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Does Brexit make the Scottish (and Welsh) independence movements less viable? An exploration of the relationship between EU membership and minority nationalism in the UK

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Abstract

The consequences of the UK's exit from the European Union have been much discussed, including the relationship between these developments and the UK's territorial future. This article seeks to contribute to this debate, focusing on the Scottish and Welsh independence movements. It argues that the European Union has been key to the growing viability of these movements over recent decades, providing both an external means of validation to their overriding objective of independence, and a practical support mechanism for its pursuit outside of the context of national politics. Further, it argues that both movements have successfully exploited international institutions and networks to further their goals. Brexit, therefore, in depriving them of such avenues and halting their European institutionalisation presents a threat to their ongoing viability and harms the technical feasibility of Scottish and Welsh independence. These findings significantly disrupt the assumption that the rupture of Brexit makes Scottish (or indeed Welsh) independence more likely, let alone inevitable.

Index terms



Keywords: Brexit, minority nationalism, Scottish independence, Welsh independence, independence movement

Introduction

- 1 Minority nationalist parties in the UK have developed and strengthened in recent years thanks to an exploitation of the opportunities provided by the changing distribution of power in the UK's increasingly multi-level political system. This article seeks to explore the nature of the Scottish and Welsh independence movement's engagement with the structures of the European Union, identifying a myriad of ways in which Europe became a means of achieving policy objectives, governing credibility, and building and exploiting international networks to support their objectives. Brexit provides an opportunity to assess the extent to which these movements relied upon the European polity, and to hypothesise what the changed configuration of the UK's multi-level, multi-national polity in its wake might mean for minority nationalist movements. In pursuit of these objectives, we examine several key policy documents to inform two case studies.
- 2 Minority nationalist movements in European Union (EU) member states have historically been influenced by the process of European integration. They have often faced obstruction and intransigence at the national level, forcing them to seek support at the supranational level. European integration is often supported by minority nationalist movements as the EU encourages the sharing of powers between different levels of government, granting key roles to local and regional actors¹². As such, these movements have bypassed the nation state in a search for support at the European level. This has been termed as *paradiplomacy*³ and has been described as creating a crisis of the nation-state. This 'attack' from above and below the central state has been particularly prevalent in the United Kingdom (UK) where the independence movements of Scotland and Wales, and their 'standard bearer' political parties the Scottish Nationalist Party (SNP) and Plaid Cymru have sought to exploit the potential of European politics to advance their demands for self-government.
- 3 The study of minority nationalism and European integration has often been explored in the context of Hooghe and Marks's multilevel governance (MLG)⁴⁵. MLG provides a means of exploring and understanding the processes of European integration and the role it has played in undermining the dominance of the central state through encouraging and facilitating the simultaneous diffusion of power 'downward' to the sub-state level, and 'upward' to the supranational level. Moreover, literature on MLG and European integration emphasises the impact of the EU's many regional and structural programmes, institutionalised regional representation in the EU, and the transnational activity of the regions⁶. Each of these factors is significant in understanding the development of Scottish and Welsh minority nationalism over recent decades. This article is guided by such insights in seeking to explore the ways in which European integration has impacted Scottish and Welsh demands for self-governance.
- 4 The article begins by exploring, and comparing insights on the key issues of MLG, minority nationalism in Europe, and European integration in the context of the UK (and in particular the Scottish and Welsh nationalist movements). Next, it moves on to explore the Scottish example, where the 'normative' and 'political' uses of the European Union in pursuit of the goal of independence are examined in turn, using the example of environment policy to refine and test these observations. Subsequently, it explores the example of Wales, focusing on how its independence movement has sought and gained internal and external credibility through a fulsome process of engagement with the political and parliamentary structures of the European Union. Both cases demonstrate a multi-faceted European influence which has become crucial to the strength and viability of both movements. The article concludes that the removal (or at least most elements of) the European level of policymaking in the political systems of Scotland and Wales significantly harms the viability of either movement achieving its ultimate goal, a

finding which upends much contemporary political discourse in the UK, which equates the growth of Scottish grievance over Brexit with a growing likelihood of Scottish independence⁷

Multi-level Governance, independence movements, and the European Union

5 The literature on multi-level governance highlights the diffusion of powers over ‘vertical’ and ‘horizontal’ axes⁸. The former relates to the territorial dimension of politics, identifying the local, regional, national, and supranational institutions and organisations that play a formal role in policymaking. The latter refers to the distribution of power across different government agencies at the different horizontal levels. In the UK, the ‘devolved’ level has nominal control over most public services, elements of economic policy, and parts of environmental policy. However, devolution in the UK is partial and unsystematic, with the Scottish Government responsible for crime and justice (operating its own courts system as well as overseeing Scottish policing arrangements) while on such issues Wales is governed from Westminster. The division of powers is not ‘optimal’, and in likelihood no such distribution exists⁹. At the supranational level, the European Union had until 2020 played a significant role in UK policymaking across a wide range of issues. As such, Brexit represented a significant recalibration of UK policymaking functions, even if European influence, particularly at the devolved government level (for instance over elements of trade policy) remains¹⁰.

