**Interview One**

##### **Interviewer**

Before we start, I just want to say a brief word about my research. Generally, I'm focused on different forms of nationalism across Europe and when political parties decide to use them. So that's how the Irish case fits into my overall research, considering the southern claims on NI: I'm interested in understanding when parties in the south will talk about NI. So, it probably makes sense to start with a very general question, but how salient an issue is NI for the different political parties in the south?

##### **Interviewee**

Good question. So there's a few obvious things to say, which is that for the lead party of opposition at the moment, in the form of Sinn Féin, it is a salient issue, if not the most salient issue. Then insofar as that's the case, it is necessarily, therefore, a salient issue for the governing parties. I suppose my argument here is that the salience of the NI ‘question’ is driven by the relative electoral success of Sinn Féin, and their current polling success. So, the Shared Island Initiative, which is the particular manifestation of the government's concern, or the governmental party's concern, with the question of NI, is a direct response to Sinn Féin's ascendance as the most potent electoral force in the Republic of Ireland. All of that having been said, of course, what's really interesting is that, and this is clear from polling and the evidence that we have, that for the people that voted for Sinn Féin in the Republic of Ireland in 2020, the issue of unification per se was not necessarily the thing that they were voting on. It's a more “bread and butter” set of concerns around housing in particular, but also things like health care and increasingly, of course, the cost of living, inflation and so forth, that's motivating support for Sinn Féin, but then that has knock on ramifications for the constitutional question per se. I think the issue has a fairly low salience in politics in the Republic of Ireland. If you look at the polling data, it demonstrates that it's not a principal motivation for a majority of voters in terms of who they support, but Irish unity is also something that they would like in the long-term. It's always 20 years away. It has been for the last 40 years or whatever. I mean, I'm pulling these numbers out of the sky now, but I don't think that it's really what motivates either people's voting preferences, or is it really the principal policy platform for any party really. I mean, I don't know how far I'd push this. Sinn Féin is in a really interesting position in that having been so successful in the Republic of Ireland, it draws attention to its policy discrepancies across the border. So, in a way, it's kind of got an interest in kind of downplaying that.

I'm starting to ramble now, really. So, I think I've basically answered the question. Not a huge salience, I think, is the broad answer to the question in the first instance.

##### **Interviewer**

Great. Do you think this saliency has changed over time, or do you think it's just stayed at a relatively low salience?

##### **Interviewee**

I guess I have to confess to not necessarily being an expert in the long history of Irish politics, particularly. But I think one thing that's clear is that, were it not for Sinn Féins success in 2020, we would not be talking, insofar as we are talking now, about a shared island. The initiative around a shared island is a direct response, and an attempt, to kind of reclaim that ground, I suppose, on the part of Fianna Fáil in particular, but also from Fine Gael, of reclaiming the mantle of being the united island party. You have Fianna Fáil figures newly burnishing their united islander credentials since 2020. Well, since Brexit, certainly. So that's also in the mix here, I suppose - that obviously the issue has taken on a kind of renewed salience in light of Brexit and the EU’s guarantee, for instance, that a newly united Ireland would be guaranteed EU membership. That changes the terms of the question. Albeit, there's no necessarily conclusive drive to Irish unity, insofar as the polls don't conclusively demonstrate, or don't consistently demonstrate, anything close to a majority in favour of it in the north, it has changed the nature and the terms of the constitutional question and the constitutional debate in Ireland.

So, that's also in the mix here, too. So, I think were it not for Brexit, were it not for Sinn Féin’s electoral ascendance (and those two things, I suppose, are related, there's a correlation there between those two seismic political events or developments), I don't know if we'd be talking in the terms that we are now. I don't think it would be a policy priority for Fine Gael, certainly not for Fine Gael: I've had members of Fine Gael actively tell me they don't want a united Ireland; I've never had anyone in Fianna Fáil tell me that; and I've obviously never had anyone in Sinn Féin tell me that.

Again, I'm starting to ramble. It's certainly an issue of high salience at the moment, and the Shared Island Initiative both represents that, and also an attempt to try and keep a lid on it. It's a way to try and channel that salience into something that is less contentious, less divisive, and an attempt to kind of move the issue onto a safer terrain for debates that keeps the reality of a united island on the long finger.

##### **Interviewer**

So you've already mentioned some things, like Sinn Féin’s issue ownership and the role of Brexit, but is there anything else you think affects the saliency of this issue?

##### **Interviewee**

I think I said at the outset that the thing that primarily motivates voters, the thing that's primarily motivating support for Sinn Féin, are “bread and butter” problems like housing. But of course, those things aren't divorced from the constitutional question either, particularly for a lot of younger voters. Looking at the current economic climate across both jurisdictions on the island of Ireland, but particularly in the one that I'm sitting in today, there's a kind of ‘well, anything's got to be fucking better than this. I can't afford a house. I'm never going to be able to. Waiting lists are less of a motivation for younger voters, perhaps, but I can't afford a house. I can't even afford to rent one. My wages have stagnated, et cetera’. A lot of the narrative around constitutional change is risky, that there's economic risk attached to constitutional change. And, well, if your life is already defined by economic precarity, then what have you got to lose by seeking some kind of more profound transformation, the kind of profound transformation that would be represented by Irish unity? So, I think that motivates a lot of young people's support for Sinn Féin, too. You see in the polling that younger people want a united Ireland more, the desire for more immediate Irish reunification decreases as you go up the age demographic. And I think that that's all in the mix, too, so there is a material basis for thinking about Irish unification, particularly if you're a young person for whom the current settlement, frankly, just doesn't work. Anything has got to be better than this.

##### **Interviewer**

Great, thanks. So, you've kind of already alluded to this, but do you think the EU has played any role in shaping how salient the issue of NI is?

##### **Interviewee**

Yeah, Brexit definitely has. Right. And the fact that the question of Irish unification is now connected to the question of EU membership, is there another way in which Irish unity becomes the progressive option? You're either tied to this Tory dominated, corrupt UK government, it appears in political culture, this kind of regressive ‘other’ against which Irish unity, which comes with EU membership and the forms of internationalism and outward lookingness that are embodied in that, as the progressive option married to the kinds of progressive social change that have taken place in the Republic of Ireland around the obvious things marriage equality, the abortion referendum, and so on. So, in a kind of symbolic cultural way, it has an impact as well as in kind of starker political economic ones.

Does it make sense in the long term? All throughout the Brexit debate, I know that a lot of European Parliamentarians were asking Irish politicians, well, why doesn't Ireland just unite? Then you resolve this border problem. Irish unity is a resolution to the problem of now. In the end, the protocol, as it was eventually arrived at, recognises the current constitutional reality of NI's place in the UK and the Republic of Ireland's place in the EU.

There's a narrative all the way through from unionism in NI that the EU is trying to push a united Ireland, and I don't buy that at all. I think the EU sees itself in ways that are perhaps more or less convincing, as a kind of neutral arbiter of this question rather than as someone with a partisan stake in, and position on, it. I'm not sure that that's fully convincing either, but I think it's probably closer. I don't believe that the EU is driving towards a united Ireland, but the issue of EU membership is certainly part of the picture and of the puzzle, and it's something that those promoting a united Ireland will certainly be keen to push, but I'm not sure that's mirrored by the EU itself.

##### **Interviewer**

That's interesting you talk about the EU portraying itself as a neutral arbiter between these different groups. So, Ireland and the UK were obviously joint EU members for quite a while, from 1973 to Brexit. Do you think this joint membership of the EU affected either how salient the issue of NI was, or even how political parties discussed it?

##### **Interviewee**

Well, yeah, again, the thing that joint membership of the EU did was reduce the salience of the question, that the kind of post-sovereigntist arrangement that is the EU, that the EU is able to facilitate, it kind of militates against border politics. Basically, for so long as both the UK and Ireland were members of the EU, with the same trading standards and regulations, the same customs tariffs, etc, that border became less important. You know, I'm not the only one who has commented on this more or less invisible border, and that reduces the salience over time. The Good Friday Agreement wouldn't have been possible without that, and furthermore, the Good Friday Agreement reinforces it, it reinforces a reality that was already existing, which is that this border has reduced meaning in a post-sovereignist context, with both Ireland and the UK being members of the EU. So, necessarily, therefore, when the United Kingdom removes itself from that post-sovereigntist context, that reinvigorates this question. So, we come back then to Brexit being an important part of the story in terms of the increased salience of the constitutional question in Ireland.

Maybe to go back on something I previously said, obviously, when it came to the negotiation between the UK, when it came to the Brexit withdrawal process, the EU wasn't a neutral party because Ireland was remaining part of the EU, and the UK was leaving. I don't think the EU has a meaningful stake, really, in the question of Irish unity. It doesn't have a stake inofar as it's not trying to push one constitutional outcome over another. The protocol accommodates the existing constitutional reality and there is the capacity to adapt to a new constitutional reality. But I don't think the EU has a meaningful role, or it sees itself as having a meaningful role in making that decision.

**Interviewer**

That’s all the questions I had for the EU. Another question I had was, how important do you think this issue is for the public and does this drive party support, or is it the other way round?

**Interviewee**

I think there's something of an effect whereby people are voting for Sinn Féin for one thing, but it's increasing the salience of the other thing. I've already suggested that I think those two things are more interconnected than that kind of analysis necessarily suggests. But I also think that there is a degree of truth in that kind of analysis, that in supporting Sinn Féin in order to address things like the housing crisis, there's perhaps an inadvertent or a side effect in that the issue of Irish reunification also gains increased saliency because of the policy platform that Sinn Féin has. This is a very nuanced political scientist answer, that there's a degree of back and forth: parties shape opinion, but opinion also shapes parties. I don't think I'm saying anything particularly controversial there, but I do think that it was really interesting in the 2020 general election, Sinn Féin did not really push the united Ireland agenda in its election messaging. It was in the manifesto, but much more attention was paid to things like housing and those “bread and butter” questions, albeit that Sinn Féin success in that election had ramifications for the constitutional debates. So, I suppose I'm arguing really that the direction is more party shaping opinion, rather than opinion shaping party, albeit I think that picture is necessarily mixed and nuanced.

**Interviewer**

So that's all the questions I had planned, but is there anything else you think is important in understanding the saliency of these appeals?

##### **Interviewee**

All of the political parties that stand for election in the Republic of Ireland seek to give some expression to a sense of Irish nationhood. They're all, in one way or another, nationalist parties, there's a background sense in which partition has motivated politics and shaped politics on this island, in both jurisdictions, in ways that often go under-acknowledged, even if that's in the fact that all of the political parties organised here are in some way at least tacitly nationalist, but also a lot of them are also tacitly partitionist. Partitionism is a defining feature of the politics of this island, in a sense. In the north that's obvious because the motivating question in Northern politics is are you opposed to or are you supportive of partition? The border is the defining question. But I think that's also true to a degree here as well, and I think that often goes under-acknowledged and under-analysed, really, that partition has shaped the politics of this place, too.

In some ways it's obvious, but in other ways it's more insidious and more tacit, I suppose. I'm trying to think of concrete examples of what I mean. But in the way that Northern nationalists are often regarded, and talked, about as kind of a problem. There's a greater fear, I think, in some quarters, of what unity would mean that's less connected having the DUP sitting in the Dáil and is more connected to having Northern nationalists, people that are Irish, sitting in the Dáil. The fear that attaches to the rise of Sinn Féin, the claim is that it's because of the shadowy back-room figures that sit in the Felon’s Club in West Belfast, but I think in a lot of ways it's the fact that they're in West Belfast that's the problem, rather than that they were or are in the IRA. There's an ‘othering’ of people in the north who are Irish, which sits at odds with the kinds of tacit nationalism that allegedly underpin the politics of all of the parties in this part of the island. So, there's this kind of weird interplay of the foundational nationalism of the politics of the Republic of Ireland versus its foundational partitionism. I don't know if that necessarily helps in terms of the questions that you're asking, but I think that the nation motivates politics on this island in interesting and sometimes contradictory ways.

**Interview Two**

##### **Interviewer**

Just before we get started, I probably should say something about my research. In general, I research when political parties use different forms of nationalism and what causes them to do that. So one of the cases is obviously Hungary, and when do political parties start talking about ethnic Hungarians in neighbouring countries. That's essentially what the purpose of this interview is, to try and figure out when parties will do that. So to start with, I want to ask probably a very general, possibly quite vague question, which is how salient an issue do you think ethnic Hungarians are for the different political parties in Hungary?

##### **Interviewee**

I think it's always a salient issue, like, it's always going to be a salient issue for Hungarian politics. But it's kind of a salient background issue. I don't think it drives voting. I'm not going to say it doesn't drive policies, it certainly shapes some aspects of foreign policy, particularly, I think, for the more right-wing parties and for Fidesz in particular. But it's hard to disentangle it from Hungarian politics more generally. It also depends on the issue. One of the interesting things about the upcoming election that I've been looking at is this tension between the Fidesz right and the opposition, more the left opposition, because you have this common list, which has Jobbik in there, which makes things weird. So, I'll say the left opposition, and this is a tension that has been brewing over the years, but kind of came to a head in 2004 when the left campaigned against the dual citizenship referendum for the ethnic Hungarians, which has never been forgotten or forgiven by people who particularly care about that. It certainly hasn't been forgotten or forgiven, say, in Transylvania in particular. And that has continued right now in the run up to the election. You have this tension between, for example, the idea that all the ethnic Hungarians in the neighbouring countries are going to vote for Fidesz and they get to vote very simply, they get to vote by mail. They can just drop off a bunch of ballots to one of these democracy centres and somebody will mail them to Hungary for them. People have done these things where they go in and they say ‘Hey, if my son is sitting in London, but it's really inconvenient for him to vote there, can I just fill out a ballot for him here (this is in an ethnic Hungarian town in Transylvania), can I just fill out his ballot here and just drop it off to mail in?’ Because of the election, there's this kind of instrumentalizing about the issue. And then on the other side, there's the Hungarian emigrants in the UK, in other places, who can't vote by mail, they have to go to the consulate or whatever. So, I've been reading things where they're basically like ‘don't let these people in Romania decide our election’. I think there are moments like that, since you have the introduction of the eased citizenship and voting rights, where that's kind of a newer dimension to see them instrumentally as voters, and that's not always in a positive light.

I have to say, I was just looking at the most pathetic, weird campaign platform ever seen. But the opposition list finally came out with their platform, as you would imagine, it's about lowest common denominators, given how many parties are coming together, doing an electoral platform. They talk about the ethnic Hungarians and if you just read that, you wouldn't see any huge disagreement with what Fidesz says, without the rhetorical flourishes. It's basically like, ‘yeah, we should support their culture, their language, we should support their economic development, they're part of the Hungarian nation, blah, blah, blah’. I mean, they have their own little section in the platform and it's very generic.

So, on the one hand, there's not that much disagreement about those basic things, but also the opposition left knows that they are vulnerable on that issue. This has been going on forever, they've always been vulnerable on it. I think it's interesting the way it's coming out, and then I think it's coming out in the current context around that. I think it's also coming out around the amount of money Fidesz has been spending on these clientelistic networks. They've been spending tonnes of money in Transylvania and elsewhere on things like sports clubs and all these things. So that's kind of the larger conversation, but it's more from the critical perspective, there's more investigative journalism on where the hell is all this money going and who is it going to. Then there's the tension between Hungarians who emigrated and ethnic Hungarian as to who's part of the legitimate political community that should be deciding things like elections. And, I will say that the opposition platform did specifically say, on the emigration issue, that they would switch to postal voting for emigrants, because that's a constituency that's much more in play. These are people who left Hungary during the Fidesz years.

I think the issue also comes up in foreign policy issues. So, you can see it with the response to Ukraine, if you've been following that. There's been some ongoing tension between the Ukrainian government and Hungarian government over some of these language policies, education policies, etc. I think that shapes how people see some aspects of foreign policy, but I've seen way less of that in the public sphere, just like in people's feelings about Ukraine. But that's one of the main things like, ‘oh, well, of course we can't have any weapons come from here to there because they're going to blame the Hungarians’. Which is ironic because usually they don't seem to care that much about helping to securitize the Hungarian minorities in neighbouring countries. Who knows what the larger reasons are for this. We know that Hungary has been pretty Russia friendly compared to other countries in the region and has its own things, but that's just the justification they're using. And considering the fact that Putin is justifying an invasion of Ukraine based on protecting the poor ethnic Russians, we know that manipulation is not something that is unusual. But I mean, Fidesz is on a different level, they're not trying to justify invasion! But they're always this convenient thing to sort of justify, oh, we're not going to support so and so’s EU membership, we're not going to support this.

##### **Interviewer**

So, you actually mentioned this a bit with your discussion of the left being weak on this or feeling vulnerable on it, but how do you think the saliency of the issue has changed over time?

##### **Interviewee**

I think in some ways the saliency, or the stakes, have diminished somewhat now that most of the ethnic Hungarians are in the EU. They can travel. The citizenship issue took some of that off the table. But I guess my point is I don't like to think of it as about more or less salient, but about how the focal points have shifted. Right. So, as I've been saying, you have this shift towards a much more sort of strategic political constituency idea, to see them as voters, and to see them like demographic groups. The fact that, on the one hand, Hungary said the worst thing would be for these people to leave ethnic Hungarian lands, because then that would destroy these communities, but on the other hand, they make it really easy for them to leave.

So, in some ways, the EU and the citizenship issue at least for a while, and who knows how this war will change things, like if it'll lead to a broader increase in the securitization of national minorities in the region, but in some ways, I think it took some of the existential questions off the table and this idea of ‘okay, well, they're not just symbolically members of the Hungarian nation, but in a more literal sense’. But then I think it created issues in politics, like more very real points of tension and saliency. But that doesn't mean it's always the thing that everybody's talking about.

I also think Fidesz has done an interesting job mirroring some of its own very homogenising, neo-natalist middle class social policies in its policies towards ethic Hungarians, so they've also reinforced some of these things through their ethnic Hungarian policy, like things like this focus on children and families, and focusing on small businesses, and focusing on Hungarian nursery schools. It's very sort of middle class family unit, heteronormative, very sort of totalizing homogenising idea of this is the way that you are a good Hungarian, whether you're in Hungary or you're in Romania, Slovakia, Serbia. So, I mean, there's a way in which they've done a frighteningly admirable job of making that all go together: focusing on some similar things, and then also, the things that he's been spending money on in Hungary, he's been spending on there, like sports, soccer teams, and this kind of thing. I think there's these moments where the saliency increases around elections, around things that are happening in the region that could maybe threaten or change the status of ethnic Hungarian communities, or that allows Hungary to respond in a way that it wants to, maybe for another reason, with some caution and use them as a justification for why it has to be cautious or why it has to pursue its sort of own interest. Then, on the other hand, it's another thing that helps bolster both its nation versus EU rhetoric, and also this conservative social policy stuff. It's kind of there under the surface a lot of the time.

Then, for the left, I do think that they really took a hit. I don't know if you're talking to Pogonyi about this at all, but he's written about the ugly quality of the left’s campaign against the dual citizenship referendum in 2004, which was a huge strategic mistake that they never quite recovered from. In fact, Márki-Zay [leader of the United for Hungary opposition list] was talking about maybe visiting some places in Transylvania, and they were like, ‘screw you, we don't want you’. Not because Márki-Zay has ever said anything bad about the ethnic Hungarians, but because Fidesz’s whole thing has been this guy is a mini Gyurcsány, who was the guy spearheading the left’s campaign as the Prime Minister. So, they hate Gyurcsány on this, and they're trying to say that Márki-Zay basically, I don't know if you've seen them, but there's literally posters of Gyurcsány as the evil guy, and then Márki-Zay is the MiniMe, which the opposition has cutely put their own version on Facebook posts of Putin as the evil guy and then Orbán as MiniMe. So, basically they're like, ‘yeah, you're aligned with Gyurscány and he's on your electoral list, and so we don't even want you to come’.

But this is not an issue that's going to make or break an election, it's part of the package at this point. You have to support it, no one's running around saying we should massively, drastically change these policies. I mean, there is some concern about how easy they've made it for them to vote, so there may be some trying to tamp that down. It's not really an issue where there's this big policy disagreement. It kind of falls into that national conservative classic version of ethnic nationhood versus the idea that the left doesn’t care about any of these things, and they're basically anti-national or un-national or liberal, cosmopolitan, globalists who can't be counted on to support these communities, even if they say the basic right things. Except around these voting issues, there's not a lot of policy tension, I would say. So, for the people who care about that larger national conservative narrative, then it's another blow against the left. But is that the thing they're going to vote on? Well, not unless they're actually part of the Hungarian groups outside the country then, yeah, that's what they're voting on.

##### **Interviewer**

You mentioned how common membership of the EU has diminished the stakes associated with this issue, so could you say a bit more about what the EU's effect has been on this issue?

##### **Interviewee**

Well, again, I think it's more about how the focus has shifted. So, between EU membership and the extension of citizenship and voting rights, they basically got rid of, for all intents and purposes, the actual borders between these communities in that sort of sense, so if somebody wants to use their Hungarian nationality for mobility, they can, and if they want to get a passport, they can. Or if they're an EU member, then they can leave on their own, too. This sort of fortress Schengen idea that drove things like the Status Law earlier and those kinds of things, that's all off the table. Those kinds of really intense policy debates that happened around the Status Law aren't really happening anymore. There's no need for massive policy innovation, I guess, beyond the massive amounts of funding. There's no need to be innovative or put your nose in front and do something dramatic, which is kind of what the Status Law was. Also, one of the things that made dual citizenship seem risky in 2004 was because nobody was sure how the EU would take it. Now that Hungary is in the EU and can do pretty much whatever the hell it wants, and now that a good chunk of all the ethnic Hungarians are in the EU, and the ones who weren't now can come and can get into the EU physically as individuals if they want, with a Hungarian passport, I think it's less about these massive new policy rollouts. So, in some ways, there's less need for Hungary to have to problem-solve like that, if that makes sense.

##### **Interviewer**

Thanks. So, you mentioned that now Hungary is in the EU, it can do essentially whatever it wants, but of course, to become an EU Member State, Hungary had to fulfill the Copenhagen criteria. So, do you think the accession process altered how parties used these appeals, and did that change after this process ended or not?

##### **Interviewee**

Yeah, I think there was a sense of clear sort of caution. I mean, again, a big part of the 2001 debates around the Status Law, and the fact that people were uncertain about the dual citizenship referendum in 2004, in part, one of the things they were afraid of was spooking the EU. Again, this is in part because Hungary was pushing the boundaries in some ways of some of these policies. I mean, other countries had done different kinds of Status Laws, but there were some unique features of the way Hungary was doing it that made them nervous. And there was also a time when they had not so great relationships with a lot of the neighbouring governments. I think that has shifted, but perhaps not with all of them. So, I think there was a sense of caution because they were right there on the cusp. This is when they didn't want to make too many waves, they just wanted to get accession done. So, I think there was some sense of putting things off. Then by 2010, when Orbán got back into power, they're in the EU. Other States have done some versions of extension of citizenship. You also saw this in Romania, when they did this massive ‘all of Moldova is Romanian, so anybody in Moldova can be citizens’, and it was around 2007, when they rolled back some of the decrees that had made it super easy for Moldovans to get citizenship, and then as soon as they got in the EU, they went back to the original way. So, I think there was a sense of caution and then not caring. You had these moments, like in 2008 with the Bolzano recommendations and even with the Venice recommendations about the Status Law, where there was this very vague language that we essentially recognised the right of States to have these relationships across the border, but we should be careful that these relationships don't impact societal relations within those countries and create more conflict. That was such a soft target. I think the Fidesz government was just like ‘yeah, whatever’, and then they're like, ‘look, we're not invading anybody. We're not like sending arms, we're not riling up separatists, we're not doing any of those things’. One could argue that some aspects of the massive funding domination of Hungarian media space, that some of these things maybe aren't the best if you want long term communities that can live together and understand each other, but did they actually overstep any boundaries that are out there in EU norms? A, there aren't that many EU norms about it; and B, what there were was super mushy. They basically saw that we get to have these relationships, and then as long as you're not doing anything like completely violating sovereignty, then you're all good.

Hungry was pretty much at the forefront of trying to use pan-European organisations, like the EPP, to push some of these national minority issues. I wouldn't say they got all that far, but they were more effective than most, but they got somewhere, they got asked to write some reports and things on the status of national minorities. And they were really at the forefront of pushing that citizen’s initiative on minorities and things like that. Those are perfectly plausible and reasonable things to do. Did anything come of it? This question maybe plays into Orbán’s anti-EU rhetoric, that the only people that's really going to care about nations are the leaders of nations, that Europe is a Europe of nations, only a strong state can protect the nation, and for him, the nation he's protecting is broader than just Hungary.

##### **Interviewer**

So, you kind of already touched on this, but let's just examine it in a little bit more depth. Do you think this is an important issue for voters, primarily non-ethnic minority voters in Hungary? Does that influence parties or not?

##### **Interviewee**

I don't know. I haven't really seen any good polling on this lately, so I'm kind of just winging it. People might be a little more concerned about this because of what's going on in Ukraine, but barring that, I don't think it's a top issue for voters. Like I said, I think it's more part of the package than a particular issue - it's never going to be like abortion in the US, because there is not this massive policy disagreement except on the tension around voting that at different times rises to the fore and gets really complicated because it essentially gets to who's legitimate actors in the political community. So, that's problematic, but nobody wants to let that go too far. I think very few people are going to vote on that basis, I guess. If you already don't like Fidesz, you're going to be super pissed about the disproportionate access to voting between ethnic Hungarians in neighbouring countries and emigrated Hungarians. If you don't care that much, you're not going to care or you're going to be like ‘whatever, if they really want to vote then they can vote’. I think it's something that people think is a little weird, but it's not going to be the thing they vote about because it has this moral sense to it, but it's not something that's going to get people fundamentally outraged, unless something happens.

**Interview Three**

##### **Interviewer**

Before we start, it probably makes sense for me just to say a few words about my research. My research, in general, focuses on how political parties across Europe use different forms of nationalism and one form of nationalism is how you deal with kin in a neighbouring country. So, Hungary is an obvious case and another case is Ireland and its relationships with N. Perhaps these are the obvious cases, but for this part of my research, that's what I'm looking at. So, yeah, I'm mostly interested in how salient it is for Hungarian parties and how they talk about the issue. To start with, I’m just going to ask a really general question. Just how important do you think the issue of ethnic Hungarians is for the different political parties in Hungary?

##### **Interviewee**

I think it is of serious importance for them, mainly of course for the nationalist parties. Which parties are nationalist, or which parties have the tendency to use this rhetoric? Of course, Fidesz and previously also Jobbik, which has now moved a little bit to the non-radical sector, the same as Marine Le Pen in France. But in general, to your question, yes, it is important for them. It was always important for them. It even was important if there were other parties in government, not just these rightist parties, as they are today. But of course this tendency can be seen more often in recent years because of Fidesz being in government. We also saw some attempts to support Hungarians living abroad in the case of leftist governments because it's their basic task to do so. If they didn't, they would automatically be criticised for ignoring Hungarians living abroad. But let's be honest, these clear tendencies can be seen mainly under the Orbán government. So yes, the answer is I think it's important for Hungarian parties, mainly of course mainly for the rightest ones.

##### **Interviewer**

Great, thanks. So, you've kind of already alluded to this a bit, but do you think the importance of this issue has changed over time, or not?

##### **Interviewee**

Yes, and we have evidence for it changing over time because it was the Orbán government who introduced citizenship for Hungarians living abroad, and it was the Orbán government who granted citizenship to hundreds of thousands Hungarians living abroad. Before, there were close relations to Hungarians, or attempts to have close relations, at least at the symbolic level. It was Orbán who came up with the idea to institutionalise the relationship via citizenship, which was, of course, criticised a lot by the other governments, who declared that if the Slovaks or Ukrainians accept Hungarian citizenship, they would automatically lose the Slovak one, and so on. So, to your question, yes, it changed. And we may see it, for example, based on these citizenship laws in the formal sphere.

We also have different evidence. I think it was approximately five or six years ago, a deputy for the Jobbik party in the Hungarian Parliament opened his office in Slovakia, in the territory of another country. He did it maybe for symbolic reasons, but practically, if he was criticised, he just declared ‘it's logical that I do so because we have Hungarian voters in Slovakia, we have people here with Hungarian citizenship, and therefore it makes sense to represent us in this foreign country as well’. Of course, it was just rhetoric because if you look at the numbers of people accepting Hungarian citizenship in Slovakia, these were very low. Of course, they do not tell the Slovak state because they know they would lose their Slovak citizenship. But we can guess how many people did so, and this is maybe some single thousands of people. So they cannot even vote in one deputy, they wouldn't be enough. So he did just for symbolic reasons. So, that is the second type of evidence I could show you, and that just shows things changed under the Orbán government. And of course, this Jobbik deputy, he didn't do so because of Orbán, because Jobbik is a competitor party to Orbán's Fidesz. It just shows that these tendencies are there.

##### **Interviewer**

Thanks. So, that's a good discussion of how important it is, but what do you think causes it to be important or not important, or even changes in how parties talk about it? You already mentioned Orbán’s government coming into power, but is there anything else that will affect how it's discussed?

##### **Interviewee**

I think it's clear in Hungary, if we look at the party system compared to Western Europe, it's not based so much on the socio-economic cleavage. So, the voters going to elections do not decide based on taxes, at least not predominantly on these topics, but for them the cultural cleavage is much more important. Similarly to Poland. Let's say the cleavage is universalism vs. nationalism. In other words, if you want to be successful in Hungary, you have to play this game of Hungarian nationalism, Hungary’s position within the international system and of course from different angles depending on which party you are in. But this matters. And, of course, Orbán understands that quite well. He played the game which was started by him in the second half of the 1990s, but historically this plays a crucial role. Now, we see examples from Orbán’s speech last year about George Soros, who was previously Hungarian with Jewish origins. Orbán speaks about this international plot against Hungary being bled by these (he never says Jewish, that would be dangerous for him, he knows where the borders of what he can and cannot say are, but it's there, implicitly in the discourse) Hungarians and the Bureaucrats of Brussels. At least rhetorically, he has never accepted Hungary as part of Brussels, it is always Hungary and Brussels, the symbols of the nation and Hungarian history play a big role.

So, back to your question. In order to summarise, your question was what are the variables influencing the tendencies in last years? Why is it stronger? Why didn't he do so previously? My answer is he did. He did it previously as well. So it's just an ongoing game. He does it now in a stronger fashion than previously, maybe because he knows he is in a stronger position. Let's not forget there was a different party system, there was a different electoral system. Now, there is a majoritarian mixed member system. He can lose a lot in elections, maybe that radicalises him. He knows that it works because he started this anti-immigration rhetoric in 2015 and now he realises it functioned quite well in the 2018 elections, so he hasn't any reason to skip that topic. I’ve also studied a little bit of Orbán’s discourse in the Covid crisis and one would think he will criticise the Brussels elite because of weak coordination in the Covid crisis. But no, he always speaks, even in the Covid crisis, about migration and the Hungarian nation. It works because he realised he can translate that hard topic, that topic concerning health issues, he can translate it to the predominant cleavage. So, when speaking about Covid, he speaks about migration, which goes on the nation and the safety of the nation. He, of course, says that Covid is dangerous because Covid brings health issues for the Hungarian people, and if there are migrants coming to Hungary, they can bring Covid. He just makes stronger what he already found out that works.

Years ago, he might have been weaker in his rhetoric in his first premiership, which was 1998 to 2002, because he was new to the role. At the time, he planned some things, which he did then after 2010. He planned this dual citizenship, citizenship for Hungarians living abroad, but he didn't have time enough to do these things. But after 2010, his position was much different. He knows that he has not just a majority in Parliament, but he has a constitutional majority. At the beginning, he was known as, not nationalist, but somebody tending to this direction. But 2010-1, it was not so strong. There were quite a few problems with leftist governments in Hungary. I saw tendencies of people supporting Orbán in 2010, not later, because they were saying, look at these leftist governments which were in power from 2002-10 and their corruption, this is a promise of new times and so on. Even if there were some strange steps by him then, it was still like, ‘okay, but that's what conservative governments do’. It became stronger and stronger when he understood that he will keep this position and that it works. These George Soros narratives, or supporting the minorities abroad because we are a big Hungarian nation and we have to help them, or the migration crisis. The migration crisis is what helped him a lot when I already thought that his career would decline. Then the migration crisis came, and he was great at misusing it.

##### **Interviewer**

So I want to focus on one potential thing that you might think matters, or doesn't matter. But do you think the EU has influenced how important these appeals are, or even how parties discuss ethnic Hungarians?

##### **Interviewee**

Yes, at the beginning it somehow worked. I saw strong international critiques towards Orbán after his silencing of the media, or the Constitution, or the reform of justice, and so on. At least if I remember properly, Orbán was able to postpone some things, or at least to change some details in his media law, based on this international critique. So, that's what happened, and the reasons are clear: A) naming and shaming; and B), which is even stronger, the EU structural funds, so these financial tools against him. Hungarians are, of course, very much interested in getting this Brussels money because the Hungarian economy is quite weak in comparative terms, if you compare it to Slovakia or Czechia, in particular.

Later, I had the impression that Orbán was certainly under pressure, but the socialisation did not work so much. That's my point. Look just at his expulsion from the European People's Party. One could say such it's important for him, but it wasn't important for him at all. And for this reason, I'm not quite sure why they didn't do so earlier. He didn't care about a lot. The pressure via the membership of the EPP in the European Parliament was quite ineffective, they do not have so many tools. They can of course accuse him of the Court of justice, which they did. It doesn't seem that will function because if you have to punish the state, then there will be unanimous voting and Poland will help. Not just Poland. Everybody speaks about Poland, but I'm quite sure there will be States, not just in Eastern Europe, helping Orbán. So, this pressure from the EU doesn't work quite well.

Just look now at what happens in Ukraine. They prohibited the transporting of weapons across the Hungarian territory and they do not care about being criticised. They get gas much cheaper than the other European States, they pay just a quarter of the price. So, I do not have the impression that European pressure works a lot. Of course they try to coexist somehow, they try to communicate a lot. We did research on Visegrad, so we asked officials in Prime Minister offices and foreign ministries of the Visegrad States about Visegrad, whether it works or not, and what do they say to it and what are the potential and disadvantages, and so on. And we also ask who are your closest allies in Europe? We didn't use the word allies, but if there is one state you negotiate with first, which state is it? Very interesting answers. Speaking with Hungary, they always mention Germany in the first place. They criticise Germany, but Germany was for them number one; they were not the closest ally, not that, but for strategic reasons, they were number one. That may have changed under Scholz, I’ve no idea whether it has or will changed, but they were able to speak with Merkel. So, yes, there were of course attempts to put pressure on them. But I do not have the impression that it functions, because we are where we are. Hungary is being accused at the Court of Justice.

