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Scotland's post-Brexit perspectives

Scotland has fostered a distinct European profile throughout the Brexit process — yet maintaining it will be the real challenge

Scotland has been outside the European Union for several days now – and it feels surreal. After nearly five decades in our shared European community, the page has been unwantedly turned and an uncertain future awaits.

The UK's departure from the EU was in Scotland met overwhelmingly with deep sadness and regret. Brexit day brought countless displays of pro-European spirit. Vigils and demonstrations took place across the country. 'Scotland loves Europe' was carved into the beach on the shores of outer Edinburgh. In the evening, the Scottish Government's headquarters were illuminated in the colours of the European flag.

Following debate and eventually a plenary vote, the Scottish Parliament decided to continue flying its European flag outside the building. The flag has been there since the Holyrood parliament was built and opened in 2004. Around the same time that the UK's newly incarnated Mission to the EU in Brussels took down its European flag, Scotland House across the street off the Schuman Roundabout hoisted one up.

Brexit's transformation of the Scottish independence debate

While such symbols cannot defy the reality of Brexit, they are a testament to the strength and depth of Scotland's European vocation. The visual contrast on Brexit day between the protest of the Scottish Government and the celebration of the UK Government was striking. Moreover, it reflects markedly different perspectives on European integration.

Scotland never endorsed Brexit on any occasion. While its clear decision to remain in the EU in the 2016 referendum became widely known, it also rejected Brexit at every subsequent election. Not even a single opinion poll ever demonstrated majority support in Scotland for leaving

the EU. Talk of profound division on the question of Europe does not apply in Scotland. The fact that Scotland and the UK left the EU anyway raises existential concerns over the UK's constitutional system and indeed the future of the UK as a state.

With the UK now a third country, maintaining Scotland's European connections will be challenging.

Independence was already the central question of Scottish politics. Brexit did not create that salience, but it has transformed the debate. After years of Brexit indecision, the UK's actual withdrawal from the EU now requires a choice in Scotland between the UK union and the European Union. Pro-European unionists, many of whom are current or former supporters of the Scottish Labour Party, wanted to keep Scotland in both unions. With that outcome no longer possible, the eventual opinion of these voters could prove decisive in a future independence referendum.

The politics of an independence referendum

The focus in Scotland is now whether a new independence referendum should happen – separate from the question of support for or opposition to independence. The Scottish National Party (SNP) and the Scottish Greens are pro-independence and pro-referendum parties. The Scottish Conservatives and the Scottish Liberal Democrats will undoubtedly continue to oppose both.

The position of Scottish Labour is the most uncertain. While it remains a pro-UK party, several of its politicians have called for a new referendum, either on the basis of the political context now or should a pro-independence majority result (again) from the next Scottish election in May 2021. These arguments are rooted in the fundamental change caused by Brexit, the increasing public support for a referendum and Labour's identification as a party of self-determination.

Wider Scottish society also appears to be coalescing around the idea of an independence referendum. Scotland's largest trade union, UNISON Scotland, recently passed a motion calling for the Scottish Parliament to have the power to decide on the timing of a new referendum. The Parliament has already voted in favour of holding one this year. Unlike in England, where trade unions are predominantly associated with the Labour Party only, in Scotland both the SNP and Scottish Labour have

relationships with unions.

As the dispute between the Scottish Government and the UK Government continues over holding an independence referendum, growing support from civil society in Scotland for a plebiscite would strength Edinburgh's case. Should the issue not be resolved before the Holyrood 2021 election, and the election produce another pro-independence majority, a referendum would appear increasingly certain.

The challenges of Scotland-EU cooperation

With the UK now a third country, maintaining Scotland's European connections will be challenging. While the EU-UK partnership remains to be negotiated, all indications are that the UK Government's choices will make it fairly distant compared to EU membership. The Scottish Parliament may well wish to preserve alignment to EU laws and policies, but it could be prevented from doing so in areas where the UK Government insists on an all-UK approach. The Scottish Government and other Scottish actors will have to work hard just to sustain their current relationships, let alone keep pace with developments in the EU.

Scotland has fostered a distinct European profile throughout the Brexit process. Its continued support for the European Union, its foundational tenets such as the free movement of citizens and the shared values of the Union stand it apart from the rest of the UK. This commitment has evidently been recognised by many EU actors and attitudes to an independent Scotland joining the EU have become much more positive compared to the independence referendum in 2014. Scotland's pro-Europeanism provides a commonality with EU partners that is difficult to quantify, but immensely valuable.

Scotland's independence debate requires more substantive discussion on how it would face the realities of being a European small state and what kind of EU member state it would seek to become.

Yet European politics and diplomacy remain based on interests and power. It will be difficult for Scotland to find a role and to have influence from its newfound position. Scotland is even further removed, both not being in the EU and not being a state. Its independence debate can also be a hindrance to building political relations. While EU member states might see advantages to working with Scotland on particular subjects, they will equally be conscious of respecting the UK's constitutional integrity. Scotland must face these challenges

and respond creatively.

To remain well connected to the EU and its members, Scotland must advance its practical cooperation with European partners on areas of mutual interest. It has valuable contributions to make on areas ranging from renewable energy and new technologies to civic participation and wellbeing. As a nation of 5.4 million Europeans, Scotland must also participate in the major debates on the future of Europe.

Scotland's European network

To do so, the Scottish Government published a new European strategy, *The European Union's Strategic Agenda 2020-2024: Scotland's Perspective*, on Brexit day. This strategy sets out four shared priorities that should focus Scotland's engagement in the EU: democracy and values, the climate emergency, wellbeing and smart economies. It is a powerful statement of intent and a solid basis for future cooperation and partnership. The strategy affirms that Scotland will consider its relationship with the EU not only in terms of what it receives, but what it contributes. This approach is positive and forward-looking.

Scotland also now has a footprint within the EU to implement this strategy. The Scottish Government has established a network of representative offices, mostly called Innovation and Investment Hubs. It opened hubs in Berlin, Paris and Dublin, and expanded Scotland House in Brussels – in addition to opening an office in London. Moreover, these representations will enable Scotland to develop its bilateral relations with important partners.

Yet further steps should be taken to enhance Scotland's European connections. Its pro-European sentiment must be more concretely translated into practice and action. Greater Europeanisation of Scottish politics and government should be fostered. Scotland's independence debate requires more substantive discussion on how it would face the realities of being a European small state and what kind of EU member state it would seek to become. Whatever its constitutional future, Scotland's European outlook will endure beyond Brexit. Its Europeanism is too deeply rooted to be shaken.



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