6 Boylan and Turkina argue that the EU’s multilevel system of governance affords minority nationalist parties operating in member states the opportunity to “bypass” the nation state to appeal directly to the EU for assistance in the face of suppression and opposition¹¹. On this reading, there are significant incentives to full engagement with the EU for regional independence movements. This perspective is given credence by the leading separatist parties in the four European regions with the strongest independence movements all pursuing policies of “independence in Europe”¹². Llamazares and Marks, reflecting on parties in Southern Europe, argue that subnational movements are no longer ‘constrained to dyadic interactions with central state actors, instead they are free to interact with a variety of actors in multiple EU venues¹³. In other words, European Union membership appears to provide opportunities for regional independence or secessionist movements to pursue their objectives outside of the nation state umbrella, and to engage in paradiplomatic, cultural, and economic activities¹⁴. Such developments can be characterised as contributing to a pincer movement against the assumption of nation state centrality, undermining both support for shared national identity in countries with internal divisions, and on the other hand generating a multi-national and cosmopolitan politics. Lynch warns that European integration has shaped the political opportunity structure for minority nationalist parties in a manner which can be described as ‘uneven’ however, he affirms that the EU has been of central concern to minority nationalist parties rhetoric and strategy¹⁵.

The UK context

7 As a result of the dynamics described above, Scottish and Welsh minority nationalism have benefited significantly from EU membership. They have done so in two key ways. Firstly, EU membership has provided space to articulate and legitimise the nationalist project, including through the creation of a context in which the political parties that represent such movements can establish links with similar movements to strengthen and amplify their calls for greater autonomy and independence¹⁶. Secondly, the EU and its system of multilevel governance allowed for the Scottish and Welsh devolved governments to demonstrate their policymaking competence through the achievement

of various policy successes, contributing to a sense that they can be relied upon as responsible custodians when called upon to act maturely. In summary, EU membership has undoubtedly been a boon in these efforts, and manifests in two ways.

- Europe as an external support structure, and;
- Europe as an opportunity to influence and shape policy

8 There are a number of ways in which participation in the EU has provided spaces and venues for the Scottish and Welsh independence movements to legitimise and articulate their causes. One of these ways was through alliances with other minority nationalist groups, made possible by the framework of the European Free Alliance (EFA) and Committee of the Regions (CoR), both of which operate within the European Parliament for the promotion of the right of self-determination of peoples¹⁷. This has provided a context in which issues of self-determination, nationhood, and independence can be placed, and kept, on the political and policymaking agenda at the EU level¹⁸ for example through Plaid Cymru's ability to amplify its arguments through the EFA. There are also multiple instances of more informal means of cooperation and collaboration between independence movements, for example in the collaboration between the Scottish, Catalan, and Flemish autonomy movements, particularly in the wake of the Spanish Government's response to the (unofficial) referendum on Catalanian independence in 2017¹⁹. Such international cooperation may be a secondary consequence of the 'internationalisation' of these movements, facilitated by the participation in formal institutions.

9 The EU has also created opportunities for the independence supporting parties to pursue their broad objectives, and in doing so to lent credibility to themselves and their broader objectives²⁰. An apposite case is the distinctively Welsh approach to gender equality, whereby Welsh political actors were able to utilise EU funds and draw upon norms of gender equality to establish and legitimize institutions to achieve gender equality related goals. Minto and Parken argue that the EU became a venue for Welsh actors to 'establish relationships, secure funding, influence policy and build an international profile'²¹. Another prescient example relates to the Scottish Government's attempts to pursue the Minimum Unit Pricing of alcohol, which became a controversy (and triggered vociferous alcohol industry opposition) which was overcome through legal means at the European level, in the shape of a favourable ruling against the Scottish Whisky Association by the Court of Justice of the European Union^{22,23}. In each case, the institutions of the European Union have provided opportunities to build the profile, popularity, and policymaking agenda of independence supporting parties such as the SNP and Plaid. We now discuss the Scottish and Welsh cases in greater detail, exploring the various ways in which the political wings of these two autonomy movements exploited their membership of the European Union.

10 More generally, the territorial governance of the UK has been in a state of flux for a number of decades²⁴. While it would be reductive to characterise this as a linear process of the transfer of power from London to Edinburgh and Cardiff, this does at least capture the broad direction of travel²⁵. Beginning in the late 1970s, loud calls for greater territorial autonomy for the UK's 'nations' translated into the creation of new systems of government in Scotland and Wales (as well as sub-nationally, within England). These bodies slowly took on greater powers, and paved the way for a referendum on Scottish independence in 2014, which was narrowly rejected in part as a result of the preference of many voters for greater powers *within* the UK. The Welsh devolved system likewise became more powerful in subsequent years (as part of an imperfect process from a conferred to a reserved model – Moon and Evans, 2017). During a similar period, the European Union took on ever greater powers, including in areas traditionally reserved to nation states. The combination of supranational and sub-national autonomy building contributed to a 'hollowing out' of the nation state²⁶, strongly influenced public opinion, and perhaps contributed to the growth of a more assertive nationalist politics in England which contributed to the decision to vote to leave the EU in 2016 (Henderson

et al, 2017). We now turn to the interactions between the nationalist movements in Scotland and Wales and the European polity, exploring Scotland first.