So, they had the opportunity to change something here and there, and to give something to the Europeans in order to make them satisfied, but they didn't do so. Orbán did so in the first years, in his first years of 2010, 2011, and even 2012. But then he probably got this funny geopolitical impression that ‘I would be the bridge between east and west’. This idea of a bridge is often denied by experts who say no, there are different reasons, he cannot be so naive. But maybe he is. Yesterday he realised that Putin put him on the list of 50 biggest enemies. That must have been a shock to him - you do everything you can just to satisfy Putin for your whole career and then he puts you on the list of biggest enemies!

##### **Interviewer**

Yeah, Ireland had a similar moment because we tried to be neutral and we ended up on the list anyway, much higher than Hungary was on the list, I think. So, it's kind of like the neutrality didn't really help.

Obviously, to become a Member of the EU, Hungary had go through the Copenhagen criteria. So, do you think this accession process influenced how parties talked about Hungarians in neighbouring countries, or not?

##### **Interviewee**

This problem wasn't so obvious at times. I think the problems we speak about now, of course there was this nostalgia already starting in the 1990s, so even the first Prime Minister, Antall, brought this nostalgia to the party system and he spoke about Hungarians living abroad and so on. But I do not remember that they would have critiqued Hungary concerning the democratic quality of the state before 2004. There were no doubts that Hungary should become a member of the EU. There were no doubts that things were improving, the democratic transition and economic transformation, that these things work.

I know that 1994-8 there was a leftist government, which were quite crucial years and theoretically leftist governments do not tend to pick this topic. However, there was a very nationalist government in Slovakia. So, yes indeed, there were some tensions but I do not remember specific evidence or specific examples. There was of course something then, but I do not truly remember what. Then, before accession, there was the first Orbán government, which already brought in the end of this four year period, the idea of Hungarian citizenship for Hungarians living abroad. If I remember properly, they established a conference for Hungarians living abroad, and in this conference all of the minority institutions beyond Hungarian borders were united in this conference, and it was led by the Foreign Ministry of Hungary. This could have been seen as quite offensive politics. But if I remember properly, after the end of the Orbán government in 2002, the role of this conference diminished because of leftist governments, which never had these tendencies and never tried to stress this topic as much. This doesn't mean it didn't exist. I think it existed but it wasn't stressed so much. So, starting with summer 2002 or late 2002 (no idea where the diminishing role of this conference starts), I think everybody saw ‘okay there will not be problems because the new government is leftist and has different tendencies’. What I don't know is what was the international reaction to the existence of this conference between 1998 and 2002, when Orbán was in government? Probably they were angry, probably they criticised it as usual. So, probably Hungary reacted as ‘okay, this is just cross-cultural cooperation. What do you want? It's pretty non-aggressive, blah blah’. But that's just what I think, I do not know the reaction of the neighbouring States on the existence of this conference. What I do know is that the activities of this conference were refreshed or updated after 2010, when the second Orbán government came into office.

I know there was lots of stress after 2006 in the mutual relations, not just because of Hungary, but mainly because of Slovakia, because there were very nationalist governments in Slovakia. There was the Social Democratic Party, which had strong populist tendencies with one nationalist and one extremist party. In this 2006-10 period, lots of things happened, which influenced nationalism in both countries and mutual relations, and the topic of Hungarians living abroad was on the table everyday. This was the most important period for the topic of Hungarians, not abroad, but the Hungarian minority in Slovakia especially. It was not primarily because of the Hungarian government at the time, because there was a socialist one, for which it's never much of an important issue, but it was because of the Slovak one.

##### **Interviewer**

Thank you. My final question, because I've taken up a lot of your time, I know, is how important do you think the issue of Hungarians in neighbouring countries is for Hungarian voters?

##### **Interviewee**

I have not read a lot about it, but it of course must be important for at least some part of the population because Orbán does nothing without a purpose. So yes, I do have some evidence. But this is just anecdotal, it's just what I saw, but when I was in Hungary ten years ago (I am there like twice or three times a year), I was quite surprised when I met guys that were my age, around 25-7. They asked where are you from, and I said I’m from the Czech Republic, but my wife is from Slovakia, and they immediately say the other word for Slovakia in Hungary, which the Slovaks do not like because it's a romantic or historical term that means the upper country of greater Hungary. They know when people use it, for some people who are more sensitive, it has a little bit more nationalistic connotations. And they said what do you mean you are fortunate? And I thought okay, these guys are not voting for extremists, they were well educated, so probably voting for Fidesz (this was shortly after the 2010 elections). At least for them it was important. So they spoke about Hungarians in Slovakia and so on. Not that they would have mentioned radical things, that they would have wished to get back greater territory. Not that, no extremist narratives, but this romanticism was there. So, at least this single case maybe shows something, it illustrates that probably Orbán knows what he is doing or he knows to whom he speaks, who are his voters. Certainly not all of them care about Hungarians living abroad. Of course not. But a certain part of them do. Also, the Jobbik party were, at times, connected to this Hungarian Guard (a far-right group), which spoke just about these topics, that was their prime topic. Then there has to be an audience for this, or it wouldn't make sense. So, yes, I am sure it is important for a certain part of Hungarian society. Not saying that they would like to have territories or something, that may be a part of it, but maybe only for 1 or 2%, it's not big at all. But this romanticism, they like to speak about and they like to say how bad is the position of Hungarian minorities abroad. But I seriously think it is a topic for few people.

**Interview Four**

##### **Interviewer**

So, before we get started, it probably makes sense for me to say a bit about what my research is. My research looks at how political parties across Europe use different forms of nationalism, and when they decide to focus on those different things. One form of nationalism would be focusing on ethnic kin in neighbouring countries. So, that's why I'm interested in Hungary as a case and trying to understand when Hungarian parties will talk about ethnic Hungarians and neighbouring countries. So, to start with, given that topic, it probably makes sense to start with a really broad question. Just how important an issue do you think ethnic Hungarians are for the political parties in Hungary?

##### **Interviewee**

The ethnic kin abroad has been, let's put it this way, a special topic in Hungary, given the historical background that Hungary, after the First World War, lost two-thirds of its territory and a third of its people. So, this has been a special topic, I would say an important topic, within Hungarian domestic politics. I mean, there's a lot of literature showing that a lot of the domestic developments regarding, for example, minority protections have been done with the aim of promoting the situation of the kin abroad. In this sense, I would argue that this is an important topic and has been an important topic ever since regime change.

##### **Interviewer**

So just to kind of probe this a bit more, do you think the importance has changed over time at all, or do you think it's just consistently important over time?

##### **Interviewee**

There are some fluctuations for sure. This has been important during regime change, for sure, and because of the immediate difficulties with this transition, I guess it lost a bit of importance, but then it returned in the early 2000s, for sure. Then you have the 2004 referendum, whether the kin abroad should get citizenship or not, which again, of course, makes the topic highly salient. Then, after Orbán returned to power in 2010, one of the first policy changes that they implemented was the new dual citizenship law, which gives preferential citizenship to these Hungarians. And they also establish some new forms of consultations with the kin abroad. So, this is a perpetual topic: of course, there are periods where it's less important, so in 2014, I think it was less of an issue, but even today you hear occasional statements that the Hungarians abroad are, of course, an important part of the nation, and so on and so forth. It stays on, although there's of course some fluctuation in how salient it is on the daily scene, let's put it this way.

##### **Interviewer**

Do you think any political parties have ownership of the issue?

##### **Interviewee**

By now? Absolutely. Ever since the dual citizenship referendum took place, Fidesz actually owns the issue, I would say. Hungarian politics is characterised, or used to be characterised, more precisely, by these two blocks of the left and right, and Fidesz has owned the issue. Ever since the new citizenship laws in 2010, they basically claim to be the sole caretaker of the kin abroad, and of course, they accuse the Socialist Party of betraying the kin abroad, because in the 2004 referendum they were arguing against granting citizenship to the kin abroad. While the left has been trying to reformulate its standard, I would still say that the issue is owned by Fidesz.

##### **Interviewer**

Thanks. So that's a good discussion of how important an issue it is, but perhaps it probably makes sense to talk about what could cause it to be more or less important, what could cause these fluctuations. So, do you think there's anything in particular that causes parties to focus on this issue or give it less attention?

##### **Interviewee**

The answer would be, of course, daily politics. This is why I said that, for example, after 2010, there was this great discourse of reuniting the nation, as you know, part of establishing this new state for Hungary. But of course, Orbán himself, labeled illiberal democracy or later Christian democracy, but part of this entire concept was again the unification of the nation. So at that time, this was highly salient. But again, this would be in 2011-2, and afterwards things get normalised. Also, it gets more stable in the economic crisis that was going on after 2008. Then, of course, there's a minor increase by the time of the elections because citizenship comes with voting rights, and as part of the electoral mobilisation, the issue returns to the daily agenda. But again, after the elections, I would say the issue loses its significance, except for those annual meetings of the Diaspora Council, where they establish some principles of what should be done in the near future. And I think the salience of the issue returns as part of some of the electoral reforms, for example, so that this is how it comes back to the domestic political scene, that Fidesz changes some of the electoral procedures. For example, Hungarians abroad can vote in the national elections via a mail-in ballot, but Hungarian citizens working abroad have to go to embassies or consulates to vote in person. So, in this indirect mode, it does return to the agenda. But other than that, not really. I would say that the issue has been taken care of, ever since granting citizenship, the issue has been solved. So, there's just these ongoing occasional remarks that, of course, we do take care of our kin.

##### **Interviewer**

Great. So there's one variable that I want to focus on a bit. You might think it matters, you might think it doesn't matter, that's all right. But do you think the EU has played any role in shaping either how important the issue is or how parties talk about the issue?

##### **Interviewee**

It's a difficult question. I'm trying to think if there was anything. Originally, of course, and again, we go back to the 1990s part of the EU negotiations, this has been an important issue. Even granting citizenship, some of the key non-EU members like Serbia or Ukraine have been an issue. Other than that, I don't really think that they played any specific role. So, this has been a totally disjointed policy initiative as this is somehow a special duty of the Hungarian state, that, according to Orbán, the EU should have no say in because this is in the interest of the nation.

##### **Interviewer**

Yeah, great. So you mentioned the negotiations in the 1990s. What influence did these negotiations for accession have on this issue?

##### **Interviewee**

What I meant is that when, for example, Romania was applying for EU membership, the Hungarians were promising to block Romania's accession because of the situation of the Hungarian minority in Romania. So, in this sense, in the later negotiations, it was definitely used by Hungary as leverage against the other members. In the very beginning of the negotiations, of course, they had initiatives such as the Hungarian Status Law, which granted some benefits for the Hungarians abroad, but of course, this was highly criticised by the neighbouring countries as interference in domestic affairs. So, the Hungarian Status Law, for example, was toned down as part of these EU negotiations, so that you conform with the expectations that you are in good friendly relations with your neighbours.

##### **Interviewer**

Great, thanks. So the other thing I was thinking of in terms of the EU, is the joint EU membership of Hungary and the relevant neighbour. Does this joint membership have any effect on these appeals, or not?

##### **Interviewee**

Not really. I mean, you can look at the Slovakian case. After the Hungarian law of dual citizenship in 2010, the Slovakian state responded immediately by revoking dual citizenship for Slovaks, so whoever would take up the Hungarian citizenship would supposedly lose their Slovak citizenship. Of course, some people were stopped from taking Hungarian citizenship because of these changes, and others just didn't declare. To return to the original question, both are part of the EU, with no special influence or whatever. There, of course, have been talks that EU membership should actually disable the need for any of these citizenship laws, but other than this discursive influence, I wouldn't say there was any great influence.

##### **Interviewer**

Yeah, great. So moving away from the EU, just how important do you think this issue has been for the Hungarian public over time? How important do you think this issue has been for the general public in Hungary?

##### **Interviewee**

Not specifically important. This is why I said that, at the original time of regime change, of course, this was a greatly popular topic as this was part of this new life, new freedoms, new opportunities, to do whatever. Then, basically this topic loses importance because people have their daily concerns and difficulties as the entire economy changes. There are much more salient issues. Of course, the issue became quite hot at the time of the referendum back in 2004 as there's a lot of mobilisation by the political parties. So, basically I would say that society is split. Although, even at that time one could argue that the referendum failed because it didn't reach the threshold, basically people didn't go to vote. So, this could signal that the issue was not really of a major concern maybe, but it was more topical than it is now. Right now, as I said, after 2010, as part of the newly established Orbánistic state, let's put it that way, the topic has become a bit more popular, but most of the people are really not concerned.

I think nowadays, it's only part of this electoral talk about what the kin abroad can do, and whether their mail-in ballots can secure the additional seats that Orbán might need for a two-thirds majority. This is the only frame that I would think this comes in. Other than that, by now there has been lots of internal migration, so some of the Hungarians abroad come to Hungary. There have been occasional arguments, such as back in 2004, about whether these people are welcome here or not, but by now this, I think, really is below the radar, so it's not really an issue.

##### **Interviewer**

Yeah, thanks. So, that's all the questions I had planned, but do you think it's important to talk about anything else for this issue, or that will affect how important it is?

##### **Interviewee**

Right now? There is a very interesting talk with the war going on as some of these Ukrainian refugees actually have dual citizenship. If you have dual citizenship, you cannot apply for refugee status, so some of these people will be automatically excluded from some of these opportunities just because they have Hungarian citizenship. But at the same time, it's also very interesting that usually the men cannot leave, but if you have dual citizenship, you might be able to actually flee the country that otherwise you might not. So, in this sense, I think now there is some talk of, actually this might be a life-saving option if you have this. But at the same time, as I said, there are real difficulties if you want to apply for some of these refugee benefits. At the same time, I guess it's only the Ukrainian Hungarians that would aim to only stay in Hungary. The rest, at least in my understanding, go further away. But this might bring again some additional talk beyond this electoral role of these communities or Hungarian domestic life.

There is a very minor role, and I would actually expect more of the discussion of whether these kin abroad should interfere in Hungarian domestic politics or not, but somehow this has not really caught up with public attention. So, this was part of the debate originally, that if you do not reside in the country, you do not pay taxes here, why would you have voting rights? But as I said, all of this somehow succeeded by now, and it's really just about this block voting in these kin communities abroad, that 95% or more vote Fidesz. I don't remember the exact figures, but it's really a block vote. By now, I think you have a million of these people that took up preferential citizenship, and only a fraction of these people actually vote.

**Interview Five**

**Interviewer**

I just want to start with a pretty broad question. How important an issue do you think Northern Ireland is for Fianna Fáil, either now or historically?

**Interviewee**

Well, historically, it was always a very important issue for Fianna Fáil, although, when you look at the origins of Fianna Fáil in 1926, I suppose it wasn't one of the motivating factors that led to the establishment of Fianna Fáil. I suppose what led to Fianna Fáil was the fact that the people who had opposed the Treaty decided that they were prepared to work within the then constitutional framework and it was established in order to facilitate De Valera and his supporters to come back into the Dáil. So, it wasn't, I suppose, a cause for the founding of Fianna Fáil. Also, when you look at the Treaty debates, with the exception of McEntee, very few of the anti-Treatities referred to what was then the north during the debate. But it did, after the establishment of Fianna Fáil and in particular once Fianna Fáil got into government, it became very important. I'm sure you're aware that De Valera, in the 1930s and 40s was trying to internationalise it as an issue. He viewed it in, I suppose, what some people might regard as very simplistic terms, that it was an imperial denial of the full self-determination of the Irish people. It was important, I suppose, but it was perceived as being just a part of Fianna Fáil’s identity at the time, although it didn't do much about it, to be frank with you. Then, Lemass probably perceived that the issues with Northern Ireland could only be resolved through dialogue and through consent. He was probably ahead of his time, like his view certainly would be in line with the Good Friday Agreement. When Haughey came to power it defined the politics of Fianna Fáil a bit while the Troubles were going. Haughey was perceived as being more republican. The violence in Northern Ireland did have an impact on how important it was as an issue. Once the violence was going on, it was always an important issue for Fianna Fáil. There were a whole load of methods of resolution, and then Bertie Ahern and the Good Friday Agreement are something we claim great pride in. After the Good Friday agreement, it seems to have faded in significance and importance completely.

**Interviewer**

Great, thanks. This perhaps might seem like a very obvious question, but what is Fianna Fáil’s position on Northern Ireland?

**Interviewee**

Well, good question. One of the first principles of Fianna Fáil is the establishment and independence of the Irish people and the Irish nation, so implicitly you can read into that that Northern Ireland is important. What's the position? Well, that's been changed by the constitutional change in 1998. But I would have thought, if you were asking me the current political position of Fianna Fáil, I would describe it as a republican party that believes in the reunification of Ireland, through peaceful and consensual means.

**Interviewer**

So, to think about the party system as a whole, do you think any political party currently has ownership of the issue of Northern Ireland?

**Interviewee**

No, I don't think so. Some try to own it more. One of the concerns I have is that one of the great achievements, I’d say, of Fianna Fáil (I'm sure Fine Gael would try to claim some credit, but it's predominantly a success of Fianna Fáil) is that through the peace process and Good Friday Agreement, we managed to persuade misguided people that the avenue to achieve reunification was down peaceful, constitutional paths. We got those people onto peaceful constitutional paths, and then we sort of got off the pathway ourselves, which was an unusual thing to do. That means that it now looks to anyone between 20 and 30 years of age, who don't remember events from the last century, that Sinn Féin are the party that believe in, and are strongest about, reunification. When in fact, in terms of achieving reunification and putting the pathway in place to achieve unification, Fianna Fáil has done a lot more and is doing a lot more.

**Interviewer**

Yeah, great. So, let’s probe that a little bit more. Why do you think Fianna Fáil strayed from that path?

**Interviewee**

I think it faded as a political issue. Once the Good Friday Agreement was achieved in 1998, there was a presumption that, ‘okay, the north is sort of sorted’. It really only became a political issue once there was a crisis. As well as that, there was a belief that ‘we’ve sorted out that problem, it’s dealt with’. There's a certain amount of justification to that, the whole purpose of it was to allow, and ensure, that NI matured politically, and it probably didn't mature as much as people thought it would.

Crisis fits every agenda, it suits both sides of the polarised political playing field in NI to move from crisis to crisis, to crisis, to crisis and constantly relying on both governments to intervene, because I suppose their primary political ideology depends on the intervention of the larger government.

**Interviewer**

Yeah, great. So, crisis is one thing you mentioned, but is there anything else you think is important for explaining when Fianna Fáil focuses on the issue, or when it decides not to? Either in recent times or in the past.

**Interviewee**

Politics is very reactive, and reactionary, I suppose. Issues arise in Irish politics, and the bigger the issue, the more they dominate. There’s a lot going on here. So, when NI is not in a state of crisis, nobody's really looking out at it here. Part of the problem with Irish politics is that people don't set out a vision as to what's the long-term objective. I think Fianna Fáil failed (maybe not failed, that’s the wrong word) by failing to articulate a constant and consistent vision as to what Fianna Fáil wants to happen in respect to NI. Then there's ambiguity as to what's to happen and what's our policy. It allows others to try to dictate the agenda.

**Interviewer**

How important do you think NI is for southern voters?

**Interviewee**

Listen, for some of them it's very important. For the majority, I'd say it's unimportant. Depends on the voter.

**Interviewer**

Great, and does that influence how much parties talk about it?

**Interviewee**

Yeah, I would have thought so. Parties here have to be careful about speaking about it too much. It’s not of huge interest to people. This disappoints me even in Fianna Fáil, but it's not of huge interest to people in Fianna Fáil. Most people in Dublin, if you ask them, and they've done polling on this, what issues you're going to vote on in the next election, NI is 1-2%. It's not a big motivator for people, but I suppose, part of the reason for that, is again, politics here just reacts to it. There's no desire by politics in Ireland to make it a big issue.

Sinn Féin don’t realise that if they talk about it too much, they’ll piss people off. And they don’t realise they are the worst people to push for a united Ireland. They can’t persuade people. There is a black cloud over them, and they don’t realise it.

**Interviewer**

So, just to focus on one thing that you might think matters, or you might think doesn't matter at all. Do you think the EU has played any role in shaping either how important the issue is, or how people talk about it?

**Interviewee**

Well, I think the EU has had an impact because of Brexit. Northern Ireland was very much centrally involved in the whole Brexit post-mortem and analysis of what needs to happen because of Brexit. But does the EU play a role? I don't think the EU has an enormous interest in Northern Ireland, to be honest with you, although it is good they've accepted that if there was to be a reunified state, that it would automatically get back into the EU. But I don't think the EU has a huge say in it or an impact on people's views on it.

**Interviewer**

You mentioned Brexit there, so just to probe that a bit more, how did Brexit make the issue more important?

**Interviewee**

Because it, I suppose, created a crisis, which was that, are we going to have a hard border on the island of Ireland? It required people from outside Ireland to look at this political issue of the border, which, in truth, they never really looked at before. The border became an important issue in the thinking of Euro-crats and people in the EU. By forcing people to look at it, I would have thought (and obviously, I'm biased in respect to this), that any sort of objective analysis of the consequences of Brexit on the island of Ireland would lead somebody to say, ‘well why isn't that one?’ It's not an irrational conclusion to form. So, yeah, I would have thought Brexit was consequential in it.

**Interviewer**

Obviously, Ireland and the UK were common members of the EU for quite a long time, since they joined in 1973. Do you think this joint membership of the EU managed to reduce the saliency of the issue, kind of like the John Hume vision, or not?

**Interviewee**

I think it was beneficial, joint membership of the EU, because the EU became more influential in the lives of people within the Union, and as barriers between EU countries reduced and as the single market existed, necessarily, the division between northern and south became much less obvious. From the point of view of preventing a united Ireland, that’s the objective of say, a unionist voter, I would have thought that the preservation of NI and the UK within the EU was ant important factor in ensuring that there's no need for a united Ireland.

**Interviewer**

So, do you think unionist parties messed that up, then?

**Interviewee**

Yeah, I do. It's difficult for me to objectify. I think they made a bad mistake by backing Brexit. They didn't think it out, and obviously, there's a part of unionism that wants to align with Brexiteerism or English nationalism. But they didn't realise, or they should have realised, the consequences of that. I think they thought that it was going to make NI more British. In fact, it didn't have that effect. Maybe it would have happened if Brexit had been in the 1970s, or something like that. It damaged the cause of the Union, I believe.

**Interviewer**

Great, thanks. That's all the questions I had planned. Do you think there's anything else that's important to talk about here?

**Interviewee**

Europe ignored that issue. If there was violence, then it was of some form of interest to them. And then when the Brexit issue arose, it became an issue. Aside from that, I would have thought the EU hasn't put any pressure on - it's not as though the EU is some fiendish European plot to try to force NI into a united Ireland. So, I don't think it plays any role in it.

I suppose the attitude of Sinn Féin to the EU is bizarre, when you think about how it just changed its attitude. While it was seeking reunification, it was also valentantly opposed to the EU. So, I don't think there’s consistent compatibility between the EU and those who advocate Irish unity.

**Interview Six**

##### **Interviewer**

So, to start with, I'm going to start with some really obvious questions that probably seem a bit too obvious. But anyway, most of this will be focused on Fine Gael for obvious reasons. So, what is the party's position on NI?

##### **Interviewee**

Yeah. So Fine Gael is the United Ireland Party, and the broad thrust of Fine Gael would be aspiring, in some way, to Irish unity, and I think there are various degrees of that expressed within the parliamentary party. There are some people who would like to see it, in a very practical way, very soon and like to see a plan of some kind, although I think that expression is somewhat theoretical. Probably, people like Fergus O’Dowd fit in that camp, in a border county in Louth. Others, like Neale [Richmond], wrote a quasi-effort of a plan towards that. He probably wouldn't describe it as a quasi-effort towards a plan, but there wasn't a lot, if you look at it carefully, in terms of real tangibles about how that would be done. But what I think is important about it is that it was a concrete expression of where he wanted to go, which is important, even if the details may not have been there. People like Emer Currie, who grew up in NI, her father was an SDLP politician and a Fine Gael politician, very clearly interested in unity, but her foremost focus is reconciliation, and NI really working for its people in a reconciled way. And she's very strong on that. Leo Varadkar has a fairly strong view about an aspiration to Irish unity, but it's immediately set against what are the practicalities of that, what do we mean by that, anyway, and what would that look like in terms of state building? Leo's vision, when he talks about it, it's very much about recognising that there are a million people on this island who don't identify as Irish, who identify as something very different and finding ways to really, genuinely accommodate and talk about that, which is obviously extremely difficult. So, that's quite a different notion of Irish unity than maybe presented by Ireland's Future or Sinn Féin, or others, but there's a very strong sentiment.

I'm surprised by how strong it is in the parliamentary party, because where I come from, in Dún Laoighaire, it isn't replicated with the same strength, a desire for unity as such. First of all, nobody has ever raised it with me, ever, in any election, including my own, or when I've been canvassing for anyone else in Dublin South or Dublin Midwest. Nobody has ever raised it with me on the doors as something that's important to them. And even when I ask, it's sort of, ‘ah yeah, that'd be nice, but…’. And that's the sort of sentiment that you actually see when you look at the opinion polls, both north and south. Very little engagement in the practicalities of what that is or what that might be. I assume if you were to ask someone in Sinn Féin, it’d be Irish unity tomorrow, at all cost essentially, or something close to that. From my personal perspective, I don't actually have a strong view about whether there should or shouldn't be a united Ireland. First of all, I’d like to see NI reconciled with itself, and a political reconciliation that's more towards the centre than the polarised politics that I see, and that I don't think reflects actual integration and cooperation on the ground between individuals, between families, between communities. The politics is more polarised. The state is set up, in many ways, after the St. Andrews Agreement, to be polarised. To make that the electoral outcome or the electoral dynamic, which is a pity. I don't have any strong views on it. The irony is, if there is to be a united Ireland, it'll probably be delivered by somebody like me who's not that strong on it or driven by it, because there's possibly better opportunity for genuine discussion with Unionists than setting out a predetermined position. Ironically, I really am open to any form of constitutional future. Doesn't have to be a united Island, doesn't have to be an Ireland. It can be something very different. But what I am concerned about is prosperity on the island, stability on the island, and real, proper inclusion on the island, and that means for people with intellectual disabilities, and it means for people who identify as British. Whatever name you want to put on that, or whatever structure you want to put on that, I don't really care. Not too bothered.

##### **Interviewer**

Yeah, thanks. I find it interesting, the contrast you draw between figures within the party and what voters really care about; these different but strong positions on NI within the party, and then voters never raising it as an issue. So, do you have any explanation for why figures in the party care so much about it as an issue, whereas voters don't?

##### **Interviewee**

Their voters might care about it. Just because mine don't and just because the places that I canvassed around don't, doesn't mean that they don't care about it in other places. So, their voters may very well care about it. They may also be in politics because of an interest in it, because of historical attachments in different ways. Also, Fine Gael is a very broad party. When you look at what Fine Gael has done over the last 10 or 15 years, it's gone from a quasi-religious, sort of conservative, anti-abortion, anti-gay marriage, anti, anti, anti, anti, anti, to quite a different party that has an openly gay, half-Indian leader and has delivered on big social change. So, Fine Gael is a very broad Church in a real way, and of course, there are going to be people with different perspectives within it.

##### **Interviewer**

Thanks. So, how important an issue do you think NI is for Fine Gael?

##### **Interviewee**

It features as a subject at the parliamentary party think-in, but nobody turned up to it. There was a handful of people there. Fergus was chairing it, it was the second day. Emer was there, and I could see her looking around, a bit disappointed, and I knew what she was thinking. I said to her later, I was like, people are just not that interested. I think that's reflective of the broad reality, rather than the handful of us in the party who are really interested in it. I think people care in theory, just as I've described my theory about the electorate more broadly: so long as I don't have to turn up and do stuff. It's not a bad thing!

##### **Interviewer**

Yeah, you're always going to have to prioritise what you want to focus on. And if NI is not the thing you want to prioritise, then it's going to be low saliency. So, is there anything you think changes how important the issue is, or how politicians talk about it, or is it just a relatively stable thing?

##### **Interviewee**

No. Of course, what actually happens in NI has an impact on it: the stability or otherwise of the institutions there, the stability or otherwise of the political system. We all get very exercised about proposals from the British, in relation to legacy proposals, in relation to Brexit, in relation to cross-border movement of third parties. There's a sort of united Irish reaction to that, which is consistent among all parties, and including most parties in NI as well. So, those sorts of things mean that you talk more about it, but they don't mean that you're necessarily talking more about the steps that would, or could, be taken towards a united Ireland. So, they're different.

But, I can tell you that nobody cares. Nobody cares about it electorally. For example, Simon Coveney broke his back to try and get the political institutions re-established over Christmas 2019. Do you think it featured once, even once, in the general election campaign, six weeks later? Not a bit. And the reason is people don't care. Sorry.

##### **Interviewer**

No, it's fine. I think most people would agree it didn't come up as a major electoral issue afterwards.

##### **Interviewee**

And you know what? If he hadn't gotten the institutions re-established, would it have come up as a big issue?

##### **Interviewer**

Probably not either. So, do you think any party has ownership of the issue or not?

##### **Interviewee**

I think Sinn Féin tried to take ownership of it, but that's not the same thing.

##### **Interviewer**

There was one thing I really wanted to focus on. You might think it matters, you might think it doesn't matter. But do you think the EU has played any role in either how important the issue is, or how people talk about it?

**Interviewee**

In what respect, mostly?

**Interviewer**

I was thinking in terms of common membership. So, the UK and Ireland were common members of the EU for quite a while, and then Brexit happened and suddenly they're not anymore. So, that was along the lines I was thinking.

##### **Interviewee**

Obviously, the EU was sort of, I can’t remember the correct phrase, but an overseer of the Agreement generally. People presumed that that would always be the case. And obviously, Brexit has had a huge disruptive effect on that. Ireland has managed that situation as well as it possibly could. The day after the referendum, Enda Kenny went to Downing Street, and after that, he went and visited all the different European leaders to drum up support for the Irish position on Brexit and the protection of the all island movement, there being no border. We could see these things a mile away. It wasn't replicated, possibly on the Whitehall side. Certainly it wasn't replicated politically, or at least if it was, it didn't get any expression, as you well know. So, the EU has been obviously central to Ireland's position and to Ireland's strength in protecting the Agreement.

**Interviewer**

So, that were the main questions I had planned. Is there anything else you think it's important to talk about when it comes to this issue?

##### **Interviewee**

No.

**Interview Seven**

##### **Interviewer**

So, just before we start, I'll say a few words about my research. I look at different forms of nationalism across Europe and what causes political parties to focus on these different forms. One thing I'm looking at is when parties start talking about conationals in neighbouring countries, so how Hungary talks about ethnic Hungarians, how Ireland talks about Northern Ireland, and that's how the Irish case fits in and what role it's playing.

Just to start with a really obvious question, how important do you think the issue of Northern Ireland is for Fine Gael?

##### **Interviewee**

I would say it's increasingly important. People obviously have different views within the party. I suppose Fine Gael has to try and represent how the public feel. I think there's a growing belief, even though I know the recent polling says that's not a very strong belief or it hasn't been thought through. I would say that' the concept of Irish unity is accepted, rather than being speculated on. How that would work and the process, procedures, the impact on the economy, and all of that hasn't been articulated by anybody up to now. So, we will be hopefully representing, like every other party, that view. I don't see any difference between the parties, really. The question is, for moderate unionist opinion, if you can, do you make it an inclusive Ireland that they can feel very comfortable in, or do you go for the majority plus one? So, I think they're the two ideas out there.

##### **Interviewer**

So, you said that the parties mostly agree in terms of this desire for a united Ireland. Do you think any party has ownership of the issue, or not?

##### **Interviewee**

Well, I think the difficulty we face is that Sinn Féin obviously have fought a campaign of murder and intimidation for over 30 years and basically they've been forgiven their sins by the nationalists in the North, who have changed from supporting the SDLP, which is a moderate party, to support a more extreme nationalist position and articulating and supporting the murder of people, which they did. But I mean, I'm only saying that from the south here, and I have to accept that. I have to work with it. I'm not comfortable with that at all. But it is a fact. So, yes, we face a position here in the south that they are the strongest party, right now, in terms of popular support. So, it is an increasing issue, and they have been dominating on that. Obviously, Fianna Fáil would have traditionally held a more stronger so-called republican view, while Fine Gael would probably have been somewhat more moderate in terms of its views on unionism and so on.

##### **Interviewer**

So, you mentioned the polling numbers there, which is interesting. How important an issue do you think this is for the electorate in the south?

##### **Interviewee**

Well, I'd say the position every party would have in the south is that we all start from one point, we all believe in a united Ireland, but we've got to articulate, and that's the challenge to all of us, including Sinn Féin, to articulate what that would look like. It's not just good enough to say that the demographic changes are coming, and blah, blah, blah. At the end of the day, say that the British government in their wisdom decides to call a referendum, what are we going to say, what is our offer? Personally, I think Fine Gael should make an offer that the unionists can't refuse. Basically, that means giving them a significant power base in any future government, possibly even regardless of what that government is. I'd say you'd have to have some sort of Northern Ireland Assembly, obviously, and you would have to perhaps give them increased powers. One of the issues I suppose you could look at, which I'm just thinking of now, but the so-called province of Ulster isn't a province at all, it's only a rump, really. Obviously, we need peace on our island, but I do think you have to offer something. I don't think nationalists would have any problem with a united Ireland, but unionists do. So, what would that look like? What sort of flag and national anthem would you have? What part would they have to play? Can you give them a veto?

If they see the demographic changes coming, these guys will say ‘we better do something, we can't keep saying No forever!’. They're going to have to say yes, at sometime to something. Looking at the position of the DUP under their present enlightened leader, I think he's quite a challenge, actually. He's playing games at the moment and he's banging the drum. I understand why he's doing that, but I would have no confidence in him at all. That wouldn't surprise him. So, I keep looking for an enlightened unionist, like the UUP. Poor Doug, he Twittered away his reputation far too early in his political lifespan. But I think that, we in Fine Gael, would be much happier with the SDLP and the UUP than we are with Sinn Féin and the DUP. That's why I talk about the realities that are there, and they are different than what we want.

##### **Interviewer**

Yes, I suppose then we’d better hope the TUV doesn't do as well as the polling suggests, that would make it even more difficult. Let's hope it’s just Jim Allister doing well in North Antrim and that's about it.

##### **Interviewee**

Well, I mean, Jim Allister, he had the Markethill meeting where Sammy Wilson looked like a moderate. So, that's the problem. Unionism lacks leadership. It lacks a strategy of engagement. They cannot say no forever. To me, it doesn't want to engage. Sometimes they say to me, off the record, that ‘if we engage, the guys behind us will lose their nut’, so they fear they would be out-flanked. So, it's the courage of leadership from the unionist community. Now, if Stephen Farry can attract unionist votes, I think that'd be brilliant. I think between him and Doug Beattie, in this election, I would love to see Alliance do very well, if the UUP are not going to do well, which they probably won't. The SDLP have some wonderful people in them and they have a wonderful history. Claire Hanna is a very bright person. I think she's very capable, I think she might be good enough to take them on. Colum Eastwood is a very decent guy, he's doing well with Derry, obviously they've turned things around there. But I just think that the leadership in the SDLP is weak at the moment. It's not ticking the boxes, I think.

