

Scotland's European debate will need greater depth in the years ahead

*Although Europe is a major aspect of Scotland's political conversation, the focus is principally on Brexit and matters narrowly deemed to affect Scottish interests, writes **Anthony Salamone**. Instead, he argues that building a meaningful European debate in Scotland, regardless of its constitutional future, will require greater depth and an appreciation of the realities of Scotland's place within Europe.*

Europe has been at the core of Scotland's politics for some time. EU membership was a central aspect of the 2014 independence referendum. Brexit has since transformed the constitutional debate. The prospect of a [new independence referendum](#) after next spring's Scottish Parliament election is real, and Europe would feature prominently in the campaign once more – now, in the significantly altered post-Brexit landscape.

Scotland is arguably a pro-European place. The Scottish public never endorsed Brexit on any occasion – not in the EU referendum, any subsequent election or indeed any opinion poll. We can call this strong and consistent support for the EU [Scotland's mainstream Europeanism](#). The Scottish electorate and Scottish politics both sustain a consensus in favour of European integration – and, moreover, an ease with it.

Although the UK has departed the EU, this mainstream Europeanism will not simply go away. In truth, it is the [primary driver](#) of notable discontent over Brexit and, now, of [majority support](#) for independence. The UK Government's decision not to extend the transition period and its trajectory towards a distant future relationship with the EU, compared to membership, are markedly discordant with Scottish [public opinion](#). While pro-European sentiment crosses the constitutional divide, it is not surprising to see greater alignment between support for the EU and for independence.

However, Scotland's mainstream Europeanism is contrasted with relatively minimal Europeanisation of the political conversation. Its European debate is underdeveloped, especially for a country which might in future seek to join the EU. While European themes certainly form part of the public discourse, they do not feature to an extent or depth that might be expected, given Scotland's ostensible pro-EU position.

I identify two principal causes for this condition. The first is a strong domestic filter. The European debate is predominantly concentrated on Brexit and whatever select matters are narrowly deemed to affect Scottish interests. Major European issues outside that filter rarely feature in the political conversation or the media. As an example, Scottish media gave no perceptible coverage to the July European Council's landmark deal on the €750-billion [Next Generation EU](#) coronavirus recovery plan – perhaps one of the most noteworthy developments in European integration in years.

The second is a general knowledge deficit. Within the Scottish political system, acquaintance with the finer points of the functioning of the EU or recent developments in EU member states can sometimes be limited. While reservoirs of expertise in European affairs exist within wider Scottish society, they often remain disconnected from the political debate. Mainstream Scottish media is certainly not Eurosceptic, but it rarely offers substantive analysis or interpretation of European matters. Scottish politics is, to a noticeable extent, separated from the EU in practice.

Overall, Scotland's present European debate does not fully reflect the reality that the EU will always have significant direct and indirect consequences for Scottish society, whatever the course of Brexit or the constitutional question. Evaluation of European affairs is often reduced to their immediate and direct impact on Scotland. By contrast, a more holistic debate would recognise that developments in the rest of Europe have implications for Scotland's general interests and values. In the years ahead, discussion on Scotland's future relationship with the EU will develop in two dimensions: its ongoing European relations and the independence debate.

Scotland's ongoing European relations

Scotland has long-standing relationships with the countries and regions of Europe. These connections are not wholly dependent on its constitutional status, and instead reflect the deep interconnectedness of our continent. Given its pro-EU sentiment, it is not inevitable that Brexit becomes normalised in Scotland. Building on its previous 47 years in the Union by virtue of the UK's EU membership, space exists to create a unique Scottish approach to the EU from its current constitutional position.

Scotland faces significant challenges to [successfully engaging in the EU](#), now that it is part of a third country. It is confronted with reduced access, less relevance and some association with UK policy, regardless of its own position. These challenges must be fully appreciated and not subordinated to a sense that Scotland's rejection of Brexit is somehow sufficient to sustain meaningful EU engagement and influence.

In the Brexit era, creative responses are required. Scotland's support for European integration fosters invaluable common ground with EU partners. Where appropriately marshalled, it can facilitate opportunities which the wider UK will not have. To develop a [distinct Scottish profile](#) in the EU, its mainstream Europeanism must be activated, converting sentiment into action. Through strategic and purposeful engagement, Scotland could establish a novel position – outside of the EU, but well connected to it.

