational working. The research findings are presented and discussed, and the paper concludes by proposing a research agenda aimed at advancing our understanding of the practice of sub-national RL-type leadership for transnational knowledge exchange and learning. The research approach and method are explained in the Appendix.

### **WHAT IS RELATIONAL LEADERSHIP AND WHAT DOES IT ADD?**

Studies of city and regional leadership (sometimes referred to as place leadership) are not new, and a growing economic, social and political geography literature offers important insights into leadership in sub-national settings (Collinge, Gibney, & Mabey, 2010; Sotarauta, Beer, & Gibney, 2017; Sotarauta & Beer, 2020). However, while the question of 'how to do transnational cooperation at the sub-national scale in the EU' is addressed in recent EU-related leadership policy and development literature (Centre of Expertise for Local Government Reform, 2017; McMaster, 2017), only limited conceptual attention has been paid to sub-national leaders' experiences of transnational working in Europe beyond the boundaries of local place(s) and the nation state (see, e.g., Collinge & Gibney, 2010). Accounts of sub-national leadership experiences at times of significant breaks in supranational policy continuity are also lacking. This paper addresses these gaps by suggesting that RL theory provides insights into the importance of encouraging ongoing dialogue and meaningful conversations between city and regional partners in transnational working.

In the world of transnational economic development, there is a strong case for continual investment in dialogue across boundaries, both physical and imagined. As Raelin (2012, p. 5) suggests, ‘People join a dialogue provided they are interested in listening to one another, in reflecting upon perspectives different from their own, and in entertaining the prospect of being changed by what they learn. It often leads to collaborative action.’ In other words, as humans, we are essentially relational beings and we create meaning(s) and action(s) together (Gergen, 2009). What we do, why we do it and what we might achieve at times of economic and social transition are at least partly explained by features and qualities of our relationships and interactions with one another (Drath, 2001; Uhl-Bien, 2006; Cunliffe & Eriksen, 2011; Uhl-Bien & Ospina, 2012; Raelin, 2016).

RL theory and practice challenge the notion that social progress results primarily from the traits or heroic behaviours and actions of a bounded, self-actualising and all-knowing individual leader (Gergen, 2009; Uhl-Bien & Ospina, 2012), and proposes instead that the ‘co-creation of everything’ emerges from a multiplicity of everyday human interactions (Gergen, 2009; Raelin, 2016). For Uhl-Bien (2006), the dynamic social process of leadership is explained by human interactions and negotiation rather than hierarchy and authority: ‘a “relational” orientation starts with processes and not persons, and views persons, leadership and other relational realities as *made* in processes’ (Uhl-Bien, 2006, p. 655, citing Hosking, 2007).

Influenced by Bakhtinian dialogical philosophy, the RL ‘turn’ in leadership discourse advocates dialogue and conversation as a foundational currency in human relations, allowing for shared meaning(s), understandings and mutually beneficial interactions that contribute to the ‘ongoing intersubjective shaping of social circumstances and surroundings’. In ‘ideal’ human encounters, people meet and interact with one another as equals and ‘without rank’ (see Shotter, 2016, p. 133, citing Bakhtin), and together create new and previously unforeseeable

potentialities that could not be achieved through authoritarian, hierarchical or purely transactional engagements with others. In this sense, leadership is conceived as more than a functional, skills-based influencing or manipulative practice (Raelin, 2016). Rather it is ‘a way of being-in-the-world that embraces an intersubjective and relationally-responsive way of thinking and acting’; hence ‘those engaged in relational leadership are aware of the importance of the flow of present moments in making sense of complexity, resolving problems, shaping strategic direction and practical action’ (Cunliffe & Eriksen, 2011, pp. 1445–1446).

From the perspective of ‘doing’ leadership as a relational practice, Shotter suggests some pertinent framing conditions (see Figure 1).

1. We must assume as a starting point that the other(s) and their otherness are radically unknown to us – we must abandon our preconceptions;
2. We must ‘enter into’ dialogical relationships with the other and their otherness – that is, become involved/engaged with them;
3. We must ‘open’ ourselves to the other and their otherness – we must be responsive to difference;
4. Tact and courtesy are important as we develop dialogical relationships with others;
5. We may sometimes ‘follow’ the other but also provide opportunities for others sometimes to ‘follow’ us;
6. We must be prepared to be affected and moved as a result of our engagement/involvement in dialogical exchanges with the other/others;
7. At times we may be of a mind ‘with’ them as they may at times be of a mind ‘with’ us;
8. While we may not respond to every aspect of their influence, nor they to our influence, we are responsive to one another’s experiences and aspirations.

**Figure 1: Framing relational leadership**

Source: shortened and adapted from Shotter, 2016, pp. 142–143

In other words, particular ‘ways of thinking and being in the world’ set the ground rules for how people engage with *others* as equals, and come to know them and *their otherness(es)* for the purpose of collaborative exploration and discovery.

Given the importance of learning from others’ experiences of city and regional working across borders (Hachmann, 2016), how might UK and EU sub-national leaders respond to the challenge of maintaining and extending transnational knowledge exchange and learning at times of policy disruption? As those in leadership roles encounter and relate to each *other* and *their otherness(es)*, they are central to shaping beneficial transnational relationships.