Scotland

- 11 The relationship between the SNP as the highest profile pro-independence Scottish political party and the European Union has not been straightforward. Prior to 1988, the SNP sought to leave not only the UK state, but also the (then) European Community. Subsequently, the party adopted a policy of ‘independence in Europe’²⁷. Thereafter, support for Scottish independence grew in tandem with (though not necessarily as a direct result of) processes of European integration, which strengthened during this period due to the creation of the Single Market and the signing of the Maastricht Treaty by EU member states (including the UK). Here, we explore the two dimensions described above: the EU as a support structure, and the EU as a forum to influence and shape policy. Regarding the former, we focus on the construction and mobilisation of the EU as a concept, and how it has been used to create an external support structure in SNP visions of an independent Scotland²⁸. This will show how the EU has been used as a rhetorical device to frame Scotland as an outward looking European country. Secondly, it will focus on the EU’s impact on Scottish policymaking through a ‘Europeanization’ of Scottish agriculture policy²⁹ which helps to demonstrate the competence and strengthen the credibility of the SNP as a governing party and by proxy to improve the perception of Scottish nationalism.

The EU as an external support structure

- 12 Since the acceptance of the Single European Act (1986) as ‘compatible with Scottish independence’³⁰ and the adoption of the ‘Independence in Europe’ policy the SNP has consistently sought to promote an independent Scotland’s place in the EU (Thiec, 2021). This shift away from Euroscepticism resulted from a growing recognition that EU membership was compatible with their overriding objective of secession from the UK state, and may indeed make its realisation more viable^{31,32}. This stance also had two main political advantages. Firstly, it allowed the party to differentiate itself from Westminster and its party-political rivals, the Conservatives. Anti-Conservatism has become established as an animating factor in Scottish politics over a long period, and particularly since the Thatcher-led governments of the 1980s (Schnapper, 2015). Secondly, this position allows the SNP to plausibly assure Scottish voters that a post-independence stability was within reach thanks the potential of an independent Scotland joining the EU as one of a host of other small states (such as Ireland, Denmark, or Slovakia).
- 13 The 2014 referendum campaign helps to bring these issues into focus. For instance, the 2013 white paper *Scotland’s Future*³³ (the Scottish Government’s plan for a transition to a post-independence future, which combined elements of manifesto and policy document seeks distance from Westminster and presents independence not as a separation but as a new form of partnership with the rest of the UK which would create ‘strong institutional, economic, cultural, and inter-governmental connections’³⁴. The document’s ‘International Relations and Defence’ section focuses largely on Scotland’s relationship with European institutions, emphasising the country’s outward looking approach, emphasising a positive contrast to Westminster’s more Eurosceptic approach³⁵. This supports the notion that the Scottish independence movement (or at least the SNP) has sought to construct an outward looking and internationalist image of an independent Scotland which strikes a flattering contrast with a presentation of British nationalism which is inward looking and isolationist^{36,37}. The European Union has occupied a central role in this construction.

14 Elsewhere in *Scotland's Future*³⁸, Westminster is presented as an obstructive middleman, and an obstacle to be overcome (rather than a constructive partner in governance). While research demonstrates the maintenance of well-functioning intergovernmental relations in most key respects (with some notable exceptions)³⁹, at least when it comes to public pronouncements supporters of Scottish independence seek to present Westminster as an intransigent obstacle. In contrast, senior politicians such as the former First Minister, Nicola Sturgeon, have spoken of an alignment of values between Scotland and the EU. This can be exemplified by a speech she made to the European Policy Centre in 2019. In the address she emphasised that the SNP's desire for independence in Europe was not simply to benefit from the perks of EU membership like free movement and free trade but to 'contribute Scotland's ideas and talents to Europe's shared challenges, and to uphold and exemplify our shared values'⁴⁰. Other SNP figures have emphasised this congruence of outlook. For example, SNP MSP Fiona Hyslop used a ministerial foreword to the Scottish Government policy document *The European Union's Strategic Agenda 2020-2024: Scotland's Perspective*, where she wrote that the EU embodies a 'continued pursuit of peace, democracy, respect for human rights, the rule of law and equality', values which she claims are integral to Scotland's future prosperity, and that these are values Scotland shares⁴¹.

15 However, the SNP's overriding aim of secession from the United Kingdom inevitably implies uncertainty, and EU membership has been suggested as a potential 'safety net' for movements with aspirations to statehood and to imply the potential for post-independence stability⁴². Opponents of Scottish independence have appealed to that uncertainty in making their case for continued Scottish membership of the UK and more broadly to extol the virtues of the Union. For example, the late Alastair Darling, one of the leading anti-independence campaign spokespeople, said in 2012: 'the downsides [of independence] are immense, the risks are amazing. I just don't think the uncertainties are worth gambling on'⁴³. Similarly, his Lib Dem counterpart Lord Wallace claimed to be unsure 'to what extent will [Scotland's Future] own up to the uncertainties which would inevitably flow from a Yes vote in the referendum'⁴⁴. In this context, the appeal of 'independence in Europe' is obvious: it acts as a counterbalance to the warnings of post-independence instability (and worse) and explains the use of the argument by the SNP, the Scottish Government, and the Yes campaign. They argue that Scotland's interests can only be protected not only outside of the UK, but as a full member of European club (though it is worth noting that this logic does not extend to currency, where the Scottish Government have argued they would retain Pound Sterling as their currency - regardless of whether the UK government agreed - in preference to adopting the European Single Currency).

