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## Post-Brexit Scottish Independence Perspectives\*

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### *Abstract*

The article attempts to identify the socio-political root causes of the recent intensification of the Scottish nationalist movement and the patterns determining the high potential of Scottish independence discourse in the formation of internal social confrontation in Scotland and the UK. The paper additionally focuses on formulating the key socio-political manifestations and “anti-elite” patterns of the Scottish nationalistic idea. To achieve that, the key features of Scottish nationalism and the demands made by the separatist forces on the eve of the 2014 referendum are outlined followed by the assessment of the impact of Brexit on the state and the intensity of the separatist movement in Scotland as well as the results of recent Holyrood elections. Finally, the relevance of the article stems from the complex evaluation of the probability of a new referendum on Scottish independence provided by the author, formulating such predictions based on the study of the current socio-political and economic context existing in Scotland and the amalgam of factors elucidated in the paper.

*Keywords:* Scottish independence, independence referendum, The Scottish national party, Brexit, Holyrood elections, social fault lines

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### *Аннотация*

В статье предпринята попытка выявить социально-политические причины недавней активизации шотландского националистического движения и закономерности, определяющие высокий потенциал дискурса о независимости Шотландии в формировании внутриобщественного противостояния в Шотландии и Великобритании. В статье дополнительно уделяется внимание формулированию ключевых социально-политических проявлений и «антиэлитных» паттернов шотландской националистической идеи. Для

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достижения этой цели излагаются ключевые особенности шотландского национализма и требования, выдвинутые сепаратистскими силами накануне референдума 2014 г., после чего дается оценка влияния Брексита на состояние и интенсивность сепаратистского движения в Шотландии, а также результаты недавних выборов в Холируд. Наконец, актуальность статьи заключается в предоставлении комплексной оценки вероятности нового референдума о независимости Шотландии на основе изучения текущего социально-политического и экономического контекста, существующего в Шотландии.

*Ключевые слова:* независимость Шотландии, референдум о независимости Шотландии, Шотландская национальная партия, Brexit, выборы в Холируд, линии общественного разлома

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Over the past few decades, the unity of England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland has been increasingly questioned and put under scrutiny following the intensification of separatist sentiments in Scotland, whose socio-political life has been overwhelmingly centered around the prospect of independence and secession from the United Kingdom amidst the rise of Scottish nationalists.

The goal of this article will be to give an evaluation of the probability of a new referendum on Scottish independence. Notably, the scenario in scrutiny is the one whereby certain of the following political alignments is in place: 1) Boris Johnson remains the leader of the Conservative Party and Keir Starmer remains the leader of the Labour Party — the party in power is not determinant 2) Boris Johnson remains the leader of the Conservative Party at power 3) Keir Starmer remains the leader of the Labour Party at power. It is argued in the article that under the current leadership present in the two parties (Boris Johnson in the Conservative and Keir Starmer in the Labour) the possibility of a new referendum on Scottish independence remains rather low. To prove that point, three major dimensions of societal interaction in Scotland will be assessed: political, economic, social. Thus, the factors conducive and obstructive in regards to a new referendum in each of the dimensions will be identified. As a result, the author will be able to quantify their “weight” respective to each other and make conclusions on the likelihood of a new independence referendum in the given context.

## 2. SCOTTISH INDEPENDENCE REFERENDUM-2014: A “PYRRHIC VICTORY” FOR THE SCOTTISH NATIONALISTS

The Scottish National Party has long been considered a key player on the Scottish political arena. It was with its strengthening in the second half of the 20th century that the popularity of the Scottish independence thought soared. Since then, independence claims have been “branded” by the SNP. Until Brexit, Scottish nationalism was considered to have “peaked” with its anti-central establishment agenda during the 2014 independence referendum, which, however, resulted in nationalists’ defeat and unionists’ victory. In the run-up to the 2014 referendum, SNP officials vaunted numerous reasons to demand independence, such as: the possession of Scotland’s own parliament (Holyrood), certain tax-regulation capacities and the right to elaborate laws, alongside the presence of its own Presbyterian church and judicial system<sup>1</sup>. The “oil” argument was also deemed significant: Scotland’s major economic

