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Scotland's European and International Policies: Time for a Strategic Approach

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Introduction

Across the EU institutions and member states, Brexit is falling down the agenda, as other priorities come ever more to the fore. The EU27 are currently embroiled in political bargaining over who will get the top EU jobs in the next five year cycle – notably the presidents of the Commission and European Council. Major challenges within and beyond the EU – from reform of the eurozone to dealing with the challenges to democracy and rule of law in several member states to climate change and the unstable geopolitical environment are all under the spotlight.

Yet, while the Scottish government has a Brexit strategy – a much clearer one than the current UK government – it lacks a genuine European strategy or fully-fledged wider international strategy. There are elements of such a European strategy to be found in particular policies and initiatives, likewise on the international front. But while EU member states are busy setting out what they want the EU to do in the next five years, no such strategic statement of interests is currently on offer from the Scottish government. Yet Brexit or not, where the EU goes next, with what priorities and goals is of fundamental importance to Scotland (and indeed to the UK).

This policy note, therefore, considers Scotland's European interests and policy approaches and whether and how Scotland could build a more strategic European and international policy¹. There are, of course, significant constraints for Scotland in terms of devolved powers, and the reserved nature of foreign policy. But at the same time there is considerable scope for smaller states and regions, given the nature of today's internationalised world, to engage across multiple dimensions and issues. Terms including 'soft power' and 'para-diplomacy' have been coined to illustrate how sub-state actors (including regions, local government, cities, non-governmental actors) can and do engage internationally both in their areas of devolved competence and beyond².

On the Brexit front, neither the Scottish government nor Scottish parliament have held back in challenging the Brexit process as a whole, given Scotland's remain vote and the chaotic UK politics of the last 3 years, rather than focusing only on devolved areas of competence. To put this Brexit politics into the wider context of the EU's future strategic direction, not least when it is in Scotland's wider interests to retain and deepen existing EU relationships, looks timely. More generally, while the UK has been – and remains in – the EU, the Scottish government and officials have long engaged in a range of ways with UK government ministers and officials on EU policies and strategies, including through the Joint Ministerial Committee (Europe).

Whether Brexit goes ahead or not, Scotland can benefit from having a wider European strategy – whether to underpin its direct interaction with EU institutions, member states and other European actors and/or to underpin its interaction with the UK on its European strategy. At the same time, as Michael Keating has pointed out, if the UK does leave the EU, its future relations with the EU will come under the heading of foreign policy. This means current structures for Scotland to engage in the UK's EU policy will no longer exist: “Brexit could lead to a recentralisation as the UK uses its monopoly over foreign policy to intrude into devolved competences”³.

The chaotic process of Brexit has also reinforced calls for another independence referendum, with First Minister Nicola Sturgeon saying she would like such a referendum by late 2020. If Scotland did become independent, it would obviously then have more scope for its own European and international strategies. But independent or not, Scotland's strategic European interests can surely be identified now and used as a coherent framework for policy and for political debate – whether over Scotland's European interests, the UK's current policies, devolved powers and/or independence⁴.

Scotland's EU and International Approach

The Scottish government has what it terms an international framework⁵ or agenda with two main aims – firstly: “to create an environment within Scotland that supports a better understanding of international opportunities and a greater appetite and ability to seize them” and secondly: “to influence the world around us on the issues that matter most in helping Scotland flourish.”

Amidst lots of good intentions and goals, this framework boils down to prioritising trade and investment opportunities, building relationships (in a broad sense) and cultural relations, and also has a particular emphasis on research and international research networks. Rather than a separate European strategy – or building up its international strategy from the core of an EU strategy – the Scottish government instead subsumes the EU within its international framework and emphasises the reasonable wish on the EU front “to continue to contribute meaningfully to collective goals”.