16 In summary, the external support system provided by the vertical and horizontal dispersal of power was and remains vital to pro-independence forces, and particularly the 2014 Yes campaign's framing of an independent Scotland's position in the world, without which independence would be less plausible⁴⁵. This supranational level of Scottish policymaking is used by the SNP and other pro-independence policy actors to demonstrate the technical feasibility and to strengthen the political attractiveness of independence (primarily through addressing its downsides). Therefore, without the EU, the argument in favour of Scottish independence is weakened significantly. A further dimension relates to the way the SNP effectively appeals to the norms and values of the EU, emphasising and seeking to further widen the ideological, programmatic, and political gaps between Westminster and Holyrood⁴⁶. We return to this theme in the conclusion when discussing the consequences for Brexit on the prospects for the furtherance of the Scottish independence cause.

The EU in Scottish policymaking

17 We now shift our focus to the impact that the EU has had in Scottish policymaking, and the ways that this has impacted upon the strength of the Scottish independence

movement – with consequences for the viability of its objectives. We argue that under SNP leadership, the Scottish Government has sought to develop a reputation as a renewable energy ‘powerhouse’ and to strike a flattering contrast with the ‘anti-green’ Conservative Party in Westminster (Hinde, 2016). It has also been a key area in which Scottish policymaking has ‘Europeanized’ since devolution (Featherstone, 2003; Radaelli, 2020) in that it has undergone a ‘process of structural change, variously affecting actors and institutions, ideas, and interests... exhibiting similar attributes to those that predominate in, or are closely identified with, Europe’⁴⁷. Secondly, we examine the normative influence that the EU has exerted over the SNP-led Scottish Government’s political, programme, and political success in environment policy⁴⁸.

18 Pro-independence policy actors, and particularly the SNP, have sought to highlight environmental policy as an urgent issue, and adopt commitments and deploy policy instruments which place them ‘above and beyond’ Westminster’s aspirations in relation to particularly policy on climate change⁴⁹. A good example of this can be found in the measures contained within the Climate Change (Scotland) Act 2009 (passed by the first term SNP Government under Alex Salmond’s tenure as First Minister) which committed the country to a 42 per cent reduction in carbon emissions. This was more ambitious than the target set by the Westminster Government a year earlier⁵⁰. While the target was not met, the aspiration to go ‘further and faster’ remains, for example in their approach to EU derived Environmental Assessments, the term for ‘various statutory processes that inform policymakers of the likely environmental impact of legislation’⁵¹. Consistently, the SNP has deliberately legislated beyond the requirements of relevant EU directives from EA’s⁵².

19 Renewable energy has been an area of environment policy in which the SNP-led Government has been successful in meeting its targets. Where 7.9 per cent of total energy production was accounted for by renewables in 2009, in 2019 this sat at 24 per cent⁵³. Furthermore, in 2020, 97.4 per cent of all electricity consumed in Scotland came from renewable sources which narrowly missed the target of 100%⁵⁴. These figures look impressive when compared with the statistics for the same metrics for the rest of the UK: in 2020, 43.1 per cent of all electricity produced came from renewable sources⁵⁵. This demonstrates that the Scottish Government’s desire to set themselves apart from the rest of the UK, setting ambitious targets which bring them further into line with the EU, and exemplifying their intent to go beyond even EU policy in the shape of Environmental Assessments. In other words, EU measures have represented a useful means to strike a positive contrast with the rest of the UK in terms of the achievement of progressive goals.

20 Other environmental policies have contributed to the SNP’s overall governance success and can be directly linked to EU input. For example, action in biodiversity and natural conservation owes a great amount to EU directives and financial input. According to the Scottish Biodiversity Strategy to 2045⁵⁶ the Scottish Government has overseen significant progress in biodiversity and conservation. Some of the successful policies include *The South of Scotland Golden Eagle Project* which has overseen Golden Eagle populations rise to their highest numbers in two hundred years. Scottish Forestry has established 31,544 hectares of new native woodland since 2013. And the Green Infrastructure Strategic Intervention has allocated over £15m to creating green infrastructure in urban areas⁵⁷. Again, the Scottish Government has used EU directives as a departure point to demonstrate their environmental and effective policymaking credentials.

21 European Union influence has been crucial to the Scottish Government’s claims to success in environmental policy. This is acknowledged by the Scottish Government in a consultation paper on environmental principles and governance which claims that around 80 per cent of Scottish environment policy has derived from EU law and policy⁵⁸. Further, it acknowledges that environment policy is created in close consultation with the four Specific Environmental Principles set out in article 191(2) of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU). Additionally, European Commission functions such as monitoring and reporting, the Commission’s complaints

mechanism in combination with the oversight from the EU's Court of Justice, have also played an important role. Natura 2000, a Europe-wide network of special protection areas and special areas of conservation which forms the cornerstone of EU biodiversity policy, has 394 sites in Scotland and has facilitated much of the success in Scottish biodiversity policy. The EU's LIFE+ project, the financial mechanism supporting natural conservation projects, also played a significant role, proving pivotal in the successes in biodiversity⁵⁹.