<sup>1</sup> The Act of Scotland: 1998 // The UK Government [Electronic resource]. URL: <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1998/46/contents> (accessed: 03.09.2021).

asset considered a sort of “panacea” by the SNP is oil on the North Sea shelf. It was when the extraction and processing of the North Sea oil began in the 1970-s that the SNP’s slogan “It’s Scotland’s oil!” [7] emerged. In the run-up to the 2014 referendum, the “oil issue” was actively harnessed by the Scottish nationalists in their pursuit of independence.

### 3. LEGAL GROUND BEHIND SNP’S CLAIMS FOR INDEPENDENCE

Legally, Scotland cannot hold a referendum on independence without the central parliament’s consent. This regulation is established in accordance with the Scotland Act of 1998, namely, under paragraph 1 (b) of Schedule No. 5, which declares all issues related to the unity of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland matters of reserved nature, i.e., reserved by the central government<sup>2</sup> (Schedule 5, Part 1. Par. B). There is, however, a “loophole” in the Act of Scotland: under the so-called “procedure established in section 30”, the provisions set out in schedule No. 5 can be temporarily altered, provided the central government’s consent is given<sup>3</sup>. Such mechanism was applied to hold the referendum of 2014 which required the conclusion in 2012 of the Edinburgh Agreement<sup>4</sup>. In order to reactivate section 30 of the Scotland Act, it is necessary to obtain the approval of a majority in the House of Commons and in the House of Lords in a vote initiated by the Prime minister<sup>5</sup>.

### 4. BREXIT AND THE INTENSIFICATION OF SCOTTISH SEPARATISM

Brexit gave a new impetus to the intensification of separatist sentiments and exacerbated division, outlining the edges of the intrasocietal fault in Scotland. The reasons for these processes, which have become an integral part of modern Scottish politics, can be most generally divided into several groups.

#### 4.1. *Identity-based issues*

These include, first of all, Scottish national and political identity, at present closely intertwined with European integration. This interpretation of the national identity of Scotland has its roots back in the late 80s of the 20th century, when in 1988 the Scottish nationalist Party put forward the concept of “independence in Europe” [5, p. 43]. Modern political elite of Scotland is known to view Brexit as generally illegitimate in relation to the Scottish nation on the premise of the “no” vote in Scotland during the 2016 referendum with a result of 62% [2, p. 7]. For Scottish politicians, such rhetoric is not so much an effective means of putting pressure on London, but rather a populist instrument of political influence on the national feelings of Scottish. Thus, the SNP is often accused of the exploitation of nationalist rhetoric for their own political gain [1, p. 3].

#### 4.2. *Electoral support and political conjuncture*

It is known that at the referendum in 2014, roughly 46,7% of the population of Scotland voted in support of independence. As Brexit progressed, independent public polls reflected

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Agreement between the United Kingdom Government and the Scottish Government on a Referendum on Independence for Scotland: 2012 [Electronic resource] // The UK Government. URL: [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/313612/scottish\\_referendum\\_agreement.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/313612/scottish_referendum_agreement.pdf) (accessed: 03.09.2021).

<sup>5</sup> The Act of Scotland: 1998 [Electronic resource] // The UK Government. URL: <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1998/46/contents> (accessed: 03.09.2021).

a gradual, but continuous increase in separatist sentiments. Suchwise, a survey of the population conducted by YouGov in August 2020 showed that 53% of the population of Scotland would vote for independence in the event of a new referendum, while 47% would vote for “preserving the membership” in the United Kingdom [4]. Nevertheless, following the conclusion of the Trade and Cooperation Agreement between the EU and the United Kingdom, the polarization of the Scottish society has become almost absolute: with the exception of absentees, the votes in support and opposition to independence in the event of a second referendum were, respectively, 51% and 49% in November and 49%–51% in March<sup>6</sup>, thus demonstrating a near even parity of opinions.