Since the EU referendum, the Scottish Government has made differentiation on Brexit the priority of its European relations. It has sought to underline Scotland's opposition to leaving the EU and its support for the EU's principles, contrasted with the UK Government's pursuit of Brexit and its rejection of them. This objective has been achieved. Edinburgh's position is well recognised in Brussels and EU capitals.



Nicola Sturgeon, Credit: Scottish Government (CC BY-NC 2.0)

The question must now be how to advance Scotland's European relations. The national approach should be [founded on two pillars](#). The first pillar is practical cooperation with EU actors on areas of mutual interest. Scotland should drive forward EU bilateral, multilateral and institutional relationships through joint work on themes such as climate change and renewable energy, human rights and wellbeing, and digital innovation and governance. While such engagement takes place already, plenty of scope exists for efforts to be increased and more coordinated.

The second pillar is strategic participation in major debates on the future of Europe. Despite being outside the EU, Scotland remains a European nation and should declare itself a stakeholder in the evolution of our continent. Scottish political institutions and wider Scotland can offer constructive, innovative and challenging contributions on the various questions facing Europe. Scotland should seek to take part in the forthcoming Conference on the Future of Europe.

Collective European engagement should be conceptualised in a coherent way, taking into account the work of government and the rest of society. On the day of Brexit, the Scottish Government published its [perspective](#) on the EU strategic agenda at the time. It was a notable statement of commitment and interest in continuing to work with the EU. The task will now be to consider the wider strategy for Scotland's European relations, combining values and interests and setting out priorities and objectives.

The Scottish Government's [paradiplomatic network](#) of representations in Europe will surely exercise a prominent role in its EU engagement over time. To achieve a distinct and substantive European profile, it will likely need to develop a willingness to project Scotland's values and interest more directly – including where they differ from those of the UK Government.

European relations must be also fully insulated [from the constitutional debate](#), else they will become limited and lose much of their value. From its place outside the EU, Scotland will now have to be the proactive party to sustain relationships and build partnerships. Were it to wait for the proverbial invitation, Scotland would fade into the European political background.

Scottish independence debate and EU membership

Prospective [Scottish EU membership](#) is a major theme in the independence debate. Yet, the conversation is remarkably poor. The focus often rests on a select number of repetitive issues and the same uninspiring arguments are recycled. It reflects a regrettable lack of appreciation of the workings of the EU and of the much larger European picture into which Scotland fits.

For instance, some proponents of independence suggest that Scotland could join the EU remarkably quickly, because it already satisfies all of the *acquis communautaire*. That is not the case. While Scottish institutions comply with the *acquis* (at least until the end of the Brexit transition), much of it is fulfilled by UK institutions, which Scotland would have to replicate under independence.

Conversely, some opponents of independence claim that Scotland could not even apply to join the EU, because its national budget deficit would be higher than the targets outlined for EU membership. That is incorrect. National fiscal matters would be subject to negotiation, and transitional provisions would be eminently feasible. In such cases, the arguments deployed do not respond to the real choices, challenges and opportunities which should form the basis of debate.

Other issues strongly merit consideration. Scotland would have to determine its post-independence, pre-accession relationship with the EU, which would be essential during the years preceding membership. It would have to consider how a differentiated relationship with the Schengen *acquis*, to maintain a travel area with Ireland and the UK, could affect its wider EU membership. It would have to reconcile current public disinterest towards the euro with the strategic consequences of remaining outside the eurozone.

Adopting an even wider perspective, attention moves to what kind of member state Scotland would seek to become. Prospective counterparts like Finland and Slovakia participate in every major aspect of European integration, including the euro and Schengen. Ireland takes a broadly similar approach – and its opt-out on Schengen derives from its relationship with the UK, rather than a desire for autonomy. By contrast, Denmark has significant opt-outs (especially for its size) and arguably a more difficult relationship with the European project. In the absence of real evaluation of these questions, Scotland's EU membership conversation will remain incomplete.

The Scottish public would benefit from a more meaningful European debate, grounded in greater substance and reflection. Maintaining Scotland's ongoing European relations will require clear priorities, adroit strategy and sustained engagement. In a future independence referendum, the discussion should facilitate robust consideration of the various facets of [EU membership](#). Scotland's relationship with the EU will occupy a pivotal position in the public mind in the years ahead, and building a more thoughtful and engaging European debate would substantially enrich Scottish politics.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy or the London School of Economics. Featured image credit: [Scottish Government](#) (CC BY-NC 2.0)