22 The SNP (and by proxy the Scottish independence movement) have benefited significantly from the SNP's perceived competence in government⁶⁰. The EU has played a large role in this, acting as a means through which credible policy actions can be built upon (and at times traversed beyond) in an enthusiastic embrace of 'Europeanised' patterns of policymaking⁶¹. In doing so, it has sought to exacerbate the ideological and political differences between Scotland and the rest of the UK (and particularly England). While at the time of writing, the SNP's reputation for competence in government has been damaged (perhaps irreparably) due to financial scandals and perceived policy failures, for many years it was seen as delivering a degree of competent and 'grown up' government far beyond what could be delivered by Westminster⁶²⁶³. Indeed, the contrast with Westminster during the years 2016-present (and particularly during the Brexit negotiation process⁶⁴ was undoubtedly a positive one for the SNP and the Scottish Government it led. This reputation for competence played a role in strengthening support for independence and legitimising it as a political project, and played a role in heightening the esteem in which its primary advocates were held.

23 In summary, the European Union was operationalised by supporters of Scottish independence as a means of i) generating feasibility for its plans for an independent Scotland, and ii) providing a policy venue to pursue its policy agenda in a manner which strengthened its credibility and provided a positive contrast with the less progressive United Kingdom. We now turn to Wales, a country with a less developed and popular independence movement, but one which has benefited through fulsome engagement of that movement with the structures and opportunities associated with the European Union.

Wales

24 Plaid Cymru (PC) is the main Welsh nationalist party and has been the leading advocate of minority nationalism in Wales since 1924. Like the SNP, Plaid's attitude to the project of European integration has shifted over time, with a hostile initial perspective being supplanted for an embrace of 'Independence in Europe'. Indeed, in the 1970s, Plaid were vitriolically opposed to the European Economic Community (EEC), but now actively support the notion that an independent Wales can prosper outside of the UK but as a full member of the 'small countries' club of the European Union⁶⁵⁶⁶. Whilst the notion of Scottish independence is imbued with the credibility that comes alongside its size and historical animosity with England, Plaid have at times struggled to make acceptable and credible the notion of Welsh independence as a legitimate political project. As such, while Scotland's constitutional position has periodically been near the top of the political agenda in that country, the same has not been true of Wales.

25 With the process of European integration and the emergence of a multilevel Europe, in combination with the advent of devolution in 1999, Plaid have gained some success in (from their perspective) rectifying this issue and in projecting themselves as a serious political actor. In doing so, they have significantly enhanced the case for Welsh self-government⁶⁷ Here, we explore the ways in which the European dimension has facilitated the growth of Welsh independence from a curious and peripheral feature of the Welsh political landscape into one of its central features. We explore these phenomena in two key respects. Firstly, we explore the ways in which the advent of devolution has proven consequential in building both the Plaid and the Welsh

independence movement, and how European integration has created new opportunities for the articulation of Welsh issues in both a domestic and international context. Secondly, we discuss the building of relationships with other European sub-state actors through processes of ‘transnational regionalism’⁶⁸ has helped to propel the Welsh nationalist cause. This has primarily taken the form of participation in pan-European political groupings such as the European Free Alliance, and has provided the party greater opportunities to build alliances within the European context in pursuit of its goals.

European Integration and devolution

26 A narrow vote in favour of devolution in 1997 (50.3 per cent “Yes” - 49.7 per cent “No”, a far lower level of support for a far weaker form of devolution than seen in Scotland) saw the devolution of an array of powers from Westminster to Cardiff. The advent of the National Assembly for Wales (later renamed the *Senedd*) brought about a wholesale restructuring of Welsh governance and supplanted the centuries old reality of direct rule from London. As with Scotland, these processes occurred against an acceleration of the processes of European integration, which had always been impactful within Wales (particularly in terms of funding⁶⁹. In the following section, we explore the nature and extent of which recalibration of policymaking and governance, and the extent to which this reallocation and redistribution of power within the UK’s multi-level polity undermined and “unravelling” the Westminster state⁷⁰.

27 Prior to the intersection of devolution and integration in 1999, many European initiatives and policies significantly benefited areas of Wales. For rural Wales, the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) supported farmers to improve agricultural productivity, emphasising food production security and maintenance of rural economies by promoting agricultural jobs⁷¹. In the 1975 UK-European Communities Referendum, Plaid fought a strongly pro-European campaign which yielded significant support in rural communities. The Welsh vote in favour did not differentiate greatly from the wider UK at 64.8 per cent, however, in Welsh-speaking Gwynedd County, an area which significantly benefited from the CAP, the vote in favour was 70.6 per cent⁷². However, the perceived benefits of European integration were not restricted to the rural north of the country, but extended too to industrial South Wales. The EC’s reform of regional policy in 1988 saw a doubling of Regional Development and Structural Investment Funds (ERDF and ESIF) across Europe and an allocation of significant funds to reform coalfields in the Valleys and encouraged inward investment in the urban belt⁷³.