### 4.3. *Objective economic reasons*

Strong orientation of the Scottish economy on the European Union market coupled with extensive entrepreneurial and trade links established throughout a long history of cooperation and partnership help understand relatively pessimistic forecast given in regards to the post-Brexit evolution of Scottish exports and imports indicators: analytical reports provided by the Scottish government predict serious damage to Scotland’s exports and imports in the light of Brexit. Notably, the following factors will represent the most significant impediments for the growth of the Scottish economy: additional border checks complicating and decelerating the transportation of goods, the new points-based system for selecting qualified migrants, and the increase in trade costs for private companies. According to the Scottish government, these as well as many other factors will determine an overall reduction in Scotland’s GDP by 6,1% by 2030<sup>7</sup>.

## 5. MAY HOLYROOD ELECTIONS AS A REFLECTION OF PUBLIC SENTIMENT

In course of the elections to the Scottish Parliament, held in early May 2021, the SNP won 64 seats, i. e., fell 1 seat short of the absolute majority. Nevertheless, with the support of the Greens, who won 8 seats in Holyrood and also back Scottish independence, along with 48 out of 59 possible seats in the House of Commons obtained during the general election of 2019<sup>8</sup>, the SNP, supposedly, has gathered enough steam to claim that there is a legitimate request for a new referendum on independence. Thus, the results of the last elections confirm the presence of separatist sentiments among Scots, reflecting the repudiation of control by the central establishment in London and underlining the strive for independence. Nonetheless, May Holyrood elections also pointed to the existence of a split in the Scottish society regarding the perception of nationalists and their agenda: within the framework of the mixed electoral system of Scotland (mixed-member proportionality), parties advocating unity (the Conservative party with the idea of “one nation conservatism”<sup>9</sup>; the Labour Party, the Liberal Democratic Party) received an insignificant advantage in single-member constituencies, while the nationalists won in constituencies with party lists voting<sup>10</sup>.

<sup>6</sup> Scottish Voting Intention (4–8 Mar) [Electronic resource] // YouGov. URL: <https://yougov.co.uk/topics/politics/articles-reports/2021/03/11/scottish-voting-intention-4-8-mar> (accessed: 03.09.2021).

<sup>7</sup> Brexit: Sectoral Economic Impact Analysis [Electronic resource] // Scottish Government. URL: <https://www.gov.scot/publications/eu-uk-negotiations-outcome-analysis/#page-top> (accessed: 03.09.2021).

<sup>8</sup> Results of the 2019 General Election in Scotland [Electronic resource] // BBC News. URL: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/election/2019/results/scotland> (accessed: 03.09.2021).

<sup>9</sup> The Conservative and Unionist Party Manifesto: 2019 [Electronic resource] // The Conservative Party. URL: [https://assets-global.website-files.com/5da42e2cae7ebd3f8bde353c/5dda924905da587992a064ba\\_Conservative%202019%20Manifesto.pdf](https://assets-global.website-files.com/5da42e2cae7ebd3f8bde353c/5dda924905da587992a064ba_Conservative%202019%20Manifesto.pdf) (accessed: 03.09.2021).

<sup>10</sup> SNP Win Election one Seat Short of Majority [Electronic resource] // BBC News. URL: <https://www.bbc.com/news/live/uk-scotland-scotland-politics-56995136/page/7> (accessed: 03.09.2021).

# A total of 70 points is needed to be able to apply to work in the UK

| Characteristics   | Mandatory/Tradeable | Points |
|---|---------------------|--------|
| Offer of job by approved sponsor  | Mandatory           | 20     |
| Job at appropriate skill level  | Mandatory           | 20     |
| Speaks English at required level  | Mandatory           | 10     |
| Salary of £20,480 to £23,039 or at least 80% of the going rate for the profession (whichever is higher) | Tradeable           | 0      |
| Salary of £23,040 to £25,599 or at least 90% of the going rate for the profession (whichever is higher) | Tradeable           | 10     |
| Salary of £25,600 or above or at least the going rate for the profession (whichever is higher)          | Tradeable           | 20     |
| Job in a shortage occupation as designated by the Migration Advisory Committee                          | Tradeable           | 20     |
| Education qualification: PhD in a subject relevant to the job   | Tradeable           | 10     |
| Education qualification: PhD in a STEM subject relevant to the job                                      | Tradeable           | 20     |