In relation to approaching and engaging with others at a most basic level, the RL proposition is relevant to England–EU transnational knowledge exchange and learning, where sub-national policy makers and practitioners confront cultural ‘borderlands and fault lines’ (Dunlop, 1999, p. 57), ‘negotiating difference’ in the blending confluence(s) of national, local, political and organisational cultures and their languages. This is sensitive territory, as the new era of England–EU sub-national working will be infused with the contaminated political legacy of difficult Brexit-related negotiations and the ‘othering of the European’ that has saturated popular debate in the UK since the Brexit vote in June 2016. At the same time, economic and political relationships will alter significantly (Bailey & Budd, 2017; Chen et al., 2018; Billing et al., 2019). Consequently, human interactions, trust, reconciliation(s) and engagements with (EU) *others* and their *othernesses* beyond familiar domestic UK political, economic, cultural and linguistic boundaries will become more dynamic.

Shotter appeals for a leadership approach that favours non-prejudicial dialogue. His call for open-ended conversation and discussion amongst *others as equals*, for the purpose of exploring, creating and shaping mutually beneficial partnerships, is relevant in a cross-Europe working context. This conceptualisation of leadership adds a communicative dimension to our understanding of the relationship-building activities required of leaders who occupy formal

roles in city and regional development settings. Framing and enacting sub-national leadership in this way foregrounds the importance of promoting mutually beneficial dialogue between partners, which is especially pertinent in confused and uncertain periods of supranational policy turbulence.

### **WHAT DOES BREXIT DISRUPTION MEAN FOR TRANSNATIONAL KNOWLEDGE EXCHANGE AND LEARNING AT THE SUB-NATIONAL LEVEL?**

Important sub-national relationship-building activity has been fostered over the last four decades between cities and regions across Europe (MacNeill, Jeffery, & Gibney, 2007; Moore, 2008; Sykes & Shaw, 2008; Knodt, Greenwood, & Quittkat, 2011; Marlow, 2017; Huggins, 2018a, 2018b). Policy and practice have adjusted to a situation in which easy working across national boundaries has become normal. Ongoing dialogue and conversation at the heart of partnering activity have driven ready flows and exchanges of ideas, knowledge and transnational learning on and around socio-economic, technological and environmental ‘good’ practice across the EU, and has been a beneficial (Hachmann, 2016) but underestimated feature of the wider UK–EU sub-national development experience. Importantly, this pan-European sub-national ‘coming together’ through continuing dialogue has confronted ‘dichotomizing tendencies of thinking about differences’ and helped ‘unfix mindsets and unmap polarized notions of geography’ (Dunlop, 1999, p. 58). Central to the ‘negotiation of difference’ (ibid.), open-ended dialogue also plays a role in countering isolationism, divisive identity-based rhetoric and growing xenophobia and ‘othering’ in contemporary political leadership discourse (Goodwin, 2011; Wodak, KhosraviNik, & Mral, 2013; Sanders, 2019). Currently, Brexit-inspired toxicity in UK–EU political discourse at all levels is occurring at a time when innovative solutions to complex social, economic, scientific, technological and environmental policy problems require ongoing ‘good’ dialogue and conversations between sub-national territories, unconstrained by centralising polities. These problems can only be solved through

mutually beneficial transnational exchanges of knowledge and learning, continually shaped and re-shaped through open-ended dialogue.

The potential benefits of transnational learning are generally recognised in the knowledge exchange and policy transfer literature (Dolowitz & Marsh, 1996, 2000), and in the literature on EU transnational working more specifically (Malik & Cunningham, 2006; Dühr & Nadin, 2007; Colomb, 2007; Hachmann, 2016). Formal and informal processes of knowledge transfer and learning have been an added-value feature of EU sub-national policy initiatives for over four decades. Transnational learning has permeated myriad EU cooperation projects, including city and regional developments (Hachmann, 2016). Knowledge exchange and learning have characterised EU funding regimes such as the EC R&D Framework Programmes, Horizon 2020, Regional Innovation Strategies and Structural Funds/Cohesion Policy programmes (ESF and ERDF),<sup>1</sup> as well as sector-specific economic development initiatives, including Urban Innovative Actions, LEADER and the cross-border and transnational partnering activities promoted by several iterations of INTERREG. This learning has had a significant impact on economic development policy, programmes, project design and financial engineering in city and regional development in the UK. Few developments in UK national and sub-national infrastructure, business tourism, the creative-knowledge economy, science, technology, workforce development and innovation can claim to have been solely ‘invented here’.

So has transnational working been a product of EU membership, and is it likely to disappear once UK membership of the EU and the associated funding disappear? One view is that while ‘the culture of centralization within the English polity’ complicates relationships between EU and UK sub-national bodies (Huggins, 2018b, p. 149), planned and spontaneous knowledge exchange and learning have nevertheless played through the ‘rationalistic logic’

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, the ERDF/EU Cohesion Policy on transnational knowledge exchange activity promoted through the ‘TAIEX-REGIO Peer 2 Peer’ platform ([http://ec.europa.eu/regional\\_policy/en/policy/how/improving-investment/taiex-regio-peer-2-peer](http://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/en/policy/how/improving-investment/taiex-regio-peer-2-peer)).