The Scottish government has a small network of EU and international offices including a long-standing office in Brussels and newer ‘innovation and investment’ hubs in Berlin, Dublin, London (too) and Paris⁶. There are also offices in Beijing, Ottawa, Toronto and Washington DC as well as 30 Scottish Development International offices (of which the European ones are in Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, Ireland, Italy, Norway, Spain, and Switzerland). Alongside this, there are international engagement strategies for Canada, China, India, Pakistan and the US.

Overall, it's a somewhat eclectic mix – though there is a clear emphasis on larger players in the EU (notably France and Germany) as well as nearer neighbours, and larger global players. Yet for a government that calls for the UK to hold another referendum on Brexit and for the UK to remain in the EU, and that calls for Scotland to become independent in the EU, it is notable that

Scotland's European interests and role are not at the centre of this international approach. This may, in part, reflect the fact that Scotland is a country but not a state and is constrained by its devolved powers. The focus on trade and investment promotion and on cultural relations may also encourage, to some extent, an apparent focus on bilateral relations around the world, albeit alongside engagement with the EU and UN. There is an open question as to what strategy and focus the new European hubs will and should adopt – including how much they focus on bilateral issues per se or centre their strategies within a wider EU strategy and focus on EU issues.

In comparison to Scotland, it is notable that smaller European states tend to put their EU strategies and alliances front and centre, recognising that much of their wider international interests and strategies can be pursued through the EU and in cooperation with European partners. Scotland is not currently an independent state and cannot develop a foreign policy distinct from the UK⁷. But there are surely lessons to be learnt from the approach of smaller EU member states. And there is much in the detail of existing Scottish government policies that once pulled together could form the basis of an overarching EU strategy.

On the foreign policy side, where the UK's foreign policy may go if it leaves the EU is, for now, an open question. Conservative ideas of 'global Britain'/Empire 2.0 look less than half-baked – and if Brexit goes ahead, the UK will have ever less influence on the European and international stage which will impact on to Scotland too. But despite this uncertainty and the backward-looking, wishful thinking on global Britain, there is still room for Scotland to outline its own European priorities. After all, for a Scottish European strategy to emphasise tackling climate change, tackling poverty within and beyond the EU, or creating a new 21st century European industrial and trade strategy in the context of sustainable development priorities cannot for now be said to contradict overt UK foreign policy. At the same time, with a new prime minister soon to take over, there may be more neuralgia from Downing Street over Scotland expressing its own views. Jeremy Hunt's petty withdrawal⁸ of FCO support to Nicola Sturgeon's foreign visits if she is, in part, 'campaigning' for independence (which appears to mean mentioning it), does not suggest an open mind-set.

Scotland's interests in Europe are clearly multiple – economic, social, political, cultural and democratic. The EU is Scotland's largest international market for exports. And Scotland has dense networks across the EU – whether business, NGOs, unions, researchers, media, cultural, youth, educational and more. As a small European country, Scotland can best pursue its priorities and goals, including on wider global issues (from climate change and development to peace, security and human rights) together with other European countries in the EU context. And even if Brexit goes ahead, Scotland (and the UK) will still have strong interests – if much less influence – in the EU. The EU's climate change policies, its regulatory framework for the single market, its stance on human rights, its foreign and security policies, and so on, will all remain of central importance to Scotland.

This is not to say that smaller European countries cannot pursue other bilateral relations around the world in the context of an international strategy – of course they can and do. But influencing the EU and wider European context should remain central to Scotland whether from inside or outside the EU – and that means working with partners (whether states or non-governmental actors) at all levels. So rather than subsuming European policy within an international framework, a more strategic approach for Scotland would be to develop a clearer, more comprehensive European policy and put that at the heart of its wider international strategy.

While Scotland's EU interests are multiple and not only economic, its economic and trade interests do also point clearly in the EU direction. In 2017, Scotland exported £14.8bn to the EU, while its next largest market – some way distant – was the US at £5.5bn (this is without including Scottish exports to the rest of the UK (also, obviously, currently in the EU))⁹. Over half of Scotland's exports go to the EU and other European countries (46% to the EU, 53% to the EU and other European countries). Exports to North America count for 18.9% of Scottish exports – important but not of the scale of the European relationship.