Fig. 1. Points-based immigration system evaluation points<sup>11</sup>

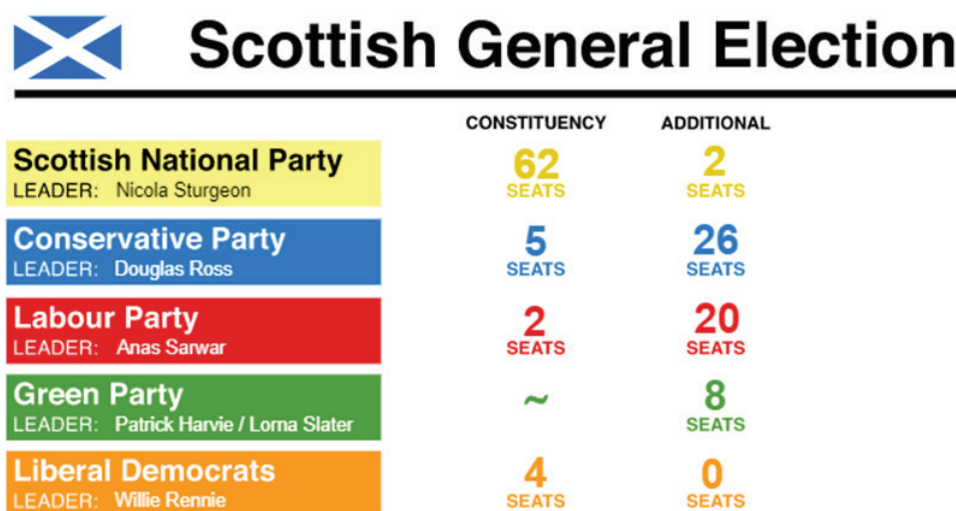


Fig. 2. Holyrood elections results (2021)<sup>12</sup>

<sup>11</sup> The UK’s Points-based Immigration System: An Introduction for Employers [Electronic resource] // The UK Government. URL: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/uk-points-based-immigration-system-employer-information/the-uks-points-based-immigration-system-an-introduction-for-employers> (accessed: 03.09.2021).

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

An equally interesting component of the May elections was the emergence of new political parties, which, despite the seemingly similar political agenda to that of nationalists, acted as an opponent of the Scottish nationalists. The most prominent example of such a political force was the Alba party, established in the run-up to the Holyrood elections by the former First Minister of Scotland and the leader of the SNP, Alex Salmond<sup>13</sup>. The focus of the Alba party manifesto largely duplicated the main demand put forward by the SNP, which, however, did not lead to cooperation between the two political forces, acting, on the contrary, in opposition to each other.

Thus, the elections to the Scottish Parliament, held on May 6, 2021, can be designated as a kind of a “tipping point”, since they shed light on all the components of the “anti-establishment vortex” in Scotland: the main opposition force to the central establishment in London, the Scottish Nationalist Party, won the majority of votes, increasing the number of seats in parliament, but failing to gain the necessary number of votes for an absolute majority, which confirms, along with the parity of votes for nationalists and unionists, given on party lists and in single-member constituencies, the presence of a significant societal divide and opposition to the Scottish nationalists and their agenda. The polls conducted in parallel only reinforce the thesis about the presence of ambiguous trends in Scotland, with half of the population being opposed to the Scottish nationalists’ demand for independence. Another relevant conclusion to be drawn from the results of the Holyrood elections is the presence of internal contradictions within the Scottish political elite, a thesis reinforced by the emergence of new political forces, such as Alba, which, despite the similarity of agenda, acted in opposition to the current Scottish establishment represented by the SNP.