28 Contemporaneously, European integration provided a framework for PC to rework their economic policy, as they began to re-establish themselves following a difficult period in the 1980’s⁷⁴. The party’s prior socialist commitments to centralised planning, an expansionist economic policy and high marginal taxes were reworked into a desire to secure a Welsh place within a ‘strong economic union based on regional democracies’⁷⁵. Prior to devolution, the results of European integration were becoming apparent to the Welsh public, making it easier for PC to resolve the issue of the feasibility of Welsh self-government through the Europeanisation of policy. Their vision of the future for Wales had transformed to one where Europe was an external support structure and an alternative to, rather than in coexistence with, the British state. The diffusion of powers over secondary legislation in the areas of agriculture, fisheries, education, housing and highways, and the opening of the National Assembly for Wales in 1999 saw the subnational level of Welsh governance strengthen significantly⁷⁶. Subsequently, over the next twenty years, greater powers over law-making, primary legislation creation, and fiscal powers over borrowing and taxation were diffused to Cardiff⁷⁷. Moreover, in 2017 the assembly followed Scotland from a system of conferred powers to one of reserved powers.

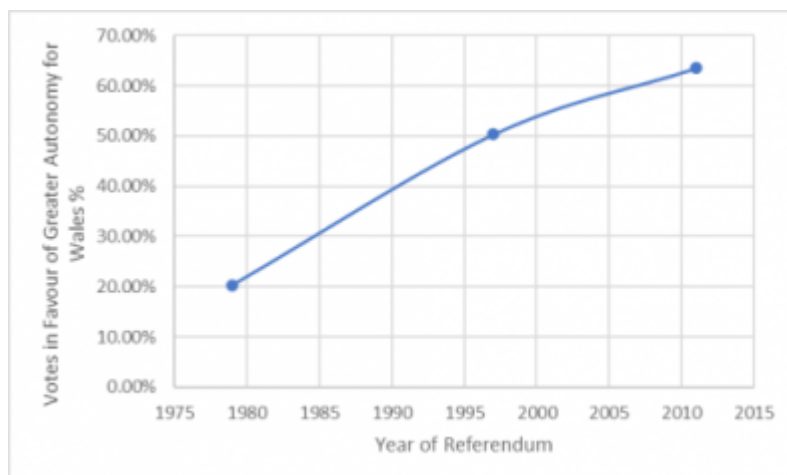
29 This gradual usurpation of powers from central to subnational government in policy areas such as economic development, education and transport in combination with the increased role of the supranational in areas such as social, regional, and environmental policy formed what Lynch describes as a “pincer” attack on the central state whereby the greater the level of European integration, the greater the likelihood of regional autonomy as the central state becomes increasingly weaker⁷⁸. Hooghe and Marks likewise suggest that the subnational and supranational in combination possess an ability to in combination weaken the central state. They argue that an unravelling of the central state occurs when authority is reallocated ‘upward, downward, and sideways from central states’⁷⁹. The argument that this weakening enhances support for independence can potentially be countered with reference to a study from 2003 which found that support for outright independence dropped from 14.1 per cent in 1997 to 12.3 per cent in 2001, however, overall support for greater autonomy for Wales increased over this period as Table 1 demonstrates - and these developments overall must be seen as of benefit in the long campaign for Welsh independence.

Table 1: Constitutional Preferences in Wales from 1997 to 2001⁸⁰.

Constitutional Preference	1997	1999	2001
Independence	14.1%	9.6%	12.3%
Parliament	19.6%	29.9%	38.8%
Assembly	26.8%	35.3%	25.5%
No Elected Body	39.5%	25.3%	24.0%
Weighted N	641	1173	1044

30 Enthusiasm for at least some form of political autonomy has grown markedly since the advent of devolution and its intersection with European integration. In the 1979 referendum on Welsh devolution, only 20.3 per cent of voters favoured the proposition, in 1997 this rose to 50.3 per cent, following a period of intense European integration. Then in 2011, the Welsh people voted 63.5 per cent in favour of greater devolution by way of a referendum on the assembly gaining law-making powers⁸¹. Support for outright Welsh independence sat in the low 20 percentages in the period between 2014 and 2022 which can be noted as a marked change from support in 2001 as seen above. While we do not wish to imply direct causality, it seems reasonable to suppose that in some combination the combined effects of devolution and increasing European integration played a role in building support for a distinctively Welsh set of political institutions distinct from Westminster. That this growth in support took place in such short order, and while the Labour Party (who had been consistently the most popular political party in Wales) were in government, is further testament to this fact, given the temporary nullification of the ‘democratic deficit’ argument associated with Labour dominance in Wales failing to prevent Conservative government in Westminster.

Figure 1: Support for greater autonomy for Wales at referenda in 1979, 1997, 2011⁸².



Plaid's international partners

31 Plaid has been proactive in forming transnational alliances with fellow minority nationalist movements at the European level, most notably in its involvement with the European Freedom Alliance (EFA). This association has been a considerable boon to Plaid, helping to publicise its policies (and those of its other members), enabling it to pursue Plaid priorities through its pressure participant activities at the European level⁸³ and gathering and disseminating information on the impact of European legislation on the regions. Further, the EFA has provided practical financial support for elections and campaign activities, which have been exploited by Plaid. Here, we explore Welsh elements of this activism and alliance building at the European level, and how this presented opportunities for horizontal policy learning and vertical policy transfer⁸⁴ through close consultation with other sympathetic minority nationalist movements⁸⁵.