In the Brexit context, there is inevitably a question of bandwidth and resources, both in terms of political attention and civil service resources, in developing a fuller European strategy. Yet it is, in fact, in some of the series of Scottish government policy papers on Brexit that elements of a clearer Scottish European policy can be found. In one recent paper, the Scottish government emphasised its wish to “act in solidarity with our neighbours in relation to security and justice, climate change, and other global challenges”, noting this will be undermined by the UK government's Brexit approach to a free trade agreement¹⁰. In other papers, an emphasis is placed on the goal of remaining part of European and international research networks, making Scotland an attractive place for researchers, scientists and others to live and work, and making the positive case for migration¹¹.

All of this makes sense in terms of looking to limit damage from Brexit. And there are a range of Scottish government activities beyond Brexit – such as developing intergovernmental relations and policies with respect to the Arctic, and emphasising Nordic and Baltic relations. But widening this out, to consider where the EU needs to go next and what Scotland can contribute to that strategic thinking and debate, would be a step up. There are multiple advantages from developing these European priorities and issues and putting them into a clearer European rather than Brexit framework. And there is much to be learnt from other EU member states' approaches to setting out their priorities (and too from their choices and strategies on alliances within the EU).

Smaller EU Member States' Strategies

Smaller EU member states operate with a range of strategies, policy positions and alliances. At a moment such as the present one, where the European Parliament has just been renewed for the next five years and the leadership of the Commission and Council is about to be renewed too, large and small

member states do tend to set out their priorities on the strategic agenda for the coming years and feed them in to the dialogue at EU level.

At its June summit, the European Council agreed a strategic agenda for the next five years but more work will be done on this (with much debate around it) once the new presidents of Commission and Council are in place in the autumn. Four broad priorities were agreed: protecting citizens and freedoms; developing a strong and vibrant economic base; building a climate-neutral, green, fair and social Europe; promoting European interests and values on the global stage¹².

Looking at how different smaller member states set out their policy priorities on future strategy, there is much similarity in the headings adopted – the devil often being in the detail. For instance, Sweden emphasises under its migration heading, the importance of “creating more legal pathways to the EU”, something that would be anathema to some other states (or at least seen as politically too hard to say)¹³. On eurozone reform, the northern ‘Hanseatic’ group of smaller countries is focused on a neoliberal defence of eurozone policies while others, large and small, such as France and Portugal, are more keen to see a centralised fiscal function and common eurozone budget.

In its headline priorities, Sweden emphasises six issues: a democratic, well-functioning and responsive EU (including gender equality, rights and the rule of law); the EU as a leader in climate transition; a competitive EU for sustainable growth and more and better jobs; a legally certain, humane and sustainable migration policy; and security in a safe world. These headlines are clearly fleshed out in a concise 3 page document.

Ireland has similar priorities but chooses to lay them out more fully in a 17 page document¹⁴. Dublin emphasises an EU that is: prosperous and competitive; safe, peaceful and secure; sustainable; socially responsible; and equipped for the future. These headings draw on questions put to a series of citizens’ dialogues in Ireland. In the detailed explanation in the paper, a range of priorities and goals are set out – from transport infrastructure to the digital single market. Ireland even states that it is open to paying more for projects that “advance the European ideal”. Dublin also publically acknowledges who some of its key allies are and the importance of its European partnerships: “As we prepare for an EU without the UK, we are recalibrating and intensifying our partnerships. We are by far the smallest member state with embassies in all other EU capitals. In a variety of policy areas, we share common approaches with many of them, in particular the Nordic-Baltic member states and the Netherlands.”

For its part, the Netherlands lays out five priorities¹⁵: migration; security; a strong and sustainable economy that offers protection; climate policy, and protecting values and interests abroad. It adds to this a ‘future proof’ effective governance and functioning of the EU. It reinforces these with a series of six policy papers on these issues.