##### **Interviewer**

You mentioned at the start that you think the issue is becoming increasingly important, so what do you think affects just how important the issue is?

##### **Interviewee**

Well, I think obviously most people nowadays, unless you have grey hair like me, don't remember the Troubles, the murders, the evils, the killing, the slaughter, the no warning bombs, all that stuff. We remember it very well and we never forget it. That's partly our problem, is that we can't forget that. I think young people, I just feel that they want a different country to what we have now.

I think what's going to happen in the North, if Sinn Féin becomes the leading party there, as maybe likely, and certainly if their support continues to grow (which I don't believe it will, by the way), that would concentrate minds. We have to have an offer on the table as well. We have to think this through, and it's not our party versus your party. It’s what will the future look like, what's good for my grandchildren, what's the best thing for everybody? I think people will increasingly look at the issue, but maybe not in great depth. It's up to us to make the offer, in the political parties, to challenge and to challenge the unionists, but it's very hard because they're so nice and they won't talk to us.

##### **Interviewer**

Now to focus on one variable that you might think matters or doesn't matter at all, whichever it is. Do you think the EU has had any influence on either how important the issue is, or how you talk about the issue?

##### **Interviewee**

I think the EU has a huge effect. Obviously, the question of the protocol is a huge issue. The question of Brexit is a huge issue. I think obviously, in terms of Southern opinion, we're even more pro-European than we ever were. And in fact, the EU made a huge offer to Northern Ireland, which unionists are too blind to see, in that they have complet, unfettered access to our markets for their produce, and at the same time, there's no barrier to them selling their stuff in the UK. So, if I was in the north, I'd be saying ‘this is a great opportunity for us, we've got the best of both worlds’. So, the EU has given Northern Ireland a huge possibility for economic momentum that nobody in the UK has, other than them. I think the EU is very important and it's increasingly important. Their support in the negotiations has been fantastic, because they're saying you're part of the EU and the whole island will remain part of the EU, and that's huge.

##### **Interviewer**

So, the UK and Ireland were obviously EU members together for quite a long time, all the way from 1973 to 2016. Do you think this joint membership of the EU had any influence on the issue?

##### **Interviewee**

I would say this: Britain has been our best friend, has been our worst enemy as well, but in modern times, we've been very much together. Our economies were greatly linked. For Britain, I just feel very badly about Brexit, because I think it's a very bad decision for them and it affects us badly as well. It affects our relationship. The political connectivity isn't there. I understand that, this month I think, all of the Secretary Generals of the departments in the south are meeting their colleagues in the UK, and we really need that connectivity, notwithstanding Brexit. Our difficulty is that our relationship with Britain has gotten much worse. We have no friends in the English Cabinet, per se. There's no Minister of any note who has an interest or knowledge in Ireland, really, and they don't give a damn. That's a pity.

##### **Interviewer**

So, there was this John Hume vision of the EU making the border less salient and providing this comfort blanket, I guess, to different groups. Do you think that actually played a role, or not?

##### **Interviewee**

Well, I think that John Hume will stand out in history on the nationalist side, there's no doubt about that. He had a wonderful idea of a shared future, I hesitate to use Martin's words, but we have to build our future together and we can't ignore that. It’s why I go on about the issue and making the offer to unionism. The trouble is to articulate that idea, or to engage with unionism, is the biggest difficulty we face. What I'm looking for, which there must be, is somebody in unionism who's enlightened. We don't threaten their unionism. The Good Friday Agreement says that to be a unionist is just as powerful and acceptable as to be a nationalist or to be neither. They don't believe that. They don't believe that a united Ireland will give them that. That's the core issue, isn't it?

##### **Interviewer**

Great. That was all the questions I had planned. Is there anything else you think is important to discuss to understand this issue?

##### **Interviewee**

No, I just feel like that’s the big lacunae, it's a big problem.

**Interview Eight**

##### **Interviewer**

So, before we begin, I'll say a few words about what I'm studying and maybe that will help you. I look at different forms of nationalism across Europe and what causes political parties to prioritise certain forms or to ignore them. One form of nationalism I'm looking at is when parties talk about co-ethnics in other countries and how they need to help them and represent them. So, Hungary is a pretty obvious case to look at for that reason. So, yeah, I'm really focused on understanding when Hungarian political parties will talk about ethnic Hungarians in neighbouring countries.

To start with, I'm going to ask a really broad question, which might seem rather obvious, but just how important a topic do you think ethnic Hungarians in neighbouring countries are for the political parties?

##### **Interviewee**

I am wondering how you would define importance or salience. I'm coming very much from the party politics literature. And in this literature, we conceptualise party strategies by assuming that they compete with other parties by promising different policy programmes to the voters, so they position themselves on different issues. But of course, they can also compete by emphasising certain issues and by framing issues in different ways. Usually, when we measure salience in cross-national research, we ask experts to rank parties on an issue from zero to ten. Is this also your conception of it?

##### **Interviewer**

Yeah, I'm mostly focused on how often they talk about it, but also the differences in how they talk about it. Do they frame it slightly differently? It's a qualitative study, so I'm interested in going into details on it.

##### **Interviewee**

Okay. I think that's important to know, that your study is a qualitative study. So, I think to me, there are two important points to start with. The first one is that this situation has emerged over time. That Hungary has these Hungarian minorities in the neighbouring countries around Hungary, that goes back to the Trianon Treaty. From this peace treaty and its consequences, basically these Hungarian minorities now live as minorities in these neighbouring countries. I think this is still considered today by the Hungarian society and parties as a national catastrophe. This means that the issue is, to some extent, salient for every Hungarian party and for really a large part of society. This then also led to the fact that the first Hungarian government after the fall of communism inserted this notion into the Constitution, that the Hungarian government has a responsibility for the situation of these minorities. I think this is not questioned by any party, but we see differences in the salience of the issue.

The second point is that, even though there is an agreement on the importance of this issue, the issue is very much part of this traditional left-right dimension of Hungarian politics. The issue is, for right-wing parties,more important than for the left-wing parties, and also they would follow a different approach in formulating policies towards these minorities. The traditional left-wing party in the 1990s was the successor of the Communist party, so you can either call them a post-Communist or socialist party, I think they see this issue more as part of the Hungarian foreign policy, while Fidesz and Jobbik (the right-wing parties), they understand these issues much more from a domestic perspective, in particular since 2011/2 when they got voting rights, but even before, because for them, these minorities are part of the Hungarian nation and they don't distinguish between those Hungarian minorities and those Hungarians who live in Hungary.

##### **Interviewer**

Great, thanks. How do you think the saliency or the importance of this issue has changed over time? You mentioned that the first government made it an issue, so has it just been relatively constant or has it changed?

##### **Interviewee**

Well, when the socialist party was governing, the issue was less prioritised among other foreign policy goals, and also just the the financial resources, for instance, were much smaller. We see, until 2010, this change because most of the time a right-wing government was followed by a left-wing government. But then, from 2010 onwards, the approach of Fidesz has changed, and I think what has led to change was basically the granting of voting rights because really after that, the issue of Hungarian minorities was really an integral part of party competition dynamics.

In other words, before 2010 the question was how can Hungarian governments help or support the demand of these Hungarian minorities abroad? After granting voting rights, this has changed because first of all they were mobilised in Hungarian elections, and second of all granting citizenship and voting rights also increased the pressure to emigrate from these neighbouring countries to Hungary. It made it so much easier to live in Hungary than before.

##### **Interviewer**

Great, thanks. You mentioned the left and the right have different views on this and approach it in different ways. So, do you think any party has ownership of the issue, or not?

##### **Interviewee**

Well, I think Fidesz has an ownership, or let's say right-wing parties have an ownership compared to left-wing parties. But, between Fidesz and Jobbik (and Jobbik’s successor party), there was a competition going on for the ownership of this issue. So, the far-right Jobbik and now Our Fatherland (the radical successor of Jobbik), accused Fidesz of using this topic opportunistically. So, one example would be that Fidesz has very much criticised Ukraine for limiting minority rights in education and probably Fidesz is not so eager to criticise other neighbouring countries, and mainly because it's of course also very welcome by Putin. So, this is a general criticism from Jobbik, that Fidesz is acting in an opportunistic way, also in migration politics. They basically say that this is not a genuine right wing party, it's a corrupt party and all issues are acted upon very strategically and opportunistically.

But of course, why is Fidesz still owning this issue? They have increased the financial support for this minority since 2010 to really, a very high degree. So, it's not so easy to say that Fidesz wouldn't care about these minorities. Fidesz controls the resources of the state.

##### **Interviewer**

Great, thanks. So, is there anything you think causes the issue to become more or less salient or what explains this variation, do you think?

##### **Interviewee**

I was trying to think about a situation that would probably lead to an increase of the importance of this issue. I think one obvious case would be if governments in neighbouring countries limit the existing minority rights of the Hungarians, because that necessarily would trigger a reaction on the side of the Hungarian government and also probably generally on the side of all Hungarian parties. Like, limiting minority rights or maybe some kind of negative statements and acts against Hungarian minorities or violence. So, I think those would trigger reactions. But one of the central issues for the minorities in Slovakia and Romania is that their rights are still not enforced and implemented. I think they would really hope for more support, but they don't really get it because it's just not that salient. Probably, it's also too abstract because they have a lot of formal rights, but these rights are not necessarily implemented.

##### **Interviewer**

Now, I have some questions about the EU. You might think it matters, you might think it doesn't matter. I'm curious to find out. So, do you think the EU has played any role in shaping either how important these appeals are, or how the parties talk about ethnic Hungarians?

##### **Interviewee**

Currently, it doesn't play a big role because several Member States struggle with the question of how to accommodate regional or national minorities, and there isn't a common answer to this from the EU or the Commission, and also because the question of how you should treat your own internal minorities is really a deeply internal question. So, for this reason, I don't see the EU Commission playing a big role. I think in the Parliament, because there are representatives of these regional minority parties present, there are some initiatives from time to time to push forward legislation on the rights of regional minorities. Generally, the Hungarian minority parties see the EU as an opportunity to push for their rights at the European level because they don't have much hope that, for instance, the Romanian government would grant them more rights, in particular territorial or cultural autonomy. During the EU accession, the role of the EU was more important. In that sense, probably we could say that the EU accession process raised the importance of this issue because minority protection was among the criteria that had to be fulfilled by aspiring countries.

##### **Interviewer**

It's interesting that you mentioned the accession process and how that affects minority rights in the neighbouring countries. Do you think Hungary's accession process had any influence on these appeals, or how widely they were used?

##### **Interviewee**

During the accession,minority protection was important on one side, but on the other side, it was also important that these neighbouring countries find or have a good relationship with each other, because the Commission also emphasised the goal of stability.

But, I don't see how the accession process would have changed these differences between the right and left-wing approach. Maybe it would be better to just see it as a general increase in the importance of minority rights.

##### **Interviewer**

Great, thanks. Then, just how important an issue do you think this is for voters in Hungary?

##### **Interviewee**

Again, as I said, to some extent, this issue is important for every party, and for all kinds of voters as well. Also, you would find this issue covered in every party programme to some extent, and that would show me that the parties actually also think that people care about this issue. But the question of voting rights divides people along the left-right cleavage, because the introduction of this voting right also discriminates against Hungarian voters who live abroad, but not in these neighbouring countries, because members of the Hungary minority in the neighbouring countries could vote via mail, and all the Hungarians who live abroad need to go to the embassy to vote. I think the voters on the left see this discrimination, understand it, and they oppose it. So, if at one point in time a left-wing government came to power, I think they would change the situation. I don't think that they would withdraw the voting rights of these minorities, but I think ideally they would create a situation where none of these groups who live abroad are discriminated against.

Currently, people expect really difficult economic times, and if the government continues to support the Hungarian minorities abroad, I think some people will question whether this should be a priority.

**Interview Nine**

**Interviewer**

Before we get started, I'll just say a word or two about my research, which mostly focuses on whether or not political parties will talk about NI or what will cause them to do that. That's going to be the main focus of the interview, and obviously, since you're from Fine Gael, that'll be probably a major focus as well.

So, to start with some really obvious questions. How important an issue do you think NI is for Fine Gael?

**Interviewee**

Well, it's very important for me personally, as a member of the Fine Gael party. I believe it's important for Fine Gael, but I'm not so sure it's important for the Irish people. If you look at any research that's done in the run-up to an election, Northern Ireland or international affairs really don't ever feature. So, in terms of the pecking order of the Irish public, I don't believe NI is an issue. I would say there is an aspiration, that probably the vast majority of Irish citizens have here in the south, and that is an aspiration towards a united Ireland. In terms of giving that any consideration, it's not something that I believe people do. It’s something that is ingrained in Irish people from their days in primary school, I don't believe it has changed in the 55 years since I left primary school.

**Interviewer**

How has this importance, for Fine Gael, changed over time, or has it stayed at a relatively constant level of importance for the party?

**Interviewee**

No. I think what has been important is that there be a bipartisan approach among the two major political parties. By and large, that has held over the years, although the fundamental founding stone of each party has been fundamentally different. In my own party, I think we were heavily influenced by people like John A. Costello (our Taoiseach for 1948-51 and 1954-7), and then by Garrett FitzGerald, who was very strong on Northern Ireland and was very strong on introducing a real and fundamental place of priority for the principle of consent. I don't believe that, in terms of party politics, it's an important issue from a day-to-day basis, it’s primarily left to the party leader. I think only in recent times have we seen other people within the party speak out on Northern Ireland. Certainly, down in the years, under Garrett FitzGerald, Alan Dukes who succeeded him, John Bruton, who succeeded him, Michael Noonan, who succeeded him, and Enda Kenny, who succeeded him, Northern Ireland was the preserve of the party leader. That might have changed a little bit under Leo Varadkar, as other members of the party speak out on Northern Ireland. That runs the risk of the party not speaking with one voice. I like to see the party speaking with one voice, but that one voice is the voice of Garrett FitzGerald, who in terms of Irish identity, was particularly strong when he said that the Irish people comprise more than just Gaels. Irish people comprise Gaels, Anglo-Irish, Ulster-Scots, and English. I think it's absolutely essential in the context of people in the south speaking about Northern Ireland that we would take that into consideration. Sadly, that is rarely the case, and particularly in the last four or five years, where matters have become quite polarised. I blame Sinn Féin for that polarisation, and I don't believe that Sinn Féin have any regard for anything other than the Gael. That, in my mind, is a recipe for trouble.

**Interviewer**

Great thanks. So, there's a few questions that stick out for me from what you just said there. You mentioned the bipartisanship on the issue and then Sinn Féin trying to change that, and its attitudes to Northern Ireland. So, do you think any party has ownership of the issue, or not?

**Interviewee**

No, I don't. Although there has been, between Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael, a bipartisan approach, particularly around the aftermath of the Anglo-Irish Agreement, where that bipartisanship broke down in 1985, when Charlie Haughey and Fianna Fáil attempted to undermine what was a very important aspect of Anglo-Irish affairs, as well as North-South affairs. When it came to the Good Friday Agreement, that mistake was not made, in so far as there appeared to be us speaking with one voice from here, the Dáil and Leinster House. I think that was important. I suppose the fundamental difference between Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael, as I would see it, is that the founding fathers of Fianna Fáil, and it still is very much in their constitution and in their DNA, focused on the restoration of the Irish language and the unification of our country. Now, they didn't say how either of those was going to be done. I would think, from my perspective, and I was always particularly happy with our Fine Gael view, because the principle of consent was very much enshrined, that yes, we would like a united Ireland, it was probably more aspirational than realistic, but it was based on, in the words of John Hume, bringing the hearts and minds of people together. A united Ireland would only take place on consent and that consent would be the consent of the majority of people in Northern Ireland.

This is where, now in the context of the promotion of a border poll, matters, to my mind, are quite fraught, dangerous, and difficult. Because the last thing Ireland needs is to replace one aggrieved minority with another. And if I am told, and in my understanding it is true, that there are in excess of a million people in Northern Ireland who do not want a united Ireland, then I have to listen to those, and I have to talk to those. I also have to ensure that here in Dublin, and here in the Republic, we have an accommodating state that will attract the majority of people in Northern Ireland. If you look, for example, at farmers, there's nobody that can convince me that the farmers of Northern Ireland are better served under Westminster than under Dublin. But you know, I found it baffling that the majority of farmers in West Ulster seemed to support Brexit. I spoke to some of their leaders, and I couldn't fathom it. In fact, I don't think they were being fair to themselves, or I don't think they were thinking in terms of future generations of Ulster farmers who, to my mind, are better served from Dublin.

**Interviewer**

Okay, great. So, that's quite a bit about these positions over time. Is there anything you think would cause the issue to become more important, or less important, for the party?

**Interviewee**

Well, yes. I think a Sinn Féin First Minister and majority in Northern Ireland (which could happen in weeks) and a Sinn Féin government here, which I don't think is the inevitability that many punters believe, would certainly change things fundamentally. For example, in Northern Ireland, if I could be so bold as to say, a Sinn Féin majority and First Minister in Northern Ireland, to my mind, presents an immediate difficulty because the fundamental raison d’être of Sinn Féin is is to disrupt Northern Ireland, to continue to regard Northern Ireland as a failed state, or failed statelet. So, how can they make it work by being the majority party of the government, when their fundamental philosophy is to tear down and not recognise the state of Northern Ireland. That's one the people of Northern Ireland have to deal with because I'm very much aware of the consequences of somebody like myself being so bold as to stick my nose into who issues pertaining to Northern Ireland. However, as the co-guarantor of the Good Friday Agreement, or at least as a member of the parliament here supporting the government that’s a co-guarantor of the Good Friday Agreement, I do stake my claim to speak about these things, albeit along the lines of the Good Friday Agreement.

**Interviewer**

So, just to focus on one thing that you might think matters, or you might think doesn't matter, it's up to you. Do you think the EU has had any role in either how important the issue is, or how parties talk about it?

**Interviewee**

I think certainly the EU has had a hugely beneficial effect on North-South relations and Anglo-Irish relations. The EU certainly molded the manner in which my party dealt with issues, European issues, international issues, and North-South issues. Because there were many aspects of North-South politics that could not be dealt with, particularly in the run up to the Good Friday Agreement, the forging of the peace process, issues of an intractable nature that could not be dead with in Belfast, in Dublin, in Westminster, but could be dealt with in Brussels. And that's why I feel that they're probably hasn't been sufficient weight given to membership of the European Parliament on the part, in particular of Ian Paisley, on the part of Jim Nicholson (of the UUP and later an independent), and of course, John Hume. I don't regard Sinn Féin members of the European Parliament as making anything towards a constructive contribution. No surprise there. But, I think Hume and Paisley often managed to use the umbrella of the EU to good effect, particularly after the Good Friday Agreement, and maybe perhaps even in the run up to it as well. I would credit Hume with changing the SDLP from a social democratic and labour, workers party-type organisation (albeit almost exclusively from a nationalist point of view), into a mature, European type party, and I think Paisley regarded his membership of the European Parliament probably stronger than he was given credit for.

**Interviewer**

Great. It's good you mentioned John Hume, because my next question is going to focus on him a bit more. John Hume had this vision of the EU as the greatest force for conflict resolution in world history, the effect of it softening borders between the UK and Ireland, providing some psychological comfort, perhaps, to people. So, do you think this common membership of the EU was important?

**Interviewee**

I think it was hugely important, but it wasn't solely important for the people of Northern Ireland, or the people of the Republic, or the people of the UK, but it was really important to the people of the EU. Because if you meet any group, German MEPs, French, MEPs, Dutch MEPs, Italian MEPs, Belgian MEPs, they will point to the Northern Ireland peace process as being a success of the EU over the last 60 years. So, the members of the EU from the continent of Europe see the Northern Ireland peace process as their success, which, of course, it is.

That's why, in the context of Brexit, the issues surrounding the peace process, the invisible border, the need to ensure a special status for Northern Ireland, were very much understood by all our EU colleagues very soon after the referendum took place. I have to say, I was really encouraged by the very strong support that we received right across the EU. Not because of anything else other than the matter of the peace process.

**Interviewer**

Great. So, you mentioned Brexit there, what effect do you think that's had on how parties in the south talk about Northern Ireland, or how important it is?

**Interviewee**

I think it's had a dreadful effect. The whole fundamental basis of the EU, post-World War Two, as you said, bringing people together, building on peace and stability, putting an end to war, strife and hostility; the fundamental plank of that was the bringing of people together. Brexit is the exact opposite of that. It's the sundering of relations, it's the pulling of people apart, and that's what it is. We were shocked here with the result of Brexit. Obviously, it's a decision of the UK people, they are sovereign in that regard. But it's the sundering of relationships, the pulling apart of people, the introduction of new strains and stresses North-South, and East-West resulting in, sadly, a deterioration in relations between Westminster and Dublin, between Stormont and Dublin, and indeed, between Belfast and Westminster, as we can see now in more recent times. So, it is a lose-lose.

And how did it mold the parties? I mean, it didn't fundamentally change anything in terms of our party constitutions, but it did solidify, certainly from our perspective in Fine Gael, members of the European People's Party, that European family of Christian Democrats, we have been members since the early 1970s (since we joined the EU), and I think that Christian democratic philosophy was hugely important in the development of our policies. Yes, it did affect Northern Ireland as well, because at any of our EPP meetings, at any stage, we are always asked by our EU colleagues ‘what's the situation in Northern Ireland?’ In fact, I'll go further and say that one of the most regrettable parts of Britain's relationship with Europe, or Britain's membership of the EU, was when Cameron took the Conservative Party out of the EPP. It was tragic because they left the table and I oftentimes believe that the EPP leadership, particularly Angela Merkel in Germany, being the strong voice at the EPP table, and German MEPs, given their influence in the group, I wonder, should they have done better? Should they have done more? And I wonder should we have done more? I had a very good relationship with Jim Nicholson, who was part of the EPP group and, as a farmer, he was quite proud of the EPP. Now, he was a bit lukewarm on Europe, but he oftentimes, like everyone in NI, had to speak to his base.

I think that is one of the difficulties about Northern Ireland that we see now in the context of an election, the tribalism, the playing to the base, the moving towards a polarised society. We don't do politics like that here. Not saying it's a sign of our maturity, but it is a sign of our difference. When I see Jeffrey Donaldson in tow with Jim Allister, when I see Sinn Féin going more towards their tribal base of the border poll. I just think that, in the circumstances, is quite unhelpful, but I would not say anything that would in any way interfere with an election in a neighbouring jurisdiction. But I remark it as being a difference, and I remark it as being regrettable. Why is it regrettable? Because ultimately, the pieces will have to be picked up after the election, whether or not there's a Stormont Executive formed. One thing is sure, if there isn't, well, then we're facing direct rule. Nobody can tell me that direct rule is in the best interest of the people of Northern Ireland. It isn't. And it's back to what I said earlier about the common links between North and South that we should be forging.

That's why, as a member of Fine Gael, I am a really strong supporter of Micheál Martin's Shared Island Initiative. Probably more than most in his party, probably more than the leadership of my party, but I do believe that is the most positive way forward. In fact, it seems to me that the more he pushes out that Shared Island Initiative, the more at odds he's becoming with the fundamental principle of his party, which is a united Ireland.

**Interviewer**

The Doug Beattie poster incident over the weekend really reinforced how nasty things are getting within unionism. That is all the questions I had planned, is there anything else you think it's important to talk about, to understand the issue?

**Interviewee**

Yeah, it's important to understand that Northern Ireland does not feature in Irish political hustings. To give you a quick example, I addressed my constituency council shortly after the Good Friday Agreement in April 1998. I thought it was a really historic time. My constituency is Laois-Offaly, so it is a rural farming constituency council, predominantly male, many Church of Ireland farmers, in particular. So, I addressed my meeting on the Good Friday Agreement and North-South relations. It wasn't something I'd ever done before, even though I had been in Parliament for over 10 years at the time, simply because we didn't discuss these issues because of a risk of introducing discord into a meeting. So, I was on my feet waxing lyrical about the agreement, a copy of the agreement in my hand. There were about a hundred people in the hall. Mainly man, as I said. I saw a note coming from the back of the hall, being passed right up through the hall, it was passed to the chairman, who opened the note, he read it, and he passed the note up to me. The note said, in sharp block capitals, ‘Fuck the North, what about the price of cattle?’ That was a lesson to me, if I needed it. That's where Northern politics stood.

I’ll give you the example of Austin Currie standing in a presidential election in 1990. He was our Fine Gael candidate. If you read the dispatchers or the newspaper colour pieces at that time, Austin Currie's northern accent was held against him. We were told that Irish people really didn't like people with northern accents coming down to tell us what their preferences are, even though he was in Fine Gael. He bombed in the election, he got much less than the national average of our party at the time.

I always maintained, in terms of northern politics, in terms of Northern Ireland issues, if you draw a straight line across from Dublin to Galway, anybody north of that line has a different perspective on Northern Ireland than anybody south of that line. I'm south of that line. We really didn't know much about Northern Ireland when I was growing up. But I make the exception because of Portlaoise prison, which was the high security prison, and which ensured that oftentimes the strife of Northern Ireland, the tension of Northern Ireland, the polarisation of Northern Ireland, was often visited upon us when a Provo demonstration took place, when we had intimidation on the part of Sinn Féin in furtherance of prison escapes, prison riots, prison privileges, political status, hunker strikers, all that sort of stuff. But by and large, if you live south of the Dublin-Galway line, it was a TV war. It was a TV issue.

I suppose my overall point is that when partition took place in the early 1920s, we did very little about that. Unionists also abandoned their southern Protestant compatriots. We abandoned nationalists in the North, by and large, and that goes right up to 1969 and the Troubles. But did we make Dublin a more pleasant place, a more welcoming place for the majority of people in Northern Ireland? I guess we didn't. Now, you could say they didn't come down and they wouldn't come down.

I remember Sir Patrick Mayhew visited a world scout jamboree in my constituency back in the early 1990s, before the Agreement, before hostilities ended. Of course, there was a huge security presence, but as well as Sir Patrick, many scout leaders from Northern Ireland came down. I was shocked at the ignorance of people in Northern Ireland towards the South. They spoke about the fact that they were surprised that there was food in the shops, they spoke about their surprise that the bus could traverse the roads comfortably, that the signposts were legible, that they were in English as well as Irish. It was a strange environment for them. That, to my mind, was extraordinary, it was something that I might have expected maybe in North and South Korea. But partition really did have an effect of keeping people on either side of a hard border, where everybody behaved badly.

Bruton once said that a sign of how important NI is, is how much money Ireland gives to it. In the 1990s, giving NI money from the budget was novel, but now it is a matter of course, and that is a sign of how important it has become.

The decade of centenaries were, looking back on them, deeply polarising, and that probably helped Sinn Féin.

**Interview Ten**

**Interviewer**

Just before we get started, I want to say a few words about my research. You know this already from the information leaflet, but just to make sure. I'm looking at different forms of nationalism across Europe and what causes parties to actually use it in their appeals, and to prioritise it. So, one of the cases, perhaps unsurprisingly, is Irish relations with the north and parties’ positions on that. A lot of this interview is going to be focused on Sinn Féin, for obvious reasons. I'm going to start with a really, perhaps too, obvious question, and that is just how important do you think the north is, as an issue, for Sinn Féin?

**Interviewee**

Well, for us as Irish Republicans, the reunification of our country is one of our primary goals, and obviously following the Good Friday Agreement, the vast majority of people on the island agree that that would be done by, thankfully, by solely peaceful and normal democratic means, where you have to win hearts and minds by the power of your arguments. That's something that obviously we continue to hope to do. We hope to have a referendum on Irish reunification in the foreseeable future. One of the things we're saying is that we need to responsibly prepare for that. So, we've talked about a citizens assembly, we've talked about an all-party Oireachtas committee in Leinster House in Dublin, looking at what does this look like, addressing the concerns of, particularly, the unionist community. So, for us, that's one of our core objectives.

In the broader sense, I think that Brexit has focused minds in terms of the limitations of partition, the challenges of partition on the island. Indeed, the COVID-19 pandemic showed the limitations of two jurisdictions on the island. So, I think it's focused minds in terms of the discussion, and that discussion is happening around us and we just need it to continue to happen.

**Interviewer**

Great, thanks. So, you sort of already mentioned this and touched on this a bit, but just for a bit more detail: is there anything that would change just how important the issue is for the party, or how you think about the issue of the North?

**Interviewee**

No. I mean, obviously our party comes from the history of conflict, of partition, and of the division of the island. The modern day Sinn Féin members and leaders, we come from that tradition where we would want to see a 32 county Ireland, making its own independent decisions, its own independent economic and foreign policy. Of course, we accept that a 32-county Ireland should be part of the EU. The opportunity to be part of that economic market of 500 million people is important. It has brought many benefits to this island and we wish to continue with that, but particularly in terms of foreign policy, it would be good to have our own independent approach. I think if you look at the conflict, for example, now between Russia and Ukraine, but particularly I would think of the Middle East, South America, or wherever conflict emerges, we, if we have an independent foreign policy, can actually play an active role in conflict resolution. So, in other words, we're not sitting on the fence saying we've nothing to do. That's a kind of neutrality I don't believe in. But I believe in a neutrality where you are not part of NATO. If you have an independent viewpoint, you may be able to help with conflict resolution in a way that members of NATO cannot because they have skin in the game with one of the major powers. Anyway, that's the broader foreign policy in terms of Ireland, I went off on a tangent there. But that's where we come from, that's our view. It's about the reunification of the island, but it's also about an independent foreign policy internationally.

**Interviewer**

So, you've already mentioned this a bit in your answer just there and in your earlier answer, but just what role has the EU played in how the party understands the north, or has it played any role at all?

**Interviewee**

Well, it wasn't until Brexit that we maybe fully appreciated how important a role it actually had played. What we had following the Good Friday Agreement and the peace process was the seamless border, the movement of people, goods, and capital because both jurisdictions were within the EU. I think that really helped to solidify the peace, to create the normalisation that all of us had yearned for.

I mean, we are critical, in some cases, of the direction that the EU has taken, but I think that reflects the political choices of voters in individual countries, so you end up with an economic policy that is pushing the privatisation of public services, pushing a light touch in terms of regulations and the oversight of business, much to the detriment. So, we would be critical of that sort of direction that has taken place, but we also would be mindful of the advances in rights (human rights, workers rights, environmental rights) that comes from membership of the EU. So, I suppose it's a balance of all of that, but when you weigh up the negatives and the pluses, I think it's quite clear that we need to be within the EU. If we believe that certain things are not working, then we need to try and build alliances politically with other parties across Europe to try and change that from within.

**Interviewer**

Great. So, you already mentioned this in terms of free movement of people and the EU underpinning the peace process to some extent, but obviously the UK and Ireland were joint members of the EU for quite a long time, as they both joined the EEC in 1973. Do you think this joint membership of the EU was important, or not?

**Interviewee**

Well, I think it was very important, and it's why, whenever the vote had taken place for Brexit, that we obviously spotted the serious threats straight away. I mean, the fact is that the British people voted to have a border with the EU. One of the big issues was around immigration and control of their own borders, so they voted for a border and that border had to go somewhere. It was looking like it was going to be a reinstatement of the hard border that was there in the past. There was a huge resistance to this, and I have to say that we had strong support on this, not just in Europe, but also in the United States, because it was fundamental that the Good Friday Agreement and peace would bring normalisation and an end to the sort of military structures or paramilitary structures that have been there. What's materialised is not perfect, I accept that, but the north of Ireland now benefits from being within the UK economy and the EU Single Market. We do have to resolve the issues around the Protocol, and I think that's possible, with a positive approach from the British Conservative Party and the new Prime Minister, and the EU.

**Interviewer**

So, that's all the questions I had planned about the EU, but I do have a few other questions. To start with, just how important do you think the north is for voters in the south?

**Interviewee**

Well, the reality is that when you're struggling to keep a roof over your head, as is the case for so many families now, the immediate thought is the cost of living. That's just the reality and it's the same across most issues in politics. I mean, if you look at opinion polls, it's clear that right now, the cost of living is the biggest issue for people in the Republic of Ireland. Next after that would be housing and health. They're the real priorities.

But I think it's also evident that, as I said earlier, the experience, particularly of Brexit, has focused minds, as has the changing electoral landscape in the north. It's clear now that a very considerable section of what would have been the unionist community, particularly young people from unionist backgrounds, are looking at the Alliance party and they're not aligning with traditional unionism. I assume that's because they have more liberal social views and they wouldn’t have any issue with being part of the EU; as in, their politics are more progressive and that's why they're doing so. So, in other words, the demographics are changing in the north and I think, with a cautious, patient, and respectful debate and discussion, we may well get to the point where you have Irish reunification. But in terms of what that looks like, I think we have to have a blank canvas, and we have to try to create a new Ireland that genuinely is inclusive, that allows people to cherish their British identity, their history, and has them central to the new Ireland. It isn't one where we all speak Irish, go Irish dancing, and play Gaelic football. This has to be a diverse, truly inclusive, and respectful new place that we're building, where everybody's identity is genuinely protected and cherished. We have to find a way to do that.

**Interviewer**

Great. You mentioned that the cost of living is the biggest issue, along with housing and health care. So, do you think that what voters prioritise will influence how much Sinn Féin prioritises the issue of the north?

**Interviewee**

When I talked about Irish Republicanism earlier, I talked about how one of our core objectives is that we would reunify the country, but it isn't just a matter of joining up six and 26. Our political perspective is obviously progressive left. We share a platform of people across the world in terms of strong public services that are free or affordable, based on progressive and fair taxation. We would ask people in the business community to pay their workers a fair wage and to pay their fair share of taxes. So, that's the sort of broad perspective that we bring to this. Therefore, we engage in politics on that basis, whether it be in the norm or the south. You know, you deal with people's political reality. But we think that, by dealing with the realities of people's lives and trying to convince them that there can be a better health service, better housing provision, and a better economy, if we can win their support for that, then that's the type of Ireland we're trying to build. I think one follows the other, and that's the best way to approach it, in our view.

**Interviewer**

Okay, great. The final question I had planned was, do you think any political party in the south has ownership of the issue of the north, or not?