(Huggins, 2018a) of UK–EU sub-national networking. This ‘softer’, tacit and opportunistic learning amongst sub-national partners has been enabled not only by institutional arrangements, but also by informal personal and group conversations and interactions (Colomb, 2007; Hachmann, 2016).

An alternative view suggests an uncertain future for UK–EU transnational knowledge exchange and learning in the urban and regional development field. While the EU appears poised to enact a wholly re-invigorated approach to sub-national economic growth and territorial cohesion agendas, with ‘massive structural transformation over the coming decades that will create major new opportunities for the EU’ (Bachtler, Oliveira Martins, Wostner, & Zuber, 2019, p. 6), the influence and impact of the EU’s territorial Europeanisation agendas seem likely to wane in the UK as its ‘privileged insider’ access to EU funding for sub-national transnational knowledge partnering reduces over time. In addition, the scale of domestic UK funds available, particularly for UK–EU city and regional transnational cooperation initiatives, is unlikely to replace what was available pre-Brexit from the EU’s many territorial development funding regimes. Any co-financing monies for cooperation projects are more likely to reflect central government priorities rather than those of the UK’s sub-national territories.

In summary, it is unclear (at the time of writing) whether the pace and scale of transnational policy and programme cooperation between cities and regions will be maintained and resourced at pre-Brexit levels. The extent of transnational knowledge exchange and policy learning between UK and EU sub-national authorities and agencies risks further curtailment as the UK’s sub-national territories are nudged by central government to support a new generation of bilateral trade agreements and inward investment promotion activities. Ongoing government thinking around the UK’s new Brexit-inspired ‘Global Britain’ business strategy (House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee, 2017) promises to shift outward focus away from the

EU toward securing economic, scientific, technological and education and skills links with the developing economies of India, China, Southeast Asia, the Arab Gulf, Africa and Latin America.

There is nothing wrong with this, of course, if it does not mean choosing between the EU and the rest of the (sub-national) world when resources for international partnering activities are already scarce. However, one consequence of a reduced EU focus is its potential impact on easy and ready transnational knowledge exchange and learning activities between UK and EU cities and regions. Furthermore, an *othering* tone in the Brexit debate, replete with accusations of ‘fake news’, contested statistics and allegations of possible disrupting/corrupting third-party interference in the UK democratic process, is adding to the fractious political atmosphere within the UK between ‘Leavers’ and ‘Remainers’, and also between central government and the UK’s less-favoured sub-national territories beyond London and the South East. An unhelpful blaming tendency on all sides of the difficult Brexit negotiations has polluted national-level UK–EU relations, and a pernicious psychodynamic legacy will echo through subsequent decades (see, e.g., Elliott, 2018). The European Commission and the UK government have approached the Brexit ‘question’ from different directions. The Commission sees the UK as seeking to secure commercial advantage from leaving the Single Market. Through greater freedom to negotiate advantageous bilateral trade deals with many of the EU’s geopolitical and economic competitors, it threatens to become a significant economic competitor to the EU in its own right. On the other hand, the EU is accused variously of looking to subvert the democratic legitimacy of the Brexit vote, meddle in UK–Ireland border affairs, weaken UK sovereignty around the question of immigration, constrain the UK’s ‘new’ economic internationalisation agenda, and tie the UK into a failing supranational political and economic project.

Little leadership research has been done at the sub-national scale, in terms of nationally-bounded place leadership studies of how sub-national leadership is affected by, and reacts to, external shocks and significant and unexpected breaks in supranational policy continuity. Put simply, Brexit is a test of whether longstanding negotiated relationships at the sub-national level are resilient enough to survive such shocks, and whether dialogue between sub-national partners for knowledge exchange and learning exists only when national governments allow it. In other words, is mutually beneficial dialogue and conversation between sub-national leaders self-sustaining, or is it simply subservient to the international policy priorities of national leadership?

## **DISCUSSION: SURFACING THEMES IN (SUB-NATIONAL) TRANSNATIONAL WORKING**

Our research findings are nuanced and sometimes paradoxical. The sample of interviewees was Europhile, given the nature of England–EU partnership work, and there is more in the data than can be presented in a single paper. Nonetheless, the participants' accounts surfaced four dominant themes:

Theme 1: Keeness to connect and engage in dialogue and learn 'with (sub-national) others'

Theme 2: Dominating presence of the (UK) centre and de-democratisation of UK–EU government affairs

Theme 3: Loss of 'privileged insider' access to EU knowledge and learning

Theme 4: Reduced access to resources for transnational working.

These are addressed in turn below.

### **Theme 1: Keeness to connect and engage in dialogue and learn 'with (sub-national) others'**

The interviewees generally subscribed to a 'no-frontiers' worldview of knowledge exchange and learning. Their behaviours and approaches to creating and maintaining 'good' and mutually

productive transnational working relationships with sub-national partners resonate with the Shotterian dialogical-relational ‘ideal’ (Shotter, 2016). Interviewees generally agreed on the importance of learning from others, and were keen to share their own experiences with others, learn from others’ experiences, create and maintain a collaborative learning atmosphere and relationships of equals with others, and encourage reciprocity and responsiveness in continuing dialogical exchanges with others.