## 6. SCOTTISH INDEPENDENCE AS A PUBLIC DEMAND: WISHFUL THINKING?

Among other things, it is necessary to outline the causes of “anti-nationalist” sentiments among the Scottish population, a significant part of which (47–50% based on independent public polls) finds itself in opposition to the idea of Scottish independence. The “anti-nationalist” movement in Scotland is based on the following assumptions:

1) One of the major incentives to vote for independence is the re-entry of Scotland into the EU on particular (simplified) terms promised by the SNP. With England being Scotland’s largest trading partner, independent Scotland rejoining the EU could potentially imply the emergence of a hard border between Scotland and England, which, according to some, might become as intractable a problem for Scotland as the Irish “backstop” for Brexit supporters [6].

2) Opposition to an independent Scotland in the EU by those members of the Union who themselves experience problems related to internal separatism is deemed to be a relevant factor. The most eminent case is Spain, which has long been an opponent of granting Scotland the right to a “special deal” fearing such an agreement could become a stimulus for the intensification of Catalan separatism;

3) The negative experience of Brexit, which became the tipping point of “anti-elite” sentiments in England and Wales. Nevertheless, behind the veil of national pride, there seems to be a substantial number of problems caused by Brexit: arduous process of negotiations, transition period, significant economic losses, social polarization and others. Given the proximity of Scotland and its British neighbors, leaving the union may bring Scotland more losses than gains.

<sup>13</sup> One Million Additional Votes for Independence, Welcome to the Alba Party [Electronic resource] // ALBA. URL: [https://www.albaparty.org/about\\_alba](https://www.albaparty.org/about_alba) (accessed: 03.09.2021).

## 7. THE ODDS OF INDYREF-2

When reflecting on the prospects of the second referendum on Scottish independence, one needs to take several factors into account: political conjuncture in London, socio-political conjuncture in Scotland in its several manifestations. These factors will be covered in detail in the following subsections.

### 7.1. *Political conjuncture in London*

The necessity to take this factor into consideration stems from the legal background required to hold a referendum. As mentioned earlier in this paper, legally, two conditions are obligatory prerequisites for a new referendum: first, the initiation by the Prime-minister of a vote in Parliament on the temporary transfer of referendum-holding capacity to the Scottish authorities, second, the majority of votes given in favour of such transfer in both the House of Commons and the House of Lords. Thus, the relevance of current views on Scottish independence manifested by the central establishment cannot be overstated.

Here, the focus should fall on the results of the 2019 general elections in the UK. As demonstrated by Figure 3, the 2019 General elections brought a confident victory to the Conservative party which subsequently formed a majority government. The Labour party, expectedly, came second. Thus, it is important to analyze the stance each of the parties holds in regards to the second independence referendum in Scotland.

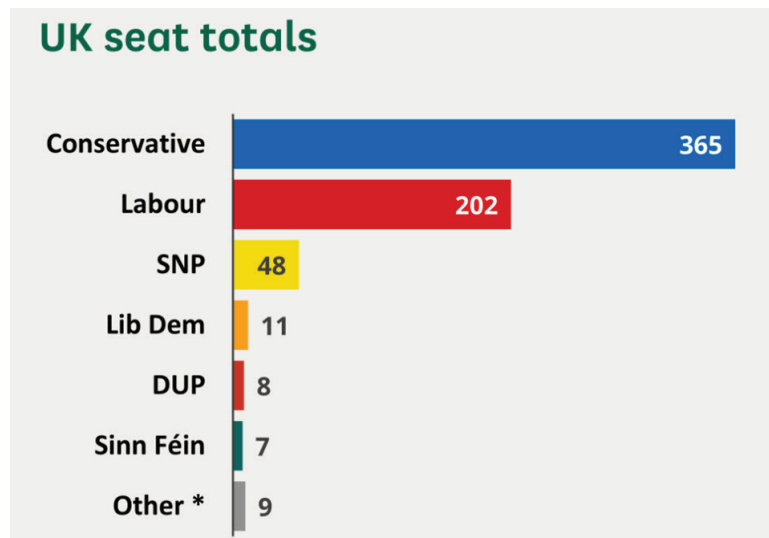


Fig. 3. General elections — 2019 results in seats by party [3]

**The Conservative Party.** One of the key slogans of Boris Johnson’s election campaign at the end of 2019 was a statement about the revival of “one nation conservatism”<sup>14</sup>. Within the UK context, its main implications include, inter alia, maintenance of the unity of England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland [9].