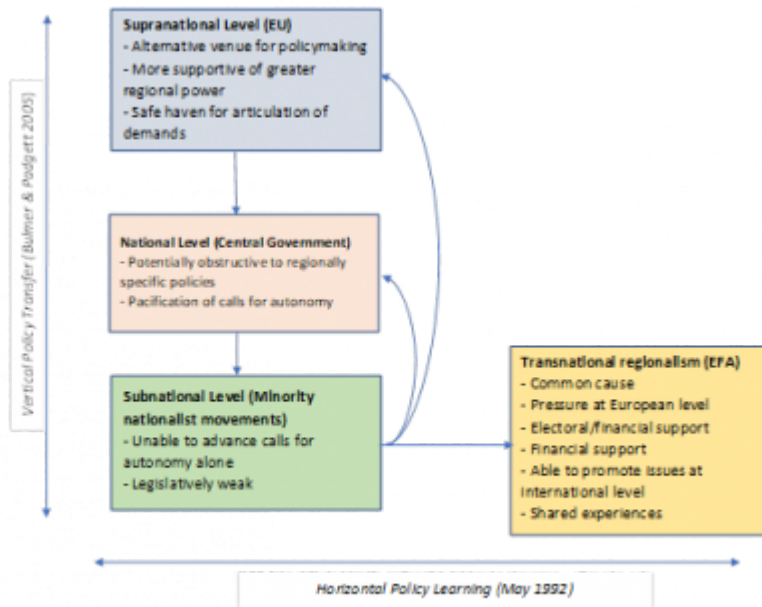
32 The core objective of the EFA is to advance regional and subnational interests in the European Parliament. Its member organisations share a common belief in national self-determination⁸⁶. Plaid has been involved in the EFA since 1981, gaining full membership in 1984, and taking a seating in the EFA group in the European Parliament in 1999⁸⁷⁸⁸. The EFA was a key factor in pushing Plaid towards the adoption of independence in Europe, and the involvement of the latter in the former is a key explanation for their shift from Euroscepticism to Euro-enthusiasm. A consequence of Plaid involvement in the EFA was that the issue of Welsh independence was placed to a greater extent on the European political agenda in the European Parliament, and therefore heightened its profile in the UK (particularly when Welsh activists faced obstruction at the UK level)⁸⁹. This can be characterised as an instance of vertical policy transfer, facilitated by the multi-level system, an insight which reinforces the notion of the EU as a 'massive transfer platform' and 'supranational idea hopper'⁹⁰. This can be identified as a further way in which EU membership has been highly beneficial to minority nationalist movements such as Plaid. Further, Plaid's involvement at the European level prior to 1999, through participation in the EFA meant that their MEPs were already well acquainted with the practices of the institution and could 'hit the ground running', advancing the Welsh independence agenda⁹¹. These European institutions thus offered a means of articulating and developing their agenda within influential fora, something less on offer domestically.

European infused policy learning

33 Plaid have facilitated policy learning through their participation in the EFA, which has acted as a platform for the development and articulation of policy and political ideas amongst minority nationalist movements. The term policy learning describes the acquisition of new knowledge which can inform policy and policymaking, or 'adjusting understandings and beliefs related to public policy'⁹². It has been facilitated at the European level by the strong alliances have formed between Plaid and parties in Brittany, the Basque Country, and Flanders, which has elevated the status of the Welsh agenda through its proximity to these strong and high-profile movements⁹³. These relationships, developed through the EFA and other historical encounters, have contributed greatly to the development of PC's independence policy and strategy. Furthermore, policy learning and development through cooperation and transnational regionalism has also taken place outside of the Welsh independence movement, with the Welsh Labour government forming close links with the Basque Country with regard to linguistic, industrial, and economic policy⁹⁴. We argue this has an impact on the perception of Welsh self-governing capability, similar to the case of environment policy in Scotland making the Welsh-Basque relationship worthy of investigation here.

Figure 2: Function of vertical policy transfer and horizontal policy learning in a multi-level structure⁹⁵

Figure 2: Function of vertical policy transfer and horizontal policy learning in multilevel structure.



Source: Author's own compilation.

34 Of course, some relationships predate shared involvement with the EFA. For example, Wales and the Basque Country have long enjoyed amicable relations based on the iron and coal trades, shared linguistic and ethnic heritage, and a purportedly similar outlook based on their marginal status⁹⁶⁹⁷. With regard to relations between the two independence movements, Wales has learned much from the Basques. The Basque movement is traditionally stronger than the Welsh, characterised by similar attributes to those in Wales like a 'well entrenched sense of regional identity'⁹⁸. The Basque case is regarded as a success in regard to regional autonomy and governance success as they enjoy a greater deal of autonomy and a stronger economy than most substates in Europe⁹⁹ (though obviously the two movements have differed markedly in their approach to the pursuit of these goals!). A strong illustration of the Basque influence on the Welsh movement is regarding the moderate Basque parties' incrementalist approach to gaining autonomy. The approach of the Partido Nacionalista Vasco (PNV) and Eusko Alkartasuna (EA) has been one which has followed "an incremental and at times contradictory strategy" characterised by a concentration of "most of their day-to-day activity on articulating demands for greater decentralisation"¹⁰⁰.

