

From devolution to revolution? Brexit threatens to stir up the UK's regional politics

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*Decision-makers in Scotland and Wales await the outcome of the UK's EU referendum with trepidation. Since their powers were introduced in the late 1990s, the devolved authorities have forged their political identities and policy programmes through active participation in European politics. As **Patricia Hogwood** explains, a UK exit from the EU would threaten to hollow out the powers of the devolved authorities and would be likely to spell an end to the safe and predictable 'cooperative regionalism' that has come to define intra-Union relations in the UK.*



So what does EU membership mean to the devolved authorities? A major concern is the prospect of losing access to European funding and markets. While the UK is a net contributor to the EU budget, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland have benefited substantially from pre-allocated and competitive European funds, notably from the Common Agriculture Policy (CAP) and regional policy funding. Scotland in particular has made good use of access to an internal European market of over [500 million consumers](#) and the advantageous terms open to its business sector through EU trade agreements with other countries. While economic issues are likely to dominate the regional campaigns, the devolved authorities' concerns run far deeper.



Scottish nationalist graffiti calling for a vote for an independent Scotland in the 2014 referendum. Photo: [Brian Smith](#) via a [CC BY-NC-SA 2.0 licence](#)

Europe matters for Scotland and Wales because it is inextricably linked with their political coming of age. The EU has served as a platform both for exercising devolved powers and for developing a political identity distinct from Whitehall. Membership of the EU resides with UK government, and, under devolution, Whitehall continues to manage relations with the EU on behalf of the Union. However, the devolved authorities take responsibility for implementing European obligations where they relate to devolved matters and may develop their own European policy in these areas.

Policymakers in Scotland and Wales were quick to recognise the European Union as a governance arena where they could make a difference. From the outset, they embarked on an intensive [capacity-building project](#) to expand

and reorganise their executive, information-gathering and networking capacity for handling EU policy matters. Engagement in EU politics gave regional policymakers opportunities to break free of pre-devolution approaches characterised by Whitehall preferences for 'top-down' and often minimalist approaches to cooperation in Europe. In their efforts to distinguish themselves from 'London', the devolved authorities identified with a political platform of inclusivity, transparency and participation. This sat well with European policy ideals in many of the areas of devolved competence, particularly in the field of environment, where a new sustainability agenda was launched at the same time as Scotland and Wales began to get involved in Europe as independent political actors.

Personnel and budget restrictions have meant that Scottish and Welsh politicians and civil servants tend to have a broader policy remit than London-based actors: sometimes cutting across traditional Whitehall policy delineations. Together with their proactive, strategic and flexible approaches to policy development, this broad knowledge base has worked to their advantage in Europe, particularly in combined areas such as rural sustainability. In policy terms, participation in EU policy processes has presented the devolved authorities with an opportunity for '[venue-shopping](#)': where political actors select the most favourable level of government open to them for developing their policy interests. Particularly where the EU is the dominant level of governance – in environmental policy for example – this alternative venue offers devolved policymakers a real input into policy-shaping.

The risks for Scotland and Wales

Beyond policy, engagement in European politics has given the devolved authorities an opportunity to develop their own political personalities in ways that are not open to them in UK domestic politics. The Scottish Government's [blueprint for EU reform](#) reveals not only different priorities from Whitehall but also a vision for a more equal and open society. While the Scottish government shares a keen interest in the EU's growth and competitiveness agenda with UK government, it also wants to work within the EU to expand social and employment rights and to support freedom of movement.

In short, if the UK's EU referendum were to prove the first step on the path to Brexit, the devolved authorities would lose access to vital sources of funding, policy influence, and the governance arena in which their political identities have developed. Brexit would inevitably result in a hollowing-out of devolved powers and governance capacity.

This in itself would be enough to provoke anger in the regions. However, Brexit would be likely to result in a deeper, structural destabilisation of intra-Union relations. To understand why, it is useful to look at the [paradox of continuing policy coherence](#) in the UK. Given the devolved authorities' determination to follow their own agenda and their efforts to extend their policy reach to Europe, it might have been expected that UK politics would soon be prey to substantive conflicts in devolved policy areas. However, although differences are voiced, these, for the most part, have been resolved quietly and efficiently. Scotland and Wales have shown remarkable deference to UK government in falling into line with traditional, pre-devolution conventions of behind-the-scenes conflict resolution. The European formation of the Joint Ministerial Committee (JMC(E)) did not develop as a forum for the resolution of intra-UK crises, [as originally anticipated](#). Most policy differences are ironed out at the official level and never even passed up to ministers.

This deference to Whitehall's preferred modes of governance is sometimes explained by the coincidence of labour administrations throughout the UK during the early years of devolution, or simply by the political actors falling back on a default set of conventions. A less passive explanation lies in the constitutional contingency of the UK's devolution settlement. The combination of constitutional dependency on UK government's willingness to uphold the devolution settlement and indirect access – via UK government – of Scotland and Wales' valued EU 'venue' has eased the UK into a model of '[cooperative regionalism](#)'. For fear of losing access to their European links, the devolved authorities have to date been prepared to play nicely.

If Brexit were to cut the devolved authorities' access to Europe, intra-Union politics would be restricted to the UK arena. Without the structuring framework of EU directives, each administration would be likely to plot its own course

in areas where policy interests and political priorities diverge significantly. The policy dispersal would be particularly noticeable in areas where currently the lion's share of legislation in force in the UK originates at the level of the EU, such as environment, agriculture and fisheries. Granted, the devolved position would remain constitutionally vulnerable, but Scotland and Wales would have no other place to fight their battles but Whitehall. In this way, Brexit would spell the end of [policy and legislative coherence](#) in the UK and the start of a more wayward and unpredictable intra-Union politics.

This post represents the views of the author and not those of BrexitVote, nor the LSE.

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