The ideology of “one nation conservatism” readopted by the Conservatives under Boris Johnson, served as the foundation for the Conservative party’s 2019 elections manifesto and, hence, determined the opposition of the Conservatives to a new referendum on Scottish independence which was explicitly stipulated in the section of the manifesto dedicated to Scotland and issues related to it.

<sup>14</sup> Tory Democracy [Electronic resource] // Merriam-Webster. URL: <https://www.merriamwebster.com/dictionary/Tory%20Democracy> (accessed: 03.09.2021).



The Labour party. Following the defeat in the 2019 elections, the Labour Party elected a new leader, Sir Keir Starmer. Just like the Conservative Party under Boris Johnson, the Labour Party under Keir Starmer made significant changes in its own views on key matters, including the issue of Scottish independence.

As was stated in the Labour manifesto: “the Labour party says “no” to Scottish independence”<sup>15</sup>. Moreover, with Keir Starmer as the party’s leader a plan concerning the further development of Scotland as part of the United Kingdom was elaborated. Keir Starmer’s plan for Scotland includes the conclusion of an updated devolution agreement with Westminster, based on the Labour’s vision of a federalist path for the UK. Thus, the Labour Party plans to transfer many of the powers reobtained from Brussels after Brexit to the Scottish establishment, namely expanded authority in fisheries regulation, taxation and other spheres [8], but unequivocally denies the possibility of another independence referendum.

## 7.2. *Socio-political conjuncture in Scotland*

Several major issues are involved in this subsection within the context of this paper: popular support for Scottish independence idea manifested by, first, Scottish electoral outcomes, second, public poll results; correlation between SNP’s leadership support rates and the backing of Scottish independence.

Not surprisingly, electoral outcomes in Scotland are seen by many as being genuinely representative in indicating the popular support rates of Scottish independence and a second referendum. If anything, this demonstrates how unequivocal the prevalence of extrinsic, nationalist and independence-oriented agenda is in the SNP’s policies, as the SNP is often associated almost exclusively with its independence claims. Although correlation should not be equated to causation in case with the SNP (one cannot unambiguously claim that all those voting for the SNP back Scottish independence – other factors need to be considered as well), electoral support for the SNP, clearly, serves as an index of independence support, at least to a certain degree. Thus, analyzing electoral outcomes over the past decade might be useful when estimating the fluctuations in independence support rates.

Recent elections to Holyrood did not fetch enough votes for the SNP to form a majority government<sup>16</sup>. Such result, allegedly, indicates the presence of uncertainty within the Scottish society and, hence, undermines the firmness of the SNP’s claim due to the lack of societal impetus that was clearly present in 2011 when the SNP acquired 4 seats on top of the 65, necessary to form a majority government<sup>17</sup>. Having done so in 2011, the Scottish nationalists gained enough confidence as well as the social impulse required to demand an independence referendum from London, which was not the case with the 2021 elections, however.

Public polls conducted directly on the matter of independence (second independence referendum) support may also be considered an indicative when considered in amalgam with other factors.

<sup>15</sup> Labour Party Manifesto: 2019 [Electronic resource] // The Labour Party. URL: <https://labour.org.uk/manifesto-2019/> (accessed: 03.09.2021).

<sup>16</sup> SNP Win Election one Seat Short of Majority [Electronic resource] // BBC News. URL: <https://www.bbc.com/news/live/uk-scotland-scotland-politics-56995136/page/7> (accessed: 03.09.2021).