The accounts confirm that a great deal of relational goodwill currently exists across the (sub-national) practice world of transnational knowledge exchange and learning, and that transnational working is regarded as important for both personal and professional learning. There was evident passion for investing in transnational knowledge exchange and learning in the world of sub-national practice:

*We want to maintain that political dialogue. We want to maintain a shared ambition ...*

*[a] shared set of objectives in tackling Europe’s problems (A4).*

Regarding the development and maintenance of working relationships with other sub-national partners:

*Regardless of all this, we are still committed to working with each other and we’re still committed to sustaining, maintaining ... all those open collaborative wonderful relationships that we’ve built up over all these years, we’re not going to dismantle them as a result of Brexit (A3).*

*...and there is an understanding that you’re trying to talk to each other as equals (C4).*

However, the message for UK central government was sometimes less positive:

*I think the [UK] government of the day will have to prove itself again, but I don’t think [UK] sub-national government will have to prove itself again. I think we’ve been in the game too long and [EU] people know where we’re coming from (C1).*

Paradoxically, the ‘shock’ of the UK Brexit vote appears to have somewhat re-energised sub-national transnational relationship building. The importance attached to safeguarding and growing existing relationships and links was clear, as viewed by EU sub-national partners:

*I think ... actually it has had a positive effect on the way we work together, because especially with [name of UK region], they really wanted to keep the link outside the island, let's say, the island of Great Britain. And our links already exist. So they put lots of energy into this cooperation (C5).*

At one level, these outlooks are unsurprising. Most interviewees spent a great deal of their daily professional lives working in the world of England–EU transnational knowledge exchange and learning. Many were multilingual and had considerable pan-European and wider cross-cultural exposure, either personally or through close family, friends and professional networks.

## **Theme 2: Dominating presence of the (UK) centre and de-democratisation of UK–EU government affairs**

Echoing Huggins’ (2018b) concerns about hampering of the sub-national, democratically elected voice in the Brexit debate, the interview data suggest that a re-energised centralising polity is at work in the world of UK–EU government affairs:

*It's a London Brexit: they've got their own stuff they want to deal with. They want to protect the financial markets in London. They want to do their deal and 'all you cities and regions, all you're doing is going to complicate matters; you know that we know best, so leave it to us. We [UK central government] don't want to discuss it, we don't want to open up, it's a private discussion.' ... There isn't a dialogue (A3).*

And in terms of the sub-national voice in the Brexit negotiations:

*They don't care. The position of most civil servants that we have ever worked with in London is that they don't care at all [about UK–EU city and regional transnational*

working]. *When you're talking about Brexit, this type of thing gets lost because, you know, it's not anything to do with customs, it's not anything to do with citizens' rights, it's not anything to do with a £40bn financial settlement – you know, it complicates things for London, which ... favours centralisation, despite whatever they might say (C4).*

Given their reported lack of voice in the Brexit discussions, sub-national organisations are sometimes having to work around central government to continue discussions with EU institutions and ensure their access to policy learning and policy-making intelligence over the longer term:

*We do not trust Member State[-level] negotiations to achieve the sorts of outcomes that would be relevant or beneficial for [UK] cities. We need to build on the relationships we already have, opening doors to [names of EU bodies and senior EU officials]. We'll battle away to get that voice [for UK cities] more of an established voice. It can't be a voice in the formal negotiations at nation state level, but it can be a voice in forging city relationships [across Europe] that we sustain beyond Brexit (A11).*

There is a concern that, post-Brexit, the power to influence EU government affairs will be pulled back from cities and regions to the centre in the UK, and it will be difficult to maintain the sub-national voice in Brussels:

*They [UK central government] can't tell us that we can't be here, so we are in that sense protected; but they could make it difficult for us, and difficult to access people and information. They can do their best to block us and block our influence. So you know, it is a bit of a concern for us at the moment (C6).*

Local authorities, in particular, are thinking about how they may need to re-frame and re-think to ensure access to EU-level discussions and debates relating to their local policy concerns:

*For example, we'll lose also our MEPs from [name of UK region], so we won't be able to directly go to them and have direct influence through them. So ... we'll have to make*

*sure our relationships with MEPs from other countries are much stronger, and that means thinking as well much more carefully about what we can bring. So I think we're going to have to be much clearer ... much more targeted and much more prepared (C6).*

With the loss of mainstream access to 'conventional' EU funds for transnational projects (from EU Cohesion Funds, INTERREG Programmes, etc.) after Brexit, local government is particularly concerned that opportunities for transnational knowledge exchange and learning may be radically curtailed, reduced to the pre-EU level of 'town twinning' activities. Yet it feels it has an important role to play in European matters post-Brexit:

*So there's specific pieces of work on different legal fields, be it public procurement, state aid, regional development, but there's also wider governance questions that we're trying to tackle about how councils can ensure a strong role in law making post Brexit. The common [local government] cause is about trying to get the best out of Brexit for local communities and for the people that the councils serve (C1).*