**Interviewee**

No. This is one thing that I feel very strongly about. Sinn Féin are polling very strongly in the Republic of Ireland, and obviously we've had a very good election result in the north recently, but we cannot address the issues that we're talking about (Irish reunification and a whole realignment of our constitution and our society) on our own. Absolutely not. I have no arrogance or issue about it. We're saying it has to happen, but we have to plan for the changes that are going to come inevitably down the road. We have to plan, we have to start to talk about it, we can't ignore it. Sinn Féin will have our views, and if we win hearts and minds, fair enough, but in terms of the changes that need to happen, all political parties need to play a role. Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael say that they want a united Ireland, but we say, then you need to make the case. If I say, for example, that I want to cross the road, then I have to put one foot in front of the other to cross the road. You can't just say I'd love to cross the road, then stand still and never try. Nobody believes me that I actually do want to cross the road, because I haven’t put a foot forward. So, you've got to demonstrate you're good will, in whatever way that is. So, yeah, I think that all of the political parties across this island have an important role to play. But the worst thing we can do is ignore this and wish it away, because then we end up with Brexit type chaos when the time comes.

**Interviewer**

That's great, thank you very much. That's all the questions I had planned, but is there anything else you think it's important to talk about here?

**Interviewee**

No, if you're happy with that, that’s fine! The great thing for me is, if I was doing a radio interview now, I would have cut most of my comments in half and just kept this as short as possible!

**Daniel McConnell Interview**

**Interviewer**

Since I'm talking about Northern Ireland and how political parties in the south talk about it, it probably makes sense to start with a pretty general question. So, how salient do you think the issue of Northern Ireland is for the different political parties?

**Daniel**

Yeah, I think the honest answer is that the traditional mainstream parties down here, in essence and probably in reality, pay a lot of lip service to Northern Ireland without doing much about it. Obviously, Fianna Fáil would claim that their work on the peace process, Good Friday Agreement, all that kind of stuff, gives them some sort of authority over Northern Ireland. But if you look seriously at moves to progress the achievement of that goal, a united Ireland, it has moved not an inch in 30 years, really, and I think there was a sort of, acceptance by the establishment in Dublin, that the sort of demographics would work themselves out over time, it will come to its own natural end. There's been a reluctance to force that issue, and that's become quite prevalent in the wake of Brexit. We've seen Sinn Féin pushing this idea of a border poll, and people like Simon Coveney saying it's not the right time. So, Fianna Fáil claims to be the republican party, a 32 county island party, so you see Martin launching his shared island unit, but again it has been kind of largely dismissed as a talking shop, it hasn’t really achieved an awful lot. So, is it there? Yes. Is it the top of the agenda? Rarely, no.

**Interviewer**

Okay, great. So do you think that has changed over time at all, or has it just consistently been low salience lip service?

**Daniel**

No, I think in the wake of the Good Friday Agreement there were definitely points where it was very prevalent and, dare I say it, sexy for a while. It attracted a lot of international attention, so therefore it did get a lot of mention. There is also obviously an established Northern Ireland unit within the Department of An Taoiseach as well. So, it has an inbuilt status, yet it's rarely top of the domestic political agenda here in Dublin. You know, obviously in recent times, Brexit did raise a lot of issues around the border, but I still don’t get that there's a political consensus, right now, in Dublin to achieve a United Ireland. Sinn Féin have said they want a referendum within five years of taking office, but it's hard to see that coming to pass, many hoops have to gone through before Sinn Féin gets into office.

**Interviewer**

Since you've mentioned Sinn Féin and also Fianna Fáil, do you think any political party has ownership of the issue and how do other parties respond to that?

**Daniel**

Sinn Féin would like to claim that they have ownership of it, but it is regularly a political charge made in the Dáil particularly, that they don't own the Northern Ireland initiative, they don’t own the unification agenda. There are many within Fianna Fáil, especially in the wake of the general election, aimed more at local councilors from the Border areas, that try to redress that balance with Sinn Féin, and maybe try to seek ownership or take ownership back of that agenda. It's a sparring point. Sinn Féin obviously would like a border poll and there’s a sense within Fianna Fáil that they can’t be given free reign on that. Fine Gael claim that they believe in a 32-county republic, but they are behind the curve on that. Labour and the Greens, likewise. Again, they’re sort of paying lip service. They have these structures and systems in place for achieving a united Ireland, I just don't get any great sense of urgency.

**Interviewer**

So, since we've talked about these different elements, it probably makes sense to talk about if anything does cause it to change saliency. So, do you think anything affects how important the issue is, or does it just stay low importance?

**Daniel**

No, I think a lot of it is going to depend on what happens in the northern elections in May: does Sinn Féin become the largest party, do the DUP go into that executive, or does it remain blocked or stopped? The symbol of Sinn Féin becoming the largest party in the North and on the verge of becoming the lead party of government in the South would be a watershed moment, should that come to pass.

There are attempts being made to answer questions about what sort of united Ireland do we want? If it's gonna happen, what does that actually involve in terms of practicalities, does the capital remain in Dublin, do we change the flag, do we change the national anthem, do we keep a regional assembly in the north hundred under the Dáil? All of these practicalities have to be worked out. And I think a large part of it will depend on what happens in the wake of those northern elections. It's very clear that you have a unionist population in the North who feel very abandoned by Westminster, and who feel very much under threat by this rampant nationalist wave. So there has to be an accommodation made for them as well, and I'm just not convinced by the sort of interplay between the DUP and Dublin over last years that there's any great recognition, trust, or respect there at all.

But this is becoming an increasingly prevalent issue, it will come more into focus in due course, rather than fading away. Polling seems to show that people are comfortable with a united Ireland, they just aren’t comfortable with a Sinn Féin led united Ireland. So, I think that discussion will have to happen in due course.

**Interviewer**

Now, perhaps to hone in one potential thing that might matter, or maybe doesn't matter. Do you think the EU has had any influence on how important this issue is?

**Daniel**

If we get to a stumbling block where the unionist community are feeling very reluctant to come into a united Ireland. Sorry, to backtrack a little, one of the great successes of the Good Friday Agreement was equal respect for both traditions, so you could be British and Irish at the same time. That principle would have to adhere in any united Ireland, so the unionist community, whether it is for a set period of time or not, will have to have that security of identity, and if they don't have that, things are going to be difficult. If this significant unionist minority are to come into a united Ireland, their identity would have to be respected, as is the case for nationalist up North at the moment. Whether it's done indefinitely, that's another story.

Whether the EU have a sort of umbrella body or whether they continue their sort of funding model to enable greater community cohesion, because I think what will have to happen, and what has been the great failure of the Good Friday Agreement, is that there has been very little move on segregation. I think if you tackle the segregation problem, a lot of the other issues may fall away over time. Ultimately, it’s about making the unionists feel very welcome, and not threatened, in a united Ireland. How you do that, whether you give me a guaranteed number of seats in Dáil Éireann, or the Seanad, or the cabinet for a certain period of time, as a mechanism to allow them feel comfortable. I don't think it's as instrumental as some people suggest, but I think that the EU definitely have to have a role. Now, again, it's complicated by the fact of Brexit and large numbers of Protestants, like the DUP, supported Brexit, but I just don’t see, from an Irish perspective, that if there's to be an independent arbiter that could adjudicate on matters, it would need to be someone like the US or the EU. So, obviously there’s a role to be played there for some outside forces.

**Interviewer**

Okay, great. So, obviously, the UK and Ireland were joint EU Members for quite a length of time, from 1973 to 2016. Do you think this joint membership ever affected how important a united Ireland was, or even how parties discussed it?

**Daniel**

For the first period of all of that, look at how damaged relations were between London and Dublin. There was the move towards Sunningdale, which fell apart obviously, so there was real mistrust between London and Dublin. That poisoned the atmosphere towards any potential solution on the North. Whether joining the EU at the same time helped things or hindered things, I don't know. By the time we got into the 1990s, the IRA had realised that the struggle was over, and it’s looking for a mechanism by which it could end the war. I suppose I'm just not educated enough to know whether or not there was a specific EU factor there.

**Interviewer**

Okay, that leads me to the next part, which is about Brexit and whether or not you think Brexit has had any effect on unification?

**Daniel**

It certainly raised the prospect of unification in the political discourse in Dublin, and moved it way up the political agenda. So again, you saw, day after day, Sinn Féin beating the border poll drum. In the newspapers, since Brexit happened, you’ve also seen a lot more discussion in print about what a united Ireland would look like, what version would it take, and are we comfortable with it? Like, are we comfortable with higher taxes to pay for a united Ireland? So, all of these questions are being asked.

So, Brexit has definitely had an impact. To a large number of people, it has hastened the pace of unification. Whether it's in the timeline that Mary Lou McDonald has outlined, within the next five years, or the five years after they take office, I don't know, but it certainly has hastened that discussion. Even if you listen to Bertie Ahern, he has said it's possible in the next decade.

I think it's reasonable to suggest that Brexit has certainly emotions on both sides of the fence, both for and against. But I think demographics are only heading in one direction, which means how do we deal with that, the fallout out of that, and then how do we make it a more palatable transition for the unionist population?

**Interviewer**

Yeah, okay, great. So, that's all the questions I had about the EU. My final question is, how important do you think this issue is for the public?

**Daniel**

Again, that's a very easy question to ask, and not so easy to answer. With Sinn Féin, for anyone you ever spoke to within the party, or for a very many, it's locked in, that idea of the achievement of a united Ireland, and that very nationalist view of a united Ireland. I'm not sure what part of being a Fianna Fáil member is contingent on being into a united Ireland, it seems to be much more about social justice issues. Similarly, for Fine Gael, it’s part of their identity, but it’s kind of hard to put your finger on it. Were Sinn Féin to get into office, it would force the issue as to who actually goes into office with them. So, if Fianna Fáil go into office with Sinn Féin, then they will need to come to some accommodation on a border poll, or reunification, or a citizen’s assembly or whatever the mechanism may be. And then, as a result, does this force Fine Gael and other parties to take an alternative position and let the background play out in the general election?

A lot will be determined by what happens in May. So, if let's say, Northern Ireland goes into another long period of uncertainty and no executive, and maybe directly from Westminster, then you are going to have to have another intensive round of deliberations between Dublin, London, and Belfast to get the institutions back up and running again. Whether there is any move from the DUP to ever go in under a Sinn Féin First Minister, and if there isn’t, then who knows where things go. It's very fluid. But take it that the Assembly does get back up and running, you do see a Sinn Féin administration up North and they become the leading party here, reunification of course becomes high on the agenda very quickly, but we are a couple years off from that.

**Interviewer**

So is there anything else that you think is important to discuss here for when parties discuss unification?

**Daniel**

Often I look at it in terms of the practicalities here, so should Sinn Féin get into government, are people comfortable with the idea of Sinn Féin taking the justice portfolio, the finance portfolio, all these sorts of things, the mechanisms that go with being in government.The majority of people are kind of happy in that perspective. But I also think that you have to be cognisant of how Ireland has moved away from a two and a half party system, so we're looking at a future of three-prong governments, or four-prong governments, which means that a much greater degree of consensus would need to be reached in order to form a programme for government. So, Sinn Féin may have the largest number of TDs, but they're not going to get it all their own way, they're going to have to make sacrifices on their agenda to form a government, and where the lines fall on those would be very interesting and could have very real consequences for Northern Ireland. So, they're talking about a citizens assembly: that might get pushed off into an Oireachtas committee first and then a citizens assembly. They may have to sacrifice a border poll within five years to get into government. But again, this is speculation. Rhetoric is one thing, and pragmatic policies are going to be something else.

**Diarmaid Ferriter Interview**

##### **Interviewer**

So before I get started, I'll just say a few words about my research and that will hopefully help you. I'm focused on how political parties across Europe use different forms of nationalism. One form of nationalism is when you have claims on people or territory in another jurisdiction. So, the Irish case obviously is very apt here with the relationship with Northern Ireland. I am focused on understanding when parties will focus on Northern Ireland or when they will ignore it, and why that's the case. So, I'm going to start with a very obvious question, perhaps, which is just how important an issue do you think Northern Ireland is for the Southern parties, either at the moment or historically?

##### **Diarmaid**

Well, historically, particularly when you consider the centenary of partition, it's offered an opportunity to reflect on the lack of engagement and the lack of interest. It struck me, when I was looking at the early years of the Free State, particularly in the midst of the upheaval arising from the Anglo-Irish Treaty, that there is a reluctance to engage with the political realities that Northern nationalists are facing. In particular, there's a letter I often return to that was written by an interned teacher in Belfast, a nationalist in Belfast, who wrote a very plaintive letter to the Southern government, to Eoin MacNeill, actually, who was Minister for Education in the Free State government. He just voiced that sense of abandonment, which was very strongly felt and obviously which endured. And the response he got reflected the mantra from Kevin O'Higgins at the time, considered the hard man of the Free State governments, that you really have to organise yourselves, that you have to put in the same effort into organising yourselves as we have put into trying to establish this Free State on a sound footing. It did seem to me to represent a washing of Southern political hands. Obviously, particularly after the death of Collins and the end of the Civil War, there was a recognition that engaging with the idea of destabilising the new Northern Ireland was not a good one. Therefore, we need to take a step back and we need to get our own house in order. So, I think that sense of a reluctance to look over the border endures. I'm not going to go through all the different decades, but there's definitely a sense of abandonment that endures. I'd often quote Cahir Healy, the Nationalist MP, because he was also interned during the early 1920s. He was on the prison ship Argenta, which was docked in Belfast docks. There were nearly 500 republican prisoners on it at one stage, and Healy's papers are in the Public Record Office in Northern Ireland. But he did write a letter to the Irish Independent newspaper in 1925, when the Boundary Commission report was leaked and it was clear that the border was going to remain the same. He said we've been sold into political servitude for all time, which was an extraordinarily pessimistic declaration. But again, it encapsulates that sense of abandonment, and it was an accusation, too, that has been leveled against the Southern politicians that they were not engaging seriously enough with this. But he also mentioned on another occasion the idea that Southern politicians did not understand the Northern character or the Northern mind. I've always found those assertions interesting because it suggests that there's a mental partition which, in many respects, predates the actual physical partition and that sense of the other and a real disconnect between north and south when it comes to understanding. So, again, that is something that bubbles away.

Obviously, there are flashpoints, particularly with the efforts of the Anti-Partition League, where there is some political engagement from the South with the idea of ending partition. But then when Northern nationalists, who were not very well organised themselves, sought an audience or the right of an audience in Dublin in the 1950s, they felt that the door was slammed in their face, that the Dáil didn't want a possible forum for them articulating their grievances. And another thing that struck me, I suppose, when Patrick Hillery was appointed Minister for External Affairs, shortly to become Foreign Affairs, he was given a tour of Iveagh House, and he innocently asked one of the civil servants ‘Where's the Northern Ireland desk?’, and he was told there wasn't one. It's a reminder of the extent to which it was neglected. It wasn't a priority.

Of course, what happens with the outbreak of the Troubles is that both the Irish and indeed the British government, they're on a very steep learning curve: they have to engage and make up for historic neglect, they have to do that quickly, and it is done quickly. There are considerably successful efforts, I think, by diplomats and by civil servants working within the Department of External Affairs/Foreign Affairs to try and properly engage with Northern Ireland. But the way Michael Kennedy (the historian) put it, this is the first time they've really taken a meaningful look over the border since the mid-1920s, which, of course, like any of these sweeping assertions, it's likely exaggerated. There were some surreptitious visits over the border by Southern diplomats, but they were quite intermittent, so there's a broad degree of accuracy in that sense as well.

Obviously, when you move on to more recent times with the peace process and the fallout from Brexit, you're dealing with a different framework in a different context and obviously Brexit has opened up a space for discussion about political realignments, constitutional change, possible unity, and of course, has put Unionists in a very defensive position. But, again, you can see the fault lines within southern politics that have endured in relation to Northern Ireland. I would argue this is still a very strong mental partition.

##### **Interviewer**

Great, thanks. That's a good historical overview of how it has changed. Do you think any parties have ownership of the issue or not?

##### **Diarmaid**

In theory, they all have ownership of the issue in the sense that all of the main political parties are committed to the idea of eventual unity. When you look back to the foundational aims of the main political parties and the parties that dominated for so long, Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael, the Republican Party and the United Ireland Party, respectively, it's supposedly attached to their political DNA and their foundational aims. Yet, in practise, they developed a consensus around the idea of consent and the dangers of violence, and whatever divided Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael, they were very united in the idea that the IRA represented a threat to the security and the stability of the state. You can see, obviously, tensions emerging internally within the respective parties at different times, depending on what's going on in Northern Ireland and how to engage with it. Sometimes it's very cynical opportunistic positionings, as you will find in relation to, for example, the Anglo-Irish Agreement of 1985. There were times when individuals were under pressure within their parties to take a more Republican line. It's interesting it was actually John A. Costello who was Taoiseach when he announced the Declaration of the Republic, and he argued he was seeking to end provocation and take the gun out of Irish politics, that it was a Fine Gael politician who was doing that.

Obviously, within Fianna Fáil there's a lot of internal tension. Fianna Fáil was very good at keeping its tensions private, but we know from the party archives now that in the 1950s in relation to the border campaign, for example, a lot of the grassroots were trying to put pressure on the leadership to be more vocal about it. But when Jack Lynch spoke to John Peck, the British ambassador in Ireland, in 1972, he suggested that most of the Irish electorate couldn't care less about Irish unification. So, they could be frank in admitting that there wasn't a huge premium attached to it politically. Yet, it's always there, in the sense that it's what many would regard as an ongoing sore. But they don't want it to intrude too much onto the politics of the Republic. Even with Charles Haughey in the early 1980s, hunger strike candidates presented him with a political problem as they were taking seats from Fianna Fáil, depriving him of an overall majority. So, whatever about his rhetorical denunciations of a failed state, he was also aware that it could cause complications. So, they all, in theory, claim a degree of ownership of it.

It's been interesting in more recent times that younger Fine Gael members, and indeed leaders, with Leo Varadkar, are striking what you might call a ‘greener’ line, or they're flexing their nationalist muscles a bit more. That partly, of course, has to do with challenging the idea that Sinn Féin owns it. But I can see instances of that going back even to when Bertie Ahern was in power, when he's watching Sinn Féin, and he's determined that they won't wrap the green flag around themselves or have that space to themselves. So, of course, Sinn Féin would claim that they are the only ones who are serious about it and that they, of course, have that fundamental long term commitment to Irish unity. Yet, as they've often found themselves, and Pearse Doherty outlined this in an interview that he would have given before Brexit, that unity was not the burning question or the burning passion for his constituents. This was a recognition that Sinn Féin’s appeal and success and rise was not primarily on the back of a demand for unity or a desire for unity, or in the sense that they own the unity question. It was more to do, of course, with the bread and butter issues that still sustain their high poll rating.

Obviously, given what's happened in recent years, Sinn Féin is seeking to make much political capital out of the idea of unity. There's an exaggeration from the current leadership that it’s being talked about in every village and so on in the country. But they still have a challenge to try and bring it centre-stage politically. There's been a consistency in the Republic since the 1970s: roughly two-thirds of the Irish electorate will respond with a yes when asked would they like to see a united Ireland, but that's quite aspirational. It's quite abstract, it's quite emotional for some people, that sense of an unresolved issue, but it doesn't necessarily impinge on their day-to-day lives or their everyday thinking about politics. So, you can read different things into those responses.

##### **Interviewer**

Yeah, great. So, that's interesting about polling. I also lecture on polling on a united Ireland, and it depends on exactly how you ask the question. Do you think this low saliency for voters affects how much parties talk about it, or not?

##### **Diarmaid**

Oh, it does, yeah. They question how many votes are in it, where should you position yourself if you're thinking about how you might maximise your appeal? There are a number of different things going on at the moment. Obviously, there's the desire on the part of Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael to try and dispute Sinn Féin’s ownership of the question. That's one part of it. The other is a genuine belief that you need to be very careful. The Shared Island Initiative or the talk of integrating Ireland or going after non-contentious areas of North-South cooperation when it comes to energy and electricity and health, in a way, it's an updated version of what Sean Lemass was suggesting in the late 1950s, early 1960s: let's try and thaw this Cold War, not by talking about unity, not by talking about the six counties (Sean Lemass was trying to move away from that language and give the Northern Ireland state more legitimacy), but focused on the practicalities of sharing a small island. That's a genuine belief that it's the best way to do it, and to try and take the confrontational elements or the territorial element out of it.

But again, whether or not that is something that chimes particularly strongly with the electorate? I think there's still a belief that there isn't a huge amount of political capital in pushing this question very aggressively. But also, I think, a genuine realisation that you don't want to repeat the mistakes that were made in the past in relation to imposing an approach or imposing a so-called solution that leaves a substantial minority feeling alienated and angry. There's a complex psychology around all of that, because a lot of people who are involved in politics are aware of the era out of which they grew up, and its long term legacy. And it doesn't take an awful lot for progress to be undermined or for reconciliation to take a step backwards. We've seen that in recent years. You can build up maybe elements of trust between North and South through cooperation. I mean, I remember Peter Robinson, when he was Northern Ireland’s First Minister, not even ten years ago, claiming North-South relations had never been better. But then consider what's happened in the last couple of years. So, a lot of the issues that we thought were settled or resolved, insofar as they could be or as much as they could be, a lot of that distrust has returned. Those issues that we thought were solved have returned to the frame and are generating a lot of distrust.

##### **Interviewer**

So you mentioned Brexit earlier, and this probably fits in with what you were just saying there. But what do you think the effect of Brexit has been?

##### **Diarmaid**

It's massive and we're still absorbing it, and it's still too early to historicize it, but I was very conscious of it. I wrote a book on the border in the aftermath of Brexit, which is not something I planned to do, but the whole Brexit question provided an impetus to re-examine not just the border question, but Anglo-Irish relations, North-South relations, and the gulf between rhetoric and reality. I thought it provided an opportunity to re-examine all of those questions. Brexit did that, it opened up that space. It exposed all sorts of false lines. It generated quite a lot of understandable anger as well. Historians do not operate outside of the environment in which they live. So, in a sense, myself and others have been responding to that. The gulf in understanding and the ignorance that's on display from English nationalists, in particular, about Ireland and the low priority that's attached to Ireland, the lack of recognition of how complicated the border question was. It didn't feature prominently at all in the Brexit debate, but it turned out then to be the most intractable problem. So, that generated a lot of instability and also distrust.

There was a phrase from John Peck, I mentioned him earlier on, he used to refer to ‘brawling in public’ when Anglo-Irish relations were going through very rocky periods. A lot of brawling in public returned, not helped, of course, by the instability in British politics and the clowns in charge of the Tory party. But there was a sense of a return to that, and that in turn, of course, emboldened nationalists. It emboldened, understandably, not only those who might desire Irish unity, but also those who can see within the Brexit issue the seeds of the wider destruction of the sense of the United Kingdom. It emboldened Scottish nationalists as well. Just how fragile is that concept of the United Kingdom? I'm sure there were those who felt that this was an opportunity to pursue a particular political agenda, which is a perfectly legitimate political agenda, that it gave them that added impetus and it created that instability. It also raised interesting questions about self-determination, with Northern Ireland voting against Brexit and yet having to be part of Brexit. That did raise that question again, the question that we thought, to a degree, had been resolved by the Belfast Agreement, that it was up to the people of Northern Ireland to determine their own future and where they would find themselves and how they would view themselves in their citizenship, and all that.

So, again, it opened up those questions for new interrogation and new urgency. It really has had profound implications across all of those different themes, and of course, all of those themes weave their way through a century of Anglo-Irish and Irish history anyway. But it's really brought them to the fore.

##### **Interviewer**

A lot of attention has been placed on Brexit, but of course, the UK and Ireland were common members of the EU since they both joined in 1973. So, do you think this long period of joint EU membership had any influence on either how important Northern Ireland was, or how parties talked and thought about it?

##### **Diarmaid**

I wouldn't exaggerate it. It does play an important role in relation to informal contacts and keeping open channels of communication. It wasn't unusual, for example, for British and Irish leaders to talk to each other on the margins of EU summits, and to emphasise that they were part of an organisation that was seeking to break down barriers and borders. Obviously, the opening up of trade and the sense of free trade across the island took some of the heat out of the border question. But at the same time, it was made clear to both the British and the Irish sides that the EU was not going to formally intervene when it came to the Troubles, and when it came to resolving the Troubles or a political solution. What they were going to do, of course, was finance a lot of the reconciliation projects. There's a very significant amount of money that goes into them. But it's been interesting as well, in more recent times, that the Irish dilemma and the Irish battle after the Brexit referendum is an EU one. It's not just an Irish one. So they do get that backing from the EU, and obviously they have that very firm commitment in the event of unity, that there would be an acceptance of a unified Ireland into the EU without the need for formal accession talks or anything like that, which is quite significant. But when you go back to the height of the Troubles in the 1970s and the 1980s, the EU wasn't going to directly intervene. That was regarded as a matter that had to be resolved by Britain and Ireland. But it was one thing that they had in common, that joint European membership, at a time when they had much that divided them. When you consider all the Anglo-Irish tensions of that era, they did keep that joint EU membership. They did have that in common, and it did help to a degree.

##### **Interviewer**

Great, thanks. So that's all the questions I have planned. Is there anything else you think is important to discuss to understand how parties talk about Northern Ireland?

##### **Diarmaid**

It depends on what your focus is. Obviously, this is just one part of a wider study that you're engaging in. What are you trying to get to the nub ofl?

##### **Interviewer**

I'm mostly focused on the role of the EU, and whether or not it's able to influence different forms of nationalism.

##### **Diarmaid**

Well, one thing I will say about that, there was a lot of mention during the run up to EEC membership of the idea that this European project would fatally undermine partition. That sense would have been voiced by people like Sean Lemass and Patrick Hillery, that borders would be rendered redundant, and if this European project was to be successful, this could be the beginning of the end of the partition of Ireland. Now, ultimately, what propelled Ireland's vote in favour of EEC membership almost exactly 50 years ago was primarily economic, but there were those who were making those political noises that this would be good for those who wants to see an end to partition in Ireland, because the whole logic, of course, was to break down barriers and to break down borders. So, they do mention that at various stages in the late 1960s and the early 1970s. However, there was also a recognition, I suppose, from Jack Lynch at the time, that the Irish were not regarded as thinking in European terms. The way he put it is we've lacked the breadth of outward vision, we have been quite insular and that this is an opportunity for us to begin to think in European terms that ultimately could benefit both North and South. But again, I wouldn't suggest it's a very strong strain of political thinking.

**Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire Interview**

**Interviewer**

As you know, my research focuses on different types of nationalism and how parties across Europe utilise them. So, it makes sense to study Ireland, especially since I'm based in Dublin. Anyway, in this interview, a lot of the focus is going to be on Sinn Féin, for obvious reasons. I'm going to start with a really obvious question perhaps, but just how important an issue do you think the north is for your party?

**Donnchadh**

Very important, I suppose. It's probably one of the strongest unifying parts of our politics. It's a key priority and it's been an essential plank to the party through its many evolutions over the course of the last few decades.

**Interviewer**

So, has the importance stayed pretty consistent over time, then, or has there been any change, in either how important or it is, or how the party views and talks about the issue?

**Donnchadh**

I suppose your answer to that question will probably depend on your definition of when the party existed from. It's not actually particularly important to me to be honest, but, you’ve the debate over whether we started from 1905 or the split in 1970 and all that. In the first instance, I suppose you could possibly say that during the 1960s, the emphasis on Irish unity did take somewhat of a backward step, but it was always organised on an all-island basis. So look, I suppose the short answer is that, if it has changed in priority, it hasn't changed very much, or very significantly.

**Interviewer**

Yeah, great. So, is there anything that would cause the party to think or talk about the issue of unification in any different way, or is that also relatively stable over time?

**Donnchadh**

I think that can and does change. I suppose some of it is how unity might be achieved and how it might be organised. So, obviously, in the past you had the Éire Nua policy, which talked about a federated Irish system. That's no longer the policy (for regional parliaments and so on) - there would be a single, unitary state, although there is potentially scope for devolution to regions within that, but not a federated system. So, the approach and how unity might be organised does vary. And obviously, the arguments for it will vary, and the context will vary. I mean, how we would achieve it and how you would persuade people to do it would vary, it would depend on - you know, at various stages the north has been more prosperous than the south, and it's probably only the last 20 years or so (maybe longer) that the south is more prosperous than then then north has been. I suppose that probably the biggest change is that reunification now brings with it, through the actions taken by Enda Kenny, to be fair, the agreement that the north would become part of the EU. So, Brexit obviously changes things significantly. The Protocol is an attempt to mitigate all the issues, but it's not possible to completely eliminate the disadvantages (as I would see it) of leaving the EU. So, the fact that Irish reunification is potentially the route back into the EU for the north. I give that as an example to show that the context and the arguments can change, and the mechanisms and the politics that surround any argument for reunification can, and has, evolved.

**Interviewer**

Great, thanks. So, it's interesting that you mentioned Brexit, because I was going to ask you a few questions about the role of the EU. You mentioned how the arguments vary depending on the context, so do you think the EU has played any role in influencing the context, and the type of arguments that are used?

**Donnchadh**

I think so, yeah. I think in recent years, certainly, both in the arguments that were made against Brexit and the fact that those who typically vote for nationalist parties, typically voted against Brexit, they were influenced by that. Obviously, as a party, we would have our criticisms of the EU, but we support ongoing membership of the EU, and there are net benefits. I think people in the north have seen that too, and the fact that both jurisdictions now have very different relationships with the EU is challenging. It's challenging for border communities, it’s challenging for all-island trade. The Protocol is doing a reasonable job at mitigating that, but again, it’s imperfect. It’s imperfect for both north-south and east-west relations.

So, yeah, the EU has played a role and politicians of various stripes in Ireland have contributed to that. In fairness, Enda Kenny did secure agreement that the north could be part of the EU (obviously, there would be whole process involved with that). Our own Sinn Féin MEPs, and various other MEPs, would have fairly successfully put the issue of the north in the middle of the discussions around Brexit.

**Interviewer**

Great, thanks. So, obviously both the UK and Ireland were part of the EU for quite a long time, since they joined together in 1973. Do you think this joint membership had any influence over the issue, either for Sinn Féin, or more generally?

**Donnchadh**

I'm not sure I follow. Like, I mean, at the time trade between the two was so closely tied together that it would have been lunacy not to join the EU at the same time as Britain, given how reliant Ireland was on Britain from a trading point of view. But when both were very much on the same track, I'm not sure (I could be wrong, I'd have to read back over the arguments of the time) the issues around reunification were very much considered. After that, I think most people saw either leaving the EU as highly unlikely. At least in Ireland, I'm not sure that many people ever imagined that Ireland would end up wielding so much influence. I think people thought that both countries being members of the EU was a given, and would be given indefinitely.

**Interviewer**

Yeah, great thanks. So, I know you've already mentioned this a bit already, but I just want to probe it a little bit more. What exactly do you think the effect of Brexit has been?

**Donnchadh**

People have made arguments in relation to the Good Friday Agreement and Brexit, but it's not necessarily the case that Brexit, in and of itself, is a breach of the Good Friday Agreement. But, I suppose the point is that the Good Friday Agreement was constructed in a background where membership of the EU was a given, where it was assumed, and where that was the norm. That meant that the Good Friday Agreement could actually build on the free travel and free movements provisions that existed across the EU at the time. But it also meant that, with the ceasing of hostilities, cross-border trade and the integration of communities, north and south, people from the north becoming more familiar with the south and vice-versa, holidays, business, leisure, whatever - all that could flourish and did flourish. I think it's the case that Brexit has the potential to disrupt that. Now, a lot of good work has gone on in terms of the Protocol to ensure that the effects of that on business and travel are minimised fairly extensively, but probably, as much as anything else from a business point of view, I think it's impossible to completely eliminate that, particularly if the Protocol does go, or if the British government acts unilaterally. But, provided that the protocol is there, then a lot of those benefits can be retained, but if not, then there'd be potentially significant disruptions on trade, employment, and so on.

I suppose, in addition to that, for people in the north, although it’s probably more true of people who vote for nationalist parties than people who vote for unionist parties, there is a desirability about being a member of an EU state, with all the opportunities that entails in terms of funding, grants, Erasmus, and so on. Some of these things have been retained, but others have not. So, even aside from the cross-border trade stuff, the EU is seen as a positive thing to be a part of. I think that is primarily for people from nationalist-voting backgrounds, but also for many people who are in the Alliance-Green type demographic, and some would be from the more liberal end of unionism.

**Interviewer**

Great, thanks. So, that's all the questions I had planned for the EU, and just to move on from there - how important an issue do you think Irish reunification is for voters in the South?

**Donnchadh**

Obviously, that varies a lot, but I would say it's probably of high priority in the long-term and middling to low priority in the short-term. People understand it's not going to happen overnight, and obviously, people in their day-to-day lives are primarily concerned with putting food on the table and paying the bills, and things like that. Understandably so. But when they look to the long-term future of the country, if you are asked what do you want to see for Ireland in the next 15-20 years, I think unity would be high there. Not based on any evidence, that’s just my anecdotal sense of it.

**Interviewer**

Ok, and does that difference between long-term goals and more immediate priorities influence how Sinn Féin approaches the issue, or not?

**Donnchadh**

Not necessarily in terms of how highly we prioritise it, because obviously, as a political party, you’re always trying to get the balance between being 1) in tune with people, but 2) offering leadership to them and putting your priority at the heart of the conversation. So, I don't know that it has an influence on how we prioritise it (maybe to some limited extent), but it probably does influence how we communicate and approach it.

**Interviewer**

Great. The final question I have planned is, do you think any party in the south has ownership of the issue of Irish reunification, or not?

**Donnchadh**

I don't think that they do, and I don't think that they should. If you ask a lot of the public they would probably say Sinn Féin, and while in some respects that reflects the fact that we are very committed to this and working hard on it, in other respects I don't know if that's desirable because, to achieve it, you need a broad range of parties, perspectives, traditions, and politics to support the proposition. I've heard the phrase used in meetings and things like that, that Irish reunification won't happen without Sinn Féin, but it's not going to happen with Sinn Féin alone. I think that's true. So, in the public’s mind there probably is a sensible ownership, but I don't see Sinn Féin as owning the issue, and I don't think that should be the case, even if it is.

**Interviewer**

Right, thanks. So that's all the questions I had planned. Is there anything else you think it's important to talk about for this?

**Donnchadh**

Just maybe briefly to say that I think the reason that I support Irish reunification (well, I suppose there are multiple reasons), is that it's the natural and most cohesive form of political organisation on the island. When you think of how prominent stories from the north feature in the Dublin media as opposed to the British media, I think that the people of the north’s interest will be more central to the considerations of an all-Ireland polity. The north would have much greater influence, and that includes obviously the unionist community, who would be potentially between a sixth and a fifth of any all-Ireland parliament. So, I think that it just makes sense in terms of political organisation, I think it makes sense economically, and I think it makes sense in business ways.