And even outside the EU, Norway has also contributed to this strategic discussion with a detailed paper in 2018¹⁶. As a member of the European Economic Area, it is clearly in Norway's interests to make a contribution even though it is not a member state and not at the European Council table. Norway's paper also leads on to a detailed annual work programme for its ministries.

Rather than a small number of priorities, the Norwegian European vision runs through a long sequence of headings but these cover many of the areas emphasised by others including: security and defence; climate change; an open, international economy; cooperation in justice and home affairs; rights and freedoms and the rule of law; natural resource management, and a comprehensive approach to migration. It is also interesting to note how Norway approaches influencing the EU, given its outsider status. The paper states: "Norway needs good channels for communicating our views to EU institutions and member states. Given that Norway is not a member of the EU, we often have to use alternative channels and resources to seek to influence and participate in the European cooperation. Some of these channels are available to us through our agreements with the EU; we have to develop other channels ourselves."

Overall, smaller EU member states clearly engage in depth in these fundamental discussions that are so important to the future direction the EU will take in the coming years. These strategic contributions also give a coherence and framework to each country's detailed policy and diplomatic work done across the gamut of EU issues.

Elements of a Strategy for Scotland

A European strategy for Scotland would set out clear priority areas and issues, together with a strategic approach to partnerships and alliances, networking, communication and influencing.

The order of priorities will, however, depend in part on the ability to influence an issue or at least participate in debate and discussion. And that will, in turn, depend both on whether, and in what form, Brexit happens and on constitutional questions. But in the end, priorities such as urgently tackling climate change, or cooperating to create and defend a democratic and secure Europe, will be there for Scotland, whatever happens with Brexit, devolved powers or independence. What changes is the ability to influence them.

A list of major priority areas for a Scottish European strategy could include the following goals for the EU:

- Tackling climate change, committing to an early net-zero target;
- Protecting human rights, including social and economic rights
- Tackling challenges to democracy within the EU and defending the rule of law, promoting solidarity within the EU

- A green new deal strategy for the EU that brings together economics, trade and competitiveness policies with climate change, development, inequality and inclusion goals. Rethinking industrial strategy for the 21st century (including AI, digital).
- Developing a fair, more open EU migration policy
- A global EU that is promoting and defending multilateralism, fulfilling its SDG goals, strengthening its neighbourhood policy, and ensuring its security (including cyber security challenges)
- An economic policy that drives sustainable, fair and inclusive growth.

These seven goals could form the basis for a more detailed and comprehensive strategy, taking account of Scotland's current constitutional status (i.e. within the UK and within the EU) and the current UK opt-outs from key EU policies (notably Schengen and the euro).

How the Scottish government might then promote these goals – and work with others both politically and with civil society – is another key question. The EU hubs in Berlin, Brussels, Dublin, London and Paris provide one starting point. Deciding how to develop these hubs strategically, once strategic European priorities are clearly identified, would need more detailed work. This would include identifying likely upcoming actions (new laws, regulations, strategic initiatives) at EU level. And it would involve identifying where Scottish policy interests and contributions align with those of other EU and EEA countries. It would also require in-depth consideration of how para-diplomacy and soft power strategies could be deployed in the current context.

It has been suggested¹⁷ that Scotland could benefit from imitating the Irish government which has undertaken a set of bilateral audits of some of its bilateral EU relationships. Such audits could follow on from the first stage proposal of identifying key allies and potential alliances and networks. Anthony Salamone also suggests initiating a series of citizens' debates on Europe – as has been done by Ireland, France and several other countries.

A step further could be to focus part of the citizens' assembly proposed by the Scottish government onto the question of Europe's future¹⁸. And, in parallel, an independent commission, bringing together experts, to address Scotland's European options, interests and challenges could also be fruitful. All of these could contribute to the drawing up of a clear, overarching European strategy and vision for Scotland.