Local government, as the democratic local voice in England, clearly fears being sidelined altogether by a re-energised centralising polity in EU government affairs – 'cut out' not only from the opportunity to create and benefit from pan-European relationships that allow for knowledge exchange and learning, but also more widely from meaningful involvement at the 'intimate heart' of any new UK–EU policy-shaping and decision-making process. As part of the proposed new UK industrial strategy (HM Government, 2017), central government appears to favour prioritising higher education-sector access to resources, allowing research-active universities in England to continue to participate in EU R&D programmes (e.g., remaining Horizon 2020 programmes, and European Research Area programmes beyond 2020). City and regional economies may benefit from some of the learning embedded in these R&D-focused programmes, and England's research-led universities are regarded as 'anchor' institutions in the proposed UK industrial strategy (HM Government, 2017), making important contributions

to sub-national economies, and to national wealth-creation and prosperity agendas (Charles, 2003; Vallance, Tewdwr-Jones, & Kempton, 2019). However, from a critical perspective, they are not impartial, transparent or democratic institutions (Canaan & Shumar, 2008; Rustin, 2016; Pelletier, Kottke, & Sirotnik, 2019), they are becoming increasingly marketised and globally oriented, and they are only one of a number of institutional voices in England's sub-national territories.

After a decade of dealing with the impact of austerity on public services, local government in England, in particular, fears becoming marginalised by centralising forces in national-level UK negotiations around Brexit, and is seeking to ensure that the local community voice is also heard at the decision-making table, enabling R&D efforts to contribute more directly to local economic development, creativity and public-service innovation. Local government in England is re-thinking how it can exert more territorial influence on UK–EU R&D governance and funding affairs by working through Brussels-based advocacy bodies such as Eurocities to shape funding priorities. It is also seeking to integrate a re-energised transnational effort in Brussels with a renewed strategy of partnership building with local universities:

*So we are already playing in that [EU R&D funds] space, and I've always said for many, many years that we should raise our game, because there is significant funding in this sphere of EU [R&D] funding. We don't get anywhere close to attracting as much as I think that we should, whether it be around intelligent transport systems ... or innovative procurement, knowledge and innovation in public service. And we do believe that the [EU R&D] framework funds do provide money for demonstrator-type piloting and testing of more innovative forms of public service where we can work collaboratively with higher education institutions (A12).*

### **Theme 3: Loss of ‘privileged insider’ access to EU knowledge and learning**

Interviewees raised concerns around medium-term access to EU ‘privileged insider’ policy and programme intelligence, and the personal relationships required to sustain this. There are clear signals that sub-national partners may be less intimately involved in EU-level discussions around the design of sub-national policy, programmes and projects:

*On a personal basis, I’m still treated as someone who [EU-level] people want to work with. I get asked to do certain things ... continuing through with those [personal] relationships. On an institutional basis, however, and if you talk to [name of EU-level institution], it’s come to a point where the EU are now very much looking beyond Brexit and beyond 2020. [EU] institutions are now looking more and more at a scenario that will not have the UK involved (A2).*

At the same time, their physical (as opposed to virtual) absence in Brussels was seen as eroding sub-national influence in the corridors of power in Brussels:

*I’ve been to meetings in my area of research and innovation and various things, to conferences, where I’m the only UK person and nobody comes from the UK. And you see, it’s been a massive drop. I think one of the problems is the [financial/austerity] crisis – the money: you’ve always had the view that if you go over to Brussels it’s a jolly, right? This is where the Brits are just absent now, so they don’t have the sort of corridor intelligence, you know, the watercooler intelligence – you [could] say they [are] less informed (C3).*

And on the question of the UK sub-national presence in Brussels beyond Brexit:

*It’s not in six months, you have to – it’s one, two, three, four, five years with somebody that you’ve built up, you’ve worked together, you know and trust each other, you trust each other with secret information and that sort of thing and you exchange things. Now if those relationships are not there... (C3).*

To compensate, some sub-national organisations are seeking to (re-)make and reinforce their routes into EU-level policy and decision making through EU-level advocacy associations and other forums, to ensure that the flow of policy intelligence and pan-European knowledge-exchange and learning opportunities are not compromised by Brexit:

*What I'm saying is, maintaining membership of a [EU-level] city-led network organisation that is embedded into the governance of EU policy making – Eurocities is able to comment and influence on EU policy regulation and funding. It means that UK cities [can] access that influence – access that the UK government doesn't have. So that's one area that I think is critically important, because we need to take account of what's still going on [that is] important to us in terms of our relationships in Europe (A4).*

However, for UK sub-national territories to continue to benefit from pan-European mutual exchange and learning, a Brussels-based advocacy association suggested:

*They will have to work hard [at] keeping in contact with their [EU] peers, let's say. I think they will have to work hard to invent or propose different ways or new ways in which cities could still benefit from the EU. They should remain active in [EU] networks. They will have to work harder (C2).*

There was a sense that the dominance of the Brexit debate in the UK is also affecting the 'ambience' of England–EU transnational relational working in more subtle ways not always explicitly voiced by EU partners:

*Everything is kind of couched in this backdrop of Brexit, so it's the elephant in the room, you can't escape it. But it's not always explicit, and I think our relationships are still good. I get the impression as well that there's a kind of boredom. A lot of people [our EU partners] are not really following it as closely as we are as Brits. We're completely caught up in everything that's going on and all of the political dramas that are taking place, and I think a lot of Europeans on this side have tuned out a little bit (C6).*

#### **Theme 4: Reduced access to resources for transnational working**

Interviewees expressed optimistic views on whether adequate and bespoke ‘ring-fenced’ resources would be made available for England–EU transnational knowledge exchange and learning collaboration at the sub-national scale, although there was a view that personal relationships would remain important:

*It’s beyond money. It’s partly influenced and enabled by money but not solely or always enabled by money (A4).*

Nevertheless, the question of how sub-national transnational cooperation will be funded in the future, and what, if anything, might replace EU funding were key concerns for sub-national partners both in England and on the EU mainland:

*I think something that has really changed and is really important for [name of UK regional authority] is also how current and future European funding programmes or European policy might be reflected in the future domestic arrangements once we’re out of the EU. So ... there’s a whole element in also ensuring that we’re active in the negotiations that are starting now, happening now on the future European funding programmes, to ensure that they’re still [available] for regions on this side of the Channel – because some of that is going to be reflected, we expect, in the future domestic policy (C6).*

*I think the interest in working with partners from the UK, or from UK universities, in working with others in [name of EU mainland regional authority] would still exist, but would they have the money and the way to do it without the EU money? ... [for] cooperative research, we know this money really helps them work together. I’m not sure they do work together because of the money [alone]. The money allows them to have the time, to have the means to travel, for instance, to really work together (C5).*

More bluntly, issues may arise when sub-national partners in England seek to have a say on EU-funded projects or related thematic priorities in transnational projects:

*At some point [on the co-funding question] I think it makes things a bit tense, because we just want to say, or I heard some colleagues say it, ‘come on [UK partners], you’re leaving, so you’re not going to tell us what we have to do with the EU money’ (C5).*

## **Reflections**

Despite the personal and professional commitment of our sample of England’s sub-national leaders to continuing dialogue with partners across and through Dunlop’s metaphorical and literal ‘boundary lands’, our research suggests that transnational knowledge exchange and learning are not immune to turbulence in the wider world of UK–EU relations. Dialogue at the transnational sub-national scale is constrained and complicated by (as yet) unanswered political concerns around likely realignments of EU ‘insiders’ and ‘outsiders’, and by (as yet) unanswered questions concerning the emerging dynamics of ‘transnational cooperation versus competition’ in England–EU relations beyond Brexit. It is also clear from the interview data that the ability to maintain and grow sub-national relationships with EU partners may vary spatially. Some cities and regions in England are investing in a new generation of relationship-building activity, both in Brussels and more widely across the EU, to offset the loss of ‘privileged insider’ access post-Brexit. Others areas appear less likely to be able to find the resources necessary for pan-European relational work, and over the longer term may find themselves disadvantaged in policy and economic development intelligence, with only second- or third-order access to sub-national policy shaping. Moreover, the interviewees’ accounts suggest a degree of territorial favouritism in the encouragement of (sub-national) transnational knowledge and learning activity. In other words, the conditions of any policy support secured from the ‘UK centre’ for European-focused transnational knowledge and exchange activity,

and thus levels of territorial awareness and preparedness, differ qualitatively, say for Newcastle and the North East of England compared with London, Kent and the South East of England.

Clearly, the challenges of a 'new' centralism in EU government affairs, loss of 'privileged insider' access to funding and policy intelligence and fear of being sidelined or excluded from pan-European flows of knowledge and learning are exercising the minds of leaders, policy makers and strategists in England's cities and regions. The data also suggest that this is a highly charged emotional time on both sides of the English Channel. Words (and hence perspectives) such as 'disaster', 'bereavement', 'pity', 'sorrow', 'guilt', 'anger' and 'tiresome' appeared throughout the interviews and in informal conversations and sub-national Brexit impact events attended by research team members between 2017 and 2019. However, encouragingly, words such as 'together', 'cooperation', 'solidarity', 're-building', 'bridges', 'conversation', 'dialogue' and 'listen(ing)' were also heard.

A Shotterian relational worldview of leadership is generally evident in the interview data. The interviewees wished to continue to cooperate with their England/EU neighbours, and the practice of RL-type approaches was observable in interview accounts of behaviours and actions. However, the deep historical 'well' of relational goodwill – the seeking of common democratic cause and associated dialogue between sub-national partners as equals – is coming under severe pressure. Across the sub-national world of transnational knowledge exchange and learning, the data reveal clear tensions between personal commitment to engaging in non-prejudicial working with *the other*, and a wider, ongoing Brexit 'project' that appears at times constraining and insecure.

