Varadkar says burning of his image not a reflection of opinion in North

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Taoiseach Leo Varadkar does not believe the image of his poster being burned on a loyalist bonfire accurately reflected the opinion of the majority of Northern Ireland residents towards the Republic and its leaders.

The Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) is investigating the incident in Tyrone on Saturday evening as it appears to have been a potential hate crime.

Photographs, videos and social media posts about the construction of the giant bonfire, as well as it being set alight, are being reviewed.

A large poster of the Taoiseach was erected on top of an old building, bedecked with two tricolours and a placard criticising the Good Friday Agreement. It was then set alight.

A large crowd attended the bonfire burning and cheered as it vanished in flames.

Speaking in Cork yesterday, Mr Varadkar said he was aware of the incident but did not believe it reflected the opinion of the vast majority of people in Northern Ireland.

“I have no idea what image I travel north of the border. I get a very good welcome, a very good reception in unionist and nationalist communities and from all sections of society really, so I think it’s the actions of a small minority of people. It won’t distract us in any way from our main mission here, which is to get the Good Friday Agreement working again and the [Northern Ireland] institutions up and running.”

Unionist leaders have condemned the placing of the Irish flag and Mr Varadkar’s picture on the bonfire.

DUP leader Jeffrey Donaldson tweeted: “I am proud of my tradition but if we want respect from the rest of the UK then we must show respect to others. Burning the flag of our neighbouring state & a poster of the head of government of that state is disrespectful and wrong. It is not culture!”

Ulster Unionist Party leader Doug Beattie said: “This is not acceptable, it is childish and promotes hate. Again, the many are let down by a few.”

Most of the bonfires to mark Northern Ireland’s traditional July 12 celebrations will be lit tomorrow, July 12. July 12 marks the victory of Protestant King William of Orange over Catholic King James II in the Battle of the Boyne in 1690.

William of Orange’s victory secured a Protestant line of succession for the British crown.

There has been controversy around bonfires in recent years, with election posters and Irish flags hung from the stacks if wood, with some towering over 30m high.

Meanwhile, the annual Orange Order2023 parade took place in Co Armagh yesterday. Orange Order members held a short protest at the police lines burning them from the return route along the mainly nationalist Carrickgolgy Road.