Brexit has led to economic, political and social damage to Scotland and the UK. It has also led to a narrowing of horizons as the political crisis, and chaos, that is Brexit unfolds. But other big and urgent issues have not gone away. Engaging with those wider issues more comprehensively through building a European strategy for Scotland, and placing it at the heart of a wider international strategy, can open out our horizons again and give more weight

to all the ways Scottish actors – government, political, business, civil society, cultural and more – continue to engage in Europe and the world.

¹ For a comprehensive analysis of current EU challenges and Scottish interests, see our recent SCER report, Hughes, K, ed. (2019) The Future of Europe: Disruption, Continuity and Change

² See, for example, Wolff, Stefan (2007) “Paradiplomacy: Scope, Opportunities and Challenges” *The SAIS Europe journal* April; Tavares, Rodrigo (2016) “Forget Nations: Cities Will Transform the Way We Conduct Foreign Affairs” UNU <https://unu.edu/publications/articles/forget-the-nation-state-cities-will-transform-the-way-we-conduct-foreign-affairs.html>

³ Keating, Michael (2019) (2019) “Scotland in Europe: Future Prospects” in Hughes, K, ed. The Future of Europe: Disruption, Continuity and Change *Scottish Centre on European Relations*

⁴ Hughes, Kirsty (2019) “Europe’s Future in the Face of Systemic Challenges” in Hughes, K, ed. The Future of Europe: Disruption, Continuity and Change *Scottish Centre on European Relations*

⁵ <https://www.gov.scot/publications/scotlands-international-framework-9781788514033/>

⁶ For a fuller discussion of these hubs, see Salamone, Anthony (2019) “Small States and Regions: Evolving Strategies in EU Politics” in in Hughes, K, ed. The Future of Europe: Disruption, Continuity and Change *Scottish Centre on European Relations*

⁷ Kenealy, Daniel (2019) “The EU’s Foreign, Security and Defence Policies in an Unstable World” in Hughes, K, ed. The Future of Europe: Disruption, Continuity and Change *Scottish Centre on European Relations*

⁸ <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2019/jun/25/jeremy-hunt-pulls-foreign-office-support-nicola-sturgeon>

⁹ “Export Statistics Scotland 2017” (2019), Scottish Government, January

¹⁰ Scottish Government (2018) “Scotland’s place in Europe: our way forward” October <https://www.gov.scot/publications/scotlands-place-europe-way-forward/>

¹¹ Scottish Government (2018) “Scotland’s place in Europe: science and research”, November <https://www.gov.scot/publications/scotlands-place-europe-science-research/pages/6/>

¹² European Council (2019) “A New Strategic Agenda 2019 – 2024”, annex to European Council conclusions 20th June <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/39922/20-21-euco-final-conclusions-en.pdf>

¹³ Swedish Government (2019) “A responsive European Union benefiting the citizen: Swedish priorities for the legislative period 2019–2024” <https://www.government.se/49e036/contentassets/e88f91d191784dcdb9b7ed dce8b05c1a/a-responsive-european-union-benefiting-the-citizen.pdf>

¹⁴ Irish Government (2019) “National Statement on the European Union: Ireland’s contribution to the European Union’s Strategic Agenda 2019 – 2024”

¹⁵ Government of the Netherlands (2019) “Dutch priorities for the EU for 2019-2024” <https://www.permanentrepresentations.nl/latest/news/2019/05/03/dutch-priorities-for-the-eu-2019-2024>

¹⁶ Government of Norway (2018) “Norway in Europe. The Norwegian Government’s strategy for cooperation with the EU 2018–2021”, 9 May https://www.regjeringen.no/en/dokumenter/eu_strategy/id2600561

¹⁷ Salamone, Anthony (2019) “Small States and Regions: Evolving Strategies in EU Politics” in in Hughes, K, ed. The Future of Europe: Disruption, Continuity and Change *Scottish Centre on European Relations*

¹⁸ Hughes, Kirsty (2019) “Europe’s Future in the Face of Systemic Challenges” in Hughes, K, ed. The Future of Europe: Disruption, Continuity and Change *Scottish Centre on European Relations*