While RL theory is a useful guiding device for our research on the dynamics of human (leadership) interactions in these types of settings, the RL worldview has utopian tendencies and may underestimate the place of power, conflict and contradiction in dialogue(s) and conversations between partners (De Cock & Böhm, 2007; Raelin, 2012). The interview data

provide clear evidence of the limits to dialogue (and to trust and patience). They also reveal that an altered policy environment post-Brexit will present new challenges for city and regional development leaders involved in transnational knowledge exchange and learning, for which there appears to be diminishing policy support from UK central government. Moreover, recent research and policy literature on the combined sub-national economic and social consequences of a decade of public finance austerity in the UK (Loopstra & Lalor, 2017; Social Metrics Commission, 2018; UN, 2019), now exacerbated by the political disruption caused by Brexit, predicts a worsening of spatial inequalities in the UK, leading Billing et al. (2019) to conclude that 'Brexit is likely to make the UK's interregional inequalities worse than they already are, with many Leave-voting regions being especially vulnerable'.

Substantial improvements to leadership, regional investment and institutional capacity will be required at the sub-national scale if regional disparities are to be overcome in England (Billing et al., 2019, p. 756; Liddle & Shutt, 2019; Menon, Portes, & Bevington, 2019; Shutt & Liddle, 2019). The combined fiscal and political stresses suffered by the most vulnerable places in England, added to concerns about the UK central government's real commitment to increasing post-austerity investment levels at the sub-national scale, threaten to impact significantly on city and regional leaders' ability to enable sustainable prosperity and wealth spread, let alone to engage in transnational knowledge exchange and learning with partners across Europe.

In summary, themes 2, 3 and 4 surfaced from the interview data suggest, in different ways, that external shocks and significant disruptions to supranational policy continuity, such as Brexit, test the resilience of longstanding negotiated relationships at the sub-national scale, and question whether ongoing dialogue and meaningful conversations between sub-national partners for knowledge exchange and learning exist only when sanctioned by (UK) national government. On a more positive note, theme 1 (keenness to connect and engage in dialogue

and learn ‘with sub-national others’) confirms continued common cause and goodwill at the sub-national level.

Overall, however, given the disturbance of the Brexit ‘project’, whether productive relationships between sub-national leaders can be self-sustaining is uncertain, as they may simply prove to be subservient to the international policy priorities of (UK) national leadership.

## CONCLUSION

This paper has considered the contemporary lived experiences of senior (formal) city and regional leaders in England who are navigating the ongoing knowledge-exchange and learning legacies of the Brexit ‘project’. We have sought to address two main questions: how is the Brexit ‘project’ impacting on leadership relations in England–EU transnational working at the sub-national scale; and how does RL theory help to illuminate the nature of the challenge(s) faced by sub-national leaders?

With regard to the first question, we have found that while England–EU transnational working at the sub-national scale is likely to survive the disruption, Brexit signals a very different approach. This altered political, economic and social environment presents new interrelational challenges for city and regional leaders, who continue to pursue transnational dialogue(s) and conversations for the purpose of maintaining and extending mutually beneficial knowledge exchange and learning.

With regard to the second question, we have proposed that RL theory, as a framing device, has new explanatory value in the England–EU city and regional leadership setting. In particular, its emphasis on the contribution of non-prejudicial dialogue and meaningful conversations between co-actors allows us to foreground the specific communicative dilemmas faced by sub-national leadership in transnational working during supranational policy disruptions.

Our findings also add an underestimated transnational knowledge exchange and learning dimension to the study of city and regional leadership at times of significant supranational policy disruption. More practically, the research suggests that, in order to remain connected with political, policy and economic intelligence beyond national boundaries, England's city and regional leaders will need to make creative, geostrategic use of political, business and friendship 'back channels' in Brussels, and more widely across continental Europe. They will also need to re-think their EU relationship-building activities and focus on key European continental partner territories and priority knowledge themes, where mutual gain can be achieved with much more limited resources for sub-national transnational partnering than in the pre-Brexit era.

Paradoxically, there is evidence that at least some sub-national leaders in England are re-energised by the challenges of Brexit. However, in re-thinking approaches to England–EU sub-national transnational partnerships, the loss of 'privileged insider' access and the uncertain medium-term relational legacies of Brexit cannot be ignored, as varieties of *othering* continue to play through popular and mainstream political discourse at all levels. Some toxicity is evident in wider UK–EU political and economic debates, and not everyone at the UK centre appears convinced of the merits of 'negotiating difference' and co-creating opportunity through 'dialogues of equals'. The research confirms that 'big' international policy shocks impact on sub-national leaders, and these impacts may constrain and disrupt non-prejudicial dialogue between partners in transnational sub-national settings.

Our findings are limited by the overall sample size and the generally Europhile interview sample. Nevertheless, they do flag up an important future research agenda. Before we can say that RL actually exists as a practice in sub-national transnational knowledge-exchange and learning environments, we need more strongly evidenced case examples of RL in action in different types of city and regional settings. Assuming that RL is a real and observable

phenomenon, we need also to better understand what happens during a wider variety of ‘big’ international policy transition events and crises that impact on cities and regions, in order to be more confident about what difference RL-type practices might make to transnational knowledge-exchange and learning outcomes over time.