The other two things I would say is that the strategy of Sinn Féin and all parties who support Irish unity now is based on referendums (on 50% plus one), and I very much agree with that. Anything that is an application of Irish reunification has to be based on that. Some on the margins of republicanism might talk about the historical grievances, and that may be a big part of how the public generally conceives of this issue. But there is a reality, in this day and age, that has to be engaged with: the north, as a polity, has now existed for over a hundred years. The only way of achieving Irish unity in a sustainable way, although it isn't the only ingredient, is through the principle of consent.

I would also say that the version of nationalism that Sinn Féin has is, in my view, a progressive nationalism. It's quite different from some of the more xenophobic and chauvinistic types of nationalism. Nationalism can vary significantly. I don't think Sinn Féin’s on its own on that, there are other examples in the Basque Country, Catalonia, and even to some extent in Greece, in terms of some of the traditional social democratic parties that would have existed in some of those countries, such as PASOK, that would have had that kind of progressive nationalism that would have been about patriotism, and pride in your history and your culture and your condition, but without seeing that as a proxy for for oppression, for exclusion, for xenophobia. Irish republicanism has, undoubtedly, contained parts of the other type of nationalism in the past. But I think the type of nationalism that the Sinn Féin of today esposes is very much that civic nationalism. In terms of my own politics and my own view of things, I would consider that to be very central, and that people in the north who identify as British, who vote unionist, have every much a right to call this their own home place as anyone else. Any conception of Irish unity needs to ensure that tradition is respected, valued, cherished, and seen as native, as part of our national story and tradition as well.

**Emer Currie Interview**

##### **Interviewer**

As I said, I'm looking at Northern Ireland and how Southern parties talk about Northern Ireland, or when they talk about it. So, how important an issue do you think Northern Ireland is for Southern parties?

##### **Interviewee**

I think it has become more important in recent times. But I think there's a disconnect between the reality of Northern politics, the day-to-day about Northern politics, and parties in the south. They gravitate towards the Good Friday Agreement and constitutional issues, but maybe they don't drill down to the everyday experiences of people living in the North.

##### **Interviewer**

The thing that immediately comes to mind there is that you said it's become more important over time. So, why do you think Northern Ireland's become more important for parties?

##### **Interviewee**

Well, I think it's because of what's happening with Brexit, and obviously the impact that Brexit has had on the Good Friday Agreement has meant that issues around a potential hard border obviously came into play. We're talking about the Protocol a lot, and that has obviously had an effect on bringing the questions around constitutional change back into the frame more so than it was in the past. So, Brexit basically has been the catalyst for there being more engagement and more focus on politics in the North, but it is still very much around the Good Friday Agreement and constitutional change, and it doesn't really go deeper than that.

##### **Interviewer**

Yeah, great. So, that's interesting that you mentioned Brexit, because I was actually going to ask a few questions about the EU, and one of them was going to be Brexit. So, you've answered that pretty quickly. But the corollary, I guess, of that is that the UK and Ireland were obviously members of the EU for quite a long time together, since 1973. Do you think that joint membership of the EU affected how important Northern Ireland was, or even how parties talked about it before Brexit?

##### **Interviewee**

Absolutely. The framework of the Good Friday Agreement was based on being in the European Union, even though it wasn't necessarily part of it. It was based on those relationships being there and the presumption that both parties would remain in the European Union. So, John Hume, for instance, very much brought the values of the European Union with him in relation to the Good Friday Agreement.

##### **Interviewer**

Great, thanks. So, the EU and Brexit are one thing, but is there anything else you think will affect when parties talk about Northern Ireland, or how they talk about it, or is it mostly just a Brexit effect?

##### **Interviewee**

It's Brexit, and then it is obviously the impact that Brexit has had even in the most recent elections. But the catalyst for this really began with Brexit.

##### **Interviewer**

Great. So perhaps a controversial question maybe: do you think any parties have ownership of the issue, or is there more competition over what party owns it?

##### **Interviewee**

Sinn Féin would see themselves as the party that has the most say on the north because it's an all-Ireland party. But I would feel that Fine Gael has just as much to offer, as do other parties, like Fianna Fáil and Labour. We're all invested in the north, but I think the fact that Sinn Féin is an all-island party, and it's something that they are obviously very focused on.

##### **Interviewer**

Do you think this is an important issue for voters or not?

##### **Interviewee**

I think that it does come into play to a certain extent, but it doesn't come up on the doorsteps as a local issue unless there's something happening in the news at that time. It wouldn't be the first topic that people mentioned. It’s similar to how the parties have this disconnect between north and south. I think there is a broad understanding of what's happening in the north, but people don't delve into the specifics unless there's something relevant happening in the news at that time. So, if I went out canvassing today, for instance, we would probably be talking about what's happening in Stormont. But it doesn't really go deeper than that. I mean, people will talk about the constitutional question whenever it's raised, but it would rarely come up on the doorsteps as an issue for people. So, again, at the moment, the narrative in the south is about constitutional change being on the agenda, possibly on the horizon, and what might happen, but it doesn't really go deeper than that. There might be a press article about how many people would vote for it and what they'd be willing to change to accommodate Unionists, things like flags, national anthems, etc. But it hasn't gone deeper than that, and it doesn't come up on the doorsteps unless somebody is really interested in it.

##### **Interviewer**

Yeah, great. You mentioned these polling questions about flags, national anthems, and things like that. Do you have any thoughts on this classic difference between how many people would say they vote for a united Ireland and then how few people would see changes in some of these things?

##### **Interviewee**

Well, there have been polls that have been done in the newspapers, so that's probably the best reference point for that. I think the debate needs to go deeper than are you going to change the flag and the national anthem. There's plenty of work going on at the moment in relation to the Shared Island Initiative, and that really is about expanding the conversation, or any kind of dialogue, with communities all over the island. That is about being inclusive and building a shared island. But at the moment, really, the focus is on those top-line questions (do you change the anthem or not), and it isn't so much about what happens to the healthcare system, what about a subvention, what about education? Those conversations are happening or those studies are happening, but the focus tends to be on, and the media hasn't really gone beyond the kind of topics that I've already outlined.

##### **Interviewer**

Yeah, great. So, do you think this disconnect is for both parties and voters, or mostly for voters?

##### **Interviewee**

For voters. So, for instance, I would attend those studies about the difference in the education system, the difference in the healthcare system. So, I think that is happening. But mainly the focus goes on the other issues. Voters, in terms of it being a driver, are still very much on the ‘do you support a border poll now’? It's about the mechanism for constitutional change, rather

than delving into what it would look like.

##### **Interviewer**

Yeah, great, thanks. That was a pretty quick discussion, and it covered the main questions I planned. Is there anything else you think it's important to talk about for parties and when they talk about Northern Ireland?

##### **Interviewee**

I like to hear parties talk about the economic opportunities, the welfare supports, the building of stronger communities, and reconciliation. So that, to me, is what's important. When Leo Varadkar said that he didn't want nationalists to be left behind, I think that was an important moment. It's on all of us to make sure that we are involved in what's happening in the north.

**Eoin Ó Broin Interview**

**Interviewer**

Quite a bit of this interview is going to be focused on Sinn Féin, for very obvious reasons, and you already know that the research is about attitudes to the north and how important an issue that is. So, I'm going to start with perhaps a really obvious question: just how important is the north for Sinn Féin?

**Eoin**

It's as important as the rest of the country. So look, we're an all-island party. Many of us, in fact, have worked in both jurisdictions. As you know, I lived in Belfast for 11 years and was elected to the Council there. Even when we have roles as activists or politicians in specific parts of the country, we see our role as all-Ireland. So, I'm the party's housing spokesperson here in the south, but I do regular meetings with Deirdre Hargey, our Housing and Communities Minister in the north to try and make sure that, as much as possible, we align the work that we do. We factor into almost every aspect of our work, an all-Ireland dimension. Part of that is, of course, because essentially winning a referendum on the reunification of our country is part and parcel of the DNA of the party and in the work of our activists, north and south. So, the north is as important as the south, as the east, as the west, and we treat it as one indivisible whole, despite its different parts.

**Interviewer**

Okay, great. So, is there anything that would either change how important an issue the north is for the party, or indeed, how the party talks about the north and unification?

**Eoin**

Certainly nothing would change it. Like, the party has two principal objectives: Irish reunification; and the creation of an Ireland of equals, that idea of social and economic justice, and equality. So, that's the fundamental basis on which we do our work and get us out of bed every morning. Obviously, how we deal with various issues is dependent on those issues themselves. So, while the broad political direction of the party is the same, how we respond to issues depends on the issues themselves. But I don't see, certainly in the short to medium term, fundamental changes other than changes that are required by responding to changes in circumstances as they present themselves.

**Interviewer**

So, potentially one important circumstance, which you might think is important or not, might be the role of the EU. Do you think the EU has played any role in shaping how the party understands the pursuit of Irish unity?

**Eoin**

I'm not sure if the EU itself has changed that. Obviously, the EU played an important role, particularly as an ancillary supporter of the peace process, peace building, and peace and reconciliation, particularly through the peace programs. It also created a political platform and a stage for all political actors on the island, and in the north, to make their case, whether that of John Hume or Gerry Adams, Sinn Féin’s MEPs, or indeed, the unionists. I do think Brexit and the bad decision of England to drag Britain and the north of Ireland out of the EU is having a very significant impact. It's changed a lot of the conversations and dynamics, and I think it's part of what's unlocking some of the interesting electoral changes that have taken place recently. So, that's less to do with the EU and its own activities, if you like, and a simple fact that whatever one's view of the EU (because Sinn Féin is critical of some aspects of it and supportive of others), it is much more preferable for a party that’s a united Ireland party to have all parts of Ireland inside the EU, as opposed to part in and part out, with all of the challenges that creates in terms of new regulatory borders and barriers, etc. So, I think Brexit has probably had more of an impact in some respects than the EU in and of itself.

**Interviewer**

Yeah, okay, great. So, just to probe this a little bit more: Ireland and the UK were obviously joint members of the EU for a considerable length of time (since they joined in 1973), so do you think this joint membership was important or had any effect?

**Eoin**

Well, firstly, in fact it was the French desire to keep Britain out that actually delayed Irish membership in the EU for about a year - in fairness, that's not something we can blame the British government on! But yeah, look, we obviously have a Common Travel Area with Britain. We've a special relationship with England, Scotland, and Wales. And now that we're in a post-conflict, peace-building period, that's very important, very valuable. In all of our dealings, I suppose we wanted to ensure that if Britain was being taken out of the EU, we would be able to still have the advantages that come both from EU membership (obviously, that's what the Protocol is about) and the Common Travel Area. Given that so many of us have lived and worked in England or Scotland over the years, whether you're from the north or the south, there's cultural, economic, and social ties that are there, notwithstanding the century or so of conflict. Therefore, it was always better if Britain was in the EU. Even in the post-reunification scenario on the other side of a successful referendum, the north, as part of a reunified Ireland, would join the EU, which would be the plan, there's still a friction created by England and Wales (I assume by that stage Scotland will be independent potentially, and inside the EU as well) leaving. I don't think that's helpful, either to social, economic, or cultural interests on this side of the Irish Sea, or on the other side.

**Interviewer**

Great. So, you've already mentioned Brexit a few times, but I just want to probe it a bit more. Just what effect do you think Brexit has had? Because you've already mentioned that it could potentially have had an effect in the north, and potentially in the south as well. So what do you think it's effect has been?

**Eoin**

First of all, Brexit was always going to be disruptive, so whatever the long-term outworkings of it are, in the short to medium term it was going to be disruptive, particularly to business and travel. While the travel disruptions have been limited, the business disruptions, particularly access to certain markets, has been problematic. Brexit was always going to do that. Some people are blaming the Protocol for things that are actually Brexit’s fault, and in some senses the protocol is the roadmap to resolving some of those matters, so long as it's worked through in an appropriate manner. Obviously, the most immediate impact, beyond the frictions around trade and travel, is the political implications. We've had an election; the Assembly and Executive can’t meet; we're in the middle of a cost of living and health crisis in the north; we can only have quarter-on-quarter budgets; we can't have any big, significant political decisions or interventions, including, for example, the commitments that were given by parties to invest a further billion pounds into the NHS and spent three hundred million pounds on a cost of living package for families and small businesses.

So, there's the business impacts of the friction created by Brexit, but you also then have these political spillovers, particularly in terms of that negative interaction between the crisis that's going on in the Conservative Party, what's happening within political unionism (including their particular approach to the Protocol), and the collapse of the institutions. None of that is particularly helpful. It also makes resolving the issues around the Protocol a little bit tricky. Ultimately, they've to be resolved between Westminster and Brussels through negotiations, but the political stalemate and lack of institutions in the north doesn't help either.

**Interviewer**

Yeah, great. So, moving away from the EU somewhat, I've a few other questions and I'll do them relatively quickly because I know you're running out of time. How salient an issue do you think Irish reunification is for voters?

**Eoin**

The answer to that is in the opinion polls, because we do have some polling data on that, both north and south. While it's not the number one or number two issue (some of the recent opinion polls in the north talked about the cost of living and health, for example, and in the south it's generally issues of housing, healthcare, and the cost of living), that doesn't mean that it's not an important issue to a lot of voters. Voters can be quite sophisticated in knowing what they need sorted now, but also knowing what they'd like to see in the medium to long-term as well. So, there is a significant, and often underappreciated, level of support for reunification in both the north and south, but particularly in the south, than people often think there is. But I also think a lot of that depends on the conversation, because somebody can have a general view that they would like to see a particular set of constitutional changes, but when that happens, how that happens, at what cost, and in what order, is the meat of the debate that you will get into in the context of a two or three year referendum campaign - similar to what they had in Scotland with the independence referendum. So, do I think it has saliency? Yes. Do I think it's the top priority for very, very large numbers of people? The polls don't indicate that, but I don't underestimate the significance of it being a second-order issue of importance to very large numbers, both north and south.

**Interviewer**

Great. The final question I had planned is, do you think any political parties in the south have ownership of the issue of Irish unification, or not?

**Eoin**

No, I don't think so, and I don't think it would be helpful. I think what's interesting is the growth of Sinn Féin in the south, and our increased presence here in the Oireachtas, has meant that the north and all-Ireland issues have been subject to far greater discussion and political debate than had been the case. That's a good thing. Interestingly, Fine Gael probably actually made more running on the issue of talking about the all-island dimension, although Fianna Fáil are beginning to catch up as well. I think that's a good thing. I do think it is being discussed more than ever before, and I think that's a very positive thing that we need to build on into the future. I think that there is further evidence of the salience of the issue of all-Ireland matters, as well as eventual Irish reunification. For Neale Richmond, for example, to be proposing that Fine Gael should develop a policy to actively pursue a United Ireland, albeit in a different framework than maybe somebody like myself would have, is a very positive thing.

We will not win a referendum if any one party, including Sinn Féin, thinks it's their issue. This has to be a truly all-Ireland, national conversation, in the diverse, plural meaning of that term. Therefore, even those people who aren’t keen of the idea, need to be, as much as we can, drawn into the conversation, because unless it's truly plural and national in that broader sense, it's not going to succeed. So, it doesn't belong to anybody, and nor should it. The more people sat around the table crafting that future, the better.

**Interviewer**

Thank you very much for making the time for this. That's all the questions I had planned, but is there anything else you think it's important to mention before you go?

**Eoin**

I think that's all good on my end.

**Ian McAllister Interview**

##### **Interviewer**

Let's get started, my discussion is on or my focus is on Southern parties and how they utilise NI in their discourse, when do they make it salient, when do they not. So to start off with, it makes sense to ask a pretty broad question. How salient do you think NI is for political parties in the south?

##### **Ian**

Well, the short answer is I don't know a lot about it because I haven't done much research in this area since I did the book with Bernie Hayes and we did look a bit at attitudes in the Irish Republic to NI, but our main focus was really looking at public opinion in NI and how that has changed over a 30-40 year period, starting with Richard Rose's 1968 loyalty survey. So, we were interested in tracing long term trends in there. My impression of this, when I've looked at it, is that it shifts up and down a bit depending on what's happening within NI. So, I think when the Troubles started in 1968-9 and then when they became very bad in the early 70s, I think it was actually a bit of a shock to people in the Irish Republic and the political parties really didn't know how to deal with it. And what they effectively tried to do was make it a bipartisan issue and effectively exclude, well, later when Sinn Féin became an electoral party, exclude Sinn Féin from the process. My impression since probably the Good Friday Agreement, greater electoral successes for Sinn Féin in the Irish Republic and of course in NI as well, effectively displacing the SDLP as a representative of the Catholic community, is that they've had to take it a lot more seriously. Also, I think that's really been driven by elections and also external events.

##### **Interviewer**

So that also covers my other question, how it's changed over time. But do you think any political parties have ownership of this issue or not?

##### **Ian**

Well, I suppose what I would go back to is Lipset & Rokkan’s freezing hypothesis and the way social cleavages were frozen at the time of democratisation. If we take the Irish Republic, the party system that emerged in well, basically 1932 when Fianna Fáil got into office was one based around attitudes towards the Civil War, that largely cemented attitudes towards a lot of things. I suppose the other thing is that the EU has changed everything a lot, not recently, but for people in the Irish Republic. One of the things I observed is that a lot of the people I used to know in the SDLP who became prominent, not the sort of John Hume’s and so on, who's now dead, obviously, but a lot of those sorts of younger people I dealt with when there was direct rule in NI, they all disappeared off into Brussels. And obviously that was almost an alternative power source for the Irish political parties, and they could do a lot of their work, their lobbying, and so on through the EU and Brussels. And I think that has actually changed a lot. I don't know a lot about smaller states in Europe, particularly the ones in Central and Eastern Europe, but certainly for the Irish Republic, the EU as an alternative power source and so on, I think has been a major factor. It's also, incidentally, I think, removed a lot of the political talent away from Dublin actually, and a lot of the political talent went to the EU.

##### **Interviewer**

Okay. Thanks. So, just to probe that a little bit further, the EU acts as an alternative power source. So, what do you think that means for the saliency of NI for southern parties, or even how they talk about it?

##### **Ian**

I think it means that it's much less important because it seems to be a peripheral problem. What concerns people in the EU is much bigger issues and it affects how people behave and what they do in the EU. And I think that's basically what happens to marginalise it.

##### **Interviewer**

Thanks. So we spent quite a bit of time talking about how this has changed over time. Are there any variables other than the EU that you think are going to be important in affecting how salient the issue is?

##### **Ian**

Well, obviously, if there are minor parties and independents that get electoral support as the way Sinn Féin has in the south, that's going to affect it. If there's existential events of one sort or another. I suppose I'm thinking back to the Dublin bombings in 1974 and things like that, these were major external events that forced the whole issue on to the political agenda. This is the way it normally happens. And of course, what we know about party systems and party system organisation is that the choice set that exists, how parties organise themselves, the degree of polarisation, the sorts of issues they politicise, this determines what ordinary voters and citizens think about issues. So, if the parties choose not to politicise things for one reason or another, it won't get onto the political agenda. And for the major parties in the south, it's always been the case that it's in nobody's interest to politicise NI because nobody's going to win over it. It's a non-bargainable issue, that's been the problem. Anything to do with territorial aspirations is largely a non-bargainable binary. It's just a hugely dangerous issue.

##### **Interviewer**

Okay. It's good that you brought up the EU, because I actually had several questions related to the EU and about its potential effect. So you already discussed how it's made this a peripheral issue. One way perhaps it might play a role is the joint membership of the UK and Ireland. They've obviously been joint members of the EU for most of this period, since 1973 until Brexit. So, do you think this joint membership has affected the saliency of Northern Ireland or not?

##### **Ian**

I think it's continued to act to keep it off the political agenda because it would not be in the EU’s interest to have two Member States in dispute over a part of the territory of another Member State. And I think that's been the major dilemma with all of this. If you remember back to things like internment and issues like that, these created a huge degree of friction between Britain and the Irish Republic, but it was also things that were played out in Europe. I remember at the time various discussions in Europe about how you would get the Member States to try and compromise on these issues. One of the incentives that Margaret Thatcher had to try and get British-Irish agreement and promote that (this was somebody who was very strongly in favour of law and order and constitutional rights and so on), was that she wanted to neutralise this in terms of how it might affect their relations with the EU. So, I think the EU sort of sits as a broad context behind a lot of this.

Also, if you remember when the Irish government took the British government to the European Court of Human Rights over torture and internment and so on, that was a huge thing at the time. One Member State taking another Member State to the European Court, and they pursued it right through to the end, which sort of surprised me. It was very deliberate by the British government to try and settle it, so it didn't get to a full court. And we probably think that's a relatively minor thing, but in the context of European politics, that was actually a large thing.

##### **Interviewer**

Obviously, we've already (or I've already) mentioned Brexit a few times. So, do you think Brexit has affected the saliency of NI, or not?

##### **Ian**

Too soon to say. It's a bit like when somebody asked Chairman Mao what he thought the effect of the French Revolution was, and he said it was too soon to say. I think in the case of Brexit, it really is too soon to say. I honestly don't know. The interesting thing in British politics is that there's a lot of discussion about new cleavages across Europe and so on. I mean, ever since Peter Mair and various other people started working away at cleavage structures and how well they fitted modern society and so on, people have been proposing new cleavages and none of these have really aventuated. There's discussion in British political science, as you probably know, about Brexit forming a new political cleavage. It’s too soon to say, but if it did, potentially that could affect NI. Of course, the whole thing about having a customs border down the middle of the Irish Sea quite dramatically changes the whole thing, and of course, it's completely alienated the Ulster unionists because they thought they had a deal that they were going to remain part of the UK on the same terms and agreements, and Boris reneged on the deal for them. So, the whole Brexit thing is going to take years to work its way through, and who honestly knows what's going to be at the end of us.

If Brexit is changing anything, I do think it's changing attitudes in NI a bit. I suppose I'm sitting here 10,000 miles away, but I do keep in touch with NI and relatives and so on. These sort of mainstream unionists, who are always very strongly pro-British and so on, they're a bit less pro-British. One of the things I noticed is that they're sort of, not toying with the idea, but they're almost thinking that maybe Irish unification might not be too bad after all. The major things they had against unification was, the Irish economy wasn't as strong as the British economy. Well, that's no longer the case. Secondly, the influence of the Catholic Church. That's no longer the case. The Irish Republic has got one of the lowest rates of Church attendance in any part of Europe at the moment, and things like moral issues and so on, abortion, but of course, all that's gone as well. In fact, in many ways, the Irish Republic is more advanced than NI. So, a lot of the traditional impediments towards Protestants wanting Irish unity sort of disappeared, and the more thinking unionists are thinking, well, maybe we might be a bit better off with the Irish Republic than Britain.

Of course, the ones that don't really want that are people in the Irish Republic. The last thing they want is a million Protestants suddenly coming in and turning the political system upside down. That's always been the case. It would be too great a disjuncture. Suddenly, the party system and everything else would be flown into great flux.

##### **Interviewer**

Yeah. If unionists actually managed to galvanise around one or even two parties, they’d be a significant size, given how fractionalised southern politics is at the minute.

##### **Ian**

I think that's exactly right. What we know about political parties, Peter Mair wrote a lot of really great stuff on this, is that political parties are infinitely adaptable. So they adapt to things, and if they see an existential threat to their survival, then they act to neutralise it. And if they saw something like Irish unity, all these Protestants coming in undermining the party system, they'd act to stop it, I'm sure.

##### **Interviewer**

Great. I know you've done a fair bit of public opinion polling on the issue, so how salient do you think the issue of NI is for the southern public?

##### **Ian**

Well, I haven't really looked at it recently, but it's never been very salient. I mean, what people vote for in domestic national elections is health, education, economic management. They don't vote on territorial issues. And of course, political parties steer them away from territorial issues because, as I mentioned before, they're non-bargainable and they undermine your own supporters. The only way they deal with issues like that is in referendums or deliberative assemblies, things like that, e.g., same sex marriage and abortion. The deliberative assemblies they did for those were very similar to the ones David Farrell ran. What party systems do is they delegate those decisions to other bodies because they're too divisive for themselves. So, the political parties would keep this off the agenda. I think for the ordinary person in southern Ireland, this is not an issue. It would only be an issue if it was an issue in the early 1970s because, well, actually around about 1975 and the failure of the Constitutional Convention, the British government were toying with a Unilateral Declaration of Independence. They were going to withdraw and they were responding to the polls in Britain which showed there was a majority of people who were in favour of withdrawing the troops, and there's always been a majority in favour of withdrawing the troops, going right back to about 1972. That stuck it on the agenda because the various studies done at the time showed that not only would the Irish Army and the Irish police not be able to retain the current borders, they would only be able to hold probably Dublin, and that shot it onto the political agenda. I remember for about a year there was a pretty intense debate actually, around that sort of issue. That, plus the influence of Europe, convinced the British government that they couldn't withdraw and they were in there for the long haul. And that's why people like Thatcher and Major and so on made such efforts to try and deal with the problem, because they realised they couldn't get out of it. They were stuck with it.

**Kevin Cunningham Interview**

##### **Interviewer**

As I already said, my chapter is focused on the attitude of political parties to NI. So, how important an issue do you think NI is for the different political parties in the south?

##### **Kevin**

I think there's a distinction between the political parties and the general public, which is quite interesting. I think for the political parties it is much more interesting. At least, politicians often emphasise is quite a lot. Arguably, every single leader will talk about it as one of their primary objectives. Fianna Fáil, as the Republican Party, in particular emphasises it. But that is quite distinct from the general public who, from what I see in the opinion polling data, isn't as enthusiastic about it. I think one of the really interesting things about Irish politics in the South is that something like abortion (the repeal of the Eighth Amendment issue), the popularity of that particular change is actually more popular than the prospect of a United Ireland. Yet, from the politician's perspective, you almost have universal support for United Ireland, and yet, for something like the abortion issue, they were much more divided and more cautious about their positioning on that issue. So, perhaps it's one of these things for which the broad public would like it to happen, but this is conditional on the costs and potential problems, and risks to peace, and so on and so forth. But definitely the political elite, I would say, are slightly different from the public on this particular issue. In fact, the political elite, I think, have taken it almost as a given that the public are quite nationalist on this issue. And I do wonder whether the rise of Sinn Féin, which has emerged as a result of completely different things, from what I can see, has inspired them to try to be a bit more prominent on the issue.

##### **Interviewer**

Great. So, that actually leads me on very nicely to my next question. You mentioned whether or not there's been a change with Sinn Féin becoming more popular, so do you think the saliency of NI has changed over time or not?

##### **Kevin**

I think, yeah, it's become a more salient issue in the context of Brexit. There is a mischaracterization from what I see in terms of the data, in terms of the supposed demographic inevitability of a united Ireland. From what I can see in the data, the fastest growing demographic in NI is the middle ground, which is definitely moving faster than any supposed gains there might be in terms of the proportion of people who might be originally from a Catholic background as opposed to a Protestant background. It is also interesting that it is the Catholic and Protestant divide that is always brought up, rather than Irish and British identities. If one were to look at the Irish and British identities, the gap is clearly much bigger, with 45% or so that identify as British, 25-26% that identify as Irish, and maybe 20% identify as Northern Irish. That is probably a closer reflection of where the debate is in NI, yet in the south the discourse really focuses on the types of figures that present, if one was looking at it from a nationalist perspective, a more optimistic perspective. There is one stat I use to surprise people about the whole thing: if you were to look at the percentage of people who identify as both British and Catholic as opposed to Irish and Protestant in NI, there are three times as many British identifying Catholics than there are Irish identifying Protestants. But the way the narrative is in the south, you would never know that to be the case. So, it's clear that the middle ground has opened up, but a lot of the discussions and narratives talk about almost the demographic inevitability.

Okay, now there might be an inevitability due to Brexit, but I'm not sure if that's the case either. There’s the idea that because obviously the border is in the Irish Sea, as it is at the minute, you'll have a divergence in terms of the markets of NI from the market of Britain. But if you look at the evolution of trade deals throughout the world, it seems inevitable that there will eventually be closer integration between Britain and the EU in terms of trade. I don't know if that is the case, but that is probably the main reason why Brexit leads to some idea that there'll be greater integration between North and South.

##### **Interviewer**

That's a good discussion of the saliency of the debate, but it makes sense for us to discuss what caused it to be more or less salient. So, is there anything you think that will influence how salient NI is?

##### **Kevin**

Brexit definitely influenced the saliency of the issue, there’s no doubt about that. The salience of the issue among politicians, not necessarily among the public. You know, when you look at the percentage of people that would treat NI or a united Ireland as one of the most important issues facing the country, it's a very small percentage you're talking about. I've polled this particular issue over time, and you're talking about 3% or so. I think that there was a significant increase in the number of people that wanted a united Ireland, particularly in, I think it was, late 2017, when the backstop started to be introduced as a concept in the negotiations between Leo Varadkar and Theresa May. In that context, support for Leo Varadkar rose because he was seen perhaps as being quite statesman-like, and it was perceived as getting one over on the Unionists and that sort of stuff. Definitely, if there was ever a point in which you could see some significant nationalism on this particular issue and the saliency of the issue, it was probably then.

I did an opinion a couple of months before that, asking people whether they are in favour of a united Ireland, notwithstanding a cost, so I included a cost of I think it was like £9 billion or something like that. Sometimes the question is asked as ‘even if it means an increase in your taxes’, which I think is a very silly way to look at it from an economic perspective, because one could just use debt, they don't actually have to pay taxes to cover the cost. There was a significant increase, I think from 50-50 to 60-40 people in favour. The second poll was done at that particular point in time. For a lot of referendums that one might conduct in Ireland, if you're going into a referendum and you had only 60% support on any issue in Ireland, you wouldn't be that confident that it would pass, and yet people are very confident that it would pass. I mean, the children's referendum, which barely passed (52% or something like that), all the polling in the lead up to that was 80 - 90%. The abolition of the Seanad, that failed, and yet every single poll suggested that was going to pass, I guess because people who were more concerned about the Seanad turned out. I don't want to say the No’s always increase, because that's the mistake people made around Brexit. But one wouldn’t be that confident of a united Ireland passing, if there was a referendum.

But in terms of the saliency of the issue, I guess the only answer I can give on that is about Brexit really raising the saliency of the issue, at a time when the demographics are changing. We will have the headline demographics from the census that is currently being conducted, and invariably we will have a majority of people who will say that they are originally from a Catholic community, even if they themselves are not Catholic. That may raise the saliency of the issue as well. And you could argue that the emergence of Sinn Féin, like you see some politicians, such as Jim O’Callaghan, has really focused on this particular issue, he's obviously positioning himself perhaps as the next leader of Fianna Fáil. And it's quite interesting that he has chosen this particular issue as an important issue, perhaps in reflection of the idea that Sinn Féin is stealing its nationalist clothes. Fianna Fáil probably would have been regarded as the most nationalist party prior to the emergence of a significant Sinn Féin, and perhaps they lose that a bit. The rise of Sinn Féin, it seems to me to be much more about opposition to Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael, economics, the rise of the left in general in Ireland, which has always been very small, but is getting to normal European levels, rather than anything to do with a united Ireland. In fact, they did a poll asking people why they were voting Sinn Féin, and very few people said it was because of a united Ireland.

##### **Interviewer**

Great. So, it's good you mentioned Brexit a few times because I was going to ask some questions on the role of the EU. So I'll start with a pretty general question. Do you think the EU has influenced either the saliency of this debate, or how different parties approach the debate over time?

##### **Kevin**

Yeah, the protocol itself has. I mean, the fact that people were talking about the NI border, right throughout Europe. I don't know if the EU could have done much else, but the fact is that they backed Ireland on that particular issue, on the backstop, and that was the decision the EU took. It was a very positive decision for Ireland, at least the Republic, because at least it ensured that there wouldn't be huge differences and there wouldn't be a border, at least on the island of Ireland. So it took Ireland's position, and in doing so, it raised the saliency of this issue. Well, I guess if it didn't, it would have been worse. But maybe you can say it legitimised feelings on the issue. Ireland itself is very pro-European in terms of its European membership, and it has become even more so in the context of these Brexit negotiations.

##### **Interviewer**

I suppose, given the context of Brexit, it’s important to remember that Ireland and the UK were members of the EU for quite a long time together. So, do you think this joint membership of the EU affected how Irish political parties thought about NI, or not?

##### **Kevin**

Well, yeah, I guess it removed the economic problems in some way. A border is just generally speaking, not very good for the economy of the border region. You can see that, even to this day, the areas that are pretty underdeveloped on the island are all in the border area between Donegal, Cavan, Fermanagh, Tyrone, that kind of particular area. You look at any of the infrastructure on the island, it's relatively weak in that particular region, and that's because of lack of cross-border initiatives. It is the poorest region. Deonegal is the poorest county in Ireland, and that's because it's surrounded by a border. And membership of the EU would have softened that deviation, but the existing border that was there even in the EU didn't help Donegal. So, it obviously softens the relative impact. I mean, if you go back, a lot of the more nationalist politicians, like Blayney, were from that particular part of the country as well. I think the issue of a united Ireland is far more economically pertinent and real for people who live in that border region, and the protocol, and all of this stuff. So, it is a very real and salient issue for those people. Then, arguably, the membership of the EU would obviously reduce the relative saliency of the issue for people for whom it directly affects.

##### **Interviewer**

You've mentioned Brexit a few times already, so it probably makes sense to get you to develop that a bit further. What exactly do you think the effect of Brexit has been on the issue of NI?

##### **Kevin**

It certainly polarised things. I think for the unionist community, the board down the Irish Sea was very visible in terms of the goods that were suddenly no longer available in NI, the types of things that people buy. NI is still broadly a divided society, and people go to different shops, buy different things in the shops based on their community, and that still persists. The absence of some of these goods is very visible and the emergence of goods from south of the border to replace them was a very visible feature. So, that definitely affected the politics in Northern Ireland relatively recently. Sorry, what was your question?

##### **Interviewer**

It was more about whether Brexit affected how Southern political parties looked at NI.

##### **Kevin**

Yeah, I think it did. It's fairly clear because it created an issue. It created a direct conflict between the interests of the south and northern nationalists, and northern unionists. It pitted them against one another, particularly more recently around this Protocol, but even before that, around the negotiation of the trade deal itself. Although, to be fair, the politics in the South in relation to the negotiations was fairly narrowly focused on the issue of NI, and didn't really focus as much on the idea of the UK in its entirety being within an arrangement, which was originally Theresa May's argument. The jump from what was a really good agreement for the UK, actually, for there to be no border East-West, to one for which there's only a border between Northern Ireland and Britain, it feels like that was a major loss for Ireland, but it wasn't recognised as such because of the focus on NI, rather than its chief economic interest, which would be, I think, closer aligned with the UK. A market of 60 million people is much more important than a market of 1.9 million, if you think about it economically. But emotionally, I guess for people, it's this connection with NI in particular, this legacy idea of certain things in Irish projects which are almost assumed positions, and support for a united Ireland is an assumed position.