<sup>17</sup> Results and Turnout at the 2011 Scottish Parliament Election [Electronic resource] // Electoral Commission. URL: <https://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/who-we-are-and-what-we-do/elections-and-referendums/past-elections-and-referendums/scottish-parliamentary-elections/results-and-turnout-2011-scottish-parliament-election> (accessed: 02.09.2021).

Following the Holyrood elections in May, independent public polls conducted by several organizations, have demonstrated a continuous pattern of the lead by the support of the unity with an average of 7% of the respondents undecided<sup>18</sup>.

This, however, should not be deemed as the ultimate representation of the public sentiment since previously, polls have demonstrated an opposite trend whereby support for independence led by several points. Ambiguous trends have been implicit for the Scottish context for a long time, as opinions in presented samples often diverge, while responses tend to exemplify a near parity, thus indicating a lack of any unequivocal stance on independence. The presence of such a split within the Scottish public clearly represents a deterrent for the nationalistic narrative, since it substantially diminishes the incentive for radical unauthorized action and/or change: were such scenario to take place, Scotland could potentially experience an influx of violence with detrimental consequences. Such predictions are based not only on the fact of an even social divide, but additionally, on the peculiarities of the current political, party, and state system present in Scotland: in case of an unauthorized referendum with successful outcomes for nationalists, there will be no place for the “devolved” parties, i.e., the Conservative, Labour and Liberal Democratic parties which could imply the formation of a “one-party dictatorship” of the SNP. Besides, the lack of established state institutions, as well as economic stability hinder the referendum from taking place without detailed planning and obtained consent.

## 8. CONCLUSIONS

Following an assessment of the present Scottish context in economic, political and social spheres some conclusions can be made on the likelihood of a new referendum on independence.

Economic deficiencies, England’s status as Scotland’s largest trading partner coupled with potential emergence of a “backstop” between England and Scotland, as well as current incompatibility of the Scottish economy to the EU terms all represent economic impediments on the way to Scottish independence.

Along that, the socio-political context is characterized by the formation of a multidimensional split in Scotland, electoral volatility, gradual convergence of the agenda of traditionally diverse political forces and, as a result, blurred political spectrum and complication of political choice.

The complex nature of the problem of Scottish independence, which affects all dimensions of public relations, determines the complexity of the consequences generated by such a development perspective: Scotland’s socio-political life is characterized not by a one-line confrontation between the local population and the establishment in London, but by the presence of several tracks of socio-political contradictions at once: between the political elites in Scotland, between the population and the Scottish nationalists, between the establishment in Edinburgh and London. While the Scotland of today is being gradually “seized” by nationalist rhetoric and aspirations, it has thus far remained undetermined with half the population opposing independence (as demonstrated by public polls presented in the article).

Evidently, firm opposition to Scottish independence manifested by the two leading parties (the Conservative and the Labour) under current leadership thwarts the independence vote owing to the legal prerequisites necessary to hold it. In the situation where the UK’s central establishment is strongly opposed to the idea of a new referendum of independence, only

<sup>18</sup> How Would You Vote in a Scottish Independence Referendum if Held Now? [Electronic resource] // What Scotland thinks. URL: <https://whatscotlandthinks.org/questions/how-would-you-vote-in-the-in-a-scottish-independence-referendum-if-held-now-ask/> (accessed: 02.09.2021).

nation-wide solidarity in Scotland and a cohesive stance on the necessity to hold another vote could help break the deadlock. As has been proven previously, such cohesiveness is lacking in the Scottish society, manifestly divided over the issue of secession.

Additionally, the seemingly negative example of Brexit alongside factors previously outlined supersede the confident performance demonstrated by the SNP during the General elections of 2019 and a less compelling one during the Scottish elections of 2021.

Given such conditions, the possibility of a second independence referendum is concerned, the likelihood of such a scenario, let alone, the prevalence of the “yes” vote, were the referendum to take place, seems to be rather low, with a new vote remaining implausible as long as the current central establishment is in power.

However, there is no doubt that the intrasocietal contradictions caused by the intensification of Scottish separatism will not pass unnoticed, bringing significant changes not only to the Scottish, but also the British and European political landscapes.

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