Finally, our research focused on exploring the experiences and reactions of sub-national leaders in two city/region cases in England, which of course may be particular to these settings. To develop a more comprehensive understanding, and to compare and contrast what is happening more widely at the UK sub-national level, we need to gather evidence of the impact of Brexit policy disruption on transnational knowledge exchange and learning in the UK’s devolved territories of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

END NOTE: This research was presented and discussed at: (Insert details of 3 separate international (in 2018 and 2019) research conferences, seminars and workshops here)

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### DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

The authors report no potential conflict of interest.

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## APPENDIX: RESEARCH APPROACH AND METHOD

This research project was approved by the University of (*Insert name of University here*)'s Ethical Review Committee (*Insert 2 ethics committee reference numbers*). The research was abductive, thematic and qualitative in character, 'constantly going "back and forth" from one type of research activity to another and between empirical observations and theory ... to expand understanding of both theory and empirical phenomena' (Dubois & Gadde, 2002, p. 555). Twenty-eight formal, in-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted in England (in Greater Birmingham and the North East of England), Brussels and elsewhere in mainland EU with senior individuals (political and executive leaders) who worked in, or represented, various sub-national organisations involved in transnational knowledge exchange and learning activities between English and EU cities and regions. The interviewees were based in local, regional and combined authorities, local enterprise partnerships, universities, chambers of commerce, Brussels-based (sub-national) representations and trade unions. To preserve anonymity, quotations are referenced alphanumerically (e.g., A1, C2), with As referring to the two English sites and Cs to Brussels/EU mainland sites.

Early interviewees were chosen purposively, as we wanted to hear from senior policy makers, advisors and practitioners occupying formal leadership roles, and who were closely involved in post-Brexit (sub-national) economic development 'visioning', policy reviews, 'future resourcing' and strategic investment and policy-planning activities. A non-random snowballing/personal-recommendations approach was then used to identify further interviewees in similar roles in England–EU sub-national organisations. In England, interviews were conducted in two city/region sites (Greater Birmingham and the North East of England). These were chosen purposively, as both have benefited very considerably from EU urban and regional development funding regimes over the last four decades, and have longstanding and

extensive experience of transnational knowledge exchange and learning projects across the EU. The interviews were conducted face-to-face, or via Skype if distance was an issue.

A project abstract and semi-structured topic guide were e-mailed to interviewees in advance. The topic guide included reflective questions (see Figure 2), with some variation to accommodate the interviewees' different organisational and geographical locations.

1. To what extent have your Brexit-related discussions/dialogue(s) been easy and fruitful at local, national, interregional and EU level?
2. What has gone well in your Brexit-related discussions/dialogue(s) and other Brexit-related activities? Why has it gone well?
3. What has gone less well? Why has it gone less well?
4. Could you describe/characterise the state of the 'sub-national–national–EU' working atmosphere currently?
5. From where you currently sit, and thinking about the projects/programmes you are involved with, how do you see [business, policy, organisational, personal] relationships at the interregional and EU scale developing beyond Brexit? How might EU sub-national relations develop going forward?
6. What do you feel the medium- to longer-term implications of the Brexit 'project' are likely to be for sub-national development policy makers and practitioners in the UK?
7. How do you feel UK partners are currently regarded by their EU city and regional partners?
8. Can you illustrate the current 'mood', say with some examples of recent reactions/observations/insights offered by your EU partners?
9. Do you think you will need to operate differently in the EU at the sub-national scale? If so, how will you (that is to say, the behaviours and approaches of city and regional development 'leaders') be affected and why?

10. What (if any) are the opportunities going forward for sub-national/interregional working in the EU? What (if any) are the limitations?

**Figure 2: Interview topic guide (shortened extract)**

Drawing on the lessons of thematic analysis from previous qualitative studies (Corley & Gioia, 2004; Braun & Clarke, 2006; Dubois & Gadde, 2002; Nowell et al., 2017), the interview data were analysed in three stages. First, a general reading of all interview data was conducted to obtain an overall sense of the ‘dominant experiences’ reported. Second, a more detailed reading of each individual transcript was undertaken to allow for deeper manual coding of dominant experiences across the data. These were brought together into *four themes*. The draft findings and discussion section were then read alongside a set of unannotated primary interview transcripts to verify the trustworthiness of the thematic interpretations. This final verifying reading was carried out by a researcher who had not been involved in the previous phases of manual coding and thematic review of the data.

For context, the most recent academic literature on the sub-national implications of Brexit was reviewed, alongside policy literature on the potential economic and political impacts at the sub-national level in England (CER, 2014; CEP, 2016; IPPR, 2016; LGA, 2017; Cambridge Econometrics, 2018; The UK in a Changing World, 2018; Birmingham City Council, 2018; North East Brexit Group, 2018). To complement the regional policy literature review and gather UK-wide contextual perspectives to help interpret the qualitative interview data, the researchers attended eight sub-national Brexit policy impact workshops, seminars and conferences as both observers and contributors between 2017 and 2019. Regarding the trustworthiness of the research and its interpretations, the authors presented their early findings at three international academic research conferences/seminars in 2018–2019 (see End Notes) to gauge critical peer reactions. A final draft of the paper was critically reviewed by four experienced senior academics (see Acknowledgements).