##### **Interviewer**

Great. So, you've already kind of mentioned this with Jim O'Callaghan's positioning within Fianna Fáil, but do any parties have ownership of this issue and how does that affect how the other parties talk about it?

##### **Kevin**

Yeah, you could certainly argue that Sinn Féin owns the issue because it is so closely related to it. And again, Fianna Fáil would probably view itself as being close to the issue. Fine Gael’s tagline is the United Ireland Party, but it doesn’t reflect that as much, as it is arguably much softer on the issue, and definitely around the RIC commemoration. Leo Varadkar went up to NI, I think he visited an Orange Lodge, maybe in 2018 or 2019, and he was delighted, he was quite pleased with his ability to do that. The RIC commemoration was perhaps an extension of that, the idea of Fine Gael trying to be closer to an honest broker on the issue, or at least Leo Varadkar. You could say that there's a significant difference between Leo Varadkar and Simon Coveney on the issue, where the latter would have been a little bit closer to Fianna Fáil’s position, I would have thought, much closer to the idea of a united Ireland. Coveney said something at the start of the negotiations, something along the lines of a united Ireland being a goal or an objective of this, but he got in a lot of trouble for it. Again, I'd say this was like summer 2017. There’s clearly a difference within Fine Gael, but they generally tend to be a little bit softer. The Labour Party would obviously be more softer again on the issue.

Does anyone own the issue? I think in terms of Petrocik, if someone cared so much about that issue that they were voting for a party on the basis of that issue, they would invariably vote for Sinn Féin, in the same way that someone who solely carried climate change would invariably vote Green.

##### **Interviewer**

Right. So, that's all the questions I had planned. Is there anything else you think it's important to discuss for the attitude of Southern parties?

##### **Kevin**

When you see the views of politicians in particular and the development of certain narratives, I think this just happens on every issue, that narratives develop about what is perceived to be the agreed thing one can say. Some issues are viewed as being contestable and some issues are viewed that you shouldn't contest those issues. I just think, from an opinion polling perspective, it's quite remarkable sometimes how these things emerge. Like when the mandatory hotel quarantine thing came in 2020, I polled that one and it had like 90% support among the general public, whereas a united Ireland has like 60%. I remember being on a radio panel where people were talking about these issues, and all the politicians disagreed with the mandatory quarantine or at least they were kind of trying to be balanced on the issue, whereas when it came to the issue of a united Ireland, they were very keen to emphasise where they stood on that issue.

Politicians invariably react to public opinion in a very strong way because they believe they're representing people, especially on those broad things. I mean, it's quite interesting how there is the development of an idea of what an Irish politician must look like on those issues, and the supposed inevitability of it, which you see quite a lot, the narrative around ‘we need to create a plan because it's happening anyway’, and an inbuilt assumption that this is going to happen. But that doesn't seem inevitable if you look at any of the data, because you have this massive middle ground, and while that middle ground, especially Alliance, would be much more liberal on climate and social issues, they don't seem to be as much in favour of a united Ireland.

**Mick Fealty Interview**

##### **Interviewer**

As you probably know from my email, I'm looking at how different political parties in the south talk about Northern Ireland and what causes them to make it a salient issue or to ignore it altogether. So, perhaps it makes sense to start by asking you how salient and important do you think NI is for the different political parties in Ireland?

##### **Mick**

Overall, I would say in terms of how it's reflected in their individual priorities, I don't think it's a terribly salient issue, and that actually includes Sinn Féin. It's not just that the other parties are what Sinn Féin say they are, largely it's true, which is 26-county parties, they're all organised like that. But it also actually applies to Sinn Féin, in all senses of the practical politics and the practical appeal that their current electoral popularity is based on. I think in all cases, well, certainly for the three, what I would call, republican parties, that would be Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael, and Sinn Féin, I think it's important totemically, but really until the Shared Island Initiative, and I would guess also Bertie Ahern's partnership, if we could put it that way, with Tony Blair around the Good Friday Agreement, Northern Irish politics has rarely impinged upon the Southern political imagination in any serious way, other than it’s a disaster zone you don’t want to go near.

##### **Interviewer**

Great, thanks. So that kind of answers the next question, but in any case, it might be helpful to ask anyway. Do you think the importance of the issue has changed over time, or do you think it's just generally not been important over many years?

##### **Mick**

Imaginatively, given that the foundational event for the Southern state has always been 1916, it’s always had a huge symbolic importance. But when you ask southern citizens, do they want a united Ireland, generally the vast majority say yes, but not just yet. It's the same Augustine issue: ‘Lord, make me good, but not quite yet’. That's because no Southern party really has a practical solution to the problem, as they would see it, of partition. Yes, it's very important, foundationally, for modern Sinn Féin, it is incredibly important, but neither they nor the traditional republican parties in the south have ever really come up with a practical way to make mainstream an interest in Northern Ireland. Partition has been extraordinarily successful in terms of just creating two very different political spaces on one small island.

##### **Interviewer**

Thanks. So, yeah, we've had a bit of a discussion about how important it is, or not very important. I'm going to ask you a few questions about what would cause parties to focus on it or to ignore it as an issue. So just to start off very generally, is there anything that you think would cause parties to focus on Northern Ireland or to ignore it?

##### **Mick**

The only events I can see that would change southern indifference to the North are events within the North. The radical change of opinion within the North, whereby a clear majority of people in NI really began to take seriously any prospect of real political unification. That would have to manifest itself in the south. Now, it could be that one, or perhaps more than one, of the southern parties would pursue serious policies that made that more likely.

This is the paradox of Ireland's dilemma, which is quite different from Scotland. People often, and I think rather lazily, Southern commentators have adopted what was originally, I think, a Sinn Féin view, or a supposed Sinn Féin strategy, that Scotland leaving would be a stepping stone to NI also leaving the UK. The problem facing Scottish nationalists is rather different from the one facing Irish nationalists in the sense that it's unidirectional. So, if Scotland were to leave the UK, it only needs to make one single decision, that is, to leave. It's a damn set more problematic than many Scottish nationalists believe it is, and many Irish nationals commentators, particularly in Dublin believe: there's the currency issue, which in my book is one of the reasons why Scotland didn't leave in the end; but there's also the practical issues of, if Scotland was able to petition its way back into the EU, what would a border between England and Scotland look like? That's potentially a cold water moment for a lot of Scots. I would imagine post Brexit, that's going to be much more of a problematic prospect than it was in 2014. So that's just by way of joining a contrast, Samuel, I know it's not a direct answer to your question. The problem Irish nationalists have, to stick with the Scottish example, is it's not unidirectional: there needs to be a movement, a simultaneous movement towards each other from the North to the South, and from the South to the North. Under the current leadership of Sinn Féin in the North, that's been a leadership that's been in place now for nearly 20 years (the 2003 Assembly election is when Sinn Féin decisively stepped ahead of the SDLP into that leadership position), actually nationalism has slowly diminished, almost in exact proportion to the way that unionism has diminished. Therefore, its ability to influence large swathes of public opinion in NI on the issue of partition, and on the issue of unity, has diminished even as talk of a border poll has been amplified. It's almost as though the talk of a border poll is a tacit mission that they failed in terms of building a policy platform that is capable of drawing in sentiment and support from a wide enough space within the electorate to actually make it a prospect.

There is some possibility, and I stress possibility, in the Shared Island Initiative in terms of its ability to at least begin to build some policy bridges between North and South, particularly in the context of a settled deal over the Northern Ireland protocol, where, in a sense, Brexit just kind of quietly leaves the building in terms of controversy and there's a bilateral programme potential for building those kinds of connections. I'm talking about fairly prosaic stuff here. When I left Ireland in the 1980s, it took 2 hours and 10 minutes to get from Belfast central station to Connolly Station, and it still takes exactly the same amount of time. There's been no bilateral cooperation on that. There's been no mutual investment strategy in terms of speeding that up by passing Connolly, using Connolly as a suburban station rather than as a mainline station, taking it into Heuston, it then links you up to Galway and Cork and stuff like that. None of this work has been done, and that's only basic infrastructure to get people in Belfast more invested in the social, political, and economic life of Dublin. I think it's a pre-existing requirement for people in the South to take the North more seriously, and people in the North to take the South more seriously.

##### **Interviewer**

Yeah, that's a good point about Connolly, don't even get me started on how long the bus takes to get from Dublin to Belfast, that's even worse. My next question is about the EU. Do you think that it's had any influence on either the importance of NI, or even on how political parties in the south view NI?

##### **Mick**

I'm not really sure I've got a clear answer to that. What were you thinking?

##### **Interviewer**

I suppose this is a general question just to see if you had any ideas. One possible thing is both the UK and Ireland were obviously members of the EU at the same time for a considerable length of time, including across the entirety of the Troubles. So do you think that played any role, or not?

##### **Mick**

I think from a psychological point of view, it was a great comfort blanket for Northern nationalists, to get a sense that they were sitting in a sovereignty pool, that wasn't joint authority. This kind of goes back to my point about Scotland. Scotland's second independence referendum will be much more problematic once Brexit is properly unwound, because you simply go from one pocket within the EU to another one, and it diminishes the kind of practical issues that you might have to deal with the rest of the British island. So, I think from a psychological point of view, certainly Hume saw this as a kind of an enabling framework in which, ironically, the British end of that pooling of sovereignty could be accepted under the fact that we were now in this kind of multinational situation. Now that it's broken, weirdly, I'm not sure we're going to see an awful lot of difference other than that I can see Ireland's experience in the EU becoming slightly more stressful than it was before, in the sense that the one thing that you really can't admit to in Dublin is actually the Brits and the Irish had very close ties of interest. I wouldn't put it any more strongly than that. More often than not, there was a singularity of view between the UK state and the Irish state on a lot of major issues, and that simply will not exist. The nearest neighbour speaks French, has a very different economic model from the Irish-Anglo model, and I think that could get more problematic. But I also think people have exaggerated the legal significance of that joint membership of the EU. I think it was psychologically a support for nationalism at a difficult moment when it had to sign up to the Good Friday Agreement and effectively accept British sovereignty in the North. Less problematic for the SDLP, perhaps, than Sinn Féin, but I don't really see it as being a live influence on North-South relations as we go forward, other than if there's proper cooperation, that would need the North to start reciprocating to the Taoiseach’s Shared Island Initiative more strongly, and the EU could be a really important source of structural funding for some of the changes that need to happen.

##### **Interviewer**

Yeah, okay. So, just to probe that a little bit more - you mentioned Brexit there, and you seem to think that it's not going to have overly much influence on this. So could you elaborate on that a bit more?

##### **Mick**

If there's a disastrous outcome to these negotiations, then yes, it will have a huge effect. I'm probably more optimistic than I ought to be, but I think we're close to a solution on the East-West trade issue, which is the one thing that unionism is holding out against. I think it's more likely than not that we will get an equitable resolution that will be, in particular, very beneficial to the North. Colum Eastwood and others have banged on endlessly about dual market access, and they're quite right when it comes to exporting businesses in the North. I can think of one particular business in Tyrone, which I visited recently, where they're just warehousing stuff for a German company for onward flow into the rest of the island and the rest of the UK. That is potentially a huge benefit, and it's not something, contrary to a lot of nationalist commentators, that even the harshest unionist critics are unaware of. They understand that, they do have contacts with NI business, and they certainly understand the export potential of that. But what they're complaining about is the domestic import issue, and providing that is settled in the comprehensive way that it can be, if you take into account the very low risk of goods in NI recirculating into the wider single market, I think we're potentially set for a real Renaissance in northern business, which has been a long time coming. I mean, for me, what's coming down the line, potentially, is that the peace dividend finally arrives after 20 years of waiting. And I think that settling of the Northern economy, the opportunity for people to look forward and think that their kids have more of an opportunity than they had, I think could have some very profound effects on really settling, allowing us to transform from a peace process to a genuine civic political process.

##### **Interviewer**

Great, thanks. So far our discussion has been mostly on political parties, but how important do you think this issue is for voters and are parties just following voters, or is it the other way around?

##### **Mick**

I think the closer you get to the North, the more important it is. People in Donegal, Leitrim, maybe Sligo, Cavan, Monoghan, and Louth all understand the importance of this. And if the Shared Island Initiative is handled in the way that it ought to be, potentially a huge bonus on its way. Like Donegal, if Derry takes off in the way, economically, that Newry already has, there's a huge potential bonus there, certainly for the border regions of Donegal. Potentially, there's a huge, long-awaited economic Renaissance on its way there. But how aware are people at the moment? I think, certainly in business, they're aware of the opportunities. Are voters voting on it? I'm not sure. I would say the high. If you compare where Sinn Féin was, maybe in December 2010 when Pearse Doherty won in Donegal South-West, to where they are now, which is more or less the dominant party in Donegal, I don't think people are quite yet voting on the economic opportunity. I think they're still pretty much really pissed off. So, some of what we're talking about here is potential, rather than actual politics that's currently in play.

##### **Interviewer**

Great. So, do you think any parties in the south have ownership of the issue of NI, or not?

##### **Mick**

I would say, for a southern audience, it’s Sinn Féin, all day and all night. That changes somewhat when you come to the North because you've got the political-cultural mix. I would say Fianna Fáil is seen, certainly amongst non-nationalists, as the most reliable of the three main parties in the south. But that's partly because they don't trust Sinn Féin and its populism, they've seen its record in government, and they know pretty much that whatever gets promised in between elections, it's their ability to villainise their opponents that has created their current dominance. Their record of delivery is pretty poor. It's not the same intensity, but there is a housing crisis in the North. Sinn Féin has responsibility for housing, barely built anything in the last five years. But as I say, it comes down to the fact that NI, as far as Southern voters are concerned, is not seen as anything other than a totemic issue. No one in the south is voting on the basis that Sinn Féin will deliver a united Ireland, it’s part of the background colouring. It's what ties them into the idea of what the State is supposed to do, even though in 100 years it's made very little progress on that.

##### **Interviewer**

And then my final question is, do you think anything else would shape how important the issue is for Southern parties, or do you think we've discussed most of the important things?

##### **Mick**

Yeah, I think an economic Renaissance in the North, perhaps over a period of about maybe 10-15 years, will begin to rebalance how southerners view the North. I think that's partly to do with economic performance, which I think perhaps is sort of an issue of resilience. Looked at it one way, the South has huge resilience, as we've seen how it's come back from a near life-ending kind of disaster in the world financial crisis, but it's paid a huge price for that, and it’s people have paid a huge price for it. The North is always kind of protected from that because it is part of this larger kind of insurance policy, if you like. It was always the UK government that picked up the bill. Also, George Osborne never passed on the cuts that were made in England, particularly at the local government level, onto NI to the same degree. Yes, there were cuts that did create problems because you've got spending ministries in NI, where parties like the DUP and Sinn Féin suddenly couldn't show largesse, and had to constantly kind of cut things back. But nor did the economic crisis hit the North anywhere near as disastrously as it hit the south.

I think going forward, especially if there are advances in terms of enhancing the North-South infrastructure, that might make NI look and sound like a place you want to send your kids to go to University, a place you want your kids to go and advance their careers in things like cybertech and fintech, and some of the new digital industries that are coming to Belfast, not coming to Dublin. So, there may well be a kind of a rebalancing of perspective. If we go back to the 1940s, NI seemed like this place where you could just get away from all that misery [in the south]. We may see a kind of rebalancing. I'm not saying we go back to that kind of extreme, but if there are these opportunities for the North out of the protocol, I think we may well see that change.

The odd thing about partition is it just made us all strangers to each other in a way that we weren't before partition. Years ago, I did a thing on the Irish famine and as part of my research for that, I went to the Central Library in Belfast, to go and look at the archives, and the only newspaper they still had there in the archives that had been published the whole way through, from 1845-9, which was the News Letter. It was ostensibly a Unionist paper that basically spent three years in its editorial columns in an absolute culture war with the Times of London defending the character and standing of people in what it calls the south and west of Ireland What's happened with partition is we have become two quite separate cultural spaces, notwithstanding the influence of bridging organisations like the GAA. We have different standards in education, we've got different, very different outlets. We’re a bit absent from each other in terms of understanding exactly how the other operates and thinks and feels about things. One of the things I've realised over the 20 years I've been writing Slugger is Northerners don't understand Southern politics, it's an absolutely closed book. You know what? It’s the same the other way around, except southerners I think sometimes just get off on the idea of Protestants as these unconscionable aliens that really aren't us in some way or another. The perfect example of that was that BT Sport documentary, in which Brian O’Driscoll met a bunch of Orange men in Portadown, and he was utterly puzzled at the fact that these guys absolutely worshiped him. I think they were Black men, actually from the Royal Black. That’s going to take time to change. Also, both countries are changing in ways unimaginable 40 years ago. The South has liberalised and secularised in ways that were just really off the scale. So has the North, in its own way. The demography is not one of domination: Catholics are no longer calling themselves Catholics, and Protestants are no longer calling themselves Protestants. I would fully expect that, when last year’s census results are announced, we'll be somewhere around 20% saying ‘fuck off, I’m not one or the other’, and that's not something that has made its way even into the intelligensia in Dublin. So, this closed book thing is problematic for people who think there's going to be more of an interplay between the two parts. If you want a united Ireland, it's going to be a long haul, and it's going to cost a lot of money. It may take generations before everybody's ready for it. I wouldn't bet against partitions still being in place in a hundred years.

**Neale Richmond Interview**

**Interviewer**

It probably makes sense to start with a really broad question: just how important do you think the issue of Northern Ireland is for different political parties, but especially for Fine Gael?

**Neale**

Increasingly important. That's the thing when it comes to Northern Ireland, everyone takes it very seriously, everyone takes a very big responsibility, but unlike other issues, it's not an electoral issue - there’s kind of a duty of care. At various stages of Fine Gael’s history it's got increased focus, like when Garret FitzGerald was leader and today, but for a large part of the party’s history, much like parties generally down here, there wasn't a lot of attention paid to NI.

**Interviewer**

So, what do you think causes this different level of attention over time?

**Neale**

Certain personalities are very important, but events, completely events. So, you know, Garrett became leader of the party in 1977, having been in government in a very difficult period as Minister of Foreign Affairs for 1973-7. Throughout the Troubles period, you know, in the 1980s, it was so important, it was what people cared about because the Troubles were having such an impact on everyone's lives - not just people's lives in NI, but down in the south as well. In terms of contemporary times, the focus is very much the result of Brexit, it's forced NI to be a bigger issue in southern politics than it was, not in terms of any electoral thing, but it was a matter of debate, it required action, you couldn't not have a position on Brexit or the protocol or the backstop or standing up for the Good Friday Agreement. It has an electoral element, but not in terms of votes, people just want to know that you're serious about it and you have a position and a stance, and will talk about it.

**Interviewer**

Yeah, so there's a few things from that, which would be good to probe a bit more. So, how would you characterise Fine Gael’s stance on NI?

**Neale**

It's a very passive stance, you know, it's not put front and centre, and there will be a large chunk of the party, individuals being members or elected representatives, who don't think about the north, but those of us who do, think about it very seriously and, I'd like to think, imaginatively. We try to move a little bit beyond tribalism. I think there is a generational shift in the party, and a desire to be more engaged and more affirmative in our position on NI. I don't know if that's a reaction to other things, but certainly I found people are more interested in talking about it again. When I started in politics, I remember as a young councillor at a conference in 2013, we were talking about how no one really was focused on the north and my generation just didn't care. But they care now, and they have a very strong opinion on it, and they want to know what our stance is. So, it's forced people to think a lot more seriously about it, but I still see a definite generational shift in terms of a certain generation that don't want to engage and get a little bit uncomfortable with some of us who are willing to talk about it more.

**Interviewer**

Okay, so since you mentioned Brexit, just what role has the EU played in how parties discuss NI - has it affected how much you talk about it, or how you talk about it?

**Neale**

Ironically, common membership of the EU meant we didn't really talk about the North. You know, a lot of the issues were removed by common membership, in terms of the practical issues of having a border between jurisdictions on one island - because we were both in the single market and the customs union, there were just no problems. The EU certainly played a very benevolent role in the peace process, a very supportive role financially, but what we see in terms of Brexit is it's forced us to spend, me in particular and others, a number of years with European colleagues, explaining to them the situation on the island, bringing them to the border region, bringing them to border towns in particular, or farms that cross the border. That's forced us to kind of get more involved and refresh our own memories. Once upon a time you may have visited the North for political reasons, maybe once a year and you'd never go on northern media, now both are very regular and that's not just for me, that's for a range of people.

**Interviewer**

So, Brexit has made the issue more important, but has it affected your stance on NI, or is that just a continuation of previous stances?

**Neale**

It's forced us to be a bit more vocal in our stance on the North, and there are many of us who believe that Brexit will force a discussion on the constitutional issue sooner rather than later. This means that if we're going to have this conversation, we need to be part of it and we need to be informed, whereas before, a lot of people would go ‘well, be careful not to poke the bear, don't be having a conversation for the sake of it, and maybe this is something that's a little bit further away’. But yeah, Brexit has forced some of us to write papers, others to speak at lectures. The party’s policy actually hasn't changed, it's still Fine Gael: The United Ireland Party, but this might actually be a reality a lot sooner than many people would have thought, it's no longer just a general aspiration. It might actually become a practical concern, with a political responsibility.

**Interviewer**

So that's all I wanted to ask about the EU. Do you think any political party has ownership of this issue or not?

**Neale**

No, no, I don't think so, but there are parties who are just naturally stronger, like Sinn Féin are an all-island party, they run candidates in the North. I think Fine Gael is very strong in recent years, but would have previously been seen as very weak on NI. Fianna Fáil seems to have detached themselves from this, despite how they would have campaigned hard on this once upon a time. Then for the smaller parties, okay, the Greens and People Before Profit are all-island parties, but it's not what they talk about, they're not interested in the constitutional issues, they are there in terms of issues like the environment or worker’s rights, or whatever it is. The independents and other smaller parties don’t really talk about it. I think there's certainly a desire not to allow one party to have ownership, and that's why a lot of people in Fine Gael have said hold on, if we're gonna have to have this question, you can't just be talking about SF’s vision of a United Ireland, we need to get back into that space and be quite clear that we have a vision for United Ireland that's different and that perhaps could appeal more to the middle ground in the North. We're not going to win over Unionists, by definition they’re unionists, but there’s the growing ‘other’. They look at the south, and they look at losing EU funding and membership of the EU. So many people are more mobile, they're coming down to uni here, they're going over to the UK. There would have been a concern a couple of years ago that only one party was talking about it, but I don't think that's the case anymore.

**Interviewer**

It's interesting what you said about Fianna Fáil kind of ‘detaching’ from the issue. Do you think that's given Fine Gael more space to talk about it, or has it nor really had much of an effect?

**Neale**

I think it has. I think people are a bit more surprised to see us being more vocal about it. Maybe that's reflective of the leadership we have, or this sort of generational shift. Also, Micheál Martin has very distinct opinions, he wants to do it a certain way, and I think that's impacting his party's policy. I don't know if it’s necessarily in line with his TDs in the Dáil. So, it’s certainly given us more platforms, and we're taking the platforms, whereas Fianna Fáil perhaps aren't. Some are, but some aren't.

**Interviewer**

You said this isn't really an electoral issue and it's more about a duty of care, so how important an issue do you think NI is for southern voters?

**Neale**

NI is always an issue when something’s happening, so when nothing's happening or things are working, it's not an issue at all for people, bar those who live in the border region, or people who are involved in North-South enterprise or reconciliation work, a lot of which happens behind the scenes or quietly. It was interesting, in the election Brexit wasn't an electoral issue at all. We thought it would be, if it was an election issue we'd have an overall majority. I think people like to know the party has a stance. Very few people put Northern Ireland in their top 10 issues, but they would be appalled if a party wasn’t working on it. It's something you do for the sake of doing it, because it’s the right reason, and anyone who goes into it thinking you do it to win votes because voters are going to vote on your position is in trouble. But like anything, if you have a clear well-articulated position on any issue and you're passionate about it, people will respect that. They mightn't agree with you, but they respect it. If you just kind of give it a cursory few lines in the end of the manifesto to tick a box, I think people see through that very quickly.

Certainly, when you go and debate northern politicians or go on northern media shows, it's very important to be informed. It's a respect thing as much as anything else, if you want to talk about the north, then be informed.

**Interviewer**

So, if the public aren't overly concerned about the issue and just want you to have a stance and show you’re competent on the issue, does that affect how you deal with it?

**Neale**

I think it affects who deals with it. You find the people who like to talk about it or to do the work on it, who have a real passion and an interest in it. You're not doing it reacting to representations coming into your office, and that's probably why there's less people who are very vocal on these issues in the south. Personally, I think there is a reward in doing it, politically and not just the job satisfaction, but a lot of people go ‘well, that's not going to deal with the call sheet of 20 people I have. That's what I have to respond to and therefore, that will influence what work I do in the Dáil and outside the Dáil’.

**Interviewer**

That's all the questions I had planned. Is there anything else you think is important to talk about for understanding when parties talk about it?

**Neale**

I'm just interested in the overall area you're talking about, nationalism and looking at different jurisdictions. I think there is a uniqueness to the situation on this island, compared to other European countries. So, I think of say the Hungarian minority in Romania, and I lived in Belgium, which is obviously very distinct, and the Germans in Belgium, just saw themselves as Belgian. There were German speaking Belgians as opposed to detached Germans. Whereas for a lot of people in the south, they don't necessarily see NI as a different country. Yeah, a different jurisdiction, and all that. And there’s a lot of people in the North who equally see the south as the same country and another lump who see Great Britain as the same country. So, I think there's a wonderful complexity there, that sadly has been tragic for too long. I’m sounding very misty eyed here, but as someone who believes in a cosmopolitan society, and if you look at the approach in Finland to the Swedish minority, I think that sort of approach would be very interesting to take, you know, actually we're really proud that we've multiple strands to our national identity, and they all bring really unique flavours and benefits. It's sad when I see things like the Irish language weaponised by both sites and when so many people feel they have to run from their houses on the 12th of July. I don’t like what the Orange Order stands for, but I do like the idea of parades as community days. I'd love to see an Ireland where we can embrace all these differences. Not the melting pot of the US, but, you know, just be very proud that the 12th of July is a bank holiday, that St Patrick's Day is a bank holiday. You know, some people speak Irish, some people have a twang of Ulster Scots, and we share a GAA pitch with a rugby pitch, which just makes common sense. I think if we focus actually more on how our differences are positive, and certainly in the south, I think a big issue is whilst there's an invisible border on the island, there is a massive emotional border and there's a general ignorance towards life in the north. We don’t travel up there enough, and it goes both ways: I’ve a lot of relations in the North, who don't come down to the south, except to go to the airport or a funeral. Realistically, the number of people going to each other's universities is tiny, especially compared to how many go across to GB. Yeah. Until we break down that artificial barrier, it'll make the discussion about unity, and certainly that idea of either Irish nationalism or British nationalism very much at a remove.

I often see it in London, when I'm over there and I see hardcore Unionists, and I go ‘these Tories just see you as Irish. They don't see you as equally British or more British, despite your aspirations’. I know my uncle, when he went over to England in the 50s/60s, they had no interest in the fact that he was a southern Protestant that went to school in the North, but yet spoke Irish and everything else like that. That came with lots of prejudice, as well as opportunity. So I think it's just such a unique situation that's very much gone down the tragic and dark route, but I'd love to think that there's a way we can turn that around and celebrate the differences.

But I think the first thing is, from a policy point of view, it doesn't matter which party is in charge, before we talk about constitutional change or nationalism, if we actually just get a little bit more decentralisation and encourage people to move and go South-North a lot more. I think that would make things a lot more interesting and better.

**Pat Leahy Interview**

##### **Interviewer**

Just before I get started I'll say a few words about what my research is and that might make it a bit easier for you. I look at how political parties across Europe use different forms of nationalism, and one form of nationalism I'm looking at is when countries have claims to neighbouring people or territories. So, Ireland’s relationship with Northern Ireland is a very obvious example there. So, really I'm focused on trying to understand when parties will focus on Northern Ireland and when they'll ignore it.

So, the first question is going to be a really obvious one, but just how important do you think the issue of Northern Ireland is for the political parties in the south?

##### **Interviewee**

The obvious answer is that it depends on which party that you're talking about. It's obviously very important for Sinn Féin, and we know that Sinn Féin is different in lots of ways to the other parties. The question of the North and the move towards a united Ireland, as Sinn Féin would like it to be, is one of the two raison d’êtres for their existence. The party exists to achieve its social and economic goals and to achieve a united Ireland, and it fuses those two goals in the idea of a new island, a 32-county Ireland that is a socially and economically reformed version of the two states that exist at the moment. For Sinn Féin, it's at the very heart of their political project. It's a motivating factor for many of their members and volunteers and it is, let us not forget, something that many of its members were prepared to either take lives themselves in pursuit of, or to assist, support, and justify the taking of lives by their comrades in the organisation. So, I think you can't overestimate the importance of that goal for Sinn Féin. Now, how it is achieved and the sort of timelines they might view privately as realistic, is another question. But certainly for Sinn Féin, it's something that's at the very heart of their political project.

For the other parties, for Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael, and Labour, it is something to which they are committed in a long-term and aspirational sense, to varying degrees. Fianna Fáil would have a view of itself as being ‘greener’, if I can put it that way, than Fine Gael and its self-image would certainly be such as to promote that goal to a greater extent than Fine Gael would. Ironically, in recent years the rhetoric from Leo Varadkar and Simon Coveney has often been ‘greener’, or more devoted to the achievement of a united Ireland than it has been from Micheál Martin, who has prioritised non-constitutional cooperation with the North on a variety of planes, but not on the political constitutional one, with his Shared Island project. So, while Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael, and Labour say a united Ireland is part of their political priorities, it is in no way comparable to the sort of importance that it has for Sinn Féin. The other smaller parties and independents may talk about a united Ireland in an aspirational sense, but none has any meaningful political commitment to the achievement of a united Ireland.

##### **Interviewer**

Great, thank you very much. Do you think the importance of the issue has changed for the parties over time, or not?

##### **Interviewee**

Yeah, I think so. Again, you have to separate Sinn Féin from the pack on this. So, dealing with Sinn Féin first, I suppose they would say that the achievement of a united Ireland is not less important for them than it was during the IRA campaign, but it's just that history has moved on to make the achievement of that goal possible by peaceful means in a way that it wasn't possible during the 1970s, 80s, and for much of the 90s. That seems to me to be a rather self-serving way of justifying the armed campaign and perhaps more importantly, the abandonment of the armed campaign by the IRA. Is something more of a priority for you if you are prepared to shoot somebody for it, or merely to organise politically in pursuit of it? I guess you can make your own mind up on that, but under the Good Friday Agreement, the commitment of republicans to purely peaceful means of achieving their political goals is certainly a massive change in the way that they look at a united Ireland that might someday be achieved by them, if that is what happens, because a united Ireland that was achieved by democratic consent would be a different proposition for many people in the North than one achieved by violent means.

For the other parties, if you look at the history of Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael, they've had a different emphasis. I mentioned earlier that Fianna Fáil would have always seen itself as ‘greener’ and as a party who viewed the achievement of a united Ireland in the era of Articles Two and Three as being an important political priority. But, if you look at the history of Fianna Fáil governments, did it ever really do anything to bring about a united Ireland, or to bring that goal closer? I don't think so. One of the effects of the Troubles in the North was to make the Republic hunker down and look after its own security, rather than seek to engage with the violence in the North for fear that the Southern state would become infected by the violence that was taking place in the North. Even the Archdeacon of nationalist rhetoric in Fianna Fáil, De Valera, his record in government was always to prioritise the 26 counties over the six counties. Even whilst he might talk of the reintegration of the national territory, his record in government was always to protect and consolidate the 26 county state. That is equally, and even more, true of governments led by Fine Gael and supported by the Labour Party. Ironically, in a way, the Good Friday Agreement has opened up the possibilities of political and administrative cooperation between the two jurisdictions, you look at things like the North-South Ministerial Council and so on, which have made cooperation between governments in Dublin and Belfast more of an everyday part of the operations of government, when it wouldn't have been before. So, in a way, practical cooperation in governments led by both Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael has been a part of their life in government in a way that it wouldn't have been beforehand. Their commitment to the achievement of a united Ireland has remained, however, largely rhetorical.

##### **Interviewer**

Great, thanks. Is there anything you think that would make the issue more important or less important, or would alter how the parties talk about Northern Ireland?

##### **Interviewee**

Well, I think Brexit had a very substantial impact on relationships within the island, and obviously that is something that is still unfolding. There was a decision made by the last government during the height of the Brexit negotiations, when a no deal Brexit was a definite possibility (in fact, from some perspectives, a desired outcome, certainly by parts of the Tory party in Britain), which would have confronted the Dublin government with the choice between having some sort of border checks or infrastructure to protect the single market, or maintaining an entirely open trade border and therefore endangering Ireland's position within the single market. The decision was made by that government, which they didn't trumpet at the time, they talked about ‘whatever happened, there would never be any border infrastructure or border checks’, and that pivoted during the summer of 2019 or 2020 to saying ‘there might have to be checks, but they would be set back from the border, there wouldn't be any infrastructure on the border, but there might have to be cheques on goods at different points’. So, the decision that was made by the leadership of that government was that, if it came to a choice between safeguarding Ireland's place in the EU single market or maintaining an entirely single market on the island, that they would prioritise Ireland's place in the single market. In other words, in practical terms, they were prepared to contemplate some sort of economic border. So, they hadn't quite worked out exactly how that was going to happen, but they would do that rather than having checks or barriers between goods flowing from Ireland to the rest of the single market. In effect, prioritising Ireland's place in the EU above the unity of the island. Now, as we know, the achievement of the EU-UK agreement and the device of the protocol made that unnecessary. But, pushed to a choice between a border-free island and Ireland's place in the EU, they were going to go for Ireland's place in the EU, which I think is significant.

##### **Interviewer**

Yeah, great. So, do you think Brexit made the issue of unification more important, or not?

##### **Interviewee**

I think it changed the conversation a bit in both parts of Ireland, because people in the North, the majority of whom had voted to remain in the EU, were suddenly finding themselves being taken out of the EU against their wishes. Now, that's a different thing from being asked to choose between the EU and the UK, but it's a different, more complex sort of choice. It was certainly never advertised at the time of the referendum that the UK would leave the single market and that would have all these complications that we're not so familiar with. But, I think for a part of the population in the North which doesn't define itself exclusively by reference to the constitutional question, and that includes the people who say they're neither primarily Nationalist nor Unionist, that may be one of the factors that makes them less attached to the Union and more attracted to the idea of a united Ireland within the EU.

In the south, the dynamic is possibly a little different. There is a strain of opinion in the south that has always viewed the border as illogical on a small island. Were there to be the imposition of checks and the disruption that a hard economic border between North and South would have, if it came to pass, the disruption that would have meant for daily commercial life, strengthened that strain within Southern thinking that views the border as unnecessary and illogical. It's not a terribly deep analysis, but it is not an uncommon one, and that idea is probably strengthened by Brexit.