35 The approach of PNV and EA has contributed to the overall success in Basque autonomous governance and has represented an incrementalist role model for Plaid. In the adoption of less radical and arguably more feasible policies toward independence, Plaid have sought to attune unaligned voters to the idea of greater autonomy for Wales. Finding the right mix between practicality and emotional attachment to the territory has been vital to the success of the Basque movement and is something Plaid may have adopted through their cooperation with the Basques¹⁰¹. Furthermore, the Labour run (and firmly anti-independence) Welsh Government have cultivated strong links with the Basque Country through their Supporting Collaborative Research and innovation in Europe (SCoRE) scheme¹⁰². This has overseen an increased degree of collaboration between Welsh and Basque companies and organisations through the development of a memorandum of understanding between the Welsh, Basque and Flemish autonomous governments¹⁰³. Overall, this development of relations, horizontally at the substate level, has aided in constituting the development of a Welsh autonomous foreign policy.

36 In summary, the advent of Welsh devolution in 1999, coupled with the continuing process of European integration, created a double pronged attack on the central state. In doing so, the process of devolution amplified and broadened the audience for calls for greater autonomy in Wales whilst simultaneously contributing to a growing sense of Welsh policymaking competence. Further, Plaid's development of relationships with other minority nationalist movements in Europe has grown through participation in the EFA and has undoubtedly been valuable to their development as a serious political

movement which can attract support from the Welsh public. Overall, it has become clear that the Welsh movement has benefited considerably from both UK membership of the EU and the utilisation of Europe in their policy, perhaps even more so than has Scotland from the European dimension. We now conclude with a comparison of the two movements, and what they may lose in the wake of the stripping away of the European level of government.

Conclusion

- 37 The European dimension has been a vital factor in the growth and development of minority nationalism in the UK, exerting normative, economic, and political influence over the Scottish and Welsh independence movements and helping to take the case for self-government from the realms of secessionist fantasy to a serious political possibility. However, the UK's own act of secession - from the EU through the process of Brexit - comes an inevitable rescaling and reshaping of the UK governance structure to the extent not seen since accession to the EEC in 1973 or devolution in 1999. There exists an argument that Brexit makes Scottish and Welsh independence more likely in that secession has become the clearest route to re-joining the EU¹⁰⁴ something reflected in the behaviour of the Scottish campaign for independence (where the narrative seems to have shifted from one of "independence in Europe" to "independence to go back to Europe"¹⁰⁵. While Brexit may have initially sparked strong support for this notion, especially with Scotland voting 62 per cent to remain in the EU, our arguments here suggest that the possibility of independence is actually damaged by Brexit and leaves the movements of Scotland and Wales vulnerable to being constrained by dyadic interactions with a presently obstructive host state¹⁰⁶. We qualify this action here with reference to three key factors identified above: the EU as an external support structure; its role as a normative and economic influence; and the EU as a venue for alliance building and horizontal policy learning.
- 38 An exploration of the Scottish case shows that the EU membership helped to remedy issues of the feasibility of independence and often acted as a means of addressing inevitable and salient questions related to the instability and uncertainty after independence. This logic applies to the Welsh case too, given Plaid's adoption of the policy of 'Independence in Europe'. The EU demonstrated the viability of independence in the contemporary context of small state independence within a broader political and economic bloc, lending credibility to argument for independence in the face of critiques which suggest that Scotland and Wales would be too small and financially weak to survive outside of the UK framework (Barber, 2010). Despite claims that support for independence is likely to increase in the aftermath of Brexit, polls show at best mixed evidence for this proposition.
- 39 In many important respects, Brexit reduces the feasibility of "independence in Europe" and severely hampers the effectiveness and political saleability of this approach. It emerged during a period in which the UK was a full member of the EU, deeply enmeshed in the Single Market, and looked likely to deepen rather than end its involvement with Europe. Ultimately, secession from the UK in combination with accession to the EU would create significant trade and logistical barriers between an independent Scotland or Wales and the rest of the UK. The Trade and Cooperation Agreement which underpins UK-EU trade arrangements would require that customs procedures and other bureaucratic checks would be required, especially on heavily regulated products like agri-foods and medicine at a Scottish-UK or Welsh-UK border. While independence could trigger a rethink of the UK-EU relationship, the consequences of failure in this agenda would be far more serious for Scotland than the rump UK.
- 40 One of the strengths of the 'Independence in Europe' approach lies in its ability to create an image of a seamless transition to an amicable relationship between Scotland or Wales and the UK in a post-independence situation. This possibility is now off the

table. Indeed, such issues could and undoubtedly would be mobilised to devastating effect in any putative future referendum on Scottish or Welsh independence. Indeed, one need only imagine how the Machiavellian political strategist and referendum guru Dominic Cummings or his future equivalent might exploit the issue of a hard European border between, say, Berwick and Edinburgh, or Bristol and Cardiff. An exploration of the circumstances that would be required to force another referendum are, mercifully, beyond the scope of this article, however the prospects here do not look particularly good, either, particularly given the post-Sturgeon travails of the SNP, and the decisive position of the UK's Supreme Court. As such, it does not seem a stretch to conclude that far from making independence for either country inevitable, Brexit may stifle these endeavours considerably.

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List of illustrations

	Title	Table 1: Constitutional Preferences in Wales from 1997 to 2001 ⁸⁰ .
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