##### **Interviewer**

So, this has been a lot about Brexit, but of course, Ireland and the UK were members of the EU for a long time, since 1973, together. Do you think this joint membership of the EU had any effect on how Southern parties approached Northern Ireland?

##### **Interviewee**

I think that it certainly was one of the things that helped build a closeness between the British and Irish governments. Officials on both sides have said this to me, that the nuts and bolts of EU work, the meetings and trips to Brussels for meetings of the Council of Ministers every month, and then summits five or six times a year at which leaders and their entourages would travel, they gave British and Irish officials and politicians a lot of facetime with one another. Apart from agriculture, they tended to be on the same side of a lot of EU arguments, particularly since the erection of the single market. Not alone were they English speaking with a similar sort of political cultural outlook, but they also tended to be natural allies in most, not all, but most, EU arguments. Your question is from the Southern perspective, so what did the EU do for Irish parties? Certainly, for the parties that were participating routinely in government here, there was a couple of extraordinary partnerships, principally between Bertie Ahearn and Tony Blair, and latterly, to a lesser extent, but still not ineffective, between Enda Kenny and David Cameron, which saw the two governments hand in glove, really, on their approach to the North, and I think that the EU dynamic was part of what contributed to that.

##### **Interviewer**

Thanks. So do you think any party has ownership of the issue of Northern Ireland, or not?

##### **Interviewee**

I think that it's an interesting political battleground in the South, because it's very clear that Sinn Féin wished to make itself the party of a united Ireland. You'll be familiar with the polls that say that the majority of people in the South favour a united Ireland, but most of them say eventually, not necessarily if it costs them anything or if it's done on their terms and they don't have to change the symbols and outlook of this state, and so forth. But I think that there will be a competition and, in some respects, this is what Micheál Martin’s Shared Island Unit and Initiative is about, and also what the quite ‘green’ rhetoric employed by Leo Varadkar and Simon Coveney during the Brexit negotiations was also about. It was about recognising that there is a soft and maybe not terribly deep, but quite broad small-n nationalist constituency in the South, and all politicians must be cognizant of that. Now, I have my doubts if being seen as the most united Ireland party is going to really attract a lot of extra votes for Sinn Féin, because all the people that view that as one of the most important things about politics in Ireland and who think that it should be the first priority of government and should be achieved as soon as possible, probably all of those are voting for Sinn Féin anyway, or certainly most of them are voting for Sinn Féin. I think a lot of Shinpain's growth has been driven not so much by its nationalist appeal but by its social and economic policies, and particularly by dissatisfaction on the part of mainly young voters with the lack of progress in areas such as housing and so forth.

##### **Interviewer**

Yes, great. So, the final question I have, which fits in nicely with your talk of polls, is how important an issue do you think Northern Ireland is for voters?

##### **Interviewee**

I think for a small number of them it's very important. But actually, if you look at the polls on a united Ireland, they will tell you that it's not even the most important thing for most Sinn Féin voters. So, if you go through the numbers, there's certainly less than 20 per cent of people for whom a united Ireland is one of the massive priorities that they want to see the government spend time, attention, and treasure on. There's an awful lot of people who are well disposed towards the idea: around two-thirds or so say they want to see it, they think it will happen, they would like it to happen. But that commitment is kind of soft. One of the things, maybe, that will decide the next election is how deep that commitment is and to what extent the Sinn Féin project to make the achievement of a united Ireland a near-term absolute priority for an Irish government might attract voters, but to what extent it might also repel some voters who might be in favour of it, but might not necessarily want to pay for it or might be rather scared that some of the obvious divisions that still exist in Northern society will be imported into a unitary state.

This is a rather long-winded way of avoiding your question. How much of a thing is it going to be? The answer is, it's going to be a thing. Will it be decisive? I just don't know.

##### **Interviewer**

That's all the questions I have planned. Is there anything else you think is important to talk about?

##### **Interviewee**

I don't think so. When you're going back over if you think of anything that jumps out at you and you need to ask on, just bang me an email and I'll talk to you again.

**Sam McBride Interview**

**Interviewer**

Before I get started, I'll just say a brief bit about my research. I mostly focus on how political parties across Europe use different forms of nationalism and how they imagine the nation, so, of course, it makes sense for Ireland to be one of the cases, considering its claims about Northern Ireland. That's what I'm going to be mostly focused on: how southern parties talk about Northern Ireland, or if they talk about it. It probably makes sense to start with a really broad question. How important do you think the issue of Northern Ireland is for political parties in the south?

**Sam**

Well, it's more important than it was prior to Brexit. Northern Ireland had moved into a category, I suppose, for most political parties in both the Republic of Ireland and Great Britain that seemed to them to be, for now at least, largely solved, and so they weren't compelled to think about it. Politics is about priorities and you've always got a thousand things that you could do, and probably many of them you should do, but there's a crisis that right now, you have to address, so whatever gets into the crisis category, probably gets done and beneath that, it's much less likely that even something which you want to achieve actually manages to get the time and the resources required for it. So, I think Northern Ireland had moved from the crisis positioning within government, and I think there's a remarkable symmetry here in terms of how Dublin and London view Northern Ireland, despite really different interests and different long-term strategic views of what might be in their interests. But the immediate priority, obviously to stop the killing, to try to stabilise things, and to try to stop Northern Ireland being a drag on each of them, that was the biggest priority, and that has been achieved. So they had sort of settled into this sub-optimal equilibrium, which was deeply imperfect, which didn't bring good governance, which had all sorts of flaws, but because it wasn't demanding their attention on a daily basis through atrocities or anything else that might be impacting on their jurisdictions, they were understandably more worried about other things. From their perspective, if you're an Irish party and the country is financially falling apart, as it was in the period, for instance, after Paisley and McGuiness struck the deal in 2007 and you enter that sort of relative golden period of stability in Stormont, if your country is facing an existential financial threat to its economic independence, worrying about somewhere that you don't have responsibility for that doesn't elect you and doesn't pay taxes, that is the responsibility of somewhere else, it's a bit of a luxury. So I think Brexit, to round this off, has moved Northern Ireland back into crisis territory.

Yes, there is ideology involved, as Irish politicians, almost to a person, have got some level of desire to see Irish unity at some point and to remove any barriers there might be to that, or to soften the border. All of that is of course true, but I don't think that's really the key driver of their interest. I think the key driver of their interest in it, is that there is an existential threat to their state. If this goes in various directions, some of which could involve serious violence and some of which could involve a very hard border, or a border around the entire island cutting them off from the single market etc, NI becomes something that is absolutely critical to address.

So I think that it moves according to how significant Northern Ireland is to their own interests. But I'm not saying that as a criticism. I just think that’s the realpolitik: a democratic politician’s first priority and their first duty is to the people who've voted for them. That is the nature of representative democracy and the people who vote for Southern parties are de facto not in Northern Ireland. That doesn't mean they don't care about the place, it doesn't mean they're indifferent to it entirely or anything like that, but the most important thing is the practicalities of life there.

**Interviewer**

So, do you think any political parties have ownership of the issue, either historically or at the minute?

**Sam**

Well, I suppose if you asked this question 20 years ago, SF was such a small party in the south, you almost wouldn't have thought to mention them. I think that because SF, and by SF I mean modern SF’s roots really are in Northern Ireland, and they inevitably have got the greatest link to Northern Ireland - I mean, they were led for the majority of their current existence by somebody who was a West Belfast representative and most of the leadership were in the north, so it was the core goal of their entire movement to remove the border, in a way that it wasn't for the other parties. You know, it was a desire of the other parties, but it wasn't the absolute essence of their political ideology. So I think inevitably, that is SF, and when we go beyond SF, the other parties are pretty much bunched up on this: FF to a certain extent more republican under people like Charles Haughey, obviously seen as much greener, but in terms of the parties as they are today, is Micheál Martin somebody who is seen by the typical unionist as more enthusiastic about Irish unity or Northern Ireland in general than Simon Coveney? No, probably the reverse, if anything, is true. So yeah, I don't think there's much between the others.

**Interviewer**

So, do you think that SF’s emergence in the south has affected how other parties talk about it, or not really, in the south?

**Sam**

Yes, I think it has, albeit to a limited degree. I think that it has forced the other parties to at least pay lip service to the idea that this is a significant issue for them. It's probably not the sole driver of the Shared Island Initiative, but I think that it must have been a significant element of the thinking there, being seen to do something, to be able in a debate to point back and say, ‘well yes you're saying we should do this, but we are doing that’. That has become more important. However, you go back many, many years and the South has pumped the money into the North: infrastructure projects and peace money, and even in terms of the diplomatic footprint, I don't think they like to be called diplomats, but the DFA’s footprint in the north is pretty significant. All of that really predates SF and is founded in just the basic ideology of the state, that they want, at some point, to achieve Irish unity, ergo, you have to chip away at this thing and negotiate whatever you can get, bit by bit. So, I think SF would like to be able to get to a situation where they can say ‘even if we're not the people that can deliver Unity, because we're very objectionable to unionists in the north, we can: a) harness the structures of the state in the South to make unity more credible; and b) we can drag these other parties onto our territory, we can get, for instance, Micheál Martin to move more towards our position than he would otherwise have done, and he's a more persuasive person to a soft unionist or an Alliance or Green voter’. That's, I think, the strategic aim for SF, and it's entirely logical, but I'm not sure thus far that there's any great evidence that that's happening. And so, yeah, maybe, maybe that's where things go.

**Interviewer**

Since you mentioned the importance of a crisis focus, how important do you think this issue is for southern voters?

**Sam**

There has been polling, which I can't immediately pick my finger on, but I've seen polling that shows that, basically proximity to the border determines how significant NI is to you, so if you live in Cork, NI’s a pretty remote place, you don't go there very often, you don't do business with northern companies very often, but you might go on holiday there. So, there is a geographic aspect to this. Of course, Cork has a very long republican tradition, so it's not that people don't care about things just because they're far away, but I think that, over time, that has morphed into a different sort of emphasis in terms of the geographic reality of where you are. Obviously, if you live in Monaghan, you live in Donegal or somewhere like that, I mean, you're buying fuel on one side of the border you're shopping there, you’re doing all that stuff, it feels much more like your country on both sides of the border, and if you're if you're a nationalist in Northern Ireland, the same is true.

I think that, you know, this is very imprecise, and it's very hard to even extrapolate out of different polls exactly what people mean, and you've got the question that's been asked several times of ‘Would you like unity?’ Yes. ‘Would you like it if it cost you this?’. A little bit less. But how useful is that, in the sense that in an actual referendum, the question isn't going to be ‘Would you like it and it's going to cost you this?’, it's going to be ‘Would you like it?’ and everybody on the side of saying it would be a good thing is going to say ‘Ah, sure there’s going to be no cost at all, it's going to be fine’. Brexit is quite instructive there, that even if there is an existential reality that can be pointed to and is objectively true, if the voters are persuadable that it might not be true, then how much does that really matter?

So, on all of these things, my perception is that southern voters are overwhelmingly, and I suppose understandably, in many ways much more comfortable with the status quo than northern nationalists. That's always been the case, that was the basis for the foundation of the Free State: it wasn't perfect, but it was more perfect for more people than any of the alternatives, and that remains the case today. And as the state has become more successful, and much wealthier, certainly much wealthier than the Northeastern part of the island, I think that there's a sense of pride in southern citizens as to what they have built, as to what they have done. I think there's also sometimes quite a limited understanding of the complexities of Northern Ireland, and that cuts across both their views of unionists and nationalists, it's not a sectarian thing. It seems quite remote to a lot of them, and so the idea of putting this very successful state in jeopardy, potentially in any way, through violence, or through economic disruption or whatever, and potentially getting into things like the flag and the anthem and all the practicalities of statehood, I think it makes people quite uncomfortable. So, I think there's been a quite simplistic understanding of Northern Ireland, which in many ways is understandable, whereas the Northern nationalist view is obviously that it's much more keenly felt, because it's their lived experience and they were left behind in 1921.

**Interviewer**

Great, thanks. I've one variable to focus on a bit more, perhaps you will think it matters, perhaps it doesn't. Do you think the EU has played any role in how parties discuss the issue?

**Sam**

I think that John Hume's idea of both sides of the island being in the EU would, over time, help to gradually rub out lots of the bits of the border that were still visible, was accurate. That was something that obviously made sense on all sorts of ideological levels for him, as somebody who was very committed to the EU as an institution, but also wanted to get rid of the border and wanted to do it incrementally, peacefully, etc. So I think that that aspect of the EU, quietly and un-threateningly dismantling parts of the border has been very significant.

I think that when we get up to the point of Brexit, where this becomes contentious where before it hadn't really been seen as contentious - I suppose everything from a Northern Irish perspective tends to get allocated into a zero-sum equation, and so the because the EU was not on the side of Brexiteers and was not inside of most unionists, and, ultimately came to have a position that was going to put a border inside the UK rather than at the Irish border, for unionists it very firmly came to be seen in the Nationalist camp. Probably there was a, then as a result of that. Also, as a result of the fact that the EU became this very powerful ally of Ireland and the Irish government in a way that surprised a lot of Brexiteers: this argument about how the German car manufacturers will come in, and it will all be dealt with in the final reckoning, all that sort of stuff persisted for years, almost until the end, but it just didn't happen. That has strengthened Southern Irish respect for, and the value which they place on the EU. They see how, as a pretty small country in European terms, they can be part of this entity that in geopolitical terms is actually very powerful and more powerful than the UK. So, Northern Ireland is obviously integral to that, but it went beyond just the issues of the Northern Ireland protocol. It went to the interests of the EU, and the interests of Ireland economically and socially, in terms of trying to minimise the scale of Brexit and ensure that it was as least disruptive as possible.

**Interviewer**

Great, thanks. That's all the questions I had planned. Is there anything else you think is important to understanding this issue?

**Sam**

Well, I think one issue, which is a live issue, is the question of people in Northern Ireland being able to vote in Irish presidential elections, which is largely supported by most of the southern parties (quite possibly all of them), but has been moving at a fairly sedate pace of actually being implemented. SF has been the most enthusiastic about it, unsurprisingly because they probably think there's more votes up here for them than for anybody else and the unionists who wouldn't vote for them are probably not going to vote for anybody. So, I think that is probably another example of where a lot of this is about ideology, but it also intersects quite neatly and with self-interest.

And there are limited examples of where Southern parties have acted in a way that is knowingly detrimental to the interests of the Irish public, and knowingly beneficial to the interests of Northern Ireland, and, so, prioritised one over the other. It’s perfectly logical why you wouldn't do that. But if you adopt the position of saying, as the Constitution does, that essentially, we aim to unite the entire territory, there's a tension there between the people who elect the politicians and the vaguer aspirations that they hold. Also, because politicians are driven by very acute democratic instincts, if you're not good at knowing what your voters want, you won’t last very long in politics. So, if voters in the south actually cared about Northern Ireland, as much as maybe, some people think they do or would like them to, depending on their views, then politicians there would have acted in different ways. So, when Leo Varadkar says, I think it was four years ago, and I'm paraphrasing him here, but it was words to the effect of ‘Northern nationalists will never be left behind again’, there's an implicit acceptance that they were left behind in the past, which is broadly accepted, just factually. While that rhetoric has changed, and he's saying something has fundamentally changed, when it comes to the bit, where the interests of the South and the North don't align, is he actually, or is any politician actually going to be able to do something that is detrimental to the interest of their own voters, but is in the interests of people who don't vote for them, don't pay taxes, and don't develop the same stake in the state, can you get away with that in a democracy? I don't think anybody has really ever tested that on a big ticket issue. The biggest example recently has been the debate about the post-Brexit architecture, where one of the possibilities, which is still being discussed if the British government reneged on the protocol and essentially say that things can continue to flow through Belfast port here and into the Single Market, they're not going to be checked, and the EU says, well, we're going to have to impose checks between the Republic and mainland continental Europe. In that context, where the choice would essentially be between putting a border of some sort, however harder or soft, at the border, and putting a border, however hard or soft, around the rest of the island, would Irish politicians choose to keep the border away from dividing the island, which their ideology says is the absolutely central aim of what they want to achieve and put it around the island? I don't think very many people believe they would do that because the economic consequences would be so stark for Ireland, and would they have support from voters if they did that? I doubt it.

**Seán Haughey Interview**

**Interviewer**

So, let’s get started. I’ve already told you that my research is on different forms of nationalism and the focus today is going to be on Irish attitudes to Northern Ireland and unification. Before we get started, do you have any questions that you want to ask me, or is it relatively clear?

**Seán**

I think it's relatively clear.

**Interviewer**

Great. A lot of this interview is probably going to be focused on Fianna Fáil, for obvious reasons. To start with perhaps an obvious question, just how important an issue do you think the North is for Fianna Fáil?

**Seán**

I think the north is a very important issue for Fianna Fáil. You know, on the Fianna Fáil website at the moment, under the aim section, right up there at the top, number one is ‘to secure in peace and agreement, the unity of Ireland and its people.’ It's really important to the membership of Fianna Fáil. As far as the Fianna Fáil government is concerned, they probably take a more practical approach to it and the day-to-day issues, but certainly, for the party and the organisation as a whole, it's very important.

**Interviewer**

Has that important importance changed over time or has it been relatively consistently important?

**Seán**

I think it's changing over time. At the moment James Lawless, TD is initiating a review of aims and objectives of Fianna Fáil and his paper will be presented to the Ardfheis at the end of this month. But I expect that it will still be the number one aim when that is agreed or otherwise by the Arfheis.

I think maybe since the signing of the Good Friday Agreement there are changes in attitudes and in relation to the Taoiseach’s Shared Island Initiative, I think there's a perception that it's becoming more complex as an issue and not as straightforward as the membership would have believed traditionally.

**Interviewer**

Okay, in what way do you think it's becoming more complex than the membership believes?

**Seán**

Again, the Good Friday Agreement was an important milestone in that it sets out very clearly how a border poll might come about and the procedures, and so forth. I think there's also a general acceptance, with regard to Martin’s Shared Island Initiative, that the immediate priority is to get all the provisions of the Good Friday Agreement up and running, and also to research how we share the island with all traditions. So, that's the focus in the short term.

**Interviewer**

So you mentioned the Good Friday Agreement there and the changes that has brought about, but is there anything else you think would change either how important the issue is, or how the party thinks about the issue?

**Seán**

I guess it has to be seen in the global context as well, and the moves towards internationalism, a rules-based international order, and multilateral diplomacy, as well as the big battle going on between democracies and autocracies. I think it has to be seen in the global context as well. That it's not just a UK, republican, and UK-Ireland, mutter. There are global trends as well… and I actually forget what your initial question was.

**Interviewer**

So, this actually fits in pretty well with my next question, because I was going to focus a bit on the EU. Do you think the EU has had any effect?

**Seán**

Again, we have to recognise that Brexit was also a crucial turning point as well, with the UK leaving the European Union. The European Union seems to be, or is, very supportive of the position of Ireland, as you know, and in particular also they are very supportive of the peace process generally and obviously is very anxious to avoid the creation of a hard border on the island of Ireland. On the whole, very supportive of the Irish position regarding the Protocol and so on, and funding under the Peace Plus cross border program. So, that's all significant, I think. Generally speaking, the nationalist community in Northern Ireland are pro-EU and I think that's significant, whereas the unionists are less pro-EU.

**Interviewer**

So, the UK and Ireland were obviously joint members of the EU for quite a long time, since they joined together in 1973 until Brexit. Do you think this joint membership of the EU had any influence on how the party understood the issue of the North?

**Seán**

Yeah, I think generally speaking, the EU and the peace process were complementary. The EU was supportive of the peace process and still is, because I guess the European Union is a peace project at the end of the day as well. So, basically the EU, I I feel, is important to the nationalist position and supportive. Enda Kenny, as Taoiseach, negotiated that if Northern Ireland ever voted to secede from the UK, that they would automatically be members of the European Union. I guess the EU seems to reinforce the nationalist views generally.

**Interviewer**

So, you mentioned Brexit already and how the EU is supportive of Ireland's position on Brexit. What do you think that the impact of Brexit has been on the party's view of the north and unification?

**Seán**

I think Brexit is a very significant event in the history of these islands. So, I think that nationalists felt diminished by Northern Ireland and the United Kingdom leaving the European Union. Europe and the EU is part of the nationalist identity, I think. So, Brexit has been significant for the nationalist community, certainly and nationalists believe that they had to leave the EU against their will.

**Interviewer**

Great, thanks! That's all the questions I planned for the EU, but I've a few other questions. To start with, just how important do you think the issue of the North is for voters in the South?

**Seán**

I'm going to be honest, and I represent a Dublin constituency. It waxes and wanes. Generally speaking, it's not a big issue as far as voters are concerned but it can come onto the political agenda. For example, it came on the political agenda in a very real way in the early 1980s due to the hunger strikers and the North became a big issue in the 1981, ‘82 General Elections. But generally speaking, it's not a big issue. I guess the elephant in the room here is Sinn Féin, and Sinn Féin is unapologetically a strong nationalist party. So, with their advocating a strong nationalist position and they are gaining support, then it would certainly seem to be on the agenda. But at the end of the day, when people vote it’s probably going to be on the bread and butter issues and the competence of the government, and so on.

**Interviewer**

It's interesting that you mentioned Sinn Féin. Do you think any party in the south has ownership of the issue of the North and is trusted on the issue, or not?

**Seán**

Obviously, there is a debate going on within Fianna Fáil. Martin in particular has sort of initiated that, and he's for more practical policies to deal with Northern Ireland and is not advocating a border poll any time soon. But the issue of a border poll is gaining momentum. There's a lot of civic society groups, Ireland's Future is one of them, organising seminars and talks and conferences on that. It's becoming more of an issue, which I think all the parties will have to respond to and I’ve no doubt that Fianna Fáil will as well, given that it is the number one aim of the party.

**Interviewer**

Great, thanks. That's all the questions I had planned, but is there anything else you think it's important to talk about here?

**Seán**

Yeah. I'm a very strong supporter of the European Union, and I mentioned earlier on about the battle between autocracies and democracies and the need for a rules-based international order. So, obviously, I'm concerned about the rise of populism on the left and the right. From that point of view, I think that Fianna Fáil, as a centre party, really does have to make its case that there is room for a centre party and that democracy needs centrist policies generally, if it's to survive and so on.

**Seán Kelly Interview**

**Interviewer**

So, just before I get started, I’ll say a little bit about my research. I'm focused on how Irish political parties talk about Northern Ireland, when they talk about it, what influences them, and so on. In this interview there will obviously be a heavy focus on Fine Gael, and also the EU as well. So, just to start with probably a very basic and obvious question: just how important an issue do you think Northern Ireland is for Fine Gael?

**Seán**

I think it has always been very important to Fine Gael and continues to be so. I think that they try to be the voice of reason and calmness and impartiality, as far as possible, in relation to Northern Ireland. I think that was seen very clearly during Brexit and before that with other leaders, etc. So, I think it's hugely important. Going back to Fine Gael’s founder, Michael Collins, I suppose we feel that there's unfinished business there, that in due course we aspire to a united Ireland, but it's not something that we will be pushing. We think it should happen gradually and over time.

**Interviewer**

Great, thanks. So, has the issue of Northern Ireland changed in importance over time, or has it stayed relatively consistently important for the party?

**Seán**

It has stayed relatively consistently important, but obviously it depends on how much Northern Ireland is in the news, at particular times. So, prior to Brexit, it was there and we were working away quietly, through the benefits of the Good Friday Agreement, the peace projects, etc. All that was going on nicely. Brexit put a damper on things and put more focus on Northern Ireland. There was a need for a more balanced approach, and particularly working to ensure that there wouldn't be a hard border on the island of Ireland, which Fine Gael didn’t want (and, in fairness, other parties didn’t want either). That combined approach, and pressure in Europe, ensured that we didn't get a hard border on the island, and Northern Ireland is now in the Single Market of the European Union and the market of the United Kingdom.

**Interviewer**

So, do you think that the EU has played a role in adjusting how important the issue is, or how parties talk about the issue?

**Seán**

I think the EU has played a huge role, and it has surprised me by the commitment of so many politicians and the Commission in Europe to Northern Ireland, which is, after all, only a tiny part of Europe. Yet, they had enough interest and concern that they put it as a priority when Brexit occurred, to ensure that we would get the best possible arrangement without going back to darker days, which everybody has left behind and hopefully has left behind permanently. But of course, it would be very easy to trigger this contempt, which could lead to that situation again.

**Interviewer**

Great, thanks. So, the UK and Ireland were obviously joint members of the EU for quite a long time, from when they both joined in 1973, all the way up until Brexit happened. So, do you think this joint membership played a role in influencing either how important Northern Ireland was as an issue, or how it was approached?

**Seán**

Yeah, without a doubt. I mean, the United Kingdom was a very valued member of the EU. They may not have played the part they could have played, in terms of taking on a leadership role, which they could have done, but nevertheless they were the third biggest member of the EU. They did an awful lot in terms of developing the single market itself and developing European standards and values. Obviously, it helped enormously when it came to ensuring that the peace process in Northern Ireland was a priority, which they helped to deliver through negotiations and also, of course, through funding for peace initiatives in Northern Ireland. So, the joint membership of the Irish and British Governments was very important, and they were probably closer during that time than anytime in our history. That was significant because it had a huge influence in Europe.

**Interviewer**

You've already mentioned relatively briefly the potential effects of Brexit, and how that may make Northern Ireland become a more salient issue. So, I was wondering if you could say a little bit more about how Brexit has influenced the importance of Northern Ireland as an issue?

**Seán**

Brexit was perceived very negatively in the EU. It was a bit like the war in Ukraine, because it was often spoken about but nobody expected it to really happen. When it happened then, the attitude in Europe changed from one of tolerating, particularly, UKIP and their continuously negative approach to Europe and criticism of the EU, to an intolerance basically of them. They were just waiting for them to get out with a sigh of relief. But at the same time, there was enough composure in Europe to realise that this had to be handled delicately, and I think that appointing Michel Barnier, in particular, was a master stroke because he ticked every box, from diplomacy, to experience, to track record, to knowledge of Northern Ireland, and to commitment to the EU. I think the negotiations were conducted in a very open and frank spirit, recognising that the UK were going to leave, but trying to do so in the best possible terms. That actually was what happened in the end, but of course, it hasn't transpired that way since, primarily, if not entirely, because of the behaviour of the British government, which hasn't been a great partner in the process, especially in the last year.

**Interviewer**

Great. So, moving away from the role of the EU, how important an issue do you think Northern Ireland is for voters, and does this influence how the party approaches it?

**Seán**

I'm not too sure it's a major issue at all. I think if you did a survey of people who voted Fine Gael, I would say very few voted for Fine Gael because of their position on Northern Ireland. They may vote for them, in the broadest perspective, as a law and order party who wouldn't tolerate the breaking down of rules and regulations. But I wouldn't think they’d vote for either Fine Gael or Fianna Fáil because of their position on Northern Ireland. There are other priorities, like their own personal circumstances: the cost of living, housing, child care are the key ones. The political situation in Northern Ireland: once everything is going ok, then it doesn't become a factor. If we were seen to be doing something negative, then you would probably lose votes on it, but you don't gain many votes because of your position.

**Interviewer**

Okay, great, that makes sense. So, you mentioned that Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil aren’t going to gain votes because of it, and obviously Sinn Féin likes to talk about Northern Ireland quite a bit, and they claim that they have ownership of the issue. So, do you think any party actually has ownership of the issue of Northern Ireland, or not?

**Seán**

No party has ownership of it, but Sinn Féin claims ownership of it, and they obviously talk about more than anybody else, being a party in the north and south. If there is a benefit in terms of votes in relation to the position on Northern Ireland, it goes to Sinn Féin rather than to Fine Gael or Fianna Fáil, because strong nationalists who aspire to a united Ireland immediately probably prefer Sinn Féin’s approach to it, as opposed to the more cautious and more practical approach of Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil, who want it to evolve over time, whereas Sinn Féin are seen to push it.

**Interviewer**

Great, thanks. So, that's all the questions I had planned. Is there anything else you think it's important to talk about for either how Fine Gael approaches the issue, or the influence of the EU?

**Seán**

I think one point is that this talk of a border poll will have to be handled very carefully. Sinn Féin are pushing for it, but it's not hopeful at the moment because it's destabilising the situation. It's putting the fear of God in the loyalists, particularly the supporters of the DUP, who we want to bring on board. So, our priority would be to get the Northern Ireland Assembly up and running, and let it evolve from there, whereas the approach of Sinn Féin looking for a border poll is not helping, in the present circumstances. It’s something we all aspire to, in due course, but they want it immediately.

Secondly, I feel there is going to be a referendum in Scotland, which they are talking about for October 2023. If it takes place, and that referendum is successful, then the momentum for a border poll will grow, and I would expect you'll have the likes of Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael, and Labour also looking for it. So, that's something to be noted as we move forward. If the vote is negative in Scotland, then I imagine we would revert to the present situation of let's get institutions up and running, let's calm things down, and let's talk about a border poll in the future.

**István Gergő Székely Interview**

##### **Interviewer**

So, to start with a very broad question, just how salient do you think the issue of ethnic Hungarians is for political parties in Hungary?

##### **SZIG**

It is, and it is increasingly so since 2011, when they gave the right to vote to ethnic Hungarians, not only from the neighbouring countries, but also from the world diaspora who applied for dual citizenship. So, this dual citizenship thing you probably are familiar with, it is in force since 2010 and then from 2011, the rights to vote are also there. And you are probably also aware that in a few weeks, actually less than three weeks, there will be parliamentary elections in Hungary and this will be the third occasion when the ethnic kin can vote. There will also be a referendum, and there was another referendum in 2016. So, basically it's the fifth occasion now that they can exercise their rights to vote.

##### **Interviewer**

Thanks. So, you said the issue has become more salient since 2011. Is this the only time it's increased, or has it been a more constant saliency before that?

**SZIG**

I would say that the salience increases each time when elections are approaching, but this only refers to this dimension of the issue. I would say that it has multiple dimensions. So, apart from the electoral rights, a very important aspect of this is the subsidies or financial support that is flowing from Hungary to these minority communities. Then, increasingly is that some important, or not very important, not the highest level, but second or third level politicians, there are increasingly more and more people who are originally from the neighbouring countries, like, they were born in Romania but emigrated to Hungary and now they are at the State Secretary level, not higher. This is also creating discourses on both sides of the Hungarian political spectrum. And of course, there is this bilateral dimension of the entire problem that basically you have the bilateral relationship between Hungary and these neighbouring countries, but in many cases you also have a strong ethnic minority party which finds itself somewhere in the middle, and it can play a mediator role. If you place it into this triadic nexus, then very interesting dynamics can emerge.

##### **Interviewer**

So, do you think any political party has ownership of the issue of ethnic Hungarians or not?

##### **SZIG**

Yeah, sure. So, it is obvious that this issue is owned and dominated by Fidesz. This was not always the case, but at least since the mid-2000s, it is true. So, even before dual citizenship was awarded. You are probably familiar with the case of the referendum from 2004 when this question was put to a vote, but that referendum failed. However, it had very important consequences on both sides of Hungary's political spectrum. The right, very reluctantly, embraced the issue around 2003/2004, and then they campaigned for a Yes. But the left didn't agree, and in the campaign they were advocating openly for a No vote, and because of this, the left-wing parties, even if there has been a huge transformation going in the left, they still have this very negative legacy, or very problematic situation, because simply the Hungarians abroad or in the neighbouring countries just didn't forget. Of course, you have to think about the elite discourses primarily here, but also at the grassroots level. So, even without an elite discourse, this would have caused huge trauma. And because of this, you still have this thing, and it is a very solid cleavage which doesn't seem to fall, if you know what I mean. Of course, the parties on both sides are doing much in order to keep the cleavage very deep and sharp, especially on the right, but also on the left.

##### **Interviewer**

Thanks. So you've touched on this a little bit, but just to develop it a bit more. Is there anything you think causes the issue to be particularly salient or not salient for parties?

##### **SZIG**

Well, there is an electoral gain at stake, and you probably know what the voting figures look like in the past two elections. We are talking about figures that are above 90%. I mean, it's completely indifferent whether it is 90% or whether it is 95%, but it is extremely high. So, basically the other parties are, I don't say they are nonexistent, there are some pockets. That's not a good expression because pocket would mean a concentrated constituency, but basically it's only intellectuals (some of them) who don't vote for Fidesz, and maybe some other insignificant groups or individuals who are voting out of protest. But it's 90%, so this is huge. Now, a more important question than this 90% is, how much does this count in the electoral math in Hungary? At the last election, it was arguably two seats. In the 2014 election, it was one seat. It is problematic to do these calculations because the electoral system is rather complex. It is a mixed member system, but not a regular one. So, not something along the lines that you have in Germany, for instance. It is a mixed member system which is leaning very much towards the majoritoritarian component. So, because of this, it is difficult to say exactly how much these votes weigh in the overall calculus, but it is one or two seats. And this can be important, not because of who will win the election, but in terms of whether the governing party will have another super-majority of seats, or not. I mean, this election which is coming now, it is very difficult to tell what will happen, mostly due to the Ukraine war. So, it could even be a tipping point. But, due to the electoral system in Hungary, you don't win elections by a very narrow margin. You win them with a huge margin, with a landslide. So, this is one thing, the electoral gain, which is one or two seats.

But there is another thing too, which you must not discount, and this is the symbolic dimension of the issue, because the right is building a political community based on this discourse. And this is very interesting in Hungary, that it has a very specific configuration with regard to attitudes towards the political community. And there is a huge difference between the conception of the right and of the left. So, the right basically considers that all the Hungarians in the Carpathinian basin should be part of the Hungarian political nation. The left is much more equivocal on this, and much more reluctant to accept this position. They accept that all these minorities are part of the Hungarian cultural nation, but the political nation is a bit problematic for them. They are not really willing to accept this. Most of the left-wing parties have already accepted the idea of electoral rights, but there is one very important exception, and that's currently the largest party on the left in Hungary. They are saying, ‘okay, we are fine with citizenship, but the voting rights are not okay. Hungary’s political nation coincides with those who are living on the territory of Hungary, plus the new diaspora, which are the Hungarians who emigrated to London, to Dublin, and so on and so forth’.

##### **Interviewer**

So which party on the left is it that opposes voting rights? Is this the MSZP?

##### **SZIG**

No, not the Hungarian Socialist Party, the MSP. So, back in 2004 it was MSP who were campaigning against the citizenship issue. Back then, Hungary had a perfectly symmetrical party system: two big parties, one on the left, one on the right, and two small parties, one on the left and one on the right. It had a huge block stability, and the cleavage was as deep as it is today. But then, in 2010, the left collapsed and a series of party splits began. Since then, MSP has become a small party, so now they are definitely below 10% and I think it would be quite risky for them to run on their own because even the 5% threshold could be problematic. The largest party now on the left is the Democratic Coalition Democratic (DK), which is the party of the former Prime Minister Ferenc Gyurcsány, who happened to be Prime Minister back in 2004, and because of this, he is the public enemy number one among Hungarians abroad because he was the guy who slammed the door into their faces. They will never forget this, and of course, Fidesz is doing everything so that the ethnic Hungarians across the border will not forget.

##### **Interviewer**

Okay, great, thanks. So to focus on one particular variable, you might think it matters, you might think it doesn't matter. Do you think the EU has played any role in affecting how salient these issues are?

##### **SZIG**

Do you mean what the impact or the influence of the EU was on the fact that this dimension of nationalist politics evolved the way it did in Hungary? We have to go back a bit in time, so think about the late 1990s and early 2000s, basically the turn of the Millennium. I already told you that Fidesz and the Hungarian right were pretty reluctant to embrace the citizenship issue. The main reason for this was that, back then this issue was owned by radical right organisations. It was still a bit uncertain whether this issue could be safely decoupled from any irredentist agenda. So, probably they were cautious, but instead of dual citizenship, they invented this notion of some sort of quasi-citizenship, which materialised in the so-called Status Law, which was adopted in 2001 by the first Orbán government. Back then, he was quite a moderate centre-right guy, his party was at the centre, or close to the centre. The main idea, or the main motivation, behind the Status Law, was that this was the period of Euro-Atlantic enlargement, and it looked like Hungary was doing way better than most of its neighbouring countries. Until 1996, in Romania you had some interesting cryptocommunist government. In Slovakia, you had Vladimír Mečiar. In Serbia, you have Milošević. So, Hungary seems to be the eminent pupil in the region, unlike these neighbouring countries (not to talk about Ukraine, which was a mess back then too), so it seems like Hungary will easily walk into the EU and NATO, and these neighbouring countries will stay outside for a long time. This is what they were expecting, but that it will take decades until these neighbouring countries will catch up. Then, they came up with this idea that the Status Law could somehow alleviate the problems that such developments would cause among the ethnic Hungarian communities in these countries.

Initially, they were planning to somehow facilitate access to the Hungarian labour market, and to facilitate travel in case the visa would be imposed. Of course, gradually it turned out that all these plans were very much at odds with Hungary’s EU membership, because if you let them come to your labour market and you're an EU member, then that would mean that you give them access to the entire EU labour market, by and large. So, this was one of the things that they miscalculated. And the other thing that was miscalculated was this delay, which after all didn't really materialise. Slovakia joined the EU together with Hungary, and Romania was only three years late. Of course, Serbia and Ukraine are a different story, but the Hungarian communities there are also smaller. Okay, so this was the conception of the Status Law, the main motivation was about what will happen if Hungary accedes to these Euro-Atlantic structures and neighbouring countries stay out.

But there is another important dimension to this too. Soon enough, they switched from the Status Law to something more, to this citizenship conception. This had mainly domestic and more mainly party political motivations. Why did Fidesz embrace the idea? It was very simple. They wanted to beat the left in a referendum. They didn't succeed. They succeeded two years later in 2006 or 2008, I don't remember. Anyway, it doesn't matter, that was a completely different issue. Basically, Hungary has such a polarised party system that Fidesz, I will be cynical now, don't give a fuck what the issue is, only that issue should be suitable so that you can score a victory against your political opponent. But, of course, later they became socialised into it, so the discourse became so strong that after a while it became an ideology. Now, I would bet that most of Fidesz really believe in this, so it is no longer a cynical thing for them.

Then, back to the EU. Another very important thing with the EU is that all these Hungarian minority communities, we're talking especially about Romania, but also to a lesser extent Slovakia, were waiting for EU accession as if it was going to heaven. So, they had huge expectations. And these expectations are not only about quality of life or economic development, but also the settling of their minority status. So, minority rights, the improvement of their status as minorities. In Romania, we have already had 15 years that passed in the EU and Slovakia even more, so somewhere a few years after accession, it became increasingly clear that the EU will not be able to fulfill this expectation. The EU didn't even promise this, but somehow there was this huge expectation. But now, already, surveys show very clearly that the trends have changed: back in 2007, 2009 in Romania, trust in the EU was much higher among ethnic Hungarians than among the rest of the population, this is why in 2007 and 2009 we had a huge turnout difference at the European election, so we have 6.5% Hungarians in Romania and they scored 9% in the election because of higher turnout; but then it changed, and at the latest European elections in 2019, it was already quite difficult for the Hungarian party in Romania to reach the national turnout level, and since then it went below the national average. Of course, it also has a lot to do with not only the failure of the EU to deliver in terms of minority rights, but also this very aggressive discourse of Orbán, who is constantly in a fight with the EU.

##### **Interviewer**

So, just to pick up on some things you mentioned there. You mentioned the process of becoming an EU member and how the Status Law fell afoul to that to some extent. So, do you think this process of having to go through the Copenhagen criteria affected how Hungry talked about this issue, or how salient it was in that period?

##### **SZIG**

I have a feeling, but I cannot prove it to you. I'm not even aware whether there's research on this. I had this feeling that back in the accession period, under this EU conditionality, when Hungary was not yet in the Euro-Atlantic structures, they were much more cautious. They didn't want to push too hard. Their primary goal was to obtain EU membership. And if you want to jump even further back in time, there was the bilateral treaty between Hungary and Romania, which was regarded by the Hungarian ethnic minority party in Romania as them being left behind by the Hungarian government, because the Hungarian government accepted a version of this treaty which the minority regarded as a watered down version because it didn't say anything about autonomy. So, this proves, in a sense, that they were very cautious about that, and the goal of maintaining close relations with the ethnic Hungarians was clearly subordinated to the main foreign policy objectives of Hungary. We can even argue that it involves some sort of a trial and error process because some errors were made, for instance, with the Status Law. But then, they gradually realised that they can safely switch to the dual citizenship agenda. It worked without problems in the case of Romania and Serbia, mostly because both of these countries have huge communities of US citizens and those countries have their own nationalistic agendas, which are on the verge of irredentism because Romania has Moldova, Serbia has ex-Yugoslav situation. It didn't work in Slovakia and in Ukraine. Or, in Ukraine it worked as the Ukrainians tacitly accepted, so it was very low-level saliency stuff. It didn't work at all in Slovakia. It is still not settled in Slovakia. In Ukraine now, an entirely new situation has emerged, it might have devastating consequences. We don't know yet, but it might be that this is the end of the Hungarian minority there. There are estimates that half of this population cross the border into Hungary as refugees.

So, I would say that the Copenhagen criteria is extremely broad and doesn't say much. The operationalization of this Copenhagen criteria, you can find it basically in the Council of Europe documents, the Framework Convention, and the European Charter of Regional and Minority Languages. The point is that most of these instruments are not too strong. Almost all of the Hungarian communities abroad are claiming more than this, and it is especially about autonomy. And basically these countries more or less fulfilled the criteria. Slovakia maybe is a bit reluctant, but it's definitely not the Copenhagen criteria that is relevant here. That would be too low a baseline.

##### **Interviewer**

My final question on the EU is, do you think that common membership of Hungary and certain neighbouring countries has affected how these appeals operate, or not?

##### **SZIG**

Yeah, definitely it did. So, you cannot neglect or discount the very basic issue of travelling. I told you about the Status Law, it was exactly that point. Hungary was fearing that the EU border will cut off those parts of the nation who are beyond the border. So, maybe it's not a perfect analogy, but Brexit led to a border issue there on the Irish island. But it was a different context back then, in the late 1990s and early 2000s, and now it is again a different context, but also in economic terms. This is a very important issue, and you can see that Hungary is probably the first and foremost supporter of Serbia's membership. They really want it. Of course, this also has other reasons, or even more important reasons than the ethnic kin. It has mainly political and economic reasons. On the other hand, with Ukraine, you can see that there has been a long conflict over language rights, and this is why Hungary was very reluctant and was threatening to veto Ukraine's approach to the EU and also to NATO. Of course, now it has become a completely different issue with Ukraine, but any attempt by Ukraine to come closer to these structures was not welcomed by Hungary due to some pieces of domestic legislation.

##### **Interviewer**

Okay, great, thanks. The final question I have is how important do you think this issue is for Hungarian citizens, rather than parties?

##### **SZIG**

I can't tell you precise figures, but the point is that the issue is still very divisive. So, I told you that the parties are putting much emphasis on it, especially when elections are approaching, but not only when elections are close, because I told you about this massive financial support that is flowing across the border. This is not always very easy to sell in Hungary. There are elites or politicians who will question this, and they will frame it in a way that can have quite a huge appeal among voters. Coming back to the elite, I told you about the different conceptions of the nation and that the left was framing it differently. This is important, but at the price of gross simplification, the left (I'm talking about the elites now: parties, intellectuals, and opinion leaders) have objections against this unification of the nation due to ideological and philosophical reasons. Basically, their arguments are mostly grounded in some sort of civic patriotism, which they contrast with this ethnic nationalism concept that they are criticising. In my opinion, the problem with this is that it contains a huge amount of bullshit because they also employ very, very harsh exclusion tactics in order to maintain this conception, and who are excluded? primarily the Hungarians from the neighbouring countries. Okay, so this is the elite level, which is grounded in political philosophy and so on. But you have another level, and this brings us back to public opinion. You can imagine that it is not these Habermas-ian ideas that are embraced by the population of small villages in north-eastern Hungary, which is the economically most backward part. So, it also has this welfare chauvinist component. Basically, back in 2004, when the campaign on dual citizenship was going on, MSP said that if we provide dual citizenship, then 22 million Romanians will invade our labour market. 22 million! So not 2 million or 1.5 million, which would be the Hungarians from Romania, they were claiming that the entire population of these countries would move to Hungary for work!

This thing is still there among voters. This is very interesting, it is not absent even among the Fidesz electorate, and it gets increasingly higher among the constituencies of the other parties. What is very interesting in this case, is the former radical right or extreme right party, Jobbik. On the rhetorical level, they stopped very, very short of irredentism, so they were very nationalistic, very vocal about this. But there was a small problem - Jobbik was pushed towards the centre of the political spectrum because Fidesz moved very much to the right. Basically, the two parties arguably switched positions. On the declarative level, Jobbik supports all the policies targeting the ethnic minorities abroad. Of course, they criticise the government because the entire opposition is claiming that Fidesz is building very strong clientelistic networks through this policy of financial support. But the point is that not even Jobbik’s voters are very enthusiastic about the support for the ethnic kin abroad, but for different reasons than the voters of the other parties. Of course, for the left-wing voters, there is a mix. Basically, there are some smaller parties which are disproportionately supported by people with more education. In their case, this civic patriotism idea might be more important than in the case of less educated voters.

**Tamás Kiss Interview**

##### **Interviewer**

So, to start off with a very broad question, how important do you think the issue of ethnic Hungarians is for the different political parties in Hungary?

##### **Tamás**

Yeah, it's a complicated question. It became a highly debated issue following the fall of the communist regime, and at several moments or several historical junctures, it became very divisive between the so-called left liberals and so-called right-wing political actors in Hungary. One such moment was 2001, when the famous Status Law was introduced, and that was the first occasion when a political debate broke out regarding this question. The second important moment was the referendum in 2004, which referred to the dual citizenship of Hungarians living in the neighbouring countries, and then with the rise to power of Orbán. It was the well known legislative act which allowed Hungarians living in neighbouring countries to obtain Hungarian citizenship without residing in Hungary. Many analysts, maybe you heard about Kantor or Kosner, they argued that this put an end to the classificatory struggle concerning the redefinition of the Hungarian nation. But actually, according to recent research, this was not true because negative sentiment towards the transborder minority Hungarian communities have increased recently in Hungary. And the issue of subsidies for these communities, the issue of extraterritorial voting, and also the issue of extraterritorial citizenship, have become re-politicised again. So, I think that we are again at the moment when this is a hot topic in the domestic Hungarian political battles.

One more thing. It might be argued that following the regime change, two opposing strategies or projects of redefining the Hungarian nations opposed each other. The first one was the so-called constitutional patriotism, which was designed by left-liberal intellectuals after the German model of Habermas. And on the other side, there was the project of virtual nation-building and virtual unification (to use the concepts coined by James Goldgeier). These two opposing visions of the Hungarian nation can be used to analyse the problem in internal Hungarian politics.

##### **Interviewer**

Great, thanks. That's a good discussion of how the issue’s saliency has changed over time. Do you think any political parties have ownership of the issue?

**Tamás**

Because there are these opposing visions of the Hungarian nation, I think that there is a dual ownership of the issue. On the one hand, the right (being Fidesz and Orbán) have the ownership in the eyes of those who have adopted this virtual nation-building, and for them, Fidesz is the legitimate owner of the topic. But the Hungarian public is deeply divided on this issue and there is a concurrent ownership, that of Democratic Coalition and Ferenc Gyurcsány, which operates with quite different topics, and it uses a kind of welfare chauvinism of the native Hungarian population and plays this card of Hungarian minority communities abroad as his own kind of xenophobia, against the anti-migrant and racist xenophobia performed by the Orbán government. So, I think that there is a dual ownership. On the one hand, Orbán is the owner from a nationalist perspective, and on the other hand, among the opposition parties, the Democratic Coalition is the owner of the topic, but this is from the perspective of welfare chauvinism and the nativism, or concurrent nationalism, of native Hungarians, which has its reference the actual territory of Hungary and not the Carpathian Basin. So, I think that this duality is quite important, and this dual ownership of the topic.

##### **Interviewer**

Great, thanks. You've already mentioned that this saliency varies over time, often in response to specific events and electoral contests. So, what do you think causes the issue to become more or less salient for parties?

**Tamás**

Well, as I mentioned already, there was an argument that the new legislation on citizenship, or the modification of the previous law on citizenship, has put an end to this classificatory struggle, but this was not true. The driver for why it has become salient again is this duality of the Hungarian national identity. There are two references for this Hungarian national identity. The first one is the Carpathian Basin, and this is connected to the process of nation building performed in the late 19th century and in the early 20th century. And on the other hand, there is another kind of nation-building, which has its reference as the actual territory of Hungary and the institutions of the actual Hungarian state, especially the welfare institutions. This is also nationalism, even if it's not a kind of nationalism referring to greater Hungary. The most important period for this kind of nation-building was the former regime, especially the Kádár regime, and it is connected to this welfare chauvinism. I think that these feelings and these attitudes are really embedded in Hungarian society, and this was recognised by the opposition parties, who found an issue where even the electorate of Fidesz was divided. Actually, this was, for them, a good opportunity to rise again and make salient again the issue of minority Hungarians and their belonging to the Hungarian political community.

Actually, this means that the driver was internal politics, in my opinion.

##### **Interviewer**

Okay. So, the focus on internal politics might shape your answer to the next question, but just to focus on one variable that you might think matters or doesn't matter, do you think the EU has played any role in shaping how important this issue is for political parties?

**Tamás**

Yes. In a way, it played a role. This was already discussed by James Goldgeier, that this kind of virtual nation-building, which is in opposition to a classical form of nation-building that focuses on territory, this kind of virtual nation-building was made possible by the EU institutions and by the transnationalization of the European political space. This virtual nation-building means that Hungary actually does not have territorial claims vis-à-vis its neighbours, nor intentions to repatriate minority communities. But it's an intention to build non-territorial institutions in order to underpin the reproduction of the Hungarian nation, to unify this ethnically or nationally defined, or culturally, linguistically, defined political community. So I think, yes, this virtual nation-building was made possible by the restructured political space, and this is closely connected to the EU. But it is also important to point out that this is the context, so without the context of this enlargement, this project of virtual nation-building would not be possible. But I think that the main drivers are internal politics.

##### **Interviewer**

To focus on the area a bit more obviously, Hungary had to go through the Copenhagen criteria to become an EU member. Do you think this accession process affected the saliency of these appeals, or how ethnic kin were talked about?

##### **Tamás**

Yes, not only the Copenhagen criteria, but, for instance, the Council of Europe has several documents - the Bolzano document refers specifically to what kind of kin-state policies are legitimate, and what kind of kin-state policies are not legitimate. And this topic was debated exactly concerning Hungary’s kin-state aspirations. The concrete moment was the 2001 Status Law, where also the Venice Commission made an opinion on this issue. So, yes, I think that these debates where European and EU institutions were involved affected the way kin-state policies were framed and designed in Hungary. Hungary, at certain moments, was at the very centre of these debates, most importantly in the moment of the 2001 Status Law. But in Romania, for instance, it's got quite a similar institutional framework dealing with the transborder Romanian community, if Moldova can be considered a transborder Romanian community, because this is also debated. But the institutional framework is quite similar, and the similarities are due to the common European context. So, yes, this is obvious. This process, not only the Copenhagen criteria, but the whole build up of these minority institutions or international institutions were very important in this process.

##### **Interviewer**

Yeah, great, thanks. So, since you mentioned the joint framework that Hungary and Romania have been under through EU membership, can you just say a bit more about how you think joint EU membership has influenced these appeals?

**Tamás**

In a way, yes. Because, for instance, the Status Law was abandoned when it became obvious for the Hungarian policymakers that this citizenship legislation can receive a green line from the EU institutions. So yes, in a way I think that this kin-state policy has developed in a constant dialogue with these European institutions, even if this dialogue was not without sanctions at any moment.

##### **Interviewer**

Great. So moving away from the EU, just how important do you think this issue is for Hungarian voters? You've already mentioned that they're divided between these different conceptions of the nation, but just how important is the issue for them?

##### **Tamás**

It is important because it is about their national identity and about these opposing forms of Hungarian national identity. But I don't think that it would be of primary importance. For instance, even if Fidesz receives some votes from outside the borders from the Hungarian minority communities, it loses votes because of this issue. But as it is not the primary axis influencing the voters in their decision, Fidesz can afford this. So, it is important, but not of primary importance. Other issues, for instance, issues of how development should be defined, whether an orthodox neoliberal model should be followed or other unorthodox ways should be followed, or relations with the EU, or, in the present context, the security issue and the sense that we are threatened by this war, are more important than the issue of transborder Hungarian minority communities. But it has some importance, definitely.

##### **Interviewer** Great, thanks. That's all the questions I had planned. Do you think there's anything else we need to talk about to understand the issue?

##### **Tamás** I don't know. There are many aspects we can talk about, but I do not have anything concrete in my mind.

**Thomas Byrne Interview**

**Interviewer**

As you know, the interview is about different forms of nationalism across Europe, and the particular focus here is on attitudes towards Northern Ireland and Irish unity. Obviously, quite a bit of the focus of this interview is going to be on Fianna Fáil. I'm going to start with perhaps a really obvious question, and that is, how important an issue do you think Northern Ireland is for Fianna Fáil?

**Thomas**

NI is an extremely important issue, probably the most important issue, for Fianna Fáil - to ensure peace in Northern Ireland, to ensure stability in Northern Ireland, and, if the people of Northern Ireland agree, to have a united Ireland as well.

**Interviewer**

Great, thanks. Has the importance of the issue, or how the party thinks about it, changed over time, or has it stayed relatively constant?

**Thomas**

I don't think it has stayed constant, I think really the turning point was the Good Friday Agreement and the work that happened towards that. So, the foundation of our Northern Ireland policy is really the Good Friday Agreement. Northern Ireland policy has always been so central to Fianna Fáil that its really been the leader, and the spokesperson for Northern Ireland. So, I would say that the Good Friday Agreement was a key turning point.

**Interviewer**

Okay. So, aside from the Good Friday Agreement, is there anything that would cause the party to change how it talks about the issue, or not?

**Thomas**

Well, there's a lot of pressure at the moment because there's some people who are actively campaigning for a united Ireland and talking about this conversation on a united Ireland. That's certainly put the party under pressure to respond to that. But the problem I have with all of that, and the problem Fianna Fáil have with all of that, is that the conversation is, in my opinion, a one-way street, which is never going to work. Our view, as a party, is that we should continue to build trust between communities in Northern Ireland because it's clearly lacking in many parts of that jurisdiction at the moment. That's certainly my priority.

**Interviewer**

Thanks. So, I have a few questions about the EU. Do you think the EU has had any influence on how the party approaches the issue, or not?

**Thomas**

Oh, yeah. I think, first of all, if you go back to John Hume (he was not of our party, but definitely closely associated with all of us in mainstream nationalism), he saw the EU as an inspiration for peace in NI. That's something that we continue to see. We see the EU giving huge benefits to Northern Ireland. The EU helped out financially through the peace programmes after the Good Friday Agreement, but also the EU single market, which thankfully NI are still part of, was one of the reasons why the border patrols were brought down and the customs checks were stopped. The Good Friday Agreement allowed security checks to go, but it was the EU single market that really allowed the customs checks to go., and allow for a soft border.

**Interviewer**

So, this kind of ties into that discussion, but obviously the UK and Ireland were joint members of the EU for a considerable length of time (since 1973), so do you think that joint membership had any influence?

**Thomas**

Oh, yeah. I mean, at least it enabled us to have regular engagement with Britain - laterally, our offices were next door to each other in the Council building, MEPs would be meeting with each other, and Ministers were always meeting with each other. We signed the Treaty of Accession, actually on the same week as Bloody Sunday and it is extraordinary that, on the one hand, there was this massacre going on in Derry and other events as well around that time, but in that particular week we and Britain signed a membership application for the EU. I think undoubtedly, our relations prospered over time, as part of the EU.

**Interviewer**

Yeah, great. So, what did that mean for Fianna Fáil’s approach to Northern Ireland?

**Thomas**

Well, I think there's a direct continuum, particularly if you look from Jack Lynch. Charles Haughey was probably a bit more on the republican side. But if you look at Jack Lynch’s work, and then Albert Reynolds, Bertie Ahern, Brian Cowen, Micheál Martin, there is a direct continuum there as to how we approach NI: Yes, we are Irish republicans, yes, we are Irish nationalists, but there's a bigger picture here in the sense that a majority of people in NI don't want to be part of a united Ireland, but also can we not just live together in peace and harmony, have our economies and societies prosper, without getting too caught up on the constitutional niceties. That's the rough summary of where I see things.

Unfortunately for everybody, the big disruptor to all of that was Brexit, because then you have to start thinking about the constitutional niceties. We have to start thinking about regulations, rules, laws, jurisdictions, checks, and all of that. So, that's been the tragedy for Northern Ireland over the course of the last few years. In fact, I always say that if NI was part of the EU’s single currency, like if Britain had joined the single currency and was still part of the EU, I don't think constitutional questions would be an issue on either side because we would just get on with things and each side would be able to see their side recognised. If Britain had the same currency as Northern Ireland, and Northern Ireland had the same currency as the Republic of Ireland, I think the whole thing would be in a much better place. Anyway, that's unfortunately in the past.

**Interviewer**

You mentioned Brexit there, and I was going to ask about that. So, what was the influence of Brexit on Fianna Fáil’s position on Northern Ireland, in just a bit more detail?

**Thomas**

It puts us under more pressure because people start asking those constitutional questions that require us to start talking about them, but fundamentally it hasn't really changed. Our view is still that we need to make sure that people can live together in peace and harmony in Northern Ireland, and that its economy can prosper. We also obviously have to protect our own jurisdiction as well, protect the all-island economy as well, and protect the idea that people can move goods freely north and south. That's where the Protocol comes in, and why it has become very important to us, because we think it's very important for NI and the island of Ireland. So, that definitely has changed the conversation that we've been having.

**Interviewer**

Great, thanks. So that was all the questions I had on the EU, so moving away from that slightly, how important an issue do you think Northern Ireland is for voters in the south?

**Thomas**

Well, I mean, you can look at the polling information yourself, if you want to get facts on that, and I can give you my view on it. The reality is that health, housing, and the cost of living are the biggest issues at the moment. You even look at the NI Assembly election, where the idea of Irish unity was not really pushed by Sinn Féin on the doors. Indeed, in the Irish General Election it certainly wasn’t a feature, even of the Sinn Féin campaign. So, I have to say that I don't think it's a massive priority. Most people would probably like a united Ireland, myself included, but I think most people also recognise that it's a little bit more complicated than saying ‘let's join together’ because, first of all, there are people there who don't want to join, and how do we accommodate them. So, my answer, directly, would be to look at the research and it will show you where NI figures as an issue in Irish general elections.

**Interviewer**

Thanks. The final question I had planned is, do you think any political party in the south has ownership over the issue of Northern Ireland, or not?

**Thomas**

No, I think we've all done our bit. I mean, we look at the Good Friday Agreement as part of our legacy, and we’re very committed to protecting that legacy. Sinn Féin are obviously pushing this idea of a united Ireland, although I think they would rather push it than probably implement it to keep it there as a live issue. My strong view is that nationalism, in itself, serves no particular purpose, and we're actually better off working together with all of our neighbours, with all of our friends. We can be patriotic, we can be internationalist, we can get involved in the world, and we shouldn't always be so focused on our own particular situation. When you look at wars over nationalism, when you look at the violence caused by nationalism, it can cause lots and lots of deaths. Is it worth it? Whereas we can be a proud country working together. [**Zoom call cut off].**

**Vít Hloušek Interview**

##### **Interviewer**

My research focuses on how political parties use these different forms of nationalism. So, it probably makes sense to start with a really broad question. Just ask how salient do you think the issue of Hungarians in neighbouring countries is for the different political parties in Hungary?

##### **Vít**

At the moment, talking about the situation ahead of the next Hungary elections, it seems that these topics are the most important for the ruling Fidesz party because they are typically employing the discourse related to some complicated issues of Hungary history, like the Trianon peace treaty. Therefore, of course, they are trying to cover the issue of Hungarians living abroad, those who are Hungarian nationals and don't live in the territory of contemporary Hungary. It means that they are addressing Hungarians in Slovakia, they are addressing Hungarians living in the territory of Serbia, and in the territory of Romania. For Orbán, this is a very important source of political support because he launched a programme granting these people not only the possibility to get Hungarian citizenship and the Hungarian passport, but at the same time, there are programmes launched by the Hungarian government supporting, for example, university education in Hungary under quite accessible conditions for the Hungarians living abroad. So, from this point of view, Orbán is not only talking about the necessity to help and to promote and to protect the Hungarian minorities living abroad, he's offering some programmes for them, and those who have the right to vote typically support Fidesz. So, this is not a negligible stream of voters who are supporting the ruling party.

We can see that nationalism, or this integration of the topics of Hungarians living abroad to the discourse of the Hungarian political parties. Historically, it was very important for Jobbik, of course. Now, they downplay these issues for two reasons. First of all, they cannot any longer be easily labeled as the far-right extremist political party, they changed their leadership and some of their policy preferences. Secondly, they are part of the broad anti-Orbán coalition. This coalition is focusing on domestic issues. They are focusing on, for example, corruption and other problems related to the Orbán regime. So, for them this is far less important. And then, we have to take into consideration that the coalition is composed of very diverse political parties. There are left-wing liberal socialists politicians who never actually employed these historical narratives that much.

If you allow me one more sentence, we can see that since the very early 1990s, already when there was the dividing line between the post-Communist Hungarian Socialist party and the Hungarian right, there was a strong clash between the civic concept of the Hungarian state and nation, and the ethnic concept of the Hungarian nation. This, to some extent, has repercussions in the current way the different political parties are treating the nationalism issue.

##### **Interviewer**

Thanks for covering so many different parties there. You have slightly alluded to this, but just how much do you think the saliency of this issue has changed over time?

##### **Vít**

Well, without being able to do a precise prioritisation, I can see, looking back at the roughly three decades of party pluralism in Hungary, that there are some ups and downs in the salience of the issue. Typically, when economic issues are prevailing, like in the very early 1990s, together with the transition to democracy and the market economy, then this question played a slightly less prominent role. They can, however, be used quite nicely for the mobilisation of voters. I don't mean to say that this is the main cleavage of Hungarian politics, but at the same time, we have to recognise the fact that, together with social and economic issues, these issues are framed in the discourse of civic versus Christian-national Hungary, tradition versus modernization, and so on and so forth. These are permanently present in the Hungarian political discourse. To some extent, it depends on the political actors. Not only Orbán, but some of the other politicians in the past were able or not to utilise these discourses.

##### **Interviewer**

So, that's quite a bit about the importance of the issue, but it probably makes sense to ask what caused it to be salient and how that changes over time. So, is there anything in particular you think is important in explaining when it's salient?

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##### **Vít**

Well, to some extent there is a trend employed, typically by the right-wing Hungarian politicians to compensate for some problems, let's say, for example, in solving social and economic issues, with the more heated nationalist rhetoric.. So this is something we can mention, for example, when there was a crisis in the Eurozone that hit Hungary, despite the fact that this is a country with their own currency and Orbán was facing some problems with the economy, he speeded up the debate on the ethnic issues. What is important to say is that, since the migration crisis of 2015, nationalism in Hungary is probably fed the most with arguments against migrants. I don't speak Hungarian, but I have a colleague who does, and he quite recently analysed the speeches of Orbán during the Covid crisis. What was absolutely fascinating for me was that, even during the pandemic, one of the most important rhetorical features of Orbán was, ‘look, I am defending Hungary against the influx of migrants because these migrants are dangerous for the homogeneity of the Hungarian nation. They are not Christians. Typically, they are not able to fit into traditional Hungarian society. They do not know our language, and so on and so forth’. So again, it was framed in quite strongly in terms of a Hungarian, inward-looking, nationalistic narrative. But the migrants seemed to be probably now even more important than the Hungarian minorities living abroad.

##### **Interviewer**

Great, thanks. So, one thing I wanted to focus on in a bit more detail is the EU, which you might think either matters or doesn't matter. But do you think the EU has affected either the saliency of these issues, or how parties discuss them?

##### **Vít**

Well, maybe indirectly, because there are different issues between the EU and Hungary. I don't mean to say that the EU contributed actively to increasing the prominence or importance of nationalism in the Hungarian political debate, but there is quite a clear link between Euroscepticism and nationalism, of course, because these two typically go quite well with each other. You can build your Eurosceptic narrative while employing the nationalist issues, and that's what happens in Hungary. On the other hand, I would say, with my limited knowledge given the linguistic limitations I have, I would say that the anti-EU discourse in Hungary is not driven or composed of nationalism that much. When there is something typical for the Hungarian Eurosceptics, then it's the concept of sovereignty: of course, of nation, but of state as well. So, they are fighting the interventions of the EU institutions in the way of doing things in Hungary, for example the Constitution, legal order, and so on. Then, there is a broader, not nationalist, civilizational approach, because they are saying that the EU is leftist, the EU is too progressive, they are taking minorities into consideration too much, they are not paying respect to tradition, to Christianity and so on. So, from this point of view, it's the upper level, it's something about the nationalism, because Orbán is typically using the argument, when he's criticising the EU, that actually we are actually defending the traditional Western or European civilization. So, it's not based that much on pure Hungarian nationalism.

##### **Interviewer**

Okay, great. Some of the literature focuses on the Copenhagen criteria and the requirements it has. So, do you think the accession process in Hungary managed to affect the saliency of appeals related to ethnic Hungarians? And did that change once Hungary became an EU Member State?

##### **Vít**

Well, we have to recognise certain dynamics in the relations between Hungary and the EU, and it applies generally. It can be applied to Poland, Czechia, Slovakia, and so on and so forth. When Hungary entered the EU in May 2004, the Copenhagen criteria were fulfilled, which means it was the real transformed market economy and liberal democracy. The compliance with the legal order, the acquis communautaire, was quite high, and so on. What happened step by step, slowly after 2004, was that the transformative power of the EU decreased in importance. Once you are in, the EU cannot easily use the strategy of compliance, and this carrot and stick approach of saying ‘if you don't do these reforms, we won't let you in’ - you are already in! Some authors are now writing about superficial Europeanization, or shallow Europeanization, or even there is a concept of de-Europeanization as deviating from the standards achieved at the moment of entering the EU. And that's one of the explanations. So, actually Hungary, a decade or two ago was a country which complied much more with the standards of the EU concept of liberal democracy.

Now, they are step by step abandoning this. They are still a democratic country, that's clear. But they are less and less liberal. If you look at Hungarian institutions, it's a step by step process. It started in 2010 after the electoral victory of Fidesz, and then they changed the Constitution. There was a huge debate on the preamble of the new Constitution as there are some strong statements on the Hungarian nation and nationalism. But this is not that specific because, if you look at many other, both Central and Eastern, and Western European constitutions, you can find something similar there. The problem was the sequence of further steps, and the step by step reforms in the spheres of media regulation, judicial power, the infringement of the independence of judiciary. Then, of course, some concentration of economic power in the hands of close collaborators of Orbán’s, then fighting the NGOs symbolically, the infringement of academic freedoms, which was quite nicely illustrated by the Central European University, which moved from Budapest to Vienna.

So, this was the sequence of many steps and maybe if we will look at particular changes, we might say, okay, it still fits, to some extent, the concept of liberal democracy, but the combination and the following changes of the Hungarian media system make this more difficult.

##### **Interviewer**

My final question on the EU focuses on the fact that Hungary's neighbours joined the EU at different times or, in the case of Serbia, haven't joined at all. So, has that influenced how Hungarian political parties speak about ethnic Hungarians in other countries, or which minorities they focus on or not?

##### **Vít**

Well, no, if we are talking about rhetorics, then there is no difference. They are trying to treat all the Hungarian minorities living abroad in the same way. Of course, it's technically easier to communicate with Slovaks, to physically cross the border because of the Schengen area, and now it's much easier to do it with Romania than before the Romanian accession to the EU. But, in terms of the rhetoric of political parties, all the Hungarian minorities are sacrosanct and they are treated in the same way. Just to give one clear example of how it works in the Hungarian public debate, Orbán decided not to permit the transport of military equipment via Hungary to Ukraine. One of the most important reasons for this ban was that there is a Hungarian minority living in the territory of Ukraine, and if we give weapons to any side of the conflict, we might endanger these Hungarians living in Ukraine. So, all of them are important and they are treated the same.

##### **Interviewer**

Great, thanks. The final question that I had planned was how important is this issue for voters, and does that influence how important it is for parties?

##### **Vít**

Well, this is more difficult for me to answer because I'm not an expert in electoral behaviour. I don't know the data showing how Hungarian voters decide whom to support. But it seems to me that, for the voters who are in favour of Fidesz, this is more important than for the voters of the opposition parties, but not inevitably, there are some voters that are voting for Fidesz in order to maintain the economic course of the Orbán government, for example. But generally, I would say that the importance of nationalism, the probability that nationalism is important for you, increases if you are a Fidesz voter. It used to be even more so with Jobbik, but now I'm not sure because Jobbik dramatically changed their position, and to some extent even their rhetoric and policies.

##### **Interviewer**

Great, thanks. Is there anything else you think we need to discuss in order to understand this issue, or have we covered all those things?

##### **Vít**

##### I think that the most important things have been covered.